

I WAS AN ACTOR

by

Alexander Kuprin

From the compilation
“The Garnet Bracelet and Other Stories”

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
Moscow

Translated from the Russian by Stepan Apresyan
Ocr: <http://home.freeuk.com/russica2>

I WAS AN ACTOR

I have this sad and laughable story, which is more sad than laughable, from a friend who had lived a most colourful life and had been both the rider and the horse, as the saying goes, but who, despite the cruel blows of fate, had kept both a kind heart and a lucid mind. It was only the events described in this story that had a rather strange effect upon him, for since they happened he has never been to the theatre again, no matter how strongly urged to do so.

I shall try to relate his story here, though I fear I may not be able to do it in the simple manner, or with the soft, wistful irony, which marked his own narrative.

I

Well, now. Can you imagine a shabby little southern town? In its middle is a huge hole where Khokhols [Ukrainians.—Tr.] from the countryside, waist-deep in mud, sell cucumbers and potatoes from their carts. That is the market-place. One side of it is formed by a cathedral and, of course, Cathedral Street; another,

by a public garden; the third, by a row of stalls, with the yellow plaster peeling off, and pigeons perched on the roofs and cornices; and on the fourth side the main street runs into the market-place, with a branch office of some bank, a post-office, a notary's office and the saloon of Theodore the hairdresser, of Moscow. On the outskirts of the town, in all sorts of Zaselyes, Zamostyies and Zarechyies, [[Names of districts: Beyond-the-Village, Beyond-the-Bridge, Beyond-the-River.—Tr.](#)] an infantry regiment is stationed, and in the town centre, a dragoon regiment. There is a theatre in the public garden. And that is all.

I ought to add, however, that the town of S. with its Duma [[Town Hall.—Tr.](#)] and school, its public garden and theatre, and the cobbles in the main street, owed its existence to the bounty of the local millionaire Kharitonenko, a sugar manufacturer.

II

The full story of how I came to live in that town would take too long to tell. So I shall be brief. I was to meet there a friend of mine—may he rest in peace—a true friend married to a woman who, as is the case with the wives of all our true friends, could not stand me. He and I had several thousand rubles [apiece, earned by hard work; he had been a teacher for many years and at the same time an insurance agent, and I had been in luck at cards for a whole year. Once we hit on a very profitable enterprise in southern lamb and made up our minds to take the risk. I set out first, and he was supposed to follow me two or three days later. As I had long been known for my absent-mindedness it was he who kept all our money in two separate parcels, for he was as precise as a German.

And then came a shower of misfortunes. At Kharkov railway station my wallet was stolen from my pocket while I was eating cold sturgeon with sauce provenfale. I arrived in S., the town I am talking about, with the small change I had in my purse, and with a poorly filled but fine reddish-yellow suitcase of English make. I put up at the hotel—it was called the St. Petersburg, of course—and started sending wire after wire. The answer I got was dead silence. Yes, "dead" is the word, because at the exact hour when the thief was filching my wallet—imagine the kind of tricks fate plays on us!—my friend and partner died of a stroke while riding in a cab. All his luggage and money were sealed, and for some idiotic reason judicial pettifogging dragged on for six weeks. Whether or not the sorrow-stricken widow knew anything about my money I cannot tell. As a matter of fact, she did receive every one of my telegrams, but obstinately refused to answer them, by way of petty, jealous woman's revenge. It is true that afterwards those telegrams stood me in good stead. When the seals had been removed the telegrams chanced to catch the eye of a barrister who had been dealing with the inheritance and was a total stranger to me. He reproved the widow and at his own risk remitted five hundred rubles to me, in care of the theatre. This was scarcely surprising, for those were not ordinary telegrams but tragic cries from my soul, each compressed into twenty or thirty words.

III

It was my tenth day at the St. Petersburg. The tragic cries of my soul had completely drained my purse. The hotel owner—a grim, sleepy-looking Khokhol with a murderer's face—no longer believed a word of what I told him. I showed him certain letters and papers which I said should make it clear to him ... and so on, but he turned scornfully away and sniffed. Finally a waiter brought my dinner and announced, "The master says this is the last time."

And the day came when all that I had in my pocket was a lone, musty twenty-kopek piece. That morning the owner told me roughly that he was not going to feed or keep me any longer and would take matter to the police. I gathered from his tone that the man meant what he said.

I spent the day wandering about the town. I remember I walked into a transport office and into some other places to ask for work, but I was refused the moment I opened my mouth. Now and then I would sit on one of the green benches placed along the main street, between tall Lombardy poplars. I felt dizzy and sick with hunger. But the idea of suicide did not occur to me for a second. Throughout my tangled life, I had many times toyed with that idea, but a year, sometimes a month, or even ten minutes, would pass and everything would suddenly change, and once again I would be in luck and gay and happy. As I roamed the hot, dull town I kept saying to myself, "It's a fine mess you're in, Pavel Andreyevich."

I was hungry. But some mysterious presentiment made me keep my last twenty kopeks. Night was falling when I saw a red poster on a fence. I had nothing to do anyway. So I walked mechanically over and read the poster, which said that that night Uriel Acosta, a tragedy by Gutzkow, would be presented in the public garden, with such and such a cast. The names of two actors were printed in large black type: those of "Mile Androsova, an actress of the Petersburg stage," and "Mr. Lara-Larsky, the well-known Kharkov actor"; the minor stars were "Mmes Vologodskaya, Medvedeva, Strunina-Dolskaya, and Messrs. Timofeyev-Sumskoi, Akimenko, Samoilenko, Nelyubov-Olgin, and Dukhovskoi." The names set in the smallest type were "Petrov, Sergeev, Sidorov, Grigoryev, Nikolayev, and others." The stage-director was "Mr. Samoilenko," and the managing director, "Mr. Valerianov."

I was inspired with a sudden, desperate decision. I ran across the street to the hairdresser Theodore, of Moscow, and for my last twenty kopeks got him to shave off my moustache and small pointed beard. God Almighty! What a sullen, bare face I saw in the mirror! I could not believe my eyes. Instead of a man of thirty, respectable-looking if not very handsome, I saw, sitting in the mirror in front of me, an old, hardened provincial comedian, draped in a sheet up to his throat, with the marks of all kinds of vices on his face and, what was more, obviously drunk.

"Going to work in our theatre?" the hairdresser's assistant asked me, shaking down the sheet.

