

The Letter

Anton Chekhov

The clerical superintendent of the district, his Reverence Father Fyodor Orlov, a handsome, well-nourished man of fifty, grave and important as he always was, with an habitual expression of dignity that never left his face, was walking to and fro in his little drawing-room, extremely exhausted, and thinking intensely about the same thing: "When would his visitor go?" The thought worried him and did not leave him for a minute. The visitor, Father Anastasy, the priest of one of the villages near the town, had come to him three hours before on some very unpleasant and dreary business of his own, had stayed on and on, was now sitting in the corner at a little round table with his elbow on a thick account book, and apparently had no thought of going, though it was getting on for nine o'clock in the evening.

Not everyone knows when to be silent and when to go. It not infrequently happens that even diplomatic persons of good worldly breeding fail to observe that their presence is arousing a feeling akin to hatred in their exhausted or busy host, and that this feeling is being concealed with an effort and disguised with a lie. But Father Anastasy perceived it clearly, and realized that his presence was burdensome and inappropriate, that his Reverence, who had taken an early morning service in the night and a long mass at midday, was exhausted and longing for repose; every minute he was meaning to get up and go, but he did not get up, he sat on as though he were waiting for something. He was an old man of sixty-five, prematurely aged, with a bent and bony figure, with a sunken face and the dark skin of old age, with red eyelids and a long narrow back like a fish's; he was dressed in a smart cassock of a light lilac colour, but too big for him (presented to him by the widow of a young priest lately deceased), a full cloth coat with a broad leather belt, and clumsy high boots the size and hue of which showed clearly that Father Anastasy dispensed with goloshes. In spite of his position and his venerable age, there was something pitiful, crushed and humiliated in his lustreless red eyes, in the strands of grey hair with a shade of green in it on the nape of his neck, and in the big shoulder-blades on his lean back. . . . He sat without speaking or moving, and coughed with circumspection, as though afraid that the sound of his coughing might make his presence more noticeable.

The old man had come to see his Reverence on business. Two months before he had been prohibited from officiating till further notice, and his case was being inquired into. His shortcomings were numerous. He was intemperate in his habits, fell out with the other clergy and the commune, kept the church records and accounts carelessly -- these were the formal charges against him; but besides all that, there had been rumours for a long time past that he celebrated unlawful marriages for money and sold certificates of having fasted and taken the sacrament to officials and officers who came to him from the town. These rumours were maintained the more persistently that he was poor and had nine children to keep, who were as incompetent and unsuccessful as himself. The sons were spoilt and uneducated, and stayed at home doing nothing, while the daughters were ugly and did not get married.

Not having the moral force to be open, his Reverence walked up and down the room and said nothing or spoke in hints.

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"So you are not going home to-night?" he asked, stopping near the dark window and poking with his little finger into the cage where a canary was asleep with its feathers puffed out.

Father Anastasy started, coughed cautiously and said rapidly:

"Home? I don't care to, Fyodor Ilyitch. I cannot officiate, as you know, so what am I to do there? I came away on purpose that I might not have to look the people in the face. One is ashamed not to officiate, as you know. Besides, I have business here, Fyodor Ilyitch. To-morrow after breaking the fast I want to talk things over thoroughly with the Father charged with the inquiry."

"Ah! . . ." yawned his Reverence, "and where are you staying?"

"At Zyavkin's."

Father Anastasy suddenly remembered that within two hours his Reverence had to take the Easter-night service, and he felt so ashamed of his unwelcome burdensome presence that he made up his mind to go away at once and let the exhausted man rest. And the old man got up to go. But before he began saying good-bye he stood clearing his throat for a minute and looking searchingly at his Reverence's back, still with the same expression of vague expectation in his whole figure; his face was working with shame, timidity, and a pitiful forced laugh such as one sees in people who do not respect themselves. Waving his hand as it were resolutely, he said with a husky quavering laugh:

"Father Fyodor, do me one more kindness: bid them give me at leave-taking . . . one little glass of vodka."

"It's not the time to drink vodka now," said his Reverence sternly. "One must have some regard for decency."

Father Anastasy was still more overwhelmed by confusion; he laughed, and, forgetting his resolution to go away, he dropped back on his chair. His Reverence looked at his helpless, embarrassed face and his bent figure and he felt sorry for the old man.

