

Agafya

Anton Chekhov

During my stay in the district of S. I often used to go to see the watchman Savva Stukatch, or simply Savka, in the kitchen gardens of Dubovo. These kitchen gardens were my favorite resort for so-called “mixed” fishing, when one goes out without knowing what day or hour one may return, taking with one every sort of fishing tackle as well as a store of provisions. To tell the truth, it was not so much the fishing that attracted me as the peaceful stroll, the meals at no set time, the talk with Savka, and being for so long face to face with the calm summer nights. Savka was a young man of five-and-twenty, well grown and handsome, and as strong as a flint. He had the reputation of being a sensible and reasonable fellow. He could read and write, and very rarely drank, but as a workman this strong and healthy young man was not worth a farthing. A sluggish, overpowering sloth was mingled with the strength in his muscles, which were strong as cords. Like everyone else in his village, he lived in his own hut, and had his share of land, but neither tilled it nor sowed it, and did not work at any sort of trade. His old mother begged alms at people’s windows and he himself lived like a bird of the air; he did not know in the morning what he would eat at midday. It was not that he was lacking in will, or energy, or feeling for his mother; it was simply that he felt no inclination for work and did not recognize the advantage of it. His whole figure suggested unruffled serenity, an innate, almost artistic passion for living carelessly, never with his sleeves tucked up. When Savka’s young, healthy body had a physical craving for muscular work, the young man abandoned himself completely for a brief interval to some free but nonsensical pursuit, such as sharpening skates not wanted for any special purpose, or racing about after the peasant women. His favorite attitude was one of concentrated immobility. He was capable of standing for hours at a stretch in the same place with his eyes fixed on the same spot without stirring. He never moved except on impulse, and then only when an occasion presented itself for some rapid and abrupt action: catching a running dog by the tail, pulling off a woman’s kerchief, or jumping over a big hole. It need hardly be said that with such parsimony of movement Savka was as poor as a mouse and lived worse than any homeless outcast. As time went on, I suppose he accumulated arrears of taxes and, young and sturdy as he was, he was sent by the commune to do an old man’s job—to be watchman and scarecrow in the kitchen gardens. However much they laughed at him for his premature senility he did not object to it. This position, quiet and convenient for motionless contemplation, exactly fitted his temperament.

It happened I was with this Savka one fine May evening. I remember I was lying on a torn and dirty sackcloth cover close to the shanty from which came a heavy, fragrant scent of hay. Clasping my hands under my head I looked before me. At my feet was lying a wooden fork. Behind it Savka’s dog Kutka stood out like a black patch, and not a dozen feet from Kutka the ground ended abruptly in the steep bank of the little river. Lying down I could not see the river; I could only see the tops of the young willows growing thickly on the nearer bank, and the

twisting, as it were gnawed away, edges of the opposite bank. At a distance beyond the bank on the dark hillside the huts of the village in which Savka lived lay huddling together like frightened young partridges. Beyond the hill the afterglow of sunset still lingered in the sky. One pale crimson streak was all that was left, and even that began to be covered by little clouds as a fire with ash.

A copse with alder-trees, softly whispering, and from time to time shuddering in the fitful breeze, lay, a dark blur, on the right of the kitchen gardens; on the left stretched the immense plain. In the distance, where the eye could not distinguish between the sky and the plain, there was a bright gleam of light. A little way off from me sat Savka. With his legs tucked under him like a Turk and his head hanging, he looked pensively at Kutka. Our hooks with live bait on them had long been in the river, and we had nothing left to do but to abandon ourselves to repose, which Savka, who was never exhausted and always rested, loved so much. The glow had not yet quite died away, but the summer night was already enfolding nature in its caressing, soothing embrace.

Everything was sinking into its first deep sleep except some night bird unfamiliar to me, which indolently uttered a long, protracted cry in several distinct notes like the phrase, "Have you seen Ni-ki-ta?" and immediately answered itself, "Seen him, seen him, seen him!"

"Why is it the nightingales aren't singing tonight?" I asked Savka.

He turned slowly towards me. His features were large, but his face was open, soft, and expressive as a woman's. Then he gazed with his mild, dreamy eyes at the copse, at the willows, slowly pulled a whistle out of his pocket, put it in his mouth and whistled the note of a hen-nightingale. And at once, as though in answer to his call, a landrail called on the opposite bank.

"There's a nightingale for you..." laughed Savka. "Drag-drag! drag-drag! just like pulling at a hook, and yet I bet he thinks he is singing, too."

"I like that bird," I said. "Do you know, when the birds are migrating the landrail does not fly, but runs along the ground? It only flies over the rivers and the sea, but all the rest it does on foot."

"Upon my word, the dog..." muttered Savka, looking with respect in the direction of the calling landrail.

