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MYKOLA RYABCHUK

Bear your own halo

Jurisconsult M glanced in the mirror one morning and saw a nimbus above his head. This happening, in this same world, gave rise to a fair amount of astonishment. At first, M thought it was due to the previous day's boozing, but his wife, yawning, remarked, 'You've a halo over your head.'

The Jurisconsult shivered. So it's real, the nimbus . . .

'This is your idea of a joke!' he barked.

'More like your friends' idea of a joke,' answered his wife.

They tried to catch hold of the halo but they couldn't. Then the wife suggested they might put some make-up on top of his head, but the Jurisconsult refused, categorically.

'In that case, go to the doctor.'

'Ha! To a doctor! With a halo — to the doctor?'

'Well, do whatever you want,' said his wife. 'You got it, you get rid of it.' And she hurried off to work.

M was alone with his halo, which incidentally didn't differ at all from those painted on the icons — something which couldn't be said about the Jurisconsult's face. You must understand that it wasn't in his nature to question if his head was suited to a nimbus or not. The poor man desperately searched for the source of his illness.

It was an illness, he felt certain of that; he even wondered if the doctors would give him a sick-note. The only problem was, he couldn't bring himself to go out in the street with that doughnut over his head! So he went on sitting there on the sofa, sighing painfully, from time to time calling the devil to mind.

Sure enough, with his nimbus he could become a film star, or act in the theatre, the circus, or perform for students — none of which would be too bad, if the halo could be taken off like a hat.

Maybe they overdid it last night when they were praising me? — thought M. Come to think of it, that stranger in the tail-coat with the weird bow-tie round his neck, he called me faultlessly honest, principled, witty.

Mykola Ryabchuk is the literary editor of the journal Suchasnist. 'Bear your own halo' was written in 1971 when Ryabchuk was 18. It was published in the samizdat literary almanack Skrynia (The Chest), all copies of which were confiscated by the authorities in 1972. The story served as a pretext for Ryabchuk's expulsion from Lviv Polytechnic shortly afterwards.

. . . Last night the words seemed fine — who'd have thought they'd bring this misery?

A knock sounded on the door. The Jurisconsult opened it and saw the same stranger he had just been blaming. The same tail-coat and the same bow-tie. The stranger didn't wait to be invited into the flat.

'You did this to me!' shouted M, sticking his finger into the little circle.

'I did,' the owner of the funny bow answered calmly.

'What *need* had you to praise me?'

'I spoke the truth and only the truth,' the stranger retorted. 'What's your occupation?'

'Jurisconsult.'

'Still the jurisconsult? Then I'm right.'

'But how . . . how can . . . you and I are total strangers.'

'True. And it wasn't easy to find you among the millions of others. But, now I've done it, I want to help you become someone *great*. The people undoubtedly need rulers, but most of them are swindlers. You, to my mind, are the very person to govern the country.'

'I?'

'You. You need only have faith in your vocation and listen to my private advice. Tomorrow, begin to do your duty.' The stranger adjusted his extravagant bow and disappeared behind the door.

Stupified, M stared at the place where the unexpected visitor had exited, unable to make up his mind whether all this was really happening, till the sight of the nimbus in the mirror helped him gather his thoughts. He resolved to do as he was told, as he seemed to have little choice anyway. And from that day on, the stranger in the tail-coat always appeared at the most crucial of moments, to offer a few chosen words about the Jurisconsult's remarkable moral qualities, gifts and affability, with the result that his talents were certain of promotion.

Finally, the halo which glowed over the Jurisconsult's head shone over the whole nation.

Then there was work. Every day the Jurisconsult received telegrams from folk telling him of their enduring loyalty and support. All would have been perfect, had it not been for one senseless, unexpected incident. He was told he had to go to see some dead man. It was necessary to resuscitate this man's body, and nobody but M had a halo, so no one but he could perform miracles.

The dead man lay across the railway. To his right was a huge crowd of people, and on his



left a long line of trains stretching beyond the horizon. The trains whistled and the people were silent. The man's body was blue and in some parts greenish. The watchman, armed with old newspapers, carefully kept the flies off him.

