

The Student  
Anton P. Chekhov  
Upbeat  
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*Editor's note: This short story by Chekhov has been translated from Russian into English by Vasily Lickwar, a theological student at St. Vladimir's Seminary in Crestwood, New York. Published in 1894 in Russian, it is one of Chekhov's best stories, showing his mastery in evoking an atmosphere and subtly conveying changes of mood. Though not a churchman himself, Chekhov was capable of showing sympathetically the religious approach to life.*

In the beginning the day was nice and peaceful. Thrushes were calling out and in the nearby bogs something was plaintively droning, sounding as if the air were blowing into a bottle. As a snipe flew over, a shot sounded out, rumbling after the bird in the spring air. But when darkness was starting to cover the forest, an unseasonable cold and piercing wind blew up out of the east. Icy needle-like lines stretched themselves out over the surfaces of puddles, and in the forest it was getting uncomfortable, remote and lonely. The air smelled of winter.

Ivan Velikopolsky, a student of the theological academy and the son of a reader was returning from a hunt, making his way down a path by the flooded meadow. His fingers suddenly began to get numb and his face was burning from the wind. It seemed to him that the suddenly invading cold was intruding in upon the harmony and order in everything and that nature herself was uneasy. Therefore, darkness was setting in more quickly than it had to. It was deserted all around and was somehow especially gloomy. There was only the glow from a fire that was burning in the widows' garden near the river. Otherwise, from about three miles all around the countryside, village, everything was sunk entirely into the cold evening gloom. The student remembered how, as he was leaving the house, his mother was sitting barefoot on the porch steps, polishing the samovar and how his father was lying on the stove and coughing. There was nothing to eat at home because it was Great Friday, and the temptation to eat was painful.

As the cold was making him tremble, the student thought how during the times of Rurik, Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great, there must have been this same fierce poverty and hunger, these same leaking thatched roofs, the same ignorance and anxiety, the same emptiness all around, the gloom and the feeling of oppression. All these very horrors were, are and will be...another thousand years would pass, yet life would still not be any better. He wanted to go home.

The garden was called the widows' garden because it was kept by two widows, a mother and her daughter. The fire crackled, and it poured off heat, lighting up the tilled earth all around it. The widow Vasilissa, a tall, plump old woman wearing a man's cut-off sheepskin coat was standing near, gazing thoughtfully into the fire. Her daughter Lukerya, small, pockmarked, with a somewhat stupid face, sat on the ground washing a pot and some spoons. Obviously they had just finished supper. Suddenly, men's voices

could be heard; they belonged to some local workers who were watering down their horses along the river.

“Well, so winter’s back again,” said the student as he made his way up to the fire.

Vasilissa was startled at first, but then she recognized him and smiled invitingly.

“I didn’t recognize you! God be with you!”

They talked a bit. Vasilissa was a wise old woman who had worked as a wet nurse and guardian for some landowner’s children. She expressed herself delicately, and her soft, sober smile never left her face. Her daughter Lukerya, a country woman, down-trodden and abused by her husband, only motioned to the student by dropping her eyelids slightly and kept silent. Her expression was strange; it was as if she were a deaf-mute.

“And it was exactly during this same kind of cold night that the Apostle Peter was warming himself at a fire,” said the student while extending his hands toward the fire. “It was cold then too. What a terrible night that must have been, an exceedingly cold, despondent and long night.”

He looked around at the darkness, jerked his head and asked, “Did you go to hear the Twelve Gospels?”

“I was there,” Vasilissa answered.

“Remember how during the evening supper Peter told Jesus, ‘Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death’? But with that the Lord said to him, ‘I tell you, Peter, the cock (that’s a rooster) will not crow this day, until you three times deny that you know me.’ After that supper Jesus mortally pined and prayed in the garden. But Peter, so depressed and strengthless, couldn’t overcome sleep no matter what he did. So, closing his heavy eyelids, he slept. Then you heard how in that same night Judas kissed Jesus and then gave Him over to tormentors. They led Him, bound, to the high priest and beat Him. But Peter, exhausted and weary from anxiety and misery...you understand, he did not have enough sleep...had a feeling that something horrible would happen on earth that night when they took Jesus, so he followed behind. Peter loved Jesus with a passion, even to the point of his own distraction, and now he watched from a distance as they were beating him.”

Lukerya put aside the forks and directed an immovable gaze upon the student.

“Then came the high priest,” he continued, “and they began to interrogate Jesus. At that moment the workers started a fire in the courtyard to warm themselves by because it was cold. Also standing at the fire and warming himself was Peter, just as I’m doing now. One woman who noticed Peter there said, “That one over there was with Jesus too.” She was trying to say that he should also be interrogated. All the workers who were standing around the fire glared at him sternly and suspiciously. Peter became uneasy and said, ‘I don’t know Him!’ After hesitating for a moment someone recognized him as one of Jesus’ followers and said, ‘Aren’t you one of them?’ But he denied it. A third time

someone turned to him and said, 'Didn't I see you with Him today in the garden?' He denied it a third time. Immediately a rooster crowed, and during that same moment Peter caught a glance of Jesus in the distance. The words said to him by the Lord at supper that evening came to mind. As he remembered, he roused himself and left the courtyard. He broke-down into a very bitter weeping. In the Gospel it says 'And he went out and wept bitterly.' I can imagine a very still and very dark garden where in the quiet there can be heard, just barely, lonely sobbing."

The student gave up a sigh and then sank into deep thought. Vasilissa's smile faded into a sob, and large tears dripped down her cheeks. With her hands she shielded her face from the fire as if she were ashamed of her tears. But Lukerya, still immovably staring at the student, flushed and her expression became burdened and strained like that of a person holding back great pain.

The workers were returning from the river. One of them, riding a horse, came close by so that the glare of the fire flickered on him. The student wished the widows a good night and then went on his way. By then, it had become even darker. His hands were feeling quite numb again from the chill. A cruel wind was blowing; winter had indeed returned. One could barely believe that the day father tomorrow would be Easter.

The student, though, continued to think about Vasilissa. If she began to cry it must mean that all those experiences which were lived by Peter on that terrible night have some significance for her. He looked around. The lonely fire blinked in the darkness, and next to it some people could be seen. The student thought again about Vasilissa's crying and her daughter's uneasiness. Obviously what he told the widows about those events of twenty centuries ago has some relationship to the present...to both those women, probably to that deserted village, to himself, and to all people. If the old woman began to cry it wasn't because he knew how to tell a story dramatically, but because Peter is close to her and, because she, with her whole being, was able to feel what went on in Peter's heart.

Suddenly joy stirred in his spirit. He even stood still momentarily to catch his breath. The past, he thought, is joined to the present by an unbroken chain of events, proceeding one out of the other. It seemed to him that he had just seen both ends of that chain. As he shook one end of the chain he was able to touch the other.

The student crossed over to the other side of the river by ferry and then ascended a hill and looked to his native village, in the west, where the sunset's cold blood-red glow stretched in a narrow band across the edge of the horizon. He thought that the truth and beauty which guided human life there in the garden and in the courtyard of the high priest continued without interruption to this very day. Evidently they have always composed the ultimate of human existence, especially on earth. The feeling of youth, health strength (he was only twenty-two years old) and an inexpressibly sweet expectation of an unknown and mysterious happiness overtook him little by little...life then seemed to him to be ecstatic, miraculous and full of lofty meaning.