The Pipe

Anton Chekhov

MELITON SHISHKIN, a bailiff from the Dementyev farm, exhausted by the sultry heat of the fir-wood and covered with spiders' webs and pine-needles, made his way with his gun to the edge of the wood. His Damka -- a mongrel between a yard dog and a setter -- an extremely thin bitch heavy with young, trailed after her master with her wet tail between her legs, doing all she could to avoid pricking her nose. It was a dull, overcast morning. Big drops dripped from the bracken and from the trees that were wrapped in a light mist; there was a pungent smell of decay from the dampness of the wood.

There were birch-trees ahead of him where the wood ended, and between their stems and branches he could see the misty distance. Beyond the birch-trees someone was playing on a shepherd's rustic pipe. The player produced no more than five or six notes, dragged them out languidly with no attempt at forming a tune, and yet there was something harsh and extremely dreary in the sound of the piping.

As the copse became sparser, and the pines were interspersed with young birch-trees, Meliton saw a herd. Hobbled horses, cows, and sheep were wandering among the bushes and, snapping the dry branches, sniffed at the herbage of the copse. A lean old shepherd, bareheaded, in a torn grey smock, stood leaning against the wet trunk of a birch-tree. He stared at the ground, pondering something, and played his pipe, it seemed, mechanically.

"Good-day, grandfather! God help you!" Meliton greeted him in a thin, husky voice which seemed incongruous with his huge stature and big, fleshy face. "How cleverly you are playing your pipe! Whose herd are you minding?"

"The Artamonovs'," the shepherd answered reluctantly, and he thrust the pipe into his bosom.

"So I suppose the wood is the Artamonovs' too?" Meliton inquired, looking about him. "Yes, it is the Artamonovs'; only fancy . . . I had completely lost myself. I got my face scratched all over in the thicket."

He sat down on the wet earth and began rolling up a bit of newspaper into a cigarette.

Like his voice, everything about the man was small and out of keeping with his height, his breadth, and his fleshy face: his smiles, his eyes, his buttons, his tiny cap, which would hardly keep on his big, closely-cropped head. When he talked and smiled there was something womanish, timid, and meek about his puffy, shaven face and his whole figure.

"What weather! God help us!" he said, and he turned his head from side to side. "Folk have not carried the oats yet, and the rain seems as though it had been taken on for good, God bless it."

The shepherd looked at the sky, from which a drizzling rain was falling, at the wood, at the bailif's wet clothes, pondered, and said nothing.

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"The whole summer has been the same," sighed Meliton. "A bad business for the peasants and no pleasure for the gentry."

The shepherd looked at the sky again, thought a moment, and said deliberately, as though chewing each word:

"It's all going the same way. . . . There is nothing good to be looked for."

"How are things with you here?" Meliton inquired, lighting his cigarette. "Haven't you seen any coveys of grouse in the Artamonovs' clearing?"

The shepherd did not answer at once. He looked again at the sky and to right and left, thought a little, blinked. . . . Apparently he attached no little significance to his words, and to increase their value tried to pronounce them with deliberation and a certain solemnity. The expression of his face had the sharpness and staidness of old age, and the fact that his nose had a saddle-shaped depression across the middle and his nostrils turned upwards gave him a sly and sarcastic look.

"No, I believe I haven't," he said. "Our huntsman Eryomka was saying that on Elijah's Day he started one covey near Pustoshye, but I dare say he was lying. There are very few birds."

"Yes, brother, very few. . . . Very few everywhere! The shooting here, if one is to look at it with common sense, is good for nothing and not worth having. There is no game at all, and what there is is not worth dirtying your hands over -- it is not full-grown. It is such poor stuff that one is ashamed to look at it."

Meliton gave a laugh and waved his hands.

"Things happen so queerly in this world that it is simply laughable and nothing else. Birds nowadays have become so unaccountable: they sit late on their eggs, and there are some, I declare, that have not hatched them by St. Peter's Day!"

"It's all going the same," said the shepherd, turning his face upwards. "There was little game last year, this year there are fewer birds still, and in another five years, mark my words, there will be none at all. As far as I can see there will soon be not only no game, but no birds at all."

Yes," Meliton assented, after a moment's thought. "That's true."

The shepherd gave a bitter smile and shook his head.

"It's a wonder," he said, "what has become of them all! I remember twenty years ago there used to be geese here, and cranes and ducks and grouse -- clouds and clouds of them! The gentry used to meet together for shooting, and one heard nothing but pouf-pouf-pouf! pouf-pouf-pouf! There was no end to the woodcocks, the snipe, and the little teals, and the water-snipe were as common as starlings, or let us say sparrows -- lots and lots of them! And what has become of them all? We don't even see the birds of prey. The eagles, the hawks, and the owls have all gone. . . . There are fewer of every sort of wild beast, too. Nowadays, brother,

even the wolf and the fox have grown rare, let alone the bear or the otter. And you know in old days there were even elks! For forty years I have been observing the works of God from year to year, and it is my opinion that everything is going the same way."

"What way?"

