

In Exile, Chekhov Anton

Old Semion, nicknamed Wiseacre, and a young Tartar, whom nobody knew by name, sat by the bonfire at the side of the river. The other three ferrymen lay in the hut. Semion, an old man of sixty, gaunt and toothless, but broad-shouldered and healthy in appearance, was drunk; he would have been asleep long ago if it had not been for the flagon in his pocket, and his fear that his companions in the hut might ask him for vodka. The Tartar was ill and tired; and sat there, wrapped up in his rags, holding forth on the glories of life in Simbirsk, and boasting of the handsome and clever wife he had left behind him. He was about twenty-five years old, but now in the light of the camp fire his pale face, with its melancholy and sickly expression, seemed the face of a lad.

"Yes, you can hardly call it paradise," said Wiseacre. "You can take it all in at a glance—water, bare banks, and clay about you, and nothing more. Holy Week is over, but there is still ice floating down the river, and this very morning snow."

"Misery, misery!" moaned the Tartar, looking round him in terror.

Ten paces below them lay the river, dark and cold, grumbling, it seemed, at itself, as it clove a path through the steep clay banks, and bore itself swiftly to the sea. Up against the bank lay one of the great barges which the ferrymen call karbases. On the opposite side, far away, rising and falling, and mingling with one another, crept little serpents of fire. It was the burning of last year's grass. And behind the serpents of fire darkness again. From the river came the noise of little ice floes crashing against the barge. Darkness only, and cold!

The Tartar looked at the sky. There were as many stars there as in his own country, just the same blackness above him. But something was lacking. At home in Simbirsk government there were no such stars and no such heaven.

"Misery, misery!" he repeated.

"You'll get used to it," said Wiseacre, grinning. "You're young and foolish now—your mother's milk is still wet on your lips, only youth and folly could make you imagine there's no one more miserable than you. But the time'll come when you'll say, 'God grant every one such a life as this!' Look at me, for instance. In a week's time the water will have fallen, we'll launch the small boat, you'll be off to Siberia to amuse yourselves, and I'll remain here and row from one side to another. Twenty years now I've been ferrying. Day and night! Salmon and pike beneath the water and I above it! And God be thanked! I don't want for anything! God grant everyone such a life!"

The Tartar thrust some brushwood into the fire, lay closer to it, and said:

"My father is ill. When he dies my mother and wife are coming. They promised me."

"What do you want with a mother and wife?" asked Wiseacre, "put that out of your head, it's all nonsense, brother! It's the devil's doing to make you think such thoughts. Don't listen to him, accursed! If he begins about women, answer him back, 'Don't want them.' If he comes about freedom, answer him back, 'Don't want it.' You don't want anything. Neither father, nor mother, nor wife, nor freedom, nor house, nor home. You don't want anything, d—n them!"

Wiseacre took a drink from his flask and continued: "I, brother, am no simple mujik, but a sexton's son, and when I lived in freedom in Kursk wore a frockcoat, yet now I have brought myself to such a point that I can sleep naked on the earth and eat grass. And God grant everyone such a life! I don't want anything, and I don't fear anyone, and I know there is no one richer and freer than I in the world."

The first day I came here from Russia I persisted, 'I don't want anything.' The devil took me on also about wife, and home, and freedom, but I answered him back 'I don't want anything.' I tired him out, and now, as you see, I live well, and don't complain. If any one bates an inch to the devil, or listens to him even once, he's lost—there's no salvation for him—he sinks in the bog to the crown of his head, and never gets out.

"Don't think it's only our brother, the stupid mujik, that gets lost. The well-born and educated lose themselves also. Fifteen years ago they sent a gentleman here from Russia. He wouldn't share something with his brothers, and did something dishonest with a will. Belonged, they said, to a prince's or a baron's family—maybe he was an official, who can tell? Well, anyway he came, and the first thing he did was to buy himself a house and land in Mukhortinsk. 'I want,' he says, 'to live by my work, by the sweat of my brow, because,' he says, 'I am no longer a gentleman, but a convict.' 'Well,' I said, 'may God help him, he can do nothing better.'

