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Gooseberries

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Since early morning the whole sky had been overhung with rain-clouds; it was still, not hot, and dreary, as it is on grey, overcast days when the clouds have long brooded over the field, you wait for the rain, and there is none. The veterinary surgeon Ivan Ivanych and the gymnasium¹ teacher Burkin had already grown weary of walking, and the field seemed to them endless. Far ahead the windmills of the village of Mironositskoye¹⁵ were barely visible; to the right a line of hills stretched and then vanished far beyond the village, and they both knew that this was the river-bank — the meadows lay there, green willows, the estates, and that if you climbed one of the hills you could see from it the same immense field, the telegraph, and a train which from afar looked like a crawling caterpillar, and in clear weather you could even see the town from there. Now, in the still weather, when all nature seemed meek and pensive, Ivan Ivanych and Burkin were filled with love for this field, and both were thinking how great, how beautiful this country is.

— Last time, when we were in the barn at Prokofy the elder's, — said Burkin, — you were about to tell some story.²

— Yes, I wanted then to tell about my brother.

Ivan Ivanych drew a long sigh and lit his little pipe to begin his tale, but

at that very moment the rain came down. And within five minutes it was already pouring hard, a steady, set-in rain with no way of telling when it would stop. Ivan Ivanych and Burkin stopped, pondering; the dogs, already wet, stood with their tails tucked in and looked at them with tenderness.

— We must take shelter somewhere, — said Burkin. — Let's go to Alyokhin's. It's close by.

— Let's go, then.

They turned off and went on across the mown field, now straight on, now bearing right, until they came out onto the road. Soon poplars appeared, a garden, then the red roofs of the barns; the river gleamed, and a view opened of a broad reach with a mill and a white bathing-house. This was Sofyino, where Alyokhin lived.

The mill was working, drowning out the noise of the rain; the weir trembled.

Here, by the carts, wet horses stood with their heads drooping, and people went about covered with sacks. It was damp, muddy, cheerless, and the reach had a cold, sullen look. Ivan Ivanych and Burkin already felt wet through, unclean, uncomfortable all over the body; their feet were heavy with mud, and when, having crossed the weir, they went up towards the manor barns, they kept silent, as though angry with each other.

In one barn a winnower was droning away; its door was open, and out of it billowed the dust. On the threshold stood Alyokhin himself, a man of some forty, tall, stout, with long hair, more like a professor or an artist than a landowner. He had on a white shirt, long since unwashed, girt with a bit of cord, drawers instead of trousers, and his boots too were caked with mud and straw. His nose and eyes were black with dust. He recognised Ivan Ivanych and Burkin and, apparently, was very delighted.

— Please, gentlemen, come into the house, — he said, smiling. — I shall be there at once, this very minute.

The house was large, two storeys high. Alyokhin lived downstairs, in two rooms with vaulted ceilings and small windows, where once the stewards had lived; here the furniture was plain, and it smelt of rye bread, cheap vodka, and harness. Upstairs, in the best rooms, he was seldom to be found, only when guests came. In the house Ivan Ivanych and Burkin were met by the maid, a young woman so beautiful that they both stopped short together and looked at one another.

— You cannot imagine how glad I am to see you, gentlemen, — said Alyokhin, following them into the hall. — What a surprise! Pelageya, — he turned to the maid, — give the guests something to change into. I may as well change myself, come to that. Only I must go and wash first — I don't believe I've washed since the spring. Wouldn't you like, gentlemen, to go to the bathing-house, while things are made ready here.

The beautiful Pelageya, so delicate and so soft in appearance, brought bath-sheets and soap, and Alyokhin went off with his guests to the bathing-house.

— Yes, it's a long time since I washed, — he said, undressing. — A fine bathing-house I have, as you see, father put it up, but somehow there's never time to wash.

He sat down on the step and lathered his long hair and his neck, and the water about him turned brown.

