

Contents

Introduction	III
Small Fry and Other Stories	I
<i>Table of Ranks</i>	2
An Incident with a Classicist	3
The Enquiry	6
Surgery	9
Sorrow	13
The Lion and the Sun	19
Triumph of the Victor	24
The Lost Cause	28
The Chemist's Wife	33
The Album	39
The Country Dwellers	42
The Intelligent Watchman	44
At Christmas Time	47
The Decoration	53
The Comedy Sketch	57
The Civil-Service Exam	61
Truth Will Out	65
Ladies	70
Small Fry	74
Zakuska	78
The Mesmeric Seance	81
At the Council Meeting	84
The Zealot	88
The Discovery	90
Longing for Sleep	94
The Idler and the Young Lady	101
Up the Staircase	104

The Holiday Obligation	106
A Somebody	110
A Blunder	114
A Tale Hard to Entitle	117
The Delegate	119
Without Work	123
Conversation of a Man with a Dog	128
Two in One	131
Joy	134
The Naive Wood Goblin	137
The Wicked Boy	140
The Chameleon	143
The Tutor	147
Sergeant Prishibeyev	151
Vanka	156
From the Diary of an Assistant Bookkeeper	161
Vint	164
The Cat	168
Reading	172
She Left Him	176
The Absolute Truth	178
The Rebel	180
Women's Privileges	185
New Year's Great Martyrs	189
<i>Notes</i>	193
Extra Material	199
<i>Anton Chekhov's Life</i>	201
<i>Anton Chekhov's Works</i>	212
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	220

*Small Fry
and Other Stories*

Table of Ranks

<i>Civil Service</i>	<i>Military</i>	<i>Court</i>
1) Chancellor	Field Marshal/ Admiral	
2) Active Privy Councillor	General	Chief Chamberlain
3) Privy Councillor	Lieutenant General	Marshal of the House
4) Active State Councillor	Major General	Chamberlain
5) State Councillor	Brigadier	Master of Ceremonies
6) Collegiate Councillor	Colonel	Chamber Fourrier
7) Court Councillor	Lieutenant Colonel	
8) Collegiate Assessor	Major	House Fourrier
9) Titular Councillor	Staff Captain	
10) Collegiate Secretary	Lieutenant	
11) Ship Secretary*	<i>Kammerjunker</i>	
12) Government Secretary	Sub-Lieutenant	
13) Provincial Secretary*		
14) Collegiate Registrar	Senior Ensign	

* (*abolished in 1834*)

An Incident with a Classicist

PREPARING TO GO to a Greek-language exam, Vanya Ottepyelev kissed all the icons. His stomach was churning, and he felt a coldness in his chest. His heart would pound and then stand still from fear of the unknown. What would happen to him today? Would he get a three, or a two? He went to his mother six times for her blessing, and on leaving asked his aunt to pray for him. On his way to school he gave two copecks to a beggar, in the hope that these two copecks would compensate for his ignorance and that, God grant, numerals with *tessarakonta* and *oktokaideka** would not turn up.

He returned from school late, at five o'clock. He arrived and lay down quietly. His gaunt face was pale. There were dark circles under his reddened eyes.

"Well, what happened? How did it go? What did you get?" asked his mother, approaching the bed.

Vanya blinked, twisted his mouth to one side and started to cry. His mother grew pale, opened her mouth and threw up her hands. The short trousers that she had been mending fell from her hands.

"Why on earth are you crying? Didn't you pass, then?" she asked.

"I... I failed. I got a two."

"I knew it! I had a presentiment!" cried his mother. "Oh, Lord! How is it that you didn't pass? Why? On what subject?"

"On Greek... I, Mama... I was asked the future of *fero*, and instead of saying *oisomai* I said *opsomai*. Then... then... a secondary accent is not placed if the last syllable is long, and I... I was hesitant... I forgot that *alpha* in this case was long... so I added an accent. Then Artakserkov told me to enumerate the enclitic particles... I was enumerating them and accidentally introduced a pronoun... I made a mistake... He gave me a two... I was just... unlucky... I studied all night... All this week I was getting up at four o'clock..."

