

Díabolíad

The Tale of the Twins Who Finished off the Chief Clerk

by Mikhail Bulgakov, 1891-1940

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Chapter I

The Event on the Twentieth.

At a time when everyone else was hopping from one job to the next, Comrade Korotkov was firmly ensconced at MACBAMM (the Main Central Base for Matchstick Materials) in the permanent post of Chief Clerk, which he had now held for no less than eleven months.

Happy in his MACBAMM haven, the quiet and sensitive fair-haired Korotkov had banished from his mind completely the idea that fortunes can change, replacing it by the conviction that he, Korotkov, would go on working at the Base as long as there was life on earth. But, alas, this was not to be...

On 20 September, 1921 the MACBAMM cashier donned his revolting fur cap with the big ear flaps, put a striped cheque in his briefcase and drove off. That was at 11.00 a. m.

At 4.30 p. m. the cashier returned, drenched to the skin. He came in, shook the water off his cap, placed the cap on the desk and the briefcase on top of it, and said:

«Don't all rush, ladies and gents.»

Then he rummaged about in the desk, left the room and came back a quarter of an hour later carrying a large dead chicken with its neck wrung. Placing the chicken on the briefcase and his right hand on the chicken, he announced:

«There's no cash.»

«Tomorrow?» the women shouted in chorus.

«No,» the cashier shook his head. «Not tomorrow either, or the day after. Keep calm, ladies and gents, or you'll knock the desk over, comrades.»

«What?» yelled everyone, the naive Korotkov included.

«Citizens!» the cashier cried tearfully, elbowing Korotkov out of the way. «I beg you!»

«But there must be!» everybody shouted, that comic Korotkov loudest of all.

«Alright, look at this,» the cashier muttered hoarsely, pulling the cheque out of his pocket and showing it to Korotkov.

Above the spot where the cashier dug his grimy nail in were some words scrawled in red ink.

«Pay cash. Senat, p. p. Comrade Subbotnikov.»

Further down were some more words in purple ink.

«No cash left. Smirnov, p. p. Comrade Ivanov.»

«What?» shouted Korotkov on his own, while the others, puffing and panting, descended upon the cashier.

«Oh, my goodness!» the latter howled wretchedly. «Why blame me? Oh, my godfathers!»

Stuffing the cheque hurriedly into his briefcase, he pulled on his cap, thrust the briefcase under his arm, brandished the chicken, shouting, «Stand aside!» and, breaching his way through the human wall, disappeared through the door.

The squealing white-faced registrar tottered after him on her high heels. The left heel snapped off by the door, and the registrar staggered, lifted her foot and took the shoe off.

And there she stood in the room, one foot shoeless, with the rest of them, Korotkov included.

Chapter II

Production Produce.

Three days after the event described, the door of the office where Comrade Korotkov was working opened slightly, and a woman's head said spitefully:

«Go and get your pay, Comrade Korotkov.»

«What?» Korotkov exclaimed delightedly and, whistling the overture to Carmen, trotted along to a room with a notice saying «Cashier». By the cashier's desk he stopped open-mouthed. Two thick piles of yellow packets rose up to the ceiling. To avoid answering questions, the agitated and perspiring cashier had pinned up the cheque, which now bore yet another scrawl, this time in green ink.

«Pay in production produce.

«Preobrazhensky, p. p. Comrade Bogoyavlensky.»

«I agree — Kshesinsky.»

Korotkov left the cashier's office with a broad, stupid grin on his face. He was carrying four large yellow packets and five small green ones in his hands, plus thirteen blue boxes of matches in his pockets. Back in his room, listening to the hubbub of amazed voices in the General Office, he wrapped up the matches in two large sheets from that morning's newspaper and slipped out without a word to anyone. By the main entrance he was nearly run over by a car in which someone had just arrived, exactly who Korotkov could not see.

Back home he unwrapped the matches on the table and stood back to admire them. The stupid grin did not leave his face. After that Korotkov ruffled up his hair and said to himself:

«Come on, it's no good moping about all day. We must try to sell them.»

He knocked on the door of his neighbour, Alexandra Fyodorovna, who worked at the Provincial Wine Depot.

«Come in,» said a hollow voice.

Korotkov went in and stared in amazement. Alexandra Fyodorovna, also back early from work, was squatting on the floor in her coat and hat. In front of her

stretched a long line of bottles containing a deep red liquid, stoppered with little balls of newspaper. Alexandra Fyodorovna's face was smudged with tears.

«Forty-six,» she said, turning to Korotkov.

«Good afternoon, Alexandra Fyodorovna. Is that ink?» asked the astonished Korotkov.

«Communion wine,» his neighbour replied, with a sob.

«You've got some too?» Korotkov gasped.

«Have you been given communion wine as well then?» Alexandra Fyodorovna asked in amazement.

«No, we got matches,» Korotkov replied weakly, twisting a button on his jacket.

«But they don't light!» exclaimed Alexandra Fyodorovna, getting up and brushing her skirt.

«What do you mean, they don't light?» Korotkov exclaimed in alarm and hurried off to his room. There, without wasting a moment, he snatched up a box, tore it open and struck a match. It hissed and flared up with a green flame, broke in two and went out. Choking from the acrid smell of sulphur, Korotkov coughed painfully and struck a second one. This one exploded, emitting two fiery sparks. The first spark landed on the window-pane, and the second in Comrade Korotkov's left eye.

«Ouch!» cried Korotkov, dropping the box.

For a few moments he clattered about like a spirited stallion clasp his hand to his eye. Then he looked with trepidation into his shaving mirror, convinced that he had lost the eye. But it was still there. A bit red, though, and tearful.

«Oh, my goodness!» Korotkov said agitatedly. He took an American first-aid packet out of the chest of drawers, opened it and bandaged the left half of his head, until he looked like someone wounded in battle.

Korotkov did not turn the light out all night and lay in bed striking matches. He got through three boxes, out of which he managed to light sixty-three matches.

«The silly woman's wrong,» muttered Korotkov. «They're fine matches.»

By morning the room reeked suffocatingly of sulphur. At daybreak Korotkov fell asleep and had a weird, frightening dream. In front of him in a green meadow was an enormous live billiard ball on legs. It was so loathsome that Korotkov cried out and woke up. For a few seconds Korotkov thought he saw the ball there in the dim misty light, by his bed, smelling strongly of sulphur. But then it vanished. Korotkov turned over and fell fast asleep.

Chapter III

Enter the Bald Man.

Next morning Korotkov moved aside the bandage and saw that his eye had almost recovered. Nevertheless, an excessively cautious Korotkov decided not to take the bandage off for the time being.

Arriving at work extremely late, a crafty Korotkov went straight to his office, so as not to give rise to any false speculation among the lower ranks, and found

on his desk a memo from the head of the Supplies Sub-Section to the head of the Base asking whether the typists were to receive any special clothing. After reading the memo with his right eye, Korotkov picked it up and set off down the corridor to the office of the Base head, Comrade Chekushin.

Right outside the door of the office Korotkov collided with a most peculiar-looking stranger.

The stranger was so short that he only came up to the tall Korotkov's waist. This lack of height was compensated for by the extraordinary breadth of the stranger's shoulders. The squarish torso sat on bandy legs, of which the left one limped. But the most remarkable thing was the head. It was like a huge model of an egg placed horizontally on the neck with the pointed end facing you. It was also bald, like an egg, and so shiny that electric light bulbs shone all the time on the crown. The small face was shaven blue, and the green eyes, small as pin-heads, sat in deep sockets. The stranger's body was enveloped in an unbuttoned army jacket made from a grey blanket, with an embroidered Ukrainian shirt peeping out. The legs were clad in trousers of the same material and the feet in shortish boots with slits like those worn by hussars in the reign of Alexander I.

«Funny-looking chap,» thought Korotkov, making for the door of Chekushin's office and trying to get past the bald man. But suddenly and quite unexpectedly the latter blocked his way.

«What do you want?» the bald man asked Korotkov in a voice that made the sensitive Chief Clerk shudder. It was like the voice of a copper pan and had a timbre that sent prickles down the spine of all who heard it. What's more, the stranger's words seemed to smell of matches. In spite of all this, a short-sighted Korotkov did something one should never do under any circumstances — he took offence.

«Ahem. This is very odd. Here am I trying to deliver a memo. Would you mind telling me who you are...»

«Can't you see what's written on the door?»

