DIAMONDS TO SIT ON

By

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and

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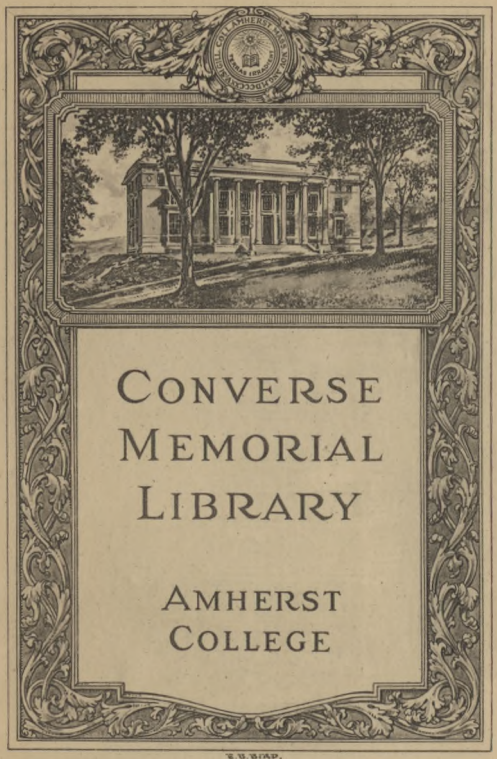
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DIAMONDS TO SIT ON

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A RUSSIAN COMEDY OF ERRORS

BY

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PART I

THE LION OF STARGOROD

CHAPTER I

BEZENCHUK AND 'THE NYMPHS'

THERE were so many hairdressers and undertakers in a certain Russian provincial town called N—— that it looked as if the inhabitants were born for the sole purpose of having a shave, a hair-cut, or a refreshing shampoo, and then of dying immediately after. In actual fact, there were very few births, shaves, or deaths in the town, for life was very quiet there. The evenings in spring were intoxicating, the mud glistened in the moonlight like anthracite, and all the young men in the town were so much in love with the secretary of the Union of Communist Youth that she could not collect the subscriptions properly.

The questions of love and death did not affect Hippolyte Matveyevich Vorobianinov, although he was supposed to be busy with these matters every day from nine in the morning till five at night, with one hour off for lunch.

In the morning, after drinking a glass of hot milk which his mother-in-law gave him, he used to go out of the dingy house into the wide Comrade Gubensky Street, which was flooded with light. It was the pleasantest kind of street you could possibly find in a provincial town. On the left-hand side, behind some green shop windows there were the coffins belonging to Nymphs, the undertakers. On the right-hand side, behind some small windows out of which nearly all the putty had dropped, there were more coffins, dusty and made of oak, belonging to another undertaker,

Bezenchuk. Farther on, the hairdressers 'Pierre and Constantine' promised their customers a 'Manicure' or 'Hair Wave in Your Own Home'. A little farther on there was an hotel with another hairdresser's shop on the ground floor, and behind this, on a large open space, stood a pale anaemic-looking calf tenderly licking a rusty shop sign which was propped up at the side of a gate. You could only just read what was written on it: 'The Undertakers Welcome.' Although there were so many undertakers there were very few clients. The Welcomes had gone bankrupt three years ago, just at the time when Hippolyte first settled in the town. As for Bezenchuk, he drank so heavily that one day he tried to pawn his best show coffin.

People did not die so often in the town, and no one knew this better than Hippolyte, for he worked in a Government office where he was in charge of the register of births, marriages, and deaths.

His desk in the office was like the slab off a tombstone. The left-hand corner of it had crumbled away, gnawed by rats, and its jerry legs trembled under the weight of bulging brown files containing entries from which you could gather all the information you might want about the inhabitants and any genealogical trees that had managed to sprout on this poor provincial soil.

On Friday the 15th April 1927 Hippolyte woke up as usual at half-past seven and immediately thrust his nose under a pair of old-fashioned gold-rimmed pince-nez. He never wore spectacles. One day he decided it was unhygienic to wear pince-nez, so he ran off to the optician and bought a pair of rimless glasses with rolled gold sides to them. This happened when his wife was still alive. He liked the spectacles, but as soon as his wife told him he looked the image of a Tsarist Minister he gave them away to the porter in the yard. Although the porter was not at all short-sighted he grew used to the spectacles and wore them with pleasure.