"Yes," I replied proudly. "Here's your money."

IV

On my way to the public garden I was thinking: "It's an ill wind that blows no one good. They'll at once see what a downy old bird I am. These little summer theatres can always use an odd man. I won't ask much to begin with. Let's say fifty—no, forty rubles a month. Afterwards we'll see. I'll ask for an advance payment of twenty rubles—no, that would be too much—ten rubles or so. First of all I'll send a strong-worded telegram; five by five is twenty-five, plus nought, that'll be two fifty, plus fifteen kopeks for delivery, that'll make two sixty-five. I'll live on the rest till Ilya comes along. If they feel like testing me, let them do so, and I'll recite something— Pimen's monologue, [[From Pushkin's Boris Godunov.—Tr.](#)] for instance." And I began under my breath, in a deep solemn voice:

One more event I will inscribe—

A passer-by darted aside in fright. I gave an embarrassed cough. I was now near the public garden. A military band was playing there; slim local misses in pink or blue were strolling hatless along the walks, and local clerks, telegraphists and excisemen dangled after them, laughing without constraint, one hand thrust under their coat lapels and their white service caps cocked.

The gate was wide open. I walked in. Somebody invited me to buy a ticket at the box-office, but I asked carelessly where I could see the manager, Mr. Valerianov. I was at once referred to two clean-shaven young gentlemen sitting on a bench not far from the entrance. I walked over and stopped about two paces from them.

Absorbed in conversation, they took no notice of me, and I had a chance to have a good look at them. One of them, in a light Panama hat and blue-striped flannels, had the affectedly noble countenance and proud profile of a jeune premier, and was playing absent-mindedly with his slender cane. The other, dressed in grey, had unusually long legs and arms. In fact, his legs seemed to start right from the chest, and his arms must have hung below his knees, all of which gave the effect of a grotesque zigzag that could easily have been duplicated by means of a hinged yardstick. He had a very small head, with a freckled face and quick black eyes.

Unobtrusively I cleared my throat. Both men turned to look at me.

"May I see Mr. Valerianov?" I asked in a friendly tone.

"That's me," said the freckled man. "What can I do for you?"

"You see, I'd like to"—my voice caught—"I'd like to offer you my services as—er—as, say, a comedian, or— er—a 'simpleton.' I could also play character parts."

The jeune premier got up and walked off, whistling and swinging his cane.

"Where were you employed before?" asked Valerianov.

I had only acted once, when I played a comic part in an amateur performance. But I strained my imagination and replied:

"To be frank, I've never been employed by a sound enterprise like yours. But I had a chance to play with small companies in the South-West. They failed almost

as fast as they were set up—Marinich's, for example, Sokolovsky's, and some other besides."

"I say, do you drink?" Valerianov demanded all of a sudden.

"No," I answered promptly. "I take something occasionally before dinner, or at a party, but no more than a drop."

Valerianov looked down at the sand, narrowing his black eyes.

"All right," he said after some reflection, "I'll take you on. You'll be paid twenty-five rubles a month, and then we'll see. You may be needed even tonight. Go to the stage and ask for the assistant stage-director Dukhovskoi. He'll introduce you to the director."

I went to the stage, wondering why he had not asked my stage name. He must have forgotten, I thought, or guessed that I had no such name. Nevertheless, as I walked along I invented a surname for myself, just in case: Osinin, a name that was not flashy but simple and pleasant-sounding.

V

I found Dukhovskoi, a fidgety lad with a sallow thief's face, behind the scenes. He introduced me to the director, Samoilenko. Samoilenko was going to play some heroic part that night and so he wore golden armour, jack-boots and the make-up of a juvenile. I managed to observe despite the camouflage that he was fat and moon-faced, with pin-point eyes and a mouth set in a perpetual inane smile. He gave me a haughty welcome and refused to shake hands. I was about to walk away when he said, "Wait a minute. What did you say your name was? I didn't catch it."

"Vasilyev!" Dukhovskoi hastened to prompt, with servile alacrity.

Taken aback, I was going to correct the error, but it was too late.

"Now look here, Vasilyev. You stay here today. Dukhovskoi, tell the tailor to give Vasilyev a coat."

That was how I changed from Osinin into Vasilyev, a name I retained to the end of my stage career, along with "Petrov, Ivanov, Nikolayev, Grigoryev, Sidorov, and others." An inexperienced actor, I did not guess until a week later that, of all those names appearing on the poster, mine alone represented a real person. The accursed assonance did it!

The tailor, a lean, lame man, came in, put on me a long, black calico shroud with sleeves, and basted it from top to tail. Then came the hairdresser. I recognized him as Theodore's assistant who had just shaved me. We gave each other a friendly smile. He put on my head a black wig with lovelocks. Dukhovskoi burst into the dressing-room and bawled, "Make up, Vasilyev!" I dipped my finger into some paint, but my neighbour on the left, an austere man with a grave forehead, snapped at me, "Can't you keep out of somebody else's box? Here are the common paints."

I saw a large box divided into cells that were filled with mixed, dirty paints. I felt dazed. It was all very well for Dukhovskoi to bawl "Make up!" But how was I to go about it? Bravely I drew a white line down my nose and at once took on a clownish appearance. Then I made a pair of cruel eyebrows, put two blue shadows

under my eyes, and wondered what else I should do. I screwed up my eyes and drew two vertical wrinkles between my eyebrows. Now I looked for all the world like a Comanche chief.

"Get ready, Vasilyev!" came a voice from above. I went out of the dressing-room and up to a linen door in the back wall. Dukhovskoi was waiting for me.

"It's your turn now. Lord, what a face! You must go on the moment you hear 'Yes, he will come back.' You'll walk on and say"—he mentioned a proper name that I have forgotten— " 'So-and-so wants a rendezvous,' and then came out again. Is that clear?"

"Yes."

" 'Yes, he will come back!'" I heard someone say, and, pushing Dukhovskoi out of my way, I rushed to the stage. What was that man's name, damn him? I was dumb for a second or two. The audience seemed to be a stirring black abyss. I saw unfamiliar, coarsely painted faces right in front of me, in the glaring light of a lamp. Everyone was staring at me intently. Dukhovskoi whispered something from behind, but I could not make out a word. Then I suddenly blurted out in a solemnly reproachful voice, "Yes! He has come back!"

