

Annajanska, the Bolshevik Empress

by

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ANNAJANSKA is frankly a bravura piece. The modern variety theatre demands for its "turns" little plays called sketches, to last twenty minutes or so, and to enable some favorite performer to make a brief but dazzling appearance on some barely passable dramatic pretext. Miss Lillah McCarthy and I, as author and actress, have helped to make one another famous on many serious occasions, from Man and Superman to Androcles; and Mr Charles Ricketts has not disdained to snatch moments from his painting and sculpture to design some wonderful dresses for us. We three unbent as Mrs Siddons, Sir Joshua Reynolds and Dr Johnson might have unbent, to devise a turn for the Coliseum variety theatre. Not that we would set down the art of the variety theatre as something to be condescended to, or our own art as elephantine. We should rather crave indulgence as three novices fresh from the awful legitimacy of the highbrow theatre.

Well, Miss McCarthy and Mr Ricketts justified themselves easily in the glamor of the footlights, to the strains of Tchaikovsky's 1812. I fear I did not. I have received only one compliment on my share; and that was from a friend who said, "It is the only one of your works that is not too long." So I have made it a page or two longer, according to my own precept: EMBRACE YOUR REPROACHES: THEY ARE OFTEN GLORIES IN DISGUISE.

Annajanska was first performed at the Coliseum Theatre in London on the 21st January, 1918, with Lillah McCarthy as the Grand Duchess, Henry Miller as Schneidekind, and Randle Ayrton as General Strammfest.

ANNAJANSKA, THE BOLSHEVIK EMPRESS

The General's office in a military station on the east front in Beotia. An office table with a telephone, writing materials, official papers, etc., is set across the room. At the end of the table, a comfortable chair for the General. Behind the chair, a window. Facing it at the other end of the table, a plain wooden bench. At the side of the table, with its back to the door, a common chair, with a typewriter before it. Beside the door, which is opposite the end of the bench, a rack for caps and coats. There is nobody in the room.

General Strammfest enters, followed by Lieutenant Schneidekind. They hang up their cloaks and caps. Schneidekind takes a little longer than Strammfest, who comes to the table.

STRAMMFEST. Schneidekind.

SCHNEIDEKIND. Yes, sir.

STRAMMFEST. Have you sent my report yet to the government? [He sits down.]

SCHNEIDEKIND [coming to the table]. Not yet, sir. Which government do you wish it sent to? [He sits down.]

STRAMMFEST. That depends. What's the latest? Which of them do you think is most likely to be in power tomorrow morning?

SCHNEIDEKIND. Well, the provisional government was going strong yesterday. But today they say that the Prime Minister has shot himself, and that the extreme left fellow has shot all the others.

STRAMMFEST. Yes: that's all very well; but these fellows always shoot themselves with blank cartridge.

SCHNEIDEKIND. Still, even the blank cartridge means backing down. I should send the report to the Maximilianists.

STRAMMFEST. They're no stronger than the Oppidoshavians; and in my own opinion the Moderate Red Revolutionaries are as likely to come out on top as either of them.

SCHNEIDEKIND. I can easily put a few carbon sheets in the typewriter and send a copy each to the lot.

STRAMMFEST. Waste of paper. You might as well send reports to an infant school. [He throws his head on the table with a groan.]

SCHNEIDEKIND. Tired out, Sir?

STRAMMFEST. O Schneidekind, Schneidekind, how can you bear to live?

SCHNEIDEKIND. At my age, sir, I ask myself how can I bear to die?

STRAMMFEST. You are young, young and heartless. You are excited by the revolution: you are attached to abstract things like liberty. But my family has served the Panjandrums of Beotia faithfully for seven centuries. The Panjandrums have kept our place for us at their courts, honored us, promoted us, shed their glory on us, made us what we are. When I hear you young men declaring that you are fighting for civilization, for democracy, for the overthrow of militarism, I ask myself how can a man shed his blood for empty words used by vulgar tradesmen and common laborers: mere wind and stink. [He rises, exalted

