

The Petcheneg

Anton Chekhov

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Translated from the Russian by Marian Fell.

ONE hot summer's day Ivan Jmukin was returning from town to his farm in southern Russia. Jmukin was a retired old Cossack officer, who had served in the Caucasus, and had once been lusty and strong, but he was an old man now, shrivelled and bent, with bushy eyebrows and a long, greenish-grey moustache. He had been fasting in town, and had made his will, for it was only two weeks since he had had a slight stroke of paralysis, and now, sitting in the train, he was full of deep, gloomy thoughts of his approaching death, of the vanity of life, and of the transient quality of all earthly things. At Provalye, one of the stations on the Don railway, a fair-haired, middle-aged man, carrying a worn portfolio under his arm, entered the compartment and sat down opposite the old Cossack. They began talking together.

"No," said Jmukin gazing pensively out of the window. "It is never too late to marry. I myself was forty-eight when I married, and every one said it was too late, but it has turned out to be neither too late nor too early. Still, it is better never to marry at all. Every one soon gets tired of a wife, though not every one will tell you the truth, because, you know, people are ashamed of their family troubles, and try to conceal them. It is often 'Manya, dear Manya,' with a man when, if he had his way, he would put that Manya of his into a sack, and throw her into the river. A wife is a nuisance and a bore, and children are no better, I can assure you. I have two scoundrels myself. There is nowhere they can go to school on the steppe, and I can't afford to send them to Novotcherkask, so they are growing up here like young wolf cubs. At any moment they may murder some one on the highway."

The fair-haired man listened attentively, and answered all questions addressed to him briefly, in a low voice. He was evidently gentle and unassuming. He told his companion that he was an attorney, on his way to the village of Duevka on business.

"Why, for heaven's sake, that's only nine miles from where I live!" cried Jmukin, as if some one had been disputing it. "You won't be able to get any horses at the station this evening. In my opinion the best thing for you to do is to come home with me, you know, and spend the night at my house, you know, and let me send you on to-morrow with my horses."

After a moment's reflection the attorney accepted the invitation.

The sun was hanging low over the steppe when they arrived at the station. The two men remained silent as they drove from the railway to the farm, for the jolting that the road gave them forbade conversation. The tarantass bounded and whined and seemed to be sobbing, as if its leaps caused it the keenest pain, and the attorney, who found his seat very uncomfortable, gazed with anguish before him, hoping to descry the farm in the distance. After they had driven eight miles a low house surrounded by a dark wattle fence came into view. The roof was painted green, the stucco on the walls was peeling off, and the little windows looked like puckered eyes. The farmhouse stood exposed to all the ardour of the sun; neither trees nor water were visible anywhere near it. The neighbouring landowners and peasants called it "Petcheneg Grange." Many years ago a passing surveyor, who was spending the night at the farm, had talked with Jmukin all night, and had gone away in the morning much displeased, saying sternly as he left: "Sir, you are nothing but a Petcheneg!" So the name "Petcheneg Grange" had been given to the farm, and had stuck to it all the more closely as Jmukin's boys began to grow up, and to perpetrate raids on the neighbouring gardens and melon fields. Jmukin himself was known as "old man you know," because he talked so much, and used the words "you know" so often.

Jmukin's two sons were standing in the courtyard, near the stables, as the tarantass drove up. One was about nineteen, the other was a hobbledehoy of a few years younger; both were barefoot and hatless. As the carriage went by the younger boy threw a hen high up over his head. It described an arc in the air, and fluttered cackling

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down till the elder fired a shot from his gun, and the dead bird fell to earth with a thud.

"Those are my boys learning to shoot birds on the wing," Jmukin said.

The travellers were met in the front entry by a woman, a thin, pale-faced little creature, still pretty and young, who, from her dress, might have been taken for a servant.

"This," said Jmukin, "is the mother of those sons of guns of mine. Come on, Lyuboff!" he cried to his wife. "Hustle, now, mother, and help entertain our guest. Bring us some supper! Quick!"

The house consisted of two wings. On one side were the "drawing-room" and, adjoining it, the old man's bedchamber; close, stuffy apartments both, with low ceilings, infested by thousands of flies. On the other side was the kitchen, where the cooking and washing were done and the workmen were fed. Here, under benches, geese and turkeys were sitting on their nests, and here stood the beds of Lyuboff and her two sons. The furniture in the drawing-room was unpainted and had evidently been made by a country joiner. On the walls hung guns, game bags, and whips, all of which old trash was rusty and grey with dust. Not a picture was on the walls, only a dark, painted board that had once been an icon hung in one corner of the room.

A young peasant woman set the table and brought in ham and borstch. Jmukin's guest declined vodka, and confined himself to eating cucumbers and bread.