“No, it is not you, but I who am unlucky, wretched boy! I am the unlucky one! I am skin and bones because of you – you persecutor, tormentor, my evil fate! I am paying for you – rubbish, useless boy that you are. I am breaking my back, torturing myself, and, I have to tell you, I am suffering. And what do you care? How do you study?”

“I... I study. All night... You yourself saw...”

“I was praying to God that he send me death, but he doesn’t – to the sinner... You are my tormentor! Others have children as children ought to be, but I have one and only one and he gives me no help, has no ambition. Should I beat you? I would beat you, but where on earth would I get the strength? Where, oh where, Mother of God, would I get the strength?”

His mother covered her face with the flap of her blouse and began to sob. Vanya writhed in misery and pressed his forehead to the wall. His aunt entered.

“Well, so... I had a foreboding,” she said, having guessed at once what had happened; she went pale and threw up her hands. “All morning I have been feeling sad... Well, well, I thought there would be some misfortune... and so there has been...”

“My wretched boy, tormentor,” said his mother.

“Why are you cursing him?” his aunt challenged her, nervously pulling from her head a little coffee-coloured kerchief. “Is he to blame? You are the one to blame! You! Why did you send him to that school? What sort of nobility are you? Or are you trying to enter the nobility? Ah, so you think you will be accepted as a member of the nobility! But it would be better, as I have said, to apprentice him to some trade, to some office, like my Kuzya. You know, Kuzya makes five hundred a year. Five hundred – is that a joke? You tortured yourself, and you tortured the boy with this learning, the devil take it. He is thin, he coughs... look: he is thirteen but looks like a ten-year-old.”

“No, Nastyenka, no, my dear! I didn’t beat him enough, my tormentor! I should have beaten him, that’s all there is to it. Oh... Jesuit, infidel, my tormentor!” She drew herself threateningly towards her son. “I should thrash you, but I don’t have the

strength. They used to tell me in the past, when he was still small: 'Beat him, beat him'... But I, a sinner, didn't listen. And so I am suffering now. Just you wait! I shall thrash you! Just wait..."

His mother shook a wet fist threateningly at him, and, weeping, went to the room of the lodger. Her lodger, Yevtikhi Kuzmich Kuporosov, was sitting at his table reading *Teach Yourself Dancing*. Yevtikhi Kuzmich was a clever and educated man. He spoke through his nose and washed with soap which had a smell that made everyone in the house sneeze. He ate meat on days of fasting and was looking for an educated bride: this is why he was considered the cleverest lodger. He sang tenor.

"Kind sir!" the boy's mother appealed, flooding with tears. "Be so noble as to thrash my... Do me a favour! He did not pass, to my grief! Believe it or not, he did not pass! I am unable to punish him, because ill health has made me weak... You thrash him instead of me. Be so noble and understanding, Yevtikhi Kuzmich! Help a sick woman!"

Kuporosov frowned and emitted a deep sigh through his nose. He thought for a while, drummed his fingers on the table and, sighing once again, went to Vanya.

"It seems they try to teach you," he began, "to educate you, to give you a start in life, disgraceful young man. Why are you like this?"

He spoke for a long time, delivered quite a speech. He referred to learning, to light and darkness.*

"Well now, young man!"

He finished speaking, removed his belt and pulled Vanya by the arm.

"There's no other way to deal with you," he said.

Vanya obediently bent and put his head between Kuporosov's knees. His pink, protruding ears rubbed against the knitted, brown-striped trousers...

Vanya did not emit a single sound. In the evening, after a family discussion, the decision was made to send him to trade.

The Enquiry

IT WAS NOON. A landowner, Voldyryev – a tall, thickset man with a shorn head and bulging eyes – took off his overcoat, wiped his brow with a silk handkerchief and warily entered the office. A floorboard creaked...

