

SHORT STORIES

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CORE COURSE II– SHORT STORIES

Objectives:

To expose learners to short story writing over the centuries To provide learners an insight into different cultures

To help learners appreciate different themes, strategies and techniques employed by the writers

Unit – I (British)

Saki

: “Alice and the Liberal Party”

Somerset Maugham

: “The Verger”

Unit – II (Indian)

Rabindranath Tagore

: “The Postmaster”

Lakshmi Kannan

: “Muniyakka”

Unit – III (Russian)

Anton Chekhov

: “The Bet”

Leo Tolstoy

: “The Candle”

Unit – IV (American)

Nathaniel Hawthorne

: “The Snow-Image”

Edgar Allan Poe

: “The Purloined Letter”

Unit – V (New Zealand & African)

Katherine Mansfield

: “An Ideal Family”

Chinua Achebe

: “The Sacrificial Eggs”

Books for Reference:

Joseph A., and Balasubramanian M, eds. *Memorable Tales*. Trichy:

PoGo Publishing House, 2013. (This collection has 7 out of 10 short stories)

Kannan, Lakshmi. *India Gate and Other Stories*. New Delhi: Disha Books, 1993

UNIT I

BRITISH

1. The Westminster Alice by Saki Alice and the Liberal Party

ALICE AND THE LIBERAL PARTY

Hector H Munro ("Saki")

Quite a number of them were going past, and the noise was considerable, but they were marching in sixes and sevens and didn't seem to be guided by any fixed word of command, so that the effect was not so imposing as it might have been. Some of them, Alice noticed, had the letters "I L" embroidered on their tunics and headpieces and other conspicuous places ("I wonder", she thought, "if it's marked on their underclothing as well"); others simply had a big "L", and others again were branded with a little "e". They got dreadfully in each other's way, and were always falling over one another in little heaps, while many of the mounted ones did not seem at all sure of their seats. "They won't go very far if they don't fall into better order", thought Alice, and she was glad to find herself the next minute in a spacious hall with a large marble staircase at one end of it. The White King was sitting on one of the steps, looking rather anxious and just a little uncomfortable under his heavy crown, which needed a good deal of balancing to keep it in its place.

"Did you happen to meet any fighting men?" he asked Alice.

"A great many—two or three hundred, I should think."

"Not quite two hundred, all told", said the King, referring to his note-book.

"Told what?" asked Alice.

“Well, they haven’t been told anything, exactly—yet. The fact is”, the King went on nervously, “we’re rather in want of a messenger just now. I don’t know how it is, there are two or three of them about, but lately they have always been either out of reach or else out of touch. You don’t happen to have passed anyone coming from the direction of Berkeley Square?” he asked eagerly.

Alice shook her head.

“There’s the Primrose Courier, for instance”, the King continued reflectively, “the most reliable Messenger we have; he understands all about Open Doors and Linked Hands and all that sort of thing, and he’s quite as useful at home. But he frightens some of them nearly out of their wits by his Imperial Anglo-Saxon attitudes. I wouldn’t mind his skipping about so if he’d only come back when he’s wanted.”

“And haven’t you got any one else to carry your messages?” asked Alice sympathetically.

“There’s the Unkhaki Messenger”, said the King, consulting his pocket-book.

“I beg your pardon”, said Alice.

“You know what Khaki means, I suppose?”

“It’s a sort of colour”, said Alice promptly; “something like dust.”

“Exactly”, said the King; “thou dost—he doesn’t. That’s why he’s called the Unkhaki Messenger.”

Alice gave it up.

“Such a dear, obliging creature”, the King went on, “but so dreadfully unpunctual. He’s always half a century in front of his times or half a century behind them, and that puts one out so.”

Alice agreed that it would make a difference.

“It’s helped to put us out quite six years already”, the King went on plaintively; “but you can’t cure him of it. You see he will wander about in byways and deserts, hunting for Lost Causes, and whenever he comes across a stream he always wades against the current. All that takes him out of his way, you know; he’s somewhere up in the Grampian Hills by this time.”

“I see”, said Alice; “that’s what you mean by being out of touch. And the other Messenger is—”

“Out of reach”, said the King. “Precisely.”

“Then it follows—” said Alice.

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘it’”, interrupted the King sulkily. “No one follows. That is why we stick in the same place. DONT!” he suddenly screamed, jumping up and down in his agitation. “Don’t do it, I say.”

“Do what?” asked Alice, in some alarm.

“Give advice. I know you’re going to. They’ve all been doing it for the last six weeks. I assure you the letters I get—”

“I wasn’t going to give you advice”, said Alice indignantly, “and as to letters, you’ve got too much alphabet as it is.”

“Why, you’re doing it now”, said the King angrily. “Good-bye.”

As Alice took the hint and walked away towards the door she heard him calling after her in a kinder tone: “If you should meet any one coming from the direction of Berkeley Square—”

2. Summary of The Verger

Maugham's short story "The Verger" is a tale about a simple man Albert Edward Foreman. He has been a verger in St. Peter's Neville Square Church, doing his duties with great enjoyment and dedication. The new vicar dismisses the verger for being illiterate. While he is roaming around the London street in a distressed mood he tries to buy a cigarette. As there is no tobacco shop nearby, an idea strikes him. He sets up a tobacco shop with the meagre amount he has got in his savings. He develops his business with full dedication which leads to success. Within ten years he opens ten new tobacco shops in London city. He saves 30000 pounds in bank savings account.

When the manager advises Foreman to invest the amount in safe securities he reveals that he does not know how to read and write. When the manager asks in surprise if he were a literate what would be his position. He humbly answers that he would be a verger in St. Peter's Neville Square church.

Elaboration of points

Maugham's short story "The Verger" is a tale about a simple man Albert Edward Foreman. He has been a verger in St. Peter's Neville Square Church, doing his duties with great enjoyment and dedication. His routine work is disturbed with the arrival of new vicar in the church. He wants everything to be perfect and when he comes to know that Foreman is an illiterate he immediately takes action. The vicar feels that things like ability to read and write reflect the good character of St. Peter's.

Foreman's impeccable record doesn't help him to retain his job. The vicar is ready to offer Foreman three month grace period to become a literate. But he refuses the proposal saying that he cannot learn to read and write at this age.

The vicar announces that the parish has decided to quit him from the service because Foreman is not literate. For Foreman, this decision of the priest is a great blow he has never anticipated. After his appointment sixteen years ago as a verger he had thought that the appointment was for life. But suddenly he becomes unemployed after a long service of sixteen years. He doesn't want to demean himself by accepting any domestic services other than the divine church service.

When Foreman leaves the church he is very much upset and deeply distressed. He, instead of heading towards his home, takes a wrong turning. He walks along the long road deeply thinking about his next move. He has got a meagre amount of money but not enough to meet all his family requirements without doing anything. He is a non-smoker but when he feels distressed and tired, he enjoys a cigarette. He feels like having a cigarette which would comfort him. He cannot find a cigarette shop in the long street. It sounds strange to him. He thinks that a tobacco shop in such a place would be profitable. His plan comes to execution the very next day. He rents a suitable shop and starts his tobacco business. It goes well. He makes profit and within ten years he opens ten branches throughout London. He becomes a great businessman and bank balance rises up to thirty thousand pounds.

One-day the manager of the bank advises him to invest his amount in some safe securities. Albert says that he does not want to take risk and want his money safe in the bank. Moreover he does not know how and in which securities he can invest. The manager replies that he is there to look after his investment and the only thing he has to do is put his signature. After setting up the business, Albert has learnt to sign. He asks the manager how he could know

where he is investing. The manager says that he can read the document and then put his signature on that. Albert confesses that he is an illiterate.

The manager is astonished at his confession. Without knowing how to read or write Albert has amassed a huge sum. What he could have done if he were a literate and educated. But Albert humbly answers him that if he knows to read and write he would be a verger at St. Peter's Neville Square and nothing more.

Questions and Answers

i. What type of person is the new vicar?

Ans. The new Vicar of the church was so energetic and wanted everything to be proper and correct. The vicar believes that the ability to read and write helps to build up good character.

ii. What is the manager's advice to Foreman?

Ans. The manager advises Foreman to invest his amount in some safe securities.

Questions and Answers

A. Answer these questions in 30-40 words. (factual and inferential questions)

1. How long had Albert Edward Foreman been verger at St Peter's when he was asked to step down?

Ans:- Albert Edward Foreman had been a verger at St Peter's, Neville Square for a great many years. He had been there for sixteen years when he was asked to step down.

2. Why was the verger asked to step down? Do you think this was a fair decision? Give reasons for your answer.

Ans:- The Verger asked to step down because he was illiterate. He could neither read nor write. It was an unfair decision. His sixteen years of services speaks volumes for it. He had

served the church sixteen years to the situations of everybody without knowing reading or writing. According to last Vicar, knowing or not knowing these things did not make any difference as far as Verger was concerned.

3. What was Foreman's reply when the vicar asked him to learn to read and write?

Ans:-When the vicar asked Foreman to learn to read and write, he replied with an apology that it was of no good in learning, reading and writing. He was too old a dog to learn new tricks. He had lived a good many years without knowing to praise himself. He added by saying that self-praise was no recommendation. He further said that he would not mind saying that he had done his duty satisfactorily enough to please the merciful providence and so did not want to learn reading and writing then.

READ ALSO: The Pilgrim - Questions and Answers

4. Why had Foreman never learnt to read or write? How had he managed in life?

Ans:- Foreman had never learnt to read or write because he thought that he had no knack for it. Since he was busy with one thing and another, he never seemed to have the time. He had never really found the want of it. Also, he thought that learning these things are wasting of time, something useful might be done instead. He managed in life with the help of his wife and pictures in the papers. Since his wife was quite a scholar, she wrote his letters and for news, he made out from the pictures in the papers.

5. What did the verger do when he left the church after his meeting with the vicar?

Ans:- When he left the church after his meeting with the vicar, he strolled across the square.

