

Short Stories
Difficult People
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Yevgraf Ivanovitch Shiryaev, a small farmer, whose father, a parish priest, now deceased, had received a gift of three hundred acres of land from Madame Kuvshinnikov, a general's widow, was standing in a corner before a copper washing-stand, washing his hands. As usual, his face looked anxious and ill-humoured, and his beard was uncombed.

“What weather!” he said. “It’s not weather, but a curse laid upon us. It’s raining again!”

He grumbled on, while his family sat waiting at table for him to have finished washing his hands before beginning dinner. Fedosya Semyonovna, his wife, his son Pyotr, a student, his eldest daughter Varvara, and three small boys, had been sitting waiting a long time. The boys—Kolka, Vanka, and Arhipka—grubby, snub-nosed little fellows with chubby faces and tousled hair that wanted cutting, moved their chairs impatiently, while their elders sat without stirring, and apparently did not care whether they ate their dinner or waited....

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

Big, sparse drops of rain pattered on the window.

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

“I ought to go tonight by the evening train. I ought to have gone before; I have missed a fortnight as it is. The lectures begin on the first of September.”

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

A minute passed in silence.

“He must have money for the journey, Yevgraf Ivanovitch,” the mother observed in a low voice.

“Money? To be sure, you can’t go without money. Take it at once, since you need it. You could have had it long ago!”

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

“How much do you want?” he asked.

“The fare to Moscow is eleven roubles forty-two kopecks....”

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

“Thank you.”

After waiting a little, the student said:

“I did not get lessons quite at first last year. I don’t know how it will be this year; most likely it will take me a little time to find work. I ought to ask you for fifteen roubles for my lodgings and dinner.”

Shiryaev thought a little and heaved a sigh.

“You will have to make ten do,” he said. “Here, take it.”

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

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

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

“Let him take my old ones; they are still quite good.”

“He must have trousers, anyway; he is a disgrace to look at.”

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

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

“He is not a little boy now, you know; he is ashamed to go about without clothes.”

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

“Take everything!” he shouted in an unnatural voice; “plunder me! Take it all! Strangle me!”

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

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

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

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

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

The student turned pale and got up.

“Listen, papa,” he began, gasping for breath. “I... I beg you to end this, for...”

“Hold your tongue!” the father shouted at him, and so loudly that the spectacles fell off his nose; “hold your tongue!”

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

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

“Yevgraf Ivanovitch,” muttered Fedosya Semyonovna, moving her fingers nervously; “you know he... you know Petya...!”

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

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

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

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

The mother huddled against the wall and waved her hands, as though it were not her son, but some phantom before her. “What have I done?” she wailed. “What?”

Like his father, the boy waved his hands and ran into the yard. Shiryaev’s house stood alone on a ravine which ran like a furrow for four miles along the steppe. Its sides were overgrown with oak saplings and alders, and a stream ran at the bottom. On one side the house looked towards the ravine, on the other towards the open country, there were no fences nor hurdles. Instead there were farm-buildings of all sorts close to one another, shutting in a small space in front of the house which was regarded as the yard, and in which hens, ducks, and pigs ran about.

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

Pyotr thought it would not be a bad thing to walk to Moscow on foot; to walk just as he was, with holes in his boots, without a cap, and without a farthing of money. When he had gone eighty miles his father, frightened and aghast, would overtake him, would begin begging him to turn back or take the money, but he would not even look at him, but would go on and on.... Bare forests would be followed by desolate fields, fields by forests again; soon the earth would be white with the first snow, and the streams would be coated with ice.... Somewhere near Kursk or near Serpuhovo, exhausted and dying of hunger, he would sink down and die. His corpse would be found, and there would be a paragraph in all the papers saying that a student called Shiryaev had died of hunger....

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

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

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

“Look out!” He heard behind him a loud voice.

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

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

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

“I suppose you have changed your mind about going today?” he asked.

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

“Listen... I must speak to you seriously... yes, seriously. I have always respected you, and... and have never brought myself to speak to you in such a tone, but your behaviour... your last action...”

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

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

“It’s not your business to teach me,” said his father.

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

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

“Hold your tongue!” he shouted.

“That’s right!” the son persisted; “you don’t like to hear the truth! Excellent! Very good! begin shouting! Excellent!”

“Hold your tongue, I tell you!” roared Yevgraf Ivanovitch.

Fedosya Semyonovna appeared in the doorway, very pale, with an astonished face; she tried to say something, but she could not, and could only move her fingers.

“It’s all your fault!” Shiryaev shouted at her. “You have brought him up like this!”

“I don’t want to go on living in this house!” shouted the student, crying, and looking angrily at his mother. “I don’t want to live with you!”

Varvara uttered a shriek behind the screen and broke into loud sobs. With a wave of his hand, Shiryaev ran out of the house.

The student went to his own room and quietly lay down. He lay till midnight without moving or opening his eyes. He felt neither anger nor shame, but a vague ache in his soul. He neither blamed his father nor pitied his mother, nor was he tormented by stings of conscience; he realized that every one in the house was feeling the same ache, and God only knew which was most to blame, which was suffering most....

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

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

“Good-bye; I am going,” said his son.

“Good-bye... the money is on the round table...” his father answered, without turning round.

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

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