Knowing how fond Savka was of listening, I told him all I had learned about the landrail from sportsman's books. From the landrail I passed imperceptibly to the migration of the birds. Savka listened attentively, looking at me without blinking, and smiling all the while

with pleasure.

“And which country is most the bird’s home? Ours or those foreign parts?” he asked.

“Ours, of course. The bird itself is hatched here, and it hatches out its little ones here in its native country, and they only fly off there to escape being frozen.”

“It’s interesting,” said Savka. “Whatever one talks about it is always interesting. Take a bird now, or a man... or take this little stone; there’s something to learn about all of them.... Ah, sir, if I had known you were coming I wouldn’t have told a woman to come here this evening.... She asked to come to-day.”

“Oh, please don’t let me be in your way,” I said. “I can lie down in the wood....”

“What next! She wouldn’t have died if she hadn’t come till to-morrow.... If only she would sit quiet and listen, but she always wants to be slobbering.... You can’t have a good talk when she’s here.”

“Are you expecting Darya?” I asked, after a pause.

“No... a new one has asked to come this evening... Agafya, the signalman’s wife.”

Savka said this in his usual passionless, somewhat hollow voice, as though he were talking of tobacco or porridge, while I started with surprise. I knew Agafya.... She was quite a young peasant woman of nineteen or twenty, who had been married not more than a year before to a railway signalman, a fine young fellow. She lived in the village, and her husband came home there from the line every night.

“Your goings on with the women will lead to trouble, my boy,” said I.

“Well, may be....”

And after a moment’s thought Savka added:

“I’ve said so to the women; they won’t heed me....They don’t trouble about it, the silly things!”

Silence followed.... Meanwhile the darkness was growing thicker and thicker, and objects began to lose their contours. The streak behind the hill had completely died away, and the stars were growing brighter and more luminous.... The mournfully monotonous chirping of the grasshoppers, the call of the landrail, and the cry of the quail did not destroy the stillness of the night, but, on the contrary, gave it an added monotony. It seemed as though

the soft sounds that enchanted the ear came, not from birds or insects, but from the stars looking down upon us from the sky....

Savka was the first to break the silence. He slowly turned his eyes from black Kutka and said:

“I see you are dull, sir. Let’s have supper.”

And without waiting for my consent he crept on his stomach into the shanty, rummaged about there, making the whole edifice tremble like a leaf; then he crawled back and set before me my vodka and an earthenware bowl; in the bowl there were baked eggs, lard scones made of rye, pieces of black bread, and something else.... We had a drink from a little crooked glass that wouldn’t stand, and then we fell upon the food.... Coarse grey salt, dirty, greasy cakes, eggs tough as india-rubber, but how nice it all was!

“You live all alone, but what lots of good things you have,” I said, pointing to the bowl. “Where do you get them from?”

“The women bring them,” mumbled Savka.

“What do they bring them to you for?”

“Oh... from pity.”

Not only Savka’s menu, but his clothing, too, bore traces of feminine “pity.” Thus I noticed that he had on, that evening, a new woven belt and a crimson ribbon on which a copper cross hung round his dirty neck. I knew of the weakness of the fair sex for Savka, and I knew that he did not like talking about it, and so I did not carry my inquiries any further. Besides there was not time to talk.... Kutka, who had been fidgeting about near us and patiently waiting for scraps, suddenly pricked up his ears and growled. We heard in the distance repeated splashing of water.

“Someone is coming by the ford,” said Savka.

Three minutes later Kutka growled again and made a sound like a cough.

“Shsh!” his master shouted at him.

In the darkness there was a muffled thud of timid footsteps, and the silhouette of a woman appeared out of the copse. I recognized her, although it was dark—it was Agafya. She came up to us diffidently and stopped, breathing hard. She was breathless, probably not so much from walking as from fear and the unpleasant sensation everyone experiences in wading

across a river at night. Seeing near the shanty not one but two persons, she uttered a faint cry and fell back a step.

“Ah... that is you!” said Savka, stuffing a scone into his mouth.

“Ye-es... I,” she muttered, dropping on the ground a bundle of some sort and looking sideways at me. “Yakov sent his greetings to you and told me to give you... something here....”

“Come, why tell stories? Yakov!” laughed Savka. “There is no need for lying; the gentleman knows why you have come! Sit down; you shall have supper with us.”

Agafya looked sideways at me and sat down irresolutely.

“I thought you weren’t coming this evening,” Savka said, after a prolonged silence. “Why sit like that? Eat! Or shall I give you a drop of vodka?”

“What an idea!” laughed Agafya; “do you think you have got hold of a drunkard?...”

“Oh, drink it up.... Your heart will feel warmer.... There!”

Savka gave Agafya the crooked glass. She slowly drank the vodka, ate nothing with it, but drew a deep breath when she had finished.

