

The First-class Passenger

Anton Chekhov

A FIRST-CLASS passenger who had just dined at the station and drunk a little too much lay down on the velvet-covered seat, stretched himself out luxuriously, and sank into a doze. After a nap of no more than five minutes, he looked with oily eyes at his vis-à-vis, gave a smirk, and said:

"My father of blessed memory used to like to have his heels tickled by peasant women after dinner. I am just like him, with this difference, that after dinner I always like my tongue and my brains gently stimulated. Sinful man as I am, I like empty talk on a full stomach. Will you allow me to have a chat with you?"

"I shall be delighted," answered the vis-à-vis.

"After a good dinner the most trifling subject is sufficient to arouse devilishly great thoughts in my brain. For instance, we saw just now near the refreshment bar two young men, and you heard one congratulate the other on being celebrated. 'I congratulate you,' he said; 'you are already a celebrity and are beginning to win fame.' Evidently actors or journalists of microscopic dimensions. But they are not the point. The question that is occupying my mind at the moment, sir, is exactly what is to be understood by the word fame or celebrity. What do you think? Pushkin called fame a bright patch on a ragged garment; we all understand it as Pushkin does -- that is, more or less subjectively -- but no one has yet given a clear, logical definition of the word. . . . I would give a good deal for such a definition!"

"Why do you feel such a need for it?"

"You see, if we knew what fame is, the means of attaining it might also perhaps be known to us," said the first-class passenger, after a moment's thought. I must tell you, sir, that when I was younger I strove after celebrity with every fiber of my being. To be popular was my craze, so to speak. For the sake of it I studied, worked, sat up at night, neglected my meals. And I fancy, as far as I can judge without partiality, I had all the natural gifts for attaining it. To begin with, I am an engineer by profession. In the course of my life I have built in Russia some two dozen magnificent bridges, I have laid aqueducts for three towns; I have worked in Russia, in England, in Belgium. . . . Secondly, I am the author of several special treatises in my own line. And thirdly, my dear sir, I have from a boy had a weakness for chemistry. Studying that science in my leisure hours, I discovered methods of obtaining certain organic acids, so that you will find my name in all the foreign manuals of chemistry. I have always been in the service, I have risen to the grade of actual civil councilor, and I have an unblemished record. I will not fatigue your attention by enumerating my works and my merits, I will only say that I have done far more than some celebrities. And yet here I am in my old age, I am getting ready for my coffin, so to say, and I am as celebrated as that black dog yonder running on the embankment."

"How can you tell? Perhaps you are celebrated."

"H'm! Well, we will test it at once. Tell me, have you ever heard the name Krikunov?"

The vis-à-vis raised his eyes to the ceiling, thought a minute, and laughed.

"No, I haven't heard it, . . ." he said.

"That is my surname. You, a man of education, getting on in years, have never heard of me -- a convincing proof! It is evident that in my efforts to gain fame I have not done the right thing at all: I did not know the right way to set to work, and, trying to catch fame by the tail, got on the wrong side of her."

"What is the right way to set to work?"

"Well, the devil only knows! Talent, you say? Genius? Originality? Not a bit of it, sir! . . . People have lived and made a career side by side with me who were worthless, trivial, and even contemptible compared with me. They did not do one-tenth of the work I did, did not put themselves out, were not distinguished for their talents, and did not make an effort to be celebrated, but just look at them! Their names are continually in the newspapers and on men's lips! If you are not tired of listening I will illustrate it by an example. Some years ago I built a bridge in the town of K. I must tell you that the dullness of that scurvy little town was terrible. If it had not been for women and cards I believe I should have gone out of my mind. Well, it's an old story: I was so bored that I got into an affair with a singer. Everyone was enthusiastic about her, the devil only knows why; to my thinking she was -- what shall I say? -- an ordinary, commonplace creature, like lots of others. The hussy was empty-headed, ill-tempered, greedy, and what's more, she was a fool.

