

# SHORT STORY AMERICA

## DARKNESS

ANTON CHEKHOV

A YOUNG peasant, with white eyebrows and eyelashes and broad cheekbones, in a torn sheepskin and big black felt overboots, waited till the Zemstvo doctor had finished seeing his patients and came out to go home from the hospital; then he went up to him, diffidently.

"Please, your honour," he said.

"What do you want?"

The young man passed the palm of his hand up and over his nose, looked at the sky, and then answered:

"Please, your honour. . . . You've got my brother Vaska the blacksmith from Varvarino in the convict ward here, your honour. . . ."

"Yes, what then?"

"I am Vaska's brother, you see. . . . Father has the two of us: him, Vaska, and me, Kirila; besides us there are three sisters, and Vaska's a married man with a little one. . . . There are a lot of us and no one to work. . . . In the smithy it's nearly two years now since the forge has been heated. I am at the cotton factory, I can't do smith's work, and how can father work? Let alone work, he can't eat properly, he can't lift the spoon to his mouth."

"What do you want from me?"

"Be merciful! Let Vaska go!"

The doctor looked wonderingly at Kirila, and without saying a word walked on. The young peasant ran on in front and flung himself in a heap at his feet.

"Doctor, kind gentleman!" he besought him, blinking and again passing his open hand over his nose. "Show heavenly mercy; let Vaska go home! We shall remember you in our prayers for ever! Your honour, let him go! They are all starving! Mother's wailing day in, day out, Vaska's wife's wailing . . . it's worse than death! I don't care to look upon the light of day. Be merciful; let him go, kind gentleman!"

"Are you stupid or out of your senses?" asked the doctor angrily. "How can I let him go? Why, he is a convict."

Kirila began crying. "Let him go!"

"Tfoo, queer fellow! What right have I? Am I a gaoler or what? They brought him to the hospital for me to treat him, but I have as much right to let him out as I have to put you in prison, silly fellow!"

"But they have shut him up for nothing! He was in prison a year before the trial, and now there is no saying what he is there for. It would have been a different thing if he had murdered someone, let us say, or stolen horses; but as it is, what is it all about?"

"Very likely, but how do I come in?"

"They shut a man up and they don't know themselves what for. He was drunk, your honour, did not know what he was doing, and even hit father on the ear and scratched his own cheek on a branch, and two of our fellows--they wanted some Turkish tobacco, you see--began telling him to go with them and break into the Armenian's shop at night for tobacco. Being drunk, he obeyed them, the fool. They broke the lock, you know, got in, and did no end of mischief; they turned everything upside down, broke the windows, and scattered the flour about. They were drunk, that is all one can say! Well, the constable turned up . . . and with one thing and another they took them off to the magistrate. They have been a whole year in prison, and a week ago, on the Wednesday, they were all three tried in the town. A soldier stood behind them with a gun . . . people were sworn in. Vaska was less to blame than any, but the gentry decided that he was the ringleader. The

other two lads were sent to prison, but Vaska to a convict battalion for three years. And what for? One should judge like a Christian!"

"I have nothing to do with it, I tell you again. Go to the authorities."

"I have been already! I've been to the court; I have tried to send in a petition--they wouldn't take a petition; I have been to the police captain, and I have been to the examining magistrate, and everyone says, 'It is not my business!' Whose business is it, then? But there is no one above you here in the hospital; you do what you like, your honour."

"You simpleton," sighed the doctor, "once the jury have found him guilty, not the governor, not even the minister, could do anything, let alone the police captain. It's no good your trying to do anything!"

"And who judged him, then?"

"The gentlemen of the jury. . . ."

"They weren't gentlemen, they were our peasants! Andrey Guryev was one; Aloshka Huk was one."

"Well, I am cold talking to you. . . ."

The doctor waved his hand and walked quickly to his own door. Kirila was on the point of following him, but, seeing the door slam, he stopped.

For ten minutes he stood motionless in the middle of the hospital yard, and without putting on his cap stared at the doctor's house, then he heaved a deep sigh, slowly scratched himself, and walked towards the gate.

"To whom am I to go?" he muttered as he came out on to the road. "One says it is not his business, another says it is not his business. Whose business is it, then? No, till you grease their hands you will get nothing out of them. The doctor says that, but he keeps looking all the while at my fist to see whether I am going to give him a blue note. Well, brother, I'll go, if it has to be to the governor."

Shifting from one foot to the other and continually looking round him in an objectless way, he trudged lazily along the road and was apparently wondering where to go. . . . It was not cold and the snow faintly crunched under his feet. Not more than half a mile in front of him the wretched little district town in which his

brother had just been tried lay outstretched on the hill. On the right was the dark prison with its red roof and sentry-boxes at the corners; on the left was the big town copse, now covered with hoar-frost. It was still; only an old man, wearing a woman's short jacket and a huge cap, was walking ahead, coughing and shouting to a cow which he was driving to the town.

"Good-day, grandfather," said Kirila, overtaking him.

"Good-day. . . ."

"Are you driving it to the market?"

"No," the old man answered lazily.

"Are you a townsman?"

They got into conversation; Kirila told him what he had come to the hospital for, and what he had been talking about to the doctor.

"The doctor does not know anything about such matters, that is a sure thing," the old man said to him as they were both entering the town; "though he is a gentleman, he is only taught to cure by every means, but to give you real advice, or, let us say, write out a petition for you--that he cannot do. There are special authorities to do that. You have been to the justice of the peace and to the police captain--they are no good for your business either."

"Where am I to go?"

"The permanent member of the rural board is the chief person for peasants' affairs. Go to him, Mr. Sineokov."

"The one who is at Zolotovo?"

"Why, yes, at Zolotovo. He is your chief man. If it is anything that has to do with you peasants even the police captain has no authority against him."

"It's a long way to go, old man. . . . I dare say it's twelve miles and may be more."

"One who needs something will go seventy."

"That is so. . . . Should I send in a petition to him, or what?"

"You will find out there. If you should have a petition the clerk will write you one quick enough. The permanent member has a clerk."

After parting from the old man Kirila stood still in the middle of the square, thought a little, and walked back out of the town. He made up his mind to go to Zolotovo.

Five days later, as the doctor was on his way home after seeing his patients, he caught sight of Kirila again in his yard. This time the young peasant was not alone, but with a gaunt, very pale old man who nodded his head without ceasing, like a pendulum, and mumbled with his lips.

"Your honour, I have come again to ask your gracious mercy," began Kirila. "Here I have come with my father. Be merciful, let Vaska go! The permanent member would not talk to me. He said: 'Go away!'"

"Your honour," the old man hissed in his throat, raising his twitching eyebrows, "be merciful! We are poor people, we cannot repay your honour, but if you graciously please, Kiryushka or Vaska can repay you in work. Let them work."

"We will pay with work," said Kirila, and he raised his hand above his head as though he would take an oath. "Let him go! They are starving, they are crying day and night, your honour!"

The young peasant bent a rapid glance on his father, pulled him by the sleeve, and both of them, as at the word of command, fell at the doctor's feet. The latter waved his hand in despair, and, without looking round, walked quickly in at his door.