— Yes, I must say... — pronounced Ivan Ivanych meaningfully, looking at his head.

— I've not washed in a long while... — Alyokhin repeated in embarrassment, and lathered himself again, and the water about him turned dark blue, like ink.

Ivan Ivanych went out, flung himself into the water with a splash and swam under the rain, his arms sweeping wide, and the waves went out from him, and on the waves white lilies rocked; he swam right to the middle of the reach and dived, and a minute later came up somewhere else and swam on, and kept diving, trying to reach the bottom. “Ah, good God... — he kept saying, revelling in it. — Ah, good God...” He swam right up to the mill, exchanged a word or two there with the muzhiks³, and turned back, and mid-reach he lay floating, holding his face up to the rain. Burkin and Alyokhin had dressed already and were about to go, but he was still swimming and diving.

— Ah, good God... — he said. — Ah, Lord have mercy.

— Oh, stop it, would you! — Burkin shouted across.

They returned to the house. And only when the lamp had been lit in the big drawing-room upstairs, both Burkin and Ivan Ivanych, dressed in silk dressing-gowns and warm slippers, were sitting in armchairs, and Alyokhin himself, washed and combed, in a new frock-coat, was walking about the drawing-room, plainly relishing the warmth, the cleanliness, the dry clothes, the light footwear, and when the beautiful Pelageya, stepping noiselessly over the carpet and smiling softly, was serving tea and jam on a tray — only then did Ivan Ivanych begin his story, and it seemed that he was listened to not by Burkin and Alyokhin alone, but also by the old and young ladies and the military men who looked out calmly and sternly from their gilt frames.

— We are two brothers, — he began, — I, Ivan Ivanych, and the other, Nikolai Ivanych, some two years younger. I took the scholarly line and became a veterinary surgeon, while Nikolai, from nineteen on, was already sitting in the Treasury office.⁴ Our father, Chimsha-Gimalaisky, was of the cantonists,⁵ but, having earned an officer's rank, left us hereditary nobility and a smallish estate. After his death the smallish estate was seized from us for debts, but nevertheless we spent our childhood in the country, free. We, just like peasant children, spent our days and nights in the field, in the forest, watched over the horses, stripped bast, caught fish, and so on and so forth... And you know, whoever has once in his life caught a ruff, or seen the migrating thrushes

in autumn, how on clear, cool days they sweep in flocks over the village, he is no longer a townsman, and to his very death something will draw him towards free country life. My brother pined in the Treasury office. Years went by, and there he stayed in the one place, filling out the same papers and thinking always of the same thing — how to get away to the country. And this longing of his little by little resolved into a definite wish, into a dream of buying himself a small country house somewhere on the bank of a river or a lake.

He was a kind, meek man, I loved him, but this wish to shut himself up for his whole life in a country house of his own I never sympathised with. People are fond of saying that a man needs only three arshins of land.⁶ But three arshins are what a corpse needs, not a man. And they also say nowadays that if our intelligentsia feels a pull towards the countryside and strives after country houses, then that is good. But these houses are those same three arshins of land. To withdraw from the city, from the struggle, from the clamour of life, to withdraw and hide away on one's own country house — that is no life, it is selfishness, sloth, it is a kind of monasticism, but monasticism without the sacrifice.

What a man needs is not three arshins of land, not a country house, but the whole globe, all of nature, where in that vastness he might show forth every quality and gift of his free spirit.

My brother Nikolai, sitting there in his chancery, dreamed of how he would eat his own shchi,⁷ the savoury smell of it drifting all across the yard, eat it on the green grass, sleep in the sunshine, sit for hours

together on the bench outside the gate and gaze at the field and the forest. Farming booklets and all those bits of advice in the almanacs made up his joy, his favourite spiritual food; he liked to read the newspapers too, but read in them only the advertisements that so many *desyatinas*⁸ of arable and meadow were for sale, with an estate, a river, a garden, a mill, with stream-fed ponds. And there appeared pictures in his head of garden walks, flowers, fruits, birdhouses, crucian carp in the ponds and, you know, all that kind of thing. These pictures of his fancy differed with whatever advertisements came his way, but somehow, in each of them, there had to be gooseberries. Not a single house, not a single idyllic little spot could he imagine without there being gooseberries in it.

