

In Passion Week

by Anton Chekhov

Translated by Marian Fell

"RUN, the church-bells are ringing! Be a good boy in church and don't play! If you do, God will punish you!"

My mother slipped a few copper coins into my hand and then forgot all about me, as she ran into the kitchen with an iron that was growing cold. I knew I should not be allowed to eat or drink after confession, so before leaving home I choked down a crust of bread and drank two glasses of water. Spring was at its height. The street was a sea of brown mud through which ruts were already in process of being worn; the housetops and sidewalks were dry, and the tender young green of springtime was pushing up through last year's dry grass under the fence rows. Muddy rivulets were babbling and murmuring down the gutters in which the sun did not disdain to lave its rays. Chips, bits of straw, and nutshells were floating swiftly down with the current, twisting and turning and catching on the dirty foam flakes. Whither, whither were they drifting? Would they not be swept from the gutter into the river, from the river into the sea, and from the sea into the mighty ocean? I tried to picture to myself the long and terrible journey before them, but my imagination failed even before reaching the river.

A cab drove by. The cabman was clucking to his horse and slapping the reins, unaware of two street-urchins hanging from the springs of his little carriage. I wanted to join these boys, but straightway remembered that I was on my way to confession, whereupon the boys appeared to me to be very wicked sinners indeed.

"God will ask them on the Last Judgment Day why they played tricks on a poor cabman," I thought. "They will begin to make excuses, but the devil will grab them and throw them into eternal fire. But if they obey their fathers and mothers and give pennies and bread to the beggars, God will have mercy on them and will let them into Paradise."

The church porch was sunny and dry. Not a soul was there; I opened the church door irresolutely and entered the building. There, in the dim light more fraught with melancholy and gloom for me than ever before, I became overwhelmed by the consciousness of my wickedness and sin. The first object that met my sight was a

huge crucifixion with the Virgin and St. John the Baptist on either side of the cross. The lustres and shutters were hung with mourning black, the icon lamps were glimmering faintly, and the sun seemed to be purposely avoiding the church windows. The Mother of God and the favourite Disciple were depicted in profile silently gazing at that unutterable agony upon the cross, oblivious of my presence. I felt that I was a stranger to them, paltry and vile; that I could not help them by word or deed; that I was a horrid, worthless boy, fit only to chatter and be naughty and rough. I called to mind all my acquaintances, and they all seemed to me to be trivial and silly and wicked, incapable of consoling one atom the terrible grief before me. The murky twilight deepened, the Mother of God and John the Baptist seemed very lonely.

Behind the lectern where the candles were sold stood the old soldier Prokofi, now churchwarden's assistant.

His eyebrows were raised and he was stroking his beard and whispering to an old woman.

"The service will begin directly after vespers this evening. There will be prayers after matins to-morrow at eight o'clock. Do you hear me? At eight o'clock."

Between two large pillars near the rood-screen the penitents were standing in line waiting their turn for confession. Among them was Mitka, a ragged little brat with an ugly, shaven head, protruding ears, and small, wicked eyes. He was the son of Nastasia the washerwoman, and was a bully and a thief who filched apples from the fruit-stalls and had more than once made away with my knuckle-bones. He was now staring crossly at me and seemed to be exulting in the fact that he was going to confession before me. My heart swelled with rage and I tried not to look at him. From the bottom of my soul I was furious that this boy's sins were about to be forgiven.

In front of him stood a richly dressed lady with a white plume in her hat. Clearly she was deeply agitated and tensely expectant, and one of her cheeks was burning with a feverish flush.

I waited five minutes, ten minutes--then a well-dressed young man with a long, thin neck came out from behind the screen. He had on high rubber goloshes, and I at once began dreaming of the day when I should buy a pair of goloshes like his for myself. I decided that I would certainly do so. And now came the lady's turn. She shuddered and went behind the screen.

Through a crack I could see her approach the altar, prostrate herself, rise, and bow her head expectantly without looking at the priest. The priest's back was turned toward the screen, and all I could see of him was his broad shoulders, his curly grey hair, and the chain around his neck from which a cross was suspended. Sighing, without looking at the lady, he began nodding his head and whispering rapidly, now raising, now lowering his voice. The lady listened meekly, guiltily almost, with downcast eyes, and answered him in a few words.

"What can be her sin?" I wondered, looking reverently at her beautiful, gentle face. "Forgive her, God, and make her happy!"