Samoilenko swept past me like a hurricane in his golden armour. Thank God! I slipped behind the scenes.

I was used in that play twice more. In the scene where Acosta denounces Jewish ritual and then falls, I was to take him in my arms and drag him out. I was assisted by a fireman attired in a black shroud like myself. (Probably so far as the audience was concerned he was "Sidorov.") Uriel Acosta turned out to be the actor whom I had seen sitting with Valerianov on the bench, that is, Lara-Larsky, "the well-known Kharkov actor." We grabbed him rather clumsily—he was muscular and heavy—but fortunately we did not drop him. He only muttered to us, "Blast you both, you numskulls!" We succeeded in hauling him through the narrow door, only the entire back wall of the ancient temple shook and swayed for a long time after.

When I appeared on the stage for the third time, it was to attend mutely the trial of Acosta. There was a little incident when Ben Akiba came in and everyone rose in deference but I remained sitting from sheer absent-mindedness. Someone gave me a painful pinch above the elbow and hissed, "You're crazy! This is Ben Akiba! Get up!"

I got up in all haste. But, really, I did not know it was Ben Akiba. I thought it was just an ordinary old man.

After the performance Samoilenko said to me, "Vasilyev, you'll attend a rehearsal at eleven tomorrow."

I returned to my hotel, but the owner banged the door shut as soon as he heard my voice. I spent the night on one of the green benches set up between the poplars. It was warm and I dreamed of fame. But the cool morning wind and the sensation of hunger woke me up rather early.

At half past ten sharp I went to the theatre. No one had come yet. Here and there in the garden sleepy waiters from the summer restaurant were loafing with their white aprons on. Breakfast or morning coffee was going to be served to someone in a green latticed arbour twined with wild vines.

Later I learned that Valerianov, the theatre manager, and Bulatova-Chernogorskaya, a former actress of about sixty-five, who maintained both the theatre and its manager, had breakfast there in the open every morning.

A fresh, gleaming-white cloth was spread on the table; two covers lay on it, and two piles of sliced bread rose on a plate.

Now comes a painful passage. I became a thief for the first and last time in my life. With a swift look round me, I whisked into the arbour, and snatched several slices of bread. It was so soft! so fine! But as I rushed out I ran into a waiter. He had probably come out from behind the arbour. He was carrying a cruet-stand with mustard, pepper and vinegar. He looked sternly at me and at the bread in my hand, and asked softly, "What's the meaning of this?"

I felt a burning, contemptuous pride rise inside me. Looking him straight in the eye, I answered just as softly, "It is that I haven't had a thing to eat since four o'clock the day before yesterday."

He spun round and hurried away without a word. I put the bread in my pocket and waited. I felt at once terrified and elated. "Wonderful!" I thought. "The owner will be here in a moment, the waiters will all gather, they'll whistle for the police to come—there'll be a turmoil, a lot of swearing, and a scuffle. Oh, how splendidly I'm going to smash those plates and this cruet on their heads! I'll bite them till they bleed!"

But the waiter came running back—alone. He was slightly out of breath. He sidled up without looking at me. I turned away too. And suddenly, from under his apron, he thrust into my hand a big chunk of last night's cold beef, carefully salted, and whispered entreatingly, "Please take this."

I grabbed the beef, went behind the scenes and picked a place where it was dark enough. There, sitting amid all sorts of shabby props, I began greedily to tear the meat with my teeth, weeping with relish.

Afterwards I saw the man almost daily. His name was Sergei. When none of the customers was about he would look at me from a distance with friendly, devoted, pleading eyes. But both for his and my own sake I was loth to spoil the original good impression, although, to be frank, sometimes I was as hungry as a wolf in winter.

He was podgy and bald-headed, with black moustaches like the feelers of a cockroach, and kindly eyes shaped like two narrow, glowing semi-circles. And he was always in a hurry as he ran about limping a little. When at last I received my money and my stage bondage was gone like a bad dream, when all the scum lapped in my champagne and fawned on me, how I missed my dear, funny, touching Sergei! I should never have dared to offer him money, of course, for how could such tenderness and affection be repaid in money? I simply wanted to leave him a souvenir. A trinket of some sort. Or to give some present to his wife or children—he had a whole bunch of them, and sometimes they came scurrying to him in the morning, as fussy and noisy as young sparrows.

But a week before my miraculous transformation Sergei was discharged, and I knew why. Captain von Bradke was served a steak that he did not find to his taste.

"Is this the way to serve it, you scoundrel?" he roared. "Don't you know I like it underdone?"

Sergei ventured to remark that it was not his fault but the cook's, and that he would at once have it changed, and even added timidly, "Pardon me, sir."

The apology made the officer quite furious. He slapped Sergei's face with the hot steak and yelled, crimson with rage:

"Wha-at? So you sir me, eh? Y-you sir me? You can't sir His Majesty's staff captain of cavalry! Owner! Call the owner here! Ivan Lukyanich, you'll get this idiot out of here this very day! I won't have him here! You kick him out or I'll never set foot in your tavern again!"

Captain von Bradke used to make merry in a big way, and so Sergei was promptly dismissed. The owner was busy all through the evening appeasing the officer. I could hear for a long time, as I went out into the garden for some fresh air during the intervals, an indignant voice coming in peals from the arbour, "Just listen to that bastard! 'Sir,' he says! I'd have shown him how to sir me if it wasn't for the ladies!"

VII

Meanwhile the actors came gradually together, and at half past twelve the rehearsal began. The play, entitled *The New World*, was an absurd side-show adaptation of Sienkiewicz's novel *Quo Vadis*? Dukhovskoi handed me a sheet of paper with my part lithographed on it. I was playing a centurion of Marcus the Magnificent and had to pronounce such excellent, high-sounding lines as "O Marcus, thy orders have been executed precisely!" or "She will be awaiting thee at the foot of Pompey's statue, O Marcus." I had taken a fancy to the part and was already reciting it in my mind in the courageous voice of a stalwart old warrior, stern and devoted.

But as the rehearsal progressed something strange happened to me: quite unexpectedly for myself, I began to fall into more and more small parts. For example, the matron Veronica finished speaking and Samoilenko, who was keeping an eye on the text of the play, clapped his hands and cried, "Enter Slave!"

Nobody came in.

"Who's the Slave here, gentlemen? See who's the Slave, Dukhovskoi."

