

THE SWAN SONG

Anton Chekhov

1887

Translated by Marion Fell

CHARACTERS

VASILI SVIETLOVIDOFF, a comedian, 68 years old
NIKITA IVANITCH, a prompter, an old man

The scene is laid on the stage of a country theatre, at night, after the play. To the right a row of rough, unpainted doors leading into the dressing-rooms. To the left and in the background the stage is encumbered with all sorts of rubbish. In the middle of the stage is an overturned stool.

SVIETLOVIDOFF. [With a candle in his hand, comes out of a dressing-room and laughs] Well, well, this is funny! Here's a good joke! I fell asleep in my dressing-room when the play was over, and there I was calmly snoring after everybody else had left the theatre. Ah! I'm a foolish old man, a poor old dodderer! I have been drinking again, and so I fell asleep in there, sitting up. That was clever! Good for you, old boy! [Calls] Yegorka! Petrushka! Where the devil are you? Petrushka! The scoundrels must be asleep, and an earthquake wouldn't wake them now! Yegorka! [Picks up the stool, sits down, and puts the candle on the floor] Not a sound! Only echos answer me. I gave Yegorka and Petrushka each a tip to-day, and now they have disappeared without leaving a trace behind them. The rascals have gone off and have probably locked up the theatre. [Turns his head about] I'm drunk! Ugh! The play to-night was for my benefit, and it is disgusting to think how much beer and wine I have poured down my throat in honour of the occasion. Gracious! My body is burning all over, and I feel as if I had twenty tongues in my mouth. It is horrid! Idiotic! This poor old sinner is drunk again, and doesn't even know what he has been celebrating! Ugh! My head is splitting, I am shivering all over, and I feel as dark and cold inside as a cellar! Even if I don't mind ruining my health, I ought at least to remember my age, old idiot that I am! Yes, my old age! It's no use! I can play the fool, and brag, and pretend to be young, but my life is really over now, I kiss my hand to the sixty-eight years that have gone by; I'll never see them again! I have drained the bottle, only a few little drops are left at the bottom, nothing but the dregs. Yes, yes, that's the case, Vasili, old boy. The time has come for you to rehearse the part of a mummy, whether you like it or not. Death is on its way to you. [Stares ahead of him] It is strange, though, that I have been on the stage now for forty-five years, and this is the first time I have seen a theatre at night, after the lights have been put out. The first time. [Walks up to the foot-lights] How dark it is! I can't see a thing. Oh, yes, I can just make out the prompter's box, and his desk; the rest is in pitch darkness, a black, bottomless pit, like a grave, in which death itself might be hiding.... Brr.... How cold it is! The wind blows out of the empty theatre as though out of a stone flue. What a place for ghosts! The shivers are running up and down my back. [Calls] Yegorka! Petrushka! Where are you both? What on earth makes me think of such gruesome things here? I must give up drinking; I'm an old man, I

shan't live much longer. At sixty-eight people go to church and prepare for death, but here I am—heavens! A profane old drunkard in this fool's dress—I'm simply not fit to look at. I must go and change it at once.... This is a dreadful place, I should die of fright sitting here all night. [Goes toward his dressing-room; at the same time NIKITA IVANITCH in a long white coat comes out of the dressing-room at the farthest end of the stage. SVIETLOVIDOFF sees IVANITCH—shrieks with terror and steps back] Who are you? What? What do you want? [Stamps his foot] Who are you?

IVANITCH. It is I, sir.

SVIETLOVIDOFF. Who are you?

IVANITCH. [Comes slowly toward him] It is I, sir, the prompter, Nikita Ivanitch. It is I, master, it is I!

SVIETLOVIDOFF. [Sinks helplessly onto the stool, breathes heavily and trembles violently] Heavens! Who are you? It is you . . . you Nikitushka? What . . . what are you doing here?

IVANITCH. I spend my nights here in the dressing-rooms. Only please be good enough not to tell Alexi Fomitch, sir. I have nowhere else to spend the night; indeed, I haven't.

SVIETLOVIDOFF. Ah! It is you, Nikitushka, is it? Just think, the audience called me out sixteen times; they brought me three wreathes and lots of other things, too; they were all wild with enthusiasm, and yet not a soul came when it was all over to wake the poor, drunken old man and take him home. And I am an old man, Nikitushka! I am sixty-eight years old, and I am ill. I haven't the heart left to go on. [Falls on IVANITCH'S neck and weeps] Don't go away, Nikitushka; I am old and helpless, and I feel it is time for me to die. Oh, it is dreadful, dreadful!