Having lost in sad thoughts, he took the wrong turning and walked along slowly. He wanted to smoke but found no shop selling cigarettes. An idea struck him. The next day he found a shop to let in that street and that he took and set up in business as tobacconist and newsagent.

6. What had Foreman done before he became a verger? Why did he not want to go back to that employment?

Ans:-Foreman had been in service in very good houses. Starting as a page-boy in the household of a merchant-prince, he had risen by done degrees from the position of fourth to the first footman, for a year he had been single-handed butler to a widowed peeress and, till the vacancy occurred butler with two men at St Peter's, with two men under him in the house of a retired ambassador. He did not want to go back to domestic service because he had been his own master for so many years in the church. Going back to domestic service was like demeaning himself by accepting a situation.

7. What happened in the course of ten years?

Ans:-In twenty-four hours since his leaving from the St. Peter's, Neville Square, Albert Edward Foreman set up in business as a tobacconist and newsagent. He moved around looking for streets that hadn't got tobacconist in them. We have found them he took shops to let to run his business. Thus in the course of ten years, he had acquired no less than ten shops and he was making money hand over first.

B. Think and answer in 100-150 words.

1. Albert Foreman became rich and successful despite not knowing how to read and write. Does this disprove the importance of reading and writing? Explain with reasons.

Ans:- The story 'the verger' ends with a staggering twist. Mr Foreman despite of being illiterate could build up and important business I and amass a fortune of thirty thousand

pounds. He said if he knew reading and writing, he would still be a poor verger in a church. When we count Foreman's success strong we really feel like negating education. But if we analyze how he succeeded, we can very well see that it is situations and circumstances which bring success. Foreman's ouster saddened him. While walking depressed, he takes the wrong road. That is the turning point. Had he taken his usual road, his condition would change from bad to worse. In the wrong road he takes, he finds the street having no shops selling tobacco. It strikes his mind with, the idea of opening shops selling tobacco and he succeeds in life because they are learned. The other one is just a coincidence. Most people below poverty live in the world are unlearned ones.

READ ALSO: Gulliver's Travels - Questions Answers And MCQs

2. Write a note on the character and appearance of Albert Foreman.

Ans:-Albert Foreman is a man of self-respect. He has confidence in his capabilities. He is not obsequious. He is honest, truthful and polite but does not allow others to take him for a ride. He is hardworking and true to his job. In any field he worked, that is, from domestic service to church service he did not work appreciatively. He is more practical-minded.

He doesn't undertake missions which he finds either useless or he cannot do it. His ingenuousness and ingenuity work for his success. He knew how to grab opportunities. He was tall, spare, grave and dignified. He looked, if not like a duke, at least like an actor of the old school who specialized in duke's parts. He had tack, firmness and self-assurance. His character was unimpeachable.

C. The verger spoke English in the manner of domestics and poorer people of London, that is, with a Cockney accent. Thus he dropped all his 'Hs. Rewrite these sentences in proper English.

(Cockney accent)

1. 'Don't 'e know I want my tea?'

Ans:- 'Don't you know I want my tea?'

2. 'All this 'ustle. But give 'im time, he'll learn.'

Ans:- 'All this bustle. But give him time, he will learn.'

3. shall be 'appy to 'and in my resignation.'

Ans:- 'I shall be happy hand in my resignation.'

4. 'It didn't make no difference. He always said there was a great deal too much education in the world for 'is taste.'

Ans:- 'It didn't make no difference. He always said there was a great deal too much education in the world for his taste.'

5. 'I didn't seem to 'ave the knack for it.'

Ans:- 'I didn't seem to have the knack for it.'

6. 'I'd 'ave to leave it all in your 'ands.' Ans:- 'I have to leave it in your hands.'

7. 'But 'ow should I know what I was signing?'

Ans:- 'But how should I know what I was signing?'

UNIT II

INDIAN

3. The Postmaster

INTRODUCTION:

“The Postmaster,” a story by Rabindranath Tagore,(1861-1941) a gifted Indian writer and thinker, achieved a world-wide reputation when he as awarded the Nobel Prize. The Postmaster is a story of a city-bred young man forced to live in a remote village. Necessity drove him to spend his evenings in the company of a simple orphan girl Ratan.

CONTENT:

The Postmaster short story is about an unnamed postmaster who was transfered to a remote post office in a small rural Indian village. The village was near a factory, and the owner of the factory where Englishmen. The postmaster was from the huge city of Calcutta and feels out of place in such a distant rural village. The post office seems to contain only two rooms: the office itself, and the postmaster’s living quarters made of “thatched shed” near a stagnant pond circled by thick foliage.

The workers in the nearby factory were so much busy with their work that they have no time to make friendship with anyone. Besides, they were not good company for “decent folk.” In addition, people from Calcutta were not particularly good at socializing. They appear to be arrogant or uncomfortable. In any case, the postmaster had few companions, and he does not have many activities to keep him occupied.

Occasionally he tried to write a bit of poetry. The rural landscape have inspired the kind of happy poetry he sought to compose. But the postmaster is uninterested in the landscape and would be happy if it were replaced by a paved road and numerous tall buildings. His salary was not great; so, he had to cook his own food and would share his suppers with Ratan – an orphan girl of the village. She did odd jobs for the Postmaster. In the evening, when the village was filled with appealing sights and sounds, the postmaster lights his lamp and called for Ratan.

Ratan, who has been waiting for the nightly call, typically asks whether she has indeed been called. She then routinely lights the fire needed for cooking. The postmaster tells her to wait till he smoke his pipe, which Ratan always lights for him. The postmaster used to talk with Ratan while smoking. He asked Ratan about her early life which She loved to share with him . The postmaster himself recalls his home, his mother and sister and discuss about them with Ratan.

She used to call the Postmaster “Dada” meaning ‘elder brother’. She obeyed her master. The postmaster taught her how to read. Ratan begins to learn about double consonants. They develop a bond of trust and friendship. They have meals together and Ratan runs small errands for the postmaster.

One day, postmaster falls ill due to the showers of the season. Ratan took care of him like a mother when he was sick. She sat beside him the whole night during the time until he was cured completely. The Postmaster decided to apply for a transfer back to Calcutta. His application for transfer gets rejected, thus he resigns from the job.

UNIT III

5. The Bet

Summary

Fifteen years ago, a party was thrown at a banker's home, where many intellectuals such as journalists and lawyers attended. During that party, the group in attendance had many lively discussions, ultimately turning to the topic of capital punishment.

As the group argued, the two sides of the debate coalesced into two representatives: the banker, who is for capital punishment and believes that it is more merciful, and a lawyer, who believes that life imprisonment is the better option, due to its preservation of life. The lawyer believes that any life is better than none, and that life cannot be taken away by the government, since life cannot be given back if the government realizes that it made a mistake. The banker and the lawyer decide to enter into a bet, with the banker wagering that the lawyer could not withstand 5 years of imprisonment. The lawyer, young and idealistic, decides to up the ante and makes the bet longer: 15 years. If he could last to the end of his sentence, the lawyer would receive two million rubles for winning the bet.

The banker cannot fathom his good fortune, and even offers the young lawyer a way out, saying that he is being hasty and foolish. Nevertheless, the lawyer decides to stick to his word and the bet is carried out.

For fifteen years, the lawyer lives on the banker's property, in a small lodge, and has no human contact. He can have any item that he desires. At first, the lawyer does not comfort himself with any liquor or tobacco, confining himself to playing the piano. But as the years progress, he gives in and spends much of his time drunk or asleep.

Later, the main focus of his time becomes books, as he searches for adventures and comforts that he cannot possess physically. He takes great advantage of the banker's ability to provide any book, and asks that the banker test the result of his reading by firing two shots in the garden if his translations of several languages is indeed flawless. The banker acquiesces and confirms the lawyer's suspicion that he has mastered languages.

As the years go by, the lawyer reads virtually every genre under the sun. He makes his way from the lighter reading of the early years, to the dense text of the Gospels and Shakespeare. The banker, by this time, has gone broke due to his own recklessness and gambling. He begins to worry that the lawyer's bet with him will ruin him financially.

The banker begins to hope against all hope that the lawyer will break his vow and lose the bet. He doesn't even feel remorse at his evil thoughts, excusing them on the basis that they are in his own best interest. In fact, the banker even manages to convince himself that the lawyer is getting the better end of the deal, since he will still be relatively young at 40, and, with the 2 million rubles, relatively rich.

With this in mind, the banker goes to investigate how the lawyer is doing. He finds that his prisoner is asleep at his desk, looking much older and careworn than he ever imagined him to be. After observing him for a few seconds, the banker notices a letter on the table.

In it, the lawyer proclaims his intention to renounce earthly goods in favor of the spiritual blessings. The prisoner has become entirely embittered during his captivity. He has developed an intense hatred for other humans and believes that there is nothing that he or they can do to ever reconcile this chasm. To prove his seriousness, the lawyer decides to leave his prison five hours before the appointed time, and renounces his claim to the two million, thereby freeing the banker from his debt and from financial ruin.

The banker cries and kisses the prisoner with relief. The next day, watchmen alert the banker of the lawyer's escape, and the banker is unsurprised. He walks over, takes the letter from the lodge, and locks it in a fireproof safe.

Analysis

In *The Bet*, Chekov decides to analyze which is worse: life imprisonment or capital punishment. In order to do this, he sets up a bet that would likely never take place in real life. This is typical of Chekov, who likes to examine philosophical questions (against the backdrop of a simple plot) as they might play out in real life, with real consequences, rather than simply examining them in the abstract.

Through this story, Chekov demonstrates the pitfalls of idealism and the foolishness of youth. Had the lawyer been older and wiser, he would never have decided so impulsively to go through with this bet. Had he had a family, a wife, children—any support structure that depended on him—he would not have agreed. So the bet also demonstrates the selfishness of man and youth. With nothing to lose, and two million to gain, the lawyer cannot think of a reason to reject the bet.