Dukhovskoi made a hurried search in sheets of some sort, but discovered no Slave.

"Oh, cross it out—why waste our time!" Boyev suggested lazily. He was the man with the grave forehead, into whose paint I had dipped my finger the day before.

But Marcus (Lara-Larsky) suddenly took offence.

"Oh, no, please. This is one of my spectacular appearances. I won't play this scene without the Slave."

Samoilenko's eyes darted about the stage and fell on me.

"Just a moment. Are you engaged in this act, Vasilyev?"

I stared into my sheet.

"Yes. At the very end."

"Well, then, here's another part for you—Veronica's slave. Read from the book." He clapped his hands. "Quiet, please, ladies and gentlemen! Enter Slave. 'Noble lady—' Louder, they can't hear you in the first row."

A few minutes later they could not find a slave for the divine Mercia (Sienkiewicz's Lygia), and stopped the gap with my person. Then someone else was wanted for the part of the House Manager, and again they used me. Thus, towards the end of the rehearsal, I came to have five additional parts besides the centurion's.

At first I did not get on well. I would come out and speak my first words, " 'O Marcus—' "

Samoilenko would spread his legs apart, bend forward and cup his palms round his ears.

"What's that? What are you mumbling, anyway? I can't make out a thing."

" 'O Marcus—' "

"I'm sorry. I can't hear at all. Louder!" He would walk up close to me. "This is how you should say it." And he would sing out in a throaty billy-goat's voice that could be heard throughout the garden, " 'O Marcus, thy command—!' That's the way to say it. Remember, young man, the immortal maxim of one of the great Russian actors: 'On the stage one doesn't speak—one utters; nor does one walk—one stalks.' " He looked smugly round. "Now say it again."

I did, but worse than before. Then they took turns to coach me, and kept on coaching me till the end of the rehearsal, all of them: proud Lara-Larsky—with a scornful, fastidious air—old, puffy Goncharov, whose flabby, red-veined jowls hung below his chin, the grease-paint owner, Boyev, the "simpleton," Akimenko, with his affected look of Ivan the Fool. I was like a harassed, steaming horse with a crowd of street advisers gathered round it, or a new pupil who had got out of the snug family circle smack into the midst of experienced, sly and cruel schoolboys.

At that rehearsal I made a petty but merciless enemy, who later poisoned every day of my existence. This is how it came about.

I was just speaking one of my endless lines: " 'O Marcus—' " when Samoilenko suddenly rushed up to me.

"Hold on, my friend, hold on. That's wrong. Who are you speaking to? It's to Marcus the Magnificent, isn't it? Well, in that case you haven't the slightest notion of how subordinates in ancient Rome addressed their supreme commander. Look: this is the right gesture."

He put his right foot forward a half pace, bent his trunk at a right angle, and dropped his right arm, shaping his palm into a scoop.

"See how it must be done? Now do it again."

I did, but the gesture turned out so stupid and ugly that I attempted a timid protest.

"I beg your pardon, but it seems to me that a military bearing somehow precludes a bent posture, and the direction here says that he comes out in armour—and you'll agree that anyone wearing armour—"

"Kindly be silent!" Samoilenko shouted in anger, and went purple. "If the stage-director tells you to stand on one leg and put out your tongue it's your duty to obey implicitly. Kindly do it again."

I did. It turned out even uglier than before. But at this juncture Lara-Larsky came to my aid.

"Stop it, Boris," he said reluctantly to Samoilenko. "Don't you see he can't do it? Besides, you know yourself that history gives us no direct guidance on this score. It's—well, it's a moot point."

Samoilenko left me alone with the classical gesture. But from then on he never missed a chance to pull me up, taunt or hurt me. He jealously looked out for every slip I might make. He hated me so intensely that I am sure he must have seen me every night in his dreams. As for me, ten years have passed since, but up to this day I choke with rage the moment I think of the man. Of course, before I left—however, I must leave that till later, or else the continuity of my narrative will be impaired.

Just before the end of the rehearsal a tall, long-nosed, gaunt gentleman with a moustache and in a bowler hat appeared suddenly on the stage. He swayed and knocked against the wings, and his eyes were like two tin buttons. Everyone looked at him with disgust, but nobody made any criticism.

"Who's he?" I asked Dukhovskoi in a whisper.

"Oh, a toper!" he replied carelessly. "Nelyubov-Olgin, our scene-painter. He's a gifted man—sometimes plays a part when he's sober—but a hopeless, irretrievable drunkard. And we've got nobody to take his place; he costs so little and paints the settings so fast."

VIII

The rehearsal was over. We began to disperse. The actors cracked jokes, punning on Mercia's name. Lara-Larsky significantly asked Boyev to go with him "there." I overtook Valerianov on one of the tree-lined walks and said, hardly keeping pace with his long stride, "Victor Victorovich, could you please advance me a little money—a very little?"

He stopped, all but speechless with amazement.

"What? What money? Why? Who for?"

I began to explain my plight to him, but he gave me no chance to finish; he impatiently turned his back on me and walked off. Then he suddenly stopped and beckoned to me.

"I say, what's your name—Vasilyev. You go to that man—your hotel-owner—and tell him to come and see me. I'll be here in the box-office for another half-hour or so. I'll talk to him."

I flew rather than went to the hotel. The Khokhol listened to me with gloomy distrust, but he pulled on his brown jacket and sauntered to the theatre. I waited for him. He came back in a quarter of an hour. His face was like a storm-cloud, and in his right hand he clutched a bunch of red pass-checks. He poked them under my nose and boomed, "See this? I thought he was going to give me money, but I got these bits of paper instead. What good are they to me?"

I stood perplexed. But the bits of paper proved of some use. After much coaxing the owner agreed to a bargain: my splendid new English suitcase of yellow leather went to him by way of security, and I kept my linen, my passport and what I treasured most—my notebooks. Before saying goodbye he asked, "Are you going to fool about there too?"

"Yes," I corroborated with dignity.

"Ha! Better look out. The moment I see you I'll yell, 'Hey, where are my twenty rubles?'"

