

THE SWAN SONG

A Dramatic Reading

by
Anton Chekhov



Wetmore Declamation Bureau

**Box 2695
Sioux City, IA 51106**

**www.wetmoredeclamation.com
Email: speeches@wetmoredeclamation.com**

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The Scene of Anton Chekhov's play, "The Swan Song," is laid on the stage of a country theatre. The characters are Vasili Svetlovidoff, a comedian sixty-eight years old and Nikita Ivanitch, a prompter.

It is during the night after the play. Svetlovidoff, with a candle in his hand, comes out of the dressing-room on the stage of the dark, empty theatre.

SVIET: (Laughs) Well, well, this is funny! Here is a good joke; I fell asleep in my dressing-room when the play was over, and there I was calmly snoring after everybody else had left the theatre. Ah! I'm a foolish old man, a poor old dodderer! The rascals have gone off and have probably locked up the theatre. The play tonight was for my benefit, and it is disgusting to think how much wine I have poured down my throat in honor of the occasion. It is horrid! Idiotic! Even if I didn't mind ruining my health, I ought at least to remember my age, old idiot that I am! Yes, my old age! It's no use! I can play the fool, and brag, and pretend to be young, but my life is really over now. I kiss my hand to the sixty-eight years that have gone by! I'll never see them again! Yes, yes, that's the case, Vasili, old boy! The time has come for you to rehearse the part of a mummy, whether you like it or not. Death is on its way to you.

(He goes toward his dressing-room: at the same time Nikita Ivanitch, an old man in a long white coat, comes out of one of the dressing-rooms.)

SVIET: (Sees Ivanitch, shrieks with terror and steps back.) Who are you? What do you want?

IVANITCH: I spend my nights here in the dressing-rooms, dear master! It is time for you to go home, sir.

SVIET: I won't go home; I have no home--none! none! none!

IVANITCH: (Sadly) Your audiences love you, master.

SVIET: My audience has gone home. They are all asleep, and have forgotten their old clown. But I am still alive! Warm, red blood is tingling in my veins, the blood of noble ancestors. I am an aristocrat, I served in the army, before I fell as low as this, and what a fine chap I was! Handsome, daring, eager!--Where has it all gone? What has become of those old days? There's the pit (Pointing to center of stage) that has swallowed them all. I remember it now. Forty-five years of my life lie buried there, and what a life! I can see it as clearly as I can see your face. The ecstasy of youth, faith, passion, the love of women! When I first went on the stage, in the first glow of passionate youth, I remember a woman loved me for my acting. She was beautiful, graceful as a poplar, young, pure and radiant as a summer dawn. Her smile could charm away the darkest night. I remember, I stood before her once, as I am now standing before you. She had never seemed so lovely to me as she did then. I fell on my knees before her, I begged for my happiness, and she said; "Give up the stage! Give up the stage!" Do you understand? She could love an actor, but marry him--never! I was acting that day. I remember I had a foolish clown's part. And as I acted, I felt my eyes being opened; I saw that the worship of the art I had held so sacred was a delusion and an empty dream; that I was a fool, a slave, the plaything of the idleness of strangers. I understood my audience at last and since that day I have not believed in their applause, or in their wreaths, or in their enthusiasm. The people applaud me, they buy my photograph, but I am a stranger to them. They don't know me, I am as the dirt beneath their feet.

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