

Panic Fears

Anton Chekhov

DURING all the years I have been living in this world I have only three times been terrified.

The first real terror, which made my hair stand on end and made shivers run all over me, was caused by a trivial but strange phenomenon. It happened that, having nothing to do one July evening, I drove to the station for the newspapers. It was a still, warm, almost sultry evening, like all those monotonous evenings in July which, when once they have set in, go on for a week, a fortnight, or sometimes longer, in regular unbroken succession, and are suddenly cut short by a violent thunderstorm and a lavish downpour of rain that refreshes everything for a long time.

The sun had set some time before, and an unbroken gray dusk lay all over the land. The mawkishly sweet scents of the grass and flowers were heavy in the motionless, stagnant air.

I was driving in a rough trolley. Behind my back the gardener's son Pashka, a boy of eight years old, whom I had taken with me to look after the horse in case of necessity, was gently snoring, with his head on a sack of oats. Our way lay along a narrow by-road, straight as a ruler, which lay hid like a great snake in the tall thick rye. There was a pale light from the afterglow of sunset; a streak of light cut its way through a narrow, uncouth-looking cloud, which seemed sometimes like a boat and sometimes like a man wrapped in a quilt. . . .

I had driven a mile and a half, or two miles, when against the pale background of the evening glow there came into sight one after another some graceful tall poplars; a river glimmered beyond them, and a gorgeous picture suddenly, as though by magic, lay stretched before me. I had to stop the horse, for our straight road broke off abruptly and ran down a steep incline overgrown with bushes. We were standing on the hillside and beneath us at the bottom lay a huge hole full of twilight, of fantastic shapes, and of space. At the bottom of this hole, in a wide plain guarded by the poplars and caressed by the gleaming river, nestled a village. It was now sleeping. . . . Its huts, its church with the belfry, its trees, stood out against the gray twilight and were reflected darkly in the smooth surface of the river.

I waked Pashka for fear he should fall out and began cautiously going down.

"Have we got to Lukovo?" asked Pashka, lifting his head lazily.

"Yes. Hold the reins! . . ."

I led the horse down the hill and looked at the village. At the first glance one strange circumstance caught my attention: at the very top of the belfry, in the tiny window between the cupola and the bells, a light was twinkling. This light was like that of a smoldering lamp, at one moment dying down, at another flickering up. What could it come from?

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Its source was beyond my comprehension. It could not be burning at the window, for there were neither ikons nor lamps in the top turret of the belfry; there was nothing there, as I knew, but beams, dust, and spiders' webs. It was hard to climb up into that turret, for the passage to it from the belfry was closely blocked up.

It was more likely than anything else to be the reflection of some outside light, but though I strained my eyes to the utmost, I could not see one other speck of light in the vast expanse that lay before me. There was no moon. The pale and, by now, quite dim streak of the afterglow could not have been reflected, for the window looked not to the west, but to the east. These and other similar considerations were straying through my mind all the while that I was going down the slope with the horse. At the bottom I sat down by the roadside and looked again at the light. As before it was glimmering and flaring up.

"Strange," I thought, lost in conjecture. "Very strange."

And little by little I was overcome by an unpleasant feeling. At first I thought that this was vexation at not being able to explain a simple phenomenon; but afterwards, when I suddenly turned away from the light in horror and caught hold of Pashka with one hand, it became clear that I was overcome with terror. . . .

I was seized with a feeling of loneliness, misery, and horror, as though I had been flung down against my will into this great hole full of shadows, where I was standing all alone with the belfry looking at me with its red eye.

"Pashka!" I cried, closing my eyes in horror.

"Well?"

"Pashka, what's that gleaming on the belfry?"

Pashka looked over my shoulder at the belfry and gave a yawn.

"Who can tell?"

This brief conversation with the boy reassured me for a little, but not for long. Pashka, seeing my uneasiness, fastened his big eyes upon the light, looked at me again, then again at the light. . . .

"I am frightened," he whispered.

At this point, beside myself with terror, I clutched the boy with one hand, huddled up to him, and gave the horse a violent lash.

"It's stupid!" I said to myself. "That phenomenon is only terrible because I don't understand it; everything we don't understand is mysterious."

I tried to persuade myself, but at the same time I did not leave off lashing the horse. When we reached the posting station I purposely stayed for a full hour chatting with the overseer, and read through two or three newspapers, but the feeling of uneasiness did not leave me.

On the way back the light was not to be seen, but on the other hand the silhouettes of the huts, of the poplars, and of the hill up which I had to drive, seemed to me as though animated. And why the light was there I don't know to this day.

The second terror I experienced was excited by a circumstance no less trivial. . . . I was returning from a romantic interview. It was one o'clock at night, the time when nature is buried in the soundest, sweetest sleep before the dawn. That time nature was not sleeping, and one could not call the night a still one. Corncrakes, quails, nightingales, and woodcocks were calling, crickets and grasshoppers were chirruping. There was a light mist over the grass, and clouds were scurrying straight ahead across the sky near the moon. Nature was awake, as though afraid of missing the best moments of her life.