For three days I did not dare to bother Valerianov and spent the night on a green bench, with the bundle of linen under my head. Luckily two of the nights were warm enough; as I lay on the bench I even felt a dry warmth rising from the flagstones of the pavement, heated during the day. But on the third night it drizzled for a long time, and seeking shelter in doorways I got no sleep till morning. At eight o'clock the public garden was opened. I crawled behind the scenes and took a sweet two-hour nap on an old curtain. But, of course, Samoilenko had to catch sight of me, and he took his time pointing out to me in caustic tones that the theatre was a temple of art, not a dormitory or a boudoir or a doss-house. Then I ventured once more to overtake the manager on a garden walk and ask him for a little money because I had no place to sleep.

"I am very sorry," he said, "but that's no business of mine. You're not under age, I think, and I don't happen to be your nurse, either."

I made no comment. His narrowed eyes wandered over the sunlit sand on the walk, and he said pensively, "I'll tell you what, though. Would you like to sleep in the theatre? I spoke to the watchman about it, but he's afraid, the fool."

I thanked him.

"Only remember this: no smoking in the theatre. If you want a smoke you must go out into the garden."

From then on I had guaranteed night quarters with a roof overhead. Sometimes I went by day to the little river two miles away, washed my linen there in a sheltered corner and dried it on the boughs of the willows growing on the bank. That linen helped me a great deal. Occasionally I went to the market to sell a shirt or something else. The twenty or thirty kopeks I made on the sale kept my stomach full for two days. Things were clearly shaping favourably for me. One day I even succeeded in wheedling a ruble out of Valerianov at a propitious moment, and I at once wired to Ilya:

"Starving send telegraphic order Leontovich c/o S. theatre."

IX

The second rehearsal was also the dress rehearsal. On that occasion I was given two more parts: an aged Early Christian and Tigellinus. I accepted them without murmur.

Timofeyev-Sumskoi, our tragic actor, also arrived for that rehearsal. He was a broad-shouldered man about six feet tall, middle-aged, with curly red hair, bulging eyeballs, and a pock-marked face—a veritable butcher or rather hangman. His voice was even bigger than himself, and he recited in the old, howling manner.

*And like a wounded beast of prey
The tragic actor roared.*

He did not know his part at all—he played Nero—and read it with difficulty from his book, using strong spectacles fit for a very old man. If anyone suggested that he should study his part a little he would reply in a low rumble, "I don't give a damn. It'll be all right. I'll stick to the prompter. This isn't the first time. The audience doesn't understand a thing, anyway. The audience is stupid."

He was having a lot of trouble with my name. He could not pronounce Tigellinus, and called me either Tigelinus or Tinegillus. Whenever they corrected him he snarled, "I don't give a damn. What rot. Why should I stuff my brains with trash?"

If he came upon a difficult figure of speech or several foreign words in a row he would simply mark it in his book with a Z and say, "I'm crossing this out."

However, everyone else did the same. Nothing was left of the play but dregs. Tigellinus' long speech was reduced to one line.

Nero asked, "Tigellinus! In what condition are the lions?"

And I answered, kneeling before him, "'O divine Caesar! Rome has never seen the like of those beasts. They are hungry and ferocious.'"

That was all.

The day of the performance came. The open auditorium was full. A dense mass of ticketless spectators crowded outside round the barrier. I was uneasy.

Heavens, how abominably they all acted! They might have agreed in advance to go by Timofeyev's words, "I don't care, the audience is stupid." Each word they uttered, each gesture they made reminded me of something monstrously old, something that people had become tired of generations ago. I had a feeling that all that those votaries of art had at their disposal was about twenty intonations learned by heart and thirty studied gestures like the one which Samoilenko had tried in vain to teach me. And I thought what moral degradation those people must have gone through to lose all shame.

Timofeyev-Sumskoi was magnificent. Leaning to the right of his throne, with his outstretched left leg sprawling across half the stage and his clownish crown set awry on his head, he would roll his eyeballs at the prompt-box and roar in a voice that made the boys beyond the barrier scream with delight. He didn't remember my name, of course. He simply yelled at me like a merchant in a Turkish bath, "Telyantin! Bring my lions and tigers here. S-snappy!"

I humbly swallowed my lines and walked off. Marcus the Magnificent—Lara-Larsky, that is—was by far the worst, because he was more shameless, unrestrained, vulgar and self-confident than anyone else. With him passion became sheer yelling, tender words degenerated into cloying toffee, and the way he spoke the imperious lines of the war-like Roman patrician betrayed the Russian trooper that he was. But Androsova was superb. Everything about her was charming: her face, full of inspiration, her lovely hands, her supple melodious voice, and even her long, wavy hair, which she let down her back in the last act. She performed as naturally and beautifully as birds sing.

Through the little holes in the canvas of the setting, I watched her with genuine artistic enjoyment, sometimes with tears in my eyes. But I could not foresee that a few minutes later she would move me in quite a different manner, off stage.

I was so multiform in that play that the management would have done well to add the names of Dmitriev and Alexandrov to those of Petrov, Sidorov, Grigoryev, Ivanov and Vasilyev on the bill. In the first act I appeared first as an old man in a loose white overall with a hood on my head; then I ran behind the

scenes, threw off the overall and came back a bare-legged centurion in armour and helmet; then I disappeared once more to turn up again as an aged Christian. In the second act I was a centurion and a slave. In the third, two more slaves. In the fourth, a centurion and two further slaves. In the fifth, a house manager and another slave. Lastly I was Tigellinus, and in the finale a mute warrior who imperiously motions Mercia and Marcus to the arena to be devoured by the lions.

Even the "simpleton" Akimenko patted me on the shoulder and said good-humouredly, "Lord! You have a knack of transforming yourself."

But I had paid dearly for this praise. I could hardly stand on my feet.

The performance was over. The watchman started putting out the lamps. I paced the stage, waiting for the last actors to wipe off their make-up so that I could lie down on my old theatrical sofa. I also longed to get at the piece of fried tavern liver that hung in my corner, between the props room and the common dressing-room. (Ever since the rats had whisked off my bacon I used to hang up all my food on a string.) Suddenly I heard a voice behind me saying, "Good night, Vasilyev."

I turned round. Androsova stood there holding out her hand. Her lovely face looked tired.

Incidentally, of all the company she alone, with the exception of small fry—Dukhovskoi and Nelyubov-Olgin— gave me her hand; all the others disdained to do this. I remember her handshake to this day: frank and tender and strong, as only a real woman and a friend can give.

I took her hand. She looked intently at me and said, "I say, you aren't ill, are you? You don't look well." And she added in a lower voice, "Perhaps you're short of money? Eh? I could lend you some."