— There's much to be said for life in the country, — he'd say. — You sit on your balcony over your tea, your ducks paddling about on the pond, everything smelling so good, and... and gooseberries grow.

He would draw the plan of his estate, and each time the plan came out just the same: a) the manor house, b) the servants' quarters, c) the kitchen-garden, d) gooseberries. He lived like a miser: short on food, short on drink, dressed any old way, like a beggar, and saved and saved and banked it all. A dreadful skinflint he grew. It hurt me to look at him, and I used to give him a little and send something at the holidays, but even that he put away. Once a man becomes possessed by an idea, there's nothing to be done.

Years passed, he was moved to another province, he was past forty by

now, and still he read the advertisements and saved. Then, word reaches me, he'd married. With the same aim — to buy himself a country house with gooseberries — he married an old, plain widow, without any feeling, only because she had a bit of money put by. Even then, with her, he lived like a miser, kept her half-starved, and banked her money under his own name. Formerly she had been a postmaster's wife, used with him to pies and fruit-liqueurs, but under her second husband she never had her fill even of rye bread; she began to wither from such a life, and in three years or so up and gave her soul to God. And of course my brother never for a moment supposed himself to blame for her death. Money, like vodka, makes a man a crank. In our town, there was a merchant dying. On his deathbed he called for a plate of honey and ate up all his money and his lottery tickets with it, so that none should come to anyone else. Once, at the railway station, I was inspecting droves of cattle, and just then a horse-dealer got caught under a locomotive and had his leg severed. We carry him into the surgery, the blood pouring out — a dreadful business — and all the while he keeps begging us to find his leg, and frets away: there's twenty roubles in the boot on the severed leg, and mind they aren't lost.

— Now that's from another opera, — said Burkin.

— After his wife's death, — Ivan Ivanych continued, having thought for half a minute, — my brother began looking for an estate. Of course, look for five years if you like, but in the end you'll make a mistake and buy nothing like the thing you dreamed of. Through an agent, with transfer of the debt, my brother Nikolai bought a hundred and twelve

desyatinas with a manor house, servants' quarters, with a park, but no fruit garden, no gooseberries, no ponds with ducks; there was a river, but the water in it was the colour of coffee, because on one side of the estate was a brickworks and on the other a bone-char works. But my Nikolai Ivanych worried little about that; he ordered twenty gooseberry bushes for himself, planted them, and began living as a landowner.

Last year I went over to check up on him. I'll go, I thought, and see how things are with him. In his letters my brother named his estate so: Chumbaroklova Wasteland, also called Gimalaiskoye.⁹ I got to "also-called-Gimalaiskoye" in the afternoon. It was hot. Ditches everywhere, fences, hedges, firs set out in ranks — and you can't tell how to drive into the yard, or where to put the horse. I go up to the house, and out to meet me comes a ginger dog, fat, like a pig. She would like to bark, but can't be bothered. Out of the kitchen came the cook-maid, bare-legged, fat, also like a pig, and said the master was resting after dinner. In I come to my brother; there he sits up in bed, a blanket over his knees; grown old, grown stout, gone flabby; cheeks, nose and lips straining forward — for all the world as if he were about to grunt into the blanket.

We fell into each other's arms and wept a little, out of joy and out of the mournful thought that we had once been young and now we were both grey and it was time to be dying. He got dressed and led me out to show off his estate.

— Well, how are you getting on here? — I asked.

— Not so bad, God be praised, I get on well.