“You’ve brought something,” said Savka, untying the bundle and throwing a condescending, jesting shade into his voice. “Women can never come without bringing something. Ah, pie and potatoes.... They live well,” he sighed, turning to me. “They are the only ones in the whole village who have got potatoes left from the winter!”

In the darkness I did not see Agafya’s face, but from the movement of her shoulders and head it seemed to me that she could not take her eyes off Savka’s face. To avoid being the third person at this tryst, I decided to go for a walk and got up. But at that moment a nightingale in the wood suddenly uttered two low contralto notes. Half a minute later it gave a tiny high trill and then, having thus tried its voice, began singing. Savka jumped up and listened.

“It’s the same one as yesterday,” he said. “Wait a minute.”

And, getting up, he went noiselessly to the wood.

“Why, what do you want with it?” I shouted out after him, “Stop!”

Savka shook his hand as much as to say, "Don't shout," and vanished into the darkness. Savka was an excellent sportsman and fisherman when he liked, but his talents in this direction were as completely thrown away as his strength. He was too slothful to do things in the routine way, and vented his passion for sport in useless tricks. For instance, he would catch nightingales only with his hands, would shoot pike with a fowling piece, he would spend whole hours by the river trying to catch little fish with a big hook.

Left alone with me, Agafya coughed and passed her hand several times over her forehead.... She began to feel a little drunk from the vodka.

"How are you getting on, Agasha?" I asked her, after a long silence, when it began to be awkward to remain mute any longer.

"Very well, thank God.... Don't tell anyone, sir, will you?" she added suddenly in a whisper.

"That's all right," I reassured her. "But how reckless you are, Agasha!... What if Yakov finds out?"

"He won't find out."

"But what if he does?"

"No... I shall be at home before he is. He is on the line now, and he will come back when the mail train brings him, and from here I can hear when the train's coming...."

Agafya once more passed her hand over her forehead and looked away in the direction in which Savka had vanished. The nightingale was singing. Some night bird flew low down close to the ground and, noticing us, was startled, fluttered its wings and flew across to the other side of the river.

Soon the nightingale was silent, but Savka did not come back. Agafya got up, took a few steps uneasily, and sat down again.

"What is he doing?" she could not refrain from saying. "The train's not coming in tomorrow! I shall have to go away directly."

"Savka," I shouted. "Savka."

I was not answered even by an echo. Agafya moved uneasily and sat down again.

"It's time I was going," she said in an agitated voice. "The train will be here directly! I know when the trains come in."

The poor woman was not mistaken. Before a quarter of an hour had passed a sound was heard in the distance.

Agafya kept her eyes fixed on the copse for a long time and moved her hands impatiently.

“Why, where can he be?” she said, laughing nervously. “Where has the devil carried him? I am going! I really must be going.”

Meanwhile the noise was growing more and more distinct. By now one could distinguish the rumble of the wheels from the heavy gasps of the engine. Then we heard the whistle, the train crossed the bridge with a hollow rumble... another minute and all was still.

“I’ll wait one minute more,” said Agafya, sitting down resolutely. “So be it, I’ll wait.”

At last Savka appeared in the darkness. He walked noiselessly on the crumbling earth of the kitchen gardens and hummed something softly to himself.

“Here’s a bit of luck; what do you say to that now?” he said gaily. “As soon as I got up to the bush and began taking aim with my hand it left off singing! Ah, the bald dog! I waited and waited to see when it would begin again, but I had to give it up.”

Savka flopped clumsily down to the ground beside Agafya and, to keep his balance, clutched at her waist with both hands.

“Why do you look cross, as though your aunt were your mother?” he asked.

With all his soft-heartedness and good-nature, Savka despised women. He behaved carelessly, condescendingly with them, and even stooped to scornful laughter of their feelings for himself. God knows, perhaps this careless, contemptuous manner was one of the causes of his irresistible attraction for the village Dulcineas. He was handsome and well-built; in his eyes there was always a soft friendliness, even when he was looking at the women he so despised, but the fascination was not to be explained by merely external qualities. Apart from his happy exterior and original manner, one must suppose that the touching position of Savka as an acknowledged failure and an unhappy exile from his own hut to the kitchen gardens also had an influence upon the women.

“Tell the gentleman what you have come here for!” Savka went on, still holding Agafya by the waist. “Come, tell him, you good married woman! Ho-ho! Shall we have another drop of vodka, friend Agasha?”

I got up and, threading my way between the plots, I walked the length of the kitchen garden.

The dark beds looked like flattened-out graves. They smelt of dug earth and the tender dampness of plants beginning to be covered with dew.... A red light was still gleaming on the left. It winked genially and seemed to smile.

I heard a happy laugh. It was Agafya laughing.

“And the train?” I thought. “The train has come in long ago.”

