

KALCHAS¹

BY ANTON CHEKHOV

VASSILII VASSILIEVICH SVETLOVIDOV, the comic, a corpulent, sturdy old man of fifty-eight, awoke and looked about him in bewilderment. In front of him two stearin candles—one on either side of a small mirror—were guttering out. Their unwavering, languid flames dimly lit up a cubby-hole of a room with walls of painted deal, and filled with tobacco fumes and dusky shadows. All about him was the evidence of a recent meeting between Bacchos and Melpomene—a meeting clandestine but tempestuous and hideous, like vice. The chairs and the floor were strewn with coats, trousers, newspaper sheets, an overcoat with a loud lining, and an opera hat. A queer, chaotic disorder reigned on the table: here were crowded and jumbled empty bottles, tumblers, three wreaths, a gold-filled cigar-case, and a tray; a lottery coupon of the Second Loan (with one corner damp), and a scarfpin in its case. All this hodge-podge was generously besprinkled with fag-ends of cigars and cigarettes, with ashes, and with the small scraps of a torn letter. Svetlovidov himself was seated in a chair and was in the costume of Kalchas, the legendary soothsayer at the siege of Troy.

“Oh, my sainted aunt! I’m still in the dressing-room,—” the comic let drop, look-

ing about him. “There’s a how’d’ye-do! Whenever did I manage to doze off?”

He cocked his ears. All around him was a silence as of the grave. The cigar-case and the lottery coupon reminded him that this had been the day of his benefit, that he had scored a hit, and that he had drunk a great deal of cognac and red wine at every intermission together with his admirers, who had repeatedly taken his dressing-room by storm.

“Whenever did I manage to doze off?” he repeated. “Oh, you old curmudgeon,—you old curmudgeon! You’re an old dog! That means you got so swizzled that you simply dozed off in your chair . . . I commend you!”

Then he fell into a gay mood. He burst into drunken, wheezing laughter, took one of the candles, and walked out of his dressing-room. The stage was deserted and in darkness. A light but perceptible wind was blowing from the back of the stage, as well as from the wings and the auditorium. Breezes, like spirits, wandered freely over the stage, colliding with one another, circling, and sporting with the flame of his candle. The light wavered, twisted in all directions, and cast its feeble illumination now on the rows of doors leading into the dressing-rooms, now on a red wing with a fire-bucket standing near it, now on a large flat sprawling in the centre of the stage. “Egorka!” the comic called out. “Egorka, you devil! Petrushka! They’ve fallen asleep, damn their hides! Egorka!”

¹ Translated from the Russian by Bernard Guilbert Guerney. Authorities on Slavonic literature in the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library and elsewhere, concur with Mr. Guerney’s opinion that his is the first translation of this recently found story into English.

A-a-a! the echo responded.

The comic recalled that Egorka and Petrushka had got three roubles apiece from him, because of his benefit, to drink his health with. After such gratuities it was hardly probable that they would remain in the theatre for the night. He grunted, slumped upon a tabouret, and placed his candle on the floor. His head was heavy and filled with drink; all the mess of the beer, wine and cognac he had drunk was merely beginning to "rectify," while from sleeping in a sitting position he had grown weak and had the jitters.

"There's a whole squadron bivouacking in my mouth, the way I feel,—” he grumbled, and spat. "Eh, you old fool, you oughtn't to be drinking! You oughtn't! The small of your back is aching, and the old bean is splitting, and you're all chills-and-fever . . . It's old age."

He looked in front of him.—He could barely distinguish the prompter's booth, the private boxes, and the music-stands in the musicians' pit; as for the entire auditorium, it seemed a black, bottomless pit, a gaping maw, out of which a chill, harsh darkness was staring.—Ordinarily unassuming and cozy, the auditorium now, at night, seemed boundlessly deep, as deserted as the grave, and soulless.—The comic looked a while at the darkness, then at the candle, and went on with his grumbling:

"Yes,—it's old age . . . No matter how you twist and turn, how brave a front you put on, and how much you play the tom-fool, there are still fifty-eight years gone up the flue! As far as life goes, it's just a case of 'So-long!' Yes siree, Vassinka! However, here I've been working on the stage for thirty-five years, and yet, apparently, I'm seeing a theatre late at night for the first time. A curious matter, by God! Yes, for the first time. A weird sensation, the Devil take it. Egorka!" he called out, rising.

A . . . a . . . a! . . . the echo responded.

And, coinciding with the echo, somewhere afar off, just as if issuing from the very depths of the gaping maw, a bell began to peal for matins. Kalchas crossed himself.

"Petrushka!" he called out. "Where are you all, you devils? Good Lord, why am I naming the Foul One? Drop such talk,—drop drinking; for you're already old,—it's time for you to croak. At fifty-eight men go to matins, and prepare themselves for death, whereas you . . . Oh, Lord! . . . Lord have mercy upon me,—how weird all this is!" he grumbled. "Why, if a fellow were to sit here like this all night through he'd be like to die of fear. If this isn't the most fitting place to evoke the spirits! . . ."

