A Troublesome Visitor

Anton Chekhov

IN the low-pitched, crooked little hut of Artyom, the forester, two men were sitting under the big dark ikon -- Artyom himself, a short and lean peasant with a wrinkled, aged-looking face and a little beard that grew out of his neck, and a well-grown young man in a new crimson shirt and big wading boots, who had been out hunting and come in for the night. They were sitting on a bench at a little three-legged table on which a tallow candle stuck into a bottle was lazily burning.

Outside the window the darkness of the night was full of the noisy uproar into which nature usually breaks out before a thunderstorm. The wind howled angrily and the bowed trees moaned miserably. One pane of the window had been pasted up with paper, and leaves torn off by the wind could be heard pattering against the paper.

"I tell you what, good Christian," said Artyom in a hoarse little tenor half-whisper, staring with unblinking, scared-looking eyes at the hunter. "I am not afraid of wolves or bears, or wild beasts of any sort, but I am afraid of man. You can save yourself from beasts with a gun or some other weapon, but you have no means of saving yourself from a wicked man."

"To be sure, you can fire at a beast, but if you shoot at a robber you will have to answer for it: you will go to Siberia."

"I've been forester, my lad, for thirty years, and I couldn't tell you what I have had to put up with from wicked men. There have been lots and lots of them here. The hut's on a track, it's a cart-road, and that brings them, the devils. Every sort of ruffian turns up, and without taking off his cap or making the sign of the cross, bursts straight in upon one with: 'Give us some bread, you old so-and-so.' And where am I to get bread for him? What claim has he? Am I a millionaire to feed every drunkard that passes? They are half-blind with spite. . . . They have no cross on them, the devils. . . . They'll give you a clout on the ear and not think twice about it: 'Give us bread! ' Well, one gives it. . . . One is not going to fight with them, the idols! Some of them are two yards across the shoulders, and a great fist as big as your boot, and you see the sort of figure I am. One of them could smash me with his little finger. . . . Well, one gives him bread and he gobbles it up, and stretches out full length across the hut with not a word of thanks. And there are some that ask for money. 'Tell me, where is your money?' As though I had money! How should I come by it?"

"A forester and no money!" laughed the hunter. "You get wages every month, and I'll be bound you sell timber on the sly."

Artyom took a timid sideway glance at his visitor and twitched his beard as a magpie twitches her tail.

"You are still young to say a thing like that to me," he said. "You will have to answer to God for those words. Whom may your people be? Where do you come from?"

"I am from Vyazovka. I am the son of Nefed the village elder."

"You have gone out for sport with your gun. I used to like sport, too, when I was young. H'm! Ah, our sins are grievous," said Artyom, with a yawn. "It's a sad thing! There are few good folks, but villains and murderers no end -- God have mercy upon us."

"You seem to be frightened of me, too. . . ."

"Come, what next! What should I be afraid of you for? I see. . . . I understand. . . . You came in, and not just anyhow, but you made the sign of the cross, you bowed, all decent and proper. . . . I understand. . . . One can give you bread. . . . I am a widower, I don't heat the stove, I sold the samovar. . . . I am too poor to keep meat or anything else, but bread you are welcome to."

At that moment something began growling under the bench: the growl was followed by a hiss. Artyom started, drew up his legs, and looked enquiringly at the hunter.

"It's my dog worrying your cat," said the hunter. "You devils!" he shouted under the bench. "Lie down. You'll be beaten. I say, your cat's thin, mate! She is nothing but skin and bone."

"She is old, it is time she was dead. . . . So you say you are from Vyazovka?"

"I see you don't feed her. Though she's a cat she's a creature . . . every breathing thing. You should have pity on her!"

"You are a queer lot in Vyazovka," Artyom went on, as though not listening. "The church has been robbed twice in one year. . . To think that there are such wicked men! So they fear neither man nor God! To steal what is the Lord's! Hanging's too good for them! In old days the governors used to have such rogues flogged."

"However you punish, whether it is with flogging or anything else, it will be no good, you will not knock the wickedness out of a wicked man."

"Save and preserve us, Queen of Heaven!" The forester sighed abruptly. "Save us from all enemies and evildoers. Last week at Volovy Zaimishtchy, a mower struck another on the chest with his scythe . . . he killed him outright! And what was it all about, God bless me! One mower came out of the tavern . . . drunk. The other met him, drunk too."

The young man, who had been listening attentively, suddenly started, and his face grew tense as he listened.

"Stay," he said, interrupting the forester. "I fancy someone is shouting."

The hunter and the forester fell to listening with their eyes fixed on the window. Through the noise of the forest they could hear sounds such as the strained ear can always distinguish in every storm, so that it was difficult to make out whether people were calling for help or whether the wind was wailing in the chimney. But the wind tore at the roof, tapped at the paper on the window, and brought a distinct shout of "Help!"

"Talk of your murderers," said the hunter, turning pale and getting up. "Someone is being

robbed!"

"Lord have mercy on us," whispered the forester, and he, too, turned pale and got up.

The hunter looked aimlessly out of window and walked up and down the hut.

"What a night, what a night!" he muttered. "You can't see your hand before your face! The very time for a robbery. Do you hear? There is a shout again."

The forester looked at the ikon and from the ikon turned his eyes upon the hunter, and sank on to the bench, collapsing like a man terrified by sudden bad news.

"Good Christian," he said in a tearful voice, "you might go into the passage and bolt the door. And we must put out the light."

"What for?"

"By ill-luck they may find their way here. . . . Oh, our sins!"

"We ought to be going, and you talk of bolting the door! You are a clever one! Are you coming?"