Korotkov looked at the door and saw the familiar notice: «Admittance by notification only.»

«Well, this is my notification,» Korotkov joked weakly, pointing at the memo.

The bald square man suddenly got angry. His little eyes flashed with yellowish sparks.

«You, Comrade,» he said, deafening Korotkov with his clatter-pan sounds, «are so immature that you do not understand the meaning of a simple office notice. I'm most surprised that you have stayed here so long. And in general there are lots of funny things going on here. Take all those bandaged eyes, for example. Never mind, we'll put all that in order. («He-elp!» Korotkov groaned to himself.) Give me that!»

With these words the stranger snatched the memo out of Korotkov's hands, read it through, pulled a chewed indelible pencil out of his trouser pocket, put the memo on the wall and scribbled a few words on it.

«There you are!» he barked, thrusting the memo at Korotkov so hard that he almost put out his other eye. The office door howled and swallowed up the stranger, while Korotkov stood there dumbfounded. Chekushin's office was empty.

A few seconds later the disconcerted Korotkov came to when he collided with Lidochka de Runi, Comrade Chekushin's private secretary.

«Oh, dear!» sighed Comrade Korotkov. One of Lidochka's eyes was covered with a bandage just like his, except that the ends were tied in a coquettish bow.

«What's the matter with your eye?»

«Matches!» Lidochka replied angrily. «Wretched things.»

«Who's that in there?» the devastated Korotkov asked in a whisper.

«Don't you know?» Lidochka whispered back. «The new boss.»

«What?» Korotkov squealed. «Where's Chekushin?»

«Got the sack yesterday,» Lidochka said angrily, and added, pointing a finger in the direction of the office: «He's a real old buffer. A right terror. Never seen anyone so revolting in all my life. Shouts the place down. 'You'll get the sack! Bald pants!» she added so unexpectedly that Korotkov goggled at her.

«What's his na...»

Before Korotkov had time to finish his question, a terrible voice boomed «Messenger!» from the office. The Chief Clerk and the secretary fled in opposite directions. Diving into his office, Korotkov sat down at his desk and delivered the following speech to himself:

«Watch out, Korotkov, old boy. You've landed in a bit of a mess. We'll have to put things right. 'Immature' indeed. Cheeky devil! You'll see how immature Korotkov is!»

With his one good eye the Chief Clerk read the bald man's missive. Scrawled across the paper were the words: «All typists and women staff in general will be issued in good time with military uniform longjohns.»

«Oo, that'll be the day!» Korotkov exclaimed with delight, shuddering voluptuously at the thought of Lidochka wearing longjohns. Without further ado, he took a clean sheet of paper and composed the following.

«Telephonogram.

«To the head of Supplies Sub-Section stop. In reply to your memorandum No. 0.15015 (b) of the 19th comma MACBAMM hereby informs you that all typists and women staff in general will be issued in good time with soldiers' uniform longjohns stop Base head signed Chief Clerk dash Varfolomei Korotkov stop.»

He buzzed for the messenger Panteleimon and told him:

«Take this to the boss for signature.»

Panteleimon ruminated for a moment, took the paper and went out.

For the next four hours Korotkov listened hard, without leaving his room, so that if the new boss decided to take a look round he would be sure to find him with his nose to the grindstone. But not a sound came from the terrible office. Only once did he hear in the distance an iron voice which seemed to be threatening to give someone the sack, but precisely whom Korotkov could not make out, although he put his ear to the keyhole. At 3.30 p. m. Panteleimon's voice was heard from the General Office.

«He's gone off in the car.»

The General Office immediately came to life and slipped off home. The last to leave, all on his own, was Comrade Korotkov.

Chapter IV

Paragraph One—Korotkov gets the Sack.

Next morning Korotkov found to his delight that his eye no longer needed to be bandaged, so he took the bandage off with relief and immediately looked more handsome and different. Gulping down some tea, he put out the primus-stove and hurried off to work, trying not to be late, and arrived fifty minutes late because instead of taking the number six route, the tram followed the number seven to some remote streets with small wooden houses and broke down there. Korotkov had to walk about two miles and trotted panting into the General Office, just as the Alpine Rose's kitchen clock was striking eleven. In the General Office he was greeted by a most unusual spectacle for that time of day. Lidochka de Runi, Milochka Litovtseva, Anna Yevgrafovna, the chief accountant Drozd, the instructor Gitis, Nomeratsky, Ivanov, Mushka, the registrar and the cashier, in other words, all the General Office staff, instead of sitting in their places at the kitchen tables of the former Alpine Rose Restaurant, were standing in a tight cluster by the wall to which a sheet of quarto paper was nailed. There was a sudden hush as Korotkov came in, and everyone looked away.

«Good morning, all, what's the matter?» Korotkov asked in surprise.

The crowd parted in silence, and Korotkov walked up to the sheet of paper. The first few lines looked at him boldly and clearly, the closing ones through a tearful stupefying haze.

«ORDER No. 1

§ 1. «For an inexcusably negligent attitude to his duties giving rise to gross confusion in important official documents, as well as coming to the office with a disgraceful face obviously damaged in a brawl, Comrade Korotkov is hereby dismissed as from today, the 26th inst. and will receive tram money up to and including the 25th inst.»

The first paragraph also happened to be the last, and under it in large letters was the flourishing signature:

«Base Head: Longjohn»

For twenty seconds perfect silence reigned in the dusty mirrored hall of the Alpine Rose that was. And the best, deepest and most deathly silence of all came from a greenish Korotkov. At the twenty-first second the silence was broken.

«What's that? What's that?» Korotkov cracked twice, like an Alpine glass being smashed on someone's heel. «That's his surname — Longjohn?»

At the terrible word the General Office splashed off in different directions and in no time at all were sitting at their tables, like crows on a telegraph wire. Korotkov's face turned from a mouldy putrid green to a spotted purple.

«Deary me, deary me,» Skvorets intoned from a distance, peeping out of his ledger. «How could you have dropped a clanger like that? Eh?»

«B-but I th-thought...» the fragments of Korotkov's voice grated. «I read 'longjohns' instead of 'Longjohn'. He writes his name with a small T and does a twiddle at the end!»

«I won't wear underpants, he needn't worry!» Lidochka tinkled.

«Shush!» hissed Skvorets snake-like. «What a thing to say!» He dived down and took refuge in his ledger, hiding behind a page.

«And it's not true, what he says about my face!» Korotkov cried quietly, turning white as ermine instead of purple. «I burnt my eye on those foul matches of ours, like Comrade de Runi!»

«Be quiet!» squealed Gitis, turning pale. «What are you saying? He tested them yesterday and said they were excellent.»

Rrrr. The electric bell over the door rang suddenly. Panteleimon's heavy body slid off the stool and trundled along the corridor.

«I'll tell him. I'll tell him!» chanted Korotkov in a high, reedy voice. He dashed to the left, then to the right, ran about ten paces on the spot, his reflection distorted in the dusty Alpine mirrors, dived into the corridor and ran towards the light of the dim bulb hanging over a notice saying «Private Rooms». Panting hard, he stopped in front of the terrible door to find himself in the arms of Panteleimon.

«Comrade Panteleimon,» Korotkov began anxiously. «Let me in, please. I must see the boss straightaway...»

«You can't, he says not to let anyone in,» Panteleimon croaked, drowning Korotkov's determination in a terrible smell of onion. «You can't. Go away, Mr. Korotkov, or you'll get me into trouble...»

«But I must, Panteleimon,» Korotkov asked weakly. «You see, my dear Panteleimon, there's been an order-Please let me pass, be a good chap.»

«Oh, my goodness...» muttered Panteleimon, glancing at the door in fright. «You can't, I say. You can't, Comrade!»

Inside the office the telephone rang loudly and a copper-heavy voice barked:

«I'm leaving now! This very moment!»

Panteleimon and Korotkov moved aside. The door flew open and out into the corridor rushed Longjohn in an army cap with a briefcase under his arm. Panteleimon trotted along behind him, and after a moment's hesitation Korotkov raced off behind Panteleimon. At a bend in the corridor Korotkov, pale and agitated, darted under Panteleimon's arm, overtook Longjohn and ran along backwards in front of him.

«Comrade Longjohn,» he mumbled with a catch in his throat. «Just let me say something, please. About the order...»

«Comrade!» the preoccupied and hurrying Longjohn roared furiously, trying to race past Korotkov. «Can't you see, I'm busy. I'm on my way.»

