

The Old House

Anton Chekhov

A Story told by a Houseowner

THE old house had to be pulled down that a new one might be built in its place. I led the architect through the empty rooms, and between our business talk told him various stories. The tattered wallpapers, the dingy windows, the dark stoves, all bore the traces of recent habitation and evoked memories. On that staircase, for instance, drunken men were once carrying down a dead body when they stumbled and flew headlong downstairs together with the coffin; the living were badly bruised, while the dead man looked very serious, as though nothing had happened, and shook his head when they lifted him up from the ground and put him back in the coffin. You see those three doors in a row: in there lived young ladies who were always receiving visitors, and so were better dressed than any other lodgers, and could pay their rent regularly. The door at the end of the corridor leads to the wash-house, where by day they washed clothes and at night made an uproar and drank beer. And in that flat of three rooms everything is saturated with bacteria and bacilli. It's not nice there. Many lodgers have died there, and I can positively assert that that flat was at some time cursed by someone, and that together with its human lodgers there was always another lodger, unseen, living in it. I remember particularly the fate of one family. Picture to yourself an ordinary man, not remarkable in any way, with a wife, a mother, and four children. His name was Putohin; he was a copying clerk at a notary's, and received thirty-five roubles a month. He was a sober, religious, serious man. When he brought me his rent for the flat he always apologised for being badly dressed; apologised for being five days late, and when I gave him a receipt he would smile good-humouredly and say: "Oh yes, there's that too, I don't like those receipts." He lived poorly but decently. In that middle room, the grandmother used to be with the four children; there they used to cook, sleep, receive their visitors, and even dance. This was Putohin's own room; he had a table in it, at which he used to work doing private jobs, copying parts for the theatre, advertisements, and so on. This room on the right was let to his lodger, Yegoritch, a locksmith -- a steady fellow, but given to drink; he was always too hot, and so used to go about in his waistcoat and barefoot. Yegoritch used to mend locks, pistols, children's bicycles, would not refuse to mend cheap clocks and make skates for a quarter-rouble, but he despised that work, and looked on himself as a specialist in musical instruments. Amongst the litter of steel and iron on his table there was always to be seen a concertina with a broken key, or a trumpet with its sides bent in. He paid Putohin two and a half roubles for his room; he was always at his work-table, and only came out to thrust some piece of iron into the stove.

On the rare occasions when I went into that flat in the evening, this was always the picture I came upon: Putohin would be sitting at his little table, copying something; his mother and his wife, a thin woman with an exhausted-looking face, were sitting near the lamp, sewing; Yegoritch would be making a rasping sound with his file. And the hot, still smouldering embers in the stove filled the room with heat and fumes; the heavy air smelt of cabbage soup, swaddling-clothes, and Yegoritch. It was poor and stuffy, but the working-class faces, the children's little drawers hung up along by the stove, Yegoritch's bits of iron had yet an air of peace, friendliness, content. . . . In the corridor outside the children raced about with well-combed heads, merry and profoundly convinced that everything was satisfactory in

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this world, and would be so endlessly, that one had only to say one's prayers every morning and at bedtime.

Now imagine in the midst of that same room, two paces from the stove, the coffin in which Putohin's wife is lying. There is no husband whose wife will live for ever, but there was something special about this death. When, during the requiem service, I glanced at the husband's grave face, at his stern eyes, I thought: "Oho, brother!"

It seemed to me that he himself, his children, the grandmother and Yegoritch, were already marked down by that unseen being which lived with them in that flat. I am a thoroughly superstitious man, perhaps, because I am a houseowner and for forty years have had to do with lodgers. I believe if you don't win at cards from the beginning you will go on losing to the end; when fate wants to wipe you and your family off the face of the earth, it remains inexorable in its persecution, and the first misfortune is commonly only the first of a long series. . . . Misfortunes are like stones. One stone has only to drop from a high cliff for others to be set rolling after it. In short, as I came away from the requiem service at Putohin's, I believed that he and his family were in a bad way.

And, in fact, a week afterwards the notary quite unexpectedly dismissed Putohin, and engaged a young lady in his place. And would you believe it, Putohin was not so much put out at the loss of his job as at being superseded by a young lady and not by a man. Why a young lady? He so resented this that on his return home he thrashed his children, swore at his mother, and got drunk. Yegoritch got drunk, too, to keep him company.

Putohin brought me the rent, but did not apologise this time, though it was eighteen days overdue, and said nothing when he took the receipt from me. The following month the rent was brought by his mother; she only brought me half, and promised to bring the remainder a week later. The third month, I did not get a farthing, and the porter complained to me that the lodgers in No. 23 were "not behaving like gentlemen."

These were ominous symptoms.

Picture this scene. A sombre Petersburg morning looks in at the dingy windows. By the stove, the granny is pouring out the children's tea. Only the eldest, Vassya, drinks out of a glass, for the others the tea is poured out into saucers. Yegoritch is squatting on his heels before the stove, thrusting a bit of iron into the fire. His head is heavy and his eyes are lustreless from yesterday's drinking-bout; he sighs and groans, trembles and coughs.

"He has quite put me off the right way, the devil," he grumbles; "he drinks himself and leads others into sin."

Putohin sits in his room, on the bedstead from which the bedclothes and the pillows have long ago disappeared, and with his hands straying in his hair looks blankly at the floor at his feet. He is tattered, unkempt, and ill.

"Drink it up, make haste or you will be late for school," the old woman urges on Vassya, "and it's time for me, too, to go and scrub the floors for the Jews. . . ."

