

1 DIFFICULT PEOPLE
2 A SHORT STORY FROM THE TALES OF CHEKHOV

3
4 THE WIFE AND OTHER STORIES

5
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10
11 YEVGRAF IVANOVITCH SHIRYAEV, a small farmer, whose father,
12 a parish priest, now deceased, had received a gift of three
13 hundred acres of land from Madame Kuvshinnikov, a general's
14 widow, was standing in a corner before a copper washing-
15 stand, washing his hands. As usual, his face looked anxious
16 and ill-humoured, and his beard was uncombed.

17
18 "What weather!" he said. "It's not weather, but a curse
19 laid upon us. It's raining again!" He grumbled on, while
20 his family sat waiting at table for him to have finished
21 washing his hands before beginning dinner. Fedosya
22 Semyonovna, his wife, his son Pyotr, a student, his eldest
23 daughter Varvara, and three small boys, had been sitting
24 waiting a long time. The boys -- Kolka, Vanka, and Arhipka
25 -- grubby, snub-nosed little fellows with chubby faces and
26 tousled hair that wanted cutting, moved their chairs
27 impatiently, while their elders sat without stirring, and
28 apparently did not care whether they ate their dinner or
29 waited. . . .

30
31

32 As though trying their patience, Shiryaev deliberately
33 dried his hands, deliberately said his prayer, and sat down
34 to the table without hurrying himself. Cabbage-soup was
35 served immediately. The sound of carpenters' axes (Shiryaev
36 was having a new barn built) and the laughter of Fomka,
37 their labourer, teasing the turkey, floated in from the
38 courtyard.

39

40 Big, sparse drops of rain pattered on the window.

41

42 Pyotr, a round-shouldered student in spectacles, kept
43 exchanging glances with his mother as he ate his dinner.
44 Several times he laid down his spoon and cleared his
45 throat, meaning to begin to speak, but after an intent look
46 at his father he fell to eating again. At last, when the
47 porridge had been served, he cleared his throat resolutely
48 and said:

49

50 "I ought to go tonight by the evening train. I out to have
51 gone before; I have missed a fortnight as it is. The
52 lectures begin on the first of September."

53

54 "Well, go," Shiryaev assented; "why are you lingering on
55 here? Pack up and go, and good luck to you."

56

57 A minute passed in silence.

58

59 "He must have money for the journey, Yevgraf Ivanovitch,"
60 the mother observed in a low voice.

61

62 "Money? To be sure, you can't go without money. Take it at
63 once, since you need it. You could have had it long ago!"

64

65 The student heaved a faint sigh and looked with relief at
66 his mother. Deliberately Shiryaev took a pocket-book out of
67 his coat-pocket and put on his spectacles.

68

69 "How much do you want?" he asked.

70

71 "The fare to Moscow is eleven roubles forty-two kopecks. .
72 . ."

73

74 "Ah, money, money!" sighed the father. (He always sighed
75 when he saw money, even when he was receiving it.) "Here
76 are twelve roubles for you. You will have change out of
77 that which will be of use to you on the journey."

78

79 "Thank you."

80

81 After waiting a little, the student said:

82

83 "I did not get lessons quite at first last year. I don't
84 know how it will be this year; most likely it will take me
85 a little time to find work. I ought to ask you for fifteen
86 roubles for my lodging and dinner."

87

88 Shiryaev thought a little and heaved a sigh.

89

90 "You will have to make ten do," he said. "Here, take it."

91

92 The student thanked him. He ought to have asked him for
93 something more, for clothes, for lecture fees, for books,
94 but after an intent look at his father he decided not to
95 pester him further.

96

97 The mother, lacking in diplomacy and prudence, like all
98 mothers, could not restrain herself, and said:

99

100 "You ought to give him another six roubles, Yevgraf
101 Ivanovitch, for a pair of boots. Why, just see, how can he
102 go to Moscow in such wrecks?"

103

104 "Let him take my old ones; they are still quite good."

105

106 "He must have trousers, anyway; he is a disgrace to look
107 at."

108

109 And immediately after that a storm-signal showed itself, at
110 the sight of which all the family trembled.

111

112 Shiryaev's short, fat neck turned suddenly red as a
113 beetroot. The colour mounted slowly to his ears, from his
114 ears to his temples, and by degrees suffused his whole
115 face. Yevgraf Ivanovitch shifted in his chair and
116 unbuttoned his shirt-collar to save himself from choking.
117 He was evidently struggling with the feeling that was
118 mastering him. A deathlike silence followed. The children
119 held their breath. Fedosya Semyonovna, as though she did
120 not grasp what was happening to her husband, went on:

121

122 "He is not a little boy now, you know; he is ashamed to go
123 about without clothes."

