

ON THE HARMFUL EFFECTS OF TOBACCO

Anton Chekhov

1886

A monologue

CHARACTER

MARCELLUS NYUKHIN, a hen-pecked husband whose wife keeps a girls boarding-school.

The stage represents the platform in the hall of a provincial club

NYUKHIN *struts in majestically, bows, adjusts his waistcoat and begins majestically.*

NYUKHIN. Ladies and Gentlemen.

It's been suggested to the wife that I should lecture here in aid of charity on some topic of general interest. True learning is modest and avoids ostentation, but seeing it's for charity the wife agreed – and so I stand before you now.

I'm not a professor, and university degrees have passed me by, but it's common knowledge that I – that I [*hesitates and glances at a piece of paper which he takes out of his waistcoat pocket*] – have sacrificed my health and creature comforts for these last thirty years working non-stop on problems of a strictly academic nature, and that I even have some of my learned scientific articles printed in the local rag. A few days ago I gave the editor a large article entitled: 'The Ill Effects of Coffee-itis and Tea-mania on the Organism'.

As the subject for my lecture today I've chosen the harmful effects of smoking and taking snuff on the human race. To explore the full significance of the theme in the scope of a single lecture is naturally difficult, but I shall endeavor to be brief and confine myself to essentials. Opposed as I am to the popular approach, I shall be strictly academic, and I suggest that you members of my audience should be imbued with a sense of the subject's significance and attend, with due seriousness, to my present lecture. If anyone's scared by the idea of a dry, strictly scientific speech-if he's that frivolous, he can stop listening and go. [*Makes a majestic gesture and adjusts his waistcoat*]. Very well, I commence.

Your attention, please. I should like to ask the doctors in my audience to pay particular attention. My lecture is a mine of useful information for them, since nicotine not only has harmful effects, but is also used in medicine. For instance, it was prescribed to my wife in the form of an enema on the 10th of February 1871. [*Looks at his piece of paper*]. Tobacco is an organic body. It is derived, to my way of thinking, from the plant *Nicotiana Tabacum*, which belongs to the genus *Solaneae*. It grows in America. Its main constituent component is an 'orrible deadly poison-nicotine. Chemically, to my way of thinking, it consists of ten atoms of carbon, fourteen atoms of hydrogen and two, er, atoms of nitrogen. [*Pants and clutches his chest, dropping his piece of paper*].

Give me air! [*Balances with his arms and legs to stop himself falling over*]. Whew. Just a moment! Let me get my breath back! Just a moment. One minute. I shall stop this attack by sheer will-power. [*Beats his chest with his fist*]. That will do. Gosh! [*A minute's pause, during which NYUKHIN walks up and down the sage, panting*].

I've suffered from these choking bouts – asthma – for ages. This complaint dates from the 13th of September 1869, the day when my wife gave birth to her sixth daughter, Veronica.

The wife has nine girls in all – but no boys, of which she's very glad because boys would be a nuisance in a girls' boarding-school in many ways. There's

only one man in the whole school – myself. But the respectable and distinguished families who have confided their children’s fate to my wife can rest assured as far as I’m concerned. Anyway – time being short, let’s not wander from the subject in hand. Now then, where were we? Phew! That choking fit caught me at the most interesting point. But it’s an ill wind that blows nobody any good. For me and you, and especially for the doctors in the house, that attack can serve as an excellent lesson. There are no effects in Nature without a cause. Let us therefore seek the cause of my present choking fit. [*Places a finger on his forehead and thinks.*]

Yes, the only cure for asthma is to avoid heavy and spicy foods, but before coming here to lecture I permitted myself a certain indulgence. It must be added that today was pancake day at my wife’s boarding-school. At lunch each girl receives a single pancake instead of the main course. Being my wife’s husband, I don’t think it’s my place to praise a woman of such integrity, but I swear that nowhere is catering so rational, hygienic and efficient as at the wife’s school. I can bear witness to this myself, having the honour to be matron. I buy food, keep an eye on the servants, present the accounts to my wife every evening, make up exercise-books, devise anti-insect precautions, spray the air, count the linen, make sure there’s at least one tooth-brush per five girls, and that not more than ten of them dry themselves on the same towel. Today I had the job of issuing flour and butter to Cook in a quantity strictly corresponding to the number of the girls. Well, so we had pancakes today. It must be added that the pancakes were intended solely for the girls. For the members of my wife’s family a roast was prepared, for which purpose we had a shin of veal that had been kept in the larder since last Friday. The wife and I decided that it might spoil by tomorrow if we didn’t cook it today. Anyway let’s go on.

