

Enemies, Chekhov Anton

At ten o'clock on a dark September evening six-year-old Andrey, the only son of Dr. Kirilov, a Zemstvo physician, died from diphtheria. The doctor's wife had just thrown herself upon her knees at the bedside of her dead child, and was giving way to the first ecstasy of despair, when the hall-door bell rang loudly. Owing to the danger of infection all the servants had been sent out of the house that morning; and Kirilov, in his shirtsleeves, with unbuttoned waistcoat, with sweating face, and hands burned with carbolic acid, opened the door himself. The hall was dark, and the stranger who entered it was hardly visible. All that Kirilov could distinguish was that he was of middle height, that he wore a white muffler, and had a big, extraordinarily pale face—a face so pale that at first it seemed to illumine the darkness of the hall.

"Is the doctor at home?" he asked quickly.

"I am the doctor," answered Kirilov, "What do you want?"

"Ah, it is you. I am glad!" said the stranger. He stretched out through the darkness for the doctor's hand, found it, and pressed it tightly. "I am very ... very glad. We are acquaintances. My name is Abogin.... I had the pleasure of meeting you last summer at Gnutcheffs. I am very glad that you are in.... For the love of Christ do not refuse to come with me at once.... My wife is dangerously ill.... I have brought a trap."

From Abogin's voice and movements it was plain that he was greatly agitated. Like a man frightened by a fire or by a mad dog, he could not contain his breath. He spoke rapidly in a trembling voice, and something inexpressibly sincere and childish imploring sounded in his speech. But, like all men frightened and thunderstruck, he spoke in short abrupt phrases, and used many superfluous and inconsequential words.

"I was afraid I should not find you at home," he continued. "While I was driving here I was in a state of torture.... Dress and come at once, for the love of God ... It happened thus. Papchinsky Alexander Semenovich whom you know, had driven over.... We talked for awhile ... then we had tea; suddenly my wife screamed, laid her hand upon her heart, and fell against the back of the chair. We put her on the bed.... I bathed her forehead with ammonia, and sprinkled her with water ... she lies like a corpse.... It is aneurism.... Come.... Her father died from aneurism...."

Kirilov listened and said nothing. It seemed he had forgotten his own language. But when Abogin repeated what he had said about Papchinsky and about his wife's father, the doctor shook his head, and said apathetically, drawling every word:

"Excuse me, I cannot go.... Five minutes ago ... my child died."

"Is it possible?" cried Abogin, taking a step back. "Good God, at what an unlucky time I have come! An amazingly unhappy day ... amazing! What a coincidence ... as if on purpose."

Abogin put his hand upon the door-handle, and inclined his head as if in doubt. He was plainly undecided as to what to do; whether to go, or again to ask the doctor to come.

"Listen to me," he said passionately, seizing Kirilov by the arm; "I thoroughly understand your position. God is my witness that I feel shame in trying to distract your attention at such a moment, but ... what can I do? Judge yourself—whom can I apply to? Except you, there is no doctor in the neighbourhood. Come! For the love

of God! It is not for myself I ask.... It is not I who am ill."

A silence followed. Kirilov turned his back to Abogin, for a moment stood still, and went slowly from the anteroom into the hall. Judging by his uncertain, mechanical gait, by the care with which he straightened the shade upon the unlit lamp, and looked into a thick book which lay upon the table—in this moment he had no intentions, no wishes, thought of nothing; and probably had even forgotten that in the anteroom a stranger was waiting. The twilight and silence of the hall apparently intensified his stupor. Walking from the hall into his study, he raised his right leg high, and sought with his hands the doorpost. All his figure showed a strange uncertainty, as if he were in another's house, or for the first time in life were intoxicated, and were surrendering himself questioningly to the new sensation. Along the wall of the study and across the bookshelves ran a long zone of light. Together with a heavy, close smell of carbolic and ether, this light came from a slightly opened door which led from the study into the bedroom. The doctor threw himself into an armchair before the table. A minute he looked drowsily at the illumined books, and then rose, and went into the bedroom.

