By MIKHAIL ZOSTCHENKO

Old Russia gave the world one of the best authors of short stories, Anton Chekhov, whose masterpieces are to be found in almost every anthology. He developed a certain type of short story, which was distinguished from that of other authors by its special kind of social criticism and sad humor. This "laughing through tears" is a characteristic of all Russian humor, ever since Gogol's "Dead Souls" and "Government Inspector."

After its wild escapades during the first few years of the Revolution, Soviet literature was strongly influenced by the great Russian authors of the nineteenth century. The most important exponent of the humorous short story in the Soviet Union is Zostchenko. While his novels had little success, he is unsurpassed in the realm of the short story. He, too, follows Gogol and Chekhov, but he has found his own special dry, slightly exaggerated humor. He, too, writes "laughing through tears." He, too, exercises social criticism—although, of course, only within the limits allowed him from above. His satirical witticisms must not be directed against the system as such, but only against the defects admitted by the system. And yet, those who read the two short stories we have selected from the wealth of his works—dealing with two favorite themes of Soviet humorists, the housing shortage and the so-called backwardness of the peasants—will also discover between the lines a bold criticism of the system.—K.M.

The other day I saw a cartload of bricks being driven by on the road, Comrades! God's truth! My heart, you know, began to pound with joy. For they are building houses now, Comrades! After all, bricks aren't being lugged around just for nothing.

In another twenty years perhaps, or maybe even sooner, I am sure that every comrade will have a whole room to himself. And if the population doesn't increase too rapidly, maybe even two. Or perhaps even three per head! With a bathroom!

What a life it will then, Comrades! In one room, say, we'll sleep, in the other we'll receive guests . . . and the third, well, Heaven knows what we'll be using that for . . . . Ha! We'll find some use for it. When life is as wonderful as that?

However, meanwhile we are still having considerable difficulties with our floor space. People are still too stingy with it. The housing shortage, you know.

I, for instance, little brother, have been living in Moscow till recently. I suffered from that shortage myself. I came to Moscow, you see. Walked through the streets carrying my belongings. Looked for a room. But not even a mousehole was to be had! You know, I walked through the streets like that for two weeks; I grew a little beard meanwhile, and I had gradually lost my belongings one by one. So I went on without any luggage, looking for a place to stay.
Finally in one house I was lucky.

"For thirty little rubles," the caretaker told me, "we can put you up in the bathroom. This flat," he said, "is extremely high-class. Three lavatories! A bathroom! And so that's where you can stay. Of course," he said, "there aren't any windows, but there is a door instead. And there's always water! If you feel like it," he said, "you just fill the bathtub and sit in it as long as you like, all day long, for all I care!"

"Dear Comrade," I answered. "I am not a fish! I don't need to sit in the water so much," I said, "I prefer to stay dry," I said.

But what could I do! I moved in.

And, indeed, the bathroom was really extremely high-class. Marble wherever you looked, tiles, and shining taps! Just that there was no place to sit down. Perhaps the edge of the bathtub, but that was a little too slippery. One always slid into the marble tub. So for thirty rubles I had a cover made for it, out of planks. After that, I lived quite comfortably.

A month later, by the way, I got married. And, you know, I got one of those young, gentle girls without a room. At first I was afraid that she would say no, because of the bathroom. And that

I would never know the bliss of family life. But nothing of the sort! She just raised her eyebrows a little and said: "Well, one can even live in a bathroom. And in an emergency," she said, "one could put up a partition of boards! Here, for example, the boudoir, and here the dining room."

"Put up, of course one could put up, Comrade!" I answered. "But the landlords, those crooks, are sure not to allow it. They always say: No alterations, please!"

All right. So we went on living as before.

In less than a year a child was born. We called him Volodka, and continued to live peacefully. Bathed him right there in the bathroom and watched him grow.

As a matter of fact, he grew quite nicely in the bathroom. Had a bath every day and didn't even catch cold.

Only one thing interfered with our happiness: every evening the neighbors came wandering into the bathroom to have a bath. During this time, the whole family had to move out into the corridor.

Again and again I begged my room neighbors: "Comrades, bath on Saturdays! That's no way to do things," I said, "to bath every day! After all, when are we supposed to live in our room? Please, put yourselves in our position."

