

The Post

Anton Chekhov

IT was three o'clock in the night. The postman, ready to set off, in his cap and his coat, with a rusty sword in his hand, was standing near the door, waiting for the driver to finish putting the mail bags into the cart which had just been brought round with three horses. The sleepy postmaster sat at his table, which was like a counter; he was filling up a form and saying:

"My nephew, the student, wants to go to the station at once. So look here, Ignatyev, let him get into the mail cart and take him with you to the station: though it is against the regulations to take people with the mail, what's one to do? It's better for him to drive with you free than for me to hire horses for him."

"Ready!" they heard a shout from the yard.

"Well, go then, and God be with you," said the postmaster. "Which driver is going?"

"Semyon Glazov."

"Come, sign the receipt."

The postman signed the receipt and went out. At the entrance of the post-office there was the dark outline of a cart and three horses. The horses were standing still except that one of the tracehorses kept uneasily shifting from one leg to the other and tossing its head, making the bell clang from time to time. The cart with the mail bags looked like a patch of darkness. Two silhouettes were moving lazily beside it: the student with a portmanteau in his hand and a driver. The latter was smoking a short pipe; the light of the pipe moved about in the darkness, dying away and flaring up again; for an instant it lighted up a bit of a sleeve, then a shaggy moustache and big copper-red nose, then stern-looking, overhanging eyebrows. The postman pressed down the mail bags with his hands, laid his sword on them and jumped into the cart. The student clambered irresolutely in after him, and accidentally touching him with his elbow, said timidly and politely: "I beg your pardon."

The pipe went out. The postmaster came out of the post-office just as he was, in his waistcoat and slippers; shrinking from the night dampness and clearing his throat, he walked beside the cart and said:

"Well, God speed! Give my love to your mother, Mihailo. Give my love to them all. And you, Ignatyev, mind you don't forget to give the parcel to Bystretsov. . . . Off!"

The driver took the reins in one hand, blew his nose, and, arranging the seat under himself, clicked to the horses.

"Give them my love," the postmaster repeated.

The big bell clanged something to the little bells, the little bells gave it a friendly answer. The cart squeaked, moved. The big bell lamented, the little bells laughed. Standing up in his

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seat the driver lashed the restless tracehorse twice, and the cart rumbled with a hollow sound along the dusty road. The little town was asleep. Houses and trees stood black on each side of the broad street, and not a light was to be seen. Narrow clouds stretched here and there over the star-spangled sky, and where the dawn would soon be coming there was a narrow crescent moon; but neither the stars, of which there were many, nor the half-moon, which looked white, lighted up the night air. It was cold and damp, and there was a smell of autumn.

The student, who thought that politeness required him to talk affably to a man who had not refused to let him accompany him, began:

"In summer it would be light at this time, but now there is not even a sign of the dawn. Summer is over!"

The student looked at the sky and went on:

"Even from the sky one can see that it is autumn. Look to the right. Do you see three stars side by side in a straight line? That is the constellation of Orion, which, in our hemisphere, only becomes visible in September."

The postman, thrusting his hands into his sleeves and retreating up to his ears into his coat collar, did not stir and did not glance at the sky. Apparently the constellation of Orion did not interest him. He was accustomed to see the stars, and probably he had long grown weary of them. The student paused for a while and then said:

"It's cold! It's time for the dawn to begin. Do you know what time the sun rises?"

"What?"

"What time does the sun rise now?"

"Between five and six," said the driver.

The mail cart drove out of the town. Now nothing could be seen on either side of the road but the fences of kitchen gardens and here and there a solitary willow-tree; everything in front of them was shrouded in darkness. Here in the open country the half-moon looked bigger and the stars shone more brightly. Then came a scent of dampness; the postman shrank further into his collar, the student felt an unpleasant chill first creeping about his feet, then over the mail bags, over his hands and his face. The horses moved more slowly; the bell was mute as though it were frozen. There was the sound of the splash of water, and stars reflected in the water danced under the horses' feet and round the wheels.

But ten minutes later it became so dark that neither the stars nor the moon could be seen. The mail cart had entered the forest. Prickly pine branches were continually hitting the student on his cap and a spider's web settled on his face. Wheels and hoofs knocked against huge roots, and the mail cart swayed from side to side as though it were drunk.

"Keep to the road," said the postman angrily. "Why do you run up the edge? My face is scratched all over by the twigs! Keep more to the right!"

But at that point there was nearly an accident. The cart suddenly bounded as though in the throes of a convulsion, began trembling, and, with a creak, lurched heavily first to the right and then to the left, and at a fearful pace dashed along the forest track. The horses had taken fright at something and bolted.

"Wo! wo!" the driver cried in alarm. "Wo . . . you devils!"

The student, violently shaken, bent forward and tried to find something to catch hold of so as to keep his balance and save himself from being thrown out, but the leather mail bags were slippery, and the driver, whose belt the student tried to catch at, was himself tossed up and down and seemed every moment on the point of flying out. Through the rattle of the wheels and the creaking of the cart they heard the sword fall with a clank on the ground, then a little later something fell with two heavy thuds behind the mail cart.

"Wo!" the driver cried in a piercing voice, bending backwards. "Stop!"

The student fell on his face and bruised his forehead against the driver's seat, but was at once tossed back again and knocked his spine violently against the back of the cart.