IVANITCH. [Tenderly and respectfully] Dear master! it is time for you to go home, sir!

SVIETLOVIDOFF. I won't go home; I have no home—none! none!—none!

IVANITCH. Oh, dear! Have you forgotten where you live?

SVIETLOVIDOFF. I won't go there. I won't! I am all alone there. I have nobody, Nikitushka! No wife—no children. I am like the wind blowing across the lonely fields. I shall die, and no one will remember me. It is awful to be alone—no one to cheer me, no one to caress me, no one to help me to bed when I am drunk. Whom do I belong to? Who needs me? Who loves me? Not a soul, Nikitushka.

IVANITCH. [Weeping] Your audience loves you, master.

SVIETLOVIDOFF. My audience has gone home. They are all asleep, and have forgotten their old clown. No, nobody needs me, nobody loves me; I have no wife, no children.

IVANITCH. Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Don't be so unhappy about it.

SVIETLOVIDOFF. But I am a man, I am still alive. Warm, red blood is tingling in my veins, the blood of noble ancestors. I am an aristocrat, Nikitushka; I served in the army, in the artillery, before I fell as low as this, and what a fine young chap I was! Handsome, daring, eager! Where has it all gone? What has become of those old days? There's the pit that has swallowed them all! I remember it all now. Forty-five years of my life lie buried there, and what a life, Nikitushka! I can see it as clearly as I see your face: the ecstasy of youth, faith, passion, the love of women—women, Nikitushka!

IVANITCH. It is time you went to sleep, sir.

SVIETLOVIDOFF. When I first went on the stage, in the first glow of passionate youth, I remember a woman loved me for my acting. She was beautiful, graceful as a poplar, young, innocent, pure, and radiant as a summer dawn. Her smile could charm away the darkest night. I remember, I stood before her once, as I am now standing before you. She had never seemed so lovely to me as she did then, and she spoke to me so with her eyes—such a look! I shall never forget it, no, not even in the grave; so tender, so soft, so deep, so bright and young! Enraptured, intoxicated, I fell on my knees before her, I begged for my happiness, and she said: "Give up the stage!" Give up the stage! Do you understand? She could love an actor, but marry him—never! I was acting that day, I remember—I had a foolish, clown's part, and as I acted, I felt my eyes being opened; I saw that the worship of the art I had held so sacred was a delusion and an empty dream; that I was a slave, a fool, the plaything of the idleness of strangers. I understood my audience at last, and since that day I have not believed in their applause, or in their wreathes, or in their enthusiasm. Yes, Nikitushka! The people applaud me, they buy my photograph, but I am a stranger to them. They don't know me, I am as the dirt beneath their feet. They are willing enough to meet me . . . but allow a daughter or a sister to marry me, an outcast, never! I have no faith in them, [sinks onto the stool] no faith in them.

IVANITCH. Oh, sir! you look dreadfully pale, you frighten me to death! Come, go home, have mercy on me!

SVIETLOVIDOFF. I saw through it all that day, and the knowledge was dearly bought. Nikitushka! After that . . . when that girl . . . well, I began to wander aimlessly about, living from day to day without looking ahead. I took the parts of buffoons and low comedians, letting my mind go to wreck. Ah! but I was a

great artist once, till little by little I threw away my talents, played the motley fool, lost my looks, lost the power of expressing myself, and became in the end a Merry Andrew instead of a man. I have been swallowed up in that great black pit. I never felt it before, but to-night, when I woke up, I looked back, and there behind me lay sixty-eight years. I have just found out what it is to be old! It is all over . . . [sobs] . . . all over.

IVANITCH. There, there, dear master! Be quiet . . . gracious! [Calls] Petrushka! Yegorka!

SVIETLOVIDOFF. But what a genius I was! You cannot imagine what power I had, what eloquence; how graceful I was, how tender; how many strings [beats his breast] quivered in this breast! It chokes me to think of it! Listen now, wait, let me catch my breath, there; now listen to this:

*“The shade of bloody Ivan now returning
Fans through my lips rebellion to a flame,
I am the dead Dimitri! In the burning
Boris shall perish on the throne I claim.
Enough! The heir of Czars shall not be seen
Kneeling to yonder haughty Polish Queen!”**

**From “Boris Godunoff,” by Pushkin. [translator’s note]*

Is that bad, eh? [Quickly] Wait, now, here’s something from King Lear. The sky is black, see? Rain is pouring down, thunder roars, lightning— zzz zzz zzz— splits the whole sky, and then, listen:

*“Blow winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
You cataracts and hurricanoes spout
Till you have drench’d our steeples, drown’d the cocks!
You sulphurous thought-executing fires
Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts
Singe my white head! And thou, all shaking thunder,
Strike flat the thick rotundity o’ the world!
Crack nature’s moulds, all germons spill at once
That make ungrateful man!”*

[Impatiently] Now, the part of the fool. [Stamps his foot] Come take the fool’s part! Be quick, I can’t wait!

