

“allez!”

Aleksandr I. Kuprin

Translated from Russian by Douglas Ashby

This jerky, exclamatory order was Melle Nora's earliest memory from the dark monotony of her erring childhood. This word *Allez* was the very first that her weak, childish little tongue ever framed, and always, even in her dreams, this cry reproduced itself in Nora's memory, evoking in its five letters the chill of the unheated circus ring, the smell of stables, the heavy gallop of the horse, the dry crackling of the long whip and the burning pain of its lash, suddenly deadening the momentary hesitation of fear. ...

“*Allez!* ...”

In the empty circus it is cold and dark. Here and there, the wintry sunlight, scarcely piercing the glass cupolas, lies in pale spots over the raspberry-coloured velvet and the gilt of the boxes, over the shields with the horses' heads, over the flags that decorate the pillars; it plays on the dim glasses of the electric globes, gliding over the steel of the tourniquets and trapezes, up there at a tremendous height amid the entanglement of the machines and the ropes, from which one can scarcely distinguish the first rows of the stalls, and the seats behind and the gallery are completely drowned in darkness.

The day's routine is in full swing. Five or six of the performers, in greatcoats and fur caps, are smoking rank cigars at the end of the first row of armchairs near the entrance from the stables. In the middle of the ring stands a square-built, short-legged man, with a tall hat perched on the back of his head, and a black moustache, carefully twisted to a fine point at the ends. He is tying a long string round the waist of a tiny little five-year-old girl, who is standing in front of him shivering from fright and cold. The big white horse, which a stableman leads round the ring, snorts loudly, shaking its arched neck as the white steam gushes from its nostrils. Every time that it passes the man in the tall hat, the horse looks askance at the whip that sticks out under his arm, snorts with agitation, and, plodding round, drags the tugging stable-boy behind it. Little Nora can hear behind her back its nervous plunges, and she shivers still more.

Two powerful hands seize her round the waist and lightly toss her on to the large leather mattress on the horse's back. Almost at the same instant, the chairs, the white pillars, the tent cloth hangings at the entrance—all this is merged in the bizarre circle which spins round to meet the horse. In vain her numb hands clutch convulsively at the rough wave of mane as her eyes close tightly, blinded by the devilish flash of the seething circle. The man in the tall hat walks in the centre of the ring, holding in front of the horse's head the end of his long whip, which he cracks deafeningly. ...

“Allez! ...”

And again she is in her short gauze skirt, with her bare, thin, half-childish arms, standing in the electric light, beneath the very cupola of the circus on a well-balanced trapeze. From this, at the little girl's feet, there is hanging, head downwards, his knees clutching the upright post, another square-built man, in pink tights, with gold spangles and fringe, curled, pomaded, and cruel. Now he has raised his lowered hands, spread them out, and, fixing Nora's eyes with that penetrating, meaning look—the hypnotising glance of the acrobat—he claps his hands. Nora makes a quick forward movement with the intention of hurling herself straight down into those strong, pitiless hands. (*What* a thrill it will give the hundreds of spectators!) But all of a sudden, her heart grows cold, seems to stop from terror, and she only squeezes more tightly the thin ropes of the trapeze. Up go once more the cruel, bent hands, and the acrobat's glance becomes still more intense ... Beneath her feet the space seems that of an abyss.

“Allez! ...”

Again she balances, scarcely able to breathe, on the very apex of the “Living Pyramid.” She glides, wriggling with her body, supple as a serpent's, between the crossbeams of the long white ladder which a man is holding on his head. She turns a somersault in the air, thrown up by the feet of the jongleur, strong and terrible, like steel springs. Again at a great height, she walks on thin, trembling wire which cuts her feet unbearably. ... And everywhere are the same dim, beautiful faces, the pomaded heads, the puffed curls, the moustaches upturned, the reek of cigars and perspiration, and always that inevitable fatal cry, the same for human beings, for horses, and for performing dogs:

“Allez! ...”

She was just sixteen, and a very pretty girl when, during a performance, she fell from the airy tourniquet past the net on to the sand of the ring. She was picked up unconscious and taken behind the scenes, where, in accordance with circus traditions, they began to shake her by the shoulders with all their might to bring her back to herself. She awoke to consciousness, groaning with pain from her crushed hand.

“The audience is getting restless and beginning to go,” they were saying around her. “Come, show yourself to the public.”

Obediently her lips framed the usual smile, the smile of the “graceful horsewoman,” but after walking two steps the pain became unbearable and she cried out and staggered. Then dozens of hands laid hold of her and pushed her forcibly in front of the public.