"She ate and drank a vast amount, slept till five o'clock in the afternoon -- and I fancy did nothing else. She was looked upon as a cocotte, and that was indeed her profession; but when people wanted to refer to her in a literary fashion, they called her an actress and a singer. I used to be devoted to the theatre, and therefore this fraudulent pretense of being an actress made me furiously indignant. My young lady had not the slightest right to call herself an actress or a singer. She was a creature entirely devoid of talent, devoid of feeling -- a pitiful creature one may say. As far as I can judge she sang disgustingly. The whole charm of her 'art' lay in her kicking up her legs on every suitable occasion, and not being embarrassed when people walked into her dressing-room. She usually selected translated vaudevilles, with singing in them, and opportunities for disporting herself in male attire, in tights. In fact it was -- ough! Well, I ask your attention. As I remember now, a public ceremony took place to celebrate the opening of the newly constructed bridge. There was a religious service, there were speeches, telegrams, and so on. I hung about my cherished creation, you know, all the while afraid that my heart would burst with the excitement of an author. It's an old story and there's no need for false modesty, and so I will tell you that my bridge was a magnificent work! It was not a bridge but a picture, a perfect delight! And who would not have been excited when the whole town came to the opening? 'Oh,' I thought, 'now the eyes of all the public will be on me! Where shall I hide myself?' Well, I need not have worried myself, sir -- alas! Except the official personages, no one took the slightest notice of me. They stood in a crowd on the river-bank, gazed like sheep at the bridge, and did not concern themselves to know who had built it. And it was from that time, by the way, that I began to hate our estimable public -- damnation take them! Well, to continue. All at once the public became agitated; a whisper ran through the crowd, . . . a smile came

on their faces, their shoulders began to move. 'They must have seen me,' I thought. A likely idea! I looked, and my singer, with a train of young scamps, was making her way through the crowd. The eyes of the crowd were hurriedly following this procession. A whisper began in a thousand voices: 'That's so-and-so. . . . Charming! Bewitching!' Then it was they noticed me. . . . A couple of young milksops, local amateurs of the scenic art, I presume, looked at me, exchanged glances, and whispered: 'That's her lover!' How do you like that? And an unprepossessing individual in a top-hat, with a chin that badly needed shaving, hung round me, shifting from one foot to the other, then turned to me with the words:

"Do you know who that lady is, walking on the other bank? That's so-and-so. . . . Her voice is beneath all criticism, but she has a most perfect mastery of it! . . ."

"Can you tell me," I asked the unprepossessing individual, 'who built this bridge?'

"I really don't know," answered the individual; some engineer, I expect."

"And who built the cathedral in your town?" I asked again.

"I really can't tell you."

"Then I asked him who was considered the best teacher in K., who the best architect, and to all my questions the unprepossessing individual answered that he did not know.

"And tell me, please," I asked in conclusion, with whom is that singer living?'

"With some engineer called Krikunov."

"Well, how do you like that, sir? But to proceed. There are no minnesingers or bards nowadays, and celebrity is created almost exclusively by the newspapers. The day after the dedication of the bridge, I greedily snatched up the local Messenger, and looked for myself in it. I spent a long time running my eyes over all the four pages, and at last there it was -- hurrah! I began reading: 'Yesterday in beautiful weather, before a vast concourse of people, in the presence of His Excellency the Governor of the province, so-and-so, and other dignitaries, the ceremony of the dedication of the newly constructed bridge took place,' and so on. . . . Towards the end: Our talented actress so-and-so, the favorite of the K. public, was present at the dedication looking very beautiful. I need not say that her arrival created a sensation. The star was wearing . . . ' and so on. They might have given me one word! Half a word. Petty as it seems, I actually cried with vexation!

"I consoled myself with the reflection that the provinces are stupid, and one could expect nothing of them and for celebrity one must go to the intellectual centers -- to Petersburg and to Moscow. And as it happened, at that very time there was a work of mine in Petersburg which I had sent in for a competition. The date on which the result was to be declared was at hand.

"I took leave of K. and went to Petersburg. It is a long journey from K. to Petersburg, and that I might not be bored on the journey I took a reserved compartment and -- well -- of course, I took my singer. We set off, and all the way we were eating, drinking champagne, and -- tra-la--la! But behold, at last we reach the intellectual center. I arrived on the very

day the result was declared, and had the satisfaction, my dear sir, of celebrating my own success: my work received the first prize. Hurrah! Next day I went out along the Nevsky and spent seventy kopecks on various newspapers. I hastened to my hotel room, lay down on the sofa, and, controlling a quiver of excitement, made haste to read. I ran through one newspaper -- nothing. I ran through a second -- nothing either; my God! At last, in the fourth, I lighted upon the following paragraph: 'Yesterday the well-known provincial actress so-and-so arrived by express in Petersburg. We note with pleasure that the climate of the South has had a beneficial effect on our fair friend; her charming stage appearance. . . ' and I don't remember the rest! Much lower down than that paragraph I found, printed in the smallest type: first prize in the competition was adjudged to an engineer called so-and-so.' That was all! And to make things better, they even misspelt my name: instead of Krikunov it was Kirkutlov. So much for your intellectual center! But that was not all. . . . By the time I left Petersburg, a month later, all the newspapers were vying with one another in discussing our incomparable, divine, highly talented actress, and my mistress was referred to, not by her surname, but by her Christian name and her father's. . . .