In the bedroom reigned the silence of the grave. All, to the smallest trifle, spoke eloquently of a struggle just lived through, of exhaustion, and of final rest. A candle standing on the stool among phials, boxes, and jars, and a large lamp upon the dressing-table lighted the room. On the bed beside the window lay a boy with open eyes and an expression of surprise upon his face. He did not move, but his eyes, it seemed, every second grew darker and darker, and vanished into his skull. With her hands upon his body, and her face hidden in the folds of the bedclothes, knelt the mother. Like the child, she made no movement; life showed itself alone in the bend of her back and in the position of her hands. She pressed against the bed with all her being, with force and eagerness, as if she feared to destroy the tranquil and convenient pose which she had found for her weary body. Counterpane, dressings, jars, pools on the floor, brushes and spoons scattered here and there, the white bottle of lime-water, the very air, heavy and stifling—all were dead and seemed immersed in rest.

The doctor stopped near his wife, thrust his hands into his trouser pockets, and turning his head, bent his gaze upon his son. His face expressed indifference; only by the drops upon his beard could it be seen that he had just been crying.

The repellent terror which we conceive when we speak of death was absent from the room. The general stupefaction, the mother's pose, the father's indifferent face, exhaled something attractive and touching; exhaled that subtle, intangible beauty of human sorrow which cannot be analysed or described, and which music alone can express. Beauty breathed even in the grim tranquillity of the mourners. Kirilov and his wife were silent; they did not weep, as if in addition to the weight of their sorrow they were conscious also of the poetry of their position. It seemed that they were thinking how in its time their youth had passed, how now with this child had passed even their right to have children at all. The doctor was forty-four years old, already grey, with the face of an old man; his faded and sickly wife, thirty-five. Andreï was not only their only son, but also their last.

In contrast with his wife, Kirilov belonged to those natures which in time of spiritual pain feel a need for movement. After standing five minutes beside his wife, he, again lifting high his right leg, went from the bedroom into a little room half taken up by a long, broad sofa, and thence into the kitchen. After wandering about the stove and the cook's bed he bowed his head and went through a little door back to the anteroom. Here again he saw the white muffler and the pale face.

"At last!" sighed Abogin, taking hold of the door-handle. "Come, please!"

The doctor shuddered, looked at him, and remembered.

"Listen to me; have I not already told you I cannot come?" he said, waking up. "How extraordinary!"

"Doctor, I am not made of stone.... I thoroughly understand your position.... I sympathise with you!" said Abogin, with an imploring voice, laying one hand upon his muffler. "But I am not asking this for myself.... My wife is dying! If you had heard her cry, if you had seen her face, then you would understand my persistence! My God! and I thought that you had gone to get ready! Dr. Kirilov, time is precious. Come, I implore you!"

"I cannot go," said Kirilov with a pause between each word. Then he returned to the hall.

Abogin went after him, and seized him by the arm.

"You are overcome by your sorrow—that I understand. But remember ... I am not asking you to come and cure a toothache ... not as an adviser ... but to save a human life," he continued, in the voice of a beggar. "A human life should be supreme over every personal sorrow.... I beg of you manliness, an exploit!... In the name of humanity!"

"Humanity is a stick with two ends," said Kirilov with irritation. "In the name of the same humanity I beg of you not to drag me away. How strange this seems! Here I am hardly standing on my legs, yet you worry me with your humanity! At the present moment I am good for nothing.... I will not go on any consideration! And for whom should I leave my wife? No.... No."

Kirilov waved his hands and staggered back.

"Do not ... do not ask me," he continued in a frightened voice. "Excuse me.... By the Thirteenth Volume of the Code I am bound to go, and you have the right to drag me by the arm.... If you will have it, drag me ... but I am useless.... Even for conversation I am not in a fit state.... Excuse me."

"It is useless, doctor, for you to speak to me in that tone," said Abogin, again taking Kirilov's arm. "The devil take your Thirteenth Volume!... To do violence to your will I have no right. If you will, come; if you don't, then God be with you; but it is not to your will that I appeal, but to your heart!... A young woman is at the point of death! This moment your own son has died, and who if not you should understand my terror?"