"And what about the ham?" Jmukin asked.

"No, thank you, I don't eat ham," answered his guest. "I don't eat meat of any kind."

"Why not?"

"I'm a vegetarian. It's against my principles to kill animals."

Jmukin was silent for a moment, and then said slowly, with a sigh:

"I see—yes. I saw a man in town who didn't eat meat either. It is a new religion people have. And why shouldn't they have it? It's a good thing. One can't always be killing and shooting; one must take a rest sometimes and let the animals have a little peace. Of course it's a sin to kill, there's no doubt about that. Sometimes, when you shoot a hare, and hit him in the leg he will scream like a baby. So it hurts him!"

"Of course it hurts him! Animals suffer pain just as much as we do."

"That's a fact!" Jmukin agreed. "I see that perfectly," he added pensively. "Only there is one thing that I must say I can't quite understand. Suppose, for instance, you know, every one were to stop eating meat, what would become of all our barnyard fowls, like chickens and geese?"

"Chickens and geese would go free just like all other birds."

"Ah! Now I understand. Of course. Crows and magpies get on without us all right. Yes. And chickens and geese and rabbits and sheep would all be free and happy, you know, and would praise God, and not be afraid of us any more. So peace and quiet would reign upon earth. Only one thing I can't understand, you know," Jmukin continued, with a glance at the ham. "Where would all the pigs go to? What would become of them?"

"The same thing that would become of all the other animals, they would go free."

"I see—yes. But, listen, if they were not killed, they would multiply, you know, and then it would be good—by to our meadows and vegetable gardens! Why, if a pig is turned loose and not watched, it will ruin everything for you in a day! A pig is a pig, and hasn't been called one for nothing!"

They finished their supper. Jmukin rose from the table, and walked up and down the room for a long time, talking interminably. He loved to think of and discuss deep and serious subjects, and was longing to discover some theory that would sustain him in his old age, so that he might find peace of mind, and not think it so terrible to die. He desired for himself the same gentleness and self-confidence and peace of mind which he saw in this guest of his, who had just eaten his fill of cucumbers and bread, and was a better man for it, sitting there on a bench so healthy and fat, patiently bored, looking like a huge heathen idol that nothing could move from his seat.

"If a man can only find some idea to hold to in life, he will be happy," Jmukin thought.

The old Cossack went out on the front steps, and the attorney could hear him sighing and repeating to himself:

"Yes—I see—"

Night was falling, and the stars were shining out one by one. The lamps in the house had not been lit. Some one came creeping toward the drawing-room as silently as a shadow, and stopped in the doorway. It was Lyuboff, Jmukin's wife.

"Have you come from the city?" she asked timidly, without looking at her guest.

"Yes, I live in the city."

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"Maybe you know about schools, master, and can tell us what to do if you will be so kind. We need advice."

"What do you want?"

"We have two sons, kind master, and they should have been sent to school long ago, but nobody ever comes here and we have no one to tell us anything. I myself know nothing. If they don't go to school, they will be taken into the army as common Cossacks. That is hard, master. They can't read or write, they are worse off than peasants, and their father himself despises them, and won't let them come into the house. Is it their fault? If only the younger one, at least, could be sent to school! It's a pity to see them so!" she wailed, and her voice trembled. It seemed incredible that a woman so little and young could already have grown-up children. "Ah, it is such a pity!" she said again.

"You know nothing about it, mother, and it's none of your business," said Jmukin, appearing in the doorway. "Don't pester our guest with your wild talk. Go away, mother!"

Lyuboff went out, repeating once more in a high little voice as she reached the hall:

"Ah, it is such a pity!"

A bed was made up for the attorney on a sofa in the drawing-room, and Jmukin lit the little shrine lamp, so that he might not be left in the dark. Then he lay down in his own bedroom. Lying there he thought of many things: his soul, his old age, and his recent stroke which had given him such a fright and had so sharply reminded him of his approaching death. He liked to philosophise when he was alone in the dark, and at these times he imagined himself to be a very deep and serious person indeed, whose attention only questions of importance could engage. He now kept thinking that he would like to get hold of some one idea unlike any other idea he had ever had, something significant that would be the lodestar of his life. He wanted to think of some law for himself, that would make his life as serious and deep as he himself personally was. And here was an idea! He could go without meat now, and deprive himself of everything that was superfluous to his existence! The time would surely come when people would no longer kill animals or one another, it could not but come, and he pictured this future in his mind's eye, and distinctly saw himself living at peace with all the animal world. Then he remembered the pigs again, and his brain began to reel.

"What a muddle it all is!" he muttered, heaving a deep sigh.