'*Bon jour*,' Hippolyte mumbled to himself as he dangled his feet over the edge of the bed. '*Bon jour*' meant he had wakened up in a good mood. If he grunted '*Guten Morgen*' on waking up, then that generally meant his liver was behaving badly, that it was no joke to be fifty-two years old, and that the weather was very muggy these days.

He thrust his scraggy legs into a pair of ready-made trousers bought before the War, fastened them round his ankles with two pieces of tape, and pushed his feet into a pair of low, comfortable boots with square toes. Five minutes later he was dressed in a short black coat and a waistcoat made of grey cloth sprinkled with small silver stars. He shook the last drops of water from his grey head, twitched his moustache, and slowly felt his scrubby chin. Then he rapidly brushed his hair and, smiling politely, walked towards his mother-in-law as she came into his room.

'Hippolyte,' she shouted, 'I had a bad dream last night.'

Hippolyte looked at her from top to toe. He was well over six feet, and from such a height it was easy enough for him to look down scornfully at her.

'I dreamt of poor dear Maria last night,' she continued loudly, 'her hair was down and she was wearing a golden belt.'

She always bellowed when she spoke, and this time the lustres on the dusty chandelier rattled and shook.

'I'm most upset. I'm sure something dreadful will happen.'

She blew out the last words with such force that the tuft of hair on the top of Hippolyte's head rose in the air.

He frowned and said in a matter-of-fact voice:

'Nothing will happen, mother. Have you paid the water-rate yet?'

She had not paid the water-rate and his goloshes had not been cleaned. Hippolyte did not love his mother-in-law. She was stupid, but she was too old

to grow any wiser now. She was terribly mean, and it was only because he was so poor that she could not be any meaner. Her voice was so deep and so powerful that even Richard Cœur de Lion would have been envious of it. And, above all, she had dreams. She was always having dreams. She dreamt of maidens in belts, of horses decked out in gold cloth, of porters playing harps, of archangels walking about in sheepskin coats, and of knitting-needles that clicked and jumped about rooms. Clavdia Ivanovna Petukhov was a stupid old woman. Besides, she had whiskers on her upper lip that looked like the bristles in a shaving-brush.

Hippolyte went out of the house in rather a bad temper.

Bezenchuk, the undertaker, was leaning against the door of his shop. He had had so many financial crashes and had soaked so much in drink that his eyes were bright yellow and flashed like a cat's.

'Good morning, friend,' he shouted across to Hippolyte.

Hippolyte politely raised his greasy felt hat.

'How's your dear mother-in-law, may I ask?'

'H'm. H'm,' answered Hippolyte rather vaguely, and shrugged his shoulders as he passed the undertaker.

'Ah, well,' said Bezenchuk, 'God grant her good health. Business is bad these days. Such losses, my dear sir, such losses!'

He folded his arms again and continued leaning against the door.

Hippolyte was stopped again at the Nymphs'. There were three owners of this shop. They all three bowed to him and asked in a chorus about his mother-in-law's health.

'Quite well, quite well,' he replied. 'She dreamt last night of a girl with golden hair.'

The three Nymphs looked at each other and sighed deeply.

All this made Hippolyte five minutes late for his office, as he learnt from the clock which hung under the motto, 'Do your work and go your way.'

He took a blue felt cushion out of the drawer in his table, put it on his chair, twisted the ends of his moustache until they were in a line with the edge of his table, and then sat down. Seated, he was slightly higher than the rest of his colleagues.

Two young people—a man and a girl—were shyly following his movements. The man was in a heavy winter overcoat. He seemed to be oppressed by the atmosphere of the room, the smell of ink, the loud-ticking clock, and the severe motto, 'Do your work and go your way.' Although he had not even started his work he would willingly have gone away. He felt his business to be so insignificant that he was quite ashamed to trouble such an important-looking citizen as Hippolyte. For his part, Hippolyte could see quite easily that the man's business was not important, and that it could very well wait. He therefore opened File Number 2 and got on with his work. The young girl, who was wearing a long coat edged with black braid, whispered something to the man, and blushing scarlet began to move slowly towards Hippolyte.

'Comrade,' she said, 'where can we——'

The man in the overcoat sighed happily and quite unexpectedly heard himself bark out: 'Get married?'

