

SHORT STORY AMERICA

A TRAGIC ACTOR

ANTON CHEKHOV

IT was the benefit night of Fenogenov, the tragic actor. They were acting "Prince Serebryany." The tragedian himself was playing Vyazemsky; Limonadov, the stage manager, was playing Morozov; Madame Beobahtov, Elena. The performance was a grand success. The tragedian accomplished wonders indeed. When he was carrying off Elena, he held her in one hand above his head as he dashed across the stage. He shouted, hissed, banged with his feet, tore his coat across his chest. When he refused to fight Morozov, he trembled all over as nobody ever trembles in reality, and gasped loudly. The theatre shook with applause. There were endless calls. Fenogenov was presented with a silver cigarette-case and a bouquet tied with long ribbons. The ladies waved their handkerchiefs and urged their men to applaud, many shed tears.... But the one who was the most enthusiastic and most excited was Masha, daughter of Sidoretsky the police captain. She was sitting in the first row of the stalls beside her papa; she was ecstatic and could not take her eyes off the stage even between the acts. Her delicate little hands and feet were quivering, her eyes were full of tears, her cheeks turned paler and paler. And no wonder--she was at the theatre for the first time in her life.

"How well they act! how splendidly!" she said to her papa the police captain, every time the curtain fell. "How good Fenogenov is!"

And if her papa had been capable of reading faces he would have read on his daughter's pale little countenance a rapture that was almost anguish. She was overcome by the acting, by the play, by the surroundings. When the regimental band began playing between the acts,

she closed her eyes, exhausted.

"Papa!" she said to the police captain during the last interval, "go behind the scenes and ask them all to dinner to-morrow!"

The police captain went behind the scenes, praised them for all their fine acting, and complimented Madame Beobahtov.

"Your lovely face demands a canvas, and I only wish I could wield the brush!"

And with a scrape, he thereupon invited the company to dinner.

"All except the fair sex," he whispered. "I don't want the actresses, for I have a daughter."

Next day the actors dined at the police captain's. Only three turned up, the manager Limonadov, the tragedian Fenogenov, and the comic man Vodolazov; the others sent excuses. The dinner was a dull affair. Limonadov kept telling the police captain how much he respected him, and how highly he thought of all persons in authority; Vodolazov mimicked drunken merchants and Armenians; and Fenogenov (on his passport his name was Knish), a tall, stout Little Russian with black eyes and frowning brow, declaimed "At the portals of the great," and "To be or not to be." Limonadov, with tears in his eyes, described his interview with the former Governor, General Kanyutchin. The police captain listened, was bored, and smiled affably. He was well satisfied, although Limonadov smelt strongly of burnt feathers, and Fenogenov was wearing a hired dress coat and boots trodden down at heel. They pleased his daughter and made her lively, and that was enough for him. And Masha never took her eyes off the actors. She had never before seen such clever, exceptional people!

In the evening the police captain and Masha were at the theatre again. A week later the actors dined at the police captain's again, and after that came almost every day either to dinner or supper. Masha became more and more devoted to the theatre, and went there every evening.

She fell in love with the tragedian. One fine morning, when the police captain had gone to meet the bishop, Masha ran away with Limonadov's

company and married her hero on the way. After celebrating the wedding, the actors composed a long and touching letter and sent it to the police captain.

It was the work of their combined efforts.

"Bring out the motive, the motive!" Limonadov kept saying as he dictated to the comic man. "Lay on the respect.... These official chaps like it. Add something of a sort... to draw a tear."

The answer to this letter was most discomfoting. The police captain disowned his daughter for marrying, as he said, "a stupid, idle Little Russian with no fixed home or occupation."

And the day after this answer was received Masha was writing to her father.

"Papa, he beats me! Forgive us!"

He had beaten her, beaten her behind the scenes, in the presence of Limonadov, the washerwoman, and two lighting men. He remembered how, four days before the wedding, he was sitting in the London Tavern with the whole company, and all were talking about Masha. The company were advising him to "chance it," and Limonadov, with tears in his eyes urged: "It would be stupid and irrational to let slip such an opportunity! Why, for a sum like that one would go to Siberia, let alone getting married! When you marry and have a theatre of your own, take me into your company. I shan't be master then, you'll be master."

Fenogenov remembered it, and muttered with clenched fists:

"If he doesn't send money I'll smash her! I won't let myself be made a fool of, damn my soul!"

At one provincial town the company tried to give Masha the slip, but Masha found out, ran to the station, and got there when the second bell had rung and the actors had all taken their seats.

"I've been shamefully treated by your father," said the tragedian; "all is over between us!"

And though the carriage was full of people, she went down on her knees and held out her hands, imploring him:

"I love you! Don't drive me away, Kondraty Ivanovitch," she besought him. "I can't live without you!"

They listened to her entreaties, and after consulting together, took her into the company as a "countess"--the name they used for the minor actresses who usually came on to the stage in crowds or in dumb parts. To begin with Masha used to play maid-servants and pages, but when Madame Beobahtov, the flower of Limonadov's company, eloped, they made her ingenué. She acted badly, lisped, and was nervous. She soon grew used to it, however, and began to be liked by the audience. Fenogenov was much displeased.

"To call her an actress!" he used to say. "She has no figure, no deportment, nothing whatever but silliness."

In one provincial town the company acted Schiller's "Robbers." Fenogenov played Franz, Masha, Amalie. The tragedian shouted and quivered. Masha repeated her part like a well-learned lesson, and the play would have gone off as they generally did had it not been for a trifling mishap. Everything went well up to the point where Franz declares his love for Amalie and she seizes his sword. The tragedian shouted, hissed, quivered, and squeezed Masha in his iron embrace. And Masha, instead of repulsing him and crying "Hence!" trembled in his arms like a bird and did not move,... she seemed petrified.

"Have pity on me!" she whispered in his ear. "Oh, have pity on me! I am so miserable!"

"You don't know your part! Listen to the prompter!" hissed the tragedian, and he thrust his sword into her hand.

After the performance, Limonadov and Fenogenov were sitting in the ticket box-office engaged in conversation.

"Your wife does not learn her part, you are right there," the manager was saying. "She doesn't know her line.... Every man has his own

line,... but she doesn't know hers...."

Fenogenov listened, sighed, and scowled and scowled.

Next morning, Masha was sitting in a little general shop writing:

"Papa, he beats me! Forgive us! Send us some money!"