

The House Over the River

Short story translated by Jayde Will

PAVLOV'S DOGS

Excerpts from an assistant's diary

February 5th, 1926

That wind and darkness are so oppressive – I loathe winter. But how wonderful it is to come to the laboratory and see that marvelous man, his smile, his eyes – so good and just. When Ivan Petrovich appears, it's like everything becomes brighter. I still most likely don't quite realize what an honor and joy it is to work with this genius. What's most important is how warm and polite he is, but his glance is enough for any brewing quarrels to settle down – his authority is so all-encompassing that even the soldiers that are guarding our institute, it appears, grow pale at the sight of him. Even the bourgeoisierespect him. And there most certainly is respect – it's no accident that Ivan Petrovich received the Nobel Prize in 1904. To be honest, I don't exactly understand why he accepted it, but perhaps it's simply human error. On the other hand, in that horrid tsarist regime, one had to find an opportunity to advance proletarian science. And Ivan Petrovich Pavlov is an example of how proletarian science breaks the ice of the bourgeoisie. Because Ivan Petrovich is a true proletarian (despite the fact that he tells abhorrent anecdotes).

February 15th, 1926

How farsighted comrade Vladimir Ilyich Lenin was. When hunger raged and poverty was rife everywhere, he was able to tend to science. And that is always critical. Proletarian science is the future of our country and a necessity. And how much pain and suffering our great scientists had to bear. A case in point – all the dogs that were in Koltushi died after the revolution. Because of improper feeding. When Ivan Petrovich talked about this, he even got upset. He had thought that all was lost, that all was for naught. Then he asked comrade Lenin to release him from his beloved homeland. He saw no other solution than to leave (though it seems to me that Ivan Petrovich was bluffing). But he did not leave, because comrade Lenin did everything so that Academic Pavlov had the conditions for work and experiments. Because they were not just experiments, but ones of utter importance, which our proletarian health will depend on in the future. But there are still unenlightened and ignorant people that do not understand this. For example, Nikifor, our building caretaker, mutters and waves his hand dismissively: "Science, science, what sort of science is that of yours, you wretched people. All you do is chop up dogs." It's horrible that there are such blind and stupid people. Now I am thinking that perhaps it's my duty as a Communist Youth to report such words by that swine of a building caretaker?

February 16th, 1926

I read Sechenov's book for the third time already. A fantastic work. A genius book, just not supported by experiments – that's what comrade Pavlov said about it. It seems I am already understanding why he is so enamored by this work.

February 17th, 1926

Comrade Pavlov trusts me more and more. For example, today – we drove to visit his old acquaintance Nikolai Yuryevich Obolensky. That Obolensky lives with his missus in the middle of the city, in pain and emptiness. He is gray, just like the walls there. Ivan Petrovich sat on his gray bed and took that gray hand of his, not bothered one bit by either the smell or the atmosphere. All the lady of the house did was blow her nose. “My condolences, Marya Alexandrova,” Ivan Petrovich said. And you felt how saddened he was. When we left that gray house, when we drove to Koltushi, Comrade Pavlov sighed and said, “De La Mettrie was right – man is a machine – only a machine made out of flesh and bones.”

February 26th, 1926

The anatomy of the human mouth is almost the same as that of a dog's mouth. To be honest, I wasn't very surprised by that. Evolution affects us all the same, people and dogs.

March 5th, 1926

That can't be true, can it? I found out that Serafima Vasilyevna believes in God. I couldn't believe it, I couldn't believe it, I couldn't believe, though I heard all sorts of rumors. How could she be the wife of Academic Pavlov and believe in God? After all, the bourgeoisie poison can bury itself into us very deeply. I saw with my own eyes how Serafima Vasilyevna made the sign of the cross. Now I can justify comrade Pavlov and his deep proletarian friendship with Marina Kapitonovna. After all, how difficult it must be as a scientist, a dyed-in-the-wool atheist, who communicates every day with a person who means something to you, but who is under the spell of the darkest of superstitions! “Serafima Vasilyevna is the mother of comrade Pavlov's children, but I am the mother of Academic Ivan Petrovich Pavlov's thoughts and dreams” – those are the words of Marina Kapitonovna, which I now believe in.

March 16th, 1926

Comrade Pavlov is not only a great scientist, but also a great humanist. How good it is to be close to him – a full chest of refreshing and remarkably light air. Today Kolya N. was once again fed chocolate. How unfortunate that around us are so many unenlightened people – the Cheka does not understand the importance of our experiments. Lieutenant Misha, whom I liked earlier, now I hardly like at all – I see how he doesn't understand why we are feeding some orphan called Kolya chocolate, cabbage cores, and wonderful bread. And I certainly won't jump to explain to him what conditional and unconditional reflexes are and how they relate to our everyday life. To be honest, Kolya has very sad eyes. I don't know why.