It is very interesting that Chekov does not show the readers the thoughts of the lawyer as he makes this bet. The only time that we see the thoughts of the lawyer clearly is later in the story, through a letter. We never see the lawyer's thought process wholly unvarnished and unfiltered, as we often see the thoughts of the banker. This allows the lawyer to remain a pure model of idealism, sacrificing years of his life to prove his moral principles, something that most would find hard to stomach in real life. It lends the lawyer a polished, holier aura.

The story also shows the toll that separation from human society can take on a person. Whereas at first the lawyer was full of virtue, eschewing wine and tobacco, he later gives

himself in to his vices, drinking and smoking constantly. He has lost some of his idealism, even as he continues to seek to prove it, and himself, right.

The story is left rather open-ended, with the reader left with a sense that the story hasn't finished. Chekov may have done this on purpose, to prompt the reader into thinking about the consequences of the banker and the lawyer's actions. What ultimately is the fate of the lawyer? Does he live out his days happily? Is the banker able to live remorse-free, feeling no guilt over taking so many years away from a young, bright man? Maybe the old banker realized the vanity and emptiness of his life; we will never know.

The banker does feel some contempt for himself, but the story does not give the reader much more detail than that. It is possible that the banker struggles with his decisions for the rest of his life as he does choose to hold onto the lawyer's last letter, but it is equally possible that he simply forgets about the lawyer in a few years time, locking away all thought of him from his mind.

6.The Candle by Leo Tolstoy

It was in the time of serfdom—many years before Alexander II.'s liberation of the sixty million serfs in 1862. In those days the people were ruled by different kinds of lords. There were not a few who, remembering God, treated their slaves in a humane manner, and not as beasts of burden, while there were others who were seldom known to perform a kind or generous action; but the most barbarous and tyrannical of all were those former serfs who arose from the dirt and became princes.

It was this latter class who made life literally a burden to those who were unfortunate enough to come under their rule. Many of them had arisen from the ranks of the peasantry to become superintendents of noblemen's estates.

The peasants were obliged to work for their master a certain number of days each week. There was plenty of land and water and the soil was rich and fertile, while the meadows and forests were sufficient to supply the needs of both the peasants and their lord.

There was a certain nobleman who had chosen a superintendent from the peasantry on one of his other estates. No sooner had the power to govern been vested in this newly-made official than he began to practice the most outrageous cruelties upon the poor serfs who had been placed under his control. Although this man had a wife and two married daughters, and was making so much money that he could have lived happily without transgressing in any way against either God or man, yet he was filled with envy and jealousy and deeply sunk in sin.

Michael Simeonovitch began his persecutions by compelling the peasants to perform more days of service on the estate every week than the laws obliged them to work. He established a

brick-yard, in which he forced the men and women to do excessive labor, selling the bricks for his own profit.

On one occasion the overworked serfs sent a delegation to Moscow to complain of their treatment to their lord, but they obtained no satisfaction. When the poor peasants returned disconsolate from the nobleman their superintendent determined to have revenge for their boldness in going above him for redress, and their life and that of their fellow-victims became worse than before.

It happened that among the serfs there were some very treacherous people who would falsely accuse their fellows of wrong-doing and sow seeds of discord among the peasantry, whereupon Michael would become greatly enraged, while his poor subjects began to live in fear of their lives. When the superintendent passed through the village the people would run and hide themselves as from a wild beast. Seeing thus the terror which he had struck to the hearts of the moujiks, Michael's treatment of them became still more vindictive, so that from over-work and ill-usage the lot of the poor serfs was indeed a hard one.

There was a time when it was possible for the peasants, when driven to despair, to devise means whereby they could rid themselves of an inhuman monster such as Simeonovitch, and so these unfortunate people began to consider whether something could not be done to relieve *them* of their intolerable yoke. They would hold little meetings in secret places to bewail their misery and to confer with one another as to which would be the best way to act. Now and then the boldest of the gathering would rise and address his companions in this strain: "How much longer can we tolerate such a villain to rule over us? Let us make an end of it at once, for it were better for us to perish than to suffer. It is surely not a sin to kill such a devil in human form."

It happened once, before the Easter holidays, that one of these meetings was held in the woods, where Michael had sent the serfs to make a clearance for their master. At noon they assembled to eat their dinner and to hold a consultation. "Why can't we leave now?" said one. "Very soon we shall be reduced to nothing. Already we are almost worked to death—there being no rest, night or day, either for us or our poor women. If anything should be done in a way not exactly to please him he will find fault and perhaps flog some of us to death—as was the case with poor Simeon, whom he killed not long ago. Only recently Anisim was tortured in irons till he died. We certainly cannot stand this much longer." "Yes," said another, "what is the use of waiting? Let us act at once. Michael will be here this evening, and will be certain to abuse us shamefully. Let us, then, thrust him from his horse and with one blow of an axe give him what he deserves, and thus end our misery. We can then dig a big hole and bury him like a dog, and no one will know what became of him. Now let us come to an agreement—to stand together as one man and not to betray one another."

The last speaker was Vasili Minayeff, who, if possible, had more cause to complain of Michael's cruelty than any of his fellow-serfs. The superintendent was in the habit of flogging him severely every week, and he took also Vasili's wife to serve him as cook.

Accordingly, during the evening that followed this meeting in the woods Michael arrived on the scene on horseback. He began at once to find fault with the manner in which the work had been done, and to complain because some lime-trees had been cut down.

"I told you not to cut down any lime-trees!" shouted the enraged superintendent. "Who did this thing? Tell me at once, or I shall flog every one of you!"

On investigation, a peasant named Sidor was pointed out as the guilty one, and his face was roundly slapped. Michael also severely punished Vasili, because he had not done sufficient work, after which the master rode safely home.

In the evening the serfs again assembled, and poor Vasili said: "Oh, what kind of people *are* we, anyway? We are only sparrows, and not men at all! We agree to stand by each other, but as soon as the time for action comes we all run and hide. Once a lot of sparrows conspired against a hawk, but no sooner did the bird of prey appear than they sneaked off in the grass. Selecting one of the choicest sparrows, the hawk took it away to eat, after which the others came out crying, 'Twee-twee!' and found that one was missing. 'Who is killed?' they asked. 'Vanka! Well, he deserved it.' You, my friends, are acting in just the same manner. When Michael attacked Sidor you should have stood by your promise. Why didn't you arise, and with one stroke put an end to him and to our misery?"

The effect of this speech was to make the peasants more firm in their determination to kill their superintendent. The latter had already given orders that they should be ready to plough during the Easter holidays, and to sow the field with oats, whereupon the serfs became stricken with grief, and gathered in Vasili's house to hold another indignation meeting. "If he has really forgotten God," they said, "and shall continue to commit such crimes against us, it is truly necessary that we should kill him. If not, let us perish, for it can make no difference to us now."

This despairing programme, however, met with considerable opposition from a peaceably-inclined man named Peter Mikhayeff. "Brethren," said he, "you are contemplating a grievous sin. The taking of human life is a very serious matter. Of course it is easy to end the mortal existence of a man, but what will become of the souls of those who commit the deed? If

Michael continues to act toward us unjustly God will surely punish him. But, my friends, we must have patience.”

This pacific utterance only served to intensify the anger of Vasili. Said he: “Peter is forever repeating the same old story, ‘It is a sin to kill any one.’ Certainly it is sinful to murder; but we should consider the kind of man we are dealing with. We all know it is wrong to kill a good man, but even God would take away the life of such a dog as he is. It is our duty, if we have any love for mankind, to shoot a dog that is mad. It is a sin to let him live. If, therefore, we are to suffer at all, let it be in the interests of the people—and they will thank us for it. If we remain quiet any longer a flogging will be our only reward. You are talking nonsense, Mikhayeff. Why don’t you think of the sin we shall be committing if we work during the Easter holidays—for you will refuse to work then yourself?”

“Well, then,” replied Peter, “if they shall send me to plough, I will go. But I shall not be going of my own free will, and God will know whose sin it is, and shall punish the offender accordingly. Yet we must not forget him. Brethren, I am not giving you my own views only. The law of God is not to return evil for evil; indeed, if you try in this way to stamp out wickedness it will come upon you all the stronger. It is not difficult for you to kill the man, but his blood will surely stain your own soul. You may think you have killed a bad man—that you have gotten rid of evil—but you will soon find out that the seeds of still greater wickedness have been planted within you. If you yield to misfortune it will surely come to you.”

As Peter was not without sympathizers among the peasants, the poor serfs were consequently divided into two groups: the followers of Vasili and those who held the views of Mikhayeff.

On Easter Sunday no work was done. Toward the evening an elder came to the peasants from the nobleman's court and said: "Our superintendent, Michael Simeonovitch, orders you to go to-morrow to plough the field for the oats." Thus the official went through the village and directed the men to prepare for work the next day—some by the river and others by the roadway. The poor people were almost overcome with grief, many of them shedding tears, but none dared to disobey the orders of their master.

On the morning of Easter Monday, while the church bells were calling the inhabitants to religious services, and while every one else was about to enjoy a holiday, the unfortunate serfs started for the field to plough. Michael arose rather late and took a walk about the farm. The domestic servants were through with their work and had dressed themselves for the day, while Michael's wife and their widowed daughter (who was visiting them, as was her custom on holidays) had been to church and returned. A steaming samovar awaited them, and they began to drink tea with Michael, who, after lighting his pipe, called the elder to him.

"Well," said the superintendent, "have you ordered the moujiks to plough to-day?"

"Yes, sir, I did," was the reply.

"Have they all gone to the field?"

"Yes, sir; all of them. I directed them myself where to begin."

"That is all very well. You gave the orders, but are they ploughing? Go at once and see, and you may tell them that I shall be there after dinner. I shall expect to find one and a half acres done for every two ploughs, and the work must be well done; otherwise they shall be severely punished, notwithstanding the holiday."

“I hear, sir, and obey.”

The elder started to go, but Michael called him back. After hesitating for some time, as if he felt very uneasy, he said:

“By the way, listen to what those scoundrels say about me. Doubtless some of them will curse me, and I want you to report the exact words. I know what villains they are. They don’t find work at all pleasant. They would rather lie down all day and do nothing. They would like to eat and drink and make merry on holidays, but they forget that if the ploughing is not done it will soon be too late. So you go and listen to what is said, and tell it to me in detail. Go at once.”

