

SHORT STORY AMERICA

CHAMPAGNE

A WAYFARER'S STORY

ANTON CHEKHOV

IN the year in which my story begins I had a job at a little station on one of our southwestern railways. Whether I had a gay or a dull life at the station you can judge from the fact that for fifteen miles round there was not one human habitation, not one woman, not one decent tavern; and in those days I was young, strong, hot-headed, giddy, and foolish. The only distraction I could possibly find was in the windows of the passenger trains, and in the vile vodka which the Jews drugged with thorn-apple. Sometimes there would be a glimpse of a woman's head at a carriage window, and one would stand like a statue without breathing and stare at it until the train turned into an almost invisible speck; or one would drink all one could of the loathsome vodka till one was stupefied and did not feel the passing of the long hours and days. Upon me, a native of the north, the steppe produced the effect of a deserted Tatar cemetery. In the summer the steppe with its solemn calm, the monotonous chur of the grasshoppers, the transparent moonlight from which one could not hide, reduced me to listless melancholy; and in the winter the irreproachable whiteness of the steppe, its cold distance, long nights, and howling wolves oppressed me like a heavy nightmare. There were several people living at the station: my wife and I, a deaf and scrofulous telegraph clerk, and three watchmen. My assistant, a young man who was in consumption, used to go for treatment to the town, where he stayed for months at a time, leaving his duties to me together with the right of pocketing his salary. I had no children, no cake would have tempted visitors to come and see me, and

I could only visit other officials on the line, and that no oftener than once a month.

I remember my wife and I saw the New Year in. We sat at table, chewed lazily, and heard the deaf telegraph clerk monotonously tapping on his apparatus in the next room. I had already drunk five glasses of drugged vodka, and, propping my heavy head on my fist, thought of my overpowering boredom from which there was no escape, while my wife sat beside me and did not take her eyes off me. She looked at me as no one can look but a woman who has nothing in this world but a handsome husband. She loved me madly, slavishly, and not merely my good looks, or my soul, but my sins, my ill-humor and boredom, and even my cruelty when, in drunken fury, not knowing how to vent my ill-humor, I tormented her with reproaches.

In spite of the boredom which was consuming me, we were preparing to see the New Year in with exceptional festiveness, and were awaiting midnight with some impatience. The fact is, we had in reserve two bottles of champagne, the real thing, with the label of Veuve Clicquot; this treasure I had won the previous autumn in a bet with the station-master of D. when I was drinking with him at a christening. It sometimes happens during a lesson in mathematics, when the very air is still with boredom, a butterfly flutters into the class-room; the boys toss their heads and begin watching its flight with interest, as though they saw before them not a butterfly but something new and strange; in the same way ordinary champagne, chancing to come into our dreary station, roused us. We sat in silence looking alternately at the clock and at the bottles.

When the hands pointed to five minutes to twelve I slowly began uncorking a bottle. I don't know whether I was affected by the vodka, or whether the bottle was wet, but all I remember is that when the cork flew up to the ceiling with a bang, my bottle slipped out of my hands and fell on the floor. Not more than a glass of the wine was spilt, as I managed to catch the bottle and put my thumb over the foaming neck.

"Well, may the New Year bring you happiness!" I said, filling two glasses. "Drink!"

My wife took her glass and fixed her frightened eyes on me. Her face was

pale and wore a look of horror.

"Did you drop the bottle?" she asked.

"Yes. But what of that?"

"It's unlucky," she said, putting down her glass and turning paler still. "It's a bad omen. It means that some misfortune will happen to us this year."

"What a silly thing you are," I sighed. "You are a clever woman, and yet you talk as much nonsense as an old nurse. Drink."

"God grant it is nonsense, but... something is sure to happen! You'll see."

She did not even sip her glass, she moved away and sank into thought. I uttered a few stale commonplaces about superstition, drank half a bottle, paced up and down, and then went out of the room.

Outside there was the still frosty night in all its cold, inhospitable beauty. The moon and two white fluffy clouds beside it hung just over the station, motionless as though glued to the spot, and looked as though waiting for something. A faint transparent light came from them and touched the white earth softly, as though afraid of wounding her modesty, and lighted up everything--the snowdrifts, the embankment.... It was still.

I walked along the railway embankment.

"Silly woman," I thought, looking at the sky spangled with brilliant stars. "Even if one admits that omens sometimes tell the truth, what evil can happen to us? The misfortunes we have endured already, and which are facing us now, are so great that it is difficult to imagine anything worse. What further harm can you do a fish which has been caught and fried and served up with sauce?"

A poplar covered with hoar frost looked in the bluish darkness like a giant wrapt in a shroud. It looked at me sullenly and dejectedly, as though like me it realized its loneliness. I stood a long while looking

at it.

"My youth is thrown away for nothing, like a useless cigarette end," I went on musing. "My parents died when I was a little child; I was expelled from the high school, I was born of a noble family, but I have received neither education nor breeding, and I have no more knowledge than the humblest mechanic. I have no refuge, no relations, no friends, no work I like. I am not fitted for anything, and in the prime of my powers I am good for nothing but to be stuffed into this little station; I have known nothing but trouble and failure all my life. What can happen worse?"