Now, what do you think happens next? When the pancakes are already cooked and counted, the wife sends to the kitchen to say that five girls have been punished for misbehaviour by not being allowed pancakes. It thus transpires that we have five pancakes in hand. What are we to do with them? Quite. Are we to give them to the daughters? But my wife won’t let her own

girls eat stodgy foods, so what do you think we did with them? [*Sighs and shakes his head.*] Could anything have been kinder, more loving, more angelically good? 'Marcellus dear,' says the wife, 'you eat 'em yourself.' So I ate them, after drinking a preliminary glass of vodka. That's why I got the wheezes, that's what was behind it all. However—. [*Looks at his watch.*]

We've somewhat erred and strayed from our subject. So let's go on. Well, chemically speaking, nicotine consists of, er— [*nervously rummages in his pockets and looks for his piece of paper*]. I suggest you memorize this formula. A chemical formula's a great stand-by. [*Seeing his piece of paper, drops his handkerchief on it. Picks up the paper and handkerchief together.*]

I forgot to say that, besides being matron in the wife's school, I also have the job of teaching mathematics, physics, chemistry, geography, history and visual aids. These subjects apart, my wife's school supplies tuition in French, German, English, Scripture, needlework, drawing, music, dancing and deportment. As you see, it has a larger curriculum than the grammar schools, not to mention the food! And the comfort! And you get all this for practically nothing, that's what's so fantastic! Full board costs only three hundred roubles, half board is two hundred, and day girls pay a hundred. There's an extra charge for dancing, music and drawing by agreement with my wife. It's a fine school! It's located on the corner of Cat Street and Five Dogs Alley in Mrs. Mamashechkin's house – the one whose husband was a major. The wife's at home available to interview parents at any time, and the school's prospectus is on sale in the porter's lodge at fifty copecks a copy. [*Looks at his piece of paper.*]

So I suggest you memorize the formula. Chemically speaking, nicotine consists of ten atoms of carbon, fourteen of hydrogen and two of nitrogen. Kindly make a note of it. It consists of a colourless liquid which smells like ammonia. But what matters to us, actually, is the immediate effect of nicotine [*looks in his snuff-box*] on the nervous centres and muscles of the digestive canal. Oh Lord, they've been mucking around with it again! [*Sneezes.*] Now, what am I to do with these wretched, miserable girls? Yesterday they put face-powder in my snuff-box, today it's something with an acrid stink.

[*Sneezes and scratches his nose.*] Sickening! God knows what this stuff's doing to my nose! Ugh! What rotten, nasty little girls! Perhaps you feel that this misdeameanour argues a lack of discipline in the wife's school. No, my dear sirs, it's not the school's fault, indeed no! It's society's fault, it's your fault! Family and school should march hand in hand, but what do we see? [*Sneezes.*] But let's forget this! [*Sneezes.*] Forget it.

Nicotine puts the stomach and intestines in a tetanic condition, that is in a condition of tetanus. [*Pause.*]

But I notice smiles on many faces. Obviously not all members of the audience fully appreciate the supreme importance of our theme. Some people even think it funny when they hear the hallowed austerities of Science proclaimed from the podium. [*Sighs.*] Naturally I don't venture to rebuke you, but—. 'Children,' I always tell my wife's daughters, 'don't laugh at what's no laughing matter!' [*Sneezes.*]

My wife has nine daughters. Anna, the eldest, is twenty-seven, and the youngest is seventeen. Gentlemen! These nine young, unspoilt creatures are an amalgam of everything beautiful, pure and exalted in Nature. Pardon my emotion and the catch in my voice, but you see before you the happiest of fathers. [*Sighs.*] But how difficult it is to get a girl married these days. Terribly hard, it is. It's easier to borrow money by mortgaging your property three times over than it is to find a husband for even one of these daughters. [*Shakes his head.*] Ah me, young men, young men — by your stubbornness and materialist leanings you deprive yourselves of one of the highest pleasures, that of family life. If only you knew what a good life it is. Thirty-three years I've lived with my wife — the best years of my life, I might say. They've flashed past like a single moment of ecstasy. [*Weeps.*] How often have I distressed her by my weaknesses. My poor wife! Although I've meekly accepted punishment, how have I rewarded her anger? [*Pause*]

The reason why my wife's daughters have been so long finding husbands is that they're shy and never meet any men. The wife can't give parties and never has anyone in to a meal, but, er, I can tell you in confidence—.

[Approaches the footlights and whispers.] My daughters are on view on high days and holidays in their Aunt Natalya's house – that's the one who has epilepsy and collects old coins. Snacks are served.

But let's not digress, time being short. I got as far as tetanus. Anyway *[looks at his watch]* – until we meet again! *[Adjusts his waistcoat and struts out majestically.]*

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