"Some years later I was in Moscow. I was summoned there by a letter, in the mayor's own handwriting, to undertake a work for which Moscow, in its newspapers, had been clamoring for over a hundred years. In the intervals of my work I delivered five public lectures, with a philanthropic object, in one of the museums there. One would have thought that was enough to make one known to the whole town for three days at least, wouldn't one? But, alas! not a single Moscow gazette said a word about me. There was something about houses on fire, about an operetta, sleeping town councilors, drunken shop keepers -- about everything; but about my work, my plans, my lectures -- mum. And a nice set they are in Moscow! I got into a tram. . . . It was packed full; there were ladies and military men and students of both sexes, creatures of all sorts in couples.

" 'I am told the town council has sent for an engineer to plan such and such a work!' I said to my neighbor, so loudly that all the tram could hear. 'Do you know the name of the engineer?'

"My neighbor shook his head. The rest of the public took a cursory glance at me, and in all their eyes I read: 'I don't know.'

" 'I am told that there is someone giving lectures in such and such a museum?' I persisted, trying to get up a conversation. 'I hear it is interesting.'

"No one even nodded. Evidently they had not all of them heard of the lectures, and the ladies were not even aware of the existence of the museum. All that would not have mattered, but imagine, my dear sir, the people suddenly leaped to their feet and struggled to the windows. What was it? What was the matter?

" 'Look, look!' my neighbor nudged me. 'Do you see that dark man getting into that cab? That's the famous runner, King!'

"And the whole tram began talking breathlessly of the runner who was then absorbing the brains of Moscow.

"I could give you ever so many other examples, but I think that is enough. Now let us

assume that I am mistaken about myself, that I am a wretchedly boastful and incompetent person; but apart from myself I might point to many of my contemporaries, men remarkable for their talent and industry, who have nevertheless died unrecognized. Are Russian navigators, chemists, physicists, mechanics, and agriculturists popular with the public? Do our cultivated masses know anything of Russian artists, sculptors, and literary men? Some old literary hack, hard-working and talented, will wear away the doorstep of the publishers' offices for thirty-three years, cover reams of paper, be had up for libel twenty times, and yet not step beyond his ant-heap. Can you mention to me a single representative of our literature who would have become celebrated if the rumor had not been spread over the earth that he had been killed in a duel, gone out of his mind, been sent into exile, or had cheated at cards?"

The first-class passenger was so excited that he dropped his cigar out of his mouth and got up.

"Yes," he went on fiercely, "and side by side with these people I can quote you hundreds of all sorts of singers, acrobats, buffoons, whose names are known to every baby. Yes!"

The door creaked, there was a draught, and an individual of forbidding aspect, wearing an Inverness coat, a top-hat, and blue spectacles, walked into the carriage. The individual looked round at the seats, frowned, and went on further.

"Do you know who that is?" there came a timid whisper from the furthest corner of the compartment.

That is N. N., the famous Tula cardsharp who was had up in connection with the Y. bank affair."

"There you are!" laughed the first-class passenger. He knows a Tula cardsharp, but ask him whether he knows Semiradsky, Tchaikovsky, or Solovyov the philosopher -- he'll shake his head. . . . It swinish!"

Three minutes passed in silence.

"Allow me in my turn to ask you a question," said the vis-à-vis timidly, clearing his throat. Do you know the name of Pushkov?"

"Pushkov? H'm! Pushkov. . . . No, I don't know it!"

"That is my name, . . ." said the vis-à-vis, overcome with embarrassment. "Then you don't know it? And yet I have been a professor at one of the Russian universities for thirty-five years, . . . a member of the Academy of Sciences, . . . have published more than one work. . . ."

The first-class passenger and the vis-à-vis looked at each other and burst out laughing.