He was a young man, fussy, and fond of talking; mowed his own grass, caught fish, and rode on horseback sixty versts a day. That was the cause of the misfortune. From the first year he used to ride to Guirino, to the post office. He would stand with me in the boat and sigh: 'Akh, Semion, how long they are sending me money from home.' 'You don't want it, Vassili Sergeyitch,' I answered, 'what good is money to you? Give up the old ways, forget them as if they never were, as if you had dreamt them, and begin to live anew. Pay no attention,' I said, 'to the devil, he'll bring you nothing but ill. At present, you want only money, but in a little time you'll want something more. If you want to be happy, don't wish for anything at all. Yes.... Already,' I used to say to him, 'fortune has done you and me a bad turn—there's no good begging charity from her, and bowing down to her—you must despise and laugh at her. Then she'll begin to laugh herself.' So I used to talk to him.

"Well, two years after he came, he drove down to the ferry in good spirits. He was rubbing his hands and laughing. 'I am going to Guirino,' he says, 'to meet my wife. She has taken pity on me, and is coming. She is a good wife.' He was out of breath from joy.

"The next day he came back with his wife. She was a young woman, a good-looking one, in a hat, with a little girl in her arms. And my Vassili Sergeyitch bustles about her, feasts his eyes on her, and praises her up to the skies, 'Yes, brother Semion, even in Siberia people live.' 'Well,' I thought, 'he won't always think so.' From that time out, every week, he rode to Guirino to inquire whether money had been sent to him from Russia. Money he wanted without end. 'For my sake,' he used to say, 'she is burying her youth and beauty in Siberia, and sharing my miserable life. For this reason I must procure her every enjoyment.' And to make things gayer for her, he makes acquaintance with officials and all kinds of people.

All this company, of course, had to be fed and kept in drink, a piano must be got, and a shaggy dog for the sofa—in one word, extravagance, luxury.... She didn't live with him long. How could she? Mud, water, cold, neither vegetable nor fruit, bears and drunkards around her, and she a woman from Petersburg, petted and spoiled.... Of course, she got sick of it.... Yes, and a husband, too, no longer a man, but a convict.... Well, after three years, I remember, on Assumption Eve, I heard shouting from the opposite bank. When I rowed across I saw the lady all wrapped up, and with her a young man, one of the officials. A troika! I rowed them across, they got into the troika and drove off. Towards morning, Vassili Sergeyitch drives up in hot haste. 'Did my wife go by,' he asked, 'with a man in spectacles?' 'Yes,' I said, 'seek the wind in the field.' He drove after them, and chased them for five days. When I ferried him back, he threw himself into the bottom of the boat, beat his head against the planks, and howled. I laughed and reminded him, 'even in Siberia people live!' But that only made him worse.

"After this he tried to regain his freedom. His wife had gone back to Russia, and he thought only of seeing her, and getting her to return to him. Every day he galloped off to one place or another, one day to the post office, the next to town to see the authorities. He sent in petitions asking for pardon and permission to return to Russia—on telegrams alone, he used to say, he spent two hundred roubles. He sold his land and mortgaged his house to a Jew. He got grey-haired and bent, and his face turned yellow like a consumptive's. He could not speak without tears coming into his eyes. Eight years he spent sending in petitions. Then he came to life again; he had got a new consolation. The daughter, you see, was growing up. He doted on her. And to tell the truth, she wasn't bad-looking—pretty, black-browed, and high-spirited. Every Sunday he rode with her to the church at Guirino.

They would stand side by side in the boat, she laughing, and he never lifting his eyes from her. 'Yes,' he said, 'Semion, even in Siberia people live, and are happy. See what a daughter I've got! you might go a thousand versts and never see another like her.' The daughter, as I said, was really good-looking. 'But wait a little,' I used to say to myself, 'the girl is young, the blood flows in her veins, she wants to live; and what is life here?' Anyway, brother, she began to grieve. Pined and declined, dwindled away, got ill, and now can't stand on her legs. Consumption! There's your Siberian happiness! That's the way people live in Siberia!... And my Vassili Sergeyitch spends his time driving about to doctors and bringing them home. Once let him hear there's a doctor or a magic curer within two or three hundred versts, and after him he must go.... It's terrible to think of the amount of money he spends, he might as well drink it.... She'll die all the same, nothing'll save her, and then he'll be altogether lost. Whether he hangs himself from grief or runs off to Russia it's all the same. If he runs away they'll catch him, then we'll have a trial and penal servitude, and the rest of it...."