Red lights came into sight in the distance. A train was moving towards me. The slumbering steppe listened to the sound of it. My thoughts were so bitter that it seemed to me that I was thinking aloud and that the moan of the telegraph wire and the rumble of the train were expressing my thoughts.

"What can happen worse? The loss of my wife?" I wondered. "Even that is not terrible. It's no good hiding it from my conscience: I don't love my wife. I married her when I was only a wretched boy; now I am young and vigorous, and she has gone off and grown older and sillier, stuffed from her head to her heels with conventional ideas. What charm is there in her maudlin love, in her hollow chest, in her lusterless eyes? I put up with her, but I don't love her. What can happen? My youth is being wasted, as the saying is, for a pinch of snuff. Women flit before my eyes only in the carriage windows, like falling stars. Love I never had and have not. My manhood, my courage, my power of feeling are going to ruin.... Everything is being thrown away like dirt, and all my wealth here in the steppe is not worth a farthing."

The train rushed past me with a roar and indifferently cast the glow of its red lights upon me. I saw it stop by the green lights of the station, stop for a minute and rumble off again. After walking a mile and a half I went back. Melancholy thoughts haunted me still. Painful as it was to me, yet I remember I tried as it were to make my thoughts still gloomier and more melancholy. You know people who are vain and not very clever have moments when the consciousness that they are miserable affords them positive satisfaction, and they even coquet with their misery for their own entertainment. There was a great deal of truth

in what I thought, but there was also a great deal that was absurd and conceited, and there was something boyishly defiant in my question: "What could happen worse?"

"And what is there to happen?" I asked myself. "I think I have endured everything. I've been ill, I've lost money, I get reprimanded by my superiors every day, and I go hungry, and a mad wolf has run into the station yard. What more is there? I have been insulted, humiliated,... and I have insulted others in my time. I have not been a criminal, it is true, but I don't think I am capable of crime--I am not afraid of being hauled up for it."

The two little clouds had moved away from the moon and stood at a little distance, looking as though they were whispering about something which the moon must not know. A light breeze was racing across the steppe, bringing the faint rumble of the retreating train.

My wife met me at the doorway. Her eyes were laughing gaily and her whole face was beaming with good-humor.

"There is news for you!" she whispered. "Make haste, go to your room and put on your new coat; we have a visitor."

"What visitor?"

"Aunt Natalya Petrovna has just come by the train."

"What Natalya Petrovna?"

"The wife of my uncle Semyon Fyodoritch. You don't know her. She is a very nice, good woman."

Probably I frowned, for my wife looked grave and whispered rapidly:

"Of course it is queer her having come, but don't be cross, Nikolay, and don't be hard on her. She is unhappy, you know; Uncle Semyon Fyodoritch really is ill-natured and tyrannical, it is difficult to live with him. She says she will only stay three days with us, only till she gets a letter from her brother."

My wife whispered a great deal more nonsense to me about her despotic uncle; about the weakness of mankind in general and of young wives in particular; about its being our duty to give shelter to all, even great sinners, and so on. Unable to make head or tail of it, I put on my new coat and went to make acquaintance with my "aunt."

A little woman with large black eyes was sitting at the table. My table, the gray walls, my roughly-made sofa, everything to the tiniest grain of dust seemed to have grown younger and more cheerful in the presence of this new, young, beautiful, and dissolute creature, who had a most subtle perfume about her. And that our visitor was a lady of easy virtue I could see from her smile, from her scent, from the peculiar way in which she glanced and made play with her eyelashes, from the tone in which she talked with my wife--a respectable woman. There was no need to tell me she had run away from her husband, that her husband was old and despotic, that she was good-natured and lively; I took it all in at the first glance. Indeed, it is doubtful whether there is a man in all Europe who cannot spot at the first glance a woman of a certain temperament.

"I did not know I had such a big nephew!" said my aunt, holding out her hand to me and smiling.

"And I did not know I had such a pretty aunt," I answered.

Supper began over again. The cork flew with a bang out of the second bottle, and my aunt swallowed half a glassful at a gulp, and when my wife went out of the room for a moment my aunt did not scruple to drain a full glass. I was drunk both with the wine and with the presence of a woman. Do you remember the song?

"Eyes black as pitch, eyes full of passion,
Eyes burning bright and beautiful,
How I love you,
How I fear you!"

I don't remember what happened next. Anyone who wants to know how love begins may read novels and long stories; I will put it shortly and in the words of the same silly song:

"It was an evil hour
When first I met you."

Everything went head over heels to the devil. I remember a fearful, frantic whirlwind which sent me flying round like a feather. It lasted a long while, and swept from the face of the earth my wife and my aunt herself and my strength. From the little station in the steppe it has flung me, as you see, into this dark street.

Now tell me what further evil can happen to me?