«It's about the ord...»

«Can't you see I'm busy? Go to the Chief Clerk.»

Longjohn raced into the vestibule, where the huge unwanted organ of the Alpine Rose was standing on the floor.

«But I am the Chief Clerk!» squealed Korotkov in horror, breaking into a cold sweat. «Please listen to me, Comrade Longjohn.»

«Comrade!» Longjohn honked like a siren, not taking the slightest notice. Still running he turned to Panteleimon and shouted: «Take measures to stop me being detained!»

«Comrade!» Panteleimon croaked with fright. «Stop detaining.»

And not knowing what measures to take, he took the following one. Putting his arms round Korotkov's torso, he drew him close as if it were the woman of his heart. The measure was most effective. Longjohn whizzed past, raced downstairs as if on roller skates, and shot out of the front door.

«Brrm! Brrm!» shouted a motor-cycle outside the windows, fired five shots and disappeared, veiling the panes with smoke. Only then did Panteleimon let go of Korotkov, wipe the sweat off his face and howl:

«God help us!»

«Panteleimon...» asked Korotkov in a shaky voice. «Where's he gone? Tell me quickly, or he'll get someone else...»

«I think it's CENTROSUPP.»

Korotkov raced downstairs like the wind, sped into the cloakroom, snatched up his coat and hat and ran into the street.

Chapter V

A Diabolical Trick.

Korotkov was in luck. At that very moment a tram drew up by the Alpine Rose. Korotkov managed to jump on, then worked his way quickly to the front, bumping against the braking wheel and sacks on people's backs. His heart burned with hope. The motor-cycle had been held up for some reason. It was now rattling away in front of the tram, and the square back in the cloud of blue smoke kept vanishing and coming into view again. For five minutes or so Korotkov was bumped and shaken about on the platform. At last the motor-cycle stopped by the grey building of CENT-ROSUPP. The square body was obscured by passers-by and disappeared. Korotkov fought his way off the tram while it was still going, spun round in a semi-circle, fell down, banged his knee and, under the very nose of an automobile, raced into the vestibule.

Covering the floors with wet patches, crowds of people were either walking towards Korotkov or overtaking him. He caught a glimpse of the square back on the second flight of stairs and hurried after it, panting hard. Longjohn was climbing up with a strange, unnatural speed, and Korotkov's heart sank at the thought that he might lose him. Which is precisely what happened. On the fifth landing, when the Chief Clerk was completely exhausted, the back melted into the crowd of faces, caps and briefcases. Korotkov flew up to the landing like lightning and hesitated for a moment before a door with two notices on it. One in gold lettering on green said «Pepinieres' Dortoir», while the other in black on white said «HQ. Supp. Sec. Bd.» Korotkov hurried through these doors at random and saw huge glass cages and lots of fair-haired women scurrying between them. He opened the first glass door and saw a man in a blue suit inside. He was sprawling across his desk, laughing gaily into the telephone. In the second compartment the desk was covered with the complete works of Sheller-Mikhailov, and next to them an elderly woman in a frock was weighing some foul-smelling dried fish on scales. In the third was a rhythmic endless clatter interspersed with little rings — there behind six typewriters, laughing and tapping away, sat six fair-headed, small-toothed women. Behind the last door was a vast expanse with plump columns. An excruciating clatter of typewriters filled the air, and lots of heads could be seen, male and female, but there was no sign of Longjohn's. Confused and exhausted, Korotkov stopped the first woman he met, who was running past, carrying a mirror. «You haven't

seen Longjohn, have you?» His heart sank with joy, when the woman replied, opening her eyes wide:

«Yes, but he's just leaving. Hurry up and catch him.» Korotkov galloped across the hall of columns in the direction in which the small white hand with shiny red nails was pointing. On the other side he found himself on a narrow, darkish landing by the open jaws of a lift with the light on. Korotkov's heart sank into his shoes. He'd caught him up. The square blanketed back and shiny black briefcase were passing into the gaping jaws. «Comrade Longjohn!» Korotkov shouted and stiffened with horror. Green circles started hopping about on the landing. Bars slid over the glass door, the lift moved, and the square back turned round, changing into a powerful chest. Korotkov recognised everything: the grey jacket, the cap, the briefcase and the currant eyes. It was Longjohn alright, but Longjohn with a long Assyrian-goffered beard down to his chest. The thought immediately flashed through Korotkov's mind: «He must have grown a beard while he was riding the motor-cycle and running up the stairs — but that's impossible!» This was followed by a second thought: «It's a false beard — but that's ridiculous!»

Meanwhile Longjohn began to descend into the caged abyss. First his legs disappeared, then his stomach and beard, and last of all his eyes and mouth shouting some words in a pleasant tenor:

«Too late, Comrade, next Friday.»

«The voice is false too.» The thought shot through Korotkov's skull. For a second or two his head burned painfully, but then, remembering that no black magic should deter him and that to stop would mean disaster, Korotkov advanced towards the lift. Through the bars he saw a roof rising on a cable. A languid beauty with glittering stones in her hair came out from behind a pipe, touched Korotkov's arm gently and asked him:

«Have you got heart trouble, Comrade?»

«Oh, no, Comrade,» gasped the stupefied Korotkov and strode towards the cage. «Don't detain me.»

«Then go to Ivan Finogenovich, Comrade,» the beauty said sadly, blocking his way to the lift.

«I don't want to!» exclaimed Korotkov tearfully. «Comrade, I'm in a hurry. Please don't.»

But the woman remained sadly adamant.

«I can't do anything, you know that,» she said, holding Korotkov's arm. The lift stopped, spat out a man with a briefcase, pulled the bars over its face and went down again.

«Let me go!» yelled Korotkov, wrenching his hand away with a curse and dashing down the stairs. After racing down six marble flights and nearly killing a tall elderly lady wearing a piece of lace on her head fastened with pins, who crossed herself fearfully, he found himself at the bottom by a huge new glass wall under a notice in silver lettering on blue that said «Duty class ladies» while another one underneath written in ink on paper read «Information». Korotkov was convulsed with dark horror. Longjohn had come into sight clearly through the glass wall. The former terrible blue-shaven Longjohn. He walked past almost next to Korotkov, separated from him only by a thin layer of glass. Trying not to think of anything, Korotkov made a dive for the copper door-handle and shook it, but it did not give.

Gnashing his teeth, he tugged at the shining copper again, and only then read in desperation a small notice that said «Entry through stairway six».

Longjohn flashed past and disappeared in a black niche behind the glass.

«Where's six? Where's six?» Korotkov cried faintly to someone. The passers-by started back. A small side door opened, and out popped an old man in a glossy suit and blue glasses holding a long list. He peered at Korotkov over his glasses, smiled and ruminated.

«So you're still wandering around, are you?» he mumbled. «It's a waste of time, you know. Just listen to me, an old man, and give it up. I've already crossed you off anyway. Tee-hee!»

«Crossed me off what?» Korotkov exclaimed.

«Ha-ha. Off the lists, of course. With my pencil — whoosh, and that's that. Tee-hee!» The old man laughed lasciviously.

«Excuse me, but how do you know who I am?»

«Ha-ha. You're a real leg-puller, Vassily Pavlovich.»

«I'm Varfolomei,» said Korotkov, putting a hand on his cold, clammy forehead. «Varfolomei Petrovich.»

For a moment the smile left the terrible old man's face. He stared at the list and ran a small dry finger with a long nail down it.

«Don't you try to confuse me! Here you are — Kolobkov V. P.»

«But I'm Korotkov!» Korotkov shouted impatiently.

«That's what I said: Kolobkov,» the old man retorted huffily. «And here's Longjohn. You've both been transferred together, and Chekushin's taken over from Longjohn.»

«What?» cried Korotkov, beside himself with joy. «Longjohn's been fired?»

«That's right. He was only there for a day before they chucked him out.»

«Thank the Lord!» exclaimed Korotkov delightedly. «I'm saved! I'm saved!» And without realising what he was doing, he shook the old man's bony hand with its long nails. The old man smiled, and for a moment Korotkov's joy faded. There was something strange and sinister in the old man's blue eye-sockets. The smile baring greyish gums seemed strange too. But Korotkov immediately drove away this unpleasant feeling and got busy.

«So I should get over to MACBAMM now, should I?» «Yes, you should,» the old man affirmed. «It says here — to MACBAMM. Only give me your work record book and I'll make a note in it in pencil.»