124

125

126

127

128 Shiryaev suddenly jumped up, and with all his might flung
129 down his fat pocket-book in the middle of the table, so
130 that a hunk of bread flew off a plate. A revolting
131 expression of anger, resentment, avarice -- all mixed
132 together -- flamed on his face.

133

134 "Take everything!" he shouted in an unnatural voice;
135 "plunder me! Take it all! Strangle me!"

136

137 He jumped up from the table, clutched at his head, and ran
138 staggering about the room.

139

140 "Strip me to the last thread!" he shouted in a shrill
141 voice. "Squeeze out the last drop! Rob me! Wring my neck!"

142

143 The student flushed and dropped his eyes. He could not go
144 on eating. Fedosya Semyonovna, who had not after twenty-
145 five years grown used to her husband's difficult character,
146 shrank into herself and muttered something in self-defence.
147 An expression of amazement and dull terror came into her
148 wasted and birdlike face, which at all times looked dull
149 and scared. The little boys and the elder daughter Varvara,
150 a girl in her teens, with a pale ugly face, laid down their
151 spoons and sat mute.

152

153 Shiryaev, growing more and more ferocious, uttering words
154 each more terrible than the one before, dashed up to the
155 table and began shaking the notes out of his pocket-book.

156

157 "Take them!" he muttered, shaking all over. "You've eaten
158 and drunk your fill, so here's money for you too! I need
159 nothing! Order yourself new boots and uniforms!"

160

161 The student turned pale and got up.

162

163 "Listen, papa," he began, gasping for breath. "I . . . I
164 beg you to end this, for . . ."

165

166 "Hold your tongue!" the father shouted at him, and so
167 loudly that the spectacles fell off his nose; "hold your
168 tongue!"

169

170 "I used . . . I used to be able to put up with such scenes,
171 but . . . but now I have got out of the way of it. Do you
172 understand? I have got out of the way of it!"

173

174 "Hold your tongue!" cried the father, and he stamped with
175 his feet. "You must listen to what I say! I shall say what
176 I like, and you hold your tongue. At your age I was earning
177 my living, while you . . . Do you know what you cost me,
178 you scoundrel? I'll turn you out! Wastrel!"

179

180 "Yevgraf Ivanovitch," muttered Fedosya Semyonovna, moving
181 her fingers nervously; "you know he. . . you know Petya . .
182 . !"

183

184 "Hold your tongue!" Shiryaev shouted out to her, and tears
185 actually came into his eyes from anger. "It is you who have
186 spoilt them -- you! It's all your fault! He has no respect
187 for us, does not say his prayers, and earns nothing! I am
188 only one against the ten of you! I'll turn you out of the
189 house!"

190

191 The daughter Varvara gazed fixedly at her mother with her
192 mouth open, moved her vacant-looking eyes to the window,
193 turned pale, and, uttering a loud shriek, fell back in her
194 chair. The father, with a curse and a wave of the hand, ran
195 out into the yard.

196

197 This was how domestic scenes usually ended at the
198 Shiryaevs'. But on this occasion, unfortunately, Pyotr the
199 student was carried away by overmastering anger. He was
200 just as hasty and ill-tempered as his father and his
201 grandfather the priest, who used to beat his parishioners
202 about the head with a stick. Pale and clenching his fists,
203 he went up to his mother and shouted in the very highest
204 tenor note his voice could reach:

205

206 "These reproaches are loathsome! sickening to me! I want
207 nothing from you! Nothing! I would rather die of hunger
208 than eat another mouthful at your expense! Take your nasty
209 money back! take it!"

210

211 The mother huddled against the wall and waved her hands, as
212 though it were not her son, but some phantom before her.

213 "What have I done?" she wailed. "What?"

214

215 Like his father, the boy waved his hands and ran into the
216 yard. Shiryaev's house stood alone on a ravine which ran
217 like a furrow for four miles along the steppe. Its sides
218 were overgrown with oak saplings and alders, and a stream
219 ran at the bottom. On one side the house looked towards the
220 ravine, on the other towards the open country, there were
221 no fences nor hurdles.