The hunter threw his gun over his shoulder and picked up his cap.

"Get ready, take your gun. Hey, Flerka, here," he called to his dog. "Flerka!"

A dog with long frayed ears, a mongrel between a setter and a house-dog, came out from under the bench. He stretched himself by his master's feet and wagged his tail.

"Why are you sitting there?" cried the hunter to the forester. "You mean to say you are not going?"

"Where?"

"To help!"

"How can I?" said the forester with a wave of his hand, shuddering all over. "I can't bother about it!"

"Why won't you come?"

"After talking of such dreadful things I won't stir a step into the darkness. Bless them! And what should I go for?"

"What are you afraid of? Haven't you got a gun? Let us go, please do. It's scaring to go alone; it will be more cheerful, the two of us. Do you hear? There was a shout again. Get up!"

"Whatever do you think of me, lad?" wailed the forester. "Do you think I am such a fool to

go straight to my undoing?"

"So you are not coming?"

The forester did not answer. The dog, probably hearing a human cry, gave a plaintive whine.

"Are you coming, I ask you?" cried the hunter, rolling his eyes angrily.

"You do keep on, upon my word," said the forester with annoyance. "Go yourself."

"Ugh! . . . low cur," growled the hunter, turning towards the door. "Flerka, here!"

He went out and left the door open. The wind flew into the hut. The flame of the candle flickered uneasily, flared up, and went out.

As he bolted the door after the hunter, the forester saw the puddles in the track, the nearest pine-trees, and the retreating figure of his guest lighted up by a flash of lightning. Far away he heard the rumble of thunder.

"Holy, holy, holy," whispered the forester, making haste to thrust the thick bolt into the great iron rings. "What weather the Lord has sent us!"

Going back into the room, he felt his way to the stove, lay down, and covered himself from head to foot. Lying under the sheepskin and listening intently, he could no longer hear the human cry, but the peals of thunder kept growing louder and more prolonged. He could hear the big wind-lashed raindrops pattering angrily on the panes and on the paper of the window.

"He's gone on a fool's errand," he thought, picturing the hunter soaked with rain and stumbling over the tree-stumps. "I bet his teeth are chattering with terror!"

Not more than ten minutes later there was a sound of footsteps, followed by a loud knock at the door.

"Who's there?" cried the forester.

"It's I," he heard the young man's voice. "Unfasten the door."

The forester clambered down from the stove, felt for the candle, and, lighting it, went to the door. The hunter and his dog were drenched to the skin. They had come in for the heaviest of the downpour, and now the water ran from them as from washed clothes before they have been wrung out.

"What was it?" asked the forester.

"A peasant woman driving in a cart; she had got off the road . . ." answered the young man, struggling with his breathlessness. "She was caught in a thicket."

"Ah, the silly thing! She was frightened, then. . . . Well, did you put her on the road?"

"I don't care to talk to a scoundrel like you."

The young man flung his wet cap on the bench and went on:

"I know now that you are a scoundrel and the lowest of men. And you a keeper, too, getting a salary! You blackguard!"

The forester slunk with a guilty step to the stove, cleared his throat, and lay down. The young man sat on the bench, thought a little, and lay down on it full length. Not long afterwards he got up, put out the candle, and lay down again. During a particularly loud clap of thunder he turned over, spat on the floor, and growled out:

"He's afraid. . . . And what if the woman were being murdered? Whose business is it to defend her? And he an old man, too, and a Christian. . . . He's a pig and nothing else."

The forester cleared his throat and heaved a deep sigh. Somewhere in the darkness Flerka shook his wet coat vigorously, which sent drops of water flying about all over the room.

"So you wouldn't care if the woman were murdered? " the hunter went on. " Well -- strike me, God -- I had no notion you were that sort of man. . . ."

A silence followed. The thunderstorm was by now over and the thunder came from far away, but it was still raining.

"And suppose it hadn't been a woman but you shouting 'Help!'?" said the hunter, breaking the silence. "How would you feel, you beast, if no one ran to your aid? You have upset me with your meanness, plague take you!"

After another long interval the hunter said:

"You must have money to be afraid of people! A man who is poor is not likely to be afraid. . . ."

"For those words you will answer before God," Artyom said hoarsely from the stove. "I have no money."

"I dare say! Scoundrels always have money. . . . Why are you afraid of people, then? So you must have! I'd like to take and rob you for spite, to teach you a lesson! . . ."

Artyom slipped noiselessly from the stove, lighted a candle, and sat down under the holy image. He was pale and did not take his eyes off the hunter.

"Here, I'll rob you," said the hunter, getting up. "What do you think about it? Fellows like you want a lesson. Tell me, where is your money hidden?"

Artyom drew his legs up under him and blinked. "What are you wriggling for? Where is your money hidden? Have you lost your tongue, you fool? Why don't you answer?"

The young man jumped up and went up to the forester.

"He is blinking like an owl! Well? Give me your money, or I will shoot you with my gun."

"Why do you keep on at me?" squealed the forester, and big tears rolled from his eyes. "What's the reason of it? God sees all! You will have to answer, for every word you say, to God. You have no right whatever to ask for my money."

The young man looked at Artyom's tearful face, frowned, and walked up and down the hut, then angrily clapped his cap on his head and picked up his gun.

"Ugh! . . . ugh! . . . it makes me sick to look at you," he filtered through his teeth. "I can't bear the sight of you. I won't sleep in your house, anyway. Good-bye! Hey, Flerka!"

The door slammed and the troublesome visitor went out with his dog. . . . Artyom bolted the door after him, crossed himself, and lay down.

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