A Story Without an End

Anton Chekhov

Translated from Russian by Constance Garnett

Soon after two o'clock one night, long ago, the cook, pale and agitated, rushed unexpectedly into my study and informed me that Madame Mimotih, the old woman who owned the house next door, was sitting in her kitchen.

"She begs you to go in to her, sir . . ." said the cook, panting. "Something bad has happened about her lodger. . . . He has shot himself or hanged himself. . . ."

"What can I do?" said I. "Let her go for the doctor or for the police!"

"How is she to look for a doctor! She can hardly breathe, and she has huddled under the stove, she is so frightened. . . . You had better go round, sir."

I put on my coat and hat and went to Madame Mimotih's house. The gate towards which I directed my steps was open. After pausing beside it, uncertain what to do, I went into the yard without feeling for the porter's bell. In the dark and dilapidated porch the door was not locked. I opened it and walked into the entry. Here there was not a glimmer of light, it was pitch dark, and, moreover, there was a marked smell of incense. Groping my way out of the entry I knocked my elbow against something made of iron, and in the darkness stumbled against a board of some sort which almost fell to the floor. At last the door covered with torn baize was found, and I went into a little hall.

I am not at the moment writing a fairy tale, and am far from intending to alarm the reader, but the picture I saw from the passage was fantastic and could only have been drawn by death. Straight before me was a door leading to a little drawing-room. Three five-kopeck wax candles, standing in a row, threw a scanty light on the faded slate-coloured wallpaper. A coffin was standing on two tables in the middle of the little room. The two candles served only to light up a swarthy yellow face with a half-open mouth and sharp nose. Billows of muslin were mingled in disorder from the face to the tips of the two shoes, and from among the billows peeped out two pale motionless hands, holding a wax cross. The dark gloomy corners of the little drawing-room, the ikons behind the coffin, the coffin itself, everything except the softly glimmering lights, were still as death, as the tomb itself.

"How strange!" I thought, dumbfoundered by the unexpected panorama of death. "Why this haste? The lodger has hardly had time to hang himself, or shoot himself, and here is the coffin already!"

I looked round. On the left there was a door with a glass panel; on the right a lame hat-stand with a shabby fur coat on it. . . .

“Water. . . .” I heard a moan.

The moan came from the left, beyond the door with the glass panel. I opened the door and walked into a little dark room with a solitary window, through which there came a faint light from a street lamp outside.

“Is anyone here?” I asked.

And without waiting for an answer I struck a match. This is what I saw while it was burning. A man was sitting on the blood-stained floor at my very feet. If my step had been a longer one I should have trodden on him. With his legs thrust forward and his hands pressed on the floor, he was making an effort to raise his handsome face, which was deathly pale against his pitch-black beard. In the big eyes which he lifted upon me, I read unutterable terror, pain, and entreaty. A cold sweat trickled in big drops down his face. That sweat, the expression of his face, the trembling of the hands he leaned upon, his hard breathing and his clenched teeth, showed that he was suffering beyond endurance. Near his right hand in a pool of blood lay a revolver.

“Don’t go away,” I heard a faint voice when the match had gone out. “There’s a candle on the table.”

I lighted the candle and stood still in the middle of the room not knowing what to do next. I stood and looked at the man on the floor, and it seemed to me that I had seen him before.

“The pain is insufferable,” he whispered, “and I haven’t the strength to shoot myself again. Incomprehensible lack of will.”

I flung off my overcoat and attended to the sick man. Lifting him from the floor like a baby, I laid him on the American-leather covered sofa and carefully undressed him. He was shivering and cold when I took off his clothes; the wound which I saw was not in keeping either with his shivering nor the expression on his face. It was a trifling one. The bullet had passed between the fifth and sixth ribs on the left side, only piercing the skin and the flesh. I found the bullet itself in the folds of the coat-lining near the back pocket. Stopping the bleeding as best I could and making a temporary bandage of a pillow-case, a towel, and two handkerchiefs, I gave the wounded man some water and covered him with a fur coat that was hanging in the passage. We neither of us said a word while the bandaging was being done. I did my work while he lay motionless looking at me with his eyes screwed up as though he were ashamed of his unsuccessful shot and the trouble he was giving me.