222

223 Instead there were farm-buildings of all sorts close to one
224 another, shutting in a small space in front of the house
225 which was regarded as the yard, and in which hens, ducks,
226 and pigs ran about.

227

228 Going out of the house, the student walked along the muddy
229 road towards the open country. The air was full of a
230 penetrating autumn dampness. The road was muddy, puddles
231 gleamed here and there, and in the yellow fields autumn
232 itself seemed looking out from the grass, dismal, decaying,
233 dark. On the right-hand side of the road was a vegetable-
234 garden cleared of its crops and gloomy-looking, with here
235 and there sunflowers standing up in it with hanging heads
236 already black.

237

238 Pyotr thought it would not be a bad thing to walk to Moscow
239 on foot; to walk just as he was, with holes in his boots,
240 without a cap, and without a farthing of money. When he had
241 gone eighty miles his father, frightened and aghast, would
242 overtake him, would begin begging him to turn back or take
243 the money, but he would not even look at him, but would go
244 on and on. . . . Bare forests would be followed by desolate
245 fields, fields by forests again; soon the earth would be
246 white with the first snow, and the streams would be coated
247 with ice. . . .

248

249 Somewhere near Kursk or near Serpuhovo, exhausted and dying
250 of hunger, he would sink down and die. His corpse would be
251 found, and there would be a paragraph in all the papers
252 saying that a student called Shiryaev had died of hunger. .

253 . .

254

255 A white dog with a muddy tail who was wandering about the
256 vegetable-garden looking for something gazed at him and
257 sauntered after him.

258

259 He walked along the road and thought of death, of the grief
260 of his family, of the moral sufferings of his father, and
261 then pictured all sorts of adventures on the road, each
262 more marvellous than the one before -- picturesque places,
263 terrible nights, chance encounters. He imagined a string of
264 pilgrims, a hut in the forest with one little window
265 shining in the darkness; he stands before the window, begs
266 for a night's lodging. . . . They let him in, and suddenly
267 he sees that they are robbers. Or, better still, he is
268 taken into a big manor-house, where, learning who he is,
269 they give him food and drink, play to him on the piano,
270 listen to his complaints, and the daughter of the house, a
271 beauty, falls in love with him.

272

273 Absorbed in his bitterness and such thoughts, young
274 Shiryaev walked on and on. Far, far ahead he saw the inn, a
275 dark patch against the grey background of cloud. Beyond the
276 inn, on the very horizon, he could see a little hillock;
277 this was the railway-station. That hillock reminded him of
278 the connection existing between the place where he was now
279 standing and Moscow, where street-lamps were burning and
280 carriages were rattling in the streets, where lectures were
281 being given. And he almost wept with depression and
282 impatience. The solemn landscape, with its order and
283 beauty, the deathlike stillness all around, revolted him
284 and moved him to despair and hatred!

285

286 "Look out!" He heard behind him a loud voice. An old
287 lady of his acquaintance, a landowner of the neighbourhood,
288 drove past him in a light, elegant landau. He bowed to her,
289 and smiled all over his face. And at once he caught himself
290 in that smile, which was so out of keeping with his gloomy
291 mood. Where did it come from if his whole heart was full of
292 vexation and misery? And he thought nature itself had given
293 man this capacity for lying, that even in difficult moments
294 of spiritual strain he might be able to hide the secrets of
295 his nest as the fox and the wild duck do. Every family has
296 its joys and its horrors, but however great they may be,
297 it's hard for an outsider's eye to see them; they are a
298 secret. The father of the old lady who had just driven by,
299 for instance, had for some offence lain for half his
300 lifetime under the ban of the wrath of Tsar Nicolas I.; her
301 husband had been a gambler; of her four sons, not one had
302 turned out well. One could imagine how many terrible scenes
303 there must have been in her life, how many tears must have
304 been shed. And yet the old lady seemed happy and satisfied,
305 and she had answered his smile by smiling too. The student
306 thought of his comrades, who did not like talking about
307 their families; he thought of his mother, who almost always
308 lied when she had to speak of her husband and children. . .

309
310 Pyotr walked about the roads far from home till dusk,
311 abandoning himself to dreary thoughts. When it began to
312 drizzle with rain he turned homewards. As he walked back he
313 made up his mind at all costs to talk to his father, to
314 explain to him, once and for all, that it was dreadful and
315 oppressive to live with him.