Gone was the old, meek, poor wretch of a clerk; here was a proper landowner, a master. He had settled in here, grown used to it and got a taste for it; he ate heartily, bathed in the banya,¹⁰ put on weight, was already in litigation with the village commune and both factories, and was much offended when the muzhiks would not call him “Your High Honour.”¹¹ And he tended to his soul in a substantial, lordly manner, and performed his good deeds not simply, but with pomp. And what good works? He treated the muzhiks for all their ailments with soda and castor-oil, and on his name-day had a thanksgiving service held in the middle of the village, and then put up half a bucket of vodka,¹² thinking it was the thing to do. Ah, that appalling half-bucket! One day the fat landowner hauls the muzhiks up before the Land Captain¹³ for letting their cattle trespass, and the next, on some solemn occasion, sets out half a bucket of vodka for them, and they drink and cry hurrah and, drunk, bow down at his feet. A turn of life for the better, a full belly, idleness breed in a Russian man a self-conceit of the most insolent sort. Nikolai Ivanych, who once, in the Treasury office, had been afraid to hold so much as a private opinion of his own, now spoke nothing but eternal truths, and in the very tone of a cabinet minister: “Education is essential, but for the common folk it is premature,” “corporal punishment is harmful in general, but in certain cases it is beneficial and irreplaceable.”

— I know the common folk and know how to handle them, — he would say. — They’re fond of me, the common folk. I have but to lift a

finger, and the common folk will do me anything I want.

And all of it, mind, was spoken with a shrewd and kindly smile. Some twenty times over he came out with “we of the nobility,” “I, as a nobleman”; clearly it had slipped his mind that our grandfather was a peasant and our father a soldier. Even our surname, Chimsha-Gimalaisky, preposterous as it is, struck him now as sonorous, high-born, and vastly pleasing.

But he is not the point; I am. I want to tell you of the change that came over me in those few hours I spent on his estate. In the evening, over our tea, the cook-maid set on the table a heaped plate of gooseberries. This was no bought gooseberry, but his own, picked for the first time since the bushes were planted. Nikolai Ivanych laughed and gazed at the gooseberries silently for a minute, with tears in his eyes — he couldn’t speak from emotion — then put one berry in his mouth, looked at me with the triumph of a child who has finally received his favourite toy, and said:

— How delicious!

And he ate greedily and kept repeating:

— Ah, how delicious! Do try some!

They were hard and sour, but, as Pushkin said, “a delusion that exalts us is dearer than a host of truths.”¹⁴ I was looking at a happy man, whose fondest dream had come so patently to pass, who had achieved his goal

in life, got what he wanted, and who was well pleased with his lot, with himself. Into my thoughts of human happiness there had always, somehow, crept something sorrowful; but now, at the sight of a happy man, a heavy feeling took hold of me, near to despair. At night it weighed on me most of all. They made up a bed for me in the room next to my brother's bedroom, and I could hear how he wasn't sleeping and how he got up and went to the plate of gooseberries and took them one by one. I reckoned: what a number of contented, happy people there are, when all's said! What an overpowering force! Just look at this life: the insolence and idleness of the strong, the ignorance and brutishness of the weak, all round impossible poverty, overcrowding, degeneration, drunkenness, hypocrisy, lies... And all the while, in every house and street, there is stillness, peace; of the fifty thousand in the town, not one to cry out, loudly protest. We see the ones who go to market for their food, who eat by day and sleep by night, who talk their nonsense, marry, grow old, and placidly carry their dead off to the graveyard; but the ones who suffer we do not see or hear, and all that is dreadful in life takes place somewhere behind the scenes. Everything is still and peaceful, and the only thing that protests is the mute statistics: so many gone mad, so many buckets of vodka drunk, so many children dead of malnutrition... And such an order of things is obviously necessary; obviously the happy man is at ease only because the unhappy bear their burden in silence, and without that silence happiness would be impossible. It is a universal hypnosis. There ought to stand behind the door of every contented, happy man someone with a little hammer, forever reminding him with a knock that there are unhappy people, that however happy he may be,

life will sooner or later show him its claws, some misfortune will fall — illness, poverty, loss — and no one will see or hear him, just as now he neither sees nor hears the others. But there is no man with the little hammer, the happy man lives on, the small worries of life stir him only slightly, as the wind stirs an aspen — and all is well.