“Now I must trouble you to lie still,” I said, when I had finished the bandaging, “while I run to the chemist and get something.”

“No need!” he muttered, clutching me by the sleeve and opening his eyes wide.

I read terror in his eyes. He was afraid of my going away.

“No need! Stay another five minutes . . . ten. If it doesn’t disgust you, do stay, I entreat you.”

As he begged me he was trembling and his teeth were chattering. I obeyed, and sat down on the edge of the sofa. Ten minutes passed in silence. I sat silent, looking about the room into which fate had brought me so unexpectedly. What poverty! This man who was the possessor of a handsome, effeminate face and a luxuriant well-tended beard, had surroundings which a humble working man would not have envied. A sofa with its American-leather torn and peeling, a humble greasy-looking chair, a table covered with a little of paper, and a wretched oleograph on the wall, that was all I saw. Damp, gloomy, and grey.

“What a wind!” said the sick man, without opening his eyes, “How it whistles!”

“Yes,” I said. “I say, I fancy I know you. Didn’t you take part in some private theatricals in General Luhatchev’s villa last year?”

“What of it?” he asked, quickly opening his eyes.

A cloud seemed to pass over his face.

“I certainly saw you there. Isn’t your name Vassilyev?”

“If it is, what of it? It makes it no better that you should know me.”

“No, but I just asked you.”

Vassilyev closed his eyes and, as though offended, turned his face to the back of the sofa.

“I don’t understand your curiosity,” he muttered. “You’ll be asking me next what it was drove me to commit suicide!”

Before a minute had passed, he turned round towards me again, opened his eyes and said in a tearful voice:

“Excuse me for taking such a tone, but you’ll admit I’m right! To ask a convict how he got into prison, or a suicide why he shot himself is not generous . . . and indelicate. To think of gratifying idle curiosity at the expense of another man’s nerves!”

“There is no need to excite yourself. . . . It never occurred to me to question you about your motives.”

“You would have asked. . . . It’s what people always do. Though it would be no use to ask. If I told you, you would not believe or understand. . . . I must own I don’t understand it myself. . . . There are phrases used in the police reports and newspapers such as: ‘unrequited love,’ and ‘hopeless poverty,’ but the reasons are not known. . . . They are not known to me, nor to you, nor to your newspaper offices, where they have the impudence to write ‘The diary of a suicide.’ God alone understands the state of a man’s soul when he takes his own life; but men know nothing about it.”

“That is all very nice,” I said, “but you oughtn’t to talk. . . .”

But my suicide could not be stopped, he leaned his head on his fist, and went on in the tone of some great professor:

“Man will never understand the psychological subtleties of suicide! How can one speak of reasons? To-day the reason makes one snatch up a revolver, while to-morrow the same reason seems not worth a rotten egg. It all depends most likely on the particular condition of the individual at the given moment. . . . Take me for instance. Half an hour ago, I had a passionate desire for death, now when the candle is lighted, and you are sitting by me, I don’t even think of the hour of death. Explain that change if you can! Am I better off, or has my wife risen from the dead? Is it the influence of the light on me, or the presence of an outsider?”

“The light certainly has an influence . . . ” I muttered for the sake of saying something. “The influence of light on the organism. . . .”

“The influence of light. . . . We admit it! But you know men do shoot themselves by candle-light! And it would be ignominious indeed for the heroes of your novels if such a trifling thing as a candle were to change the course of the drama so abruptly. All this nonsense can be explained perhaps, but not by us. It’s useless to ask questions or give explanations of what one does not understand. . . .”

