

A Nightmare

Anton Chekhov

Kunin, a young man of thirty, who was a permanent member of the Rural Board, on returning from Petersburg to his district, Borisovo, immediately sent a mounted messenger to Sinkino, for the priest there, Father Yakov Smirnov.

Five hours later Father Yakov appeared.

"Very glad to make your acquaintance," said Kunin, meeting him in the entry. "I've been living and serving here for a year; it seems as though we ought to have been acquainted before. You are very welcome! But . . . how young you are!" Kunin added in surprise. "What is your age?"

"Twenty-eight, . . ." said Father Yakov, faintly pressing Kunin's outstretched hand, and for some reason turning crimson.

Kunin led his visitor into his study and began looking at him more attentively.

"What an uncouth womanish face!" he thought.

There certainly was a good deal that was womanish in Father Yakov's face: the turned-up nose, the bright red cheeks, and the large grey-blue eyes with scanty, scarcely perceptible eyebrows. His long reddish hair, smooth and dry, hung down in straight tails on to his shoulders. The hair on his upper lip was only just beginning to form into a real masculine moustache, while his little beard belonged to that class of good-for-nothing beards which among divinity students are for some reason called "ticklers." It was scanty and extremely transparent; it could not have been stroked or combed, it could only have been pinched. . . . All these scanty decorations were put on unevenly in tufts, as though Father Yakov, thinking to dress up as a priest and beginning to gum on the beard, had been interrupted halfway through. He had on a cassock, the colour of weak coffee with chicory in it, with big patches on both elbows.

"A queer type," thought Kunin, looking at his muddy skirts. "Comes to the house for the first time and can't dress decently.

"Sit down, Father," he began more carelessly than cordially, as he moved an easy-chair to the table. "Sit down, I beg you."

Father Yakov coughed into his fist, sank awkwardly on to the edge of the chair, and laid his open hands on his knees. With his short figure, his narrow chest, his red and perspiring face, he made from the first moment a most unpleasant impression on Kunin. The latter could never have imagined that there were such undignified and pitiful-looking priests in Russia; and in Father Yakov's attitude, in the way he held his hands on his knees and sat on the very edge of his chair, he saw a lack of dignity and even a shade of servility.

"I have invited you on business, Father. . . ." Kunin began, sinking back in his low chair. "It

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has fallen to my lot to perform the agreeable duty of helping you in one of your useful undertakings. . . . On coming back from Petersburg, I found on my table a letter from the Marshal of Nobility. Yegor Dmitrevitch suggests that I should take under my supervision the church parish school which is being opened in Sinkino. I shall be very glad to, Father, with all my heart. . . . More than that, I accept the proposition with enthusiasm."

Kunin got up and walked about the study.

"Of course, both Yegor Dmitrevitch and probably you, too, are aware that I have not great funds at my disposal. My estate is mortgaged, and I live exclusively on my salary as the permanent member. So that you cannot reckon on very much assistance, but I will do all that is in my power. . . . And when are you thinking of opening the school Father?"

"When we have the money, . . ." answered Father Yakov.

"You have some funds at your disposal already?"

"Scarcely any. . . . The peasants settled at their meeting that they would pay, every man of them, thirty kopecks a year; but that's only a promise, you know! And for the first beginning we should need at least two hundred roubles. . . ."

"M'yes. . . . Unhappily, I have not that sum now," said Kunin with a sigh. "I spent all I had on my tour and got into debt, too. Let us try and think of some plan together."

Kunin began planning aloud. He explained his views and watched Father Yakov's face, seeking signs of agreement or approval in it. But the face was apathetic and immobile, and expressed nothing but constrained shyness and uneasiness. Looking at it, one might have supposed that Kunin was talking of matters so abstruse that Father Yakov did not understand and only listened from good manners, and was at the same time afraid of being detected in his failure to understand.

"The fellow is not one of the brightest, that's evident . . ." thought Kunin. "He's rather shy and much too stupid."

Father Yakov revived somewhat and even smiled only when the footman came into the study bringing in two glasses of tea on a tray and a cake-basket full of biscuits. He took his glass and began drinking at once.