by his theme.] A king is a splendid reality, a man raised above us like a god. You can see him; you can kiss his hand; you can be cheered by his smile and terrified by his frown. I would have died for my Panjandrum as my father died for his father. Your toiling millions were only too honored to receive the toes of our boots in the proper spot for them when they displeased their betters. And now what is left in life for me? [He relapses into his chair discouraged.] My Panjandrum is deposed and transported to herd with convicts. The army, his pride and glory, is paraded to hear seditious speeches from penniless rebels, with the colonel actually forced to take the chair and introduce the speaker. I myself am made Commander-in-Chief by my own solicitor: a Jew, Schneidekind! a Hebrew Jew! It seems only yesterday that these things would have been the ravings of a madman: today they are the commonplaces of the gutter press. I live now for three objects only: to defeat the enemy, to restore the Panjandrum, and to hang my solicitor.

SCHNEIDEKIND. Be careful, sir: these are dangerous views to utter nowadays. What if I were to betray you?

STRAMMFEST. What!

SCHNEIDEKIND. I won't, of course: my own father goes on just like that; but suppose I did?

STRAMMFEST [chuckling]. I should accuse you of treason to the Revolution, my lad; and they would immediately shoot you, unless you cried and asked to see your mother before you died, when they would probably change their minds and make you a brigadier. Enough. [He rises and expands his chest.] I feel the better for letting myself go. To business. [He takes up a telegram: opens it: and is thunderstruck by its contents.] Great heaven! [He collapses into his chair. This is the worst blow of all.

SCHNEIDEKIND. What has happened? Are we beaten?

STRAMMFEST. Man, do you think that a mere defeat could strike me down as this news does: I, who have been defeated thirteen times since the war began? O, my master, my master, my Panjandrum! [he is convulsed with sobs.]

SCHNEIDEKIND. They have killed him?

STRAMMFEST. A dagger has been struck through his heart--

SCHNEIDEKIND. Good God!

STRAMMFEST. --and through mine, through mine.

SCHNEIDEKIND [relieved]. Oh, a metaphorical dagger! I thought you meant a real one. What has happened?

STRAMMFEST. His daughter the Grand Duchess Annajanska, she whom the Panjandrina loved beyond all her other children, has--has-- [he cannot finish.]

SCHNEIDEKIND. Committed suicide?

STRAMMFEST. No. Better if she had. Oh, far far better.

SCHNEIDEKIND [in hushed tones]. Left the Church?

STRAMMFEST [shocked]. Certainly not. Do not blaspheme, young man.

SCHNEIDEKIND. Asked for the vote?

STRAMMFEST. I would have given it to her with both hands to save her from this.

SCHNEIDEKIND. Save her from what? Dash it, sir, out with it.

STRAMMFEST. She has joined the Revolution.

SCHNEIDEKIND. But so have you, sir. We've all joined the Revolution. She doesn't mean it any more than we do.

STRAMMFEST. Heaven grant you may be right! But that is not the worst. She had eloped with a young officer. Eloped, Schneidekind, eloped!

SCHNEIDEKIND [not particularly impressed]. Yes, Sir.

STRAMMFEST. Annajanska, the beautiful, the innocent, my master's daughter! [He buries his face in his hands.]

The telephone rings.

SCHNEIDEKIND [taking the receiver]. Yes: G.H.Q. Yes...Don't bawl: I'm not a general. Who is it speaking?...Why didn't you say so? don't you know your duty? Next time you will lose your stripe...Oh, they've made you a colonel, have they? Well, they've made me a field-marshal: now what have you to say?...Look here: what did you ring up for? I can't spend the day here listening to your cheek...What! the Grand Duchess [Strammfest starts.] Where did you catch her?

STRAMMFEST [snatching the telephone and listening for the answer]. Speak louder, will you: I am a General I know that, you dolt. Have you captured the officer that was with her?... Damnation! You shall answer for this: you let him go: he bribed you. You must have seen him: the fellow is in the full dress court uniform of the Panderobajensky Hussars. I give you twelve hours to catch him or...what's that you say about the devil? Are you swearing at me, you...Thousand thunders! [To Schneidekind.] The swine says that the Grand Duchess is a devil incarnate. [Into the telephone.] Filthy traitor: is that the way you dare speak of the daughter of our anointed Panjandrum? I'll--

SCHNEIDEKIND [pulling the telephone from his lips]. Take care, sir.

