

THE GLEANER

A CHRISTMAS STORY

HER NEIGHBOUR ZERBINIO was most surprised that Christmas Day in 187_ when she saw Aunt Achtitsa wearing a new headscarf and both Yeros and Patrona with clean shirts and new shoes.

And rightly so, as it was very well known that Aunt Achtitsa had witnessed the sale of her daughter's dowry at public auction in order to pay off the debts of her worthless son-in-law, that she was destitute and widowed, and that she was rearing her orphaned grandchildren by resorting to odd jobs. She was one of those people who never get a lucky break. Her neighbour Zerbinio pitied the poverty of the old woman and the two orphans. But it was hardly as if she herself had the money to help them out and be their comforter.

The late *Barba*-Michalios, who had preceded his wife Achtitsa to the grave, was fortunate not to have seen the hardships that loomed after his death. He was a good soul — if only he were still alive, poor man. The two children, 'our lost ones', Yorgos and Vasilis, went down with their schooner and were drowned in the winter of 186_. The schooner was lost with all hands on board — what a tragedy, what a fate! I wouldn't wish such a dreadful thing on any good Christian woman.

Her third son, the idler, the good-for-nothing, went abroad and was living, they said, in America. He had shaken the dust from his feet. Had anyone seen him, or heard from him? Some fellow countrymen claimed that he had married in those parts and had taken, it was said, a Frankish bride, an English-speaking girl, a stranger, who did not know a word of Greek. What worse fate! But what can

you do? Can you curse your child, your own flesh and blood?

Her daughter died giving birth to a second child, leaving Achtista to inherit two orphans. Their poor excuse for a father was still alive (how far could his endless demands go?), but, really, what a head of family, what a lazy good-for-nothing! A card-player, a drunk, and with still other virtues to boot. Rumour had it that he remarried elsewhere, in order to drag down yet another family, the scoundrel! Such men! . . . She'd found a husband alright, but what a husband! (a curse on his head!). . .

What else could she do? She pushed herself as hard as she could, trying to make a living for the orphans. How pitiable, the poor things! Depending on the season, she collected herbs, pruned vines, picked olives, worked as a day labourer. She gathered arbutus berries to make *raki*. Some scrapings from the pressed grapes here, some maize husks there, everything was used. Then in October, once the olive presses opened, she took a fifty-dram tin scoop and a small jug and went around to the reservoirs where the dregs were deposited and gathered the oil from the sediment. By this means she saved enough oil for her lantern to last a year.

But Aunt Achtista derived her primary income from gleaning corn. Every year in June she took a boat, set sail and crossed over to Euboea. She endured the scornful name 'boat-woman' which other women hurled at her because it was still considered a disgrace for a woman to travel by sea. There, along with the other poor women, she gathered the wheat that had fallen from the sheaves of the harvesters, from the loading of the carts. Year after year, the peasants of Euboea and their womenfolk mocked them to their faces: 'Hey! Here come those skirts! The skirts are back again!'¹

But she would bend down patiently, quietly, pick up the fallen grains of Euboea's rich harvest, fill three or four bags, an entire year's supply for herself and the two orphans, whom she had en-

¹ The fabric of the skirts worn by the women of Skiathos was more like that of the Europeans, in contrast to the heavy traditional weaves of the Euboean women.

trusted in the meanwhile to the care of Zerbinio, and sail back to her seaside village.

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Except that this year the crops had failed in Euboea. The olives failed on the little island where Aunt Achtitsa lived. The vines failed and the maize, even the arbutus berries nearly failed, all around the crops had failed.

Then, because troubles never come singly, a heavy winter set in over those northern parts. Already from November, when the south wind had hardly begun to blow or the rains to fall, the snows came. One snowfall would stop and right away another would start up. Sometimes a dry north wind blew, packing even harder the snow, which did not melt at all on the mountains. 'More was expected.'

The old woman had just managed to transport on her back a couple of armfuls of dry wood from the ravines and woods — enough to last two or three weeks — when the heavy winter descended. Round about the middle of December there was a short break in the weather, and a few timorous rays of sun appeared, shining like gold on the higher rooftops. Aunt Achtitsa rushed out to the forest in order to bring inside some firewood while she had the chance. The next day the winter pressed in on them more bitterly. Until Christmas there was not a single fine day, no clear patch of sky to be seen, no ray of sun.