Korotkov immediately felt in his pocket, turned pale, felt in the other one, turned even paler, clapped his trouser pockets, and with a stifled howl rushed upstairs again, looking underfoot. Bumping into people, a desperate Korotkov flew up to the very top and looked around for the beauty with the stones to ask her something, but saw that she had turned into an ugly snotty-nosed boy.

«Hey, sonny!» Korotkov hailed him. «My yellow wallet...» «It's not true,» the boy snapped viciously. «I didn't take it. They're lying.»

«Oh, no, lad. I didn't mean that. My documents...» The boy glowered at him and suddenly began howling in a deep bass.

«Oh, my goodness!» shouted Korotkov wildly and rushed downstairs to the old man.

But when he got there, the old man had, gone. Disappeared. Korotkov rushed to the little door and tugged at the handle. It was locked. There was a faint smell of sulphur in the semidarkness.

Thoughts whirled like a blizzard in Korotkov's head, then a new one popped up. «The tram.» He suddenly remembered clearly being pressed hard on the platform by two young people, one thin with a black moustache that looked false.

«Now I'm in real trouble alright,» muttered Korotkov. «This is trouble to end all trouble.»

He ran into the road, hurried to the end of it, turned down a side-street and found himself by the entrance to a smallish building of unprepossessing architecture. A cross-eyed, sullen fellow asked, looking not at Korotkov but somewhere off at an angle:

«Where d'you think you're going?»

«I'm Korotkov, Comrade, V. P. Korotkov, who has just had his papers stolen. The whole lot. I could get hauled in...»

«You could and all,» the man on the porch confirmed.

«So kindly let me...»

«Tell Korotkov he must come in person.»

«But I am Korotkov, Comrade.»

«Show us your pass.»

«It's just been stolen,» groaned Korotkov. «Stolen, Comrade, by a young man with a moustache.»

«With a moustache? I bet that's Kolobkov. Must be. He's specially working in our area. Tea-houses are the place to look for him.»

«But I can't, Comrade,» Korotkov sobbed. «I must see Longjohn in MACBAMM. Please let me in.»

«Show us a warrant that it was stolen.»

«Who from?»

«Your house-manager.»

Korotkov left the porch and ran down the street.

«MACBAMM or the house-manager?» he wondered. «The house-manager only sees people in the morning, so it's MACBAMM.»

At that moment a far-away clock on a brown tower chimed four, and people with briefcases poured out of the doors. It was growing dark, and a light wet snow began to fall.

«Too late,» thought Korotkov. «Better go home.»

Chapter VI

The First Night.

There was a white note sticking out of the keyhole. Korotkov read it in the dark.

«Dear neighbour,

«Gone to see mother in Zvenigorod. Have left you the wine as a present. Drink as much as you like. No one wants to buy it. They're in the corner.

Yours, A. Paikova»

With a lopsided grin, Korotkov rattled the lock and in twenty trips moved into his room all the bottles standing in a corner of the corridor, then turned on the lamp and collapsed onto the bed just as he was, in his cap and coat. As if in a trance he stared for about half an hour at the portrait of Cromwell dissolving into the dark shadows, then jumped up and suddenly had a kind of violent fit. Pulling off his cap, he flung it into the corner, swept the packets of matches on to the floor with one fell swoop and began to stamp on them.

«Take that! Take that!» Korotkov howled as he crushed the diabolical boxes with a crunch, imagining vaguely that he was trampling on Longjohn's head.

The memory of the egg-shaped head suddenly made him think of the clean-shaven and bearded face, and at this point Korotkov stopped short.

«But how on earth could it be?» he whispered, passing a hand over his eyes. «What's this? Why am I standing here busy with trifles, when it's all awful. After all he's not really a double, is he?»

Fear crept through the dark windows into the room, and Korotkov pulled the curtains so as not to look at them. But this did not help. The double face, now growing a beard, now suddenly shaving it off, kept looming out of the corners, its greenish eyes glittering. At last Korotkov could stand it no longer and, feeling as if his brain would burst from the tension, began sobbing quietly.

After a good cry, which made him feel better, he ate some of yesterday's slippery potatoes, then, returning to the cursed puzzle, cried a bit more.

«Wait a minute,» he muttered suddenly. «What am I crying for, when I've got some wine?»

In a flash he knocked back half a tea-glass. The sweet liquid took effect five minutes later — his left temple began to ache painfully and he felt a burning, sickening thirst. After drinking three glasses of water, Korotkov forgot all about Longjohn because of the pain in his temple, tore his top clothes off with a groan and collapsed onto the bed, rolling his eyes miserably. «Aspirin...» he whispered for a long time until a troubled sleep took pity on him.

Chapter VII

The Organ and the Cat.

At ten o'clock next morning Korotkov made some tea quickly, drank a quarter of a glass without relish and, sensing that a hard and troublesome day lay ahead, left his room and ran across the wet asphalted yard in the mist. On the door of the side-wing were the words «House-Manager». Korotkov stretched a hand towards the knob, when his eyes read: «No warrants issued due to death.»

«Oh, my goodness,» Korotkov exclaimed irritably. «Everything's going wrong.» And added: «I'll see about the documents later then, and go to MACBAMM now. I must find out what's happening there. Maybe Chekushin's back already.»

Walking all the way, because his money had been stolen, Korotkov eventually reached MACBAMM, crossed the vestibule and made straight for the General Office. On the threshold he stopped short and gaped with surprise. There was not a single familiar face in the whole crystal hall. No Drozd or Anna Yevgrafovna, no one. At the tables looking not at all like crows on a telegraph wire, but like the three falcons of Tsar Alexis, sat three completely identical fair-

headed, clean-shaven men in light-grey checked suits and a young woman with dreamy eyes and diamond earrings. The young men paid no attention to Korotkov and went on scratching away at their ledgers, but the woman made eyes at Korotkov. When he responded to this with a vague smile, she smiled haughtily and turned away. «Strange,» thought Korotkov and walked out of the General Office, stumbling on the threshold. By the door to his room he hesitated and sighed, looking at the familiar words «Chief Clerk», opened the door and went in. Everything suddenly blurred before Korotkov's eyes and the floor rocked gently under his feet. There at Korotkov's desk, elbows akimbo and writing furiously with a pen, sat Longjohn himself in the flesh. Shining goffered locks covered his chest. Korotkov caught his breath as he looked at the lacquered bald pate over the green baize. Longjohn was the first to break the silence.

«What can I do for you, Comrade?» he cooed in a deferential falsetto.

Korotkov licked his lips convulsively, inhaled a large cube of air into his narrow chest and said in a barely audible voice:

«Ahem... I'm the Chief Clerk here, Comrade. I mean... Well, yes, if you remember the order...»

Surprise changed the upper half of Longjohn's face considerably. His fair eyebrows rose and his forehead turned into a concertina.

«I beg your pardon,» he replied politely, «I am the Chief Clerk here.»

Korotkov was struck by a temporary dumbness. When it passed, he uttered the following words:

«Oh, really? Yesterday, that is. Ah, yes. Please excuse me. I've got confused. So sorry.»

He backed out of the room and croaked hoarsely to himself in the corridor:

«Try to remember, Korotkov, what's the date today?»

And then answered himself:

«It's Tuesday, I mean Friday. Nineteen hundred.»

No sooner had he turned round than two corridor light bulbs flared up before him on a human sphere of ivory, and Longjohn's clean-shaven face obscured the whole world.

«Very good,» the copper clanged, and Korotkov got the shakes. «I was waiting for you. Excellent. Pleased to meet you.»

So saying he advanced towards Korotkov and gave his hand such a shake that he perched on one foot like a stork on a rooftop.

«I've allocated the staff,» Longjohn began talking quickly, jerkily and authoritatively. Three in there,» he pointed at the door of the General Office. «And Manechka, of course. You're my assistant. Longjohn's chief clerk. The old lot have all got the sack. That idiot Panteleimon too. I have information that he was a footman in the Alpine Rose. I'm just off to the Board, but you and Longjohn write a memo about that lot, particularly about that — what's his name? — Korotkov. Actually, you look a bit like that scoundrel yourself. Only he had a black eye.»

«Oh, no. Not me,» said Korotkov, open-mouthed and swaying. «I'm not a scoundrel. I've had my documents stolen. Everything.»

«Everything?» Longjohn shouted. «Nonsense. So much the better.»

