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Cynic

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N. A. Leikin said to Chekhov the next day it happened: “An absolute mayhem. The censor took everything: your *Beasts*, Trefolev’s poems, Gilyarovskiy’s poems, 1/2 of Bilibin’s reviews, my feuilleton story <...> I asked to give ‘Beasts’ a go and claimed it was an innocent story, but the committee told me: ‘Don’t we understand that it’s not about beasts!’ So I’m sending this to the *Beasts* editor. You will not lose the story. Rewrite it (make sure you do), and send it to *The Petersburg Gazette*. They will print it. The story is innocent.”

According to the censor, “one can hear a particular pessimistic tendency in the story, one can feel tendentious hints and laughter at the vicissitudes of fate of not only small, but also powerful people, at innocent misfortunes and suffering, at the hopelessness of the vanquished and enslaved...”. The censor banned the story, “bearing in mind the vagueness of the trend and the possibility of understanding it in a bad way.”

When Chekhov sent the story to The Petersburg Gazette, he changed

the title to “Cynic” and in a number of places expanded the text, the stylistic changes were small. The story was published in *The Peterburg’s Gazette* №345, 16th of December, 1885, on page 3 under the section “Flying notes”, subtitled “A sketch”, signed *A. Chekhonté*.

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Look at this dude. He hypnotises you to sign up for the Lifeboat and tell your friends to do so.

Noon. Egor Susin, the manager of The Pichnau Brothers’ Menagerie, an ex-service sergeant major, a hefty guy with a flabby, alcoholic face, wearing a dirty shirt and a greasy tuxedo, is already drunk. He swivels in front of the audience like the devil before mass: running and twisting, giggling and playing with his eyes as if he was coquetting using his kludgy manners and being unbuttoned. When his big cropped head is full of wine fumes, the audience loves him. In that case, he “explains” animals not simply, but in his new unique way.

“How should I explain?” he asks the audience with a wink of the eye. “Simply or with psychology and basic tendency?”

“With psychology and basic tendency!”

“Bene! I’m starting! African lion!” he says, swaying and looking mockingly at the lion sitting and meekly blinking in the corner of the cage. “A synonym of power combined with grace, the beauty and pride of fauna! Back then, in the days of his youth, he was captivated with his power and terrified the neighbourhood with his roar, but now... Ha-ha-ha... ..and now, such a dummy, he’s sitting in a cage... What, brother lion? Sitting? Philosophising? You must have been prowling around in the woods and thought that there is no beast stronger than you, that you would take on the devil himself... but it turned out fate is stronger... despite it is foolish, it is still stronger... Ha-ha-ha! Look, the cat dragged himself in from Africa! You must have never dreamed you’d end up here! Me too, my brother, I have gone through enough for nine lifetimes! I’ve been in a gymnasium, in a chancellery, surveyor, telegraph office, military, macaroni factory... and the devil knows where I haven’t been! But I ended up in a menagerie... in the stench... Ha-ha-ha!

And the audience, infected by the sincere laughter of drunken Susin, cackles.

“Want to be free, don’t you?” a boy, smelling of paint and covered with multicoloured grease stains, blinks to the lion.

“I doubt he does! If you let him out, he’ll come back to his cage. He has reconciled. Ha-ha-ha... Kicking the bucket soon, aren’t you? What are you waiting for, brother? A miracle? Just die and that’s it! There’s nothing to wait for! Don’t stare at me like that! Just do it! I’m telling you.”

Susin leads the audience to the next cage, where a wild cat is kicking and pounding on the bars.

“A wild cat! The progenitor of our vasyas and marusyas¹! Not even three months old when she was caught and caged. Hissing, flouncing, glaring, not letting us to get any closer. Day and night she scratches the bars: looking for a way out! A million of rubles, half of her life, her children – she would give now just to get home. Ha-ha-ha... What are you flouncing for, you fool? Why dashing around? You are not going to get out of here! You’ll die but won’t get out! You’ll get used to it, you’ll reconcile! Not only will you get used to it, but you’ll lick ours, your tormentors’, hands! Ha-ha-ha... Here, brother, it’s the same as Dante’s inferno: *abandon all hope!*”²

Susin’s cynicism is beginning to irritate the audience little by little.

“I don’t get what’s so funny!” - someone’s bass remarks.

“He grins and doesn’t know why he likes it...” - says the dyer.