A piercing north wind, the 'snow-bringer', blew on Christmas Eve. The roofs of the houses were loaded down with packed snow. The usual street games and snowball fights had stopped. That winter was not for game-playing. Dwarf crystals hung from the roof-tiles like ripe fruit, but even the neighbourhood urchins no longer had the appetite to eat them.

On the evening of the twenty-third, Yeros had come home from school full of cheer since lessons were finishing the next day. Even before taking his school satchel from under his arm, he hungrily opened the cupboard, but found not even a crust. The old woman had gone

out, perhaps to find some bread. Miserable Patrona sat slumped over near the hearth, but the hearth was cold. She poked around in the ashes, thinking in her childish simplicity (she was only four, the poor girl) that the fireplace meant warmth, even if it was not alight. But the ash was wet. Drops of water from melting snow, thanks perhaps to some secret and transient sunbeam, had leaked in through the chimney. Yeros, who was just seven, was on the verge of tears not having found anything to sate his hunger. He opened the only window, which was three spans wide. The entire house, with its low ceiling, half panelling and loft of sorts, was only about two arms' breadth in height from the floor to the ceiling.

Yeros lifted a stool onto the stone window sill, climbed up onto the stool, supported himself with his left hand on the open shutter and, reaching up daringly toward the eaves, he stretched out his right hand and broke off an icicle from the 'stalagmites' which adorned the roof. He began to suck it slowly and with pleasure, and gave one also to Patrona to eat. The poor things were starving.

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A little while later, old Ahtitsa returned carrying something wrapped up in her bosom. Yeros, recognizing from experience that his grandmother's bosom was never puffed up without reason, leapt up and ran to her breast, stuck in his hand and let out a cry of joy. That evening the good, if a little strict, grandmother had 'saved' a piece of bread — who knows how much she'd had to beg and plead for it.

But what wouldn't she do, what sacrifices wouldn't she make for the love of those two children who were hers twice over, her child's children! Still, she did not want to indulge them, to be too soft with them. She called the boy 'Yeros' because he bore the name of her real 'yeros', that is to say, 'old man', the late *Barba-Michalios*, whose name it pained her to hear and to say aloud. The hapless little girl she called by the flattering name Patrona, 'as the impoverished lady that she was', since she could not endure hearing Argyro, her daughter's name which had been bequeathed to the orphan by her

mother as she lay dying after giving birth to the girl. Except for these little nicknames, she bestowed no signs of tenderness on the two poor creatures, but provided for their everyday needs and protected them as she could.

The long-suffering old woman prepared a bed for the two orphans to sleep and lying down beside them herself told them to breathe down under their blanket to keep warm. Uttering an untruth, but wishing it might be true, she promised them that the next day Christ would bring wood and bread and a kettle boiling on the fire. She lay awake until past midnight, brooding over her bitter fortune.

* * *

In the morning, after the liturgy (it was Christmas Eve), the parish priest, *Papa-Dimitris*, suddenly appeared at the door of the humble dwelling:

‘Glad tidings!’ he addressed her with a smile.

Glad tidings indeed. Who could she expect glad tidings from?

‘I received a letter for you, *Achtitsa*,’ said the old priest, brushing the snow from his cassock and shawl.

‘Come in, Master!’

‘If only I had a fire,’ she whispered to herself, ‘or a sweet and *ra-ki* to offer him.’

The priest climbed up the four steps and went over to sit on the stool. He reached into his cassock and pulled out a large envelope covered with a variety of official seals and postage stamps.

‘A letter, you said, Father?’ *Achtitsa* repeated, just beginning to register what the priest had said.

The letter which he had pulled out from his breast appeared to be open at one end.

‘The ship arrived this morning,’ the priest resumed, ‘and they brought me this now, just as I was leaving church.’

And putting his hand into the envelope, he pulled out a folded paper.

‘The letter is addressed to me,’ he added, ‘but it concerns you.’

‘What, me? Me?’ repeated the old woman with surprise.

Papa-Dimitris unfolded the letter.

‘God saw your suffering and has sent you a little relief,’ said the good priest. ‘Your son has written to you from America.’

‘From America? Yannis! Yannis remembered me?’ the old woman cried for joy, making the sign of the cross and then adding, ‘Glory be to God!’

