

Too Early

Anton Chekhov

THE bells are ringing for service in the village of Shalmovo. The sun is already kissing the earth on the horizon; it has turned crimson and will soon disappear. In Semyon's pothouse, which has lately changed its name and become a restaurant -- a title quite out of keeping with the wretched little hut with its thatch torn off its roof, and its couple of dingy windows -- two peasant sportsmen are sitting. One of them is called Filimon Slyunka; he is an old man of sixty, formerly a house-serf, belonging to the Counts Zavalin, by trade a carpenter. He has at one time been employed in a nail factory, has been turned off for drunkenness and idleness, and now lives upon his old wife, who begs for alms. He is thin and weak, with a mangy-looking little beard, speaks with a hissing sound, and after every word twitches the right side of his face and jerkily shrugs his right shoulder. The other, Ignat Ryabov, a sturdy, broad-shouldered peasant who never does anything and is everlastingly silent, is sitting in the corner under a big string of bread rings. The door, opening inwards, throws a thick shadow upon him, so that Slyunka and Semyon the publican can see nothing but his patched knees, his long fleshy nose, and a big tuft of hair which has escaped from the thick uncombed tangle covering his head. Semyon, a sickly little man, with a pale face and a long sinewy neck, stands behind his counter, looks mournfully at the string of bread rings, and coughs meekly.

"You think it over now, if you have any sense," Slyunka says to him, twitching his cheek. "You have the thing lying by unused and get no sort of benefit from it. While we need it. A sportsman without a gun is like a sacristan without a voice. You ought to understand that, but I see you don't understand it, so you can have no real sense. . . . Hand it over!"

"You left the gun in pledge, you know!" says Semyon in a thin womanish little voice, sighing deeply, and not taking his eyes off the string of bread rings. "Hand over the rouble you borrowed, and then take your gun."

"I haven't got a rouble. I swear to you, Semyon Mitritch, as God sees me: you give me the gun and I will go to-day with Ignashka and bring it you back again. I'll bring it back, strike me dead. May I have happiness neither in this world nor the next, if I don't."

"Semyon Mitritch, do give it," Ignat Ryabov says in his bass, and his voice betrays a passionate desire to get what he asks for.

"But what do you want the gun for?" sighs Semyon, sadly shaking his head. "What sort of shooting is there now? It's still winter outside, and no game at all but crows and jackdaws."

"Winter, indeed," says Slyunka, hooing the ash out of his pipe with his finger, "it is early yet of course, but you never can tell with the snipe. The snipe's a bird that wants watching. If you are unlucky, you may sit waiting at home, and miss his flying over, and then you must wait till autumn. . . . It is a business! The snipe is not a rook. . . . Last year he was flying the week before Easter, while the year before we had to wait till the week after Easter! Come, do us a favour, Semyon Mitritch, give us the gun. Make us pray for you for ever. As ill-luck would have it, Ignashka has pledged his gun for drink too. Ah, when you

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drink you feel nothing, but now . . . ah, I wish I had never looked at it, the cursed vodka! Truly it is the blood of Satan! Give it us, Semyon Mitritch!"

"I won't give it you," says Semyon, clasping his yellow hands on his breast as though he were going to pray. "You must act fairly, Filimonushka. . . . A thing is not taken out of pawn just anyhow; you must pay the money. . . . Besides, what do you want to kill birds for? What's the use? It's Lent now -- you are not going to eat them."

Slyunka exchanges glances with Ryabov in embarrassment, sighs, and says: "We would only go stand-shooting."

"And what for? It's all foolishness. You are not the sort of man to spend your time in foolishness. . . . Ignashka, to be sure, is a man of no understanding, God has afflicted him, but you, thank the Lord, are an old man. It's time to prepare for your end. Here, you ought to go to the midnight service."

The allusion to his age visibly stings Slyunka. He clears his throat, wrinkles up his forehead, and remains silent for a full minute.

"I say, Semyon Mitritch," he says hotly, getting up and twitching not only in his right cheek but all over his face. "It's God's truth. . . . May the Almighty strike me dead, after Easter I shall get something from Stepan Kuzmitch for an axle, and I will pay you not one rouble but two! May the Lord chastise me! Before the holy image, I tell you, only give me the gun!"

"Gi-ive it," Ryabov says in his growling bass; they can hear him breathing hard, and it seems that he would like to say a great deal, but cannot find the words. "Gi-ive it."

"No, brothers, and don't ask," sighs Semyon, shaking his head mournfully. "Don't lead me into sin. I won't give you the gun. It's not the fashion for a thing to be taken out of pawn and no money paid. Besides -- why this indulgence? Go your way and God bless you!"