“Forgive me,” I said, “but . . . judging by the expression of your face, it seems to me that at this moment you . . . are posing.”

“Yes,” Vassilyev said, startled. “It’s very possible! I am naturally vain and fatuous. Well,

explain it, if you believe in your power of reading faces! Half an hour ago I shot myself, and just now I am posing. . . . Explain that if you can."

These last words Vassilyev pronounced in a faint, failing voice. He was exhausted, and sank into silence. A pause followed. I began scrutinising his face. It was as pale as a dead man's. It seemed as though life were almost extinct in him, and only the signs of the suffering that the "vain and fatuous" man was feeling betrayed that it was still alive. It was painful to look at that face, but what must it have been for Vassilyev himself who yet had the strength to argue and, if I were not mistaken, to pose?

"You here—are you here ?" he asked suddenly, raising himself on his elbow. "My God, just listen!"

I began listening. The rain was pattering angrily on the dark window, never ceasing for a minute. The wind howled plaintively and lugubriously.

" 'And I shall be whiter than snow, and my ears will hear gladness and rejoicing.' " Madame Mimotih, who had returned, was reading in the drawing-room in a languid, weary voice, neither raising nor dropping the monotonous dreary key.

"It is cheerful, isn't it?" whispered Vassilyev, turning his frightened eyes towards me. "My God, the things a man has to see and hear! If only one could set this chaos to music! As Hamlet says, 'it would—

"Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed,

The very faculties of eyes and ears."

How well I should have understood that music then! How I should have felt it! What time is it?"

"Five minutes to three."

"Morning is still far off. And in the morning there's the funeral. A lovely prospect! One follows the coffin through the mud and rain. One walks along, seeing nothing but the cloudy sky and the wretched scenery. The muddy mutes, taverns, woodstacks. . . . One's trousers drenched to the knees. The never-ending streets. The time dragging out like eternity, the coarse people. And on the heart a stone, a stone!"

After a brief pause he suddenly asked: "Is it long since you saw General Luhatchev?"

"I haven't seen him since last summer."

“He likes to be cock of the walk, but he is a nice little old chap. And are you still writing?”

“Yes, a little.”

“Ah. . . . Do you remember how I pranced about like a needle, like an enthusiastic ass at those private theatricals when I was courting Zina? It was stupid, but it was good, it was fun. . . . The very memory of it brings back a whiff of spring. . . . And now! What a cruel change of scene! There is a subject for you! Only don’t you go in for writing ‘the diary of a suicide.’ That’s vulgar and conventional. You make something humorous of it.”

“Again you are . . . posing,” I said. “There’s nothing humorous in your position.”

“Nothing laughable? You say nothing laughable?” Vassilyev sat up, and tears glistened in his eyes. An expression of bitter distress came into his pale face. His chin quivered.

“You laugh at the deceit of cheating clerks and faithless wives,” he said, “but no clerk, no faithless wife has cheated as my fate has cheated me! I have been deceived as no bank depositor, no duped husband has ever been deceived! Only realise what an absurd fool I have been made! Last year before your eyes I did not know what to do with myself for happiness. And now before your eyes. . . .”

Vassilyev’s head sank on the pillow and he laughed.

“Nothing more absurd and stupid than such a change could possibly be imagined. Chapter one: spring, love, honeymoon . . . honey, in fact; chapter two: looking for a job, the pawnshop, pallor, the chemist’s shop, and . . . to-morrow’s splashing through the mud to the graveyard.”

He laughed again. I felt acutely uncomfortable and made up my mind to go.

“I tell you what,” I said, “you lie down, and I will go to the chemist’s.”

He made no answer. I put on my great-coat and went out of his room. As I crossed the passage I glanced at the coffin and Madame Mimotih reading over it. I strained my eyes in vain, I could not recognise in the swarthy, yellow face Zina, the lively, pretty ingénue of Luhatchev’s company.

“Sic transit,” I thought.