"Please God, we will have a drink to-morrow," he said, wishing to soften his stem refusal. "Everything is good in due season."

His Reverence believed in people's reforming, but now when a feeling of pity had been kindled in him it seemed to him that this disgraced, worn-out old man, entangled in a network of sins and weaknesses, was hopelessly wrecked, that there was no power on earth that could straighten out his spine, give brightness to his eyes and restrain the unpleasant timid laugh which he laughed on purpose to smoothe over to some slight extent the repulsive impression he made on people.

The old man seemed now to Father Fyodor not guilty and not vicious, but humiliated, insulted, unfortunate; his Reverence thought of his wife, his nine children, the dirty beggarly shelter at Zyavkin's; he thought for some reason of the people who are glad to see priests drunk and persons in authority detected in crimes; and thought that the very best

thing Father Anastasy could do now would be to die as soon as possible and to depart from this world for ever.

There were a sound of footsteps.

"Father Fyodor, you are not resting?" a bass voice asked from the passage.

"No, deacon; come in."

Orlov's colleague, the deacon Liubimov, an elderly man with a big bald patch on the top of his head, though his hair was still black and he was still vigorous-looking, with thick black eyebrows like a Georgian's, walked in. He bowed to Father Anastasy and sat down.

"What good news have you?" asked his Reverence.

"What good news?" answered the deacon, and after a pause he went on with a smile: "When your children are little, your trouble is small; when your children are big, your trouble is great. Such goings on, Father Fyodor, that I don't know what to think of it. It's a regular farce, that's what it is."

He paused again for a little, smiled still more broadly and said:

"Nikolay Matveyitch came back from Harkov to-day. He has been telling me about my Pyotr. He has been to see him twice, he tells me."

"What has he been telling you, then?"

"He has upset me, God bless him. He meant to please me but when I came to think it over, it seems there is not much to be pleased at. I ought to grieve rather than be pleased. . . 'Your Petrushka,' said he, 'lives in fine style. He is far above us now,' said he. 'Well thank God for that,' said I. 'I dined with him,' said he, 'and saw his whole manner of life. He lives like a gentleman,' he said; 'you couldn't wish to live better.' I was naturally interested and I asked, 'And what did you have for dinner?' 'First,' he said, 'a fish course something like fish soup, then tongue and peas,' and then he said, 'roast turkey.' 'Turkey in Lent? that is something to please me,' said I. 'Turkey in Lent? Eh?' "

"Nothing marvellous in that," said his Reverence, screwing up his eyes ironically. And sticking both thumbs in his belt, he drew himself up and said in the tone in which he usually delivered discourses or gave his Scripture lessons to the pupils in the district school: "People who do not keep the fasts are divided into two different categories: some do not keep them through laxity, others through infidelity. Your Pyotr does not keep them through infidelity. Yes."

The deacon looked timidly at Father Fyodor's stern face and said:

"There is worse to follow. . . . We talked and discussed one thing and another, and it turned out that my infidel of a son is living with some madame, another man's wife. She takes the place of wife and hostess in his flat, pours out the tea, receives visitors and all the rest of it, as though she were his lawful wife. For over two years he has been keeping up this dance

with this viper. It's a regular farce. They have been living together for three years and no children."

"I suppose they have been living in chastity!" chuckled Father Anastasy, coughing huskily. "There are children, Father Deacon -- there are, but they don't keep them at home! They send them to the Foundling! He-he-he! . . ." Anastasy went on coughing till he choked.

"Don't interfere, Father Anastasy," said his Reverence sternly.

"Nikolay Matveyitch asked him, 'What madame is this helping the soup at your table?' " the deacon went on, gloomily scanning Anastasy's bent figure. " 'That is my wife,' said he. 'When was your wedding?' Nikolay Matveyitch asked him, and Pyotr answered, 'We were married at Kulikov's restaurant.' "

His Reverence's eyes flashed wrathfully and the colour came into his temples. Apart from his sinfulness, Pyotr was not a person he liked. Father Fyodor had, as they say, a grudge against him. He remembered him a boy at school -- he remembered him distinctly, because even then the boy had seemed to him not normal. As a schoolboy, Petrushka had been ashamed to serve at the altar, had been offended at being addressed without ceremony, had not crossed himself on entering the room, and what was still more noteworthy, was fond of talking a great deal and with heat -- and, in Father Fyodor's opinion, much talking was unseemly in children and pernicious to them; moreover Petrushka had taken up a contemptuous and critical attitude to fishing, a pursuit to which both his Reverence and the deacon were greatly addicted. As a student Pyotr had not gone to church at all, had slept till midday, had looked down on people, and had been given to raising delicate and insoluble questions with a peculiarly provoking zest.