"Oh, no, no, thank you!" I interrupted her seriously. And suddenly, inspired by a recollection of the delight I had just experienced, I burst out effusively, "How wonderful you were tonight!"

My compliment must have been unusual in its sincerity. She blushed with pleasure, dropped her eyes, and laughed softly.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it."

I respectfully kissed her hand. But just then a woman's voice called from below, "Androsova! Where are you? Come down, they're waiting to take you to supper."

"Good night, Vasilyev," she said, in a simple and friendly tone; then she shook her head and murmured as she started to go, "Oh, you poor, poor man."

At the moment I did not feel poor at all. But it seemed to me that if, before leaving, she had touched my forehead with her lips I should have died of happiness.

X

Soon I was quite familiar with the entire company. To tell the truth, even before I involuntarily became an actor I had never thought highly of the provincial stage.

But Ostrovsky [A Russian classical playwright.—Tr]. had planted in my imagination a host of outwardly coarse but inwardly delicate and generous Neshchastlivtsevs and clownish Arkashkas who were, however, devoted in their own way to art and comradeship. And now I saw that the stage was peopled by shameless men and women.

They all were heartless, treacherous towards and jealous of each other, Lacking any respect whatsoever for the beauty and force of creative work—cads and hidebound souls. And what was more, they were surprisingly ignorant and thoroughly indifferent people, hypocrites, hysterically cold liars with false tears and theatrical sobs, obstinately backward slaves, always ready to cringe to their superiors and patrons. Chekhov was right in saying, "Only the police-officer is more hysterical than the actor. See how they both stand at the refreshment bar on the tsar's birthday, making speeches and weeping."

But theatrical tradition was maintained unswervingly. A certain Mitrofanov-Kozlovsky had been in the habit of crossing himself before he went on to the stage. The gesture stuck, and each of our principal actors was sure to do exactly the same, squinting an eye to see if the others noticed it. And if they did they must certainly think how very superstitious and original he was.

One of these prostitutes of art, with a billy-goat's voice and fat hips, had once beaten up a tailor and on another occasion a hairdresser. This had also become a custom. I often saw Lara-Larsky lunging about the stage with bloodshot eyes and foaming mouth as he shouted hoarsely, "Get that tailor here! I'll kill that tailor!"

Then, having slapped the tailor and secretly expecting and dreading a blow in return, he would stretch his arms backwards, tremble and scream, "Stop me! Stop me before I really become a murderer!"

For that matter, how impressively they spoke about "sacred art" and the stage! I remember one bright, green day in June. We had not yet started rehearsing. It was rather dark and cool on the stage. Of the more important actors, Lara-Larsky and his actress wife, Medvedeva, had come first. A few young ladies and schoolboys were sitting in the stalls. Lara-Larsky was walking up and down the stage, with a worried look on his face. He must have been mentally studying some new, profound character. Then his wife spoke to him.

"Sasha, please whistle for me that melody we heard in Pagliacci last night."

He stopped, looked her up and down expressively, and said in a velvety actor's baritone, squinting at the stalls:

"Whistle? On the stage? Ha-ha-ha!" He laughed the bitter laugh of an actor. "Are you in earnest? Why, don't you know the stage is a temple, an altar on which we deposit our best ideas and desires? Whistle, indeed! Ha-ha-ha!"

Nevertheless, local cavalymen and wealthy parasites, landowners, frequented that altar—the ladies' dressing-rooms—in absolutely the same way as they did private brothel rooms. We were not at all fussy about that. Often enough you could see a light in the vine arbour and hear a woman's laughter and the tinkle of spurs and wineglasses, while the actor husband walked in the darkness up and down the path like a sentinel, hoping that he might be invited. And a waiter would elbow him out of the way as he swept past with zander au gratin held high on his tray, and say drily, "Excuse me, sir."

And if he were invited he would give himself airs, drink vodka mixed with beer and vinegar, and tell smutty jokes about Jews.

But still they spoke of art with proud enthusiasm. Timofeyev-Sumskoi delivered more than one lecture on the lost "classical exit,"

"The style of classical tragedy is lost!" he would say gloomily. "How did an actor go off in the old days? This way!" He would stand up to his full height and raise his right hand with clenched fingers, except the forefinger which stuck up like a hook. "Do you see?" And with enormous, slow strides he would start towards the door. "This is what was known as the 'classical exit.' And what have we got now? You put your hands in your trouser pockets and off you go home. That's all."

Sometimes they fancied a novelty, a gag. This was how Lara-Larsky, for one, told us about how he played the part of Khlestakov: [[The main character in Gogol's comedy, Inspector-General. —Tr.](#)]

"Look. Here's how I interpret that scene with the governor. The governor says the hotel room is a bit dark. And I say to him, 'Yes. You would like to read something— Maxim Gorky, for example—but you can't! It's so-o dark, so-o dark in here!' And I always get applause!"

Occasionally it was amusing to listen to the older men, such as Timofeyev-Sumskoi and Goncharov, when they were slightly tipsy.

"Yes, brother Fedotushka, the actor's not what he used to be. No, he isn't."

"You're right, Petrusha. He isn't. D'you remember Charsky or Lyubsky? Those were actors for you!"

"The outlook's different now."

"You're right, Petersburg. They are different There's no more respect for the sanctity of art. After all, you and I were priests of art, Petrusha, but these people— Ah! Let's have one, Peccatoris."

"And do you remember Ivanov-Kozelsky, brother Fedotushka?"

"Stop it, Petrograd, don't break my heart. Let's have one. The actors of today are a far cry from those of yore!"

"A far cry's the word!"

"Yes, sir, a far cry!"

And there was Androsova, so pure and delicate and beautiful and gifted, who really served art amid this medley of vulgarity, stupidity, cunning, gigoloism, bragging, ignorance and debauchery.

Now that I am older I realize that she was as unaware of this filth as the white, beautiful corolla of a flower is unaware of the black swamp mud that feeds its roots.

XI

We staged play after play with the speed of an express train. Minor dramas and comedies we presented after a single rehearsal. Death of Ivan the Terrible, and The New World went on the stage after two rehearsals, and Izmail, a play by Bukharin, required three rehearsals only because the cast included over forty extras from the local garrison, home guards and fire-brigade.