“I hear, sir, and obey.”

Turning his back and mounting his horse, the elder was soon at the field where the serfs were hard at work.

It happened that Michael’s wife, a very good-hearted woman, overheard the conversation which her husband had just been holding with the elder. Approaching him, she said:

“My good friend, Mishinka [diminutive of Michael], I beg of you to consider the importance and solemnity of this holy-day. Do not sin, for Christ’s sake. Let the poor moujiks go home.”

Michael laughed, but made no reply to his wife’s humane request. Finally he said to her:

“You’ve not been whipped for a very long time, and now you have become bold enough to interfere in affairs that are not your own.”

“Mishinka,” she persisted, “I have had a frightful dream concerning you. You had better let the moujiks go.”

“Yes,” said he; “I perceive that you have gained so much flesh of late that you think you would not feel the whip. Lookout!”

Rudely thrusting his hot pipe against her cheek, Michael chased his wife from the room, after which he ordered his dinner. After eating a hearty meal consisting of cabbage-soup, roast pig, meat-cake, pastry with milk, jelly, sweet cakes, and vodka, he called his woman cook to him and ordered her to be seated and sing songs, Simeonovitch accompanying her on the guitar.

While the superintendent was thus enjoying himself to the fullest satisfaction in the musical society of his cook the elder returned, and, making a low bow to his superior, proceeded to give the desired information concerning the serfs.

“Well,” asked Michael, “did they plough?”

“Yes,” replied the elder; “they have accomplished about half the field.”

“Is there no fault to be found?”

“Not that I could discover. The work seems to be well done. They are evidently afraid of you.”

“How is the soil?”

“Very good. It appears to be quite soft.”

“Well,” said Simeonovitch, after a pause, “what did they say about me? Cursed me, I suppose?”

As the elder hesitated somewhat, Michael commanded him to speak and tell him the whole truth. “Tell me all,” said he; “I want to know their exact words. If you tell me the truth I shall reward you; but if you conceal anything from me you will be punished. See here, Catherine, pour out a glass of vodka to give him courage!”

After drinking to the health of his superior, the elder said to himself: “It is not my fault if they do not praise him. I shall tell him the truth.” Then turning suddenly to the superintendent he said:

“They complain, Michael Simeonovitch! They complain bitterly.”

“But what did they say?” demanded Michael. “Tell me!”

“Well, one thing they said was, ‘He does not believe in God.’”

Michael laughed. “Who said that?” he asked.

“It seemed to be their unanimous opinion. ‘He has been overcome by the Evil One,’ they said.”

“Very good,” laughed the superintendent; “but tell me what each of them said. What did Vasili say?”

The elder did not wish to betray his people, but he had a certain grudge against Vasili, and he said:

“He cursed you more than did any of the others.”

“But what did he say?”

“It is awful to repeat it, sir. Vasili said, ‘He shall die like a dog, having no chance to repent!’”

“Oh, the villain!” exclaimed Michael. “He would kill me if he were not afraid. All right, Vasili; we shall have an accounting with you. And Tishka—he called me a dog, I suppose?”

“Well,” said the elder, “they all spoke of you in anything but complimentary terms; but it is mean in me to repeat what they said.”

“Mean or not you must tell me, I say!”

“Some of them declared that your back should be broken.”

Simeonovitch appeared to enjoy this immensely, for he laughed outright. “We shall see whose back will be the first to be broken,” said he. “Was that Tishka’s opinion? While I did not suppose they would say anything good about me, I did not expect such curses and threats. And Peter Mikhayeff—was that fool cursing me too?”

“No; he did not curse you at all. He appeared to be the only silent one among them. Mikhayeff is a very wise moujik, and he surprises me very much. At his actions all the other peasants seemed amazed.”

“What did he do?”

“He did something remarkable. He was diligently ploughing, and as I approached him I heard some one singing very sweetly. Looking between the ploughshares, I observed a bright object shining.”

“Well, what was it? Hurry up!”

“It was a small, five-kopeck wax candle, burning brightly, and the wind was unable to blow it out. Peter, wearing a new shirt, sang beautiful hymns as he ploughed, and no matter how he handled the implement the candle continued to burn. In my presence he fixed the plough, shaking it violently, but the bright little object between the colters remained undisturbed.”

“And what did Mikhayeff say?”

“He said nothing—except when, on seeing me, he gave me the holy-day salutation, after which he went on his way singing and ploughing as before. I did not say anything to him, but, on approaching the other moujiks, I found that they were laughing and making sport of their silent companion. ‘It is a great sin to plough on Easter Monday,’ they said. ‘You could not get absolution from your sin if you were to pray all your life.’”

“And did Mikhayeff make no reply?”

“He stood long enough to say: ‘There should be peace on earth and good-will to men,’ after which he resumed his ploughing and singing, the candle burning even more brightly than before.”

Simeonovitch had now ceased to ridicule, and, putting aside his guitar, his head dropped on his breast and he became lost in thought. Presently he ordered the elder and cook to depart,

after which Michael went behind a screen and threw himself upon the bed. He was sighing and moaning, as if in great distress, when his wife came in and spoke kindly to him. He refused to listen to her, exclaiming:

“He has conquered me, and my end is near!”

“Mishinka,” said the woman, “arise and go to the moujiks in the field. Let them go home, and everything will be all right. Heretofore you have run far greater risks without any fear, but now you appear to be very much alarmed.”

“He has conquered me!” he repeated. “I am lost!”

“What do you mean?” demanded his wife, angrily. “If you will go and do as I tell you there will be no danger. Come, Mishinka,” she added, tenderly; “I shall have the saddle-horse brought for you at once.”

When the horse arrived the woman persuaded her husband to mount the animal, and to fulfil her request concerning the serfs. When he reached the village a woman opened the gate for him to enter, and as he did so the inhabitants, seeing the brutal superintendent whom everybody feared, ran to hide themselves in their houses, gardens, and other secluded places.

At length Michael reached the other gate, which he found closed also, and, being unable to open it himself while seated on his horse, he called loudly for assistance. As no one responded to his shouts he dismounted and opened the gate, but as he was about to remount, and had one foot in the stirrup, the horse became frightened at some pigs and sprang suddenly to one side. The superintendent fell across the fence and a very sharp picket pierced his stomach, when Michael fell unconscious to the ground.

Toward the evening, when the serfs arrived at the village gate, their horses refused to enter. On looking around, the peasants discovered the dead body of their superintendent lying face downward in a pool of blood, where he had fallen from the fence. Peter Mikhayeff alone had sufficient courage to dismount and approach the prostrate form, his companions riding around the village and entering by way of the back yards. Peter closed the dead man's eyes, after which he put the body in a wagon and took it home.

When the nobleman learned of the fatal accident which had befallen his superintendent, and of the brutal treatment which he had meted out to those under him, he freed the serfs, exacting a small rent for the use of his land and the other agricultural opportunities.

And thus the peasants clearly understood that the power of God is manifested not in evil, but in goodness.

UNIT IV

AMERICAN

7. THE SNOW IMAGE

One afternoon of a cold winter's day, when the sun shone forth with chilly brightness, after a long storm, two children asked leave of their mother to run out and play in the new-fallen snow. The elder child was a girl, whom, because she was of a tender and modest disposition, and was thought to be very beautiful, her parents, and other people who were familiar with her, used to call Violet. But her brother was known by the style and title of Peony, on account of the ruddiness of his broad and round little phiz, which made everybody think of sunshine and great scarlet flowers. The father of these two children, a certain Mr. Lindsey, it is important to say, was an excellent but exceedingly matter-of-fact sort of man, a dealer in hardware, and was sturdily accustomed to take what is called the common-sense view of all matters that came under his consideration. With a heart about as tender as other people's, he had a head as hard and impenetrable, and therefore, perhaps, as empty, as one of the iron pots which it was a part of his business to sell. The mother's character, on the other hand, had a strain of poetry in it, a trait of unworldly beauty—a delicate and dewy flower, as it were, that had survived out of her imaginative youth, and still kept itself alive amid the dusty realities of matrimony and motherhood.

So, Violet and Peony, as I began with saying, besought their mother to let them run out and play in the new snow; for, though it had looked so dreary and dismal, drifting downward out of the gray sky, it had a very cheerful aspect, now that the sun was shining on it. The children dwelt in a city, and had no wider play-place than a little garden before the house, divided by a white fence from the street, and with a pear-tree and two or three plum-trees overshadowing it, and some rose-bushes just in front of the parlour-windows. The trees and shrubs, however,

were now leafless, and their twigs were enveloped in the light snow, which thus made a kind of wintry foliage, with here and there a pendent icicle for the fruit.

“Yes, Violet—yes, my little Peony,” said their kind mother; “you may go out and play in the new snow.”

Accordingly, the good lady bundled up her darlings in woollen jackets and wadded sacks, and put comforters round their necks, and a pair of striped gaiters on each little pair of legs, and worsted mittens on their hands, and gave them a kiss apiece, by way of a spell to keep away Jack Frost. Forth sallied the two children, with a hop-skip-and-jump, that carried them at once into the very heart of a huge snow-drift, whence Violet emerged like a snow-bunting, while little Peony floundered out with his round face in full bloom. Then what a merry time had they! To look at them, frolicking in the wintry garden, you would have thought that the dark and pitiless storm had been sent for no other purpose but to provide a new plaything for Violet and Peony; and that they themselves had been created, as the snow-birds were, to take delight only in the tempest, and in the white mantle which it spread over the earth.

At last, when they had frosted one another all over with handfuls of snow, Violet, after laughing heartily at little Peony’s figure, was struck with a new idea.

“You look exactly like a snow-image, Peony,” said she, “if your cheeks were not so red. And that puts me in mind! Let us make an image out of snow—an image of a little girl—and it shall be our sister, and shall run about and play with us all winter long. Won’t it be nice?”