I walked along a narrow path at the very edge of a railway embankment. The moonlight glided over the lines which were already covered with dew. Great shadows from the clouds kept flitting over the embankment. Far ahead, a dim green light was glimmering peacefully.

"So everything is well," I thought, looking at them.

I had a quiet, peaceful, comfortable feeling in my heart. I was returning from a tryst, I had no need to hurry; I was not sleepy, and I was conscious of youth and health in every sigh, every step I took, rousing a dull echo in the monotonous hum of the night. I don't know what I was feeling then, but I remember I was happy, very happy.

I had gone not more than three-quarters of a mile when I suddenly heard behind me a monotonous sound, a rumbling, rather like the roar of a great stream. It grew louder and louder every second, and sounded nearer and nearer. I looked round; a hundred paces from me was the dark copse from which I had only just come; there the embankment turned to the right in a graceful curve and vanished among the trees. I stood still in perplexity and waited. A huge black body appeared at once at the turn, noisily darted towards me, and with the swiftness of a bird flew past me along the rails. Less than half a minute passed and the blur had vanished, the rumble melted away into the noise of the night.

It was an ordinary goods truck. There was nothing peculiar about it in itself, but its appearance without an engine and in the night puzzled me. Where could it have come from and what force sent it flying so rapidly along the rails? Where did it come from and where was it flying to?

If I had been superstitious I should have made up my mind it was a party of demons and witches journeying to a devils' sabbath, and should have gone on my way; but as it was, the phenomenon was absolutely inexplicable to me. I did not believe my eyes, and was entangled in conjectures like a fly in a spider's web. . . .

I suddenly realized that I was utterly alone on the whole vast plain; that the night, which by now seemed inhospitable, was peeping into my face and dogging my footsteps; all the sounds, the cries of the birds, the whisperings of the trees, seemed sinister, and existing simply to alarm my imagination. I dashed on like a madman, and without realizing what I was doing I ran, trying to run faster and faster. And at once I heard something to which I had paid no attention before: that is, the plaintive whining of the telegraph wires.

"This is beyond everything," I said, trying to shame myself. "It's cowardice! it's silly!"

But cowardice was stronger than common sense. I only slackened my pace when I reached the green light, where I saw a dark signal-box, and near it on the embankment the figure of a man, probably the signalman.

"Did you see it?" I asked breathlessly.

"See whom? What?"

"Why, a truck ran by."

"I saw it, . . ." the peasant said reluctantly. "It broke away from the goods train. There is an incline at the ninetieth mile . . .; the train is dragged uphill. The coupling on the last truck gave way, so it broke off and ran back. . . . There is no catching it now! . . ."

The strange phenomenon was explained and its fantastic character vanished. My panic was over and I was able to go on my way.

My third fright came upon me as I was going home from stand shooting in early spring. It was in the dusk of evening. The forest road was covered with pools from a recent shower of rain, and the earth squelched under one's feet. The crimson glow of sunset flooded the whole forest, coloring the white stems of the birches and the young leaves. I was exhausted and could hardly move.

Four or five miles from home, walking along the forest road, I suddenly met a big black dog of the water spaniel breed. As he ran by, the dog looked intently at me, straight in my face, and ran on.

"A nice dog!" I thought. "Whose is it?"

I looked round. The dog was standing ten paces off with his eyes fixed on me. For a minute we scanned each other in silence, then the dog, probably flattered by my attention, came slowly up to me and wagged his tail.

I walked on, the dog following me.

"Whose dog can it be?" I kept asking myself. "Where does he come from?"

I knew all the country gentry for twenty or thirty miles round, and knew all their dogs. Not one of them had a spaniel like that. How did he come to be in the depths of the forest, on a track used for nothing but carting timber? He could hardly have dropped behind someone passing through, for there was nowhere for the gentry to drive to along that road.

I sat down on a stump to rest, and began scrutinizing my companion. He, too, sat down, raised his head, and fastened upon me an intent stare. He gazed at me without blinking. I don't know whether it was the influence of the stillness, the shadows and sounds of the forest, or perhaps a result of exhaustion, but I suddenly felt uneasy under the steady gaze of

his ordinary doggy eyes. I thought of Faust and his bulldog, and of the fact that nervous people sometimes when exhausted have hallucinations. That was enough to make me get up hurriedly and hurriedly walk on. The dog followed me.

"Go away!" I shouted.

The dog probably liked my voice, for he gave a gleeful jump and ran about in front of me.

"Go away!" I shouted again.

The dog looked round, stared at me intently, and wagged his tail good-humoredly. Evidently my threatening tone amused him. I ought to have patted him, but I could not get Faust's dog out of my head, and the feeling of panic grew more and more acute. . . . Darkness was coming on, which completed my confusion, and every time the dog ran up to me and hit me with his tail, like a coward I shut my eyes. The same thing happened as with the light in the belfry and the truck on the railway: I could not stand it and rushed away.

At home I found a visitor, an old friend, who, after greeting me, began to complain that as he was driving to me he had lost his way in the forest, and a splendid valuable dog of his had dropped behind.

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