But there were thirty-two of them, the blackguards. And all of them great hulking fellows who threatened at every
opportunity to ram my teeth down my throat.

Well, what was I to do? We went on living as before.

After a while my wife's mother came up from the country to visit us. Made herself comfortable right away in the corner of the bathroom.

"For a long time," she said, "I've been dreaming of rocking my little grandson to sleep. You mustn't deny me this pleasure!" she said.

"I'm not denying you anything," I answered. "Go right ahead, Grandma, and rock! For all I care, you can also fill the bathtub," I said, "and sit in it with your grandson as long as you like!"

And to my wife I said:

"Perhaps, Comrade, you are expecting some more relatives to visit you? You might as well tell me all at one time! Don't kill me with suspense."

She answered: "Maybe during the Christmas holidays my little brother ...."

Without waiting for her little brother, I left town. I send my family money by mail.

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GRIGORY Kossinossov, the watchman at the flying school, was going on leave to his native village.

"Well, what do you say, Comrade Kossinossov?" his colleagues said when he left, "as you are going there anyway, you might make a little propaganda there in the village, eh? Tell those peasants of yours all about it, and that aviation is developing here .... Perhaps they will take up a collection for a new airplane!"

"You may be sure of that," Kossinossov replied, "I'll do some fine propaganda all right! It would be different if it weren't about aviation; but about aviation—don't worry, I'll tell them plenty!"

Kossinossov arrived at his village, and on the very first day he went straight to the village soviet (council).

"Look!" he said, "I want to make a little propaganda here. Couldn't a meeting be called or something?"

"Of course, why not?" said the chairman. "Go right ahead!"

On the following day the village soviet assembled the peasants at the firehouse. Grigory Kossinossov stepped forward, made a bow, and began:
"Well, this is how it is . . . Aviation, Comrades peasants . . . Look here, since you are ignorant, backward people, I'd better explain it with politics. Here, let's say, is Germany, and over there perhaps France . . . This here—Russia, and there . . . well, anyway . . . ."

"What are you really talking about, little father?" asked the peasants.

"Talking about?" replied Kossonossov in an injured voice. "I'm talking about aviation. . . . It is developing in our country, Comrades peasants. There's no denying it! What's true is true!"

"Hm! A little hard to understand!" called the chairman. "Listen, Comrade, a little more plainly, if you please! Closer to the masses!"

Kossonossov stepped a little closer to the group of peasants, planted one leg slightly in front of the other and, embarrassed, began again:

"Well, Comrades peasants . . . They build airplanes in our country, and then afterwards people fly in them. In the air, I mean! Well, of course some people don't stick it so well up there and—bang! they come crashing down! Like the pilot, Comrade Yermilkin. He managed to fly up quite nicely, and then—bang! All we found of him was a wet spot!"

"Wasn't a bird, was he?" said the peasants, nodding wisely.

"Of course, that's just what I say!" Kossonossov was delighted with this confirmation. "Of course he wasn't a bird! A bird, if a bird falls down, well, it just shakes itself and flies off again. But not people! . . . There was another of those pilots, he landed on a tree and hung up there like an apple! Of course he was scared stiff, poor chap! . . . We laughed ourselves sick. Yes indeed, a lot of things like that happen. Once a cow walked into one of our propellers. Zip, zip! and she was cut up into little pieces! . . . Dogs too . . . ."

"And horses?" the peasants asked anxiously, "horses too, little father?"

"Horses too!" said the speaker proudly, with the full force of conviction. "That happens quite often!"

"The dirty dogs! May the Devil take them!" someone said. "The things they think of nowadays! Cutting up horses! Well, little father, and that is developing now?"

"Of course, that's what I'm saying all the time! It's developing wonderfully, Comrades peasants. . . . And that's why I think all the peasants should take up a collection."

"And what would that be for, little father?" asked the peasants, full of curiosity.

"Why, for an airplane, of course!" said the speaker triumphantly.

The peasants only smiled and slowly went their ways.

Kossonossov did not bring any money for a new airplane when he returned from his vacation. The peasants of his native village were, after all, just backward, ignorant people.