He dug his fingers into the panting Korotkov's hand, pulled him along the corridor to his precious office, threw him into a plump leather chair and sat down at his desk. Still feeling a strange quaking of the floor under his feet,

Korotkov huddled up, closed his eyes and muttered: «The twentieth was Monday, so Tuesday is the twenty-first. No, what's the matter with me? It's the year twenty-one. Outgoing No. 0.15, space for signature dash Varfolomei Korotkov. That's me. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday. Tuesday and Thursday both begin with a T, and Wednesday ... Wednesssss ... with an S, like Saturday...»

Longjohn scribbled noisily on a piece of paper, stamped it with a thump and thrust it at him. At that moment the phone rang furiously. Longjohn snatched up the receiver and yelled into it:

«Uhuh! Okay. Okay. I'm just leaving.»

He raced over to the coat-rack, grabbed his cap, covered his bald patch with it and vanished through the door with the parting words:

«Wait for me at Longjohn's.»

Everything really swam before Korotkov's eyes, when he read what was written on the paper with the stamp.

«The bearer of this is really my assistant Comrade Vassily Pavlovich Kolobkov, which is really true. Longjohn.»

«Oooh!» groaned Korotkov, dropping the paper and his cap on the floor. «What is going on?»

At that moment the door sang shrilly, and Longjohn returned in his beard.

«Longjohn gone, has he?» he asked Korotkov in a high, affectionate voice.

Everything went dark.

«Aaah!» Korotkov howled, unable to endure the torture, and beside himself with fury, rushed at Longjohn, baring his teeth. Longjohn's face turned yellow with horror. Backing into the door, he opened it with a clatter, tumbled into the corridor, losing his balance, and squatted on his heels, then jumped up and ran off shouting:

«Messenger! Messenger! Help!»

«Stop! Stop! I beg of you, Comrade,» cried Korotkov, coming to and rushing after him.

There was a bang in the General Office, and the falcons jumped up as if by order. The woman's dreamy eyes leapt up from the typewriter.

«They'll shoot! They'll shoot!» she shouted hysterically.

Longjohn ran into the vestibule first, onto the dias where the organ was, hesitated for a moment, wondering where to go, then rushed off, cutting a corner, and disappeared behind the organ. Korotkov raced after him, slipped and would probably have banged his head on the rail, if it hadn't been for a huge black crooked handle sticking out of the yellow side. It caught Korotkov's coat, the worn cloth tore with a quiet squeal, and Korotkov sat gently down on the cold floor. The side door behind the organ banged to after Longjohn.

«Goodness...» began Korotkov, but did not finish.

The impressive box with dusty copper pipes emitted a strange sound like a glass breaking, followed by a deep dusty growl, a strange chromatic squeak and the stroke of a bell. Then came a resonant major chord, an ebullient full-blooded stream, and the whole three-tiered yellow box began to play, turning over deposits of stagnating sound.

The fire of Moscow roared and thundered...

Panteleimon's pale face suddenly appeared in the black square of the door. In a trice he, too, underwent a metamorphosis. His tiny eyes shone triumphantly, he drew himself up, flung his right arm across his left, as if putting on an

invisible napkin, leapt up and galloped downstairs sideways, obliquely, like a trace-horse, circling his arms as if he were holding a trayful of cups.

The smoke did o'er the river spread...

«What on earth have I done?» Korotkov gasped in horror. After rushing through the first stagnating waves, the machine settled down smoothly, filling the empty halls of MACBAMM with the roar of a thousand-headed lion.

And on the walls by the Kremlin Gat... —

Through the howling and thundering of bells came the sound of a car, and Longjohn returned through the main entrance, a clean-shaven, vindictive and menacing Longjohn. He began to mount the staircase smoothly in a sinister bluish light. Korotkov's hair stood on end. Jumping up, he ran through the side door down the crooked staircase behind the organ and across the gravel-covered yard into the street. As if pursued by the Furies he flew into the street with the Alpine Rose booming behind him.

A grey frock-coated figure stood...

On the corner a cabby brandishing a whip was trying furiously to get his old nag going.

«Oh, my God!» Korotkov sobbed frantically. «It's him again! What is going on?»

A bearded Longjohn loomed out of the pavement of the cab, hopped in and began to whack the cabby on the back, chanting in his high voice:

«Get going, you rascal! Get going!»

The old nag gave a start, kicked up its heels and raced off under the stinging blows of the whip, clattering down the street. Through tempestuous tears Korotkov saw the cabby's patent-leather hat fly off and banknotes came fluttering out of it in all directions. Small boys chased after them, whistling. The cabby turned round and pulled in the reins wildly, but Longjohn thumped him on the back furiously and yelled:

«Keep going! Keep going! I'll pay you.»

«Ee, your good health, it's rack and ruin, ain't it?» the cabby cried wildly, putting the nag into a full gallop, and they all disappeared round the corner.

Sobbing, Korotkov looked at the grey sky racing overhead, staggered and cried painfully:

«That's enough. I can't leave it like this! I must explain everything.» He jumped on to a tram. It shook him along for five minutes or so then threw him down by a green nine-storey building. Rushing into the vestibule, Korotkov stuck his head through the quadrangular opening in a wooden partition and asked a big blue teapot:

«Where's the Complaints Bureau, Comrade?»

«Eighth floor, ninth corridor, flat 41, room 302,» the teapot replied in a woman's voice.

«Eighth, ninth, 41, three hundred ... three hundred and what was that ... 302,» muttered Korotkov, running up the broad staircase. «Eighth, ninth, eighth, no, forty ... no, 42 ... no, 302,» he mumbled. «Oh, goodness, I've forgotten ... 40, that's it.»

On the eighth floor he walked past three doors, saw the black number «40» on the fourth and went into an enormous hall with columns and two rows of windows. In the corners lay rolls of paper on spools, and the floor was strewn with scraps of paper covered with writing. In the distance at a small table with a typewriter sat a goldenish woman, cheek in hand, purring a song quietly. Looking round in confusion Korotkov saw the massive figure of a man in a long

white coat walk down heavily from the platform behind the columns. The marble face sported a grey drooping moustache. With an unusually polite, lifeless smile, the man came up to Korotkov, shook his hand warmly and announced, clicking his heels:

«Jan Sobieski.»

«You can't be!» replied Korotkov, taken aback.

The man gave a pleasant smile.

«That surprises a lot of people, you know,» he said, getting the word stresses wrong. «But don't think I have anything to do with that rascal, Comrade. Oh, no. It's an unfortunate coincidence, nothing more. I've already applied to change my name to Socvossky. That's much nicer, and not so dangerous. But if you don't like it,» the man twisted his mouth sensitively, «I don't insist. We always find people. They come looking for us.»

«Oh, but, of course,» Korotkov yelped painfully, sensing that something strange was beginning here too, like everywhere else. He looked round with a hunted expression, afraid that a clean-shaven countenance and bald eggshell might suddenly pop up out of thin air, and then added clumsily: «I'm very glad, very...»

A faint blush appeared on the marble man; taking Korotkov's arm gently, he led him to a table, talking all the time.

«And I'm very glad too. But the trouble is, you know, that I haven't anywhere to put you. They keep us in the background, in spite of all our importance.» (The man waved a hand at the spools of paper.) «Intrigues. But we'll get going, don't you worry.»

«Hm. And what have you got for us this time?» he asked the pale Korotkov affectionately. «Oh, I'm so sorry, I really must apologise, allow me to introduce,» he waved a white hand elegantly in the direction of the typewriter. «Henrietta Potapovna Persymphens.»

The woman immediately offered Korotkov a cold hand and a languid look.

«Now then,» the boss continued sweetly. «What have you got for us today? A feuilleton? Some essays?» Rolling his white eyes, he drawled: «You can't imagine how much we need them.»

«Good heavens, what's all this about?» thought Korotkov dimly, then he drew a deep convulsive breath and began talking.

«Something, er, terrible has happened. He... I don't understand. Please don't think it's a hallucination... Hmm. Ha-ha.» (Korotkov tried to give an artificial laugh, but it didn't work.) «He's alive. I assure you ... only I can't make it out, sometimes he has a beard and a moment later it disappears. I just don't understand... He changes his voice too... What's more, I've had all my documents stolen, and to make matters worse the house-manager's gone and died. That Longjohn...»

«I knew as much,» exclaimed the boss. «Is it them?»