"Shouldn't we write at once to the bishop?" Kunin went on, meditating aloud. "To be precise, you know, it is not we, not the Zemstvo, but the higher ecclesiastical authorities, who have raised the question of the church parish schools. They ought really to apportion the funds. I remember I read that a sum of money had been set aside for the purpose. Do you know nothing about it?"

Father Yakov was so absorbed in drinking tea that he did not answer this question at once. He lifted his grey-blue eyes to Kunin, thought a moment, and as though recalling his question, he shook his head in the negative. An expression of pleasure and of the most ordinary prosaic appetite overspread his face from ear to ear. He drank and smacked his lips over every gulp. When he had drunk it to the very last drop, he put his glass on the table,

then took his glass back again, looked at the bottom of it, then put it back again. The expression of pleasure faded from his face. . . . Then Kunin saw his visitor take a biscuit from the cake-basket, nibble a little bit off it, then turn it over in his hand and hurriedly stick it in his pocket.

"Well, that's not at all clerical!" thought Kunin, shrugging his shoulders contemptuously. "What is it, priestly greed or childishness?"

After giving his visitor another glass of tea and seeing him to the entry, Kunin lay down on the sofa and abandoned himself to the unpleasant feeling induced in him by the visit of Father Yakov.

"What a strange wild creature!" he thought. "Dirty, untidy, coarse, stupid, and probably he drinks. . . . My God, and that's a priest, a spiritual father! That's a teacher of the people! I can fancy the irony there must be in the deacon's face when before every mass he booms out: 'Thy blessing, Reverend Father!' A fine reverend Father! A reverend Father without a grain of dignity or breeding, hiding biscuits in his pocket like a schoolboy. . . . Fie! Good Lord, where were the bishop's eyes when he ordained a man like that? What can he think of the people if he gives them a teacher like that? One wants people here who . . ."

And Kunin thought what Russian priests ought to be like.

"If I were a priest, for instance. . . . An educated priest fond of his work might do a great deal. . . . I should have had the school opened long ago. And the sermons? If the priest is sincere and is inspired by love for his work, what wonderful rousing sermons he might give!"

Kunin shut his eyes and began mentally composing a sermon. A little later he sat down to the table and rapidly began writing.

"I'll give it to that red-haired fellow, let him read it in church, . . ." he thought.

The following Sunday Kunin drove over to Sinkino in the morning to settle the question of the school, and while he was there to make acquaintance with the church of which he was a parishioner. In spite of the awful state of the roads, it was a glorious morning. The sun was shining brightly and cleaving with its rays the layers of white snow still lingering here and there. The snow as it took leave of the earth glittered with such diamonds that it hurt the eyes to look, while the young winter corn was hastily thrusting up its green beside it. The rooks floated with dignity over the fields. A rook would fly, drop to earth, and give several hops before standing firmly on its feet. . . .

The wooden church up to which Kunin drove was old and grey; the columns of the porch had once been painted white, but the colour had now completely peeled off, and they looked like two ungainly shafts. The ikon over the door looked like a dark smudged blur. But its poverty touched and softened Kunin. Modestly dropping his eyes, he went into the church and stood by the door. The service had only just begun. An old sacristan, bent into a bow, was reading the "Hours" in a hollow indistinct tenor. Father Yakov, who conducted the service without a deacon, was walking about the church, burning incense. Had it not been for the softened mood in which Kunin found himself on entering the poverty-stricken

church, he certainly would have smiled at the sight of Father Yakov. The short priest was wearing a crumpled and extremely long robe of some shabby yellow material; the hem of the robe trailed on the ground.

The church was not full. Looking at the parishioners, Kunin was struck at the first glance by one strange circumstance: he saw nothing but old people and children. . . . Where were the men of working age? Where was the youth and manhood? But after he had stood there a little and looked more attentively at the aged-looking faces, Kunin saw that he had mistaken young people for old. He did not, however, attach any significance to this little optical illusion.

The church was as cold and grey inside as outside. There was not one spot on the ikons nor on the dark brown walls which was not begrimed and defaced by time. There were many windows, but the general effect of colour was grey, and so it was twilight in the church.

"Anyone pure in soul can pray here very well," thought Kunin. "Just as in St. Peter's in Rome one is impressed by grandeur, here one is touched by the lowliness and simplicity."

