

Only a Bird

by Angie

Vincent took the item from the boy handing it to him and sighed. Catherine had taken some of the children to a dollar store, and he had bought this ... thing. Halloween was an excuse for a lot of excess in the world above, far more than any other holiday, and it was inevitably gruesome - and often in poor taste.

The thing was plastic, of course, but that didn't detract from the sheer unpleasantness of it. Why had someone chosen to market this? What was the point? It wasn't so much scary as bizarre. And sad. Yes, definitely sad. And depressing.

Looking at the child, one of Pascal's grandchildren - Ian, he thought - Vincent tried to find something to say as he held it in the palm of his hand. Then decided to ask the child.

"Why did you buy this, Ian?" he asked, finally.

"I think it's scary," the boy replied

"Why?" he queried, trying to get a grasp on why it was attractive.

Ian shrugged. "It's a skeleton in a cage."

"What kind of skeleton?"

The child regarded it and looked up at Vincent. "I think it's a parrot," he said at last, somewhat unhappily. "I wanted a pterodactyl - something extinct, but they only this and a crow."

Vincent decided he couldn't explain why he found the thing distasteful, but he had an idea.

"May I borrow it for day or so?" he asked. There were still several days until Halloween.

The boy nodded, relieved to have an end to the questions, and at a nod from Vincent, he ran off down the tunnel.

Vincent looked closely at the immovable plastic skeleton in its cheap plastic cage and wondered why it troubled him so much. Yes, he himself had been caged once, and almost died - and would have, had not Catherine found and rescued him. But this was only a poor representation of a bird, not even very accurate, obviously intended to be gruesome.

He would use it as a prop for his next class.

After lunch, he presented the plastic cage and its occupant to his young English class. Ian wasn't in this class, being a few years younger, so he wouldn't be upset at how his purchase was being used.



"Look at this," Vincent directed the class, holding up the thing by its plastic hook and chain. "What is its message? I want you to write a story about it, 200 words or less, or a poem if you wish. Beginning now."

The children looked interested, one or two of the girls grimaced, and he thought he heard a giggle from the back - probably someone who had been on the shopping trip, or whose sibling had. But they all settled down with their pencils and lined paper and began to write.

Vincent sat down at his desk at the front and picked up a pen and decided to join the exercise. Yes, it might be ... appropriate for him to do so.

Reflecting on his vast knowledge of literature, something came to mind immediately. The subject was, of course, allegorical - and not of a bird at all - but after all, this ... thing ... depicted one of nature's most beautiful birds, reduced to bones. Not so very different.

*'The aviary was filled with an avian throng,
It shone with a thousand lights,
And there was a parrot who flew along,
The fairest of all the sights,
A bird to another then softly sighed,
She's rich in life beyond command;
But she settled for show instead of love, he cried,
Though she lives this place so grand.
She's only a bird in a gilded cage,
A beautiful sight to see,
You may think she's happy and free from care,
She's not, though she seems to be,
'Tis sad when you think of her wasted life,
For she's alone in her age,
And her beauty was sold,
For foreign gold.*

*Too soon that bird in a gilded cage.
Who the birds looked for one eve,
When sunset adorned the west,
Just look at the birds who'd come to grieve,
For the loved one laid at rest,
A cage and a skeleton marked the grave,
Of one who'd been avian queen,
And maybe she's happier here at rest,
Than to have people say when seen' **

That was, to his count, about 175 words. He waited for his class to finish the assignment, and once they had handed in their papers, thanked them and dismissed them. There were some jobs to do to prepare for Halloween, he reminded them, knowing that they where they would prefer to be. At this time of year, his talent for demanding attention were not very successful. The cage had actually been a necessary attempt to recover his self-respect.

Vincent looked at the small pile of writing on his desk with interest. He had a little time, so he began to leaf through them.

Almost at once, he smiled. His students had taken advantage of the situation to misuse the

classics, even as he had. This little imp had misused Shelley...

'Hail to thee, dread Spirit! / Bird thou never wert, / That from Hell, or near it, / Pourest thy gone heart / In profuse strains of inexplicable art.' **

He was glad to see a sense of humour emerge from his class. A little irreverence was admirable. It meant that the children were thinking beyond the covers. He found his heart lifting a little and was surprised to realize the cage, when he inevitably glanced at it, did not seem quite so ... awful.

Reading another submission, he found himself chuckling at both himself and the writer, one of the boys. This one took the cage in stride, while admitting that imagination was not their strong point. They chose instead to remark on the quality of the representation - and the likely mind of the person who had devised it. They finished with a quote he knew well: *'Where there is no imagination there is no horror.'* #

And finally, perhaps the epitome of the exercise, from one of the girls. This one made him laugh. Trust her to think of this and work it into a short story - complete with a definite nose-in-the-air character to voice it.

'We was not quite what you would call refined. We are not quite what you would call unrefined. We are the kind of person that keeps a parrot.' ##

Vincent realized he had taken the horrible thing far too seriously, even for Halloween. He sighed, gathered up the papers, and picked up the cage to return it to its owner. He was getting old if such a piece of junk could make him morose.

Catherine would know how to give him solace. He looked forward to a nice night of comfortable reading, a cup of tea, and ... well, whatever they both felt willing and able to do.

END

* (with apologies to Arthur J Lamb and Harry Vo Tilze - *"A Bird in a Gilded Cage"*)

** (With apologies to Percy Bysshe Shelley - *"To A Skylark"*)!

(Arthur Conan Doyle - *"A Study in Scarlet"*)

(With apologies to Mark Twain - *Following the Equator* (1897)).