

A Transgression

Anton Chekhov

Translated from Russian by Constance Garnett

A collegiate assessor called Miguev stopped at a telegraph-post in the course of his evening walk and heaved a deep sigh. A week before, as he was returning home from his evening walk, he had been overtaken at that very spot by his former housemaid, Agnia, who said to him viciously:

“Wait a bit! I’ll cook you such a crab that’ll teach you to ruin innocent girls! I’ll leave the baby at your door, and I’ll have the law of you, and I’ll tell your wife, too. . . .”

And she demanded that he should put five thousand roubles into the bank in her name. Miguev remembered it, heaved a sigh, and once more reproached himself with heartfelt repentance for the momentary infatuation which had caused him so much worry and misery.

When he reached his bungalow, he sat down to rest on the doorstep. It was just ten o’clock, and a bit of the moon peeped out from behind the clouds. There was not a soul in the street nor near the bungalows; elderly summer visitors were already going to bed, while young ones were walking in the wood. Feeling in both his pockets for a match to light his cigarette, Miguev brought his elbow into contact with something soft. He looked idly at his right elbow, and his face was instantly contorted by a look of as much horror as though he had seen a snake beside him. On the step at the very door lay a bundle. Something oblong in shape was wrapped up in something—judging by the feel of it, a wadded quilt. One end of the bundle was a little open, and the collegiate assessor, putting in his hand, felt something damp and warm. He leaped on to his feet in horror, and looked about him like a criminal trying to escape from his warders. . . .

“She has left it!” he muttered wrathfully through his teeth, clenching his fists. “Here it lies. . . . Here lies my transgression! O Lord!”

He was numb with terror, anger, and shame. . . What was he to do now? What would his wife say if she found out? What would his colleagues at the office say? His Excellency would be sure to dig him in the ribs, guffaw, and say: “I congratulate you! . . . He-he-he! Though your beard is gray, your heart is gay. . . . You are a rogue, Semyon Erastovitch!” The whole colony of summer visitors would know his secret now, and probably the respectable mothers of families would shut their doors to him. Such incidents always get into the papers, and the humble name of Miguev would be published all over Russia. . . .

The middle window of the bungalow was open and he could distinctly hear his wife, Anna Filippovna, laying the table for supper; in the yard close to the gate Yermolay, the porter, was

plaintively strumming on the balalaika. The baby had only to wake up and begin to cry, and the secret would be discovered. Miguev was conscious of an overwhelming desire to make haste.

“Haste, haste! . . .” he muttered, “this minute, before anyone sees. I’ll carry it away and lay it on somebody’s doorstep. . . .”

Miguev took the bundle in one hand and quietly, with a deliberate step to avoid awakening suspicion, went down the street. . . .

“A wonderfully nasty position!” he reflected, trying to assume an air of unconcern. “A collegiate assessor walking down the street with a baby! Good heavens! if anyone sees me and understands the position, I am done for. . . . I’d better put it on this doorstep. . . . No, stay, the windows are open and perhaps someone is looking. Where shall I put it? I know! I’ll take it to the merchant Myelkin’s. . . . Merchants are rich people and tenderhearted; very likely they will say thank you and adopt it.”

And Miguev made up his mind to take the baby to Myelkin’s, although the merchant’s villa was in the furthest street, close to the river.

“If only it does not begin screaming or wriggle out of the bundle,” thought the collegiate assessor. “This is indeed a pleasant surprise! Here I am carrying a human being under my arm as though it were a portfolio. A human being, alive, with soul, with feelings like anyone else. . . . If by good luck the Myelkins adopt him, he may turn out somebody. . . . Maybe he will become a professor, a great general, an author. . . . Anything may happen! Now I am carrying him under my arm like a bundle of rubbish, and perhaps in thirty or forty years I may not dare to sit down in his presence. . . .

As Miguev was walking along a narrow, deserted alley, beside a long row of fences, in the thick black shade of the lime trees, it suddenly struck him that he was doing something very cruel and criminal.

“How mean it is really!” he thought. “So mean that one can’t imagine anything meaner. . . . Why are we shifting this poor baby from door to door? It’s not its fault that it’s been born. It’s done us no harm. We are scoundrels. . . . We take our pleasure, and the innocent babies have to pay the penalty. Only to think of all this wretched business! I’ve done wrong and the child has a cruel fate before it. If I lay it at the Myelkins’ door, they’ll send it to the foundling hospital, and there it will grow up among strangers, in mechanical routine, . . . no love, no petting, no spoiling. . . . And then he’ll be apprenticed to a shoemaker, . . . he’ll take to drink, will learn to use filthy language, will go hungry. A shoemaker! and he the son of a collegiate assessor, of good family. . . . He is my flesh and blood, . . .”