But his devout mood vanished like smoke as soon as Father Yakov went up to the altar and began mass. Being still young and having come straight from the seminary bench to the priesthood, Father Yakov had not yet formed a set manner of celebrating the service. As he read he seemed to be vacillating between a high tenor and a thin bass; he bowed clumsily, walked quickly, and opened and shut the gates abruptly. . . . The old sacristan, evidently deaf and ailing, did not hear the prayers very distinctly, and this very often led to slight misunderstandings. Before Father Yakov had time to finish what he had to say, the sacristan began chanting his response, or else long after Father Yakov had finished the old man would be straining his ears, listening in the direction of the altar and saying nothing till his skirt was pulled. The old man had a sickly hollow voice and an asthmatic quavering lisp. . . . The complete lack of dignity and decorum was emphasized by a very small boy who seconded the sacristan and whose head was hardly visible over the railing of the choir. The boy sang in a shrill falsetto and seemed to be trying to avoid singing in tune. Kunin stayed a little while, listened and went out for a smoke. He was disappointed, and looked at the grey church almost with dislike.

"They complain of the decline of religious feeling among the people. . ." he sighed. "I should rather think so! They'd better foist a few more priests like this one on them!"

Kunin went back into the church three times, and each time he felt a great temptation to get out into the open air again. Waiting till the end of the mass, he went to Father Yakov's. The priest's house did not differ outwardly from the peasants' huts, but the thatch lay more smoothly on the roof and there were little white curtains in the windows. Father Yakov led Kunin into a light little room with a clay floor and walls covered with cheap paper; in spite of some painful efforts towards luxury in the way of photographs in frames and a clock with a pair of scissors hanging on the wall the furnishing of the room impressed him by its scantiness. Looking at the furniture, one might have supposed that Father Yakov had gone from house to house and collected it in bits; in one place they had given him a round three-legged table, in another a stool, in a third a chair with a back bent violently backwards; in a fourth a chair with an upright back, but the seat smashed in; while in a fifth they had been liberal and given him a semblance of a sofa with a flat back and a lattice-work seat. This

semblance had been painted dark red and smelt strongly of paint. Kunin meant at first to sit down on one of the chairs, but on second thoughts he sat down on the stool.

"This is the first time you have been to our church?" asked Father Yakov, hanging his hat on a huge misshapen nail.

"Yes it is. I tell you what, Father, before we begin on business, will you give me some tea? My soul is parched."

Father Yakov blinked, gasped, and went behind the partition wall. There was a sound of whispering.

"With his wife, I suppose," thought Kunin; "it would be interesting to see what the red-headed fellow's wife is like."

A little later Father Yakov came back, red and perspiring and with an effort to smile, sat down on the edge of the sofa.

"They will heat the samovar directly," he said, without looking at his visitor.

"My goodness, they have not heated the samovar yet!" Kunin thought with horror. "A nice time we shall have to wait."

"I have brought you," he said, "the rough draft of the letter I have written to the bishop. I'll read it after tea; perhaps you may find something to add. . . ."

"Very well."

A silence followed. Father Yakov threw furtive glances at the partition wall, smoothed his hair, and blew his nose.

"It's wonderful weather, . . ." he said.

"Yes. I read an interesting thing yesterday. . . . the Volsky Zemstvo have decided to give their schools to the clergy, that's typical."

Kunin got up, and pacing up and down the clay floor, began to give expression to his reflections.

"That would be all right," he said, "if only the clergy were equal to their high calling and recognized their tasks. I am so unfortunate as to know priests whose standard of culture and whose moral qualities make them hardly fit to be army secretaries, much less priests. You will agree that a bad teacher does far less harm than a bad priest."

Kunin glanced at Father Yakov; he was sitting bent up, thinking intently about something and apparently not listening to his visitor.

"Yasha, come here!" a woman's voice called from behind the partition. Father Yakov started and went out. Again a whispering began.

Kunin felt a pang of longing for tea.

"No; it's no use my waiting for tea here," he thought, looking at his watch. "Besides I fancy I am not altogether a welcome visitor. My host has not deigned to say one word to me; he simply sits and blinks."

Kunin took up his hat, waited for Father Yakov to return, and said good-bye to him.