“O, yes!” cried Peony, as plainly as he could speak, for he was but a little boy. “That will be nice! And mamma shall see it!”

“Yes,” answered Violet; “mamma shall see the new little girl. But she must not make her come into the warm parlour; for, you know, our little snow-sister will not love the warmth.”

And forthwith the children began this great business of making a snow-image that should run about; while their mother, who was sitting at the window and overheard some of their talk,

could not help smiling at the gravity with which they set about it. They really seemed to imagine that there would be no difficulty whatever in creating a live little girl out of the snow. And, to say the truth, if miracles are ever to be wrought, it will be by putting our hands to the work in precisely such a simple and undoubting frame of mind as that in which Violet and Peony now undertook to perform one, without so much as knowing that it was a miracle. So thought the mother; and thought, likewise, that the new snow, just fallen from heaven, would be excellent material to make new beings of, if it were not so very cold. She gazed at the children a moment longer, delighting to watch their little figures—the girl, tall for her age, graceful and agile, and so delicately coloured that she looked like a cheerful thought, more than a physical reality; while Peony expanded in breadth rather than height, and rolled along on his short and sturdy legs as substantial as an elephant, though not quite so big. Then the mother resumed her work. What it was I forget; but she was either trimming a silken bonnet for Violet, or darning a pair of stockings for little Peony's short legs. Again, however, and again, and yet other agains, she could not help turning her head to the window to see how the children got on with their snow-image.

Indeed, it was an exceedingly pleasant sight, those bright little souls at their task! Moreover, it was really wonderful to observe how knowingly and skilfully they managed the matter. Violet assumed the chief direction, and told Peony what to do, while, with her own delicate fingers, she shaped out all the nicer parts of the snow-figure. It seemed, in fact, not so much to be made by the children, as to grow up under their hands, while they were playing and prattling about it. Their mother was quite surprised at this; and the longer she looked, the more and more surprised she grew.

“What remarkable children mine are!” thought she, smiling with a mother's pride; and, smiling at herself, too, for being so proud of them. “What other children could have made anything so like a little girl's figure out of snow at the first trial? Well; but now I must finish

Peony's new frock, for his grandfather is coming to-morrow, and I want the little fellow to look handsome."

So she took up the frock, and was soon as busily at work again with her needle as the two children with their snow-image. But still, as the needle travelled hither and thither through the seams of the dress, the mother made her toil light and happy by listening to the airy voices of Violet and Peony. They kept talking to one another all the time, their tongues being quite as active as their feet and hands. Except at intervals, she could not distinctly hear what was said, but had merely a sweet impression that they were in a most loving mood, and were enjoying themselves highly, and that the business of making the snow-image went prosperously on. Now and then, however, when Violet and Peony happened to raise their voices, the words were as audible as if they had been spoken in the very parlour, where the mother sat. O how delightfully those words echoed in her heart, even though they meant nothing so very wise or wonderful, after all!

But you must know a mother listens with her heart, much more than with her ears; and thus she is often delighted with the trills of celestial music, when other people can hear nothing of the kind.

"Peony, Peony!" cried Violet to her brother, who had gone to another part of the garden, "bring me some of that fresh snow, Peony, from the very farthest corner, where we have not been trampling. I want it to shape our little snow-sister's bosom with. You know that part must be quite pure, just as it came out of the sky!"

"Here it is, Violet!" answered Peony, in his bluff tone—but a very sweet tone, too—as he came floundering through the half-trodden drifts. "Here is the snow for her little bosom. O Violet, how beau-ti-ful she begins to look!"

"Yes," said Violet, thoughtfully and quietly; "our snow-sister does look very lovely. I did not quite know, Peony, that we could make such a sweet little girl as this."

The mother, as she listened, thought how fit and delightful an incident it would be, if fairies, or, still better, if angel-children were to come from paradise, and play invisibly with her own darlings, and help them to make their snow-image, giving it the features of celestial babyhood! Violet and Peony would not be aware of their immortal playmates—only they could see that the image grew very beautiful while they worked at it, and would think that they themselves had done it all.

“My little girl and boy deserve such playmates, if mortal children ever did!” said the mother to herself; and then she smiled again at her own motherly pride.

Nevertheless, the ideas seized upon her imagination; and ever and anon, she took a glimpse out of the window, half dreaming that she might see the golden-haired children of paradise sporting with her own golden-haired Violet and bright-cheeked Peony.

Now, for a few moments, there was a busy and earnest, but indistinct hum of the two children’s voices, as Violet and Peony wrought together with one happy consent. Violet still seemed to be the guiding spirit, while Peony acted rather as a labourer, and brought her the snow from far and near. And yet the little urchin evidently had a proper understanding of the matter, too!

“Peony, Peony!” cried Violet; for the brother was again at the other side of the garden. “Bring me those light wreaths of snow that have rested on the lower branches of the pear-tree. You can clamber on the snow-drift, Peony, and reach them easily. I must have them to make some ringlets for our snow-sister’s head!”

“Here they are, Violet!” answered the little boy. “Take care you do not break them. Well done! Well done! How pretty!”

“Does she not look sweet?” said Violet, with a very satisfied tone; “and now we must have some little shining bits of ice, to make the brightness of her eyes. She is not finished yet.

Mamma will see how very beautiful she is; but papa will say, ‘Tush! nonsense!—come in out of the cold!’”

“Let us call mamma to look out,” said Peony; and then he shouted lustily, “Mamma! mamma!! mamma!!! Look out, and see what a nice ‘ittle girl we are making.”

The mother put down her work, for an instant, and looked out of the window. But it so happened that the sun—for this was one of the shortest days of the whole year—had sunken so nearly to the edge of the world, that his setting shine came obliquely into the lady’s eyes. So she was dazzled, you must understand, and could not very distinctly observe what was in the garden. Still, however, through all that bright, blinding dazzle of the sun and the new snow, she beheld a small white figure in the garden, that seemed to have a wonderful deal of human likeness about it. And she saw Violet and Peony—indeed, she looked more at them than at the image—she saw the two children still at work; Peony bringing fresh snow, and Violet applying it to the figure as scientifically as a sculptor adds clay to his model. Indistinctly as she discerned the snow-child, the mother thought to herself that never before was there a snow-figure so cunningly made, nor ever such a dear little girl and boy to make it. “They do everything better than other children,” said she, very complacently. “No wonder they make better snow-images!”

She sat down again to her work, and made as much haste with it as possible; because twilight would soon come, and Peony’s frock was not yet finished, and grandfather was expected, by railroad, pretty early in the morning. Faster and faster, therefore, went her flying fingers. The children, likewise, kept busily at work in the garden, and still the mother listened, whenever she could catch a word. She was amused to observe how their little imaginations had got mixed up with what they were doing, and were carried away by it. They seemed positively to think that the snow-child would run about and play with them.

“What a nice playmate she will be for us, all winter long!” said Violet. “I hope papa will not be afraid of her giving us a cold! Sha’n’t you love her dearly, Peony?”

“O yes!” cried Peony. “And I will hug her and she shall sit down close by me, and drink some of my warm milk!”

“O no, Peony!” answered Violet, with grave wisdom. “That will not do at all. Warm milk will not be wholesome for our little snow-sister. Little snow-people, like her, eat nothing but icicles. No, no, Peony; we must not give her anything warm to drink!”

There was a minute or two of silence; for Peony, whose short legs were never weary, had gone on a pilgrimage again to the other side of the garden. All of a sudden, Violet cried out, loudly and joyfully—

“Look here, Peony! Come quickly! A light has been shining on her cheek out of that rose-coloured cloud! and the colour does not go away! Is not that beautiful?”

“Yes; it is beau-ti-ful,” answered Peony, pronouncing the three syllables with deliberate accuracy. “O Violet, only look at her hair! It is all like gold!”

“O, certainly,” said Violet, with tranquillity, as if it were very much a matter of course. “That colour, you know, comes from the golden clouds, that we see up there in the sky. She is almost finished now. But her lips must be made very red—redder than her cheeks. Perhaps, Peony, it will make them red if we both kiss them!”

Accordingly, the mother heard two smart little smacks, as if both her children were kissing the snow-image on its frozen mouth. But, as this did not seem to make the lips quite red enough, Violet next proposed that the snow-child should be invited to kiss Peony’s scarlet cheek.

“Come, ‘ittle snow-sister, kiss me!” cried Peony.

“There! she has kissed you,” added Violet, “and her lips are very red. And she blushed a little, too!”

“O, what a cold kiss!” cried Peony.

Just then, there came a breeze of the pure west-wind, sweeping through the garden and rattling the parlour-windows. It sounded so wintry cold, that the mother was about to tap on the window-pane with her thimble finger, to summon the two children in, when they both cried out to her with one voice. The tone was not a tone of surprise, although they were evidently a good deal excited; it appeared rather as if they were very much rejoiced at some event that had now happened, but which they had been looking for, and had reckoned upon all along.

“Mamma! mamma! We have finished our little snow-sister, and she is running about the garden with us!”

“What imaginative little beings my children are!” thought the mother, putting the last few stitches into Peony’s frock. “And it is strange, too, that they make me almost as much a child as they themselves are! I can hardly help believing, now, that the snow-image has really come to life!”

“Dear mamma!” cried Violet, “pray look out and see what a sweet playmate we have!”

The mother, being thus entreated, could no longer delay to look forth from the window. The sun was now gone out of the sky, leaving, however, a rich inheritance of his brightness among those purple and golden clouds which make the sunsets of winter so magnificent. But there was not the slightest gleam or dazzle, either on the window or on the snow; so that the good lady could look all over the garden, and see everything and everybody in it. And what do you think she saw there? Violet and Peony, of course, her own two darling children. Ah, but whom or what did she see besides? Why, if you will believe me, there was a small figure of a girl, dressed all in white, with rose-tinged cheeks and ringlets of golden hue, playing about the garden with the two children! A stranger though she was, the child seemed to be on as familiar terms with Violet and Peony, and they with her, as if all the three had been

playmates during the whole of their little lives. The mother thought to herself that it must certainly be the daughter of one of the neighbours, and that, seeing Violet, and Peony in the garden, the child had run across the street to play with them. So this kind lady went to the door, intending to invite the little runaway into her comfortable parlour; for, now that the sunshine was withdrawn, the atmosphere, out of doors, was already growing very cold.