Abogin's voice trembled with agitation; in tremble and in tone was something more persuasive than in the words. He was certainly sincere; but it was remarkable that no matter how well chosen his phrases, they seemed to come from him stilted, soulless, inappropriately ornate, to such an extent that they seemed an insult to the atmosphere of the doctor's house and to his own dying wife. He felt this himself, and therefore, fearing to be misunderstood, he tried with all his force to make his voice sound soft and tender, so as to win if not with words at least by sincerity of tone. In general, phrases, however beautiful and profound, act only on those who are indifferent, and seldom satisfy the happy or unhappy; it is for this reason that the most touching expression of joy or sorrow is always silence; sweethearts understand one another best when they are silent; and a burning passionate eulogy spoken above a grave touches only the strangers present, and seems to widow and child inexpressive and cold.

Kirilov stood still and said nothing. When Abogin used some more phrases about the high vocation of a physician, self-sacrifice, and so on, the doctor asked gloomily:

"Is it far?"

"Something between thirteen and fourteen versts. I have excellent horses. I give you my word of honour to bring you there and back in an hour. In a single hour!"

The last words aided on the doctor more powerfully than the references to humanity and the vocation of a doctor. He thought for a moment and said, with a sigh:

"All right.... I will go."

With a rapid, steady gait he went into his study, and after a moment's delay returned with a long overcoat. Moving nervously beside him, shuffling his feet, and overjoyed, Abogin helped him into his coat. Together they left the house.

It was dark outside, but not so dark as in the anteroom. In the darkness was clearly defined the outline of the tall, stooping doctor, with his long, narrow beard and eagle nose. As for Abogin, in addition to his pale face the doctor could now distinguish a big head, and a little student's cap barely covering the crown. The white muffler gleamed only in front; behind, it was hidden under long hair.

"Believe me, I appreciate your generosity," he muttered, seating the doctor in the calèche. "We will get there in no time. Listen, Luka, old man, drive as hard as you can! Quick!"

The coachman drove rapidly. First they flew past a row of ugly buildings, with a great open yard; everywhere around it was dark, but from a window a bright light glimmered through the palisade, and three windows in the upper story of the great block seemed paler than the air. After that they drove through intense darkness. There was a smell of mushroom dampness, and a whispering of trees; ravens awakened by the noise of the calèche stirred in the foliage, and raised a frightened, complaining cry, as if they knew that Kirilov's son was dead, and that Abogin's wife was dying. They flashed past single trees, past a coppice; a pond, crossed with great black shadows, scintillated—and the calèche rolled across a level plain. The cry of the ravens was heard indistinctly far behind, and then ceased entirely.

For nearly the whole way Abogin and Kirilov were silent. Only once, Abogin sighed and exclaimed:

"A frightful business! A man never so loves those who are near to him as when he is in danger of losing them."

And when the calèche slowly crossed the river, Kirilov started suddenly as if he were frightened by the splash of the water, and moved.

"Listen! Let me go for a moment," he said wearily. "I will come again. I must send a feldscher to my wife. She is alone!"

Abogin did not answer. The calèche, swaying and banging over the stones, crossed a sandy bank, and rolled onward. Kirilov, wrapped in weariness, looked around him. Behind, in the scanty starlight, gleamed the road; and the willows by the river bank vanished in the darkness. To the right stretched a plain, flat and interminable as heaven; and far in the distance, no doubt on some sodden marsh, gleamed will-of-the-wisps. On the left, running parallel to the road, stretched a hillock, shaggy with a small shrubbery, and over the hill hung immovably a great half-moon, rosy, half muffled in the mist and fringed with light clouds, which, it seemed, watched it on every side, that it might not escape.