Hippolyte looked at them through the grille.

'Birth did you say? Death?'

'No, marriage,' said the man, looking foolishly round the room.

The girl burst out laughing. The matter was soon fixed up. Hippolyte, as nimble as a conjurer, set to work. He entered the names of the newly-married couple into a very thick book, sternly questioned the witnesses, who had been rapidly brought in from the street by the girl, breathed long and tenderly on to a rubber stamp, and then slightly raising himself from

his seat, he pressed the stamp on their rather grubby passports. He took two roubles from the young couple, handed them a receipt, and said with a smile : ' For the completed sacrament.'

Then he drew himself up to his full height. The broad yellow beams of the sun fell on his shoulders like epaulettes. He looked rather absurd, but unusually imposing. His glasses shone. The young people stood in front of him like two lambs.

' Young people,' he said solemnly, ' allow me to congratulate you, as we used to say in the old days, on being legally married. It is very, very pleasant to see young people such as you moving hand in hand towards the attainment of eternal ideals. It is very, very pleasant ! '

After this speech Hippolyte shook hands with them, sat down again, and feeling extremely pleased with himself went on reading File Number 2.

His colleagues at the next table tittered over their inkpots.

The ordinary working day began. No one else disturbed the registrar of marriages and deaths. Through the window Hippolyte could see people hurrying past in the cold spring air, and some of the clerks stood at the window and chatted together about what was happening outside. Towards evening Bezenchuk went by. He had been walking about all day trying to discover whether any one had died.

At last it was time for Hippolyte to leave the office. He put his papers away, hid the felt cushion in the drawer, combed his moustache, and smacked his lips at the thought of the hot soup waiting for him at home. Suddenly the door opened and in came Bezenchuk.

' Hallo ! ' said Hippolyte, smiling, ' what have you got to say for yourself ? '

Bezenchuk did not reply.

' Now then,' said Hippolyte more sternly, ' what do you want ? '

'Look here,' said Bezenchuk. 'What's your opinion of those fellows the Nymphs? What sort of goods do they supply? D'you think they can satisfy people? Why, a coffin means a deal of trouble. See how much wood it takes!'

'What are you talking about?' said Hippolyte.

'I'm talking about those Nymphs. Three families and all of them living on one business. I can't see how they do it. Their material is poor, the finish is cheap, and the tassels are rotten. Now I—I'm an old firm, I am; founded in 1907. My coffins are like cucumbers, select, the work of a craftsman.'

'You're crazy. What on earth is the matter with you?' said Hippolyte abruptly as he moved towards the door. 'You'll go mad one of these fine days, you and your coffins.'

Bezenchuk darted forward, opened the door, allowed Hippolyte to go out first and then followed him.

'You see it was different when the Welcomes were going strong. It was no good trying to compete with them. But, I tell you straight, you won't find better goods anywhere, so don't waste your time looking for them.'

Hippolyte turned his back on him. He was furious with Bezenchuk, and strode rapidly away.

The three Nymphs were at their door, looking as if they had not moved since the morning, looking as if they had not even opened their lips. But there was also a look on their faces as if they knew a thing or two, as if something important had happened.

As soon as Bezenchuk saw his competitors he rushed up behind Hippolyte and whispered: 'I'll let you have it cheap!'

Hippolyte scowled and walked on faster than ever.

'I'll let you have it on tick!' said Bezenchuk.

The three Nymphs did not say anything. They simply watched Hippolyte pass by and bowed politely to him.

Hippolyte was irritated by all these leeches. He ran up the steps of his house, scraped the mud off his boots, and went into the hall feeling ravenous.

Father Theodore, the priest, came out into the hall and without seeing Hippolyte went rapidly down the steps into the street.

Hippolyte noticed that the place looked extra clean, some of the furniture had been moved round, and he smelt a strong smell of medicine. He found Madam Kuznetsov, one of their neighbours, in the sitting-room. She whispered to him: 'Sh! She's worse. She's just been confessing. Don't make such a noise with your boots.'

'I'm not making a noise,' said Hippolyte, 'but what on earth has happened?'

Madam Kuznetsov screwed up her lips and pointed to the bedroom door.