— That night I came to see how I too had been contented and happy, — Ivan Ivanych continued, standing up. — I too, at dinner and out hunting, would preach how one ought to live, how to believe, how to govern the people. I too used to say that learning enlightens, that education is essential, but that for common folk bare literacy will do for now. Freedom is a blessing, I said, we can no more do without it than without air, but we must wait. Yes, that is how I used to talk, and now I ask: wait for the sake of what? — Ivan Ivanych demanded, glaring at Burkin. — Wait for the sake of what, I ask you? On what grounds? I'm told it can't all come at once, that every idea works itself out in life gradually, in its own time. But who says so? Where is the proof that this is just? You point to the natural order of things, the lawful course of events; but is there any order, any lawfulness, in the fact that I, a living, thinking man, stand at the edge of a ditch and wait for it to close over of itself or fill up with silt, when I might, perhaps, jump across it, or throw a bridge over it? And again, wait for the sake of what? To wait, when there is no strength left to live, and yet one must live and wants to live!

I left my brother early that morning, and ever since it has been unbearable for me to be in the town. The peace and quiet weigh on me; I am afraid to look at windows, for there is now no more painful

spectacle for me than a happy family sitting round the table drinking tea. I am old now and unfit for the struggle, I am incapable even of hatred. I only grieve in my soul, grow irritated, vexed; at night my head is on fire with the flood of thoughts, and I cannot sleep... Ah, if only I were young!

Ivan Ivanych paced in agitation from corner to corner and said again:

— If only I were young!

He suddenly went up to Alyokhin and began to press first one of his hands, then the other.

— Pavel Konstantynych, — he said in a beseeching voice, — don't settle into contentment, don't let yourself be lulled to sleep! While you are young, strong, and vigorous, never tire of doing good! There is no happiness, and there ought to be none; and if life has a meaning and a purpose, then that meaning and purpose lie not in our happiness at all, but in something more rational and greater. Do good!

And all this Ivan Ivanych said with a pitiful, imploring smile, as though he were asking it for himself.

Then all three sat on in their armchairs, at the far corners of the room, and kept silent. Neither Burkin nor Alyokhin had been satisfied by Ivan Ivanych's story. With generals and ladies gazing out of the gilt frames, alive-looking in the dusk, a story about a poor wretch of a clerk who ate gooseberries was dull. Somehow one wanted to talk and to hear of

elegant people, of women. And that they sat in a drawing-room where all of it — the shrouded chandelier, the armchairs, the carpets underfoot — told how once these very people, now looking out of the frames, had walked and sat and taken their tea here, and that lovely Pelageya now passed through it noiselessly — that was worth more than any story.

Alyokhin badly wanted to sleep; he had got up early for the farm work, before three in the morning, and his eyelids were drooping now, but he was afraid the guests might start telling something interesting without him, and so he stayed up. Was it wise, was it just, the thing Ivan Ivanych had just been saying? he did not go into; the guests spoke not of grain, nor hay, nor tar, but about something with no direct bearing on his life, and he was glad, and wanted them to go on...

— Well, it's time for bed, — said Burkin, getting up. — Allow me to wish you good night.

Alyokhin took his leave and went off downstairs to his own quarters, while the guests remained upstairs. For the night the two of them were put in a large room where stood two old wooden bedsteads with carved ornament, and in the corner an ivory crucifix; their beds — broad, cool, made up by beautiful Pelageya — gave off the pleasant smell of fresh linen.

Ivan Ivanych silently undressed and lay down.