316

317 He found perfect stillness in the house. His sister Varvara
318 was lying behind a screen with a headache, moaning faintly.
319 His mother, with a look of amazement and guilt upon her
320 face, was sitting beside her on a box, mending Arhipka's
321 trousers. Yevgraf Ivanovitch was pacing from one window to
322 another, scowling at the weather. From his walk, from the
323 way he cleared his throat, and even from the back of his
324 head, it was evident he felt himself to blame.

325

326 "I suppose you have changed your mind about going today?"
327 he asked.

328

329 The student felt sorry for him, but immediately suppressing
330 that feeling, he said:

331

332 "Listen . . . I must speak to you seriously. . . yes,
333 seriously. I have always respected you, and . . . and have
334 never brought myself to speak to you in such a tone, but
335 your behaviour . . . your last action . . ."

336

337 The father looked out of the window and did not speak. The
338 student, as though considering his words, rubbed his
339 forehead and went on in great excitement:

340

341 "Not a dinner or tea passes without your making an uproar.
342 Your bread sticks in our throat. . . nothing is more
343 bitter, more humiliating, than bread that sticks in one's
344 throat. . . . Though you are my father, no one, neither God
345 nor nature, has given you the right to insult and humiliate
346 us so horribly, to vent your ill-humour on the weak. You
347 have worn my mother out and made a slave of her, my sister
348 is hopelessly crushed, while I . . ."

349

350 "It's not your business to teach me," said his father.

351

352 "Yes, it is my business! You can quarrel with me as much as
353 you like, but leave my mother in peace! I will not allow
354 you to torment my mother!" the student went on, with
355 flashing eyes. "You are spoilt because no one has yet dared
356 to oppose you. They tremble and are mute towards you, but
357 now that is over! Coarse, ill-bred man! You are coarse . .
358 . do you understand? You are coarse, ill-humoured,
359 unfeeling. And the peasants can't endure you!"

360

361 The student had by now lost his thread, and was not so much
362 speaking as firing off detached words. Yevgraf Ivanovitch
363 listened in silence, as though stunned; but suddenly his
364 neck turned crimson, the colour crept up his face, and he
365 made a movement.

366

367 "Hold your tongue!" he shouted.

368

369 "That's right!" the son persisted; "you don't like to hear
370 the truth! Excellent! Very good! begin shouting!
371 Excellent!"

372

373 "Hold your tongue, I tell you!" roared Yevgraf Ivanovitch.

374

375 Fedosya Semyonovna appeared in the doorway, very pale, with
376 an astonished face; she tried to say something, but she
377 could not, and could only move her fingers. "It's all your
378 fault!" Shiryaev shouted at her. "You have brought him up
379 like this!"

380

381 "I don't want to go on living in this house!" shouted the
382 student, crying, and looking angrily at his mother. "I
383 don't want to live with you!"

384

385 Varvara uttered a shriek behind the screen and broke into
386 loud sobs. With a wave of his hand, Shiryaev ran out of the
387 house. The student went to his own room and quietly lay
388 down. He lay till midnight without moving or opening his
389 eyes. He felt neither anger nor shame, but a vague ache in
390 his soul. He neither blamed his father nor pitied his
391 mother, nor was he tormented by stings of conscience; he
392 realized that every one in the house was feeling the same
393 ache, and God only knew which was most to blame, which was
394 suffering most. . . .

395

396 At midnight he woke the labourer, and told him to have the
397 horse ready at five o'clock in the morning for him to drive
398 to the station; he undressed and got into bed, but could
399 not get to sleep. He heard how his father, still awake,
400 paced slowly from window to window, sighing, till early
401 morning. No one was asleep; they spoke rarely, and only in
402 whispers. Twice his mother came to him behind the screen.
403 Always with the same look of vacant wonder, she slowly made
404 the cross over him, shaking nervously.

405

406 At five o'clock in the morning he said good-bye to them all
407 affectionately, and even shed tears. As he passed his
408 father's room, he glanced in at the door. Yevgraf
409 Ivanovitch, who had not taken off his clothes or gone to
410 bed, was standing by the window, drumming on the panes.

411

412 "Good-bye; I am going," said his son.

413

414 "Good-bye . . . the money is on the round table . . ." his
415 father answered, without turning round.

416

417 A cold, hateful rain was falling as the labourer drove him
418 to the station. The sunflowers were drooping their heads
419 still lower, and the grass seemed darker than ever.