

In Trouble

Anton Chekhov

PYOTR SEMYONITCH, the bank manager, together with the book-keeper, his assistant, and two members of the board, were taken in the night to prison. The day after the upheaval the merchant Avdeyev, who was one of the committee of auditors, was sitting with his friends in the shop saying:

"So it is God's will, it seems. There is no escaping your fate. Here to-day we are eating caviare and to-morrow, for aught we know, it will be prison, beggary, or maybe death. Anything may happen. Take Pyotr Semyonitch, for instance. . . ."

He spoke, screwing up his drunken eyes, while his friends went on drinking, eating caviare, and listening. Having described the disgrace and helplessness of Pyotr Semyonitch, who only the day before had been powerful and respected by all, Avdeyev went on with a sigh:

"The tears of the mouse come back to the cat. Serve them right, the scoundrels! They could steal, the rooks, so let them answer for it!"

"You'd better look out, Ivan Danilitch, that you don't catch it too!" one of his friends observed.

"What has it to do with me?"

"Why, they were stealing, and what were you auditors thinking about? I'll be bound, you signed the audit."

"It's all very well to talk!" laughed Avdeyev: "Signed it, indeed! They used to bring the accounts to my shop and I signed them. As though I understood! Give me anything you like, I'll scrawl my name to it. If you were to write that I murdered someone I'd sign my name to it. I haven't time to go into it; besides, I can't see without my spectacles."

After discussing the failure of the bank and the fate of Pyotr Semyonitch, Avdeyev and his friends went to eat pie at the house of a friend whose wife was celebrating her name-day. At the name-day party everyone was discussing the bank failure. Avdeyev was more excited than anyone, and declared that he had long foreseen the crash and knew two years before that things were not quite right at the bank. While they were eating pie he described a dozen illegal operations which had come to his knowledge.

"If you knew, why did you not give information?" asked an officer who was present.

"I wasn't the only one: the whole town knew of it," laughed Avdeyev. "Besides, I haven't the time to hang about the law courts, damn them!"

He had a nap after the pie and then had dinner, then had another nap, then went to the evening service at the church of which he was a warden; after the service he went back to the name-day party and played preference till midnight. Everything seemed satisfactory.

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But when Avdeyev hurried home after midnight the cook, who opened the door to him, looked pale, and was trembling so violently that she could not utter a word. His wife, Elizaveta Trofimovna, a flabby, overfed woman, with her grey hair hanging loose, was sitting on the sofa in the drawing-room quivering all over, and vacantly rolling her eyes as though she were drunk. Her elder son, Vassily, a high-school boy, pale too, and extremely agitated, was fussing round her with a glass of water.

"What's the matter?" asked Avdeyev, and looked angrily sideways at the stove (his family was constantly being upset by the fumes from it).

"The examining magistrate has just been with the police," answered Vassily; "they've made a search."

Avdeyev looked round him. The cupboards, the chests, the tables -- everything bore traces of the recent search. For a minute Avdeyev stood motionless as though petrified, unable to understand; then his whole inside quivered and seemed to grow heavy, his left leg went numb, and, unable to endure his trembling, he lay down flat on the sofa. He felt his inside heaving and his rebellious left leg tapping against the back of the sofa.

In the course of two or three minutes he recalled the whole of his past, but could not remember any crime deserving of the attention of the police.

"It's all nonsense," he said, getting up. "They must have slandered me. To-morrow I must lodge a complaint of their having dared to do such a thing."

Next morning after a sleepless night Avdeyev, as usual, went to his shop. His customers brought him the news that during the night the public prosecutor had sent the deputy manager and the head-clerk to prison as well. This news did not disturb Avdeyev. He was convinced that he had been slandered, and that if he were to lodge a complaint to-day the examining magistrate would get into trouble for the search of the night before.

Between nine and ten o'clock he hurried to the town hall to see the secretary, who was the only educated man in the town council.

"Vladimir Stepanitch, what's this new fashion?" he said, bending down to the secretary's ear. "People have been stealing, but how do I come in? What has it to do with me? My dear fellow," he whispered, "there has been a search at my house last night! Upon my word! Have they gone crazy? Why touch me?"

"Because one shouldn't be a sheep," the secretary answered calmly. "Before you sign you ought to look."

"Look at what? But if I were to look at those accounts for a thousand years I could not make head or tail of them! It's all Greek to me! I am no book-keeper. They used to bring them to me and I signed them."

"Excuse me. Apart from that you and your committee are seriously compromised. You borrowed nineteen thousand from the bank, giving no security."

"Lord have mercy upon us!" cried Avdeyev in amazement. "I am not the only one in debt to the bank! The whole town owes it money. I pay the interest and I shall repay the debt. What next! And besides, to tell the honest truth, it wasn't I myself borrowed the money. Pyotr Semyonitch forced it upon me. 'Take it,' he said, 'take it. If you don't take it,' he said, 'it means that you don't trust us and fight shy of us. You take it,' he said, 'and build your father a mill.' So I took it."

"Well, you see, none but children or sheep can reason like that. In any case, signor, you need not be anxious. You can't escape trial, of course, but you are sure to be acquitted."

The secretary's indifference and calm tone restored Avdeyev's composure. Going back to his shop and finding friends there, he again began drinking, eating caviare, and airing his views. He almost forgot the police search, and he was only troubled by one circumstance which he could not help noticing: his left leg was strangely numb, and his stomach for some reason refused to do its work.

That evening destiny dealt another overwhelming blow at Avdeyev: at an extraordinary meeting of the town council all members who were on the staff of the bank, Avdeyev among them, were asked to resign, on the ground that they were charged with a criminal offence. In the morning he received a request to give up immediately his duties as churchwarden.