Slyunka rubs his perspiring face with his sleeve and begins hotly swearing and entreating. He crosses himself, holds out his hands to the ikon, calls his deceased father and mother to bear witness, but Semyon sighs and meekly looks as before at the string of bread rings. In the end Ignashka Ryabov, hitherto motionless, gets up impulsively and bows down to the ground before the innkeeper, but even that has no effect on him.

"May you choke with my gun, you devil," says Slyunka, with his face twitching, and his shoulders, shrugging. "May you choke, you plague, you scoundrelly soul."

Swearing and shaking his fists, he goes out of the tavern with Ryabov and stands still in the middle of the road.

"He won't give it, the damned brute," he says, in a weeping voice, looking into Ryabov's face with an injured air.

"He won't give it," booms Ryabov.

The windows of the furthest huts, the starling cote on the tavern, the tops of the poplars, and the cross on the church are all gleaming with a bright golden flame. Now they can see only half of the sun, which, as it goes to its night's rest, is winking, shedding a crimson light, and seems laughing gleefully. Slyunka and Ryabov can see the forest lying, a dark blur, to the right of the sun, a mile and a half from the village, and tiny clouds flitting over the clear sky, and they feel that the evening will be fine and still.

"Now is just the time," says Slyunka, with his face twitching. "It would be nice to stand for an hour or two. He won't give it us, the damned brute. May he. . ."

"For stand-shooting, now is the very time . . ." Ryabov articulated, as though with an effort, stammering.

After standing still for a little they walk out of the village, without saying a word to each other, and look towards the dark streak of the forest. The whole sky above the forest is studded with moving black spots, the rooks flying home to roost. The snow, lying white here and there on the dark brown plough-land, is lightly flecked with gold by the sun.

"This time last year I went stand-shooting in Zhivki," says Slyunka, after a long silence. "I brought back three snipe."

Again there follows a silence. Both stand a long time and look towards the forest, and then lazily move and walk along the muddy road from the village.

"It's most likely the snipe haven't come yet," says Slyunka, "but may be they are here."

"Kostka says they are not here yet."

"Maybe they are not, who can tell; one year is not like another. But what mud!"

"But we ought to stand."

"To be sure we ought -- why not?"

"We can stand and watch; it wouldn't be amiss to go to the forest and have a look. If they are there we will tell Kostka, or maybe get a gun ourselves and come to-morrow. What a misfortune, God forgive me. It was the devil put it in my mind to take my gun to the pothouse! I am more sorry than I can tell you, Ignashka."

Conversing thus, the sportsmen approach the forest. The sun has set and left behind it a red streak like the glow of a fire, scattered here and there with clouds; there is no catching the colours of those clouds: their edges are red, but they themselves are one minute grey, at the next lilac, at the next ashen.

In the forest, among the thick branches of fir-trees and under the birch bushes, it is dark, and only the outermost twigs on the side of the sun, with their fat buds and shining bark, stand out clearly in the air. There is a smell of thawing snow and rotting leaves. It is still; nothing stirs. From the distance comes the subsiding caw of the rooks.

"We ought to be standing in Zhivki now," whispers Slyunka, looking with awe at Ryabov; "there's good stand-shooting there."

Ryabov too looks with awe at Slyunka, with unblinking eyes and open mouth.

"A lovely time," Slyunka says in a trembling whisper. "The Lord is sending a fine spring . . . and I should think the snipe are here by now. . . . Why not? The days are warm now. . . . The cranes were flying in the morning, lots and lots of them."

Slyunka and Ryabov, splashing cautiously through the melting snow and sticking in the mud, walk two hundred paces along the edge of the forest and there halt. Their faces wear a look of alarm and expectation of something terrible and extraordinary. They stand like posts, do not speak nor stir, and their hands gradually fall into an attitude as though they were holding a gun at the cock. . . .

A big shadow creeps from the left and envelops the earth. The dusk of evening comes on. If one looks to the right, through the bushes and tree trunks, there can be seen crimson patches of the after-glow. It is still and damp. . . .

"There's no sound of them," whispers Slyunka, shrugging with the cold and sniffing with his chilly nose.

But frightened by his own whisper, he holds his finger up at some one, opens his eyes wide, and purses up his lips. There is a sound of a light snapping. The sportsmen look at each other significantly, and tell each other with their eyes that it is nothing. It is the snapping of a dry twig or a bit of bark. The shadows of evening keep growing and growing, the patches of crimson gradually grow dim, and the dampness becomes unpleasant.

The sportsmen remain standing a long time, but they see and hear nothing. Every instant they expect to see a delicate leaf float through the air, to hear a hurried call like the husky cough of a child, and the flutter of wings.

"No, not a sound," Slyunka says aloud, dropping his hands and beginning to blink. "So they have not come yet."

"It's early!"

"You are right there."

The sportsmen cannot see each other's faces, it is getting rapidly dark.

"We must wait another five days," says Slyunka, as he comes out from behind a bush with Ryabov. "It's too early!"

They go homewards, and are silent all the way.

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