"To the bad, young man. To ruin, we must suppose. . . The time has come for God's world to perish."

The old man put on his cap and began gazing at the sky.

"It's a pity," he sighed, after a brief silence. "O God, what a pity! Of course it is God's will; the world was not created by us, but yet it is a pity, brother. If a single tree withers away, or let us say a single cow dies, it makes one sorry, but what will it be, good man, if the whole world crumbles into dust? Such blessings, Lord Jesus! The sun, and the sky, and the forest, and the rivers, and the creatures -- all these have been created, adapted, and adjusted to one another. Each has been put to its appointed task and knows its place. And all that must perish."

A mournful smile gleamed on the shepherd's face, and his eyelids quivered.

"You say -- the world is perishing," said Meliton, pondering. "It may be that the end of the world is near at hand, but you can't judge by the birds. I don't think the birds can be taken as a sign."

"Not the birds only," said the shepherd. "It's the wild beasts, too, and the cattle, and the bees, and the fish. . . . If you don't believe me ask the old people; every old man will tell you that the fish are not at all what they used to be. In the seas, in the lakes, and in the rivers, there are fewer fish from year to year. In our Pestchanka, I remember, pike used to be caught a yard long, and there were eel-pouts, and roach, and bream, and every fish had a presentable appearance; while nowadays, if you catch a wretched little pikelet or perch six inches long you have to be thankful. There are not any gudgeon even worth talking about. Every year it is worse and worse, and in a little while there will be no fish at all. And take the rivers now . . . the rivers are drying up, for sure."

"It is true; they are drying up."

"To be sure, that's what I say. Every year they are shallower and shallower, and there are not the deep holes there used to be. And do you see the bushes yonder?" the old man asked, pointing to one side. "Beyond them is an old river-bed; it's called a backwater. In my father's time the Pestchanka flowed there, but now look; where have the evil spirits taken it to? It changes its course, and, mind you, it will go on changing till such time as it has dried up altogether. There used to be marshes and ponds beyond Kurgasovo, and where are they now? And what has become of the streams? Here in this very wood we used to have a stream flowing, and such a stream that the peasants used to set creels in it and caught pike; wild ducks used to spend the winter by it, and nowadays there is no water in it worth speaking of, even at the spring floods. Yes, brother, look where you will, things are bad everywhere. Everywhere!"

A silence followed. Meliton sank into thought, with his eyes fixed on one spot. He wanted to think of some one part of nature as yet untouched by the all-embracing ruin. Spots of light glistened on the mist and the slanting streaks of rain as though on opaque glass, and immediately died away again -- it was the rising sun trying to break through the clouds and peep at the earth.

"Yes, the forests, too . . ." Meliton muttered.

"The forests, too," the shepherd repeated. "They cut them down, and they catch fire, and they wither away, and no new ones are growing. Whatever does grow up is cut down at once; one day it shoots up and the next it has been cut down -- and so on without end till nothing's left. I have kept the herds of the commune ever since the time of Freedom, good man; before the time of Freedom I was shepherd of the master's herds. I have watched them in this very spot, and I can't remember a summer day in all my life that I have not been here. And all the time I have been observing the works of God. I have looked at them in my time till I know them, and it is my opinion that all things growing are on the decline. Whether you take the rye, or the vegetables, or flowers of any sort, they are all going the same way."

"But people have grown better," observed the bailiff.

"In what way better?"

"Cleverer."

"Cleverer, maybe, that's true, young man; but what's the use of that? What earthly good is cleverness to people on the brink of ruin? One can perish without cleverness. What's the good of cleverness to a huntsman if there is no game? What I think is that God has given men brains and taken away their strength. People have grown weak, exceedingly weak. Take me, for instance . . . I am not worth a halfpenny, I am the humblest peasant in the whole village, and yet, young man, I have strength. Mind you, I am in my seventies, and I tend my herd day in and day out, and keep the night watch, too, for twenty kopecks, and I don't sleep, and I don't feel the cold; my son is cleverer than I am, but put him in my place and he would ask for a raise next day, or would be going to the doctors. There it is. I eat nothing but bread, for 'Give us this day our daily bread,' and my father ate nothing but bread, and my grandfather; but the peasant nowadays must have tea and vodka and white loaves, and must sleep from sunset to dawn, and he goes to the doctor and pampers himself in all sorts of ways. And why is it? He has grown weak; he has not the strength to endure. If he wants to stay awake, his eyes close -- there is no doing anything."

"That's true," Meliton agreed; "the peasant is good for nothing nowadays."

"It's no good hiding what is wrong; we get worse from year to year. And if you take the gentry into consideration, they've grown feebler even more than the peasants have. The gentleman nowadays has mastered everything; he knows what he ought not to know, and what is the sense of it? It makes you feel pitiful to look at him. . . . He is a thin, puny little fellow, like some Hungarian or Frenchman; there is no dignity nor air about him; it's only in name he is a gentleman. There is no place for him, poor dear, and nothing for him to do, and there is no making out what he wants. Either he sits with a hook catching fish, or he lolls on his back reading, or trots about among the peasants saying all sorts of things to

them, and those that are hungry go in for being clerks. So he spends his life in vain. And he has no notion of doing something real and useful. The gentry in old days were half of them generals, but nowadays they are -- a poor lot."