"It was very well for him," said the Tartar, shuddering with the cold.

"What was well?"

"Wife and daughter.... Whatever he suffers, whatever punishment he'll have, at any rate he saw them.... You say you don't want anything. But to have nothing is bad. His wife lived with him three years, God granted him that. To have nothing is bad, but three years is good. You don't understand."

Trembling with cold, finding only with painful difficulty the proper Russian words, the Tartar began to beg that God might save him from dying in a strange land, and being buried in the cold earth. If his wife were to come to him, even for one day, even for one hour, for such happiness he would consent to undergo the most frightful tortures, and thank God for them. Better one day's happiness than nothing!

And he again told the story of how he had left at home a handsome and clever wife. Then, putting both his hands to his head, he began to cry, and to assure Semion that he was guilty of nothing, and was suffering unjustly. His two brothers and his uncle had stolen a peasant's horses, and beaten the old man half to death. But society had treated him unfairly, and sent the three brothers to Siberia, while the uncle, a rich man, remained at home.

"You'll get used to it!" said Semion.

The Tartar said nothing, and only turned his wet eyes on the fire; his face expressed doubt and alarm, as if he did not yet understand why he lay there in darkness and in cold among strangers, and not at Simbirsk. Wiseacre lay beside the fire, laughed silently at something, and hummed a tune.

"What happiness can she have with her father?" he began after a few minutes'

silence. "He loves her, and finds her a consolation, that's true But you can't put your finger in his eyes; he's a cross old man, a stern old man. And with young girls you don't want sternness. What they want is caresses, and ha! ha! ha! and ho! ho! ho!—perfume and pomade. Yes ... Akh, business, business!" He sighed, lifting himself clumsily. "Vodka all gone—means it's time to go to bed. Well, I'm off, brother."

The Tartar added some more brushwood to the fire, lay down again, and began to think of his native village and of his wife; if his wife would only come for a week, for a day, let her go back if she liked! Better a few days, even a day, than nothing! But if his wife kept her promise and came, what would he feed her with? Where would she live?

"How can you live without anything to eat?" he asked aloud.

For working day and night at an oar they paid him only ten kopecks a day. True, passengers sometimes gave money for tea and vodka, but the others shared this among themselves, gave nothing to the Tartar, and only laughed at him. From poverty he was hungry, cold, and frightened. His whole body ached and trembled. If he went into the hut there would be nothing for him to cover himself with. Here, too, he had nothing to cover himself with, but he might keep up the fire.

In a week the waters would have fallen, and the ferrymen, with the exception of Semion, would no longer be wanted. The Tartar must begin his tramp from village to village asking for bread and work. His wife was only seventeen years old; she was pretty, modest, and spoiled. How could she tramp with uncovered face through the villages and ask for bread? It was too horrible to think of.

When next the Tartar looked up it was dawn. The barge, the willows, and the ripples stood out plainly. You might turn round and see the clayey slope, with its brown thatched hut at the bottom, and above it the huts of the village. In the village the cocks already crowed.

The clayey slope, the barge, the river, the strange wicked people, hunger, cold, sickness—in reality there was none of this at all. It was only a dream, thought the Tartar. He felt that he was sleeping, and heard himself snore. Of course, he was at home in Simbirsk, he had only to call his wife by name and she would call back; in the next room lay his old mother.... What terrible things are dreams!... Where do they come from?... The Tartar smiled and opened his eyes. What river was this? The Volga?

It began to snow.

"Ahoy!" came a voice from the other side, "boatman!"