March 23rd, 1926

I continue to promise myself that I will write you, diary, every day, but I'm not. What's most important is that it's not because of laziness, but because of diligence. Comrade Academic Ivan Petrovich Pavlov said, "I am already an old man. Although I will live thirty years more, the operations should be done by the young." Professor N. I. Krasnogosky fastened a skin irritant to Kolya's hand. We press the little pump, and Kolya feels the irritation – it evokes salivating in him. Kolya is just like a dog. On professor Pavlov's instruction, N. I. Krasnogorsky ran a metal fistula from the salivary gland duct through the mouth cavity, which now protrudes out his cheek. And the saliva runs through that fistula into a special pouch. You show Kolya something tasty, for example cabbage, and saliva starts to drip. This kind of reaction from an organism is called a conditional reflex. Academic Pavlov does such pure experiments that he begins to do the experiment only when, after the operation, a child or dog, or for example a monkey, has fully recovered, so no inflammation remains, and when their temperature has returned to normal. Oh, how much we struggled with Kolya, as he needed to be calm and not become agitated, not touch the metal tube coming out of his mouth cavity. But of course, he became agitated, tossed and turned, and scratched. With dogs it's a bit easier. They are simply placed in a metal frame, where it can feel rather free (the frame doesn't constrict it) and at the same time be immobilized. With Kolya, we didn't know at all what to do with him, which is why in the end we were forced to tie his hands together. Kolya looks at us angrily, but the little dimwit doesn't understand that he's a participant in a scientific experiment, that he should feel happiness and honor, that he is serving proletarian science. All the more that now he receives fantastic nourishment – meanwhile, the entire country is starving. It's said that even Comrade Stalin is going without food. But Kolya is not starving – he is shown chocolate or a turnip, and it's observed what causes more salivation. We are planning on running a tube from Kolya's stomach so we can see how the conditional reflex works there too – we will separate out Kolya's pure gastric juice. We've been doing that with dogs for a long time already. The wound will heal, and the little fistula won't bother him at all – the little boy will just have to move a little less so he doesn't ruin the experiment. It is of extreme importance to our country and proletarian medicine because it is science, though sometimes it seems that Kolya couldn't care in the least.

And the Cheka soldier Misha is jealous of Kolya.

I see that he's jealous.

I am afraid to write this, but as a scientist I am obliged to – when I think of Misha, my vulva becomes wet. And yet another incident: Misha kneeled in front of me and kissed my knees. I am afraid that the proletariat would not think highly of such bourgeois sentiments. But Misha is a Chekist – a defender of the working class. I don't know what to do.

March 26th, 1926

How wonderful academic Ivan Petrovich Pavlov's family is. Today a large part of the laboratory workers was invited to the academic's home. Whoever wanted could even sip on wine. Serafima Vasilyevna played the piano. Everyone tried to persuade Ivan Petrovich to as well, but he refused. In the end, he did sit down at the instrument and while smiling

performed “March of the Dogs” with great enthusiasm. We all laughed when our adored academic talked about how he learned to play it and how he was unable to do it, but that he was determined to learn this march and he learned it. It would be unbecoming, he said, if I experimented with dogs and did not know their march. Afterwards, this luminary of science spoke (oh, I still can’t, it seems, fully understand what joy befell me in life, and I thank my destiny every day that I am here in the very heart of proletarian science), and Ivan Petrovich shared his thoughts and plans, and what experiments awaited in the near future. He decided to become acquainted with research and open the activity of the human brain to the proletarian reality through the experimental path of a physiologist. After all, it’s the same as the stomach, the eyes, the spleen – the brain is also a human organ, just like the others, but thought appears and is born in the brain because physiological laws are at work. We were brought another fourteen young teenagers, such scared, undernourished peasants with oddly enormous eyes from orphanages because their parents were long ago accused of running afoul of the laws of the communist fatherland or died, or perhaps disappeared without a trace. Hungry, some of them sickly – Academic Pavlov ordered us to take good care of them, to attend to them, give them porridge and turnips. And later, when the organisms of these young participants of proletarian science become stronger, we will implant catheters in their stomachs and other organs. The hardest thing will be, of course, with the brains, but N. I. Krasnogorsky is wonderful at performing trepanations, I trust that everything will be fine. Oh, how I am waiting for the beginning of these fascinating experiments.

When we returned from the hospitable home of academic Pavlov, the wonderful French wine that we had drunk made us a little tipsy. Perhaps I acted unwisely, but Misha was so persistent... He really is wonderful, just a little headstrong, but a true soldier of the proletariat’s dictatorship – severe and merciless. And it is me that he loves. Which is why I am not afraid of him at all. Today I even laughed, because it really was funny, that post-coital he stood in the laboratory’s dressing room with a jacket, but without his gallifet, tangled up in his footwraps.

Afterwards, before locking up the laboratory for the night, we checked everything, and I became very angry with Kolya’s behavior – so many orphans want to be in Kolya’s place, serve their Soviet fatherland, proletarian science, and the future. All the more than for the importance of the experiment, Kolya is always well-fed, kept warm, his sheets are changed, and he, thankless, does not appreciate it.

He looks at us with such spiteful eyes. As if he detested us, as if he was an animal. That, by the way, only confirms that a person evolutionarily is no different at all from a dog or other mammal. The only difference is that dogs don’t articulate words. And Kolya sometimes speaks. And who teaches him such language?

“God will curse you,” Kolya tells me.

So small and yet... enemies of the people come from such people.