“*Allez!*”

During this season there was “working” in the circus a certain star clown named Menotti. He was not the ordinary pauper clown who rolls in the sand to the rhythm of slaps in the face and who manages, on a quite empty stomach, to amuse the public for a whole evening with inexhaustible jokes. Menotti was a clown celebrity, the first solo-clown and imitator on the planet, a world-known trainer who had received innumerable honours and prizes. He wore on his breast a heavy chain of gold medals, received two hundred roubles for a single turn and boasted of the fact that for the last five years he had worn nothing but *moire* costumes. After the performance, he invariably felt “done up” and, with a highfalutin bitterness, would say of himself: “Yes, we are buffoons, we must amuse the *well-fed* public.” In the arena he would sing, pretentiously and out of tune, old couplets, or recite verses of his own composition, or make gags on the Duma or the drainage, which usually produced on the public, drawn to the circus by reckless advertising, the impression of insistent, dull, and unnecessary contortions. In private life, he had a languidly patronising manner, and he loved with a mysterious and negligent air, to insinuate his conquests of extraordinarily beautiful, extraordinarily rich, but utterly tiresome countesses.

At her first appearance at the morning rehearsal, after her sprain had been cured, Menotti came up to her, held her hand in his, made moist tired eyes at her, and asked in a weakened voice about her health. She became confused, blushed, and took her hand away. That moment decided her fate.

A week later, as he escorted Nora back from the evening performance, Menotti asked her to have supper with him at the magnificent hotel where the world-famous first solo-clown always stopped.

The *cabinets particuliers* are on the first floor, and as she made her way up Nora stopped for a minute, partly from fatigue, partly from the emotion of the last virginal hesitation. But Menotti squeezed her elbow tightly. In his voice there rang fierce animal passion and with it the cruel order of the old acrobat as he whispered:

“*Allez!*”

And she went. ... She saw in him an extraordinary, a superior being, almost a god. ... She would have gone into fire if it had occurred to him to order it.

For a year she followed him from town to town. She took care of Menotti’s brilliants and jewels during his appearances, put on and took off for him his tricot, attended to his wardrobe, helped him to train rats and pigs, rubbed his face with cold cream and—what was most important of all—believed with idolising intensity in his world-fame. When they were alone he had nothing to say to her, and he accepted her passionate caresses with the

exaggerated boredom of a man who, though thoroughly satiated, mercifully permits women to adore him.

After a year he had had enough of her. His attention was diverted to one of the Sisters Wilson who were executing “Airy Flights.” He did not stand on ceremony with Nora now, and often in the dressing-room, right in front of the performers and stablemen, he would box her ears for a missing button. She bore all this with the humility of an old, clever and devoted dog who accepts the blows of his master.

Finally, one night after a performance in which the first trainer in the world had been hissed for whipping a dog really too savagely, Menotti told Nora straight out to go immediately to the devil. She left him, but stopped at the very door of the room and glanced back with a begging look in her eyes. Then Menotti rushed to the door, flung it open furiously and shouted:

“*Allez!*”

But only two days later, like a dog who has been beaten and turned out, she was drawn back again to the master. A blackness came to her eyes when a waiter of the hotel said to her with an insolent grin:

“You cannot go up; he is in a *cabinet particulier* with a lady.”

But Nora went up and stopped unerringly before the door of the very room where she had been with Menotti a year ago. Yes, he was there. She recognised the languid voice of the overworked celebrity, interrupted from time to time by the happy laugh of the red-haired Englishwoman. Nora opened the door abruptly.

The purple and gold tapestries, the dazzling light of the two candelabras, the glistening of crystals, the pyramid of fruit and the bottles in silver buckets, Menotti lying on the sofa in his shirtsleeves, and Wilson with her corsage loosened, the reek of scent, wine, cigars, powder—all this, at first, stupefied her; then she rushed at Wilson and struck her again and again in the face with her clenched fist. Wilson shrieked and the fight began. ...

When Menotti had succeeded with difficulty in separating them, Nora threw herself on her knees, covered his boots with kisses and begged him to come back to her. Menotti could scarcely push her away from him as he said, squeezing her neck tightly with his strong fingers:

“If you don’t go at once, I’ll have you thrown out of the place by the waiter.”

Almost stifled, she rose to her feet and whispered:

“Ah—ah ... in that case ... in that case ...”

Her eyes fell on the open window. Quickly and lightly, like the experienced gymnast she was, she bounded on to the sill and bent forward, her hands grasping on each side the framework of the window.

Far down beneath her, the carriages rattled, seeming from that height mere small, strange animals. The pavements glistened after the rain, and the reflections of the street lamps danced about in the pools of water.

Nora’s fingers grew cold and her heart stopped beating for a second of terror. ... Then, closing her eyes and breathing heavily, she raised her hands above her head and, fighting down, as usual, her old weakness, she cried out, as if in the circus:

“*Allez! ...*”

Downloaded from www.libraryofshortstories.com

This work is in the public domain of Australia. Please check your local copyright laws if you live elsewhere.