Miguev came out of the shade of the lime trees into the bright moonlight of the open road,

and opening the bundle, he looked at the baby.

“Asleep!” he murmured. “You little rascal! why, you’ve an aquiline nose like your father’s. . . . He sleeps and doesn’t feel that it’s his own father looking at him! . . . It’s a drama, my boy. . . Well, well, you must forgive me. Forgive me, old boy. . . . It seems it’s your fate. . . .”

The collegiate assessor blinked and felt a spasm running down his cheeks. . . . He wrapped up the baby, put him under his arm, and strode on. All the way to the Myelkins’ villa social questions were swarming in his brain and conscience was gnawing in his bosom.

“If I were a decent, honest man,” he thought, “I should damn everything, go with this baby to Anna Filippovna, fall on my knees before her, and say: ‘Forgive me! I have sinned! Torture me, but we won’t ruin an innocent child. We have no children; let us adopt him!’ She’s a good sort, she’d consent. . . . And then my child would be with me. . . . Ech!”

He reached the Myelkins’ villa and stood still hesitating. He imagined himself in the parlor at home, sitting reading the paper while a little boy with an aquiline nose played with the tassels of his dressing gown. At the same time visions forced themselves on his brain of his winking colleagues, and of his Excellency digging him in the ribs and guffawing. . . . Besides the pricking of his conscience, there was something warm, sad, and tender in his heart. . . .

Cautiously the collegiate assessor laid the baby on the verandah step and waved his hand. Again he felt a spasm run over his face. . . .

“Forgive me, old fellow! I am a scoundrel, he muttered. “Don’t remember evil against me.”

He stepped back, but immediately cleared his throat resolutely and said:

“Oh, come what will! Damn it all! I’ll take him, and let people say what they like!”

Miguev took the baby and strode rapidly back.

“Let them say what they like,” he thought. “I’ll go at once, fall on my knees, and say: ‘Anna Filippovna!’ Anna is a good sort, she’ll understand. . . . And we’ll bring him up. . . . If it’s a boy we’ll call him Vladimir, and if it’s a girl we’ll call her Anna! Anyway, it will be a comfort in our old age.”

And he did as he determined. Weeping and almost faint with shame and terror, full of hope and vague rapture, he went into his bungalow, went up to his wife, and fell on his knees before her.

“Anna Filippovna!” he said with a sob, and he laid the baby on the floor. “Hear me before you punish. . . . I have sinned! This is my child. . . . You remember Agnia? Well, it was the devil drove me to it. . . .”

And, almost unconscious with shame and terror, he jumped up without waiting for an answer, and ran out into the open air as though he had received a thrashing. . . .

“I’ll stay here outside till she calls me,” he thought. “I’ll give her time to recover, and to think it over. . . .”

The porter Yermolay passed him with his balalaika, glanced at him and shrugged his shoulders. A minute later he passed him again, and again he shrugged his shoulders.

“Here’s a go! Did you ever!” he muttered grinning. “Aksinya, the washer-woman, was here just now, Semyon Erastovitch. The silly woman put her baby down on the steps here, and while she was indoors with me, someone took and carried off the baby. . . . Who’d have thought it!”

“What? What are you saying?” shouted Miguev at the top of his voice.

Yermolay, interpreting his master’s wrath in his own fashion, scratched his head and heaved a sigh.

“I am sorry, Semyon Erastovitch,” he said, “but it’s the summer holidays, . . . one can’t get on without . . . without a woman, I mean. . . .”

And glancing at his master’s eyes glaring at him with anger and astonishment, he cleared his throat guiltily and went on:

“It’s a sin, of course, but there—what is one to do? . . . You’ve forbidden us to have strangers in the house, I know, but we’ve none of our own now. When Agnia was here I had no women to see me, for I had one at home; but now, you can see for yourself, sir, . . . one can’t help having strangers. In Agnia’s time, of course, there was nothing irregular, because. . .”

“Be off, you scoundrel!” Miguev shouted at him, stamping, and he went back into the room.

Anna Filippovna, amazed and wrathful, was sitting as before, her tear-stained eyes fixed on the baby. . . .

“There! there!” Miguev muttered with a pale face, twisting his lips into a smile. “It was a joke. . . . It’s not my baby, . . . it’s the washer-woman’s! . . . I . . . I was joking. . . . Take it to

the porter.”

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