'A dreadful heart attack.' And, obviously repeating some one else's words which sounded important, she added: 'The possibility of a fatal issue is not excluded. I have been on my feet all day long. I came here this morning to borrow the mincer. I see the door open, no one in the kitchen, no one in here either. So I say to myself, "Madam Petukhov has probably gone out to buy some flour for her cakes. She said she wanted some the other day." Of course, you know what it is like with flour nowadays. If you don't buy it well in advance then——'

Madam Kuznetsov would have gone on talking for hours about flour and the prices of things, about how she found Madam Petukhov lying unconscious by the stove and all sorts of other details, but a groan from the next room cut her short. Hippolyte crossed himself furtively and crept into his mother-in-law's room.

CHAPTER II

THE DEATH OF MADAM PETUKHOV

CLAVDIA IVANOVNA PETUKHOV was lying on her back with one arm under her head. She was wearing a glaring yellow boudoir cap which belonged to the days when ladies were just beginning to dance the tango.

There was a triumphant look on her face, but it expressed absolutely nothing. She was staring up at the ceiling.

'Mother,' said Hippolyte in a hushed voice.

His mother-in-law began to move her lips, but instead of the familiar trumpet-blast he heard such a low, pathetic moan that his heart began to ache. A tear unexpectedly rolled down his cheek.

'Mother,' he repeated, 'what's the matter with you?'

But there was no reply. The old woman closed her eyes and turned over on her side.

Madam Kuznetsov tiptoed into the room, took Hippolyte by the hand, and led him away like a boy being dragged off to have his face washed.

'She's gone to sleep and the doctor said she wasn't to be disturbed. So just run to the chemist—here's the prescription—and find out how much an ice-bag costs.'

Hippolyte did what she told him to do, for he felt she was his superior in these matters.

It was a long way to the chemist's and it was almost dark in the street, but in the last rays of the sun he could just see Bezenchuk leaning against his gate munching his supper of bread and onion. A little farther on the three Nymphs were licking their spoons and eating some porridge out of one pot. When they caught sight of Hippolyte they drew themselves up

like soldiers. Bezenchuk shrugged his shoulders and jerking his thumb towards his competitors he muttered :

' Oh, those louts, they're always in the way.'

Round the statue in the square there was a great clacking of tongues about the news of Madam Petukhov's sudden attack. The general verdict was that they would all have to go through it some day, and that anyway what God gives He will take away.

The hairdresser ' Pierre and Constantine ', who, by the way, always answered to the name of Andrew, did not miss this chance of displaying his medical knowledge gleaned from an illustrated Moscow journal.

' Science,' he said, ' can do marvels nowadays. Take this, for instance : a customer may suddenly get a pimple on his chin ; in the old days it might have led to blood poisoning, but nowadays in Moscow, I'm told, although of course I don't know whether it is true or no, every single customer has a specially sterilized shaving-brush.'

The listeners sighed heavily.

' Eh, Andrew, you're exaggerating, aren't you ? '

' Who ever heard of separate brushes for every customer ? What next will the fellow invent ? '

One of his listeners was annoyed : ' Excuse me, sir, but according to the last census there are more than two million people living in Moscow. Do you mean to tell me they would use two million brushes ? That's pretty good, I must say ! '

The discussion was getting rather heated, and goodness knows where it would have led to, but the crowd suddenly saw Hippolyte.

' He's off to the chemist. That's a bad sign.'

' The old girl will die all right. It's not for nothing that Bezenchuk has been dashing about all day like a madman.'

' What's the doctor say ? '

' The doctor ! Where can you find a decent insurance doctor ? Why, they'd put any one under the sod ! '

Andrew, who had been itching to say something more about medicine, said in a solemn voice : ' There's nothing like haemoglobin.'

And having said this he was silent, leaving the rest to think over the marvels of that remedy.

The moon rose. It was time for supper and the idlers went home.

Meanwhile Madam Petukhov was dying. At one minute she asked for water, at another she wanted to get up to fetch Hippolyte's boots which had been taken to be repaired, then she said she would choke with all the dust that was flying about, and then she wanted all the lamps to be lit.

Hippolyte was worn out with anxiety and was pacing up and down the room. Disagreeable thoughts crowded into his head. He would have to take an advance from the Society of Mutual Credit ; he would have to run for the priest and answer letters of sympathy from relations. To distract himself a little he went out on to the top step and in the green light of the moon he suddenly noticed Bezenchuk.