"Are you asleep?" he asked.

"No."

Jmukin rose from his bed, and stood on the threshold of the door in his nightshirt, exposing to his guest's view his thin, sinewy legs, as straight as posts.

"Just look, now," he began. "Here is all this telegraph and telephone business, in a word, all these marvels, you know, and yet people are no more virtuous than they used to be. It is said that when I was young, thirty or forty years ago, people were rougher and crueller than they are now, but aren't they just the same to-day? Of course, they were less ceremonious when I was a youngster. I remember how once, when we had been stationed on the bank of a river in the Caucasus for four months without anything to do, quite a little romance took place. On the very bank of the river, you know, where our regiment was encamped, we had buried a prince whom we had killed not long before. So at night, you know, his princess used to come down to the grave and cry. She screamed and screamed, and groaned and groaned until we got into such a state that we couldn't sleep a wink. We didn't sleep for nights. We grew tired of it. And honestly, why should we be kept awake by that devil of a voice? Excuse the expression! So we took that princess and gave her a good thrashing, and she stopped coming to the grave. There you are! Nowadays, of course, men of that category don't exist any more. People don't thrash one another, and they live more cleanly and learn more lessons than they used to, but their hearts haven't changed one bit, you know. Listen to this, for instance. There is a landlord near here who owns a coal mine, you know. He has all sorts of vagabonds and men without passports working for him, men who have nowhere else to go. When Saturday comes round the workmen have to be paid, and their employer never wants to do that, he is too fond of his money. So he has picked out a foreman, a vagabond, too, though he wears a hat, and he says to him: 'Don't pay them a thing,' says our gentleman, 'not even a penny. They will beat you, but you must stand it. If you do, I'll give you ten roubles every Saturday.' So every week, regularly, when Saturday evening comes round the workmen come for their wages, and the foreman says: 'There aren't any wages!' Well, words follow, and then come abuse, and a drubbing. They beat him and kick him, for the men are wild with hunger, you know; they beat him until he is unconscious, and then go off to the four winds of heaven. The owner of the mine orders cold water to be thrown

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over his foreman, and pitches him ten roubles. The man takes the money, and is thankful, for the fact is he would agree to wear a noose round his neck for a penny! Yes, and on Monday a new gang of workmen arrives. They come because they have nowhere else to go. On Saturday there is the same old story over again."

The attorney rolled over, with his face toward the back of the sofa, and mumbled something incoherent.

"Take another example, for instance," Jmukin went on. "When we had the Siberian cattle plague here, you know, the cattle died like flies, I can tell you. The veterinary surgeons came, and strictly ordered all infected stock that died to be buried as far away from the farm as possible, and to be covered with lime and so on, according to the laws of science. Well, one of my horses died. I buried it with the greatest care, and shovelled at least ten poods of lime on top of it, but what do you think? That pair of young jackanapes of mine dug up the horse one night, and sold the skin for three roubles! There now, what do you think of that?"

Flashes of lightning were gleaming through the cracks of the shutters on one side of the room. The air was sultry before the approaching storm, and the mosquitoes had begun to bite. Jmukin groaned and sighed, as he lay meditating in his bed, and kept repeating to himself:

"Yes—I see—"

Sleep was impossible. Somewhere in the distance thunder was growling.

"Are you awake?"

"Yes," answered his guest.

Jmukin rose and walked with shuffling slippers through the drawing-room, and hail, and into the kitchen to get a drink of water.

"The worst thing in the world is stupidity," he said, as he returned a few minutes later with a dipper in his hand. "That Lyuboff of mine gets down on her knees and prays to God every night. She flops down on the floor and prays that the boys may be sent to school, you know. She is afraid they will be drafted into the army as common Cossacks, and have their backs tickled with sabres. But it would take money to send them to school, and where can I get it? What you haven't got you haven't got, and it's no use crying for the moon! Another reason she prays is because, like all women, you know, she thinks she is the most unhappy creature in the world. I am an outspoken man, and I won't hide anything from you. She comes of a poor priest's family—of church-bell stock, one might say—and I married her when she was seventeen. They gave her to me chiefly because times were hard, and her family were in want and had nothing to eat, and when all is said and done I do own some land, as you see, and I am an officer of sorts. She felt flattered at the idea of being my wife, you know. But she began to cry on the day of our wedding, and has cried every day since for twenty years; her eyes must be made of water! She does nothing but sit and think. What does she think about, I ask you? What can a woman think about? Nothing! The fact is, I don't consider women human beings."

The attorney jumped up impetuously, and sat up in bed.

"Excuse me, I feel a little faint," he said. "I am going out—of—doors."