«Oh, my goodness, of course,» the woman replied. «Those dreadful Longjohns.»

«You know,» the boss interrupted excitedly, «it's because of him that I'm sitting on the floor. Take a look at that, old chap. And what does he know about journalism?» he caught hold of Korotkov's button. «Kindly tell me that, what does he know? He spent two days here and nearly tormented me to death. But imagine what luck. I went to see Fyodor Vassilievich and he got rid of him at last. I didn't mince my words: it's either him or me, I said. They transferred him

to some MACBAMM or something, devil knows what. Let him stink the place out with those matches! But he managed to move the furniture to that damned office. The whole damn lot, if you please. And what, may I ask, am I going to write on? What are you going to write on? For I have no doubt at all that you will be one of us, dear chap.» (Korotkov's host embraced him.) «In a most irresponsible fashion that scoundrel moved all our lovely Louis Quatorze satin furniture to that stupid bureau, which they'll shut down tomorrow in any case, the devil take it.»

«What bureau?» Korotkov asked in a hollow voice.

«Oh, those complaints or whatever they are,» the boss said irritably.

«What?» cried Korotkov. «What? Where is it?»

«There,» the boss replied in surprise, prodding the floor.

Korotkov took one last crazed look at the white coat and raced into the corridor. Pausing for a moment, he turned left looking for steps going down and ran along for about five minutes, following the whimsical bends in the corridor. Five minutes later he was back where he had started. At door No. 40.

«Oh, hell!» he exclaimed, hesitating for a moment, then turned right and ran along for another five minutes until he arrived at No. 40 again. Pulling the door open, he ran into the hall to find it now empty. Only the typewriter's white teeth smiled silently on the desk. Korotkov ran up to the colonnade and saw the boss there. He was standing on a pedestal, unsmiling, with an affronted expression.

«Forgive me for not saying goodbye...» Korotkov began, then stopped. The boss's left arm was broken off and his nose and one ear were missing. Recoiling in horror, Korotkov ran into the corridor again. A secret door opposite, which he had not noticed, opened suddenly and out came a wrinkled brown old woman with empty buckets on a yoke.

«Granny! Granny!» cried Korotkov anxiously. «Where's the bureau?»

«I don't know, sir, I don't know, your honour,» the old woman replied. «Only don't you go runnin' around like that, duck, 'cos you won't find it any ways. Ten floors is no joke.»

«Ugh, silly old thing,» hissed Korotkov and rushed through the door. It banged shut behind him and Korotkov found himself in a dark space with no way out. He flung himself at the walls, scratching like someone trapped in a mine, until at last he found a white spot which let him out to a kind of staircase. He ran down it with a staccato clatter, and heard steps coming up towards him. A dreadful unease gripped his heart, and he slowed down to a halt. A moment later a shiny cap appeared, followed by a grey blanket and a long beard. Korotkov swayed and clutched the rail. At that moment their eyes met, and they both howled shrilly with fear and pain. Korotkov backed away upstairs, while Long-John retreated, horror-stricken, in the opposite direction.

«Wait a minute,» croaked Korotkov. «You just explain...»

«Help!» howled Longjohn, changing his shrill voice for the old copper bass. He stumbled and fell down, striking the back of his head. It was a blow that cost him dear. Turning into a black cat with phosphorous eyes, he flew upstairs, streaking like velvet lightning across the landing, tensed into a ball, then sprang onto the window-sill and vanished in the broken glass and spider's webs. A white fog befuddled Korotkov's brain for an instant, then lifted, giving way to an extraordinary clarity.

«Now I see it all,» Korotkov whispered, laughing quietly. «Yes, I see. That's what it is. Cats! Now I get it. Cats!»

He began to laugh louder and louder, until the whole staircase rang with peeling echoes.

Chapter VIII

The Second Night.

In the twilight Korotkov sat in his flannelette bed and drank three bottles of wine to forget everything and calm down. Now his whole head was aching: the right and left temples, the back of his head and even his eyelids. Waves of light nausea kept rising from deep down in his stomach, and Korotkov vomited twice in a basin.

«This is what I'll do,» he whispered weakly, his head hanging down. «Tomorrow I'll try not to run into him. But since he seems to be all over the place, I'll just wait. In a side-street or a blind alley. He'll walk straight past me. But if he tries to catch me, I'll run away. He'll give up. 'You just carry on, I'll say. I don't want to go back to MACBAMM anymore. Good luck to you. Be head of department and Chief Clerk, if you like. I don't want tram money either. I can do without it. Only leave me alone, please. Whether you're a cat or not, with a beard or without, you go your way and I'll go mine. I'll find another job and get on with it in peace and quiet. I don't bother anyone, and no one bothers me. And I won't make any complaints about you. I'll just get myself some documents tomorrow— and to hell with it.»

A clock began to chime in the distance. Ding, dong. «That's at the Pestrukhins',» thought Korotkov and began to count: «Ten, eleven, midnight, thirteen, fourteen ... forty.» «The clock chimed forty times,» Korotkov smiled bitterly and started weeping again. Once more the communion wine made him vomit convulsively and painfully.

«It's strong alright, this wine,» Korotkov muttered, falling back onto his pillow with a groan. Some two hours passed. The unextinguished lamp lit up the pale face on the pillow and the tousled hair.

Chapter IX

Machine Horrors.

The autumn day greeted Comrade Korotkov in a vague, strange fashion. Looking round fearfully on the staircase, he climbed up to the eighth floor, turned right without thinking and shuddered with delight. The drawing of a hand was pointing to «Rooms 302–349». Following the finger of the beckoning hand, he came to a door which said «302, Complaints Bureau». After a cautious peep inside, to avoid meeting any undesirable characters, Korotkov went in and found himself facing seven women seated at typewriters. After a moment's hesitation, he went up to the nearest one, who was matt and dark-skinned,

bowed and was about to say something when the brunette suddenly interrupted him. All the women stared hard at Korotkov.

«Let's go into the corridor,» the matt woman said abruptly and patted her hair convulsively.

«Oh, my goodness, what now?» thought Korotkov miserably. He obeyed, with a deep sigh. The six remaining ones whispered excitedly behind their backs.

Leading Korotkov into the semi-darkness of the empty corridor, the brunette said:

«You are awful. I didn't sleep all night because of you and I've made up my mind. You can have your way. Take me, body and soul!»

Korotkov took one look at the huge eyes in the swarthy face that smelt of lilies-of-the-valley, uttered a guttural cry and said nothing. The brunette threw back her head, bared her teeth with a martyr-like air, seized Korotkov's arm and pulled him to her, whispering:

«Why don't you say something, my seducer? You have conquered me with your courage, my serpent. Kiss me quick, while there's no one from the control commission around.»

Another strange sound emerged from Korotkov's mouth. He reeled, felt something sweet and soft on his lips and saw two large pupils right next to his eyes.

«Take me, body and soul.» The words were whispered right by Korotkov's mouth.

«I can't,» he replied hoarsely. «My documents have been stolen.»

«Now then,» came from behind.

Korotkov looked round and saw the glossy old man. «Ah!» cried the brunette, covering her face with her hands, and ran off through the door.

«Hee,» said the old man. «Hello there. You keep turning up everywhere, Comrade Kolobkov. Real ladies' man, you are. You can kiss as much as you like, but it won't get you an expenses-paid business trip. This old man has been given one though, and I'm off. So there.» So saying he cocked a snook at Korotkov. «But I'll tell on you alright,» he went on spitefully. «That I will. You've had three of 'em down in the main section, and now you've started on the sub-sections. You don't give a damn if those little angels are crying their eyes out, do you? They're sorry now, poor lasses, but it's too late. You can't bring back a maiden's honour. That you can't. You can't.»

The old man pulled out a large handkerchief with orange flowers, started to cry and blew his nose.

«So you want to deprive an old man of his tiny travelling allowance, eh, Mr. Kolobkov? Alright then.» The old man started shaking and sobbing and dropped his briefcase.

«Take it. Let a non-Party, fellow-travelling old man starve to death. Go on. That's all he's good for, the old cur. Only remember this, Mr. Kolobkov.» The old man's voice grew prophetically ominous and rang out like a bell. «They will do you no good, those satanic shekels. They'll stick in your throat.» And the old man burst into heavy sobs.

Korotkov was gripped by hysteria. Suddenly and quite unexpectedly for himself, he began stamping his feet.

