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# Innocent Speeches

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## 1. First Aid, by Chekhov

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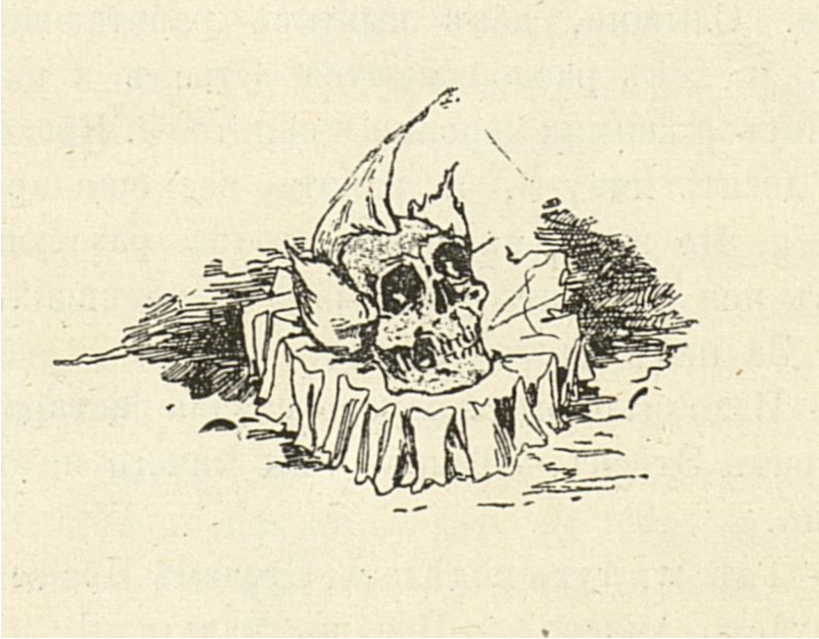
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This story is a part of Chekhov's short story collection "Innocent Speeches". I'm translating the whole collection and this is the first story in it. "First Aid" was first published on June 22, 1887, in the "Peterburgskaya Gazeta" (Petersburg Gazette), issue No. 168, on page 3, in the section titled "Flying Notes" under Chekhov's pseudonym, "A. Chekhonte." Later that same year, it was included in the "Innocent Speeches", published in Moscow by the magazine "Sverchok" (The Cricket). In this collection, the story appeared on pages 5-14. Subsequently, the story was featured in other Chekhov's collections.

It is a funny, satirical and a bit dark tale that showcases Chekhov's keen observational skill and his ability to masterfully portray people of different social classes.

I hope you enjoy it!



*The original illustration for this story from the ‘Innocent Speeches’*

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‘Out of the way, lads, the starshina<sup>1</sup> and the clerk are coming!’

‘Happy holiday, Gerasim Alpatych!’ the crowd rumbles, greeting the starshina. ‘Let it be, Gerasim Alpatych, not as we desire, but as God sees fit.’

The tipsy starshina wants to say something but cannot. He wiggles his fingers vaguely, bulges his eyes, and puffs out his red, swollen cheeks with such force, as if playing the highest note on a large trumpet. The clerk, a small, stubby man with a red nose and wearing a jockey’s cap,

puts on an energetic expression and enters the crowd.

‘Who’s drowned here?’ he asks. ‘Where’s the drowned man?’

‘This very one!’

A tall, gaunt old man in a blue shirt and bast shoes, just pulled from the water by the peasants and wet from head to toe, sits by the shore in a puddle, arms outstretched and legs sprawled, mumbling:

‘Holy saints... Orthodox brothers... Ryazan province, Zaraysky district... Divvied up between me two sons, and meself works for Prokhor Sergeyev... as a plasterer. Now’days, ye see, he gives me seven roubles<sup>2</sup> and says: ye, Fedya, says he, must now, says he, revere me in place of a parent. Oh, drat it all!’

‘Where you from?’ asks the clerk.

‘In place, he says, of a parent... Oh, drat it all! And that’s for a measly seven roubles?’

‘He’s babbling like that, not knowing head from tails,’ shouts the sotsky<sup>3</sup> Anisim in an unnatural voice, wet to the waist and clearly agitated by the incident. ‘Let me explain it to you, Yegor Makarych! Hold on, lads, stop rumberling! I want to tell it all to Yegor Makarych just as it happened... So he was walking, you see, from Kurnevo... But wait, lads, don’t prattle for nothing! ... So he was walking from Kurnevo, and the devil led him to ford the stream. The man, a bit drunk you see, not in his right mind, foolishly waded into the water, but it knocked him off

his feet and started spinning him like twig. He's shouting blue murder, and here I am with Lexandra... What's this? Why's a man shouting? We see he's drowning... What to do? Drop everything, I shout, Lexandra, the chap's in trouble! We rush straight in, clothes and all, and it's swirling and whirling, swirling and whirling — save us, Queen of Heaven! Got caught right in the vortex... He grabs him by the shirt, I by the hair. Then the other folks who saw come running to the shore, raising a ruckus... everyone wanting to save a soul... We're absolutely knackered, Yegor Makarych! If we hadn't made it in time, he'd have drowned clean away, holiday and all...'