But, after opening the house-door, she stood an instant on the threshold, hesitating whether she ought to ask the child to come in, or whether she should even speak to her. Indeed, she almost doubted whether it were a real child, after all, or only a light wreath of the new-fallen snow, blown hither and thither about the garden by the intensely cold west-wind. There was certainly something very singular in the aspect of the little stranger. Among all the children of the neighbourhood, the lady could remember no such face, with its pure white, and delicate rose-colour, and the golden ringlets tossing about the forehead and cheeks. And as for her dress, which was entirely of white, and fluttering in the breeze, it was such as no reasonable woman would put upon a little girl, when sending her out to play, in the depth of winter. It made this kind and careful mother shiver only to look at those small feet, with nothing in the world on them, except a very thin pair of white slippers. Nevertheless, airily as she was clad, the child seemed to feel not the slightest inconvenience from the cold, but danced so lightly over the snow that the tips of her toes left hardly a print in its surface; while Violet could but just keep pace with her, and Peony's short legs compelled him to lag behind.

Once, in the course of their play, the strange child placed herself between Violet and Peony, and taking a hand of each, skipped merrily forward, and they along with her. Almost immediately, however, Peony pulled away his little fist, and began to rub it as if the fingers were tingling with cold; while Violet also released herself, though with less abruptness, gravely remarking that it was better not to take hold of hands. The white-robed damsel said

not a word, but danced about, just as merrily as before. If Violet and Peony did not choose to play with her, she could make just as good a playmate of the brisk and cold west-wind, which kept blowing her all about the garden, and took such liberties with her, that they seemed to have been friends for a long time. All this while, the mother stood on the threshold, wondering how a little girl could look so much like a flying snow-drift, or how a snow-drift could look so very like a little girl.

She called Violet, and whispered to her.

“Violet, my darling, what is this child’s name?” asked she. “Does she live near us?”

“Why, dearest mamma,” answered Violet, laughing to think that her mother did not comprehend so very plain an affair, “this is our little snow-sister, whom we have just been making!”

“Yes, dear mamma,” cried Peony, running to his mother and looking up simply into her face, “This is our snow-image! Is it not a nice ‘ittle child?”

At this instant a flock of snow-birds came flitting through the air. As was very natural, they avoided Violet and Peony. But—and this looked strange—they flew at once to the white-robed child, fluttered eagerly about her head, alighted on her shoulders, and seemed to claim her as an old acquaintance. She, on her part, was evidently as glad to see these little birds, old Winter’s grandchildren, as they were to see her, and welcomed them by holding out both her hands. Hereupon, they each and all tried to alight on her two palms and ten small fingers and thumbs, crowding one another off, with an immense fluttering of their tiny wings. One dear little bird nestled tenderly in her bosom; another put its bill to her lips. They were as joyous, all the while, and seemed as much in their element, as you may have seen them when sporting with a snow-storm.

Violet and Peony stood laughing at this pretty sight: for they enjoyed the merry time which their new playmate was having with their small-winged visitants, almost as much as if they themselves took part in it.

“Violet,” said her mother, greatly perplexed, “tell me the truth, without any jest. Who is this little girl?”

“My darling mamma,” answered Violet, looking seriously into her mother’s face, and apparently surprised that she should need any further explanation, “I have told you truly who she is. It is our little snow-image, which Peony and I have been making. Peony will tell you so, as well as I.”

“Yes, mamma,” asseverated Peony, with much gravity in his crimson little phiz, “this is ‘ittle snow-child. Is not she a nice one? But, mamma, her hand, is oh, so very cold!”

While mamma still hesitated what to think and what to do, the street-gate was thrown open, and the father of Violet and Peony appeared, wrapped in a pilot-cloth sack, with a fur cap drawn down over his ears, and the thickest of gloves upon his hands. Mr. Lindsey was a middle-aged man, with a weary and yet a happy look in his wind-flushed and frost-pinched face, as if he had been busy all the day long, and was glad to get back to his quiet home. His eyes brightened at the sight of his wife and children, although he could not help uttering a word or two of surprise, at finding the whole family in the open air, on so bleak a day, and after sunset too. He soon perceived the little white stranger, sporting to and fro in the garden, like a dancing snow-wreath, and the flock of snow-birds fluttering about her head.

“Pray, what little girl may that be?” inquired this very sensible man. “Surely her mother must be crazy, to let her go out in such bitter weather as it has been to-day, with only that flimsy white gown and those thin slippers!”

“My dear husband,” said his wife, “I know no more about the little thing than you do. Some neighbour’s child, I suppose. Our Violet and Peony,” she added, laughing at herself for

repeating so absurd a story, “insist that she is nothing but a snow-image, which they have been busy about in the garden, almost all the afternoon.”

As she said this, the mother glanced her eyes toward the spot where the children’s snow-image had been made. What was her surprise, on perceiving that there was not the slightest trace of so much labour!—no image at all—no piled up heap of snow—nothing whatever, save the prints of little footsteps around a vacant space!

“This is very strange!” said she.

“What is strange, dear mother?” asked Violet. “Dear father, do not you see how it is? This is our snow-image, which Peony and I have made, because we wanted another playmate. Did not we, Peony?”

“Yes, papa,” said crimson Peony. “This be our ‘ittle snow-sister. Is she not beau-ti-ful? But she gave me such a cold kiss!”

“Pooh, nonsense, children!” cried their good, honest father, who, as we have already intimated, had an exceedingly common-sensible way of looking at matters. “Do not tell me of making live figures out of snow. Come, wife; this little stranger must not stay out in the bleak air a moment longer. We will bring her into the parlour; and you shall give her a supper of warm bread and milk, and make her as comfortable as you can. Meanwhile, I will inquire among the neighbours; or, if necessary, send the city-crier about the streets, to give notice of a lost child.”

So saying, this honest and very kind-hearted man was going toward the little white damsel, with the best intentions in the world. But Violet and Peony, each seizing their father by the hand, earnestly besought him not to make her come in.

“Dear father,” cried Violet, putting herself before him, “it is true what I have been telling you! This is our little snow-girl, and she cannot live any longer than while she breathes the cold west-wind. Do not make her come into the hot room!”

“Yes, father,” shouted Peony, stamping his little foot, so mightily was he in earnest, “this be nothing but our ‘ittle snow-child! She will not love the hot fire!”

“Nonsense, children, nonsense, nonsense!” cried the father, half vexed, half laughing at what he considered their foolish obstinacy. “Run into the house, this moment! It is too late to play any longer, now. I must take care of this little girl immediately, or she will catch her death a-cold!”

“Husband! dear husband!” said his wife, in a low voice—for she had been looking narrowly at the snow-child, and was more perplexed than ever—there is something very singular in all this. “You will think me foolish—but—but—may it not be that some invisible angel has been attracted by the simplicity and good faith with which our children set about their undertaking? May he not have spent an hour of his immortality in playing with those dear little souls? and so the result is what we call a miracle. No, no! Do not laugh at me; I see what a foolish thought it is!”

“My dear wife,” replied the husband, laughing heartily, “you are as much a child as Violet and Peony.”

And in one sense so she was, for all through life she had kept her heart full of childlike simplicity and faith, which was as pure and clear as crystal; and, looking at all matters through this transparent medium, she sometimes saw truths so profound, that other people laughed at them as nonsense and absurdity.

But now kind Mr. Lindsey had entered the garden, breaking away from his two children, who still sent their shrill voices after him, beseeching him to let the snow-child stay and enjoy herself in the cold west-wind. As he approached, the snow-birds took to flight. The little white damsel, also, fled backward, shaking her head, as if to say, “Pray, do not touch me!” and roguishly, as it appeared, leading him through the deepest of the snow. Once, the good man stumbled, and floundered down upon his face, so that, gathering himself up again, with

the snow sticking to his rough pilot-cloth sack, he looked as white and wintry as a snow-image of the largest size. Some of the neighbours, meanwhile, seeing him from their windows, wondered what could possess poor Mr. Lindsey to be running about his garden in pursuit of a snow-drift, which the west-wind was driving hither and thither! At length, after a vast deal of trouble, he chased the little stranger into a corner, where she could not possibly escape him. His wife had been looking on, and, it being nearly twilight, was wonderstruck to observe how the snow-child gleamed and sparkled, and how she seemed to shed a glow all round about her; and when driven into the corner, she positively glistened like a star! It was a frosty kind of brightness, too like that of an icicle in the moonlight. The wife thought it strange that good Mr. Lindsey should see nothing remarkable in the snow-child's appearance. "Come, you odd little thing!" cried the honest man, seizing her by the hand, "I have caught you at last, and will make you comfortable in spite of yourself. We will put a nice warm pair of worsted stockings on your frozen little feet, and you shall have a good thick shawl to wrap yourself in. Your poor white nose, I am afraid, is actually frost-bitten. But we will make it all right. Come along in."

And so, with a most benevolent smile on his sagacious visage, all purple as it was with the cold, this very well-meaning gentleman took the snow-child by the hand and led her towards the house. She followed him, droopingly and reluctant; for all the glow and sparkle was gone out of her figure; and whereas just before she had resembled a bright frosty, star-gemmed evening, with a crimson gleam on the cold horizon, she now looked as dull and languid as a thaw. As kind Mr. Lindsey led her up the steps of the door, Violet and Peony looked into his face—their eyes full of tears, which froze before they could run down their cheeks—and again entreated him not to bring their snow-image into the house.

“Not bring her in!” exclaimed the kind-hearted man. “Why, you are crazy, my little Violet!—quite crazy, my small Peony! She is so cold, already, that her hand has almost frozen mine, in spite of my thick gloves. Would you have her freeze to death?”

