

THE SIREN

A STORY

BY ANTON CHEKHOV

AFTER one of the sessions of the Assizes of the peace, the Justices withdrew to the chamber where they usually deliberated. They wanted to get into their street clothes, and after resting a while, go off to dine. The Presiding Judge, a very presentable man with fluffy side-whiskers, had failed to concur with his associates in a case that had just been tried and was sitting at a desk hastening to set down his dissenting opinion. An Acting Justice of the Peace, Milkin, a young man with a languid, melancholy face, who had a reputation as a philosopher at odds with the world and distressed by the emptiness of existence, stood at a window and gazed sadly out into the courtyard. Two judges had already left. An Honorary Justice, a fat man with a bloated look who breathed heavily, and the Assistant Prosecuting Attorney, a young man of German extraction with a catarrhal complexion, sat on a couch and waited for their

colleague to finish writing his opinion so that they could all go to dinner together. Standing before them was the secretary, a short man with side-whiskers growing close to his ears and a sugary expression on his face. He was looking at the fat man with a honeyed smile and speaking in a low voice:

"We are all hungry now, it's true, but that's because we're tired and it's after three: it's not, my dear Grigory Savvich, what you would call real appetite. I mean real appetite, the wolfish sort, when you're ready to make a meal of your own father. That comes only after physical exertion, for instance, when you've ridden to hounds, or say after you've been jolted over a hundred versts without a stop in a wretched conveyance. Of course, I won't deny, sir, that imagination has something to do with it, too. Suppose you are coming home after a day's shooting and you want to bring an appetite to your dinner.

ANTON CHEKHOV is the great Russian writer who is equally admired for his short stories and his plays. This short story, which was written in 1887, is here reproduced in an English translation for the first time. It was translated by Aurahm Yarmolinsky, who is the author of biographies of Turgenev and Dostoevsky, and the Director of the Slavonic Division of the New York Public Library.

Then you mustn't let your mind dwell on anything intellectual. Intellectual things, learned things, ruin the appetite. You know yourself that thinkers and scholars are just nowhere when it comes to eating. Even pigs, pardon the expression, pay more regard to their food than such people do. As I was saying, you are on your way home, and you must make sure that your mind dwells on nothing but the wine glass and the appetizer. Once as I was traveling I closed my eyes and pictured to myself a sucking-pig with horse-radish. Well, sir, I became virtually hysterical with sheer appetite! Now this is important: when you drive into your own courtyard, you should be aware of a smell from the kitchen, a smell of something, you know. . . ."

"Roast goose is a prime smeller," observed the Honorary Justice, breathing heavily.

"Don't say that, my dear Grigory Savvich. Duck or woodcock, those are the trumps! The bouquet of a goose lacks refinement, lacks delicacy. The richest odor is that of young onions when they just begin to get golden-brown, you know, and when the rascals fill the house with their sizzling. Another thing: when you come in, the table must be set, and when you sit down you tuck the napkin into your collar and you take your time about reaching for the vodka decanter. And mind you, you don't pour it into an ordinary wine-glass, you don't treat the sweetheart that way! No. You pour it into something

antique, made of silver, an heirloom, or into a quaint pot-bellied little glass with an inscription on it, something like this: 'As you clink, you may think, monks also thus do drink.' And you don't gulp it down, straight off, but first you sigh, you rub your hands together, you gaze nonchalantly at the ceiling, and only then, slowly, you raise it to your lips, and at once sparks from your stomach flash through your whole body."

An expression of beatitude spread over the secretary's sugary face.

"Sparks," he repeated, screwing up his eyes. "And as soon as you have had your snifter, you turn to the appetizers."

"See here," put in the Presiding Judge, raising his eyes to the secretary, "be quiet! You've made me spoil two sheets!"

"Oh, I am so sorry, Pyotr Nikolaich! I will speak more quietly," murmured the secretary, and continued in a half whisper. "Well, my dear Grigory Savvich, as I was about to say, when it comes to appetizers, one must know one's way about. The best appetizer is herring. You eat a bit of herring with onion and mustard sauce, and without waiting, my friend, while the sparks are still flying in the stomach, you help yourself to caviar, with lemon juice, if you prefer it that way, then you have a radish with salt, and another piece of herring. But I'll tell you what's better still, my friend: salted pink mushrooms, minced as fine as caviar and

served with onion and olive oil . . . exquisite! But eel-pout liver — that's beyond anything!"