Waiting a little longer, I went back to the shanty. Savka was sitting motionless, his legs crossed like a Turk, and was softly, scarcely audibly humming a song consisting of words of one syllable something like: “Out on you, fie on you... I and you.” Agafya, intoxicated by the vodka, by Savka’s scornful caresses, and by the stifling warmth of the night, was lying on the earth beside him, pressing her face convulsively to his knees. She was so carried away by her feelings that she did not even notice my arrival.

“Agasha, the train has been in a long time,” I said.

“It’s time—it’s time you were gone,” Savka, tossing his head, took up my thought. “What are you sprawling here for? You shameless hussy!”

Agafya started, took her head from his knees, glanced at me, and sank down beside him again.

“You ought to have gone long ago,” I said.

Agafya turned round and got up on one knee.... She was unhappy.... For half a minute her whole figure, as far as I could distinguish it through the darkness, expressed conflict and hesitation. There was an instant when, seeming to come to herself, she drew herself up to get upon her feet, but then some invincible and implacable force seemed to push her whole body, and she sank down beside Savka again.

“Bother him!” she said, with a wild, guttural laugh, and reckless determination, impotence, and pain could be heard in that laugh.

I strolled quietly away to the copse, and from there down to the river, where our fishing lines were set. The river slept. Some soft, fluffy-petalled flower on a tall stalk touched my cheek tenderly like a child who wants to let one know it’s awake. To pass the time I felt for one of the lines and pulled at it. It yielded easily and hung limply—nothing had been caught.... The further bank and the village could not be seen. A light gleamed in one hut, but soon went out. I felt my way along the bank, found a hollow place which I had noticed in the daylight, and sat down in it as in an arm-chair. I sat there a long time.... I saw the stars begin to grow misty and lose their brightness; a cool breath passed over the earth like a faint

sigh and touched the leaves of the slumbering osiers....

“A-ga-fya!” a hollow voice called from the village. “Agafya!”

It was the husband, who had returned home, and in alarm was looking for his wife in the village. At that moment there came the sound of unrestrained laughter: the wife, forgetful of everything, sought in her intoxication to make up by a few hours of happiness for the misery awaiting her next day.

I dropped asleep.

When I woke up Savka was sitting beside me and lightly shaking my shoulder. The river, the copse, both banks, green and washed, trees and fields—all were bathed in bright morning light. Through the slim trunks of the trees the rays of the newly risen sun beat upon my back.

“So that’s how you catch fish?” laughed Savka. “Get up!”

I got up, gave a luxurious stretch, and began greedily drinking in the damp and fragrant air.

“Has Agasha gone?” I asked.

“There she is,” said Savka, pointing in the direction of the ford.

I glanced and saw Agafya. Dishevelled, with her kerchief dropping off her head, she was crossing the river, holding up her skirt. Her legs were scarcely moving....

“The cat knows whose meat it has eaten,” muttered Savka, screwing up his eyes as he looked at her. “She goes with her tail hanging down.... They are sly as cats, these women, and timid as hares.... She didn’t go, silly thing, in the evening when we told her to! Now she will catch it, and they’ll flog me again at the peasant court... all on account of the women....”

Agafya stepped upon the bank and went across the fields to the village. At first she walked fairly boldly, but soon terror and excitement got the upper hand; she turned round fearfully, stopped and took breath.

“Yes, you are frightened!” Savka laughed mournfully, looking at the bright green streak left by Agafya in the dewy grass. “She doesn’t want to go! Her husband’s been standing waiting for her for a good hour.... Did you see him?”

Savka said the last words with a smile, but they sent a chill to my heart. In the village, near

the furthest hut, Yakov was standing in the road, gazing fixedly at his returning wife. He stood without stirring, and was as motionless as a post. What was he thinking as he looked at her? What words was he preparing to greet her with? Agafya stood still a little while, looked round once more as though expecting help from us, and went on. I have never seen anyone, drunk or sober, move as she did. Agafya seemed to be shrivelled up by her husband's eyes. At one time she moved in zigzags, then she moved her feet up and down without going forward, bending her knees and stretching out her hands, then she staggered back. When she had gone another hundred paces she looked round once more and sat down.

"You ought at least to hide behind a bush..." I said to Savka. "If the husband sees you..."

"He knows, anyway, who it is Agafya has come from.... The women don't go to the kitchen garden at night for cabbages—we all know that."

I glanced at Savka's face. It was pale and puckered up with a look of fastidious pity such as one sees in the faces of people watching tortured animals.

"What's fun for the cat is tears for the mouse..." he muttered.

Agafya suddenly jumped up, shook her head, and with a bold step went towards her husband. She had evidently plucked up her courage and made up her mind.

Downloaded from www.libraryofshortstories.com

This work is in the public domain of Australia. Please check your local copyright laws if you live elsewhere.