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Theresa May Ate What?

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Christopher Furlong / Reuters

Чиж: siskin (songbird)

If you are trying to follow the Russian news, you might have trouble right at the top of an article, with the headline. Some headlines are, of course, straightforward and succinct: В "Ростелекоме" сменился финансовый директор (Rostelekom Has New Financial Director), or Путин выступил с видеообращением по поводу выборов (Putin Made Video Address About the Elections).

But there is a long tradition in Russia of clever headlines. Very often there is a pun, like the header for an article about North Korea's nuclear program: Сукин Ын. This is a play on сукин сын (son of a bitch) and Ким Чен Ын (Kim Jong-un).

Another approach is a headline that is a quote or allusion, like С корабля на бал, a quote from Alexander Pushkin's "Yevgeny Onegin" that means literally "straight from the ship to the ball," and figuratively any kind of dramatic change. That header was on an article about a man who left his farm for a high-paying career in Moscow.

This was also one of the headline ploys in Russian periodicals over the last few days. After Prime Minister May spoke in Salisbury, Russian newspapers declared in their headers: Англичанка гадит! This phrase is itself a bit of a play on words. It means literally "the Englishwoman poops" but figuratively "the Englishwoman ruins things."

What Englishwoman? What did she mess up? Where did she poop?

Two hours and a gazillion pages later, I got through the false attributions — General Alexander Suvorov, novelist Nikolai Leskov, poet Nikolai Nekrasov — and hit upon poet Nikolai Venttsel, who wrote a little ditty in 1902. It goes like this: Нельзя, mon cher, нельзя, Чтоб, как салопница-мещанка, Твердили мы весь век, Что гадит англичанка. With a bit of literary license for rhyme, this is: Oh, mon cher, you make me sick! To proclaim to all for an age and a day! Like a gutter gossip you constantly say: That Britannia is up to her dirty tricks!

Britannia is both the United Kingdom and its then most long-serving monarch, Queen

Victoria, who had been in constant military and geo-political conflict with Russia (think: The Great Game). But Venttsel was saying something like "stop making England Russia's standard scapegoat."

Twenty years later, this was still the message: Крепко сидело в простом русском народе убеждение, что в решительные минуты успехов русских всегда "англичанка гадит" (The notion that in the critical hour of success "Britannia would ruin it all" has been ingrained in simple Russian folk.)

But that message seems to have been lost in the ensuing 100 years, and like those common scandalmongers that Venttsel criticized, people just quote the last bit: Англичанка гадит (Britannia is causing trouble.)

That's the sense of it in headlines this week. If the reader didn't get the allusion, writers helped: Правящая элита Великобритании всегда рассматривала нашу страну как своего врага, подлежащего уничтожению, вне зависимости от того, кто правил Россией и какой идеологии она придерживалась (Great Britain's ruling elite has always regarded our country as its enemy that must be destroyed, regardless of who led Russia and what ideology it adhered to.)

Now that we've gotten that settled, let's move on to another mysterious headline: Тереза Мэй "съела чижика", наказав Россию за отравление Скрипаля (Theresa May Punished Russia for Poisoning Skripal by "Eating a Little Birdie.")

To be exact, Theresa May ate a little songbird called a siskin. This one was stranger but easier to decipher. It comes from a witty little story by Russia's satirist for all times, Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin, called "Lions in Government."

In the story, a lion is made head of a forest and marches into the woods with a battle cry: внутренних супостатов усмирять (Silence internal enemies!). But he decides to first celebrate his new position with a pail of vodka. When he wakes up from his binge the next morning, he feels something jumping on him. He swats it with his paw and eats it. It turns out to have been a siskin (чиж).

All the creatures of the forest begin to make fun of the lion, including a crow who shouts: Добрые люди кровопролитиев от него ждали, а он Чижика съел! (The good citizens expected some bloodletting from him and instead he ate a little birdie!)

Here the message is: he made big threats but didn't do a thing. One Russian periodical made the point clearer in a sub-header: Угрозы Лондона пока оказались сотрясением воздуха (So Far London's Threats Are Just Hot Air).

Maybe this could be translated as: Nyah, nyah, nyah! Is that all you got?!

I can't wait for next week's headlines.

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