“Where can I make an enquiry?” he asked a doorman who was carrying a tray of glasses from the far end of the office. “I have to get some information, the minutes of the municipal government meeting.”

“Probably over there, sir! That’s the man you have to see, the one sitting by the window,” replied the doorman, pointing with the tray at the far window.

Voldyryev coughed and made for the window. There, behind a green desk, sat a young man in a faded uniform. His face was spotted, as if he had typhus; he had four tufts of hair on his head and a long, pimply nose. He was writing, and had his big nose buried in papers. A fly was walking near his right nostril. From time to time he would push out his lower lip and expel air through his nose, giving his face a deeply preoccupied look.

“May I here... from you,” Voldyryev asked him, “get some information about my case? My name is Voldyryev... At the same time I need to get a copy of a decision in the register of 2nd March.”

The official dipped his pen and examined it to see if he had taken too much ink. When he was assured that the pen was not dripping, he began to write with a squeaking sound. His lip stretched, but this time he did not have to blow: the fly was sitting on his ear.

“May I apply here for information?” repeated Voldyryev after a minute. “I am Voldyryev, a landowner.”

“Ivan Alexeich!” cried the official to the empty air, as if not noticing Voldyryev. “Tell the merchant Yalikov, when he comes,

that he has to have the copy of his application certified at the police station. He has been told a thousand times!”

“I am here regarding my dispute with the heirs of Princess Gugulina,” muttered Voldyryev. “The matter is well known. I beg you to consider my case urgently.”

Still not looking at Voldyryev, the official caught the fly on his lip, looked at it with interest and flicked it away. The landowner coughed and blew his nose loudly in his checked handkerchief. But even this did not help: he was still ignored. The silence lasted about two minutes. Voldyryev drew from his pocket a one-rouble banknote and placed it before the official on the open register. The official wrinkled his brow, pulled the register towards himself with a preoccupied look and closed it.

“A little information... I would just like to know on what grounds the heirs of Princess Gugulina... May I trouble you?”

But the official, busy with his thoughts, rose and, scratching his elbow, went for some reason to the cupboard. Returning a minute later to his desk, he again looked at the register: on it lay another rouble banknote.

“I shall trouble you for only a minute... Give me a little information, only..”

The official seemed not to hear; he began to copy something.

Voldyryev made a face and looked hopelessly at all the scribbling clerks.

“They are writing,” he thought with a sigh. “They are all just writing, the devil take the lot of them.”

He stepped away from the desk and, standing in the middle of the room, lowered his hands hopelessly. The doorman, again carrying a tray of glasses, probably noticed the helpless expression on his face, because he came up to him and asked quietly:

“Well, then? Did you make your enquiry?”

“I asked for information, but he does not want to speak to me.”

“Give him three roubles,” muttered the doorman.

“I’ve already given two.”

“You have to give more.”

Voldyryev returned to the desk and placed a green banknote on the open register.

The official again drew the register towards himself and started leafing through it. Suddenly, as if unintentionally, he raised his eyes to Voldyryev. His nose shone, reddened and wrinkled up in a smile.

“Ah... What can I do for you?” he asked.

“I would like to make an enquiry about my case... I am Voldyryev.”

“It’s a pleasure, sir! About the Gugulina case, sir? Very well, sir! What exactly do you need, in fact?”

Voldyryev stated his request.

The official came to life, as if caught up in a whirlwind. He gave the information, arranged for a copy to be made, brought the client a chair – and all this in a single moment. He even talked about the weather and asked about the harvest. And when Voldyryev left, he accompanied him downstairs, smiling with a combination of friendliness and respect, and seeming each minute as if prepared to grovel before the client. Voldyryev for some reason became embarrassed; on an impulse he drew a rouble banknote from his pocket and gave it to the official. Still bowing and smiling, the man took the banknote like a magician, so that nothing was seen of it but a flash in the air...

“Oh, the ways of the world!...” thought the landowner. Going out on the street, he stopped to wipe his brow with his handkerchief.

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