«To hell with you!» he shouted shrilly and his sick voice echoed round the vaults. «I'm not Kolobkov. Leave me alone! I'm not Kolobkov. And I'm not going anywhere!»

He tore at his collar.

The old man dried up at once and began quaking with fear.

«Next one!» someone barked behind the door. Korotkov paused and rushed inside. He turned left, past some typewriters, and found himself in front of a well-built elegant blond-haired man in a blue suit. Blondy nodded to Korotkov and said:

«Make it snappy, Comrade. No beating about the bush. What's it to be? Poltava or Irkutsk?»

«My documents have been stolen,» the confused Korotkov replied, looking round wildly. «Then a cat turned up. It's not fair. I've never been in a fight in my life. It was the matches. I shouldn't be victimised. I don't care if he's Longjohn. My documents have...»

«That's rubbish,» replied Blondy. «We'll provide the uniform, shirts and sheets. Even a second-hand sheepskin jacket, if it's Irkutsk. Make it snappy.»

He turned a key musically in a lock, pulled out a drawer, looked inside it and said:

«Alright, Sergei Nikolayevich.»

Out of the ash-wood drawer peeped a well-combed flaxen-haired head with darting blue eyes. After it curved a snake-like neck in a crackling starched collar, then a jacket, arms and trousers, and a second later a whole secretary crawled onto the red baize squeaking «Good morning.» Shaking himself like a dog after a swim, he jumped down, turned back his cuffs, pulled a fountain pen out of his pocket and began scribbling.

Korotkov recoiled, stretched out a hand and said plaintively to Blondy:

«Look, look, he climbed out of the desk. What's going on?»

«Of course, he did,» Blondy replied. «He can't stay in there all day, can he? It's time. Tempus. Time-keeping.»

«But how? How?» rang Korotkov.

«For heaven's sake,» Blondy snapped. «Don't waste my time, Comrade.»

The brunette's head looked round the door and shouted excitedly and joyfully:

«I've already sent his documents to Poltava. And I'm going with him. I've got an aunt in Poltava at 43 degrees latitude and five longitude.»

«That's splendid,» Blondy replied. «I'm sick of all this shilly-shallying.»

«I refuse!» shouted Korotkov, with a wandering expression. «I'll have to take her, body and soul, and I couldn't stand that. I refuse! Give me back my documents. My precious surname. Reinstate me!»

«That's a matter for the matrimonial department, Comrade,» squeaked the secretary. «We can't do anything about that.»

«Silly boy!» exclaimed the brunette, peeping in again. «Say yes! Say yes!» she hissed in a prompter's whisper. Her head kept darting in and out.

«Comrade!» Korotkov sobbed, rubbing his tear-stained face. «Comrade! Give me my documents, I beseech you. Be a friend. Please, I beg you with all the fibres of my soul, and I'll go into a monastery.»

«Cut out the hysterics, Comrade! Kindly inform me concretely and abstractly, in writing and by word of mouth, urgently and confidentially — Poltava or Irkutsk? Don't waste a busy person's time! No walking along the corridors! No spitting! No smoking! No asking for small change!» Blondy thundered, losing his temper.

«All handshaking abolished!» the secretary cuckooed.

«Long live clinches!» the brunette whispered passionately and rushed round the room like a gust of wind, wafting lilies-of-the-valley over Korotkov's neck.

«The thirteenth commandment says: thou shalt not go in to thy neighbour without notification,» muttered the glossy old man and fluttered around in the air, flapping the edges of his cloak. «I'm not going in. No, sir. But I'll palm a memo off on you all the same. Here you are, plop! You'd sign anything. And land up in the dock too.» He tossed sheets of paper out of his wide black sleeve, and they floated about, settling on the desks like gulls on seashore cliffs.

The room turned dark and the windows rocked.

«Comrade Blondy,» the exhausted Korotkov wept. «You can shoot me on the spot, but please issue me some kind of document. And I'll kiss your hand.»

In the darkness Blondy began to swell and grow, frantically signing the old man's sheets of paper and tossing them to the secretary, who caught them with a happy gurgle.

«To hell with him!» Blondy thundered. «To hell with him! Typists, hey!»

He waved an enormous hand, the wall disintegrated before Korotkov's eyes, and the thirty typewriters on the desks rang their bells and began to play a foxtrot. Swaying their hips, shaking their shoulders sensuously and kicking up a white foam with their cream legs, thirty women did a conga round the desks.

White snakes of paper slithered into the typewriters' jaws and were joined, cut out and sewn into a pair of white trousers with violet side-stripes which said «The bearer of this really is the bearer, and not just a worthless scallywag.»

«Put them on!» Blondy roared in the mist.

«Aaah,» whimpered Korotkov and began banging his head against the corner of Blondy's desk. His head felt better for a moment, and Korotkov caught a glimpse of a tear-stained face.

«Valerian drops!» cried someone on the ceiling.

The cloak obscured the light, like a black bird, and the old man whispered in alarm:

«Our only hope now is Dyrkin in section five. Hurry up! Hurry up!»

There was a smell of ether, and Korotkov was carried gently into the semi-dark corridor. The cloak enveloped him and swept him along, whispering and giggling: «I've done them a good turn alright. That stuff I threw on their desks will get each of them at least five years with loss of civil rights on the field of battle. Hurry up! Hurry up!»

The cloak fluttered to one side, and a damp gust of air wafted from the lift shaft plunging into the abyss.

Chapter X

Dyrkin the Dread.

The mirrored cabin began to sink down, and two Korotkovs sank with it. The second Korotkov was forgotten in the mirror of the lift by the first and main one, who walked out alone into the cool vestibule. A very fat and pink gent in a top hat greeted Korotkov with the words:

«That's wonderful. I'm going to arrest you.»

«You can't do that,» Korotkov replied with a satanic laugh, «because nobody knows who I am. Of course not. You can't arrest me or marry me. And I'm not going to Poltava either.»

The fat man quaked with terror, looked into Korotkov's eyes and began to sink backwards.

«Arrest me,» Korotkov squealed and stuck out a pale quivering tongue smelling of Valerian drops at the fat man. «How can you arrest me if instead of documents I've got sweet fanny adams? Perhaps I'm a Hohenzollern.»

«Jesus Christ,» said the fat man, crossing himself with a trembling hand and turning from pink to yellow.

«Longjohn turned up?» Korotkov asked abruptly, looking round. «Answer me, Fatty.»

«Oh, no,» the fat man replied, his pink complexion changing to grey.

«Well, what shall I do now then? Eh?»

«Go and see Dyrkin himself,» the fat man babbled. «That's the best thing. Only he's a real terror! Don't get too close. He sent two people flying. And today he broke a phone.»

«Alright then,» Korotkov replied with a devil-may-care spit. «We've nothing to lose now. Lift me up!»

«Don't hurt your leg, Comrade Delegate,» said the fat man tenderly, helping Korotkov into the lift.

On the top landing was a little fellow of about sixteen who shouted menacingly:

«Where d'ya think you're going? Stop!»

«Don't hit us, old chap,» said the fat man, hunching up and covering his head with his hands. «To Dyrkin himself.»

«Go on then,» the little fellow shouted.

«You go, Your Excellency,» the fat man whispered. «I'll wait for you here on the bench. It's awfully scary...»

Korotkov went into a dark vestibule and from there into an empty hall with a threadbare blue carpet.

In front of a door with a notice saying «Dyrkin» Korotkov hesitated for a moment, then went in and found himself in a comfortably furnished room with a huge crimson table and a wall clock. A chubby little Dyrkin bounced out on a spring from behind the desk, bristled his moustache and barked:

«Be quiet!» although Korotkov had not said a word.

At that very moment a pallid youth with a briefcase appeared in the room. Dyrkin's face was instantly wreathed in smiling wrinkles.

«Ah!» he exclaimed ingratiatingly. «Artur Arturovich. Greetings, dear friend.»

«Now listen, Dyrkin,» the youth said in a metallic voice. «You wrote to Puzyryov that I'd set up my personal dictatorship in an old-age insurance office and pocketed the May benefits, didn't you? Eh? Answer me, you rotten bastard.»

«Me?» muttered Dyrkin, magically changing from Dyrkin the Dread into Dyrkin the Good Chap. «Me, Arthur Dictaturich... Of course, I... It's a lie...»

«You blackguard,» the youth said clearly. Shaking his head and brandishing his briefcase, he slapped the latter onto Dyrkin's pate, like a pancake on a plate.

