

# In Passion Week

## Anton Chekhov

Go along, they are ringing already; and mind, don't be naughty in church or God will punish you."

My mother thrusts a few copper coins upon me, and, instantly forgetting about me, runs into the kitchen with an iron that needs reheating. I know well that after confession I shall not be allowed to eat or drink, and so, before leaving the house, I force myself to eat a crust of white bread, and to drink two glasses of water. It is quite spring in the street. The roads are all covered with brownish slush, in which future paths are already beginning to show; the roofs and side-walks are dry; the fresh young green is piercing through the rotting grass of last year, under the fences. In the gutters there is the merry gurgling and foaming of dirty water, in which the sunbeams do not disdain to bathe. Chips, straws, the husks of sunflower seeds are carried rapidly along in the water, whirling round and sticking in the dirty foam. Where, where are those chips swimming to? It may well be that from the gutter they may pass into the river, from the river into the sea, and from the sea into the ocean. I try to imagine to myself that long terrible journey, but my fancy stops short before reaching the sea.

A cabman drives by. He clicks to his horse, tugs at the reins, and does not see that two street urchins are hanging on the back of his cab. I should like to join them, but think of confession, and the street urchins begin to seem to me great sinners.

"They will be asked on the day of judgment: 'Why did you play pranks and deceive the poor cabman?' " I think. "They will begin to defend themselves, but evil spirits will seize them, and drag them to fire everlasting. But if they obey their parents, and give the beggars a kopeck each, or a roll, God will have pity on them, and will let them into Paradise."

The church porch is dry and bathed in sunshine. There is not a soul in it. I open the door irresolutely and go into the church. Here, in the twilight which seems to me thick and gloomy as at no other time, I am overcome by the sense of sinfulness and insignificance. What strikes the eye first of all is a huge crucifix, and on one side of it the Mother of God, and on the other, St. John the Divine. The candelabra and the candlestands are draped in black mourning covers, the lamps glimmer dimly and faintly, and the sun seems intentionally to pass by the church windows. The Mother of God and the beloved disciple of Jesus Christ, depicted in profile, gaze in silence at the insufferable agony and do not observe my presence; I feel that to them I am alien, superfluous, unnoticed, that I can be no help to them by word or deed, that I am a loathsome, dishonest boy, only capable of mischief, rudeness, and tale-bearing. I think of all the people I know, and they all seem to me petty, stupid, and wicked, and incapable of bringing one drop of relief to that intolerable sorrow which I now behold.

The twilight of the church grows darker and more gloomy. And the Mother of God and St. John look lonely and forlorn to me.

Prokofy Ignatitch, a veteran soldier, the church verger's assistant, is standing behind the

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candle cupboard. Raising his eyebrows and stroking his beard he explains in a half-whisper to an old woman: "Matins will be in the evening to-day, directly after vespers. And they will ring for the 'hours' to-morrow between seven and eight. Do you understand? Between seven and eight."

Between the two broad columns on the right, where the chapel of Varvara the Martyr begins, those who are going to confess stand beside the screen, awaiting their turn. And Mitka is there too -- a ragged boy with his head hideously cropped, with ears that jut out, and little spiteful eyes. He is the son of Nastasya the charwoman, and is a bully and a ruffian who snatches apples from the women's baskets, and has more than once carried off my knuckle-bones. He looks at me angrily, and I fancy takes a spiteful pleasure in the fact that he, not I, will first go behind the screen. I feel boiling over with resentment, I try not to look at him, and, at the bottom of my heart, I am vexed that this wretched boy's sins will soon be forgiven.

In front of him stands a grandly dressed, beautiful lady, wearing a hat with a white feather. She is noticeably agitated, is waiting in strained suspense, and one of her cheeks is flushed red with excitement.

I wait for five minutes, for ten. . . . A well-dressed young man with a long thin neck, and rubber goloshes, comes out from behind the screen. I begin dreaming how, when I am grown up, I will buy goloshes exactly like them. I certainly will! The lady shudders and goes behind the screen. It is her turn.

In the crack, between the two panels of the screen, I can see the lady go up to the lectern and bow down to the ground, then get up, and, without looking at the priest, bow her head in anticipation. The priest stands with his back to the screen, and so I can only see his grey curly head, the chain of the cross on his chest, and his broad back. His face is not visible. Heaving a sigh, and not looking at the lady, he begins speaking rapidly, shaking his head, alternately raising and dropping his whispering voice. The lady listens meekly as though conscious of guilt, answers meekly, and looks at the floor.