On all sides Nature exhaled something hopeless and sickly; the earth, like a fallen

woman sitting in her dark chamber and trying to forget the past, seemed tormented with remembrances of spring and summer, and waited in apathy the inevitable winter. Everywhere the world seemed a dark, unfathomable deep, an icy pit from which there was no escape either for Kirilov or for Abogin or for the red half-moon....

The nearer to its goal whirled the calèche, the more impatient seemed Abogin. He shifted, jumped up, and looked over the coachman's shoulder. And when at last the carriage stopped before steps handsomely covered with striped drugget, he looked up at the lighted windows of the second story, and panted audibly.

"If anything happens ... I will never survive it," he said, entering the hall with Kirilov, and rubbing his hands in agitation. But after listening a moment, he added, "There is no confusion ... things must be going well."

In the hall were neither voices nor footsteps, and the whole house, notwithstanding its brilliant lights, seemed asleep. Only now, for the first time, the doctor and Abogin, after their sojourn in darkness, could see one another plainly. Kirilov was tall, round-shouldered, and ugly, and was carelessly dressed. His thick, almost negro, lips, his eagle nose, and his withered, indifferent glance, expressed something cutting, unkindly, and rude. His uncombed hair, his sunken temples, the premature grey in the long, narrow beard, through which appeared his chin, the pale grey of his skin, and his careless, angular manners, all reflected a career of need endured, of misfortune, of weariness with life and with men. Judging by his dry figure, no one would ever believe that this man had a wife, and that he had wept over his child.

Abogin was a contrast. He was a thick-set, solid blond, with a big head, with heavy but soft features; and he was dressed elegantly and fashionably. From his carriage, from his closely-buttoned frock-coat, from his mane of hair, and from his face, flowed something noble and leonine; he walked with his head erect and his chest expanded, he spoke in an agreeable baritone, and the way in which he took off his muffler and smoothed his hair breathed a delicate, feminine elegance. Even his pallor, and the childish terror with which, while taking off his coat, he looked up the staircase, did not detract from his dignity, or diminish the satiety, health, and aplomb which his whole figure breathed.

"There is no one about ... I can hear nothing," he said, going upstairs. "There is no confusion.... God is merciful!"

He led the doctor through the hall into a great drawing-room, with a black piano, and lustres in white covers. From this they went into a small, cosy, and well-furnished dining-room, full of a pleasant, rosy twilight.

"Wait a moment," said Abogin, "I shall be back immediately. I will look around and tell them you are here...."

Kirilov remained alone. The luxury of the room, the pleasant twilight, and even his presence in the unknown house of a stranger, which had the character of an adventure, apparently did not affect him. He lay back in the armchair and examined his hands, burnt with carbolic acid. Only faintly could he see the bright red lamp shade and a violoncello case. But looking at the other side of the room, where ticked a clock, he noticed a stuffed wolf, as solid and sated as Abogin himself.

Not a sound.... Then in a distant room someone loudly ejaculated "Ah!"; a glass door, probably the door of a wardrobe, closed ... and again all was silent. After waiting a moment Kirilov ceased to examine his hands, and raised his eyes upon the door through which Abogin had gone.

On the threshold stood Abogin. But it was not the Abogin who had left the room. The

expression of satiety, the delicate elegance had vanished; his face, his figure, his pose were contorted by a repulsive expression not quite of terror, not quite of physical pain. His nose, his lips, his moustaches, all his features twitched; it seemed they wished to tear themselves off his face; and his eyes were transfigured as if from torture.

Abogin walked heavily into the middle of the room, bent himself in two, groaned, and shook his fists. "Deceived!" he shouted, with a strong hissing accentuation of the second syllable. "Cheated! Gone! Got ill, and sent for a doctor, only to fly with that buffoon Papchinsky! My God!"

Abogin walked heavily up to the doctor, stretched up to his face his white, soft fists, and, shaking them, continued in a howl:

"Gone! Deceived! But why this extra lie? My God! My God! But why this filthy swindler's trick, this devilish reptile play? What have I ever done? Gone!"

