

# Nerves

## Anton Chekhov

DMITRI OSIPOVITCH VAXIN, the architect, returned from town to his holiday cottage greatly impressed by the spiritualistic séance at which he had been present. As he undressed and got into his solitary bed (Madame Vaxin had gone to an all-night service) he could not help remembering all he had seen and heard. It had not, properly speaking, been a séance at all, but the whole evening had been spent in terrifying conversation. A young lady had begun it by talking, apropos of nothing, about thought-reading. From thought-reading they had passed imperceptibly to spirits, and from spirits to ghosts, from ghosts to people buried alive. . . . A gentleman had read a horrible story of a corpse turning round in the coffin. Vaxin himself had asked for a saucer and shown the young ladies how to converse with spirits. He had called up among others the spirit of his deceased uncle, Klavdy Mironitch, and had mentally asked him:

"Has not the time come for me to transfer the ownership of our house to my wife?"

To which his uncle's spirit had replied:

"All things are good in their season."

"There is a great deal in nature that is mysterious and . . . terrible . . ." thought Vaxin, as he got into bed. "It's not the dead but the unknown that's so horrible."

It struck one o'clock. Vaxin turned over on the other side and peeped out from beneath the bedclothes at the blue light of the lamp burning before the holy ikon. The flame flickered and cast a faint light on the ikon-stand and the big portrait of Uncle Klavdy that hung facing his bed.

"And what if the ghost of Uncle Klavdy should appear this minute?" flashed through Vaxin's mind. "But, of course, that's impossible."

Ghosts are, we all know, a superstition, the offspring of undeveloped intelligence, but Vaxin, nevertheless, pulled the bed-clothes over his head, and shut his eyes very tight. The corpse that turned round in its coffin came back to his mind, and the figures of his deceased mother-in-law, of a colleague who had hanged himself, and of a girl who had drowned herself, rose before his imagination. . . . Vaxin began trying to dispel these gloomy ideas, but the more he tried to drive them away the more haunting the figures and fearful fancies became. He began to feel frightened.

"Hang it all!" he thought. "Here I am afraid in the dark like a child! Idiotic!"

Tick . . . tick . . . tick . . . he heard the clock in the next room. The church-bell chimed the hour in the churchyard close by. The bell tolled slowly, depressingly, mournfully. . . . A cold chill ran down Vaxin's neck and spine. He fancied he heard someone breathing heavily over his head, as though Uncle Klavdy had stepped out of his frame and was bending over his nephew. . . . Vaxin felt unbearably frightened. He clenched his teeth and held his breath in terror.

At last, when a cockchafer flew in at the open window and began buzzing over his bed, he could bear it no longer and gave a violent tug at the bellrope.

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"Dmitri Osipitch, was wollen Sie?" he heard the voice of the German governess at his door a moment later.

"Ah, it's you, Rosalia Karlovna!" Vaxin cried, delighted. "Why do you trouble? Gavril might just . . ."

"Yourself Gavril to the town sent. And Glafira is somewhere all the evening gone. . . . There's nobody in the house. . . . Was wollen Sie doch?"

"Well, what I wanted . . . it's . . . but, please, come in . . . you needn't mind! . . . it's dark."

Rosalia Karlovna, a stout red-cheeked person, came in to the bedroom and stood in an expectant attitude at the door.

"Sit down, please . . . you see, it's like this. . . . What on earth am I to ask her for?" he wondered, stealing a glance at Uncle Klavdy's portrait and feeling his soul gradually returning to tranquility.

"What I really wanted to ask you was . . . Oh, when the man goes to town, don't forget to tell him to . . . er . . . er . . . to get some cigarette-papers. . . . But do, please sit down."

"Cigarette-papers? good. . . . Was wollen Sie noch?"

"Ich will . . . there's nothing I will, but. . . . But do sit down! I shall think of something else in a minute."

"It is shocking for a maiden in a man's room to remain. . . . Mr. Vaxin, you are, I see, a naughty man. . . . I understand. . . . To order cigarette-papers one does not a person wake. . . . I understand you. . . ."

Rosalia Karlovna turned and went out of the room.

Somewhat reassured by his conversation with her and ashamed of his cowardice, Vaxin pulled the bedclothes over his head and shut his eyes. For about ten minutes he felt fairly comfortable, then the same nonsense came creeping back into his mind. . . . He swore to himself, felt for the matches, and without opening his eyes lighted a candle.

But even the light was no use. To Vaxin's excited imagination it seemed as though someone were peeping round the corner and that his uncle's eyes were moving.

"I'll ring her up again . . . damn the woman!" he decided. "I'll tell her I'm unwell and ask for some drops."

Vaxin rang. There was no response. He rang again, and as though answering his ring, he heard the church-bell toll the hour.

Overcome with terror, cold all over, he jumped out of bed, ran headlong out of his bedroom, and making the sign of the cross and cursing himself for his cowardice, he fled barefoot in his night-shirt to the governess's room.

"Rosalia Karlovna!" he began in a shaking voice as he knocked at her door, "Rosalia Karlovna! . . . Are

you asleep? . . . I feel . . . so . . . er . . . er . . . unwell. . . Drops! . . ."

There was no answer. Silence reigned.

"I beg you . . . do you understand? I beg you! Why this squeamishness, I can't understand . . . especially when a man . . . is ill . . . How absurdly zierlich manierlich you are really . . . at your age. . . ."

"I to your wife shall tell. . . . Will not leave an honest maiden in peace. . . . When I was at Baron Anzig's, and the baron try to come to me for matches, I understand at once what his matches mean and tell to the baroness. . . . I am an honest maiden."

"Hang your honesty! I am ill I tell you . . . and asking you for drops. Do you understand? I'm ill!"

"Your wife is an honest, good woman, and you ought her to love! Ja! She is noble! . . . I will not be her foe!"

"You are a fool! simply a fool! Do you understand, a fool?"

Vaxin leaned against the door-post, folded his arms and waited for his panic to pass off. To return to his room where the lamp flickered and his uncle stared at him from his frame was more than he could face, and to stand at the governess's door in nothing but his night-shirt was inconvenient from every point of view. What could he do?

It struck two o'clock and his terror had not left him. There was no light in the passage and something dark seemed to be peeping out from every corner. Vaxin turned so as to face the door-post, but at that instant it seemed as though somebody tweaked his night-shirt from behind and touched him on the shoulder.

"Damnation! . . . Rosalia Karlovna!"

No answer. Vaxin hesitatingly opened the door and peeped into the room. The virtuous German was sweetly slumbering. The tiny flame of a night-light threw her solid buxom person into relief. Vaxin stepped into the room and sat down on a wickerwork trunk near the door. He felt better in the presence of a living creature, even though that creature was asleep.

"Let the German idiot sleep," he thought, "I'll sit here, and when it gets light I'll go back. . . . It's daylight early now."

Vaxin curled up on the trunk and put his arm under his head to await the coming of dawn.

"What a thing it is to have nerves!" he reflected. "An educated, intelligent man! . . . Hang it all! . . . It's a perfect disgrace!"

As he listened to the gentle, even breathing of Rosalia Karlovna, he soon recovered himself completely.

At six o'clock, Vaxin's wife returned from the all-night service, and not finding her husband in their bedroom, went to the governess to ask her for some change for the cabman.

On entering the German's room, a strange sight met her eyes.

On the bed lay stretched Rosalia Karlovna fast asleep, and a couple of yards from her was her husband curled up on the trunk sleeping the sleep of the just and snoring loudly.

What she said to her husband, and how he looked when he woke, I leave to others to describe. It is beyond my powers.

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