"What would you have?" his Reverence asked, going up to the deacon and looking at him angrily. "What would you have? This was to be expected! I always knew and was convinced that nothing good would come of your Pyotr! I told you so, and I tell you so now. What you have sown, that now you must reap! Reap it!"

"But what have I sown, Father Fyodor?" the deacon asked softly, looking up at his Reverence.

"Why, who is to blame if not you? You're his father, he is your offspring! You ought to have admonished him, have instilled the fear of God into him. A child must be taught! You have brought him into the world, but you haven't trained him up in the right way. It's a sin! It's wrong! It's a shame!"

His Reverence forgot his exhaustion, paced to and fro and went on talking. Drops of perspiration came out on the deacon's bald head and forehead. He raised his eyes to his Reverence with a look of guilt, and said:

"But didn't I train him, Father Fyodor? Lord have mercy on us, haven't I been a father to my children? You know yourself I spared nothing for his good; I have prayed and done my best all my life to give him a thorough education. He went to the high school and I got him tutors, and he took his degree at the University. And as to my not being able to influence his mind, Father Fyodor, why, you can judge for yourself that I am not qualified to do so!

Sometimes when he used to come here as a student, I would begin admonishing him in my way, and he wouldn't heed me. I'd say to him, 'Go to church,' and he would answer, 'What for?' I would begin explaining, and he would say, 'Why? what for?' Or he would slap me on the shoulder and say, 'Everything in this world is relative, approximate and conditional. I don't know anything, and you don't know anything either, dad.' "

Father Anastasy laughed huskily, cleared his throat and waved his fingers in the air as though preparing to say something. His Reverence glanced at him and said sternly:

"Don't interfere, Father Anastasy."

The old man laughed, beamed, and evidently listened with pleasure to the deacon as though he were glad there were other sinful persons in this world besides himself. The deacon spoke sincerely, with an aching heart. and tears actually came into his eyes. Father Fyodor felt sorry for him.

"You are to blame, deacon, you are to blame," he said, but not so sternly and heatedly as before. "If you could beget him, you ought to know how to instruct him. You ought to have trained him in his childhood; it's no good trying to correct a student."

A silence followed; the deacon clasped his hands and said with a sigh:

"But you know I shall have to answer for him!"

"To be sure you will!"

After a brief silence his Reverence yawned and sighed at the same moment and asked:

"Who is reading the 'Acts'?"

"Yevstrat. Yevstrat always reads them."

The deacon got up and, looking imploringly at his Reverence, asked:

"Father Fyodor, what am I to do now?"

"Do as you please; you are his father, not I. You ought to know best."

"I don't know anything, Father Fyodor! Tell me what to do, for goodness' sake! Would you believe it, I am sick at heart! I can't sleep now, nor keep quiet, and the holiday will be no holiday to me. Tell me what to do, Father Fyodor!"

"Write him a letter."

"What am I to write to him?"

"Write that he mustn't go on like that. Write shortly, but sternly and circumstantially, without softening or smoothing away his guilt. It is your parental duty; if you write, you will have done your duty and will be at peace."

"That's true. But what am I to write to him, to what effect? If I write to him, he will answer, 'Why? what for? Why is it a sin?' "

Father Anastasy laughed hoarsely again, and brandished his fingers.

"Why? what for? why is it a sin?" he began shrilly. "I was once confessing a gentleman, and I told him that excessive confidence in the Divine Mercy is a sin; and he asked, 'Why?' I tried to answer him, but----" Anastasy slapped himself on the forehead. "I had nothing here. He-he-he-he! . . ."

Anastasy's words, his hoarse jangling laugh at what was not laughable, had an unpleasant effect on his Reverence and on the deacon. The former was on the point of saying, "Don't interfere" again, but he did not say it, he only frowned.

"I can't write to him," sighed the deacon.

"If you can't, who can?"