His wife, as he came up the steps, had been taking another long, earnest, almost awe-stricken gaze at the little white stranger. She hardly knew whether it was a dream or not, but she could not help fancying that she saw the delicate print of Violet’s fingers on the child’s neck. It looked just as if, while Violet was shaping out the image, she had given it a gentle pat with her hand, and had neglected to smooth the impression quite away.

“After all, husband,” said the mother, recurring to her idea that the angels would be as much delighted to play with Violet and Peony as she herself was—“after all, she does look strangely like a snow-image! I do believe she is made of snow!”

A puff of the west-wind blew against the snow-child, and again she sparkled like a star.

“Snow!” repeated good Mr. Lindsey, drawing the reluctant guest over this hospitable threshold. “No wonder she looks like snow. She is half frozen, poor little thing! But a good fire will put everything to rights.”

Without further talk, and always with the same best intentions, this highly benevolent and common-sensible individual led the little white damsel—drooping, drooping, drooping, more and more—out of the frosty air, and into his comfortable parlour. A Heidenberg stove, filled to the brim with intensely burning anthracite, was sending a bright gleam through the isinglass of its iron door, and causing the vase of water on its top to fume and bubble with excitement. A warm, sultry smell was diffused throughout the room. A thermometer on the wall farthest from the stove stood at eighty degrees. The parlour was hung with red curtains, and covered with a red carpet, and looked just as warm as it felt. The difference betwixt the atmosphere here and the cold, wintry twilight out of doors, was like stepping at once from

Nova Zembla to the hottest part of India, or from the North Pole into an oven. O, this was a fine place for the little white stranger!

The common-sensible man placed the snow-child on the hearth-rug, right in front of the hissing and fuming stove.

“Now she will be comfortable!” cried Mr. Lindsey, rubbing his hands and looking about him, with the pleasantest smile you ever saw. “Make yourself at home, my child.”

Sad, sad and drooping, looked the little white maiden, as she stood on the hearth-rug, with the hot blast of the stove striking through her like a pestilence. Once, she threw a glance wistfully toward the windows, and caught a glimpse, through its red curtains, of the snow-covered roofs, and the stars glimmering frostily, and all the delicious intensity of the cold night. The bleak wind rattled the window-panes, as if it were summoning her to come forth. But there stood the snow-child, drooping, before the hot stove!

But the common-sensible man saw nothing amiss.

“Come, wife,” said he, “let her have a pair of thick stockings and a woollen shawl or blanket directly; and tell Dora to give her some warm supper as soon as the milk boils. You, Violet and Peony, amuse your little friend. She is out of spirits, you see, at finding herself in a strange place. For my part, I will go around among the neighbours, and find out where she belongs.”

The mother, meanwhile, had gone in search of the shawl and stockings; for her own view of the matter, however subtle and delicate, had given way, as it always did, to the stubborn materialism of her husband. Without heeding the remonstrances of his two children, who still kept murmuring that their little snow-sister did not love the warmth, good Mr. Lindsey took his departure, shutting the parlour-door carefully behind him. Turning up the collar of his sack over his ears, he emerged from the house, and had barely reached the street-gate when

he was recalled by the screams of Violet and Peony, and the rapping of a thimble finger against the parlour window.

“Husband! husband!” cried his wife, showing her horror-stricken face through the window-panes. “There is no need of going for the child’s parents!”

“We told you so, father!” screamed Violet and Peony, as he re-entered the parlour. “You would bring her in; and now our poor—dear—beau-ti-ful little snow-sister is thawed!”

And their own sweet little faces were already dissolved in tears; so that their father, seeing what strange things occasionally happen in this every-day world, felt not a little anxious lest his children might be going to thaw too! In the utmost perplexity, he demanded an explanation of his wife. She could only reply, that, being summoned to the parlour by the cries of Violet and Peony, she found no trace of the little white maiden, unless it were the remains of a heap of snow, which, while she was gazing at it, melted quite away upon the hearth-rug.

“And there you see all that is left of it!” added she, pointing to a pool of water, in front of the stove.

“Yes, father,” said Violet, looking reproachfully at him, through her tears, “there is all that is left of our dear little snow-sister!”

“Naughty father!” cried Peony, stamping his foot, and—I shudder to say—shaking his little fist at the common-sensible man. “We told you how it would be! What for did you bring her in?”

And the Heidenberg stove, through the isinglass of its door, seemed to glare at good Mr. Lindsey, like a red-eyed demon, triumphing in the mischief which it had done!

This, you will observe, was one of those rare cases, which yet will occasionally happen, where common-sense finds itself at fault. The remarkable story of the snow-image, though to that sagacious class of people to whom good Mr. Lindsey belongs it may seem but a childish

affair, is, nevertheless, capable of being moralised in various methods, greatly for their edification. One of its lessons, for instance, might be that it behooves men, and especially men of benevolence, to consider well what they are about, and, before acting on their philanthropic purposes, to be quite sure that they comprehend the nature and all the relations of the business in hand. What has been established as an element of good to one being may prove absolute mischief to another; even as the warmth of the parlour was proper enough for children of flesh and blood, like Violet and Peony—though by no means very wholesome, even for them—involved nothing short of annihilation to the unfortunate snow-image.

But, after all, there is no teaching anything to wise men of good Mr. Lindsey's stamp. They know everything—O, to be sure!—everything that has been, and everything that is, and everything that, by any future possibility, can be. And should some phenomenon of nature or providence transcend their system, they will not recognise it, even if it come to pass under their very noses.

“Wife,” said Mr. Lindsey, after a fit of silence, “see what a quantity of snow the children have brought in on their feet! It has made quite a puddle here before the stove. Pray tell Dora to bring some towels and sop it up!”

8. "The Purloined Letter" (1844)

Summary

In a small room in Paris, an unnamed narrator, who also narrates "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," sits quietly with his friend, C. Auguste Dupin. He ponders the murders in the Rue Morgue, which Dupin solved in that story. Monsieur G, the prefect of the Paris police, arrives, having decided to consult Dupin again. The prefect presents a case that is almost too simple: a letter has been taken from the royal apartments. The police know who has taken it: the Minister D, an important government official. According to the prefect, a young lady possessed the letter, which contains information that could harm a powerful individual. When the young lady was first reading the letter, the man whom it concerned came into the royal apartments. Not wanting to arouse his suspicion, she put it down on a table next to her. The sinister Minister D— then walked in and noted the letter's contents. Quickly grasping the seriousness of the situation, he produced a letter of his own that resembled the important letter. He left his own letter next to the original one as he began to talk of Parisian affairs. Finally, as he prepared to leave the apartment, he purposely retrieved the lady's letter in place of his own. Now, the prefect explains, the Minister D possesses a great deal of power over the lady.

Dupin asks whether the police have searched the Minister's residence, arguing that since the power of the letter derives from its being readily available, it must be in his apartment. The prefect responds that they have searched the Minister's residence but have not located the letter. He recounts the search procedure, during which the police systematically searched every inch of the hotel. In addition, the letter could not be hidden on the Minister's body because the police have searched him as well. The prefect mentions that he is willing to search long and hard because the reward offered in the case is so generous. Upon Dupin's

request, the prefect reads him a physical description of the letter. Dupin suggests that the police search again.

One month later, Dupin and the narrator are again sitting together when the prefect visits. The prefect admits that he cannot find the letter, even though the reward has increased. The prefect says that he will pay 50,000 francs to anyone who obtains the letter for him. Dupin tells him to write a check for that amount on the spot. Upon receipt of the check, Dupin hands over the letter. The prefect rushes off to return it to its rightful owner, and Dupin explains how he obtained the letter.

Dupin admits that the police are skilled investigators according to their own principles. He explains this remark by describing a young boy playing “even and odd.” In this game, each player must guess whether the number of things (usually toys) held by another player is even or odd. If the guesser is right, he gets one of the toys. If he is wrong, he loses a toy of his own. The boy whom Dupin describes plays the game well because he bases his guesses on the knowledge of his opponent. When he faces difficulty, he imitates the facial expression of his opponent, as though to understand what he thinks and feels. With this knowledge, he often guesses correctly. Dupin argues that the Paris police do not use this strategy and therefore could not find the letter: the police think only to look for a letter in places where they themselves might hide it.

Dupin argues that the Minister D is intelligent enough not to hide the letter in the nooks and crannies of his apartment exactly where the police first investigate. He describes to the narrator a game of puzzles in which one player finds a name on a map and tells the other player to find it as well. Amateurs, says Dupin, pick the names with the smallest letters. According to Dupin’s logic, the hardest names to find are actually those that stretch broadly across the map because they are so obvious.

With this game in mind, Dupin recounts the visit he made to the Minister's apartment. After surveying the Minister's residence, Dupin notices a group of visiting cards hanging from the mantelpiece. A letter accompanies them. It has a different exterior than that previously described by the prefect, but Dupin also observes that the letter appears to have been folded back on itself. He becomes sure that it is the stolen document. In order to create a reason for returning to the apartment, he purposely leaves behind his snuffbox. When he goes back the next morning to retrieve it, he also arranges for someone to make a commotion outside the window while he is in the apartment. When the Minister rushes to the window to investigate the noise, Dupin replaces the stolen letter with a fake. He justifies his decision to leave behind another letter by predicting that the Minister will embarrass himself when he acts in reliance upon the letter he falsely believes he still possesses. Dupin remarks that the Minister once wronged him in Vienna and that he has pledged not to forget the insult. Inside the fake letter, then, Dupin inscribes, a French poem that translates into English, "So baneful a scheme, if not worthy of Atreus, is worthy of Thyestes."