' Well, Mr. Vorobianinov,' he said, ' what are you going to order ? '

' Oh ! I don't know,' said Hippolyte gloomily.

' I tell you the Nymphs aren't any earthly use. What sort of goods can they supply ? '

' Go to the devil ! ' snapped Hippolyte. ' I'm sick to death of the sight of you.'

' Oh ! I—— It's nothing really. I only came to ask you about the tassels and brocade. What'll you have ? Superfine quality A, or what ? '

' No tassels and no brocade. A simple wooden coffin. Pine. D'you hear ? '

Bezenchuk put his finger to his lips to show that he had caught the other man's meaning perfectly, turned on his heel, and staggered home. It was only then Hippolyte realized that the undertaker was drunk.

Hippolyte was disgusted. He could not imagine

how he would be able to go on living in the empty, untidy house. He felt that with the death of his mother-in-law all the little comforts which he had created with such difficulty after the revolution would disappear. The revolution had swept away all his lavish comforts and habits. 'Get married,' he thought to himself; 'who shall I marry? Shall I marry the niece of the head of the military police? Or shall I have a housekeeper? No, that will cost too much.'

The future seemed black to him, and feeling disgusted with everything in general he turned back into the house.

Clavdia Ivanovna had stopped raving. She was lying propped up on her pillows, and as Hippolyte came into the bedroom she looked at him quite sensibly and, as he thought, rather sternly.

'Hippolyte,' she whispered very distinctly, 'come and sit down by my side. I have got something to tell you.'

Hippolyte sat down rather unwillingly and stared at his mother-in-law's thin face. He tried to smile and say something encouraging, but it was a wry smile, and he could not find anything comforting to say. He mumbled something unintelligibly.

'Hippolyte,' she said, 'do you remember our drawing-room furniture?'

'Which furniture?' asked Hippolyte quietly.

'The furniture which was upholstered in English chintz.'

'Oh! you mean in the old home?'

'Yes, in Stargorod.'

'Yes, I remember it very well. There was a sofa, a dozen chairs, and a round table on six legs. It was magnificent furniture, made by Gambs. But why have you suddenly thought of it?'

She could not answer. Her face was beginning to turn grey. Hippolyte caught his breath. He could see the drawing-room in his old home, the walnut

furniture arranged with precision round the room, the polished parquet floor, the old-fashioned brown piano, and his ancestors in their black oval frames on the walls.

Suddenly the invalid said in a dull, hollow voice: 'I hid my diamonds in the seat of one of the chairs.'

Hippolyte stared at the old woman.

'Diamonds?' he said mechanically. 'What diamonds? Didn't they take them away from you when they came to search the house?'

'I hid my diamonds in a chair,' the old woman repeated obstinately.

Hippolyte jumped up and, looking down at her face in the lamplight, he saw that she meant what she said.

'Your diamonds?' he shouted, and was surprised at the force of his own voice, 'in a chair? Who on earth put that idea into your head? Why didn't you give them to me?'

'Why should I give them to you? You'd already squandered all my daughter's money,' replied the old woman venomously.

Hippolyte sat down and immediately jumped up again. His heart was thumping, the blood rushed to his head, his temples were throbbing.

'But you must have taken them out of the chair? Where are they? Have you got them here?'

The old woman shook her head.

'I didn't have time. Don't you remember how quickly we had to get away? I had to leave the diamonds in the chair. It was the one that stood between the terra-cotta lamp and the fireplace.'

'But it was a mad thing to do,' he shouted. 'Oh! you're just like your daughter!'

And regardless of the fact that he was standing by the side of a dying woman, he pushed his chair back impatiently and started to walk up and down the room. The old woman watched him listlessly.

'But surely you've some idea where the chairs went

to, or perhaps you thought they'd stay in the drawing-room waiting for you to come and fetch them ? '

The old woman did not reply.

' Who'd believe that any one could be such a fool as to hide seventy thousand roubles' worth of diamonds in a chair ! In a chair ! And God knows who is sitting on it. Now, at this very minute ! '

A sob came from the bed and the old woman fell over to one side. She tried to clutch Hippolyte with her hand, but it fell heavily back on to the blanket.

Hippolyte was terrified and ran off to their neighbour.

' I think she's dying,' he said.