"In what way can she be sinful?" I wonder, looking reverently at her gentle, beautiful face. "God forgive her sins, God send her happiness." But now the priest covers her head with the stole. "And I, unworthy priest . . ." I hear his voice, ". . . by His power given unto me, do forgive and absolve thee from all thy sins. . . ."

The lady bows down to the ground, kisses the cross, and comes back. Both her cheeks are flushed now, but her face is calm and serene and cheerful.

"She is happy now," I think to myself, looking first at her and then at the priest who had forgiven her sins. "But how happy the man must be who has the right to forgive sins!"

Now it is Mitka's turn, but a feeling of hatred for that young ruffian suddenly boils up in me. I want to go behind the screen before him, I want to be the first. Noticing my movement he hits me on the head with his candle, I respond by doing the same, and, for half a minute, there is a sound of panting, and, as it were, of someone breaking candles. . . . We are separated. My foe goes timidly up to the lectern, and bows down to the floor without bending his knees, but I do not see what happens after that; the thought that my turn

is coming after Mitka's makes everything grow blurred and confused before my eyes; Mitka's protruding ears grow large, and melt into his dark head, the priest sways, the floor seems to be undulating. . . .

The priest's voice is audible: "And I, unworthy priest . . ."

Now I too move behind the screen. I do not feel the ground under my feet, it is as though I were walking on air. . . . I go up to the lectern which is taller than I am. For a minute I have a glimpse of the indifferent, exhausted face of the priest. But after that I see nothing but his sleeve with its blue lining, the cross, and the edge of the lectern. I am conscious of the close proximity of the priest, the smell of his cassock; I hear his stern voice, and my cheek turned towards him begins to burn. . . . I am so troubled that I miss a great deal that he says, but I answer his questions sincerely in an unnatural voice, not my own. I think of the forlorn figures of the Holy Mother and St. John the Divine, the crucifix, my mother, and I want to cry and beg forgiveness.

"What is your name?" the priest asks me, covering my head with the soft stole.

How light-hearted I am now, with joy in my soul!

I have no sins now, I am holy, I have the right to enter Paradise! I fancy that I already smell like the cassock. I go from behind the screen to the deacon to enter my name, and sniff at my sleeves. The dusk of the church no longer seems gloomy, and I look indifferently, without malice, at Mitka.

"What is your name?" the deacon asks.

"Fedya."

"And your name from your father?"

"I don't know."

"What is your papa's name?"

"Ivan Petrovitch."

"And your surname?"

I make no answer.

"How old are you?"

"Nearly nine."

When I get home I go to bed quickly, that I may not see them eating supper; and, shutting my eyes, dream of how fine it would be to endure martyrdom at the hands of some Herod or Dioskorus, to live in the desert, and, like St. Serafim, feed the bears, live in a cell, and eat nothing but holy bread, give my property to the poor, go on a pilgrimage to Kiev. I hear

them laying the table in the dining-room -- they are going to have supper, they will eat salad, cabbage pies, fried and baked fish. How hungry I am! I would consent to endure any martyrdom, to live in the desert without my mother, to feed bears out of my own hands, if only I might first eat just one cabbage pie!

"Lord, purify me a sinner," I pray, covering my head over. "Guardian angel, save me from the unclean spirit."

The next day, Thursday, I wake up with my heart as pure and clean as a fine spring day. I go gaily and boldly into the church, feeling that I am a communicant, that I have a splendid and expensive shirt on, made out of a silk dress left by my grandmother. In the church everything has an air of joy, happiness, and spring. The faces of the Mother of God and St. John the Divine are not so sorrowful as yesterday. The faces of the communicants are radiant with hope, and it seems as though all the past is forgotten, all is forgiven. Mitka, too, has combed his hair, and is dressed in his best. I look gaily at his protruding ears, and to show that I have nothing against him, I say:

"You look nice to-day, and if your hair did not stand up so, and you weren't so poorly dressed, everybody would think that your mother was not a washerwoman but a lady. Come to me at Easter, we will play knuckle-bones."

Mitka looks at me mistrustfully, and shakes his fist at me on the sly.

And the lady I saw yesterday looks lovely. She is wearing a light blue dress, and a big sparkling brooch in the shape of a horse-shoe. I admire her, and think that, when I am grown-up, I will certainly marry a woman like that, but remembering that getting married is shameful, I leave off thinking about it, and go into the choir where the deacon is already reading the "hours."

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