“It’s a monkey!” continues Susin, approaching the next cage. “A lousy animal! I know she hates us, she would enjoy, perhaps, tearing us into pieces, but she smiles and licks my hand! The myrmidon’s nature! Ha-ha-ha-ha... For a lump of sugar, she’ll bow to her tormentor and play a buffoon... I don’t like such!.. And this, I recommend, is a gazelle!” says Susin, leading the audience to the cage where sits a small, skinny gazelle with big tear-stained eyes.”This one is done! No sooner has she got into the cage than the denouement is ready: in the last degree of phthisis!

Ha-ha-ha-ha... Look at those human eyes – crying! Well, makes sense. Young, beautiful... wants to live! She should be out in the wild and mating with good-lookers, but here she lays on dirty straw that stenches of dogs and stables. It's strange: she's dying, yet there's hope in her eyes! That's what youth means! Eh? It's fun with you, with the young! You are hoping in vain, mother! Thus you'll meet your maker with your hope. Ha-ha-ha..."

"Brother... don't bother her with words..." says the dyer, frowning. "Creepy!"

The audience is no longer laughing. Only Susin is nickering and snorting. The more sullen the audience becomes, the louder and sharper his laughter gets. And everyone, for some reason, begins to notice that he is disgraceful, cynical, hatred, and spite appears in everyone's eyes.

"That's the crane himself!" Susin does not calm down, approaching the crane standing near one of the cages. "Born in Russia, flew to the Nile, where he talked to crocodiles and tigers. He's got the most brilliant past... Look at him: thoughtful, concentrated! So busy thinking that he doesn't notice anything... Dreams, dreams! Ha-ha-ha... He thinks "I'll gouge everyone's heads, fly out the window and jump into the blueness, the azure of the sky. And in the blueness, strings of cranes are flying to warmer climes, and clang... clang... clang..." Oh, look, the feathers are ruffling! He remembered in the midst of his dreams that his wings were clipped and... terror seized him, despair. Ha-ha-ha... His nature is irreconcilable. He'll always have his feathers ruffling till he's dead.

Irreconcilable, proud! But we don't care that you're irreconcilable! You're proud, irreconcilable, but I'll take you by the nose in front of the public if I want to. Ha-ha-ha...

Susin takes the crane by the beak and leads him.

“Don't croff!” voices appear. “Leave it! The hell's going on! Where's the master? How can they let a drunken man... torture animals!”

“Ha-ha-ha... How do I torture them?”

“With... with this, with these different... jokes... Don't!”

“It was you who asked me to do it with psychology. Ha-ha-ha...”

The audience remembers that they came to the menagerie only for “psychology” and that they were impatiently waiting for drunken Susin to come out of his cubicle and begin explanations, and to motivate their anger somehow they begin to cavil at feeding, cramped cages and etc.

“We feed them,” says Sucine, squinting mockingly at the audience. “Even now there will be feeding... Spare me!”

Having shrugged, he reaches under the counter and pulls out a small boa constrictor from the warmed blankets.

“We feed them... *You can't!* Same people: *if you don't feed – they will go belly up!* Mr. rabbit, *venez ici!* Please!

A white, red-eyed rabbit enters the scene.

“My respects!” Susin says, gesturing with fingers in front of the rabbit’s muzzle. “I am honoured to introduce myself. I endorse Mr Boa Constrictor, who wants to eat you! Ha-ha-ha-ha... Unpleasant, isn’t it, brother? Wrinkling, aren’t you? Well, it is what it is! There’s no my fault! If not today, then tomorrow... If not me, then someone else... doesn’t matter. Philosophy, brother rabbit! This minute you’re alive, sniffing the air, pondering, the next minute you’re a shapeless mass! There you go. And life, brother, is so good! God, what a good life!”

“No need in feeding!” there are voices. “That’s enough! Don’t!”

“It’s a shame!” Susin goes on, as if he doesn’t hear the audience’s murmur. “A person, an individual, a whole life... has a female, has babies and... and now, all of a sudden, bang! Here you go! What a pity but what one can do!”

Susin takes the rabbit and, laughing, sets it against the boa constrictor’s maw. But before the rabbit has time to get petrified, dozens of hands grab it. Exclamations from the audience call for the Animals Patronage Society. They yell, wave hands, knock. Susin laughingly runs off into his cubicle.

The audience leaves the menagerie with anger. They are sickened as if they had swallowed a fly. But a day or two passes, and the calmed frequenters of the menagerie begin to feel drawn towards Susin, like to vodka or tobacco. They crave his cocky and coldly back-stabbing cynicism again.

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for original fictions and translations.*

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