STRAMMFEST. I won't take care: I'll have him shot. Let go that telephone.

SCHNEIDEKIND. But for her own sake, sir--

STRAMMFEST. Eh?--

SCHNEIDEKIND. For her own sake they had better send her here. She will be safe in your hands.

STRAMMFEST [yielding the receiver]. You are right. Be civil to him. I should choke [he sits down].

SCHNEIDEKIND [into the telephone]. Hullo. Never mind all that: it's only a fellow here who has been fooling with the telephone. I had to leave the room for a moment. Wash out: and send the girl along. We'll jolly soon teach her to behave herself here...Oh, you've sent her already. Then why the devil didn't you say so, you--[he hangs up the telephone angrily]. Just fancy: they started her off this morning: and all this is because the fellow likes to get on the telephone and hear himself talk now that he is a colonel. [The telephone rings again. He snatches the receiver furiously.] What's the matter now?...[To the General.] It's our own people downstairs. [Into the receiver.] Here! do you suppose I've nothing else to do than to hang on to the telephone all day?...What's that? Not men enough to hold her! What do you mean? [To the General.] She is there, sir.

STRAMMFEST. Tell them to send her up. I shall have to receive her without even rising, without kissing her hand, to keep up appearances before the escort. It will break my heart.

SCHNEIDEKIND [into the receiver]. Send her up...Tcha! [He hangs up the receiver.] He says she is halfway up already: they couldn't hold her.

The Grand Duchess bursts into the room, dragging with her two exhausted soldiers hanging on desperately to her arms. She is enveloped from head to foot by a fur-lined cloak, and wears a fur cap.

SCHNEIDEKIND [pointing to the bench]. At the word Go, place your prisoner on the bench in a sitting posture; and take your seats right and left of her. Go.

The two soldiers make a supreme effort to force her to sit down. She flings them back so that they are forced to sit on the bench to save themselves from falling backwards over it, and is herself dragged into sitting between them. The second soldier, holding on tight to the Grand Duchess with one hand, produces papers with the other, and waves them towards Schneidekind, who takes them from him and passes them on to the General. He opens them and reads them with a grave expression.

SCHNEIDEKIN. Be good enough to wait, prisoner, until the General has read the papers on your case.

THE GRAND DUCHESS [to the soldiers]. Let go. [To Strammfest]. Tell them to let go, or I'll upset the bench backwards and bash our three heads on the floor.

FIRST SOLDIER. No, little mother. Have mercy on the poor.

STRAMMFEST [growling over the edge of the paper he is reading]. Hold your tongue.

THE GRAND DUCHESS [blazing]. Me, or the soldier?

STRAMMFEST [horrified]. The soldier, madam.

THE GRAND DUCHESS. Tell him to let go.

STRAMMFEST. Release the lady.

The soldiers take their hands off her. One of them wipes his fevered brow. The other sucks his wrist.

SCHNEIDKIND [fiercely]. 'tention!

The two soldiers sit up stiffly.

THE GRAND DUCHESS. Oh, let the poor man suck his wrist. It may be poisoned. I bit it.

STRAMMFEST [shocked]. You bit a common soldier!

GRAND DUCHESS. Well, I offered to cauterize it with the poker in the office stove. But he was afraid. What more could I do?

SCHNEIDEKIND. Why did you bite him, prisoner?

THE GRAND DUCHESS. He would not let go.

STRAMMFEST. Did he let go when you bit him?

THE GRAND DUCHESS. No. [Patting the soldier on the back]. You should give the man a cross for his devotion. I could not go on eating him; so I brought him along with me.

STRAMMFEST. Prisoner--

THE GRAND DUCHESS. Don't call me prisoner, General Strammfest. My grandmother dandled you on her knee.

STRAMMFEST [bursting into tears]. O God, yes. Believe me, my heart is what it was then.

THE GRAND DUCHESS. Your brain also is what it was then. I will not be addressed by you as prisoner.

STRAMMFEST. I may not, for your own sake, call you by your rightful and most sacred titles. What am I to call you?

THE GRAND DUCHESS. The Revolution has made us comrades. Call me comrade.

STRAMMFEST. I had rather die.