Owing to a stupid and laughable incident, I remember particularly well the performance of Death of Ivan the Terrible. The part of Ivan was played by Timofeyev-Sumskoi, Attired in a long brocade garment and a pointed dog-skin cap, he looked like a moving obelisk. In an effort to impart more ferocity to the terrible tsar he kept thrusting out his lower jaw and turning down his thick lip, rolling his eyes and roaring as he had never done before.

Of course, he did not know the part and recited it in such preposterous rhyme that even those actors who had long believed that the audience were fools who understood nothing were horrified. But he distinguished himself more than ever in that scene where Ivan drops to his knees in a fit of repentance and confesses to the boyars: "Scabs have crusted my mind," etc.

Finally he came to the words "like a mangy dog." It goes without saying that his eyes were fixed on the prompt-box. He yelled "like" and paused. " 'Like a mangy dog,' " the prompter whispered. "Pike!" roared Timofeyev. " 'Like a mangy—' "

"Tyke!"

" 'Like a mangy dog—' "

At last he managed to deal with the passage. He showed no sign of confusion or embarrassment, but I, who was standing by the throne at the moment, was suddenly seized by an irresistible fit of laughter. Indeed, that is what always happens: just when you feel you must not laugh you are attacked by that shaking, morbid laughter. I at once realized that the best hiding-place was the high back of the throne, behind which I could laugh as much as I liked. I turned and strutted as befitted a boyar, hardly able to restrain a peal of laughter, and went behind the throne; there I found two actresses, Volkova and Bogucharskaya, hugging the back of the throne and choking with soundless mirth. That was more than I could bear. I ran off stage, fell down on a sham sofa—my sofa—and started rolling on it in fits of laughter. Samoilenko, who always kept a jealous eye on me, fined me five rubles.

That performance was full of incidents anyway. I forgot to mention that we had an actor by the name of Romanov, a very handsome, tall, portly young man suited for showily majestic secondary parts. He had the misfortune to be extremely short-sighted, so that he had to wear special glasses. On the stage, without his pince-nez, he always tripped on things, toppled pillars, overturned vases and arm-chairs, caught his feet in rugs and went sprawling. He had long been famous for the time when he was playing the part of a green knight in Princess Fancy with another company in another town.

He had fallen and rolled to the footlights in his tin armour, rattling like a huge samovar. But he surpassed himself in Death of Ivan the Terrible. He burst into Shuisky's house, where the conspirators were gathered, with such force that he knocked down the long bench with the boyars sitting on it.

Those boyars were quite a sight. They all had been recruited from young Karaite Jews employed in the local tobacco factory. I was the one who had led them on to the stage. I am short of stature, but the tallest among them stood no higher than my shoulder. Besides, half of those high-born boyars wore Caucasian garbs, while the others were fitted out with caftans hired from the local bishop's choir. To crown it all they had boyish faces with black beards tied to them, shining black eyes, mouths gaping with delight, and bashfully awkward movements. The audience greeted our solemn entrance with a roar of laughter.

We staged new plays almost daily, and our theatre was rather popular. Officers and landowners came because of our actresses, and every day a box was reserved for Kharitonenko. He came seldom, no more than twice during the season, but each time he sent us a hundred rubles. The theatre was not doing badly at all, and if the minor actors got no salary it was because Valerianov was as cunning as the cabman who would hang a bunch of hay in front of his hungry horse's mouth to make it go faster.

XII

One day there was no performance, I do not remember why. It was nasty weather. At ten p.m. I lay already on my sofa, listening in the darkness to the rain pattering on the wooden roof.

Suddenly there was a rustle behind the scenes, I heard footsteps and then the crash of falling chairs. I lit a candle-end and went to see who it was; it was Nelyubov-Olgin, drunk and tottering helplessly in the passage between settings and the wall. When he saw me he showed a calm surprise, not fright. "What the hell are you d-doing here?" I told him in a few words. His hands in his trouser pockets, he rocked for a while from toe to heel. Then he lost his balance, but steadied himself by taking a few steps forward, and said, "But why d-didn't you come to my p-place?"

"I don't know you well enough."

"Bosh. Come along."

He took my arm, and we went to his home. From that hour until the last day of my actor's career, I shared with him his tiny half-dark room, which he rented from a retired *ispravnik*. [[A district police officer-Tr.](#)]. A drunkard and brawler, and an object of the hypocritical contempt of the whole company, he proved to be a gentle, quiet man of great delicacy, and an excellent companion. But there was in his soul some kind of painful, incurable wound caused by a woman. I never quite made out the point of his unhappy love story. When he was drunk he would take out of his hamper the picture of a woman, not very pretty but not ugly, either, slightly squint-eyed, with a little nose turned up defiantly—rather provincial-looking. He would kiss the picture, then throw it on the floor, press it to his heart, then spit on it, put it on the icon in the corner, then pour candle-grease on it. Nor did I understand which of them had left which, or whose children he talked about: his, hers, or someone else's.

Neither he nor I had any money. He had long ago borrowed from Valerianov a large sum to send to her, and was now no better off than a serf in bondage, which he was too honest to break. Occasionally he earned a few kopeks by lending a hand to a local sign-painter. But this income was a secret which he carefully kept from the company; Lara-Larsky would never have tolerated such an outrage on art.

Our landlord was an exceedingly good-natured man, stout, with ruddy cheeks and a double chin. Every morning and night, after his family had had its fill of tea, he would send us his refilled samovar, his teapot with tea-leaves, and as much black bread as we could, eat. Thus we always had full stomachs.

After his afternoon nap the retired ispravnik would go out in dressing-gown and sit with his pipe on the steps of the house. Before leaving for the theatre we would sit beside him for a while. We always discussed the same topic: his misfortunes while he was in the service, the unfair treatment he had had at the hands of his superiors, and the infamous intrigues of his enemies. He was always asking our advice on how to write to the national newspapers a letter which would establish his innocence and have the governor and deputy-governor kicked out of their offices together with the present ispravnik and the scoundrel of a bailiff who was in charge of the second district, and who had been the main cause of all his misfortunes. We would give him all the advice we could, but he would only sigh, pucker up his face, and shake his head.

"That isn't what I want," he would say stubbornly. "No, that isn't it. If only I could find a man with a clever pen! If I could lay my hands on a pen! I would stop at no expense."

