

ALEXANDER KUPRIN

CAPRICE

KUPRIN began his literary career as a member of the Gorky (Knowledge) school, but he soon became sufficiently significant to assume individual importance. His early training was for the army, and, consequently, his earlier stories treat of military life. He achieved literary prominence with *The Duel*, a novel that appeared immediately after the Russo-Japanese war and was acclaimed by all anti-militarists.

Caprice is one of Kuprin's later stories. The present version, anonymously translated, is reprinted from *The Pagan Magazine*, Copyright, 1916, by permission of the publisher.

WAVES of light, from three gas chandeliers ornamented with crystal prisms, flooded the theatre-hall of the University. The stage was decorated with flags, palms, and ferns. Near the proscenium stood a highly-polished grand-piano, with open top.

Although the hall seemed quite full, yet people kept streaming in through the entrance-doors. One's eyes grew dizzy watching the seated throng of bald heads, chevelures, black frock-coats, uniforms, ladies' bright dresses . . . slowly waving fans, slim white-gloved hands, agitated gestures . . . and coquettish, feminine, holiday-smiles. . . .

A handsome singer, with a self-assured, almost haughty air, climbed up on the stage and walked up to the proscenium. He wore a frock-coat, with a red gardenia in the lapel. His accompanist followed in his footsteps, unobserved, like a shadow.

The hall grew still. Several student-dandies with badges on their coat-fronts, evidently the arrangement committee, bustled about impatiently in the chill coat-room. They were anxiously awaiting the arrival of

Henrietta Ducroix, prima-donna of the Parisian opera, who was a guest-singer in the city for the winter season. Although she had received the deputation of students with charming amiability, and assured them that she would deem it a great honour to sing at their entertainment, nevertheless, the number in which she was to appear had already begun, and she 'had not yet arrived. Was it possible that she had left them in the lurch? . . . This was the uneasy, though unspoken, thought that flitted through the minds of the half-frozen arrangement committee. They hurried incessantly to the window, pressing their faces against the panes, and staring into the darkness of the wintry night.

The grinding sound of an approaching carriage became audible, and two big carriage-lamps flashed by the window. The committee hurried to the doors, bumping and jostling one another in their eager haste.

It was indeed "the" Ducroix. She blew into the coat-room like a fragrant breeze, smiling to the students, and pointing significantly to her throat, which was wrapped in costly sables; the gesture meant that she wanted to explain why she was late, but could not speak,—the room was so chilly,—for fear of catching cold.

As the Ducroix number was long past, and the disappointed public had given up expecting her, her sudden appearance on the stage came as an overwhelming surprise. Hundreds of youthful throats, and twice as many strong palms, gave her such a long and deafening ovation, that even she, who was used to being idolised by the public, felt a flattered titillation.

She stood on the stage, bent slightly forward, her laughing black eyes slowly passing along the front rows of spectators. She wore a dress of shining white satin, the corsage suspended from her shoulders by narrow ribbons, showing her beautiful arms, her high full bosom,—cut quite low,—and her fair proud neck, looking as if chiselled from warm marble. . . .

Several times the applause subsided, but no sooner did she approach the piano, than a new wave of enthusiasm brought her back to the proscenium. Finally she made a pleading gesture, smiling bewitchingly, and motioned to

the piano. The crying and applause gradually died down, while the whole hall gazed at her, fascinated. From the perfectly quiet, but living listening stillness issued the first notes of a Saint-Saens romance.

Alexei Sumiloff, a second-year medical student, stood near the stage leaning against a pillar, and listened to the singing with half-shut eyes. He loved music with a strange, profound, almost sickly passion, hearing it not only with his ears, but feeling it with all his nerves, with every fibre of his being. The sound of the beautiful voice penetrated into the depths of his soul, and reverberated with a sweet shiver through his whole body, so that for moments at a time it seemed to him the voice was singing within him, within his own heart. . . .

The shouting and clapping after every encore caused him almost physical pain. He looked at the audience with an expression of fear, pleading, and suffering.