'How long has he been lying here?' the Jurisconsult asked.

'It's a state secret,' whispered the first minister. 'Roughly speaking somewhere between two and twenty-two years.'

'And how long have the trains stood here?'

'All the trains have been departing according to schedule, though there has been a slight delay here.'

'Two or twenty-two years,' exclaimed M with dismay.

'Shush!' They all urged silence by signalling diligent spies' ears.

'Come on, get him out of here, get the trains moving.'

'We can't do that,' said the first minister. 'It's a clinical death. It would help if you could resuscitate him.'

'But why? Why?' shrieked M.

'If you could transform him into, say, a cactus, we would remove it . . . as he is, I'm sorry but . . .'

'Why into a cactus?' The Jurisconsult became furious.

'Ah-a-a-eh-e-uh-u-m-m-m, not necessarily a cactus, it could be a locomotive. But we would have thought it easier to transform him into a cactus.'



M stared, grabbed the dead man by the collar and hauled him from the embankment.

After this crazy escapade, he had this vision in which dead people are lying all over the railways and the roads as well; trains whistle, cars blow their horns and the number of dead people increases, scattered in front of every door, dismal and blue since God-only-knows when. Folk are afraid of leaving their homes and he, with his halo, struggles in vain to make them take some decisive action.

As it turns out, the latter mishap was greater than the former: the dead man disappeared. Whether he ran away himself or was snatched away was unclear, but the uproar it caused was enormous. Everywhere under heaven, the army and the police were in a state of readiness and voluntary regiments were being formed urgently.

A couple of days later, when M arrived at the government building, he didn't find a single member of his extensive administration. All of them, from bodyguards to personal

assistants, had vanished without trace. He spent some long difficult hours waiting, then went downtown. Everybody seemed to be hurrying somewhere and nobody paid the slightest attention to M.

The Jurisconsult approached a small group of children and asked them what their fathers were doing that day.

'They're looking for the dead man,' said a little girl with short plaits. 'Mummy as well.' 'Mine, too.'

'So's my dad,' echoed the children.

'You aren't the dead man, are you, by any chance?' the wee girl asked the Jurisconsult.

M smiled and went blindly on. The small man in tail-coat and weird bow-tie came after him but didn't dare speak for quite a while. At last he addressed the halo-bearer.

'What have you decided to do, Sir?'

M raised his head.

'Aha, so it's you again,' he grinned unhappily. 'See how wrong you were? I'm not the *great* one these people need, not at all.'

'No, I'm not wrong. I merely forgot to take the dead man on the railway into account. It seems he's very important for them — maybe he's a symbol?'

'I assure you he's a real dead man. I even took hold of him, yeugh!'

'Worse yet, I can't do anything about the nimbus. You really do deserve it.'

'So what now? Where to?'

'Come!' said the man with the bow-tie. 'I've got it!'

The place they arrived at was an ordinary old church.

'But what about the nation?'

'Don't worry. They can manage just by using your name.'

The man in the bow-tie and the Jurisconsult sneaked inside the church and found themselves in front of the icons.

'See that saint over there?' the man in the bow-tie asked. 'His face is completely peeled away. Jump in there.'

'What about you?'

'What about me? Oh, I have my place.'

The man with the bow-tie vanished and instantly reappeared in an icon, in the form of the Devil shoving sinners into the pitch. He winked slyly. 'Come on, faster!'

Jurisconsult M gathered his strength, hopped, and landed in the lugubrious gilt frame. The halo flared at the nape of his neck and some book ended up in his hand.

'Not bad,' he shouted.

'Indeed,' the Devil agreed from the corner.

On the grand holy day, the whole church filled up with folk, from whom the Jurisconsult learned the latest news. One elderly lady lit a candle in front of him and made the sign of the cross conscientiously. Despite the fact that he had been great, Jurisconsult M couldn't have dreamt of such adoration.

Now and again there were masses to the *great*, and when the people had left, the Devil would sound out,

'It was health they were praying to you for!'

In the empty church, the two of them roared with laughter for an age. ■

Translated by Robert Alan Jamieson and Nadia D Lewtchuk Kerecuk
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