"Mm — yes . . ." agreed the Honorary Justice, screwing up his eyes in turn. "Another good appetizer is stewed white mushrooms."

"Yes, yes, with onion, you know, and bay leaf and other spices. You lift the lid off the dish, and the steam rises, a smell of mushrooms . . . sometimes it really brings tears to my eyes! Well, sir, the meat pie is brought in from the kitchen and at once, without delay, another glass of vodka is in order."

"Ivan Guryich!" exclaimed the Presiding Judge in a tearful voice. "You made me ruin the third sheet!"

"Deuce take him, he can't think of anything but food!" grumbled Milkin, the philosopher, with a look of contempt. "Is there nothing to live for but mushrooms and meat pie?"

"Well, sir, before the meat pie you down another one," the secretary repeated in a low tone. He was so carried away that, like a nightingale singing, he heard only his own voice. "The meat pie must make your mouth water, it must lie there before you, naked, shameless, a temptation! You wink at it, you cut off a sizable slice, and you let your fingers just play over it, this way, out of excess of feeling. You eat, the butter drips from it like tears, and the filling is fat, juicy, rich, with eggs, giblets, onions. . . ."

The secretary rolled up his eyes and his mouth stretched to his ears. The Honorary Justice groaned and twid-

dled his fingers, apparently seeing the meat pie before him.

"What the devil!" grumbled the Acting Justice, walking over to the further window.

"You eat only two slices, the third you keep for the *shchi*," the secretary went on like a man inspired. "And as soon as you've finished with the meat pie, have the *shchi* served, to keep the appetite at pitch. The *shchi* must be piping hot. But even better than *shchi*, with all that cabbage, is a *borshch*, prepared with sugar beets, Ukrainian style, you know the way, my friend, with ham and country sausages. It should be served with sour cream, of course, and a sprinkling of fresh parsley and dill. Another excellent thing is a *rassolnik*, with tripe in it and giblets and young kidneys, and then if you want a soup, the best thing is a vegetable soup, with carrots, fresh asparagus, a bit of cauliflower and whatever else is legitimate."

"Yes, it's an excellent thing," sighed the Presiding Judge, lifting his eyes from his papers, but at once he caught himself up and moaned: "For heaven's sake! If you go on like that, it'll be evening by the time I get through with my opinion! I've spoiled the fourth sheet!"

"Not a word more, not a word! I am very sorry!" the secretary apologized, and went on in a whisper: "After you have had your *borshch* or your soup, as you prefer, have the fish course served, and immediately, my friend. Of all the mute race, the

finest is erucian carp, fried in sour cream. But so that it shouldn't have any odor of silt, and to give it true delicacy, it must be kept alive in milk for twenty-four hours."

"A fish ring made of sterlet is good, too," put in the Honorary Justice, closing his eyes, and then suddenly, astonishingly, with a ferocious air he rushed from his seat, and roared at the Presiding Judge: "Pyotr Nikolaich, will you be done soon? I can't wait any longer, I just can't!"

"Just let me finish!"

"The devil! I'll eat alone!"

The fat man waved his hand in despair, seized his hat and without a good-bye, ran out of the chamber. The secretary sighed, and bending over the ear of the Assistant Prosecuting Attorney, proceeded in a low voice:

"Pike, perch or carp with tomato and mushroom sauce isn't to be sneezed at, either. But fish doesn't really satisfy one, you'll admit, Stepan Frantzych: there's no substance to it. The main thing in a dinner isn't the fish, no matter with what sauce, but the roast. Which are you fondest of?"

The Assistant Prosecuting Attorney made a sour face and said, sighing:

"Unfortunately, I can't share your transports: I have catarrh of the stomach."

"Tut, tut, my dear sir! Catarrh of the stomach is an invention of the doctors! It's a complaint that comes mostly from pride and free-thinking.

Don't give it a thought. Suppose you don't feel like eating or you're even nauseated, just pay no attention, but go right ahead and eat. Say the roast is a snipe or two, and perhaps a partridge with it, or a brace of fat quail, then you'll forget all about your catarrh, I give you my word of honor. And what about roast turkey? The bird should be a hen, with fat, juicy, white meat — the breast of a nymph. . . ."

"That should be tasty," murmured the Prosecuting Attorney, with a wistful smile. "Perhaps I would enjoy a slice of turkey."

"Good Lord! and what about duck? If you take a duckling, one that has had a taste of the ice during the first frost, and roast it, and be sure to put the potatoes, cut small, of course, in the dripping-pan too, so that they get browned to a turn and soaked with duck fat and. . . ."