At the word *spirits* he had a still greater access of fear.—The vagrant drafts and the shifting of the patches of light aroused and egged-on the imagination to the last degree . . . The comic, somehow, shrank into himself, slumped over, and, bending down to retrieve the candle, cast, for the last time, with a childish fear, a sidelong glance at the dark void. His face, disfigured by make-up, was stolid, almost inane. But, hardly had he put out his hand toward the candle, when he suddenly leapt up and began to stare fixedly into the darkness. He stood thus for half a minute; then, seized by an extraordinary horror, clutched his head and began stamping his feet . . .

"Who are you?" he cried out in a piercing voice that was not his own.

In one of the private boxes stood a human figure, all in white. Whenever the light fell in its direction one could distinguish its arms, head, and even a snowy beard.

"Who are you?" the comic repeated, in a voice of utter despair.

The white figure flung one foot over the barrier of the box and leapt down into the orchestra; then, noiselessly, like a shade, it moved in the direction of the footlights.

"It's me," it uttered, clambering upon the stage.

"Who is it?" cried out Kalchas, backing away.

"It's me . . . me,—Nikita Ivannich . . . the prompter, now . . . Please don't be alarmed."

The comic, trembling, and frightened out of his wits, sank back on the tabouret in utter exhaustion and let his head drop.

"It's me!" the tall, sinewy man was saying, approaching the actor. The newcomer was bald and had a long, hoary beard; all he had on was his underwear, and he was bare-footed. "It's me, now, the prompter—see?"

"My God—it's you . . .," the comic managed to get out, passing his palm over his forehead and breathing heavily. "Is it you, Nikitushka? Why—why are you here?"

"I'm sleepin' in the box, now. There's no place else for me to sleep. Only don't you say anythin' to the manager, please."

"So it's you, Nikitushka . . .," the fagged-out Kalchas was muttering, putting out a trembling hand toward the prompter. "My God, my God . . . Sixteen curtain-calls, three wreaths over the footlights, and many other things. They were all enraptured,—but nary a soul out of the whole lot went to the trouble of waking up an old fellow and taking him home. I'm an old fellow, Nikitushka. I'm fifty-eight. I'm ill! My feeble spirit is a-weary . . ."

Kalchas, all trembling, stretched himself toward the prompter and clutched at his hand. "Don't go 'way, Nikitushka," he mumbled, as if in delirium. "I'm old, and weak, and helpless,—death is coming . . . It's a frightful thing!"

"It's time for you to be goin' home, now, Vassilii Vassilich," Nikitushka put in tenderly.

"I won't go! I have no home. . . I haven't, —I haven't!"

"Lord Jesus! Can you really have forgot where you live?"

"I don't want to go there,—I don't want to! . . .," the comic muttered, in some sort of frenzy. "I'm all alone there. . . I haven't a soul, Nikitushka,—no kin, no old woman, nor any little ones. . . I'm all alone,—as free as a wind a-roaming the fields. . . I'll die, and there'll be never a soul to remember me."

The comic's trepidation was being imparted to Nikitushka as well. The drunken, agitated old man hung on to the prompter's hand, squeezing it convulsively and soiling it with a mixture of make-up and tears. Nikitushka was shrinking from the cold and hunching his shoulders.

"I feel frightened when I'm alone!" Kalchas was muttering. "There's never a soul to say a kind word to me, to comfort me, to put me to bed when I'm drunk. Whom do I belong to? Who needs me? Nobody loves me, Nikitushka!"

"The public loves you, Vassilii Vassilich!"

"The public's gone home, and to bed. . . Nobody needs me,—nobody loves me. No wife have I, and no children."

"Oh, come, now,—you've found something to grieve about!"

"Well, I'm a living human being. . . I'm noble, Nikitushka,—of a good old family. Until I had stumbled into this hole I was of the military,—I served in the artillery. What a fine fellow I was,—good-looking, brave. After that, what an actor I was,—my God! And wherever did all this go to,—where are those times?"

Holding on to the prompter's hand the comic got up and took to blinking his eyes, as if he had stepped out of darkness into a well-lit room. Great tears, leaving streaky tracks on his make-up, coursed down his cheeks.

"What times those were!" he went on, as if delirious. "I looked at that hole in the

ground a while back, and recalled everything,—everything! This hole has eaten up thirty-five years out of my life,—and what a life, Nikitushka! I'm looking at it now, and I see everything, down to the least bit of a stroke, as plainly as I see your face!—I remember, when I was just a young actor, —when I was just beginning to get into the ardor of it all,—a certain woman fell in love with me for my playing. . . . Exquisite, graceful as a poplar, young, she was,—innocent, clever, flaming, like a summer dawn! I believed that, were there no sun, there would still be light upon this earth, since no night would have been able to hold its own before her beauty!”