UNIT V

9. An Ideal Family"

Summary

Mr. Neave felt as if he were too old for spring this year. Walking home from work, as he had done countless times before, he suddenly felt very tired and subdued by his surroundings. He could not understand why. It had been an ordinary day at the office. His son, Harold, who stood to inherit the business, arrived hours late from lunch, sauntering into the office, apologizing to no one and yet everyone, especially the women, forgave him all his faults. Harold was too handsome by far with his full lips and eyelashes. Mr. Neave thought them uncanny and recoiled at the praise his son unjustly received from the family. Charlotte, his wife, and their daughters had made a "young god" (143) of Harold and were forever telling Mr. Neave it was time for him to retire and leave the business to his son but how could Mr. Neave do so in good consciousness? Harold was unsuitable for the job: he didn't take the work seriously and had no idea how hard Mr. Neave had worked over the years to ensure the success of his enterprise. No, he could not leave it to Harold. "A man had either to put his whole heart and soul into it, or it went all to pieces before his eyes..." (144.)

Charlotte and the girls wanted him to stay at home and enjoy all of the luxuries he had worked so hard to acquire. They had the most popular house on Harcourt Ave and Charlotte and the girls were forever entertaining. Mr. Neave; however, bristled at the idea of being at home instead of at the office. His youngest daughter, Lola, had suggested he get a hobby to occupy his time hinting that he would be unbearable to live with otherwise. Mr. Neave, stopping near the ancient cabbage plants outside of the Government buildings to gather his thoughts, reflected that it was a good thing he had invested his time wisely or Charlotte and the girls would not have any of the wonderful things he had bought them over the years

including the “sixty-guinea gramophone” in the music room and the many horses, tennis lessons, and the sea-side bungalow.

Mr. Neave never begrudged his wife and daughters their accessories, knowing they were all put to good use, as the girls were very popular and Charlotte a remarkable wife and mother. Mr. Neave’s house was frequently the site of large parties and he was often complimented on his “ideal family,” especially the girls who were very beautiful and sought after but had chosen to stay at home rather than be married. It was a strange arrangement but one that suited Charlotte and the girls nicely.

Rounding a corner, Mr. Neave came upon his home on Harcourt Ave. The open windows and beautiful flowers on the porch reflected the young lives of his daughters within. As Mr. Neave entered the house he overheard his wife and daughters talking to one another in the living room. He ran into Lola, his youngest, in the hallway. She had just finished playing the piano and was nervous about something and hardly acknowledged her father’s presence. For his part, Mr. Neave barely recognized Lola, a young woman now in her prime. He thought of her still as a little girl and realized he did not know Lola as well as he thought he did.

Going into the living room he met his wife Charlotte who reproachfully told him he looked tired. Ethel and Marion, his other daughters, echoed their mother’s sentiment and Marion, taking control of the conversation, scolded her mother for allowing Mr. Neave to walk home when he should have taken a cab, implying that he was too old to walk such a distance. Marion’s stern tone of voice was at odds with the young Marion that Mr. Neave remembered who had been a shy child and had stuttered. Now Marion shouted wherever she went, making her presence known.

Mr. Neave sat down in his chair and was promptly forgotten by his family as they chatted about a dress that Ethel wanted from a catalogue and wondered aloud where Harold was and

when he would return. Mr. Neave drifted off to sleep, realizing that Charlotte and the girls were too lively for him tonight. As sleep overtook him he thought he saw an old man climbing an endless flight of stairs. “Who is he?” (147.)

Mr. Neave woke suddenly and was told to dress for dinner, they were to have guests again tonight. Mr. Neave protested that he was too tired to dress but the girls persuaded him to ask Charles, the butler, for help. Mr. Neave joined the old man on the stairs and walked to his dressing room. There, Charles waited to help Mr. Neave change into new clothes. Afterward Charles left Mr. Neave in the room.

Finally alone, Mr. Neave reflected it would soon be time for tennis and the girls would have tennis parties and Charlotte would call out asking where Harold was and someone would reply that he said he would be there...His mind wandered and he saw the old man again, now climbing down the stairs, going out the door and heading to the office. Mr. Neave called out for someone to stop the man and woke himself with a jolt. He must have fallen asleep. He heard the far-away voices of his family. They had forgotten him, again.

He listened to them for a moment and concluded that he did not know who they were. They were strangers to him. Life had passed him by and he had spent far too many hours at the office and not enough at home. He did not know Charlotte as well as he wanted to. He thought this Charlotte could not be his wife. His wife was the Charlotte of many years ago who wrapped her arms around his neck and called him “my treasure”(148.) The rest of his life has passed by in a dream.

Then the door opened and Charles told Mr. Neave that dinner was ready and the old gentleman got up and said “I’m coming, I’m coming” (148.)

10. The Sacrificial Egg

A talented young Nigerian who was educated in missionary and government schools, Chinua Achebe won a scholarship at the University College in Ibadan, where he took his degree in the arts. He studied broadcasting at the BBC and now divides his time between writing and his work at the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission. His novel dealing with life in an African tribe, *Things Fall Apart*, has recently been published by McDowell, Obolensky. A short story.

By Chinua Achebe

SHARE

JULIUS Obi sat gazing at his typewriter. The fat chief clerk, his boss, was snoring at his table. Outside, the gatekeeper in his green uniform was sleeping at his post. No customer had passed through the gate for nearly a week. There was an empty basket on the giant weighing machine. A few palm kernels lay in the dust around the machine.

Julius went to the window that overlooked the great market on the bank of the Niger. This market, like all Ibo markets, had been held on one of the four days of the week. But with the coming of the white man and the growth of Umuru into a big palm-oil port, it had become a daily market. In spite of that however, it was still busiest on its original Nkwo day, because the deity that presided over it cast her spell only on that day. It was said that she appeared in the form of an old woman in the center of the market just before cockcrow and waved her magic fan in the four directions of the earth -- in front of her, behind her, to the right, and to the left -- to draw to the market men and women from distant clans. And they came, these men and women, bringing the produce of their lands: palm oil and kernels, kola nuts, cassava,

mats, baskets, and earthenware pots. And they took home many-colored cloths, smoked fish, iron pots and plates.

Others came by the great river bringing yams and fish in their canoes. Sometimes it was a big canoe with a dozen or more people in it; sometimes it was just a fisherman and his wife in a small vessel from the swiftflowing Anambara. They moored their canoe on the bank and sold their fish, after much haggling. The woman then walked up the steep banks of the river to the heart of the market to buy salt and oil and, if the sales had been good, a length of cloth. And for her children at home she bought bean cakes or *akara* and *mai-mai*, which the Igara women cooked. As evening approached, they took up their paddles and paddled away, the water shimmering in the sunset and their canoe becoming smaller and smaller in the distance until it was just a dark crescent on the water's face and two dark bodies swaying forwards and backwards in it.

Julius Obi was not a native of Umuru. He came from a bush village twenty or so miles away. But having passed his Standard Six in a mission school in 1920 he came to Umuru to work as a clerk in the offices of the Niger Company, which dealt in palm oil and kernels. The offices were situated beside the famous Umuru market, so that in his first two or three weeks Julius had to learn to work against the background of its noise. Sometimes when the chief clerk was away or asleep he walked to the window and looked down on the vast anthill activity. Most of these people were not there yesterday, he thought, and yet the market was as full. There must be many, many people in the world. Of course they say that not everyone who came to the great market was a real person. Janet's mother had said so.

"Some of the beautiful young women you see squeezing through the crowds are not real people but *mammy-wota* from the river," she said.

"How does one know them?" asked Julius, whose education placed him above such superstitious stuff. But he took care not to sound unbelieving. He had long learned that it was bad policy to argue with Ma on such points.

"You can always tell," she explained, "because they are beautiful with a beauty that is not of this world. You catch a glimpse of them with the tail of your eye, then they disappear in the crowd."

Julius thought about these things as he now stood at the window looking down at the empty market. Who would have believed that the great market could ever be so empty? But such was the power of *Kitikpa*, or smallpox.

When Umuru had been a little village, it had been swept and kept clean by its handful of inhabitants. But now it had grown into a busy, sprawling, crowded, and dirty river port. And *Kitikpa* came. No other disease is feared by the Ibo people as much as they fear *Kitikpa*. It is personified as an evil deity. Its victims are not mourned lest it be offended. It put an end to the coming and going between neighbors and between villages. They said, "*Kitikpa* is in that village, and immediately it was cut off by its neighbors.

Julius was worried because it was almost a week since he had seen Janet, the girl he was going to marry. Ma had explained to him very gently that he should no longer come to see them "until this thing is over by the power of Jehovah." Ma was a very devout Christian, and one reason why she approved of Julius for her only daughter was that he sang in the church choir.

"You must keep to your rooms," she had said. "You never know whom you might meet on the streets. That family has got it." She pointed at the house across the road. "That is what the

yellow palm frond at the doorway means. The family were all moved away today in the big government lorry."

Janet walked a short way with him, and they said good night. And they shook hands, which was very odd.

Julius did not go straight home. He went to the bank of the river and just walked up and down it. He must have been there a long time, because he was still there when the *ekwe*, or wooden gong, of the night spirit sounded. He immediately set out for home, half walking and half running. He had about half an hour to get home before the spirit ran its race through the town.

As Julius hurried home he stepped on something that broke with a slight liquid explosion. He stopped and peeped down at the footpath. The moon was not yet up, but there was some faint light which showed that it would not be long delayed. In this light Julius saw that he had stepped on a sacrificial egg. There were young palm fronds around it. Someone oppressed by misfortune had brought the offering to the crossroads in the dusk. And he had stepped on it and taken the sufferer's ill luck to himself. "Nonsense," he said and hurried away. But it was too late; the night spirit was already abroad. Its voice rose high and clear in the still, black air. It was a long way away, but Julius knew that distance did not apply to these beings. So he made straight for the cocoyam farm beside the road and threw himself on his belly. He had hardly done this when he heard the rattling staff of the spirit and a thundering stream of esoteric speech. He shook all over. The sounds came bearing down on him. And then he could hear the footsteps. It was as if twenty men were running together. In no time at all the sounds had passed and disappeared in the distance on the other side of the road.

As Julius stood at the window looking out on the empty market he lived through that night again. It was only a week ago, but already it seemed to be separated from the present by a

vast emptiness. This emptiness deepened with the passage of time. On this side stood Julius, and on the other Ma and Janet, who were carried away by the smallpox.