Milkin, the philosopher, made a ferocious face and was apparently about to say something but instead, suddenly smacked his lips, probably dreaming of roast duck, and without a word, as though pulled by some mysterious force, seized his hat and ran out.

"Yes, perhaps I would enjoy a bit of duck, too," breathed the Assistant Prosecuting Attorney.

The Presiding Judge got up, walked about the chamber, and sat down again.

"After the roast, sir, a man is full, and he goes off into a sweet eclipse,"

continued the secretary. "The body is basking, the soul is transported. And then for the crowning touch, two or three glasses of spiced brandy."

The Presiding Judge grunted and struck out what he had written.

"I have ruined the sixth sheet!" he exclaimed angrily. "This is monstrous!"

"Go on, go on writing, my friend," murmured the secretary. "I shan't say another word. You won't hear a thing. Believe me, Stepan Frantzych," he went on in a scarcely audible whisper, "spiced brandy, if it's home-made, is better than the finest champagne. After the very first glass your whole being is suffused with a kind of fragrance, enveloped in a mirage, as it were, and it seems to you as if you aren't at home, in your own armchair, but somewhere in Australia, that you are astride a downy ostrich. . . ."

"Oh, let's be off, Pyotr Nikolaich!" cried the Prosecuting Attorney, with an impatient jerk of his leg.

"Yes, my friend," the secretary continued. "And while you are sipping your brandy, it's not a bad thing to smoke a cigar, and you blow rings, and you begin to fancy that you are a generalissimo, or better still, you are married to the most beautiful woman in the world, and all day long she is floating under your windows in a kind of pool with gold-fish in it. She floats there, and you call to her:

'Darling, come and give me a kiss.'"

"Pyotr Nikolaich!" moaned the Prosecuting Attorney.

"Yes, my friend," the secretary proceeded. "And when you have had your smoke, you lift the skirts of your dressing-gown and climb into bed! You lie on your back, and you pick up a newspaper. When you can hardly keep your eyes open, and your whole body is ready for sleep, politics makes agreeable reading: Austria made a misstep, France got somebody's back up, the Pope put a spoke in someone's wheel — it's a pleasure, sir, to read of such things."

The Presiding Judge threw down his pen, jumped up and seized his hat in both hands. The Assistant Prosecuting Attorney, who had quite forgotten his catarrh and was nearly fainting with impatience, jumped up, too.

"Let's be off!" he cried.

"Pyotr Nikolaich, and what about your dissenting opinion?" asked the secretary in dismay. "My dear friend, when will you write it? You have to be in town at six o'clock!"

The Presiding Judge waved his hand in despair and made a dash for the door. The Assistant Prosecuting Attorney made the same gesture and, seizing his brief case, vanished together with the judge. The secretary looked after them reproachfully and began to gather up the papers.

THE MOTE AND BEAM OF BIGOTRY

BY HODDING CARTER

THERE are two ways of interpreting the Biblical injunction to remove the mote from one's own eye before tackling the beam in the eye of one's brother.

The simplest and most frequently invoked interpretation is to paraphrase it as "You're another, so what," and thereby leave both the mote and the beam where they were. The harder and rarer way is to work on the mote and the beam together.

A good many Southerners, confronted with the undeniable fact of their intolerance, riposte by pointing in any direction of the compass, and calling attention to the rest of the nation's bigots. Likewise, many non-Southerners, comfortably oblivious to their own local hate manifestations, take delight in crusading far from home and usually by remote control.

Both of these reactions are defensive, consciously or sub-consciously. Both are human. And both are dangerous.

But, since the South has been historically the region most publicized for its shortcomings — no national

magazine of general circulation is published in the South — the greatest danger in this situation lies in the relative smugness of the South's critics, who, by focusing most of the attention upon Southern bigotry, minimize the extent and menace of racial and religious intolerance in America.

I first discovered this pot-and-kettle relationship — though not its implications — some twenty years ago as an undergraduate in a small and ancient New England college, a place proud, and with considerable justification, of its liberal tradition. (Incidentally, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had been written within less than a rebel yell of its campus.) As one of the few Southerners ever to attend that college, I was fair game; and I responded to their criticisms as would most any youngster from the South who had never before questioned that our racial dealings were just and proper. I got angry enough to start another Civil War. And being angry, I began looking around for those beams in the Yankee eye. They weren't hard to

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