The neighbour crossed herself in a business-like way, and she and her husband hurried into the house, while Hippolyte, feeling quite dazed, staggered into the town garden.

God knows what passed in his mind. He could hear gipsy choruses and weird music ; he could see Moscow in the winter, fine horses, and all sorts of fantastic pictures. He slackened his pace and stumbled against Bezenchuk, who was lying fast asleep in the middle of the path. The undertaker woke up with a start, sneezed, and jumped to his feet.

' Don't worry, Mr. Vorobianinov,' he said, as if he were continuing their earlier conversation ; ' the coffin will be a good one.'

' She's dead,' said Hippolyte.

' God rest her soul ! So she's dead. Well, well, elderly ladies must die, you know. Your old lady was little and good, and, as we say, she's presented her soul to God.'

' What do you mean ? We say. Who says ? '

' Why, we undertakers. When a good little body like that dies we always say, " Ah ! well, she's gone to face God." Of course when it's an ordinary fellow, a porter or some one like that, then we say, " Ah, well, he's stretched his legs out for the last time." '

Rather staggered by such a queer classification, Hippolyte asked: 'And what will they say when you die?'

'When I die? Oh! I'm nobody. When I die they'll simply wag their heads and say, "So Bezenchuk's gone and snuffed it, eh?"' Then he continued more seriously: 'Now what about that coffin, Mr. Vorobianinov? You didn't really mean you wanted one without tassels and brocade, did you?'

But Hippolyte was again deep in thought and did not reply. Bezenchuk followed him, counting something on his fingers and muttering as usual.

By now Hippolyte had made up his mind.

'I'll go,' he said. 'I'll jolly well go and find them.'

And in his dreams about diamonds his mother-in-law seemed to him to be much nicer than she had ever been before. 'Oh! go to the devil!' he shouted at Bezenchuk. 'Make the best coffin you've ever made in your life. Tassels and fringes and anything else you like!'

CHAPTER III

THE MIRROR OF SIN

AFTER listening to the dying woman's confession, Father Theodore left Hippolyte's house in great agitation and walked down the road, smiling absent-mindedly to himself. He was nearly run over by a motor-car and only just escaped out of the petrol fumes, but forgetting the dignity of his calling and age, he set off home at a gallop.

His wife was laying the table for supper. On days when there were no vespers Father Theodore liked to have supper early, but this time he took off his hat and coat and, much to the surprise of his wife, ran straight into the bedroom, locked the door, and began to pray in a loud, monotonous voice. 'There's something in the wind,' his wife thought to herself rather anxiously. 'I wonder what's the matter?'

Father Theodore was never at peace. He had never known what peace was, not even in the days when he had been a student at the theological college. After that he had studied law for three years at the university, but taking fright at the idea of being called up for military service in 1915, he again returned to the Church. First he was made a deacon, then ordained a priest, and finally appointed to this provincial town. Wherever he had been, and in whatever calling, he had always been greedy for gain, and had had dreams of making money.

One of his dreams was to own a candle factory. Tormented by visions of great vats of wax, he pictured to himself the time when he would be able to buy a little factory of his own.

His ideas came by fits and starts, and as soon as they came he began to scheme and make plans. Once

he tried soap. He made tons and tons of soap ; but although he used pounds of fat, the soap would not lather, and, besides, it cost three times as much as the soap at the co-operative stores. It lay about the house for months until at last it had to be thrown on to the rubbish heap.

Another time he read in some farmers' journal that rabbit flesh was as tender as chicken, that rabbits multiply rapidly, and that breeding them was very profitable. So he bought half a dozen rabbits, and two months later there were so many lop-ears in the backyard that their pet terrier took fright and ran away. The folk in the town were surprisingly conservative and seemed to have mutually sworn never to buy a rabbit. Father Theodore talked the matter over with his wife, and they both decided to test for themselves whether rabbit was really as good as chicken. They had roast rabbit, baked rabbit, stewed rabbit, minced rabbit ; stews and soups made of rabbit ; rabbit was served up hot for dinner and cold for supper and put under crusts for pies. But it did not seem to make any difference. Father Theodore worked it out that even if they ate nothing but rabbit all the week round they could not possibly eat more than forty rabbits a month, while their rabbits were breeding at the rate of ninety a month, and each month the numbers would grow.