With that I went out, not forgetting to take the revolver, and made my way to the chemist’s. But I ought not to have gone away. When I came back from the chemist’s, Vassilyev lay on

the sofa fainting. The bandages had been roughly torn off, and blood was flowing from the reopened wound. It was daylight before I succeeded in restoring him to consciousness. He was raving in delirium, shivering, and looking with unseeing eyes about the room till morning had come, and we heard the booming voice of the priest as he read the service over the dead.

When Vassilyev's rooms were crowded with old women and mutes, when the coffin had been moved and carried out of the yard, I advised him to remain at home. But he would not obey me, in spite of the pain and the grey, rainy morning. He walked bareheaded and in silence behind the coffin all the way to the cemetery, hardly able to move one leg after the other, and from time to time clutching convulsively at his wounded side. His face expressed complete apathy. Only once when I roused him from his lethargy by some insignificant question he shifted his eyes over the pavement and the grey fence, and for a moment there was a gleam of gloomy anger in them.

" 'Weelright,' " he read on a signboard. "Ignorant, illiterate people, devil take them!"

I led him home from the cemetery.

Only one year has passed since that night, and Vassilyev has hardly had time to wear out the boots in which he tramped through the mud behind his wife's coffin.

At the present time as I finish this story, he is sitting in my drawing-room and, playing on the piano, is showing the ladies how provincial misses sing sentimental songs. The ladies are laughing, and he is laughing too. He is enjoying himself.

I call him into my study. Evidently not pleased at my taking him from agreeable company, he comes to me and stands before me in the attitude of a man who has no time to spare. I give him this story, and ask him to read it. Always condescending about my authorship, he stifles a sigh, the sigh of a lazy reader, sits down in an armchair and begins upon it.

"Hang it all, what horrors," he mutters with a smile.

But the further he gets into the reading, the graver his face becomes. At last, under the stress of painful memories, he turns terribly pale, he gets up and goes on reading as he stands. When he has finished he begins pacing from corner to corner.

"How does it end?" I ask him.

"How does it end? H'm. . . ."

He looks at the room, at me, at himself. . . . He sees his new fashionable suit, hears the ladies laughing and . . . sinking on a chair, begins laughing as he laughed on that night.

“Wasn’t I right when I told you it was all absurd? My God! I have had burdens to bear that would have broken an elephant’s back; the devil knows what I have suffered—no one could have suffered more, I think, and where are the traces? It’s astonishing. One would have thought the imprint made on a man by his agonies would have been everlasting, never to be effaced or eradicated. And yet that imprint wears out as easily as a pair of cheap boots. There is nothing left, not a scrap. It’s as though I hadn’t been suffering then, but had been dancing a mazurka. Everything in the world is transitory, and that transitoriness is absurd! A wide field for humorists! Tack on a humorous end, my friend!”

“Pyotr Nikolaevitch, are you coming soon?” The impatient ladies call my hero.

“This minute,” answers the “vain and fatuous” man, setting his tie straight. “It’s absurd and pitiful, my friend, pitiful and absurd, but what’s to be done? Homo sum. . . . And I praise Mother Nature all the same for her transmutation of substances. If we retained an agonising memory of toothache and of all the terrors which every one of us has had to experience, if all that were everlasting, we poor mortals would have a bad time of it in this life.”

I look at his smiling face and I remember the despair and the horror with which his eyes were filled a year ago when he looked at the dark window. I see him, entering into his habitual rôle of intellectual chatterer, prepare to show off his idle theories, such as the transmutation of substances before me, and at the same time I recall him sitting on the floor in a pool of blood with his sick imploring eyes.

“How will it end?” I ask myself aloud.

Vassilyev, whistling and straightening his tie, walks off into the drawing-room, and I look after him, and feel vexed. For some reason I regret his past sufferings, I regret all that I felt myself on that man’s account on that terrible night. It is as though I had lost something. . . .