

In The Coach-house

Anton Chekhov

IT was between nine and ten o'clock in the evening. Stepan the coachman, Mihailo the house-porter, Alyoshka the coachman's grandson, who had come up from the village to stay with his grandfather, and Nikandr, an old man of seventy, who used to come into the yard every evening to sell salt herrings, were sitting round a lantern in the big coach-house, playing "kings." Through the wide-open door could be seen the whole yard, the big house, where the master's family lived, the gates, the cellars, and the porter's lodge. It was all shrouded in the darkness of night, and only the four windows of one of the lodges which was let were brightly lit up. The shadows of the coaches and sledges with their shafts tipped upwards stretched from the walls to the doors, quivering and cutting across the shadows cast by the lantern and the players. . . . On the other side of the thin partition that divided the coach-house from the stable were the horses. There was a scent of hay, and a disagreeable smell of salt herrings coming from old Nikandr.

The porter won and was king; he assumed an attitude such as was in his opinion befitting a king, and blew his nose loudly on a red-checked handkerchief.

"Now if I like I can chop off anybody's head," he said. Alyoshka, a boy of eight with a head of flaxen hair, left long uncut, who had only missed being king by two tricks, looked angrily and with envy at the porter. He pouted and frowned.

"I shall give you the trick, grandfather," he said, pondering over his cards; "I know you have got the queen of diamonds."

"Well, well, little silly, you have thought enough!"

Alyoshka timidly played the knave of diamonds. At that moment a ring was heard from the yard.

"Oh, hang you!" muttered the porter, getting up. "Go and open the gate, O king!"

When he came back a little later, Alyoshka was already a prince, the fish-hawker a soldier, and the coachman a peasant.

"It's a nasty business," said the porter, sitting down to the cards again. "I have just let the doctors out. They have not extracted it."

"How could they? Just think, they would have to pick open the brains. If there is a bullet in the head, of what use are doctors?"

"He is lying unconscious," the porter went on. "He is bound to die. Alyoshka, don't look at the cards, you little puppy, or I will pull your ears! Yes, I let the doctors out, and the father and mother in. . . They have only just arrived. Such crying and wailing, Lord preserve us! They say he is the only son. . . . It's a grief!"

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All except Alyoshka, who was absorbed in the game, looked round at the brightly lighted windows of the lodge.

"I have orders to go to the police station tomorrow," said the porter. "There will be an inquiry . . . But what do I know about it? I saw nothing of it. He called me this morning, gave me a letter, and said: 'Put it in the letter-box for me.' And his eyes were red with crying. His wife and children were not at home. They had gone out for a walk. So when I had gone with the letter, he put a bullet into his forehead from a revolver. When I came back his cook was wailing for the whole yard to hear."

"It's a great sin," said the fish-hawker in a husky voice, and he shook his head, "a great sin!"

"From too much learning," said the porter, taking a trick; "his wits outstripped his wisdom. Sometimes he would sit writing papers all night. . . . Play, peasant! . . . But he was a nice gentleman. And so white skinned, black-haired and tall! . . . He was a good lodger."

"It seems the fair sex is at the bottom of it," said the coachman, slapping the nine of trumps on the king of diamonds. "It seems he was fond of another man's wife and disliked his own; it does happen."

"The king rebels," said the porter.

At that moment there was again a ring from the yard. The rebellious king spat with vexation and went out. Shadows like dancing couples flitted across the windows of the lodge. There was the sound of voices and hurried footsteps in the yard.

"I suppose the doctors have come again," said the coachman. "Our Mihailo is run off his legs. . . ."

A strange wailing voice rang out for a moment in the air. Alyoshka looked in alarm at his grandfather, the coachman; then at the windows, and said:

"He stroked me on the head at the gate yesterday, and said, 'What district do you come from, boy?' Grandfather, who was that howled just now?"

His grandfather trimmed the light in the lantern and made no answer.

"The man is lost," he said a little later, with a yawn. "He is lost, and his children are ruined, too. It's a disgrace for his children for the rest of their lives now."

The porter came back and sat down by the lantern.

"He is dead," he said. "They have sent to the almshouse for the old women to lay him out."

"The kingdom of heaven and eternal peace to him!" whispered the coachman, and he crossed himself.

Looking at him, Alyoshka crossed himself too.

"You can't pray for such as him," said the fish-hawker.

"Why not?"

"It's a sin."

"That's true," the porter assented. "Now his soul has gone straight to hell, to the devil. . . ."

"It's a sin," repeated the fish-hawker; "such as he have no funeral, no requiem, but are buried like carrion with no respect."

The old man put on his cap and got up.

"It was the same thing at our lady's," he said, pulling his cap on further. "We were serfs in those days; the younger son of our mistress, the General's lady, shot himself through the mouth with a pistol, from too much learning, too. It seems that by law such have to be buried outside the cemetery, without priests, without a requiem service; but to save disgrace our lady, you know, bribed the police and the doctors, and they gave her a paper to say her son had done it when delirious, not knowing what he was doing. You can do anything with money. So he had a funeral with priests and every honor, the music played, and he was buried in the church; for the deceased General had built that church with his own money, and all his family were buried there. Only this is what happened, friends. One month passed, and then another, and it was all right. In the third month they informed the General's lady that the watchmen had come from that same church. What did they want? They were brought to her, they fell at her feet. 'We can't go on serving, your excellency,' they said. 'Look out for other watchmen and graciously dismiss us.' 'What for?' 'No,' they said, 'we can't possibly; your son howls under the church all night.' "

Alyoshka shuddered, and pressed his face to the coachman's back so as not to see the windows.