Jmukin, still talking about women, drew back the bolts of the hall door, and both men went out together. A full moon was floating over the grange. The house and stables looked whiter than they had by day, and shimmering white bands of light lay among the shadows on the lawn. To the right lay the steppe, with the stars glowing softly over it; as one gazed into its depths, it looked mysterious and infinitely distant, like some bottomless abyss. To the left, heavy thunder-clouds lay piled one upon another. Their margins were lit by the rays of the moon, and they resembled dark forests, seas, and mountains with snowy summits. Flashes of lightning were playing about their peaks, and soft thunder was growling in their depths; a battle seemed to be raging among them.

Quite near the house a little screech owl was crying monotonously:

"Whew! Whew!"

"What time is it?" asked the attorney.

"Nearly two o'clock."

"What a long time yet until dawn!"

They re-entered the house and lay down. It was time to go to sleep, and sleep is usually so sound before a storm, but the old man was pining for grave, weighty meditations, and he not only wanted to think, he wanted to talk as well. So he babbled on of what a fine thing it would be if, for the sake of his soul, a man could shake off this idleness that was imperceptibly and uselessly devouring his days and years one after another. He said he would like to think of some feat of strength to perform, such as making a long journey on foot or giving up meat,

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as this young man had done. And once more he pictured the future when men would no longer kill animals; he pictured it as clearly and precisely as if he himself had lived at that time, but suddenly his thoughts grew confused, and again he understood nothing.

The thunder-storm rolled by, but one corner of the cloud passed over the grange, and the rain began to drum on the roof. Jmukin got up, sighing with age and stretching his limbs, and peered into the drawing-room. Seeing that his guest was still awake, he said:

"When we were in the Caucasus, you know, we had a colonel who was a vegetarian as you are. He never ate meat and never hunted or allowed his men to fish. I can understand that, of course. Every animal has a right to enjoy its life and its freedom. But I can't understand how pigs could be allowed to roam wherever they pleased without being watched—"

His guest sat up in bed; his pale, haggard face was stamped with vexation and fatigue. It was plain that he was suffering agonies, and that only a kind and considerate heart forbade him to put his irritation into words.

"It is already light," he said briefly. "Please let me have a horse now."

"What do you mean? Wait until the rain stops!" "No, please!" begged the guest in a panic. "I really must be going at once!"

And he began to dress quickly.

The sun was already rising when a horse and carriage were brought to the door. The rain had stopped, the clouds were skimming across the sky, and the rifts of blue were growing wider and wider between them. The first rays of the sun were timidly lighting up the meadows below. The attorney passed through the front entry with his portfolio under his arm, while Jmukin's wife, with red eyes, and a face even paler than it had been the evening before, stood gazing fixedly at him with the innocent look of a little girl. Her sorrowful face showed how much she envied her guest his liberty. Ah, with what joy she, too, would have left this place! Her eyes spoke of something she longed to say to him, perhaps some advice she wanted to ask him about her boys. How pitiful she was! She was not a wife, she was not the mistress of the house, she was not even a servant, but a miserable dependent, a poor relation, a nonentity wanted by no one. Her husband bustled about near his guest, not ceasing his talk for an instant, and at last ran ahead to see him into the carriage, while she stood shrinking timidly and guiltily against the wall, still waiting for the moment to come that would give her an opportunity to speak.

"Come again! Come again!" the old man repeated over and over again. "Everything we have is at your service, you know!"

His guest hastily climbed into the tarantass, obviously with infinite pleasure, looking as if he were afraid every second of being detained. The tarantass bounded and whined as it had done the day before, and a bucket tied on behind clattered madly. The attorney looked round at Jmukin with a peculiar expression in his eyes. He seemed to be wanting to call him a Petcheneg, or something of the sort, as the surveyor had done, but his kindness triumphed. He controlled himself, and the words remained unsaid. As he reached the gate, however, he suddenly felt that he could no longer contain himself; he rose in his seat, and cried out in a loud, angry voice:

"You bore me to death!"

And with these words he vanished through the gate.

Jmukin's two sons were standing in front of the stable. The older was holding a gun, the younger had in his arms a grey cock with a bright red comb. The younger tossed the cock into the air with all his might; the bird shot up higher than the roof of the house, and turned over in the air. The elder boy shot, and it fell to the ground like a stone.

The old man stood nonplussed, and unable to comprehend his guest's unexpected exclamation. At last he turned and slowly went into the house. Sitting down to his breakfast, he fell into a long reverie about the present tendency of thought, about the universal wickedness of the present generation, about the telegraph and the telephone and bicycles, and about how unnecessary it all was. But he grew calmer little by little as he slowly ate his meal. He drank five glasses of tea, and lay down to take a nap. .