THE GRAND DUCHESS. Then call me Annajanska; and I will call you Peter Piper, as grandmamma did.

STRAMMFEST [painfully agitated]. Schneidekind, you must speak to her: I cannot--[he breaks down.]

SCHNEIDEKIND [officially]. The Republic of Beotia has been compelled to confine the Panjandrum and his family, for their own safety, within certain bounds. You have broken those bounds.

STRAMMFEST [taking the word from him]. You are I must say it--a prisoner. What am I to do with you?

THE GRAND DUCHESS. You should have thought of that before you arrested me.

STRAMMFEST. Come, come, prisoner! do you know what will happen to you if you compel me to take a sterner tone with you?

THE GRAND DUCHESS. No. But I know what will happen to you.

STRAMMFEST. Pray what, prisoner?

THE GRAND DUCHESS. Clergyman's sore throat.

Schneidekind splutters; drops a paper: and conceals his laughter under the table.

STRAMMFEST [thunderously]. Lieutenant Schneidekind.

SCHNEIDEKIND [in a stifled voice]. Yes, Sir. [The table vibrates visibly.]

STRAMMFEST. Come out of it, you fool: you're upsetting the ink.

Schneidekind emerges, red in the face with suppressed mirth.

STRAMMFEST. Why don't you laugh? Don't you appreciate Her Imperial Highness's joke?

SCHNEIDEKIND [suddenly becoming solemn]. I don't want to, sir.

STRAMMFEST. Laugh at once, sir. I order you to laugh.

SCHNEIDEKIND [with a touch of temper]. I really can't, sir. [He sits down decisively.]

STRAMMFEST [growling at him]. Yah! [He turns impressively to the Grand Duchess.] Your Imperial Highness desires me to address you as comrade?

THE GRAND DUCHESS [rising and waving a red handkerchief]. Long live the Revolution, comrade!

STRAMMFEST [rising and saluting]. Proletarians of all lands, unite. Lieutenant Schneidekind, you will rise and sing the Marseillaise.

SCHNEIDEKIND [rising]. But I cannot, sir. I have no voice, no ear.

STRAMMFEST. Then sit down; and bury your shame in your typewriter. [Schneidekind sits down.] Comrade Annajanska, you have eloped with a young officer.

THE GRAND DUCHESS [astounded]. General Strammfest, you lie.

STRAMMFEST. Denial, comrade, is useless. It is through that officer that your movements have been traced. [The Grand Duchess is suddenly enlightened, and seems amused. Strammfest continues in a forensic manner.] He joined you at the Golden Anchor in Hakonsburg. You gave us the slip there; but the officer was traced to Potterdam, where you rejoined him and went alone to Premyslople. What have you done with that unhappy young man? Where is he?

THE GRAND DUCHESS [pretending to whisper an important secret]. Where he has always been.

STRAMMFEST [eagerly]. Where is that?

THE GRAND DUCHESS [impetuously]. In your imagination. I came alone. I am alone. Hundreds of officers travel every day from Hakonsburg to Potterdam. What do I know about them?

STRAMMFEST. They travel in khaki. They do not travel in full dress court uniform as this man did.

SCHNEIDEKIND. Only officers who are eloping with grand duchesses wear court uniform: otherwise the grand duchesses could not be seen with them.

STRAMMFEST. Hold your tongue. [Schneidekind, in high dudgeon, folds his arms and retires from the conversation. The General returns to his paper and to his examination of the Grand Duchess.] This officer travelled with your passport. What have you to say to that?

THE GRAND DUCHESS. Bosh! How could a man travel with a woman's passport?

STRAMMFEST. It is quite simple, as you very well know. A dozen travellers arrive at the boundary. The official collects their passports. He counts twelve persons; then counts the passports. If there are twelve, he is satisfied.

THE GRAND DUCHESS. Then how do you know that one of the passports was mine?

STRAMMFEST. A waiter at the Potterdam Hotel looked at the officer's passport when he was in his bath. It was your passport.

THE GRAND DUCHESS. Stuff! Why did he not have me arrested?

STRAMMFEST. When the waiter returned to the hotel with the police the officer had vanished; and you were there with your own passport. They knouted him.

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