"They are badly off nowadays," said Meliton.

"They are poorer because God has taken away their strength. You can't go against God."

Meliton stared at a fixed point again. After thinking a little he heaved a sigh as staid, reasonable people do sigh, shook his head, and said:

"And all because of what? We have sinned greatly, we have forgotten God . . and it seems that the time has come for all to end. And, after all, the world can't last for ever -- it's time to know when to take leave."

The shepherd sighed and, as though wishing to cut short an unpleasant conversation, he walked away from the birch-tree and began silently reckoning over the cows.

"Hey-hey-hey!" he shouted. "Hey-hey-hey! Bother you, the plague take you! The devil has taken you into the thicket. Tu-lu-lu!"

With an angry face he went into the bushes to collect his herd. Meliton got up and sauntered slowly along the edge of the wood. He looked at the ground at his feet and pondered; he still wanted to think of something which had not yet been touched by death. Patches of light crept upon the slanting streaks of rain again; they danced on the tops of the trees and died away among the wet leaves. Damka found a hedgehog under a bush, and wanting to attract her master's attention to it, barked and howled.

"Did you have an eclipse or not?" the shepherd called from the bushes.

"Yes, we had," answered Meliton.

"Ah! Folks are complaining all about that there was one. It shows there is disorder even in the heavens! It's not for nothing. . . . Hey-hey-hey! Hey!"

Driving his herd together to the edge of the wood, the shepherd leaned against the birch-tree, looked up at the sky, without haste took his pipe from his bosom and began playing. As before, he played mechanically and took no more than five or six notes; as though the pipe had come into his hands for the first time, the sounds floated from it uncertainly, with no regularity, not blending into a tune, but to Meliton, brooding on the destruction of the world, there was a sound in it of something very depressing and revolting which he would much rather not have heard. The highest, shrillest notes, which quivered and broke, seemed to be weeping disconsolately, as though the pipe were sick and frightened, while the lowest notes for some reason reminded him of the mist, the dejected trees, the grey sky. Such music seemed in keeping with the weather, the old man and his sayings.

Meliton wanted to complain. He went up to the old man and, looking at his mournful, mocking face and at the pipe, muttered:

"And life has grown worse, grandfather. It is utterly impossible to live. Bad crops, want. . . . Cattle plague continually, diseases of all sorts. . . . We are crushed by poverty."

The bailiff's puffy face turned crimson and took a dejected, womanish expression. He twirled his fingers as though seeking words to convey his vague feeling and went on:

"Eight children, a wife . . . and my mother still living, and my whole salary ten roubles a month and to board myself. My wife has become a Satan from poverty. . . . I go off drinking myself. I am a sensible, steady man; I have education. I ought to sit at home in peace, but I stray about all day with my gun like a dog because it is more than I can stand; my home is hateful to me!"

Feeling that his tongue was uttering something quite different from what he wanted to say, the bailiff waved his hand and said bitterly:

"If the world's going to end I wish it would make haste about it. There's no need to drag it out and make folks miserable for nothing. . . ."

The old man took the pipe from his lips and, screwing up one eye, looked into its little opening. His face was sad and covered with thick drops like tears. He smiled and said:

"It's a pity, my friend! My goodness, what a pity! The earth, the forest, the sky, the beasts of all sorts -- all this has been created, you know, adapted; they all have their intelligence. It is all going to ruin. And most of all I am sorry for people."

There was the sound in the wood of heavy rain coming nearer. Meliton looked in the direction of the sound, did up all his buttons, and said:

"I am going to the village. Good-bye, grandfather. What is your name?"

"Luka the Poor."

"Well, good-bye, Luka! Thank you for your good words. Damka, ici!"

After parting from the shepherd Meliton made his way along the edge of the wood, and then down hill to a meadow which by degrees turned into a marsh. There was a squelch of water under his feet, and the rusty marsh sedge, still green and juicy, drooped down to the earth as though afraid of being trampled underfoot. Beyond the marsh, on the bank of the Pestchanka, of which the old man had spoken, stood a row of willows, and beyond the willows a barn looked dark blue in the mist. One could feel the approach of that miserable, utterly inevitable season, when the fields grow dark and the earth is muddy and cold, when the weeping willow seems still more mournful and tears trickle down its stem, and only the cranes fly away from the general misery, and even they, as though afraid of insulting dispirited nature by the expression of their happiness, fill the air with their mournful, dreary notes.

Meliton plodded along to the river, and heard the sounds of the pipe gradually dying away behind him. He still wanted to complain. He looked dejectedly about him, and he felt insufferably sorry for the sky and the earth and the sun and the woods and his Damka, and

when the highest drawn-out note of the pipe floated quivering in the air, like a voice weeping, he felt extremely bitter and resentful of the impropriety in the conduct of nature.

The high note quivered, broke off, and the pipe was silent.

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