The priest put on his glasses and began trying to read:

‘It is poorly written,’ he said, ‘and I have a hard time reading the characters they use these days, but I will try to get the sense of it.’

And he started to read, with difficulty and much stumbling:

‘*Papa-Dimitris*, I kiss your hand. First of all, I trust that you are well, etc., etc. I’ve been away for many years and I don’t know what has happened there, whether they are alive or dead. I’m far away, deep in Panama, and have no contact with other Greeks living in America. Three years ago I met (so and so) and (so and so), but they too had been abroad for many years and had no news of my family.

‘If my mother or father is alive, tell them to forgive me, because even though we always struggle for the good, often things go wrong. I twice fell seriously ill with one of the nasty infections you catch here, and I spent a lot of time in hospital. I gave all my money to the doctors and I only just escaped with my life. I was married ten years ago according to the local custom, but am now a widower, and want nothing more than to get together enough money to return home in time to receive my parents’ blessing. Tell them that they shouldn’t hold anything against me, for it is God’s will and we can’t go against it. And they shouldn’t hold a grudge, since, unless God desires it, man can’t get anywhere.

‘I am sending you the enclosed bill of exchange written in your name, Father, for your Reverence to sign and take care to cash for my father or mother, if they are still living. If, and I dearly hope it is not so, they are dead and buried, would your Reverence be so kind as to cash it and give the money to one of my siblings, if they

are alive, or to a nephew, or some other poor soul. And, Father, if my parents are dead, please reserve part of the money for the forty liturgies in their memory. . .’*

The letter had a lot to say, but it also omitted one important thing. It did not refer to the amount of money that he intended to be cashed. Noting the omission, *Papa*-Dimitris guessed that the author of the letter had assumed through oversight that he had already specified the amount of money earlier in the letter, and considered it unnecessary to repeat it again below. For that reason he wrote simply, ‘this amount’.

Achtitsa’s joy was ineffable, receiving news of her son after so many years. As if it had been sleeping beneath ashes for long years, the spark of maternal love rose up to her face from deep within her and the aged, shrivelled and wrinkled visage was transformed, shining forth youth and beauty.

Even if they did not understand what had transpired, the two children, seeing their grandmother’s joy, began to skip and gambol about.

* * *

Kyr-Margaritis was not principally a money changer, or lender or merchant, he was all these together.* He paid tax on one trade, but practised three.

Old Achtitsa, being in urgent need, took her son’s promissory note, on which there appeared black and red characters, both typed and hand-written, about which neither the parish priest nor she knew anything, and went to the shop of *Kyr*-Margaritis.

Kyr-Margaritis took a pinch of snuff, dusted off his full breeches onto which some of it always fell, lowered his cap down to his eyebrows, put on his glasses, and began to examine the promissory note at length.

‘It comes from America?’ he said. ‘Your son remembered you, I see. Bravo. I’m happy for you.’

Then he went on: ‘It has the number 10, but I don’t know in what currency, ten shillings, ten rupees, ten crowns, or ten. . .’

He stopped before saying 'ten pounds'.

'Let's call the teacher,' muttered *Kyr-Margaritis*, 'perhaps he will know how to read it. What language is it anyway?'

The schoolmaster, who was sitting next door watching a game of *chiamo*, was summoned and walked over to the shop of *Kyr-Margaritis*. Stiff and erect in his gait, he entered and picked up the letter, asked *Kyr-Margaritis* to lend him his glasses and began to sound out the Latin characters.

'It must be English,' he said, 'unless it is German. Where does this document come from?'

'America, Sir,' answered Aunt *Achtitsa*.

'America? Then it is English.'

And saying this, he tried to sound out the words 'ten pounds sterling', as it was written by hand on the cheque.

'Sterling,' he said. 'Sterling would mean *taler*, I believe. The word appears to be of this derivation,' he pronounced dogmatically.

He returned the letter to the hands of *Kyr-Margaritis*.

'That will be it, then,' he said, 'and since the number ten is written at the top of the page, it must be a promissory note for ten *talers*. But to tell you the truth, I'm not an expert in financial matters. We men of letters occupy ourselves with other things.'

And with that, since he was feeling a chill in the flagstone-paved shop of *Kyr-Margaritis*, he returned to the coffee house to warm up.