"At first the General's lady would not listen," continued the old man. "'All this is your fancy, you simple folk have such notions,' she said. 'A dead man cannot howl.' Some time afterwards the watchmen came to her again, and with them the sacristan. So the sacristan, too, had heard him howling. The General's lady saw that it was a bad job; she locked herself in her bedroom with the watchmen. 'Here, my friends, here are twenty-five roubles for you, and for that go by night in secret, so that no one should hear or see you, dig up my unhappy son, and bury him,' she said, 'outside the cemetery.' And I suppose she stood them a glass . . . And the watchmen did so. The stone with the inscription on it is there to this day, but he himself, the General's son, is outside the cemetery. . . . O Lord, forgive us our transgressions!" sighed the fish-hawker. "There is only one day in the year when one may pray for such people: the Saturday before Trinity. . . . You mustn't give alms to beggars for their sake, it is a sin, but you may feed the birds for the rest of their souls. The General's lady used to go out to the crossroads every three days to feed the birds. Once at the crossroads a black dog suddenly appeared; it ran up to the bread, and was such a . . . we all know what that dog was. The General's lady was like a half-crazy creature for five days afterwards, she neither ate nor drank. . . . All at once she fell on her knees in the garden, and prayed and prayed. . . . Well, good-by, friends, the blessing of God and the Heavenly

Mother be with you. Let us go, Mihailo, you'll open the gate for me."

The fish-hawker and the porter went out. The coachman and Alyoshka went out too, so as not to be left in the coach-house.

"The man was living and is dead!" said the coachman, looking towards the windows where shadows were still flitting to and fro. "Only this morning he was walking about the yard, and now he is lying dead."

"The time will come and we shall die too," said the porter, walking away with the fish-hawker, and at once they both vanished from sight in the darkness.

The coachman, and Alyoshka after him, somewhat timidly went up to the lighted windows. A very pale lady with large tear stained eyes, and a fine-looking gray headed man were moving two card-tables into the middle of the room, probably with the intention of laying the dead man upon them, and on the green cloth of the table numbers could still be seen written in chalk. The cook who had run about the yard wailing in the morning was now standing on a chair, stretching up to try and cover the looking glass with a towel.

"Grandfather what are they doing?" asked Alyoshka in a whisper.

"They are just going to lay him on the tables," answered his grandfather. "Let us go, child, it is bedtime."

The coachman and Alyoshka went back to the coach-house. They said their prayers, and took off their boots. Stepan lay down in a corner on the floor, Alyoshka in a sledge. The doors of the coach house were shut, there was a horrible stench from the extinguished lantern. A little later Alyoshka sat up and looked about him; through the crack of the door he could still see a light from those lighted windows.

"Grandfather, I am frightened!" he said.

"Come, go to sleep, go to sleep! . . ."

"I tell you I am frightened!"

"What are you frightened of? What a baby!"

They were silent.

Alyoshka suddenly jumped out of the sledge and, loudly weeping, ran to his grandfather.

"What is it? What's the matter?" cried the coachman in a fright, getting up also.

"He's howling!"

"Who is howling?"

"I am frightened, grandfather, do you hear?"

The coachman listened.

"It's their crying," he said. "Come! there, little silly! They are sad, so they are crying."

"I want to go home, . . ." his grandson went on sobbing and trembling all over. "Grandfather, let us go back to the village, to mammy; come, grandfather dear, God will give you the heavenly kingdom for it. . . ."

"What a silly, ah! Come, be quiet, be quiet! Be quiet, I will light the lantern, . . . silly!"

The coachman fumbled for the matches and lighted the lantern. But the light did not comfort Alyoshka.

"Grandfather Stepan, let's go to the village!" he besought him, weeping. "I am frightened here; oh, oh, how frightened I am! And why did you bring me from the village, accursed man?"

"Who's an accursed man? You mustn't use such disrespectful words to your lawful grandfather. I shall whip you."

"Do whip me, grandfather, do; beat me like Sidor's goat, but only take me to mammy, for God's mercy! . . ."

"Come, come, grandson, come!" the coachman said kindly. "It's all right, don't be frightened. . . . I am frightened myself. . . . Say your prayers!"

The door creaked and the porter's head appeared. "Aren't you asleep, Stepan?" he asked. "I shan't get any sleep all night," he said, coming in. "I shall be opening and shutting the gates all night. . . . What are you crying for, Alyoshka?"

"He is frightened," the coachman answered for his grandson.

Again there was the sound of a wailing voice in the air. The porter said:

"They are crying. The mother can't believe her eyes. . . . It's dreadful how upset she is."

"And is the father there?"

"Yes. . . . The father is all right. He sits in the corner and says nothing. They have taken the children to relations. . . . Well, Stepan, shall we have a game of trumps?"

"Yes," the coachman agreed, scratching himself, "and you, Alyoshka, go to sleep. Almost big enough to be married, and blubbering, you rascal. Come, go along, grandson, go along. . . ."

The presence of the porter reassured Alyoshka. He went, not very resolutely, towards the sledge and lay down. And while he was falling asleep he heard a half-whisper.

"I beat and cover," said his grandfather.

"I beat and cover," repeated the porter.

The bell rang in the yard, the door creaked and seemed also saying: "I beat and cover." When Alyoshka dreamed of the gentleman and, frightened by his eyes, jumped up and burst out crying, it was morning, his grandfather was snoring, and the coach-house no longer seemed terrible.

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