— Lord, forgive us sinners! — he murmured, and drew the bedclothes over his head.

From his little pipe on the table came a strong reek of stale tobacco, and Burkin could not get to sleep for a long while, quite unable to make out where the heavy smell was coming from.

The rain drummed at the windows all night.

Notes

1. a classical secondary school in Imperial Russia with a big focus on Greek and Latin as well
2. refers to the first story of the trilogy, “Man in a Case”. yes, apparently there’s a trilogy... It begs to be translated (one day!). UPD: interesting fact, “a case” in the original, футляр (futlyar), implies something more of a small fitted case, a hard scabbard of sorts.
3. strictly peasant men, meaning a random set of the village’s adult males, an abstract entity that answers to the Land Captain (see note 13), does the peasantry things, and gets the peasantry vodka. We could render it just as “peasants”, but that’s too many people, including women and children and elderly, or “peasant men”, but it sounds weird, or potentially “lads” or “blokes” but “muzhiks” can be both condescending (like counting heads) and endearing, which is the modern meaning most of the time, used as “I’m gonna go to the pub with the muzhiks” = “... with the lads”, meaning random male friends or acquaintances. Nikolai Ivanych uses the word rather a lot which tells you what you need to know about Nikolai Ivanych. We could get into historical and fiscal details here if we wanted, e.g. when serfdom was a thing, muzhiks could also indicate “all male adults of working age” and was used to count how much workforce / how many heads / how many souls you had as a landlord with serfs, whereas women and children are latent and adjacent to muzhiks and don’t have to be mentioned at all, i.e. “muzhiks and whatever comes with them”.
4. the provincial department of the finance ministry that handled state revenue and accounts (and by all accounts it’s deadly dull, quintessentially Chekhovian)
5. cantonist was a soldier’s son bound from birth to lifelong military

- service and schooling in the special “canton” establishments where he could win hereditary nobility by not dying and (not or) rising up to officer’s rank
6. an old Russian measure of length, about 71 cm (28 in); three arshins is how much land needed for a grave. See also Tolstoy’s short story, “How Much Land Does a Man Need?”, which perhaps also needs to be translated (one day!)
 7. traditional Russian cabbage soup, quite sour, quite plain, quite domestic; can stay out of the fridge for days and still be consumable.
 8. an old Russian measure of land, about 1.09 hectares (2.7 acres), a hundred desyatinas was where “respectable landlord” territory began.
 9. Chekhov’s joke here is “the Himalayan place sits atop Chumbaroklova Waste”, something supposedly high and elevated combined with bathetic Bumfuck, Nowhere.
 10. the Russian steam bathhouse, famous national pastime, symbolic in various senses, a proverbial place to spend time with the muzhiks / lads / mates, akin to an English pub.
 11. the correct form of address for an official of the higher-middle ranks, for an ex-clerk though? lol
 12. this is a literal translation of “vedro”, an old liquid measure of about 12 litres, so half a bucket is around six litres of vodka, which seems to be an amount it was sold by, which seems like quite a lot, to be honest.
 13. a district official post created in 1889, filled from the local nobility, giving them administrative and judicial power over the muzhiks. The Land Captain then can be the same man who drags them to court and supplies them with the vodka.
 14. from Pushkin’s poem “The Hero” (1830), slightly misquoted, “low truths” is in the original; whether this was deliberate or not — at the reader’s discretion. Both Russian originals also use “Istina”, trü, transcendent Truth.
 15. etymology of the village name traced back to the Myrrh-Bearing Women — Мироносицкое = миро (myrrh) + носить (to carry) — the women who came to Christ’s tomb to anoint the body but found it empty. However, to a contemporary Russian ear that has gone through sovietisation / atheistisation, миро (myrrh) sounds like мир (peace / the world), which might make a difference for the story if we assume Chekhov meant something by choosing this name for a fictional village, or might not, and just remains a curious detail.
h/t Natasha Carey

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