"I have simply wasted the morning," he thought wrathfully on the way home. "The blockhead! The dummy! He cares no more about the school than I about last year's snow. . . . No, I shall never get anything done with him! We are bound to fail! If the Marshal knew what the priest here was like, he wouldn't be in such a hurry to talk about a school. We ought first to try and get a decent priest, and then think about the school."

By now Kunin almost hated Father Yakov. The man, his pitiful, grotesque figure in the long crumpled robe, his womanish face, his manner of officiating, his way of life and his formal restrained respectfulness, wounded the tiny relic of religious feeling which was stored away in a warm corner of Kunin's heart together with his nurse's other fairy tales. The coldness and lack of attention with which Father Yakov had met Kunin's warm and sincere interest in what was the priest's own work was hard for the former's vanity to endure. . . .

On the evening of the same day Kunin spent a long time walking about his rooms and thinking. Then he sat down to the table resolutely and wrote a letter to the bishop. After asking for money and a blessing for the school, he set forth genuinely, like a son, his opinion of the priest at Sinkino.

"He is young," he wrote, "insufficiently educated, leads, I fancy, an intemperate life, and altogether fails to satisfy the ideals which the Russian people have in the course of centuries formed of what a pastor should be."

After writing this letter Kunin heaved a deep sigh, and went to bed with the consciousness that he had done a good deed.

On Monday morning, while he was still in bed, he was informed that Father Yakov had arrived. He did not want to get up, and instructed the servant to say he was not at home. On Tuesday he went away to a sitting of the Board, and when he returned on Saturday he was told by the servants that Father Yakov had called every day in his absence.

"He liked my biscuits, it seems," he thought.

Towards evening on Sunday Father Yakov arrived. This time not only his skirts, but even his hat, was bespattered with mud. Just as on his first visit, he was hot and perspiring, and sat down on the edge of his chair as he had done then. Kunin determined not to talk about the school -- not to cast pearls.

"I have brought you a list of books for the school, Pavel Mihailovitch, . . ." Father Yakov began.

"Thank you."

But everything showed that Father Yakov had come for something else besides the list. His whole figure was expressive of extreme embarrassment, and at the same time there was a look of determination upon his face, as on the face of a man suddenly inspired by an idea. He struggled to say something important, absolutely necessary, and strove to overcome his timidity.

"Why is he dumb?" Kunin thought wrathfully. "He's settled himself comfortably! I haven't time to be bothered with him."

To smoothe over the awkwardness of his silence and to conceal the struggle going on within him, the priest began to smile constrainedly, and this slow smile, wrung out on his red perspiring face, and out of keeping with the fixed look in his grey-blue eyes, made Kunin turn away. He felt moved to repulsion.

"Excuse me, Father, I have to go out," he said.

Father Yakov started like a man asleep who has been struck a blow, and, still smiling, began in his confusion wrapping round him the skirts of his cassock. In spite of his repulsion for the man, Kunin felt suddenly sorry for him, and he wanted to soften his cruelty.

"Please come another time, Father," he said, "and before we part I want to ask you a favour. I was somehow inspired to write two sermons the other day. . . . I will give them to you to look at. If they are suitable, use them."

"Very good," said Father Yakov, laying his open hand on Kunin's sermons which were lying on the table. "I will take them."

After standing a little, hesitating and still wrapping his cassock round him, he suddenly gave up the effort to smile and lifted his head resolutely.

"Pavel Mihailovitch, " he said, evidently trying to speak loudly and distinctly.

"What can I do for you?"

"I have heard that you . . . er . . . have dismissed your secretary, and . . . and are looking for a new one. . . ."

"Yes, I am. . . . Why, have you someone to recommend?"

"I . . . er . . . you see . . . I . . . Could you not give the post to me?"

"Why, are you giving up the Church?" said Kunin in amazement.

"No, no," Father Yakov brought out quickly, for some reason turning pale and trembling all over. "God forbid! If you feel doubtful, then never mind, never mind. You see, I could do the work between whiles, . . so as to increase my income. . . . Never mind, don't disturb

yourself!"

"H'm! . . . your income. . . . But you know, I only pay my secretary twenty roubles a month."