"Father Fyodor!" said the deacon, putting his head on one side and pressing his hand to his heart. "I am an uneducated slow-witted man, while the Lord has vouchsafed you judgment and wisdom. You know everything and understand everything. You can master anything, while I don't know how to put my words together sensibly. Be generous. Instruct me how to write the letter. Teach me what to say and how to say it. . . ."

"What is there to teach? There is nothing to teach. Sit down and write."

"Oh, do me the favour, Father Fyodor! I beseech you! I know he will be frightened and will attend to your letter, because, you see, you are a cultivated man too. Do be so good! I'll sit down, and you'll dictate to me. It will be a sin to write to-morrow, but now would be the very time; my mind would be set at rest."

His Reverence looked at the deacon's imploring face, thought of the disagreeable Pyotr, and consented to dictate. He made the deacon sit down to his table and began.

"Well, write . . . 'Christ is risen, dear son . . .' exclamation mark. 'Rumours have reached me, your father,' then in parenthesis, 'from what source is no concern of yours . . .' close the parenthesis. . . . Have you written it? 'That you are leading a life inconsistent with the laws both of God and of man. Neither the luxurious comfort, nor the worldly splendour, nor the culture with which you seek outwardly to disguise it, can hide your heathen manner of life. In name you are a Christian, but in your real nature a heathen as pitiful and wretched as all other heathens -- more wretched, indeed, seeing that those heathens who know not Christ are lost from ignorance, while you are lost in that, possessing a treasure, you neglect it. I will not enumerate here your vices, which you know well enough; I will say that I see the cause of your ruin in your infidelity. You imagine yourself to be wise, boast of your knowledge of science, but refuse to see that science without faith, far from elevating a man, actually degrades him to the level of a lower animal, inasmuch as. . . ' " The whole letter was in this strain.

When he had finished writing it the deacon read it aloud, beamed all over and jumped up.

"It's a gift, it's really a gift!" he said, clasping his hands and looking enthusiastically at his Reverence. "To think of the Lord's bestowing a gift like that! Eh? Holy Mother! I do believe I couldn't write a letter like that in a hundred years. Lord save you!"

Father Anastasy was enthusiastic too.

"One couldn't write like that without a gift," he said, getting up and wagging his fingers-- "that one couldn't! His rhetoric would trip any philosopher and shut him up. Intellect. Brilliant intellect! If you weren't married, Father Fyodor, you would have been a bishop long ago, you would really!"

Having vented his wrath in a letter, his Reverence felt relieved; his fatigue and exhaustion came back to him. The deacon was an old friend, and his Reverence did not hesitate to say to him:

"Well deacon, go, and God bless you. I'll have half an hour's nap on the sofa; I must rest."

The deacon went away and took Anastasy with him. As is always the case on Easter Eve, it was dark in the street, but the whole sky was sparkling with bright luminous stars. There was a scent of spring and holiday in the soft still air.

"How long was he dictating?" the deacon said admiringly. "Ten minutes, not more! It would have taken someone else a month to compose such a letter. Eh! What a mind! Such a mind that I don't know what to call it! It's a marvel! It's really a marvel!"

"Education!" sighed Anastasy as he crossed the muddy street; holding up his cassock to his waist. "It's not for us to compare ourselves with him. We come of the sacristan class, while he has had a learned education. Yes, he's a real man, there is no denying that."

"And you listen how he'll read the Gospel in Latin at mass to-day! He knows Latin and he knows Greek. . . . Ah Petrushka, Petrushka!" the deacon said, suddenly remembering. "Now that will make him scratch his head! That will shut his mouth, that will bring it home to him! Now he won't ask 'Why.' It is a case of one wit to outwit another! Haha-ha!"

The deacon laughed gaily and loudly. Since the letter had been written to Pyotr he had become serene and more cheerful. The consciousness of having performed his duty as a father and his faith in the power of the letter had brought back his mirthfulness and good-humour.

"Pyotr means a stone," said he, as he went into his house. "My Pyotr is not a stone, but a rag. A viper has fastened upon him and he pampers her, and hasn't the pluck to kick her out. Tfoo! To think there should be women like that, God forgive me! Eh? Has she no shame? She has fastened upon the lad, sticking to him, and keeps him tied to her apron strings. . . . Fie upon her!"

"Perhaps it's not she keeps hold of him, but he of her?"

"She is a shameless one anyway! Not that I am defending Pyotr. . . . He'll catch it. He'll read the letter and scratch his head! He'll burn with shame!"