IVANITCH. [Takes the part of the fool]

“O, Nuncle, court holy-water in a dry house is better than this rain-water out o’ door. Good Nuncle, in; ask thy daughter’s blessing: here’s a night pities neither wise men nor fools.”

SVIETLOVIDOFF.

*“Rumble thy bellyful! spit, fire! spout, rain!
Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters;
I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness;
I never gave you kingdom, call’d you children.”*

Ah! there is strength, there is talent for you! I’m a great artist! Now, then, here’s something else of the same kind, to bring back my youth to me. For instance, take this, from Hamlet, I’ll begin . . . Let me see, how does it go? Oh, yes, this is it. [Takes the part of Hamlet]

“O! the recorders, let me see one.—To withdraw with you. Why do you go about to recover the wind of me, as if you would drive me into a toil?”

IVANITCH. “O, my lord, if my duty be too bold, my love is too unmannerly.”

SVIETLOVIDOFF. “I do not well understand that. Will you play upon this pipe?”

IVANITCH. “My lord, I cannot.”

SVIETLOVIDOFF. “I pray you.”

IVANITCH. “Believe me, I cannot.”

SVIETLOVIDOFF. “I do beseech you.”

IVANITCH. “I know no touch of it, my lord.”

SVIETLOVIDOFF. “‘Tis as easy as lying: govern these vantages with your finger and thumb, give it breath with your mouth, and it will discourse most eloquent music. Look you, these are the stops.”

IVANITCH. “But these I cannot command to any utterance of harmony: I have not the skill.”

SVIETLOVIDOFF. “Why, look you, how unworthy a thing you make of me. You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak. S’blood! Do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me!” [laughs and clasps] Bravo! Encore! Bravo! Where the devil is there any old age in that? I’m not old, that is all nonsense, a torrent of strength rushes over me; this is life, freshness, youth! Old age and genius can’t exist together. You seem to be struck dumb, Nikitushka. Wait a second, let me come to my senses again. Oh! Good Lord! Now then, listen! Did you ever hear such tenderness, such music? Sh! Softly;

*“The moon had set. There was not any light,
Save of the lonely legion’d watch-stars pale
In outer air, and what by fits made bright
Hot oleanders in a rosy vale
Searched by the lamping fly, whose little spark
Went in and out, like passion’s bashful hope.”*

[The noise of opening doors is heard] What’s that?

IVANITCH. There are Petrushka and Yegorka coming back. Yes, you have genius, genius, my master.

SVIETLOVIDOFF. [Calls, turning toward the noise] Come here to me, boys! [To IVANITCH] Let us go and get dressed. I’m not old! All that is foolishness, nonsense! [laughs gaily] What are you crying for? You poor old granny, you, what’s the matter now? This won’t do! There, there, this won’t do at all! Come, come, old man, don’t stare so! What makes you stare like that? There, there! [Embraces him in tears] Don’t cry! Where there is art and genius there can never be such things as old age or loneliness or sickness . . . and death itself is half . . . [Weeps] No, no, Nikitushka! It is all over for us now! What sort of a genius am I? I’m like a squeezed lemon, a cracked bottle, and you—you are the old rat of the theatre . . . a prompter! Come on! [They go] I’m no genius, I’m only fit to be in the suite of Fortinbras, and even for that I am too old.... Yes.... Do you remember those lines from Othello, Nikitushka?

*“Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content!
Farewell the plumed troops and the big wars
That make ambition virtue! O farewell!
Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,
The spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife,
The royal banner, and all quality,
Pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war!”*

IVANITCH. Oh! You’re a genius, a genius!

SVIETLOVIDOFF. And again this:

*“Away! the moor is dark beneath the moon,
Rapid clouds have drunk the last pale beam of even:
Away! the gathering winds will call the darkness soon,
And profoundest midnight shroud the serene lights of heaven.”*

They go out together, the curtain falls slowly.

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