The tears burst from his eyes. He turned on one foot and walked up and down the room. And now in his short coat, in the narrow, fashionable trousers, which made his legs seem too thin for his body, with his great head and mane, he still more closely resembled a lion. On the doctor's indifferent face appeared curiosity. He rose and looked at Abogin.

"Be so good as to tell me ... where is the patient?"

"Patient! Patient!" cried Abogin, with a laugh, a sob, and a shaking of his fists. "This is no sick woman, but a woman accursed! Meanness, baseness, lower than Satan himself could have conceived! Sent for a doctor, to fly with him—to fly with that buffoon, that clown, that Alphonse. Oh, God, better a thousand times that she had died! I cannot bear it.... I cannot bear it!"

The doctor drew himself up. His eyes blinked and filled with team, his narrow beard moved to the right and to the left in accord with the movement of his jaws.

"Be so good as to inform me what is the meaning of this?" he asked, looking around him in curiosity. "My child lies dead, my wife in despair is left alone in a great house. I myself can hardly stand on my feet, for three nights I have not slept, and what is this? am brought here to play in some trivial comedy, to take the part of a property-man.... I don't understand it!"

Abogin opened one of his fists, flung upon the floor a crumpled paper, and trod on it as upon an insect which he wished to crush.

"And I never saw it! I never understood!" he said through his clenched teeth, shaking one of his fists beside his face, with an expression as if someone had trod upon a corn. "I never noticed that he rode here every day, never noticed that to-day he came in a carriage! Why in a carriage? And I never noticed! Fool!"

"I don't understand ... I really don't understand," stammered Kirilov. "What is the meaning of this? This is practical joking at the expense of another ... it is mocking at human suffering. It is impossible. ... I have never heard of such a thing!"

With the dull astonishment depicted on his face of a man who is only beginning to understand that he has been badly insulted, the doctor shrugged his shoulders, and not knowing what to say, threw himself in exhaustion into the chair.

"Got tired of me, loved another! Well, God be with them! But why this deception, why this base, this traitorous trick?" cried Abogin in a whining voice. "Why? For

what? What have I done to her? Listen, doctor," he said passionately, coming nearer to Kirilov. "You are the involuntary witness of my misfortune, and I will not conceal from you the truth. I swear to you that I loved that woman, that I loved her to adoration, that I was her slave. For her I gave up everything; I quarrelled with my parents, I threw up my career and my music, I forgave her what I could not have forgiven in my own mother or sister.... I have never said an unkind word to her.... I gave her no cause! But why this lie? I do not ask for love, but why this shameless deception? If a woman doesn't love, then let her say so openly, honestly, all the more since she knew my views on that subject...."

With tears in his eyes, and with his body trembling all over, Abogin sincerely poured forth to the doctor his whole soul. He spoke passionately, with both hands pressed to his heart, he revealed family secrets without a moment's hesitation; and, it seemed, was even relieved when these secrets escaped him. Had he spoken thus for an hour, for two hours, and poured out his soul, he would certainly have felt better. Who knows whether the doctor might not have listened to him, sympathised with him as a friend, and, even without protest, become reconciled to his own unhappiness.... But it happened otherwise. While Abogin spoke, the insulted doctor changed. The indifference and surprise on his face gave way little by little to an expression of bitter offence, indignation, and wrath. His features became sharper, harder, and more disagreeable. And finally when Abogin held before his eyes the photograph of a young woman with a face handsome but dry and inexpressive as a nun's, and asked him could he, looking at this photograph, imagine that she was capable of telling a lie, the doctor suddenly leaped up, averted his eyes, and said, rudely ringing out every word:

"What do you mean by talking to me like this? I don't want to hear you! I will not listen!" He shouted and banged his fist upon the table. "What have I to do with your stupid secrets, devil take them! You dare to communicate to me these base trifles! Do you not see that I have already been insulted enough? Am I a lackey who will bear insults without retaliation?"

Abogin staggered backwards, and looked at Kirilov in amazement.