"It's a splendid letter, only you know I wouldn't send it, Father Deacon. Let him alone."

"What?" said the deacon, disconcerted.

"Why. . . . Don't send it, deacon! What's the sense of it? Suppose you send it; he reads it, and . . . and what then? You'll only upset him. Forgive him. Let him alone!"

The deacon looked in surprise at Anastasy's dark face, at his unbuttoned cassock, which looked in the dusk like wings, and shrugged his shoulders.

"How can I forgive him like that?" he asked. "Why I shall have to answer for him to God!"

"Even so, forgive him all the same. Really! And God will forgive you for your kindness to him."

"But he is my son, isn't he? Ought I not to teach him?"

"Teach him? Of course -- why not? You can teach him, but why call him a heathen? It will hurt his feelings, you know, deacon. . . ."

The deacon was a widower, and lived in a little house with three windows. His elder sister, an old maid, looked after his house for him, though she had three years before lost the use of her legs and was confined to her bed; he was afraid of her, obeyed her, and did nothing without her advice. Father Anastasy went in with him. Seeing his table already laid with Easter cakes and red eggs, he began weeping for some reason, probably thinking of his own home, and to turn these tears into a jest, he at once laughed huskily.

"Yes, we shall soon be breaking the fast," he said. "Yes . . . it wouldn't come amiss, deacon, to have a little glass now. Can we? I'll drink it so that the old lady does not hear," he whispered, glancing sideways towards the door.

Without a word the deacon moved a decanter and wineglass towards him. He unfolded the letter and began reading it aloud. And now the letter pleased him just as much as when his Reverence had dictated it to him. He beamed with pleasure and wagged his head, as though he had been tasting something very sweet.

"A-ah, what a letter!" he said. "Petrushka has never dreamt of such a letter. It's just what he wants, something to throw him into a fever. . . ."

"Do you know, deacon, don't send it!" said Anastasy, pouring himself out a second glass of vodka as though unconsciously. "Forgive him, let him alone! I am telling you . . . what I really think. If his own father can't forgive him, who will forgive him? And so he'll live without forgiveness. Think, deacon: there will be plenty to chastise him without you, but you should look out for some who will show mercy to your son! I'll . . . I'll . . . have just one more. The last, old man. . . . Just sit down and write straight off to him, 'I forgive you Pyotr!' He will under-stand! He will fe-el it! I understand it from myself, you see old

man . . . deacon, I mean. When I lived like other people, I hadn't much to trouble about, but now since I lost the image and semblance, there is only one thing I care about, that good people should forgive me. And remember, too, it's not the righteous but sinners we must forgive. Why should you forgive your old woman if she is not sinful? No, you must forgive a man when he is a sad sight to look at . . . yes!"

Anastasy leaned his head on his fist and sank into thought.

"It's a terrible thing, deacon," he sighed, evidently struggling with the desire to take another glass -- "a terrible thing! In sin my mother bore me, in sin I have lived, in sin I shall die. . . . God forgive me, a sinner! I have gone astray, deacon! There is no salvation for me! And it's not as though I had gone astray in my life, but in old age -- at death's door . . . I . . ."

The old man, with a hopeless gesture, drank off another glass, then got up and moved to another seat. The deacon, still keeping the letter in his hand, was walking up and down the room. He was thinking of his son. Displeasure, distress and anxiety no longer troubled him; all that had gone into the letter. Now he was simply picturing Pyotr; he imagined his face, he thought of the past years when his son used to come to stay with him for the holidays. His thoughts were only of what was good, warm, touching, of which one might think for a whole lifetime without wearying. Longing for his son, he read the letter through once more and looked questioningly at Anastasy.

"Don't send it," said the latter, with a wave of his hand.

"No, I must send it anyway; I must . . . bring him to his senses a little, all the same. It's just as well. . . ."

The deacon took an envelope from the table, but before putting the letter into it he sat down to the table, smiled and added on his own account at the bottom of the letter:

"They have sent us a new inspector. He's much friskier than the old one. He's a great one for dancing and talking, and there's nothing he can't do, so that all the Govorovsky girls are crazy over him. Our military chief, Kostyrev, will soon get the sack too, they say. High time he did!" And very well pleased, without the faintest idea that with this postscript he had completely spoiled the stern letter, the deacon addressed the envelope and laid it in the most conspicuous place on the table.

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