"I am falling!" was the thought that flashed through his mind, but at that instant the horses dashed out of the forest into the open, turned sharply to the right, and rumbling over a bridge of logs, suddenly stopped dead, and the suddenness of this halt flung the student forward again.

The driver and the student were both breathless. The postman was not in the cart. He had been thrown out, together with his sword, the student's portmanteau, and one of the mail bags.

"Stop, you rascal! Sto-op!" they heard him shout from the forest. "You damned blackguard!" he shouted, running up to the cart, and there was a note of pain and fury in his tearful voice. "You anathema, plague take you!" he roared, dashing up to the driver and shaking his fist at him.

"What a to-do! Lord have mercy on us!" muttered the driver in a conscience-stricken voice, setting right something in the harness at the horses' heads. "It's all that devil of a tracehorse. Cursed filly; it is only a week since she has run in harness. She goes all right, but as soon as we go down hill there is trouble! She wants a touch or two on the nose, then she wouldn't play about like this. . . Stea-eady! Damn!"

While the driver was setting the horses to rights and looking for the portmanteau, the mail bag, and the sword on the road, the postman in a plaintive voice shrill with anger ejaculated oaths. After replacing the luggage the driver for no reason whatever led the horses for a hundred paces, grumbled at the restless tracehorse, and jumped up on the box.

When his fright was over the student felt amused and good-humoured. It was the first time in his life that he had driven by night in a mail cart, and the shaking he had just been through, the postman's having been thrown out, and the pain in his own back struck him as interesting adventures. He lighted a cigarette and said with a laugh:

"Why you know, you might break your neck like that! I very nearly flew out, and I didn't even notice you had been thrown out. I can fancy what it is like driving in autumn!"

The postman did not speak.

"Have you been going with the post for long?" the student asked.

"Eleven years."

"Oho; every day?"

"Yes, every day. I take this post and drive back again at once. Why?"

Making the journey every day, he must have had a good many interesting adventures in eleven years. On bright summer and gloomy autumn nights, or in winter when a ferocious snowstorm whirled howling round the mail cart, it must have been hard to avoid feeling frightened and uncanny. No doubt more than once the horses had bolted, the mail cart had stuck in the mud, they had been attacked by highwaymen, or had lost their way in the blizzard. . . .

"I can fancy what adventures you must have had in eleven years!" said the student. "I expect it must be terrible driving?"

He said this and expected that the postman would tell him something, but the latter preserved a sullen silence and retreated into his collar. Meanwhile it began to get light. The sky changed colour imperceptibly; it still seemed dark, but by now the horses and the driver and the road could be seen. The crescent moon looked bigger and bigger, and the cloud that stretched below it, shaped like a cannon in a gun-carriage, showed a faint yellow on its lower edge. Soon the postman's face was visible. It was wet with dew, grey and rigid as the face of a corpse. An expression of dull, sullen anger was set upon it, as though the postman were still in pain and still angry with the driver.

"Thank God it is daylight!" said the student, looking at his chilled and angry face. "I am quite frozen. The nights are cold in September, but as soon as the sun rises it isn't cold. Shall we soon reach the station?"

The postman frowned and made a wry face.

"How fond you are of talking, upon my word!" he said. "Can't you keep quiet when you are travelling?"

The student was confused, and did not approach him again all the journey. The morning came on rapidly. The moon turned pale and melted away into the dull grey sky, the cloud turned yellow all over, the stars grew dim, but the east was still cold-looking and the same colour as the rest of the sky, so that one could hardly believe the sun was hidden in it.

The chill of the morning and the surliness of the postman gradually infected the student. He looked apathetically at the country around him, waited for the warmth of the sun, and

thought of nothing but how dreadful and horrible it must be for the poor trees and the grass to endure the cold nights. The sun rose dim, drowsy, and cold. The tree-tops were not gilded by the rays of the rising sun, as usually described, the sunbeams did not creep over the earth and there was no sign of joy in the flight of the sleepy birds. The cold remained just the same now that the sun was up as it had been in the night.

The student looked drowsily and ill-humouredly at the curtained windows of a mansion by which the mail cart drove. Behind those windows, he thought, people were most likely enjoying their soundest morning sleep not hearing the bells, nor feeling the cold, nor seeing the postman's angry face; and if the bell did wake some young lady, she would turn over on the other side, smile in the fulness of her warmth and comfort, and, drawing up her feet and putting her hand under her cheek, would go off to sleep more soundly than ever.

The student looked at the pond which gleamed near the house and thought of the carp and the pike which find it possible to live in cold water. . . .

"It's against the regulations to take anyone with the post. . . ." the postman said unexpectedly. "It's not allowed! And since it is not allowed, people have no business . . . to get in. . . . Yes. It makes no difference to me, it's true, only I don't like it, and I don't wish it."

"Why didn't you say so before, if you don't like it?"

The postman made no answer but still had an unfriendly, angry expression. When, a little later, the horses stopped at the entrance of the station the student thanked him and got out of the cart. The mail train had not yet come in. A long goods train stood in a siding; in the tender the engine driver and his assistant, with faces wet with dew, were drinking tea from a dirty tin teapot. The carriages, the platforms, the seats were all wet and cold. Until the train came in the student stood at the buffet drinking tea while the postman, with his hands thrust up his sleeves and the same look of anger still on his face, paced up and down the platform in solitude, staring at the ground under his feet.

With whom was he angry? Was it with people, with poverty, with the autumn nights?

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