'What's your name?' the clerk asks the drowned man. 'What's your origin?'

The man stares vacantly and remains silent.

'He's addled!' says Anisim. 'And how could he not be? Nearly a bellyful of water, I reckon. Dear man, what's your name? Silence! What life is left in him? Mere appearance, his soul's probably halfway gone... What a misfortune on a holiday! What are we to do here? Might well be a goner... Look how his mug's turned blue!'

'Listen, you!' shouts the clerk, shaking the drowned man by the shoulder. 'You! Answer me, I say! What's your origin? Silent, as if your noggin's flooded. You there!'

'For a measly seven roubles?' the drowned man mumbles. 'The hell with you, I say... We don't want...'

‘What don’t you want? Answer clearly!’

The drowned man is silent, his whole body shivering from the cold, his teeth chattering.

‘He’s a mere shadow of a man,’ says Anisim, ‘though, look at him, hardly a human at all. Should give him some drops...’

‘Drops...’ the clerk mimics. ‘What drops? The man nearly drowned, and you say drops! Need to pump the water out! Why are you gaping? Heartless folk! Run quickly to the volost<sup>4</sup> office for a sackcloth and pump him!’

Several men dash off and run to the village for a sackcloth. Inspiration strikes the clerk. He rolls up his sleeves, rubs his sides with his palms, and makes a flurry of small movements, indicating an excess of energy and determination.

‘Don’t crowd, don’t crowd,’ he mutters. ‘Those who aren’t needed, leave! Did you go for the constable? And you should go, Gerasim Alpatych,’ he says, turning to the starshina. ‘You’re sozzled, and in your interesting condition, it’s best you sit at home now.’

The starshina wiggles his fingers vaguely and, wanting to say something, puffs up his face so much that it looks ready to burst and scatter in all directions.

‘Well, lay him down,’ the clerk shouts when they bring the sackcloth. ‘Take him by the arms and legs. Like this. Now lay him down.’

‘To hell with you, I say,’ the drowned man mumbles, not resisting and seeming not to notice that they’re lifting him and laying him on the sackcloth. ‘We don’t want...’

‘It’s all right, all right, friend,’ the clerk says to him, ‘fret not. We’ll pump you a bit and, God willing, you’ll come to your senses. The constable will arrive presently and draw up a report based on existing laws. Pump! Lord bless!’

Eight sturdy chaps, including the sotsky Anisim, take hold of the corners of the sackcloth; at first they pump hesitantly, as if not trusting their strength, but then, gradually getting into the swing of it, they put on a fierce, focused expression and pump with greed and fervour. They stretch, stand on tiptoe, jump up and down, as if wanting to fly to the heavens together with the drowned man.

‘Hup! hup! hup! hup!’

The stubby clerk runs around them and, stretching with all his might to reach the sackcloth with his hands, shouts in an unnatural voice:

‘Faster! Faster! All together, in time! Hup! Hup! Anisim, don’t lag behind, I implore you! Hup!’

During a brief respite, a dishevelled head and pale face appear from the sackcloth, with an expression of bewilderment, horror, and physical pain, but immediately disappear as the sackcloth flies up to the right again, swiftly descends, and soars up to the left with a crack. The crowd

of onlookers makes approving sounds:

‘That’s it! Put your back into it, for the soul’s sake! Thank you!’

‘Well done, Yegor Makarych! For the soul’s sake, that’s right!’

‘And we won’t let him off easy, lads! When he gets back on his feet, comes to his senses — he owes us a round for our troubles!’

‘Oh, codswallop! Look here, lads, the Shmelev lady is coming with her steward. So it is. The steward’s in a hat.’

A carriage stops near the crowd, in which sits a plump elderly lady, in a pince-nez and with a colourful parasol; with his back to her, on the box next to the coachman, sits the steward—a young man in a straw hat. There’s a look of fear on the lady’s face.

‘What is it?’ she asks. ‘What are they doing?’

‘Pumping up a drowned man! Happy holiday, by the way! He’s a bit drunk, because, you see, it’s such an occasion—today we walked across the whole village with icons! Holiday!’

