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Allez!

This short commanding cry was what mademoiselle Nora remembered first as coming from the gloomy, monotonous, unsettled times of her childhood. This word was spelled with her infant's delicate tongue earlier than others. Following this cry, even if she was asleep, hard time memories arose from Nora's mind, these were circus ring coldness, the smell of the stable, the horse's heavy gallop, click of a long whip and burning pain from the strike which suddenly stifles the minute hesitation of fear. - Allez!..

It is dark and cold in an empty circus. Winter sunrays come through the glass cupola in some places and lay as dim spots onto crimson velvet and gilt of the boxes, onto screens decorated with horse head paintings and flags decorating the columns. The rays run on the frosted glasses of electrical lamps and slide along the horizontal steel bars and trapezes at the terrible height where the machines and rods are muddled up. Only the first rows of chairs are to be seen, and seats behind the boxes and the gallery are in deep darkness.

Day work is going on. Five or six performers wearing fur-coats and hats are sitting in the first row chairs near the entrance to the stable and smoking smelly cigars. A sturdily built short-legged man wearing a top hat, with black moustache twisted carefully into a thread, is standing at the middle of the ring. He is tying a long rope the round waist of a tiny five-year girl who is standing before him. The girl is shaking from agitation and cold. A huge white horse, that is being guided along the barrier by a stableman, is snorting loudly, shaking its curved neck, and white jets of steam run away from its nostrils impetuously. Each time the horse passes by the top-hat man it squints at a whip, which is seen under the man's arm, and makes uneasy snorts and draws the leaning stable man aside. Little Nora feels the horse's nervous movements behind her back, and so she is trembling more.

Being moved by two strong hands grasping her waist, she is put up easily onto the horse back, onto a wide leather pad. Around the same moment all the things, both the chairs and white columns and ticking curtains at the entrances, turn into a single mixed circle running towards the horse quickly. It is unnecessary to keep the hands convulsive in horse's hard mane and close the eyes firm being blinded from furious flashing of the misty circle. The top-hat man is walking inside the circle keeping the tip of his long whip near the horse's head; he is making deafening click with it... - Allez!..

And here is she, dressed in a short gauze skirt, with naked lean child-like hands, is standing under the very top of the circus cupola, illuminated with electrical light. She is standing on a trapeze swinging drastically. Another sturdily built man is near the girl's legs. He is suspended upside-down clinging to the bar with his knees. This man is wearing pink tights with golden spangles and fringe, with his hair curled, pomade dressed, severely looking. He lifted his hanging hands up, throwing his hands aside and fixed his targeting and acrobat's hypnotic eye on Nora, and, suddenly, he clapped his hands. Nora is moving forward quickly in order to rush down, direct to his strong merciless hands (Oh! Hundreds of viewers will gasp for breath just now), but her heart became cold suddenly and beating stops from horror, and she is only holding the rods firmly. The lowered severe hands are lifting again, the acrobat's look is becoming more strained ... The space underneath, under her feet, seems abyss. - Allez!..

She is balancing on the top of a pyramid built of six men, hardly taking her breath. She is sliding, wriggling her flexible body as a snake, between rungs of a long white ladder, which is held on a man's head beneath. She is turning head-over-heels in air having been thrown up by juggler's strong and terrible legs, that are like steel springs, in "the Icarian games". She is walking high over

the ground on a thin trembling wire cutting into her feet and causing intolerable pain... And everywhere she saw the same dull beautiful faces, pomade-dressed partings, puffed up quiffs, twisted moustache, smell of cigars and sweaty human bodies. And everywhere she feels the same fear and the same ever-existing fatal cry, which is the same to people, horses and performing trained dogs: - Allez!

She was just over sixteen, and she was a very pretty girl, when one day, during the performance, she fell down from the aerial bar having lost her support, and, flying by the safety net, she fell on the circle sand. She was taken behind the scenes in unconscious condition immediately, and there they began shaking her with all their might grasping her shoulders, in order to revive her, according to ancient circus custom. She recovered and moaned from pain caused by her dislocated hand. They were saying around her: "The audience is becoming worried and breaking up, go and appear before them!.." She obediently made the accustomed smile with her lips, a smile of graceful horsewoman, but after two steps she cried and staggered from excruciating pain. Then tens of hands gripped and pushed her by force to the scene out from the entrance curtain, to make her appearance to the audience. - Allez!..