The Ducroix began a new aria, and Alexei again lowered his eyes, abandoning himself utterly to the waves of glorious sound. He wished yearningly that the singing might never cease. . . .

They forced her to give almost a dozen encores, and let her go only when she put her hand to her throat, smiling sweetly, and shook her head in regretful protest.

Sumiloff heaved a deep, broken sigh, as if he had just awakened from a lovely day-dream.

As he was descending the stairs he felt a sudden tap on the shoulder. He turned around and saw the jurist-student Beeber, his former classmate in the Gymnasium, the son of a well-known millionaire. Beeber was radiant with happy excitement. He put his arm around Sumiloff's waist and hugged him affectionately, whispering in his ear: "She has consented. The troikas will be here in a few minutes". . . .

"Who has consented?" asked Sumiloff.

"She . . . the Ducroix. . . . We've ordered supper in the European. . . . She refused, at first,—absolutely. . . . But she weakened, after a while. . . . The whole gang'll be there. . . . You're coming along, of course, aren't you?". . .

"I? . . . No; I don't care to go". . . .

Sumiloff did not belong to Beeber's "crowd," which comprised the golden youth of the University, the sons of substantial proprietors, bankers, and merchants. Beeber was quite conscious of this, but he felt so elated that he wished to bestow his kindness on everybody. He therefore protested at Sumiloff's refusal.

"Oh, come, don't talk nonsense; you must come along. . . . What're your objections?" . . .

Sumiloff, with a rather embarrassed laugh, answered: "You see . . . well,—you know . . . my . . ."

"Oh, never mind! . . . You'll give me the details later. . . . All right, old boy, then you're with us" . . .

By this time the troikas had arrived. . . . The horses neighed and tossed their heads, causing the bells around their necks to jingle merrily. The students disposed themselves pell-mell in the troikas, their voices sounding rather shrill and strained through the frosty night-air.

Sumiloff sat next to Beeber. He was still under the influence of the music, his mind absorbed in a strange reverie, while the troikas raced through the deserted streets. The whistling of the wind, the singing of the steel runners over the snow . . . the cries of the students, and the ceaseless jingle of the bells, blended in a wondrous harmony. . . . There were moments when he did not comprehend,—or forgot, rather,—what was happening to him, and where he was being taken.

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At the supper-table all the students crowded around the Ducroix. They kept on kissing her hands, and paying her bold compliments in bad French. Her handsome, fascinating décollete person intoxicated them more than the champagne . . . their eyes fairly gleamed with desire. . . . She was trying to answer them all at once . . . laughing uproariously as she leaned back on the satin-covered divan . . . slapping her young courtiers lightly on their too-free lips with her fan. . . .

Sumiloff was not used to wine . . . the two goblets he had drunk mounted to his head. He sat in a corner, shielding his eyes from the light of the candelabra, and looking at the Ducroix with enraptured eyes. Inwardly he wondered at the audacity of his colleagues in behaving so familiarly with the great singer . . . at the same time he felt vexed, envious . . . and even jealous. . . .

Sumiloff was by nature timid, and his upbringing in a genteel, conservative family, had increased his bashfulness. His intimate friends called him "young lady." He was indeed, in many ways, quite naive and child-like, with rare purity of thought and feeling. . . .

"Who is the gentleman over there in the corner?" asked the Ducroix pointing to Alexei. "He seems to be afraid of us, like a mouse. . . . Perhaps the gentleman is a poet. . . . Listen, Mr. Poet. . . . Come here!" exclaimed the singer.

Sumiloff approached with an embarrassed air, and stopped in front of the singer. . . . He felt the blood rushing to his cheeks.

"Mon dieu! Your poet is quite a handsome fellow" . . . laughed the Ducroix. "He looks like a high-school miss. . . . My word! he is actually blushing. . . . How pretty!" . . .

