

SHORT STORY AMERICA

SMALL FRY

ANTON CHEKHOV

"HONORED Sir, Father and Benefactor!" a petty clerk called Nevyrazimov was writing a rough copy of an Easter congratulatory letter. "I trust that you may spend this Holy Day even as many more to come, in good health and prosperity. And to your family also I..."

The lamp, in which the kerosene was getting low, was smoking and smelling. A stray cockroach was running about the table in alarm near Nevyrazimov's writing hand. Two rooms away from the office Paramon the porter was for the third time cleaning his best boots, and with such energy that the sound of the blacking-brush and of his expectorations was audible in all the rooms.

"What else can I write to him, the rascal?" Nevyrazimov wondered, raising his eyes to the smutty ceiling.

On the ceiling he saw a dark circle--the shadow of the lamp-shade. Below it was the dusty cornice, and lower still the wall, which had once been painted a bluish muddy color. And the office seemed to him such a place of desolation that he felt sorry, not only for himself, but even for the cockroach.

"When I am off duty I shall go away, but he'll be on duty here all his cockroach-life," he thought, stretching. "I am bored! Shall I clean my boots?"

And stretching once more, Nevyrazimov slouched lazily to the porter's room. Paramon had finished cleaning his boots. Crossing himself with

one hand and holding the brush in the other, he was standing at the open window-pane, listening.

"They're ringing," he whispered to Nevyrazimov, looking at him with eyes intent and wide open. "Already!"

Nevyrazimov put his ear to the open pane and listened. The Easter chimes floated into the room with a whiff of fresh spring air. The booming of the bells mingled with the rumble of carriages, and above the chaos of sounds rose the brisk tenor tones of the nearest church and a loud shrill laugh.

"What a lot of people!" sighed Nevyrazimov, looking down into the street, where shadows of men flitted one after another by the illumination lamps. "They're all hurrying to the midnight service.... Our fellows have had a drink by now, you may be sure, and are strolling about the town. What a lot of laughter, what a lot of talk! I'm the only unlucky one, to have to sit here on such a day: And I have to do it every year!"

"Well, nobody forces you to take the job. It's not your turn to be on duty today, but Zastupov hired you to take his place. When other folks are enjoying themselves you hire yourself out. It's greediness!"

"Devil a bit of it! Not much to be greedy over--two roubles is all he gives me; a necktie as an extra.... It's poverty, not greediness. And it would be jolly, now, you know, to be going with a party to the service, and then to break the fast.... To drink and to have a bit of supper and tumble off to sleep.... One sits down to the table, there's an Easter cake and the samovar hissing, and some charming little thing beside you.... You drink a glass and chuck her under the chin, and it's first-rate.... You feel you're somebody.... Ech h-h!... I've made a mess of things! Look at that hussy driving by in her carriage, while I have to sit here and brood."

"We each have our lot in life, Ivan Danilitch. Please God, you'll be promoted and drive about in your carriage one day."

"I? No, brother, not likely. I shan't get beyond a 'titular,' not if I try till I burst. I'm not an educated man."

"Our General has no education either, but..."

"Well, but the General stole a hundred thousand before he got his position. And he's got very different manners and deportment from me, brother. With my manners and deportment one can't get far! And such a scoundrelly surname, Nevyrazimov! It's a hopeless position, in fact. One may go on as one is, or one may hang oneself..."

He moved away from the window and walked wearily about the rooms. The din of the bells grew louder and louder.... There was no need to stand by the window to hear it. And the better he could hear the bells and the louder the roar of the carriages, the darker seemed the muddy walls and the smutty cornice and the more the lamp smoked.

"Shall I hook it and leave the office?" thought Nevyrazimov.

But such a flight promised nothing worth having.... After coming out of the office and wandering about the town, Nevyrazimov would have gone home to his lodging, and in his lodging it was even grayer and more depressing than in the office.... Even supposing he were to spend that day pleasantly and with comfort, what had he beyond? Nothing but the same gray walls, the same stop-gap duty and complimentary letters....

Nevyrazimov stood still in the middle of the office and sank into thought. The yearning for a new, better life gnawed at his heart with an intolerable ache. He had a passionate longing to find himself suddenly in the street, to mingle with the living crowd, to take part in the solemn festivity for the sake of which all those bells were clashing and those carriages were rumbling. He longed for what he had known in childhood--the family circle, the festive faces of his own people, the white cloth, light, warmth...! He thought of the carriage in which the lady had just driven by, the overcoat in which the head clerk was so smart, the gold chain that adorned the secretary's chest.... He thought of a warm bed, of the Stanislav order, of new boots, of a uniform without holes in the elbows.... He thought of all those things because he had none of them.

"Shall I steal?" he thought. "Even if stealing is an easy matter,

hiding is what's difficult. Men run away to America, they say, with what they've stolen, but the devil knows where that blessed America is. One must have education even to steal, it seems."

The bells died down. He heard only a distant noise of carriages and Paramon's cough, while his depression and anger grew more and more intense and unbearable. The clock in the office struck half-past twelve.

"Shall I write a secret report? Proshkin did, and he rose rapidly."

Nevyrazimov sat down at his table and pondered. The lamp in which the kerosene had quite run dry was smoking violently and threatening to go out. The stray cockroach was still running about the table and had found no resting-place.

"One can always send in a secret report, but how is one to make it up? I should want to make all sorts of innuendoes and insinuations, like Proshkin, and I can't do it. If I made up anything I should be the first to get into trouble for it. I'm an ass, damn my soul!"

And Nevyrazimov, racking his brain for a means of escape from his hopeless position, stared at the rough copy he had written. The letter was written to a man whom he feared and hated with his whole soul, and from whom he had for the last ten years been trying to wring a post worth eighteen roubles a month, instead of the one he had at sixteen roubles.

"Ah, I'll teach you to run here, you devil!" He viciously slapped the palm of his hand on the cockroach, who had the misfortune to catch his eye. "Nasty thing!"

The cockroach fell on its back and wriggled its legs in despair. Nevyrazimov took it by one leg and threw it into the lamp. The lamp flared up and spluttered.

And Nevyrazimov felt better.