Korotkov instinctively gasped and froze.

«It'll be the same for you, and any other smart Alec who sticks his nose into my business,» the youth said menacingly and went out, shaking a red fist at Korotkov in parting.

For a moment or two there was silence in the room, broken only by the tinkling of the chandelier as a lorry rumbled by.

«There, young man,» said a nice and humiliated Dyrkin, with a bitter smile. «That's what you get for your pains. You deprive yourself of sleep, food and drink, and the result's always the same — a slap round the chops. Perhaps you've brought one too. Go on then. Give old Dyrkin a bashing. He's got a public property face. Perhaps your hand hurts, eh? Then use the chandelier, old chap.»

And Dyrkin proffered his chubby cheeks temptingly. In a daze, Korotkov gave a shy crooked smile, took the chandelier by the base and crunched the candles down on Dyrkin's head. Blood spurted onto the baize from the latter's nose and he rushed through an inner door shouting for help.

«Cuck-oo!» piped a forest cuckoo happily, hopping out of a little painted Nuremberg house on the wall.

«Ku-klux-klan!» it cried, turning into a bald head. «We'll tell them how you beat up public servants!»

Korotkov was seized by fury. He swung the chandelier and brought it down on the clock. It replied with thunder and showers of golden arrows. Longjohn hopped out of the clock, turned into a white cockerel with a notice saying «outgoing» and darted through the door. From behind the inner door Dyrkin howled: «Catch him, the rascal,» and heavy footsteps sounded on all sides. Korotkov turned and took to his heels.

Chapter XI

Par Force Movie and the Abyss.

The fat man hopped off the landing into the lift, slid behind the bars and plunged down. Down the huge gnawed-out staircase ran first the fat man's black top hat, followed by the white outgoing cockerel, behind which the chandelier whizzed past about two inches above the cockerel's pointed white head, then came Korotkov, the sixteen-year-old with a revolver in his hand, and some other people, clattering with their studded boots. The staircase resounded with ringing bronze, and doors slammed agitatedly on the landings.

Someone leaned over on the top floor and shouted through a megaphone:

«Which section is moving? You've forgotten the safe!»

A woman's voice below replied:

«Bandits!»

Overtaking the top hat and chandelier, Korotkov was the first to dash through the large front door and, gulping down a huge portion of red-hot air, raced into the street. The white cockerel vanished into thin air, leaving a whiff of sulphur behind it, the black cloak materialised out of nowhere and trailed along beside Korotkov, drawling in a high voice:

«Co-op lads get beaten up, Comrades!»

In Korotkov's path pedestrians were scattering and crawling under gates. Short whistles flared up and went out. Someone careered off, wildly hallooing, and anxious hoarse cries of «Catch him!» lit up. Iron shutters were closed with a clatter, and a lame man sitting on the tram-line squealed:

«It's begun!»

Shots were now flying after Korotkov, frequent and jolly like Christmas crackers, the bullets whining at either side and overhead. Growling like a blacksmith's bellows, Korotkov sped towards a gigantic eleven-storey building at right angles to the street, its main facade in a narrow side alley. Right on the corner a glass sign with the words Restaurant und Bier cracked starlike, and an elderly cabby with a languid expression on his face moved from the coach-box to sit on the pavement, saying:

«Hey there. Taking pot-shots just for kicks, eh, lads?»

A man ran out of a side-street, tried to catch Korotkov by his jacket and was left holding the lapel. Korotkov turned the corner, raced a few yards and ran into the mirrored expanse of the vestibule. A boy with braid and gold buttons jumped out of the lift and started crying.

«Get in, mister. Get in!» he bawled. «Only don't hit an orphan.»

Korotkov darted into the lift cabin, sat down on a green sofa opposite another Korotkov and started gulping like a fish on the sand. The boy got in after him, sobbing, closed the door, pulled a cord and the lift went up. At that moment shots rang out in the vestibule below, and the revolving glass doors spun wildly.

Up went the lift, gently and nauseatingly. The boy grew calmer and wiped his nose with one hand, while the other twiddled the cord.

«Stolen some money, mister?» he asked avidly, staring at the lacerated Korotkov.

«We're ... attacking ... Longjohn,» panted Korotkov in reply. «But he's taken the offensive...»

«You'd better go right to the top, mister, where the billiard tables are,» the boy advised him. «You can sit it out on the roof, if you've got a Mauser.»

«Let's go up there,» Korotkov agreed.

A moment later the lift stopped, the boy flung open the doors, sniffed hard and said:

«Get out, mister, and nip on the roof.»

Korotkov jumped out, looked round and did as he was told. From below came a growing, mounting noise, from the side the knocking of ivory balls through a glass partition with agitated faces flashing behind it. The boy darted back into the lift, closed the door and plunged down.

Surveying his position with an eagle eye, Korotkov hesitated for a moment, then ran into the billiard room with the battle-cry «Charge!» Green rectangles flashed past with shiny white balls and pale faces. From below, much nearer now, a shot echoed deafeningly and there was a sound of breaking glass. As if in response to a signal, the players flung down their cues and scrambled hurriedly through the side door with a clatter. Korotkov rushed over and shut the door behind them on the latch, slammed the main glass door from the staircase to the billiard room, and armed himself with some billiard balls. A few seconds later behind the glass the first head loomed up beside the lift. A ball flew out of Korotkov's hands, whistled through the glass and the head disappeared. In its place a pale light flashed, and a second head loomed up, then a third. The balls flew one after the other, breaking the panes of glass in

the partitions. The smashes echoed down the staircase and in reply a machine-gun howled like a deafening Singer sewing machine, and shook the whole building. Glass and frames were sliced out of the upper part, as if with a knife, and a powdery cloud of plaster swept round the room.

Korotkov realised he could not hold his position. Covering his head with his hands, he took a run and kicked the third glass partition, behind which lay the flat asphalt of the roof. The glass splintered and scattered. Under heavy fire he managed to toss five pyramids onto the roof, and they rolled about on the asphalt like severed heads. Korotkov leapt out after them, and just in time too, because the machine-gun lowered its fire and blew out the whole bottom section of the frame.

«Surrender!» he heard faintly.

Suddenly Korotkov saw a pale sun overhead, a bleached sky, a breeze and frozen asphalt. From below and outside a muffled anxious roar spoke of the town. After hopping up and down on the asphalt and looking round, Korotkov picked up three balls, ran over to the parapet, climbed onto it and looked down. His heart missed a beat. Below lay the roofs of buildings that looked flattened and small, a square with trams crawling over it, beetle-people, and at once Korotkov saw tiny grey figures dancing up to the entrance along the crack of the side-street, followed by a heavy toy dotted with shining gold heads.

«Firemen!» Korotkov gasped. «I'm surrounded.»

Leaning over the parapet, he took aim and threw the three balls, one after the other. They rose up, described an arc, then plunged down. Korotkov picked up another three, crawled over again, swung his arm and let them fly too. The balls flashed like silver, turning black as they fell, then flashed again and disappeared. Korotkov thought he saw the beetles begin to scurry about in alarm in the sun-lit square. He bent down to get another batch of missiles, but did not have time. With a crunching and smashing of glass people appeared in the billiard room. They spilled out like peas, jumping onto the roof. Grey caps and greatcoats poured out, and the glossy old man came flying through an upper pane, without touching the ground. Then the wall collapsed completely, and a terrible clean-shaven Longjohn swept out menacingly on roller-skates with an old blunderbuss in his hands.

«Surrender!» came the howls from all sides and overhead, submerged by an unbearable deafening saucepan bass.

«This is the end,» Korotkov gasped faintly. «The end. Battle's lost. Ta-ta-ta,» he trumpeted the retreat with his lips.

The courage of death took possession of him. By hanging on and balancing, Korotkov made his way to a post on the parapet, clutched it swaying, drew himself up to his full height and shouted:

«Better death than dishonour!»

His persecutors were close on his heels now. Korotkov saw the outstretched hands, the flame leaping out of Longjohn's mouth. The lure of the sunny abyss was so strong that it took his breath away. He jumped with a piercing triumphant cry and soared upwards. For a second he stopped breathing. Indistinctly, very indistinctly, he saw something grey fly up past him with black holes as if from an explosion. Then he saw very clearly that the grey thing had fallen down. He himself was rising up to the narrow crack of the side-street which lay above him. Then the blood-red sun burst resoundingly in his head, and he saw nothing more.