‘Good heavens!’ the lady says, horrified. ‘They’re pumping a drowned man! What is this? Étienne,’ she turns to the steward, ‘go, for God’s sake, tell them they mustn’t do this. They’ll kill him! Pumping is a superstition! They need to rub him and do artificial respiration. Go, I beg you!’

Étienne jumps down from the box and heads towards those pumping. He looks stern.

‘What are you doing?’ he shouts angrily. ‘Why would anyone pump a man?’

‘What else to do?’ asks the clerk. ‘He’s drowned!’

‘So what if he’s drowned? Those unconscious from drowning shouldn’t be pumped, but rubbed. That’s what it says in every almanac. Enough, stop it!’

The clerk shrugs in embarrassment and steps aside. Those pumping lay the sackcloth on the ground and look in surprise now at the lady, now at Étienne. The drowned man is already lying on his back with his eyes closed, breathing heavily.

‘Drunkards!’ Étienne fumes.

‘Dear man!’ says Anisim, panting and pressing his hand to his heart. ‘Stepan Ivanych! What are we, some pigs who can’t understand?’

‘Don’t you dare pump him! You need to rub him! Take him and rub him! Undress him quickly!’

‘Lads, rub him!’

They undress the drowned man and, under Étienne’s guidance, begin to rub him. The lady, not wishing to see a naked peasant, drives a little

distance away.

‘Étienne!’ she groans. ‘Étienne! Come here! Do you know how artificial respiration is done? One must turn him from side to side and press on his chest and stomach.’

‘Turn him from side to side!’ Étienne says, returning from the lady to the crowd. ‘And press on his stomach, only gently.’

The clerk, who feels somewhat uneasy after his vigorous, energetic activity, approaches the drowned man and also sets about rubbing him.

‘Do your best, brothers, I implore you!’ he says. ‘I implore you!’

‘Étienne!’ the lady groans. ‘Come here! Let him smell burnt feathers and tickle him... Tell them to tickle him! Quickly, for God’s sake!’

Five, ten minutes pass... The lady looks at the crowd and sees strong movement within it. The puffing of the working chaps can be heard, as well as Étienne and the clerk giving orders. The smell of burnt feathers and alcohol wafts through the air. Another ten minutes pass, and the work continues. But then, at last, the crowd parts, and a red-faced, sweaty Étienne emerges from it. Anisim follows behind him.

‘They should have rubbed him from the very start,’ Étienne says. ‘Now nothing can be done.’

‘What one could do at all, Stepan Ivanych!’ Anisim sighs. ‘We got to him too late!’

‘Well, what?’ asks the lady. ‘Is he alive?’

‘No, he’s dead, heaven rest his soul,’ Anisim sighs, crossing himself. ‘At the time we pulled him from the water, there was movement in him and his eyes were open, but now he’s gone all stiff.’

‘What a pity!’

‘Means it was his fate<sup>5</sup> to meet death not on dry land, but in the water. Could you spare a bit of change for our efforts, if you’re feeling generous?’

Étienne leaps onto the box, and the coachman, glancing back at the crowd that shies away from the dead body, whips the horses. The carriage rolls on.

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## Notes

1. Starshina (lit. “senior” or “elder”)—an elected head of a volost (also see n. 4), an administrative unit comprising several villages in pre-revolutionary Russia. The starshina was responsible for the affairs of the volost, including tax collection, execution of official orders, and representing the interests of the peasants before the authorities.
2. Roughly, for 1 rouble, one could buy 40 eggs or 1 kg of butter or 2 kg of sturgeon.
3. A sotsky (lit. a hundredman) was a low-ranking official in the local government system of pre-revolutionary Russia. The term “sotsky” derives from the word “сотня” (sotnya), meaning “a hundred”, as the sotsky was typically responsible for overseeing around one hundred households in a rural area. The sotsky’s duties included maintaining order, investigating minor crimes, and assisting in tax collection. They were chosen from among the peasants and served as

- intermediaries between the villagers and higher authorities. The position was abolished after the Russian Revolution of 1917.
4. In pre-revolutionary Russia, a volost (волость) was an administrative subdivision of a rural district (uyezd). The volost was a unit of peasant self-government, typically encompassing several villages and rural communities. It had its own elected officials, including a volost elder (starshina) and a volost clerk, who were responsible for maintaining order, collecting taxes, and resolving local disputes. The volost office served as the administrative center for the area. Following the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the subsequent administrative reforms, the volost system was gradually phased out and replaced with new territorial divisions.
  5. The original word “planida” is a Russian reinterpretation of a borrowed noun ‘планида’ (planida) which goes back to the Greek word meaning ‘heavenly body’ (planet). The new meaning of the word arose because astrologers predict fate based on the movement and position of planets and stars.

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