After that Avdeyev lost count of the blows dealt him by fate, and strange, unprecedented days flitted rapidly by, one after another, and every day brought some new, unexpected surprise. Among other things, the examining magistrate sent him a summons, and he returned home after the interview, insulted and red in the face.

"He gave me no peace, pestering me to tell him why I had signed. I signed, that's all about it. I didn't do it on purpose. They brought the papers to the shop and I signed them. I am no great hand at reading writing."

Young men with unconcerned faces arrived, sealed up the shop, and made an inventory of all the furniture of the house. Suspecting some intrigue behind this, and, as before, unconscious of any wrongdoing, Avdeyev in his mortification ran from one Government office to another lodging complaints. He spent hours together in waiting-rooms, composed long petitions, shed tears, swore. To his complaints the public prosecutor and the examining magistrate made the indifferent and rational reply: "Come to us when you are summoned: we have not time to attend to you now." While others answered: "It is not our business."

The secretary, an educated man, who, Avdeyev thought, might have helped him, merely shrugged his shoulders and said:

"It's your own fault. You shouldn't have been a sheep."

The old man exerted himself to the utmost, but his left leg was still numb, and his digestion was getting worse and worse. When he was weary of doing nothing and was getting poorer and poorer, he made up his mind to go to his father's mill, or to his brother, and begin dealing in corn. His family went to his father's and he was left alone. The days flitted by,

one after another. Without a family, without a shop, and without money, the former churchwarden, an honoured and respected man, spent whole days going the round of his friends' shops, drinking, eating, and listening to advice. In the mornings and in the evenings, to while away the time, he went to church. Looking for hours together at the ikons, he did not pray, but pondered. His conscience was clear, and he ascribed his position to mistake and misunderstanding; to his mind, it was all due to the fact that the officials and the examining magistrates were young men and inexperienced. It seemed to him that if he were to talk it over in detail and open his heart to some elderly judge, everything would go right again. He did not understand his judges, and he fancied they did not understand him.

The days raced by, and at last, after protracted, harassing delays, the day of the trial came. Avdeyev borrowed fifty roubles, and providing himself with spirit to rub on his leg and a decoction of herbs for his digestion, set off for the town where the circuit court was being held.

The trial lasted for ten days. Throughout the trial Avdeyev sat among his companions in misfortune with the stolid composure and dignity befitting a respectable and innocent man who is suffering for no fault of his own: he listened and did not understand a word. He was in an antagonistic mood. He was angry at being detained so long in the court, at being unable to get Lenten food anywhere, at his defending counsel's not understanding him, and, as he thought, saying the wrong thing. He thought that the judges did not understand their business. They took scarcely any notice of Avdeyev, they only addressed him once in three days, and the questions they put to him were of such a character that Avdeyev raised a laugh in the audience each time he answered them. When he tried to speak of the expenses he had incurred, of his losses, and of his meaning to claim his costs from the court, his counsel turned round and made an incomprehensible grimace, the public laughed, and the judge announced sternly that that had nothing to do with the case. The last words that he was allowed to say were not what his counsel had instructed him to say, but something quite different, which raised a laugh again.

During the terrible hour when the jury were consulting in their room he sat angrily in the refreshment bar, not thinking about the jury at all. He did not understand why they were so long deliberating when everything was so clear, and what they wanted of him.

Getting hungry, he asked the waiter to give him some cheap Lenten dish. For forty kopecks they gave him some cold fish and carrots. He ate it and felt at once as though the fish were heaving in a chilly lump in his stomach; it was followed by flatulence, heartburn, and pain.

Afterwards, as he listened to the foreman of the jury reading out the questions point by point, there was a regular revolution taking place in his inside, his whole body was bathed in a cold sweat, his left leg was numb; he did not follow, understood nothing, and suffered unbearably at not being able to sit or lie down while the foreman was reading. At last, when he and his companions were allowed to sit down, the public prosecutor got up and said something unintelligible, and all at once, as though they had sprung out of the earth, some police officers appeared on the scene with drawn swords and surrounded all the prisoners. Avdeyev was told to get up and go.

Now he understood that he was found guilty and in charge of the police, but he was not frightened nor amazed; such a turmoil was going on in his stomach that he could not think

about his guards.

"So they won't let us go back to the hotel?" he asked one of his companions. "But I have three roubles and an untouched quarter of a pound of tea in my room there."

He spent the night at the police station; all night he was aware of a loathing for fish, and was thinking about the three roubles and the quarter of a pound of tea. Early in the morning, when the sky was beginning to turn blue, he was told to dress and set off. Two soldiers with bayonets took him to prison. Never before had the streets of the town seemed to him so long and endless. He walked not on the pavement but in the middle of the road in the muddy, thawing snow. His inside was still at war with the fish, his left leg was numb; he had forgotten his goloshes either in the court or in the police station, and his feet felt frozen.

Five days later all the prisoners were brought before the court again to hear their sentence. Avdeyev learnt that he was sentenced to exile in the province of Tobolsk. And that did not frighten nor amaze him either. He fancied for some reason that the trial was not yet over, that there were more adjournments to come, and that the final decision had not been reached yet. . . . He went on in the prison expecting this final decision every day.

Only six months later, when his wife and his son Vassily came to say good-bye to him, and when in the wasted, wretchedly dressed old woman he scarcely recognized his once fat and dignified Elizaveta Trofimovna, and when he saw his son wearing a short, shabby reefer-jacket and cotton trousers instead of the high-school uniform, he realized that his fate was decided, and that whatever new "decision" there might be, his past would never come back to him. And for the first time since the trial and his imprisonment the angry expression left his face, and he wept bitterly.

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