* * *

Kyr-Margaritis had started rubbing his hands and appeared to be lost in thought.

'Now then, what shall we do?' he said turning to the old woman. 'Times are hard. Business sluggish. Do I accept it and cash it for you, do I know that my money is guaranteed, or whether the bill is forged? Does one expect honesty from over there, from that lost world? All the frauds, all the counterfeiters come from there. Those vagabonds — I beg your pardon, I don't include your son — roam around for so long there in the land where the sun bakes the

bread and they don't bother to send home real money, proper cash, they only send worthless scraps of paper.'

He took two turns around his enormous accounting office and said: 'And it is not a slight undertaking, I'll have you know. We are talking about ten *talers*! If I had ten *talers*, I would get married.'

Then he went on: 'But what can I say? I feel sorry for you — a good woman with those orphans to look after. I'll keep a *taler* and a half for the risks I'm running and, as for the eight and a half that remain... well, to be sure, so that you don't go looking for crowns, I'll give you five francs to make it even between us... So that makes eight and a half and five francs... Oh! and I forgot!...'

To the contrary, he had not forgotten. He had been thinking about it from the start of their conversation.

'Your late husband Michalios owed me something, I don't remember what it was just now...'

And he turned to his accounts book: 'Ah yes, and I believe your good-for-nothing son-in-law made off with two *talers* from me.'

And armed with his gigantic accounts register, he added, 'It is right and proper, after all, for me to withhold this money... however much you get, it will seem a gift from heaven to you.'

He opened the register.

The densely annotated pages of that register resembled fertile fields, rich earth. Whatever was sown therein bore fruit many times over.

It was like pruning the leaves of a sapling, each time he made an outlay of money. But the root remained underground, preparing to sprout forth again.

Straightaway *Kyr-Margaritis* located the record of the two accounts.

'Your late husband owed me nine and fifteen,' he said, 'and two *talers* borrowed and not paid back by your son-in-law, that makes...'

Taking up his pen he started to add up the amount owed and the conversion from *talers* to drachmas, and then to subtract the sum from ten French *talers*.

‘So it all comes out to my giving you . . .,’ *Kyr-Margaritis* started to say.

Just then a new figure appeared on the scene.

* * *

It was a merchant from Syros, on their island briefly for business. With an air of confidence and self-assurance, he strode up to the desk where *Kyr-Margaritis* stood.

‘What do we have here, *Kyr-Margaritis*? . . . What is this?’ he asked with a quick glance at the poor widow’s promissory note that lay on the desk.

And then, picking it up: ‘A bill of exchange for ten English pounds from America,’ he said in a clear voice. ‘Where did this come from? You do this sort of business too, *Kyr-Margaritis*?’

‘For ten pounds!’ Aunt *Achtitsa* repeated spontaneously, having heard the word pronounced with no uncertainty.

‘Why, yes, for ten English pounds,’ the businessman from *Hermoupolis* said again, this time turning to her. ‘Is it yours perhaps?’

‘Indeed.’

Usually, when Aunt *Achtitsa* wanted to agree with something, she always said ‘yes’. But this time she herself could not quite understand how it came to her to use the more formal ‘indeed’, or where she found this word.

‘Or is it maybe for ten napoleons?’ *Kyr-Margaritis* murmured, biting his lip.

‘I tell you, it is for ten English pounds,’ the man from Syros repeated. ‘Don’t you understand?’

He took another long look at the promissory note: ‘It is guaranteed money, *argent comptant*,¹ I tell you. Are you going to cash it, or shall I do it here and now?’ he asked, starting to get out his purse.

‘Could somebody take it for nine . . . French pounds,’ asked *Kyr-Margaritis*, hesitating.

¹ In other words, ‘as good as cash’.

‘French? I’ll take it for nine English.’

And turning the sheet of paper over, he saw the good priest’s signature, checked it against the name that appeared in the text, and found it to be identical.

Then, opening his purse, he counted out into the hand of the widow Aunt Achtitsa, right before her bedazzled eyes, nine shining English pounds.

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This was how it came about that on Christmas Day the poor widow was wearing a new white headscarf and the two orphans had clean shirts on their thin frames and warm shoes on their frozen little feet.

[1889]

Translated by Elizabeth Key Fowden