That season clown Menotti worked in the circus in the capacity of actor on tour. He was not a simple low-paid poor clown who wallows in the sand, receives slaps on his face and amuses the audience for the whole evening performance with his inexhaustible jokes, having had nothing to eat since yesterday. He was a famous clown, the first solo-clown and imitator, the world-known animal-trainer who won honorary awards, and so on. He was wearing a heavy chain of golden medals on his chest, earned two hundred roubles for his entrance, he was proud that he had been wearing only moire suits for already five years, he always felt himself tired badly after evening performance, and told about himself with bitterness in his voice: "Yes! We are jesters, we have to make the wealthy audience laugh!" When performing on the circle he sang old couplets with forged and exaggerated expression in his voice, or recited his own verses, or told funny stories about the Duma and sewage system. The audience, being attracted to the circle thanks to massive advertising, found all these tricks bombastic, boring and unskilled affectation. In his life he put on languorous and patronising behaviour, and he liked to hint at his liaisons with very beautiful and rich countesses, telling about them in affected secret and casual manner, that he is tired of them completely. When Nora first appeared at the morning rehearsal in the circus having recovered after her hand dislocation, Menotti kept her hand in his hand with greeting, put tiredness and tears in his eyes and asked her with his limp voice how she is. She felt disturbed, turned red and took her hand away. This moment was decisive to her fate. A week later, when accompanying Nora from a gala evening performance, Menotti asked her to come with him to a restaurant of that splendid hotel where the world-famous first solo clown always stays.

Single rooms were on the upper floor. Having gone upstairs, Nora stayed for a moment, being stopped by her agitation and the last chaste hesitation. But Menotti gripped her elbow firmly. His voice sounded with ferocious passion and severe order of the former acrobat when he murmured "Allez!" ..

And she went with him ... He seemed to her an extraordinary supreme human being, almost a God... And she would go into the fire if he took it into his mind to order to do so.

She went after him from city to city for a year. She watched over Menotti's brilliants and medals during his entrances, put on and took off his tights, maintained his wardrobe, helped him to train rats and pigs, rub cold cream down the skin of his face, and, most important, she believed ardently in his world grandeur as an idolater would praise his fetish to the skies. When they stayed alone, he didn't know what to tell her, and he took her ardent endearments as if he was a satiated, boring male, but kindly allowed to adore himself.

He became sick of her in a year. His languid look was attracted by one of Wilson sisters who performed "air flights". Now he became completely free in his bad conduct with Nora. He slapped

her face frequently in the dressing room, for a missing button, before the actors and stable men. She bore it with the same resignation as an old, clever and devoted dog stands beating from its master.

At last one night, after a performance, in which the world's first animal trainer was hissed, as he beat the dog with his whip too heavily Minotti told Nora without hesitation to go away from him to all the devils. She followed, but she stopped at the very door of the room and turned round with praying look. Then Menotti rushed to the door quickly, flung the door wide open, hitting it with his foot, and cried "Allez!"..

However two days later she felt an urge as a dog to her master after it was beaten and turned out. Everything became dark before her eyes, when a hotel servant said with his insolent smile: "It is impossible. He is busy with a mademoiselle in the room".

Nora went upstairs and stayed at the door of the same room where she was with Menotti a year ago. It is right. He is there. It is his languid voice of a tired famous man that she hears now alternating with the happy laughter of the red-haired English woman. She opened the door fast.

Crimson-golden wallpaper, bright light of two candelabums, brilliance of cut-glass ware, a pile of fruits and bottles in silver vases, Menotti lying with his frock-coat taken off on the divan, and Wilson with unfastened corsage, the smell of perfume, wine, cigar and powder - all these things stunned her first; then she rushed to Wilson and hit her in face several times. The woman squealed and scuffle began ...

When Menotti managed to pull both women apart with difficulty, Nora fell before him knelt down, and prayed him to return to her, kissing his boots. Menotti pushed her back, and, griping her neck firmly with his strong fingers he said: "- If you don't go away, skunk, I will tell the servants to pull you from here!"

She raised, being out of breath, and murmured: "Then, then ...". She looked at the open window. She jumped onto the window-sill quickly and slightly, as a trained female gymnast does, and bent forward, holding the both external frames with her hands.

Far underneath, on the roadway, carriages thundered; they looked like strange small animals from above; pavements were gleaming after the rain, and reflected light of street lamps vibrated in puddles.

Nora's fingers turned cold, her heart stopped beating from a minute horror ... Then, with eyes closed and breath taken, she lifted her arms above the head, and, having overcome her weakness with accustomed effort, she cried to herself exactly as in the circus - Allez!..

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