The old woman is the only one in the flat who does not lose heart. She thinks of old times,

and goes out to hard dirty work. On Fridays she scrubs the floors for the Jews at the crockery shop, on Saturdays she goes out washing for shopkeepers, and on Sundays she is racing about the town from morning to night, trying to find ladies who will help her. Every day she has work of some sort; she washes and scrubs, and is by turns a midwife, a matchmaker, or a beggar. It is true she, too, is not disinclined to drown her sorrows, but even when she has had a drop she does not forget her duties. In Russia there are many such tough old women, and how much of its welfare rests upon them!

When he has finished his tea, Vassya packs up his books in a satchel and goes behind the stove; his greatcoat ought to be hanging there beside his granny's clothes. A minute later he comes out from behind the stove and asks:

"Where is my greatcoat?"

The grandmother and the other children look for the greatcoat together, they waste a long time in looking for it, but the greatcoat has utterly vanished. Where is it? The grandmother and Vassya are pale and frightened. Even Yegoritch is surprised. Putohin is the only one who does not move. Though he is quick to notice anything irregular or disorderly, this time he makes a pretence of hearing and seeing nothing. That is suspicious.

"He's sold it for drink," Yegoritch declares.

Putohin says nothing, so it is the truth. Vassya is overcome with horror. His greatcoat, his splendid greatcoat, made of his dead mother's cloth dress, with a splendid calico lining, gone for drink at the tavern! And with the greatcoat is gone too, of course, the blue pencil that lay in the pocket, and the note-book with "Nota bene" in gold letters on it! There's another pencil with india-rubber stuck into the note-book, and, besides that, there are transfer pictures lying in it.

Vassya would like to cry, but to cry is impossible. If his father, who has a headache, heard crying he would shout, stamp with his feet, and begin fighting, and after drinking he fights horribly. Granny would stand up for Vassya, and his father would strike granny too; it would end in Yegoritch getting mixed up in it too, clutching at his father and falling on the floor with him. The two would roll on the floor, struggling together and gasping with drunken animal fury, and granny would cry, the children would scream, the neighbours would send for the porter. No, better not cry.

Because he mustn't cry, or give vent to his indignation aloud, Vassya moans, wrings his hands and moves his legs convulsively, or biting his sleeve shakes it with his teeth as a dog does a hare. His eyes are frantic, and his face is distorted with despair. Looking at him, his granny all at once takes the shawl off her head, and she too makes queer movements with her arms and legs in silence, with her eyes fixed on a point in the distance. And at that moment I believe there is a definite certainty in the minds of the boy and the old woman that their life is ruined, that there is no hope. . . .

Putohin hears no crying, but he can see it all from his room. When, half an hour later, Vassya sets off to school, wrapped in his grandmother's shawl, he goes out with a face I will not undertake to describe, and walks after him. He longs to call the boy, to comfort him, to beg his forgiveness, to promise him on his word of honour, to call his dead mother to

witness, but instead of words, sobs break from him. It is a grey, cold morning. When he reaches the town school Vassya untwists his granny's shawl, and goes into the school with nothing over his jacket for fear the boys should say he looks like a woman. And when he gets home Putohin sobs, mutters some incoherent words, bows down to the ground before his mother and Yegoritch, and the locksmith's table. Then, recovering himself a little, he runs to me and begs me breathlessly, for God's sake, to find him some job. I give him hopes, of course.

"At last I am myself again," he said. "It's high time, indeed, to come to my senses. I've made a beast of myself, and now it's over."

He is delighted and thanks me, while I, who have studied these gentry thoroughly during the years I have owned the house, look at him, and am tempted to say:

"It's too late, dear fellow! You are a dead man already."

From me, Putohin runs to the town school. There he paces up and down, waiting till his boy comes out.

"I say, Vassya," he says joyfully, when the boy at last comes out, "I have just been promised a job. Wait a bit, I will buy you a splendid fur-coat. . . . I'll send you to the high school! Do you understand? To the high school! I'll make a gentleman of you! And I won't drink any more. On my honour I won't."

And he has intense faith in the bright future. But the evening comes on. The old woman, coming back from the Jews with twenty kopecks, exhausted and aching all over, sets to work to wash the children's clothes. Vassya is sitting doing a sum. Yegoritch is not working. Thanks to Putohin he has got into the way of drinking, and is feeling at the moment an overwhelming desire for drink. It's hot and stuffy in the room. Steam rises in clouds from the tub where the old woman is washing.

"Are we going?" Yegoritch asks surlily.

My lodger does not answer. After his excitement he feels insufferably dreary. He struggles with the desire to drink, with acute depression and . . . and, of course, depression gets the best of it. It is a familiar story.

Towards night, Yegoritch and Putohin go out, and in the morning Vassya cannot find granny's shawl.

That is the drama that took place in that flat. After selling the shawl for drink, Putohin did not come home again. Where he disappeared to I don't know. After he disappeared, the old woman first got drunk, then took to her bed. She was taken to the hospital, the younger children were fetched by relations of some sort, and Vassya went into the wash-house here. In the day-time he handed the irons, and at night fetched the beer. When he was turned out of the wash-house he went into the service of one of the young ladies, used to run about at night on errands of some sort, and began to be spoken of as "a dangerous customer."

What has happened to him since I don't know.

And in this room here a street musician lived for ten years. When he died they found twenty thousand roubles in his feather bed.

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