But now the priest was covering her head with the stole.

"I, Thy unworthy servant," his voice rang out, "by the power vouchsafed me, forgive this woman and absolve her from sin--"

The lady prostrated herself once more, kissed the cross, and retired. Both her cheeks were flushed now, but her face was calm, and unclouded, and joyous.

"She is happy now," I thought, my eye wandering from her to the priest pronouncing the absolution. "But how happy he must be who is able to forgive sin!"

It was Mitka's turn next, and my heart suddenly boiled over with hatred for the little thief. I wanted to go behind the screen ahead of him, I wanted to be first. Mitka noticed the movement, and hit me on the head with a candle. I paid him back in his own coin, and for a moment sounds of panting and the breaking of candles were heard in the church. We were forcibly parted, and my enemy nervously and stiffly approached the altar and bowed to the ground, but what happened after that I was unable to see. All I could think of was that I was going next, after Mitka, and at that thought the objects around me danced and swam before my eyes. Mitka's protruding ears grew larger than ever and melted into the back of his neck, the priest swayed, and the floor rocked under my feet.

The priest's voice rang out:

"I, Thy unworthy servant--"

I found myself moving toward the screen. My feet seemed to be treading on air. I felt as if I were floating. I reached the altar, which was higher than my head. The weary, dispassionate face of the priest flashed for a moment across my vision, but after that I saw only his blue-lined sleeves and one corner of the stole. I felt his near

presence, smelled the odour of his cassock, and heard his stern voice, and the cheek that was turned toward him began to burn. I lost much of what he said from excitement, but I answered him earnestly, in a voice that sounded to me as if it were not my own. I thought of the lonely Mother of God, and the Disciple, and the crucifixion, and my mother, and wanted to cry and ask for forgiveness.

"What is your name?" asked the priest, laying the stole over my head.

How relieved I now felt, and how light of heart! My sins were gone, I was sanctified. I could enter into Paradise. It seemed to me that I exhaled the same odour as the priest's cassock, and I sniffed my sleeve as I came out from behind the screen and went to the deacon to register. The dim half-light of the church no longer struck me as gloomy, and I could now look calmly and without anger at Mitka.

"What is your name?" asked the deacon.

"Fedia."

"Fedia, what?"

"I don't know."

"What is your daddy's name?"

"Ivan."

"And his other name?"

I was silent.

"How old are you?"

"Nine years old."

On reaching home I went straight to bed to avoid seeing my family at supper. Shutting my eyes, I lay thinking of how glorious it would be to be martyred by Herod or some one; to live in a desert feeding bears like the hermit Seraphim; to pass one's life in a cell with nothing to eat but wafers; to give away all one possessed to the poor; to make a pilgrimage to Kief. I could hear them laying the table in the dining-room; supper would soon be ready! There would be pickles and cabbage pasties and baked fish--oh, how hungry I was! I now felt willing to endure any torture

whatsoever, to live in the desert without my mother, feeding bears out of my own hands, if only I could have just one little cabbage pasty first!

"Purify my heart, O God!" I prayed, pulling the bedclothes up over my head. "O guardian angels, save me from sin!"

Next morning, Thursday, I woke with a heart as serene and joyful as a spring day. I walked gaily and manfully to church, conscious that I was now a communicant and that I was wearing a beautiful and expensive shirt made from a silk dress left me by my grandmamma. Everything in church spoke of joy and happiness and springtime. The Mother of God and John the Baptist looked less sad than they had the evening before, and the faces of the communicants were radiant with anticipation. The past, it seemed, was all forgiven and forgotten. Mitka was there, washed and dressed in his Sunday best. I looked cheerfully at his protruding ears, and, to show that I bore him no malice, I said:

"You look fine to-day. If your hair didn't stick up so and you weren't so poorly dressed one might almost think your mother was a lady instead of a washer-woman. Come and play knuckle-bones with me on Easter Day!"

Mitka looked suspiciously at me and secretly threatened me with his fist.

The lady of yesterday was radiantly beautiful. She wore a light-blue dress fastened with a large, flashing brooch shaped like a horseshoe.

I stood and admired her, thinking that when I grew to be a man I should certainly marry a woman like her, but, remembering suddenly that to think of marriage was shameful, I stopped, and moved toward the choir where the deacon was already reading the prayers that concluded the service.