Kalchas was speaking vehemently, tossing his head and brandishing his free arm. Nikitushka was standing before him and listening,—bare-footed and in nothing but his underwear. Both were enveloped in the dusky shadows, feebly repelled by the impotent candle. A strange, out-of-the-ordinary scene, this, the like of which was unknown to any theatre in the world, and its sole spectator was the soulless black hole. . .

“She loved me,” Kalchas went on, gasping. “And what was the upshot? I remember standing before her, even as I am standing before you now. . . She was more beautiful then than ever before; she looked at me in such a way that I shan't forget those eyes of hers in my very grave! They held a caress,—a velvetiness; they had the brilliance of youth,—they had profundity! Intoxicated, happy, I fell down on my knees before her, imploring happiness.”

The comic paused to draw a long breath and, sinking his voice, went on:

“But she says: ‘Leave the stage!’ D’you understand? She could love an actor,—but to be his wife? Never! I remember I had to play that day. . . . My part was a vile, buffoonish one. . . . I played,—but snakes and tigers were fighting in my heart. . . .

I did not drop the stage,—no; but, right there and then, my eyes were opened! . . . I fathomed that I am but a slave, a toy for the idle pastime of others, that there is no such thing as ‘the sacredness of art,’ that everything is but delirium and delusion. I saw through the public! Since that time I’ve had no faith in plaudits or wreaths, or raptures! Yes, brother,—Mr. Public applauds me; he buys my photograph—for as much as a whole rouble!—but, nevertheless, I am a stranger to him: to him I am filth,—well-nigh a cocotte! For the sake of vanity he seeks my acquaintance,—but he would never lower himself so far as to give me his sister’s hand in marriage, or his daughter’s! I trust him not,—I hate him,—and he is a stranger to me!”

“It’s time for you to be goin’ home. . . ,” the prompter remarked hesitatingly.

“I see through the public only too well!” Kalchas cried out, threatening the black void with his fist. “It was even then that I came to see through it. . . . While I was still young I saw the light and perceived the truth. . . . And this enlightenment cost me dear, Nikitushka. After that incident I began to. After that young lady I took to drifting, without rhyme or reason,—to living aimlessly, without looking ahead. . . I played buffoons,—I grinned through a horse-collar,—I perverted minds. . . I made my speech vulgar and broken,—I lost the image and the likeness of man. *Ehhh!* . . This hole has devoured me! I did not feel it before, but today . . . when I woke up and looked back,—there were fifty-eight years in back of me! Old age has come just now! My song is sung!”

Kalchas was still trembling and gasping. —When, somewhat later, Nikitushka led him off to his dressing-room and began taking his things off, the comic slumped altogether and went all to pieces, but did not cease to mumble and weep.

FRANCES PERKINS: LIBERAL POLITICIAN

BY MARGUERITE YOUNG

AT THE end of the ghastly nineties, while American imperialism was stretching its legs in the Caribbean and American labor stiffened at the memory of Haymarket and Homestead, Frances Cora Perkins strolled under the gentle elms at Mount Holyoke College, studying sociology.

Fanny Cora, as they called her, was graduated in 1902, the year of the anthracite strike, which politicalized the word *sociologist*. President Theodore Roosevelt called for arbitration. Operators balked at including a labor representative among the arbiters. For at this time the higher strategy of conciliation was new. Samuel Gompers had yet to denounce Socialists in the American Federation of Labor with his celebrated remark, "Economically, you are unsound; socially, you are wrong; industrially, you are impossible!" Top A. F. of L. officials, in fact, still acted on the principle that, as the preamble of their constitution declares, "A struggle is going on in all the nations of the civilized world between the oppressors and the oppressed . . . , a struggle between the capitalist and the laborer, which grows in intensity from year to year, and will work disastrous results to the toiling millions if they are not combined for mutual protection and benefits."

So on the arbitration board that was to end the anthracite strike Theodore Roosevelt placed, instead of a labor representative, "a sociologist—a man who has

thought and studied deeply on social questions, and has practically applied his knowledge."

The Fanny Cora of that day was only a girl of twenty. She would devote some time to slumming and carrying baskets to the poor before becoming a full-fledged sociologist. She returned to Worcester, Massachusetts, and spent several years with her family, doing Episcopal Church work and organizing classes of factory workers. Then to Chicago to teach in a private girls' school. She visited Chicago Commons, met Jane Addams, and read Shaw's "Man and Superman" and Vida Scudder's "A Listener in Babel." She was greatly impressed by all four. Then she studied economics at the University of Pennsylvania while working for a Philadelphia social welfare agency, finding jobs for poor little immigrant girls.

A few weeks ago some forty needle trades workers, daughters of immigrant girls such as those for whom Fanny Cora used to find jobs, sat before the Secretary of Labor in a hearing room of the Department in Washington. The refined cruelty of the social worker still clung to her, as she, now middle-aged and heavy, mounted the dais high above the women's heads.

A metallic smile prefaced the opening remarks. "We shall have to be brief . . . I'm sorry this platform is so high. When we get into our new building we shall have a platform more—human!"