The rascal really had money. One day I happened to step into his room and found him clipping coupons from dividend warrants. He was a little embarrassed; he got up and hid the slips of paper with his back and the flaps of his dressing-gown. I am perfectly sure that while in the service he must have exceeded his authority and resorted to bribery, extortion and other forms of sharp practice.

At night, after the performance, Nelyubov and I sometimes strolled about the garden. Little white tables stood invitingly everywhere among the green plants, and candles burned with a steady flame in bell-glasses. Men and women smiled and bent towards each other in a way that was somehow festive, coquettish and full of meaning. The sand crunched under light women's feet.

"I wish we could find a mug!" Nelyubov would sometimes boom huskily, with a sly sidelong look at me.

At first that jarred on me. I have always hated the greedy and genteel readiness of garden actors to sponge on other people's meals, those moist, hungry eyes, friendly as a dog's, those unnaturally pert baritones at table, that gastronomic omniscience, that eagerness, that habitually imperious familiarity with waiters. But afterwards, when I had come to know Nelyubov better, I realized that he did not mean it. Though a crank he was proud and very fastidious in his own way.

But there was one amusing and slightly shameful occasion, when a "mug" himself found the two of us. This is how it happened.

One evening we were last out of the dressing-room after a performance, when a certain Altschiller darted out from somewhere behind the scenes. He was a local Rothschild, young but already fat, a ruddy-cheeked Jew of the voluptuous kind, over-free of manner, glittering with rings, chains and pendants. He rushed to us.

"Oh, my God! I've been running about for half an hour now—I'm utterly exhausted. Tell me, for goodness' sake, have you seen Volkova or Bogucharskaya anywhere?"

We had seen the two actresses leave immediately after the performance for a ride with some dragoon officers, and we obligingly informed Altschiller of the fact. He clutched his head and rushed about the stage.

"How mean of them! I've ordered supper! Really, it's beyond me! They gave me their word, they promised! And now see what they've done."

We made no reply.

He whirled about the stage some more, then he stopped, faltered, scratched his temple, smacked his lips thoughtfully, and suddenly said with determination, "Gentlemen, I humbly beg you to have supper with me."

We declined.

But it was no use. He stuck to us like a leech. He dashed from one of us to the other, shook our hands, gazed tenderly into our eyes and hotly protested that he loved art. Nelyubov was the first to waver.

"Hang it all! Let's go. Why not?"

The patron of art led us to the main dais and got busy. He picked the most prominent spot, seated us, and then jumped up again and again to fetch the waiter, waved his arms and, after a glass of doppeitkutmel, made himself out to be a terrific rake. He had cocked his bowler to give himself a more jaunty look.

"Pickles? How do you say that in Russian? No food will go down without pickles—right? And how about some vodka? Please eat, eat all of it, I beg you. Perhaps you'd like a bosuf Stroganoff? The cuisine here is excellent. Hey, waiter!"

I was drunk on a big chunk of fried meat as if it had been wine. My eyes were closing. The veranda with its lights, its blue tobacco smoke and its whirl of chatter kept floating away past me, and I heard as in a dream, "Please have more, gentlemen. Don't stand on ceremony. 'What can I do if I love art so much!'"

XIII

But the climax was drawing near. The unrelieved diet of tea and black bread had made me irritable, and often I had to run out into some far corner of the garden to check my temper. I had long sold all my linen.

Samoilenko went on tormenting me. You know how a boarding-school teacher comes to hate some puny pupil— for his pale face, for his protruding ears, for his unpleasant habit of jerking a shoulder—and the feeling lasts for years. That was how Samoilenko felt towards me. He had already fined me a total of fifteen rubles, and during the rehearsals he treated me, to say the least, as a prison governor might treat his prisoner. Sometimes as I listened to his rude comments I would drop my eyelids and see fiery circles before me. Valerianov no longer spoke to me and when we met he would stomp away as fast as an ostrich. I had been employed for six weeks but had received only one ruble.

One morning I woke up with a headache, a metallic flavour in my mouth and black, unaccountable anger in my heart. I went to the rehearsal in that mood.

I forget what play we were presenting that evening, but I do recall that I had in my hand a rolled-up book. As usual I knew my part thoroughly. Incidentally, it contained the words "I deserve it."

During the rehearsal the moment came for me to say that.

"I deserve it," I said.

But Samoilenko rushed up to me and yelled, "Do you call that Russian? Who ever speaks such Russian? 'I deserve it,' indeed! The right way to say that is 'I deserve for it!' You ignoramus!"

I went pale, and held out my book to him.

"Kindly consult my text," I said.

But he roared, "I don't care a tinker's damn for your text! *I* am the text for you! If you don't like it here you may go to hell!"

I looked up quickly. He understood at once; he went as pale as I and swiftly took two steps back. But it was too late. With the heavy roll I struck him a painful smack on the left cheek, then on the right, then again on the left, and again on the right, and kept on hitting him. He did not resist, did not so much as duck or try to escape, but just jerked his head right or left at each blow, like a clown pretending surprise. Finally I hurled the book in his face, left the stage and went into the garden. Nobody tried to stop me.

And lo! a miracle happened. The first person I saw in the garden was a messenger boy from the local office of the Volga and Kama Bank. He asked me who was Leontovich, and handed me an order for five hundred rubles.

An hour later Nelyubov and I were again in the garden, where we ordered a monstrous meal, and in two more hours the whole company was quaffing champagne with me and congratulating me. It was Nelyubov, and not I, who spread the rumour that I had inherited sixty thousand rubles, but I did not refute him. Afterwards Valerianov swore that the company was on the rocks, and I gave him a hundred rubles.

At five o'clock in the afternoon I was taking my train. I had in my pocket, besides a ticket to Moscow, no more than seventy rubles, but I felt like Caesar. After the second bell, when I was climbing into my carriage, Samoilenko, who until then had kept away from me, walked up.

"Please forgive me for letting my temper run away with me," he said theatrically.

I shook his proffered hand and replied amiably, "Please forgive me for doing the same."

They gave me three cheers in farewell. I exchanged a last, warm glance with Nelyubov. The train started, and everything moved away, for ever, irrevocably. And when the last blue huts of Zarechye were dropping out of sight to be replaced by a dreary steppe scorched yellow, a strange sadness clutched my heart. You would say that back there, where I had known anxiety and suffering and hunger and humiliation, I had left part of my heart for ever.