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A Conversation Between A Drunken Man And A Sober Chort, by Chekhov

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The former Intendant Office¹ clerk, retired collegiate secretary Lakhmatov, was sitting at his desk, drinking his sixteenth shot, contemplating on fraternity, equality and freedom². Suddenly a chort looked at him from behind a lamp... But don't be scared, readers³. Do you know what a chort is? It's a handsome young man, with a mug as black as his boots and with red expressive eyes. On his head, although he isn't married⁴, he has little horns... and a hairdo *à la Capoul*⁵. His body is covered in green wool and smells like a dog. At the bottom of his back dangles a tail ending with an arrowhead... Instead of fingers he has claws, instead of feet he has horse hooves. Seeing the chort, Lakhmatov became somewhat troubled, but then, remembering that green chorts have a silly habit of appearing to all generally tipsy people, he soon calmed down.

“To whom do I have the honour of speaking?” He turned to the uninvited guest.

That confused the chort and his eyes went blank.

‘Don't be shy,’ continued Lakhmatov. ‘Come closer... I am a man of no prejudices and you can talk to me sincerely... heart-to-heart... Who are

you?’

The chort hesitantly approached Lakhmatov and, tucking his tail under himself, bowed politely.

‘I am a chort, or a demon...’ He introduced himself. ‘I’m a special officer under His Excellency the Director of the Infernal Office of Mr. Satan’

‘I’ve heard, I’ve heard... I’m pleased. Have a seat! Do you fancy some vodka? Very pleased... And what do you do?’

That confused the chort even more.

‘Actually, nothing particular...’ he replied, coughing in embarrassment and blowing his nose in a *Rebus*⁶ issue. ‘Before, indeed, we had an occupation... We tempted people... steering them from the path of good into the path of evil... Now that occupation, *entre nous soit dit*⁷, is not worth a spit... There is no longer a path of good, there is nothing to tempt them from. And besides, people have grown more cunning than we are... Try to tempt a man when he’s studied all the sciences at university, been through fire, water and trumpets⁸! How can I teach you to steal a ruble when you’ve already snatched a thousand without my help?’

‘That’s true... But you do at least something, don’t you?’

‘Yes... Our former position may only be a commemorative now, but we do still have a job... We tempt the class ladies, we nudge the youth to write poetry, we make drunken merchants smash mirrors... In politics,

in literature and in science, our intervention has ceased long ago... We have no damn clue about it... Many of us are employees at *Rebus*, there are even some who've quit hell and enlisted in the human race... These retired chorts who joined the people, married rich merchant women and now live a great life. Some of them are lawyers, others publish newspapers, and are generally very sensible and respectable people!

'Pardon my indiscreet question: what kind of allowance do you receive?'

'The situation is the same as before...' answered the chort. 'The establishment hasn't changed a bit... Room and board, lighting and heating are still provided... We don't have a wage because we're all overstaffed and a chort is an honourable position... In general, frankly, it's a bad life, one might as well beg around⁹... Thanks to people, you've taught us how to take bribes, otherwise, we'd have all gone belly up¹⁰... So we have to make shift with what we have.... You supply the sinners with provisions, and... well, take a bite of it... Satan has grown old, he keeps going to see Zucchi¹¹, he has no time for our reports now...

Lakhmatov poured the chort a shot of vodka. Drinking it made him more talkative. He told him all the secrets of hell, poured out his soul, wept, and appealed to Lakhmatov so much that he even let him stay overnight. The chort slept on the stove¹² and raved all night long. By morning he had disappeared.

Notes

1. A civil office managing all kinds of supplies and resources for the military.
2. *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*, French for ‘liberty, equality, fraternity’, is the national motto of France.
3. Chekhov precisely refers to a female reader here. It’s important to keep that for context.
4. “Having horns” is an idiom meaning “playing away”, cheating. Chekhov uses it ironically here as if suggesting that many do that in marriage.
5. *A la Capoule* (French à la Capoule, “under Capoule”) is a male hairstyle popular in the late 19th century, named after the famous French tenor Victor Capoule.
6. *Rebus* was a weekly magazine published in St. Petersburg since 1881. At first, it was published as a sheet of riddles and puzzles, then it became an organ of spiritualism and mediumism, which also referenced in the story in the following Rebus mention.
7. French for “between us be said”.
8. “To go through fire, water and trumpets (or literally brass pipes)” (пройти огонь, воду и медные трубы) means “to go to hell and back”, to persevere in the face of extreme adversity. If the trials with “fire” and “water” are “clear”, trumpets refer to the challenges caused by sudden fame and popularity with the people or the government. [More here.](#)
9. The original here is “go out into the world [with a sack]” which means “wander around the world and beg”.
10. The original here is “to chill out” (not sure), “to go cold”, meaning “to die and cool down”.
11. Wiki: Virginia Zucchi (1849-1933) was a famous Italian ballerina. She was known as “the Divine Zucchi” or even “the Divine Virginia” for her artistry, expressiveness, and virtuosity.
12. You can sleep on top of a [Russian stove](#) and it’s not a unique case.

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for original fictions and translations.*

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