"Good heavens! I would take ten," whispered Father Yakov, looking about him. "Ten would be enough! You . . . you are astonished, and everyone is astonished. The greedy priest, the grasping priest, what does he do with his money? I feel myself I am greedy, . . . and I blame myself, I condemn myself. . . . I am ashamed to look people in the face. . . . I tell you on my conscience, Pavel Mihailovitch. . . . I call the God of truth to witness. . . ."

Father Yakov took breath and went on:

"On the way here I prepared a regular confession to make you, but . . . I've forgotten it all; I cannot find a word now. I get a hundred and fifty roubles a year from my parish, and everyone wonders what I do with the money. . . . But I'll explain it all truly. . . . I pay forty roubles a year to the clerical school for my brother Pyotr. He has everything found there, except that I have to provide pens and paper."

"Oh, I believe you; I believe you! But what's the object of all this?" said Kunin, with a wave of the hand, feeling terribly oppressed by this outburst of confidence on the part of his visitor, and not knowing how to get away from the tearful gleam in his eyes.

"Then I have not yet paid up all that I owe to the consistory for my place here. They charged me two hundred roubles for the living, and I was to pay ten roubles a month. . . . You can judge what is left! And, besides, I must allow Father Avraamy at least three roubles a month."

"What Father Avraamy?"

"Father Avraamy who was priest at Sinkino before I came. He was deprived of the living on account of . . . his failing, but you know, he is still living at Sinkino! He has nowhere to go. There is no one to keep him. Though he is old, he must have a corner, and food and clothing -- I can't let him go begging on the roads in his position! It would be on my conscience if anything happened! It would be my fault! He is. . . in debt all round; but, you see, I am to blame for not paying for him."

Father Yakov started up from his seat and, looking frantically at the floor, strode up and down the room.

"My God, my God!" he muttered, raising his hands and dropping them again. "Lord, save us and have mercy upon us! Why did you take such a calling on yourself if you have so little faith and no strength? There is no end to my despair! Save me, Queen of Heaven!"

"Calm yourself, Father," said Kunin.

"I am worn out with hunger, Pavel Mihailovitch," Father Yakov went on. "Generously forgive me, but I am at the end of my strength. . . . I know if I were to beg and to bow down, everyone would help, but . . . I cannot! I am ashamed. How can I beg of the peasants? You

are on the Board here, so you know. . . . How can one beg of a beggar? And to beg of richer people, of landowners, I cannot! I have pride! I am ashamed!"

Father Yakov waved his hand, and nervously scratched his head with both hands.

"I am ashamed! My God, I am ashamed! I am proud and can't bear people to see my poverty! When you visited me, Pavel Mihailovitch, I had no tea in the house! There wasn't a pinch of it, and you know it was pride prevented me from telling you! I am ashamed of my clothes, of these patches here. . . . I am ashamed of my vestments, of being hungry. . . . And is it seemly for a priest to be proud?"

Father Yakov stood still in the middle of the study, and, as though he did not notice Kunin's presence, began reasoning with himself.

"Well, supposing I endure hunger and disgrace -- but, my God, I have a wife! I took her from a good home! She is not used to hard work; she is soft; she is used to tea and white bread and sheets on her bed. . . . At home she used to play the piano. . . . She is young, not twenty yet. . . . She would like, to be sure, to be smart, to have fun, go out to see people. . . . And she is worse off with me than any cook; she is ashamed to show herself in the street. My God, my God! Her only treat is when I bring an apple or some biscuit from a visit. . . ."

Father Yakov scratched his head again with both hands.

"And it makes us feel not love but pity for each other. . . . I cannot look at her without compassion! And the things that happen in this life, O Lord! Such things that people would not believe them if they saw them in the newspaper. . . . And when will there be an end to it all!"

"Hush, Father!" Kunin almost shouted, frightened at his tone. "Why take such a gloomy view of life?"

"Generously forgive me, Pavel Mihailovitch . . ." muttered Father Yakov as though he were drunk, "Forgive me, all this . . . doesn't matter, and don't take any notice of it. . . . Only I do blame myself, and always shall blame myself . . . always."