The Tartar shook himself, and went to awaken his companions. Dragging on their sheepskin coats on the way, swearing in voices hoarse from sleep, the ferrymen appeared on the bank. After sleep, the river, with its piercing breeze, evidently seemed to them a nightmare. They tumbled lazily into the boat. The Tartar and three ferrymen took up the long, wide-bladed oars which looked in the darkness like the claws of a crab. Semion threw himself on his stomach across the helm. On the opposite bank the shouting continued, and twice revolver shots were heard. The stranger evidently thought that the ferrymen were asleep or had gone into the village to the kabak.

"You'll get across in time," said Wiseacre in the tone of a man who is convinced that in this world there is no need for hurry. "It's all the same in the end; you'll gain nothing by making a noise."

The heavy, awkward barge parted from the bank, cleaving a path through the willows, and only the slow movement of the willows backward showed that it was moving at all. The ferrymen slowly raised their oars in time. Wiseacre lay on his stomach across the helm, and, describing a bow in the air, swung slowly from one side to the other. In the dim light it seemed as if the men were sitting on some long-clawed antediluvian animal, floating with it into the cold desolate land that is sometimes seen in nightmares.

The willows soon were passed and the open water reached. On the other bank the creak and measured dipping of the oars were already audible, and cries of "Quicker, quicker!" came back across the water. Ten minutes more and the barge struck heavily against the landing-stage.

"It keeps on falling, it keeps on falling," grumbled Semion, rubbing the snow from his face. "Where it all comes from God only knows!"

On the bank stood a frail old man of low stature in a short foxskin coat and white lambskin cap. He stood immovable at some distance from the horses; his face had a gloomy concentrated expression, as if he were trying to remember something, and were angry with his disobedient memory. When Semion approached him, and, smiling, took off his cap, he began:

"I am going in great haste to Anastasevki. My daughter is worse. In Anastasevka, I am told, a new doctor has been appointed."

The ferrymen dragged the cart on to the barge, and started back. The man, whom Semion called Vassili Sergeyitch, stood all the time immovable, tightly compressing his thick fingers, and when the driver asked for permission to smoke in his presence, answered nothing, as if he had not heard. Semion, lying on his stomach across the helm, looked at him maliciously, and said:

"Even in Siberia people live! Even in Siberia!" Wiseacre's face bore a triumphant expression, as if he had demonstrated something, and rejoiced that things had justified his prediction. The miserable, helpless expression of the man in the foxskin coat evidently only increased his delight.

"It's muddy travelling at this time, Vassili Sergeyitch," he said, as they harnessed the horses on the river bank. "You might have waited another week or two till it got drier. For the matter of that, you might just as well not go at all.... If there was any sense in going it would be another matter, but you yourself know that you might go on for ever and nothing would come of it.... Well?"

Vassili Sergeyitch silently handed the men some money, climbed into the cart, and drove off.

"After that doctor again," said Semion, shuddering from the cold. "Yes, look for a real doctor—chase the wind in the field, seize the devil by the tail, damn him. Akh, what characters these people are! Lord forgive me, a sinner!"

The Tartar walked up to Semion, and looked at him with hatred and repulsion. Then, trembling, and mixing Tartar words with his broken Russian, he said:

"He is a good man, a good man, and you are bad. You are bad. He is a good soul, a great one, but you are a beast.... He is living, but you are dead.... God made men that they might have joys and sorrows, but you ask for nothing.... You are a stone, —earth! A stone wants nothing, and you want nothing. ... You are a stone, and God has no love for you. But him He loves!"

All laughed; the Tartar alone frowned disgustedly, shook his hand, and, pulling his

raggedly round him, walked back to the fire. Semion and the ferrymen returned to the hut.

"Cold!" said one ferryman in a hoarse voice, stretching himself on the straw with which the floor was covered.

"Yes, it's not warm," said another. "A galley-slave's life!"

All lay down. The door opened before the wind, and snowflakes whirled through the hut. But no one rose to shut it, all were too cold and lazy.

"I, for one, am all right," said Semion. "God grant everyone such a life."

"You, it is known, were born a galley-slave—the devil himself wouldn't take you."

From the yard came strange sounds like the whining of a dog.

"What's that? Who's there?"

"It's the Tartar crying."

"Well ... what a character!"

"He'll get used to it," said Semion, and went off to sleep.

Soon all the others followed his example. But the door remained unshut.