She looked with genuine pleasure at his straight, slim, flexible figure . . . his clear, rosy face covered with a light down . . . his fair, soft hair falling in disorder over his forehead. . . . Suddenly seizing his hand, the singer forced him to sit down near her on the divan.

"Why didn't you want to come over to me?" she asked. "You are too proud. . . . Do you expect a woman to make overtures to you . . . ?"

Alexei was dumb. One of the students, who had never seen him in their company, said, with a malicious little laugh: "Madam, our colleague doesn't understand French". . . .

The remark affected Alexei like the lash of a whip. He turned around sharply, and gazing at the speaker, answered curtly, but in most elegant French, the French which was once the pride of the Russian nobility, and still remains such in some families . . . : "It is quite unnecessary, Monsieur, that you should speak for me,

particularly as I have not the honour of being acquainted with you."

While he spoke his brows contracted and his blue eyes flashed.

"Bravo! bravo!" cried the singer, without letting his hand go—"What is your name, mon poete?"

Sumiloff, whose anger had subsided, became bashful again, and blushed as he answered: "Alexei."

"How? how? . . . Ale,—"

Sumiloff repeated the name.

"Oh, that's the same as Alexis. Well, Monsieur Alexis, as a punishment for keeping distant, you'll have to escort me home. I want to take a walk . . . otherwise I'll get up with a headache to-morrow."

The carriage stopped in front of a first-class hotel. Sumiloff assisted her from the carriage and began to take leave of her. She looked at him with a seductive expression of tenderness, and asked: "Won't you see my little den?"

"I should be . . . very . . . happy," he stammered nervously; "but I'm afraid . . . it's so late". . . .

"Come!" she answered. "I want to punish you completely. . . ."

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While she was changing her clothes Alexei gazed about the room. He observed that she had furnished the commonplace apartment with an elegant coquettish chic which only a Parisienne is capable of. The air was scented with a subtle perfume which he had first perceived when he sat beside her in the carriage.

She re-appeared in a loose, white, gold-clasped peignoir. She sat down on a low Turkish divan, arranging the folds of her gown about her feet, and with an imperative gesture motioned Alexei to sit down next to her. He obeyed.

"Closer, closer . . . still closer . . . so! Now, then, let's have a little chat, Monsieur Alexei. In the first place,

where did you gain such mastery of the French tongue? You express yourself like a Marquis". . . .

Sumiloff told her that he had had French governesses from his earliest childhood, and that French was the language most spoken in his family.

She then began to overwhelm him with numerous questions about his family, his studies, his friends. . . . He had scarcely time to answer any of them. Suddenly, in a low, soft voice, she asked: "Tell me . . . have you ever loved any woman. . . ."

"Yes. . . . When I was fourteen I was in love with my cousin". . . .

"No one else? . . ."

"No."

"On your word of honour?"

"On my word of honour."

"And you have never loved a woman . . . altogether . . . ?"

He understood, and while he fingered the fringes of the table-cloth nervously, whispered, "No . . . never". . . .

"Don't you love me?" she asked in the same faint whisper, bending so close to him that he felt the warmth of her cheeks. . . . "Look into a person's face when you're spoken to," she exclaimed with playful vexation, seizing his head in her hands and causing him to look into her eyes. . . . Her passionate glance frightened him, at first . . . then saddened him . . . and finally awoke the same passion in him. . . . He bent closer to her . . . her lips were moist, burning. . . .

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"Is Madame Ducroix at home?"

"No."

"Are you sure? . . . Perhaps she has returned by this time."

The fat, liveried footman, with his red, swollen, sleepy face rubbed his back against the door-jamb.

"What do you mean, am I sure . . . ? It's my business to know whether she's in or not. Why are you so all-fired anxious about her? . . . You've been running up here these last two weeks bothering me about her. . . . If I tell you she ain't home, she ain't home; that settles it. . . . She don't want to see you . . . d'you understand? . . . That's the whole story. . . ."

The whole story! . . . He felt his heart throbbing painfully, aching with vain longing . . . burning with anger. . . . Why had she done this to him? . . .