Father Yakov looked about him and began whispering:

"One morning early I was going from Sinkino to Lutchkovo; I saw a woman standing on the river bank, doing something. . . . I went up close and could not believe my eyes. . . . It was horrible! The wife of the doctor, Ivan Sergeitch, was sitting there washing her linen. . . . A doctor's wife, brought up at a select boarding-school! She had got up you see, early and gone half a mile from the village that people should not see her. . . . She couldn't get over her pride! When she saw that I was near her and noticed her poverty, she turned red all over. . . . I was flustered -- I was frightened, and ran up to help her, but she hid her linen from me; she was afraid I should see her ragged chemises. . . ."

"All this is positively incredible," said Kunin, sitting down and looking almost with horror at Father Yakov's pale face.

"Incredible it is! It's a thing that has never been! Pavel Mihailovitch, that a doctor's wife should be rinsing the linen in the river! Such a thing does not happen in any country! As her pastor and spiritual father, I ought not to allow it, but what can I do? What? Why, I am always trying to get treated by her husband for nothing myself! It is true that, as you say, it is all incredible! One can hardly believe one's eyes. During Mass, you know, when I look out from the altar and see my congregation, Avraamy starving, and my wife, and think of the doctor's wife -- how blue her hands were from the cold water -- would you believe it, I forget myself and stand senseless like a fool, until the sacristan calls to me. . . . It's awful!"

Father Yakov began walking about again.

"Lord Jesus!" he said, waving his hands, "holy Saints! I can't officiate properly. . . . Here you talk to me about the school, and I sit like a dummy and don't understand a word, and think of nothing but food. . . . Even before the altar. . . . But . . . what am I doing?" Father Yakov pulled himself up suddenly. "You want to go out. Forgive me, I meant nothing. . . . Excuse . . ."

Kunin shook hands with Father Yakov without speaking, saw him into the hall, and going back into his study, stood at the window. He saw Father Yakov go out of the house, pull his wide-brimmed rusty-looking hat over his eyes, and slowly, bowing his head, as though ashamed of his outburst, walk along the road.

"I don't see his horse," thought Kunin.

Kunin did not dare to think that the priest had come on foot every day to see him; it was five or six miles to Sinkino, and the mud on the road was impassable. Further on he saw the coachman Andrey and the boy Paramon, jumping over the puddles and splashing Father Yakov with mud, run up to him for his blessing. Father Yakov took off his hat and slowly blessed Andrey, then blessed the boy and stroked his head.

Kunin passed his hand over his eyes, and it seemed to him that his hand was moist. He walked away from the window and with dim eyes looked round the room in which he still seemed to hear the timid droning voice. He glanced at the table. Luckily, Father Yakov, in his haste, had forgotten to take the sermons. Kunin rushed up to them, tore them into pieces, and with loathing thrust them under the table.

"And I did not know!" he moaned, sinking on to the sofa. "After being here over a year as member of the Rural Board, Honorary Justice of the Peace, member of the School Committee! Blind puppet, egregious idiot! I must make haste and help them, I must make haste!"

He turned from side to side uneasily, pressed his temples and racked his brains.

"On the twentieth I shall get my salary, two hundred roubles. . . . On some good pretext I will give him some, and some to the doctor's wife. . . . I will ask them to perform a special service here, and will get up an illness for the doctor. . . . In that way I shan't wound their pride. And I'll help Father Avraamy too. . . ."

He reckoned his money on his fingers, and was afraid to own to himself that those two

hundred roubles would hardly be enough for him to pay his steward, his servants, the peasant who brought the meat. . . . He could not help remembering the recent past when he was senselessly squandering his father's fortune, when as a puppy of twenty he had given expensive fans to prostitutes, had paid ten roubles a day to Kuzma, his cab-driver, and in his vanity had made presents to actresses. Oh, how useful those wasted rouble, three-rouble, ten-rouble notes would have been now!

"Father Avraamy lives on three roubles a month!" thought Kunin. "For a rouble the priest's wife could get herself a chemise, and the doctor's wife could hire a washerwoman. But I'll help them, anyway! I must help them."

Here Kunin suddenly recalled the private information he had sent to the bishop, and he writhed as from a sudden draught of cold air. This remembrance filled him with overwhelming shame before his inner self and before the unseen truth.

So had begun and had ended a sincere effort to be of public service on the part of a well-intentioned but unreflecting and over-comfortable person.

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