"Why did you bring me here?" continued the doctor, shaking his beard.... "If you marry filth, then storm with your filth, and play your melodramas; but what affair is that of mine? What have I to do with your romances? Leave me alone! Display your well-born meanness, show off your humane ideas, (the doctor pointed to the violoncello case) play on your double basses and trombones, get as fat as a capon, but do not dare to mock the personality of another! If you cannot respect it, then rid it of your detestable attention!"

Abogin reddened. "What does all this mean?" he asked.

"It means this: that it is base and infamous to play practical jokes on other men. I am a doctor; you regard doctors and all other working men who do not smell of scent and prostitution as your lackeys and your servants. But reflect, reflect—no one has I given you the right to make a property man of a suffering human being!"

"You dare to speak this to me?" said Abogin; and his face again twitched, this time plainly from anger.

"Yes ... and you, knowing of the misery in my home, have dared to drag me here to witness this insanity," cried the doctor, again banging his fist upon the table. "Who gave you the right to mock at human misfortune?"

"You are out of your mind," said Abogin. "You are not generous. I also am deeply unhappy, and...."

"Unhappy!" cried Kirilov, with a contemptuous laugh. "Do not touch that word; it ill becomes you. Oafs who have no money to meet their bills also call themselves unfortunate. Geese that are stuffed with too much fat are also unhappy. Insignificant curs!"

"You forget yourself, you forget yourself!" screamed Abogin. "For words like those ... people are horsewhipped. Do you hear me?"

He suddenly thrust his hand into his side pocket, took out a pocket-book, and taking two bank-notes, flung them on the table.

"There you have the money for your visit!" he said, dilating his nostrils. "You are paid!"

"Do not dare to offer money to me," cried Kirilov, sweeping the notes on to the floor. "For insults money is not the payment."

The two men stood face to face, and in their anger flung insults at one another. It is certain that never in their lives had they uttered so many unjust, inhuman, and ridiculous words. In each was fully expressed the egoism of the unfortunate. And men who are unfortunate, egoistical, angry, unjust, and heartless are even less than stupid men capable of understanding one another. For misfortune does not unite, but severs; and those who should be bound by community of sorrow are much more unjust and heartless than the happy and contented.

"Be so good as to send me home!" cried the doctor at last.

Abogin rang sharply. Receiving no answer he rang again, and angrily flung the bell upon the floor; it fell heavily on the carpet and emitted a plaintive and ominous sound.... A footman appeared.

"Where have you been hiding yourself? May Satan take you!" roared Abogin, rushing at him with clenched fists. "Where have you been? Go, tell them at once to give this gentleman the calèche, and get the carriage ready for me!... Stop!" he cried, when the servant turned to go. "To-morrow let none of you traitors remain in this house! The whole pack of you! I will get others! Curs!"

Awaiting their carriages, Abogin and Kirilov were silent. The first had already regained his expression of satiety and his delicate elegance. He walked up and down the room, shook his head gracefully, and apparently thought something out. His anger had not yet evaporated, but he tried to look as if he did not notice his enemy.... The doctor stood, with one hand on the edge of the table, and looked at Abogin with deep, somewhat cynical and ugly contempt—with the eyes of sorrow and misfortune when they see before them satiety and elegance.

When, after a short delay, the doctor took his seat in the calèche, his eyes retained their contemptuous look. It was dark, much darker than an hour before. The red half-moon had fallen below the hill, and the clouds that had guarded it lay in black spots among the stars. A carriage with red lamps rattled along the road, and overtook Kirilov. It was Abogin, driving away to protest ... and make a fool of himself....

And all the way home Kirilov thought, not of his wife or of dead Andreï, but of Abogin and of the people who lived in the house which he had just left. His thoughts were unjust, heartless, inhuman. He condemned Abogin and his wife, and Papchinsky, and all that class of persons who live in a rosy twilight and smell of perfumes; all the way he hated and despised them to the point of torture; and his mind was full of unshakeable convictions as to the worthlessness of such people.

Time will pass; the sorrow of Kirilov will pass away also, but this conviction—unjust, unworthy of a human heart—will never pass away, and will remain with the doctor to the day of his death.