So they decided to cook meals for other people. Father Theodore spent a whole evening writing out notices about ' The villa where you can get tasty, wholesome dinners cooked exclusively with fresh butter.' The advertisement began with the words, ' Cheap and Tasty '. The priest's wife then filled an enamel basin with flour paste, and late one night Father Theodore went out and stuck the notices up on all the telegraph poles and on the walls near the Government offices.

This venture was a huge success. On the very first

day seven people came in for dinner. They thought the dinner was excellent. The next day fourteen people came. There was hardly enough time to skin the beasts. Throughout the week everything went with a swing, and Father Theodore was already dreaming of opening a tannery when an absolutely unexpected thing happened. The co-operative stores had been closed for stocktaking for three weeks and they now re-opened. Out into the backyard, which was shared with Father Theodore, the co-operative workers rolled a barrel of rotten cabbage ; it was tossed on to the rubbish heap. Attracted by such an unusual smell all the rabbits ran to the heap. Next morning the rabbits were ill ; they had been struck down with a curious disease which lasted for only three hours, but it laid the whole lot low. The breeders, the litters, the large and the small rabbits, every single one of them died.

Father Theodore was broken-hearted and could not do anything for two whole months. He was only just beginning to take heart again. And now he had come back from Hippolyte's house, and to his wife's surprise sat locked up in his bedroom. All this pointed to the fact that something else had come into his mind.

She tapped gently at the bedroom door. There was no answer, but the chanting went on louder and louder. A minute later the door opened and Father Theodore's face appeared in the opening. His face was flushed with excitement.

' My dear,' he said rapidly, ' bring me some scissors. Quick ! '

' What about your supper ? '

' Oh, that can wait ! ' he retorted.

He snatched the scissors out of her hand, locked himself up in the room again, and went up to the oval looking-glass on the wall. There was a popular picture hanging on the wall next to the looking-glass, called ' The Mirror of Sin '. It was painted by hand,

and after his mishap with the rabbits it had been peculiarly consoling to Father Theodore, for it illustrated the vanity of earthly things. At the top of the picture there were four small pictures, and underneath these were the words, ' Shem prays, Ham sews, and Japheth hath power. Death rules all.' Death stood holding a scythe and an hour-glass. The picture reminded Theodore that such silly things as rabbits did not count in the long run. At this moment he preferred to look at the small picture ' Japheth hath power '. Japheth, sitting on a throne, was a fat, prosperous man with a long beard.

The priest smiled as he looked at himself in the mirror and began to trim his beard. Snippets of hair fell on to the floor, the scissors squeaked, and five minutes later he was convinced he was no good at cutting a beard. It was uneven at one side and looked awful. He was annoyed and called his wife. Handing her the scissors, he said testily : ' Here, you might at least help. I'm blessed if I can cut my beard properly.'

She looked at him in horror.

' What do you think you're doing ? '

' Doing ? Nothing ; just cutting my beard, that's all. Please help me. It's a bit crooked.'

' Surely, darling, you're not thinking of going over to the New Church ? '

Father Theodore was quite pleased at this turn in the conversation.

' Well, and why shouldn't I go over to the New Church ? Aren't their priests as much men as ours are ? '

' Of course, of course,' she said, and then added sarcastically, ' of course they are men. They go to concerts and keep fine ladies.'

' Then I shall go to concerts too.'

' Do ! I shan't stop you.'

' All right ! I'll go ! '

'Eh, you'll soon get sick of it all. Just look at yourself in the mirror.'

He looked and saw a rather daring face, two bright black eyes, a small, wild beard, and a stupid, drooping moustache.

They trimmed his moustache and made it a decent size. What followed simply amazed his wife. He announced that this very evening he had to go away on business, and insisted that she should run to her brother, the baker, and borrow his brown suit for a week and his coat with the astrakhan collar.

'I shan't dream of going,' she said, beginning to cry.

For half an hour the priest marched up and down the room, frightening his wife with his face, that looked so different, and with the absolute rubbish that he talked. All she could understand was that he had cut off his beard for no reason at all, that he wanted to travel goodness knows where in a ridiculous coat, and that he wanted to leave her, his wife.

'I'm not throwing you over,' he said. 'I tell you I'll be back in a week's time for certain. After all, a man can have business, can't he?'

'No, he can't,' she retorted, and began to weep.

Father Theodore, who was usually a very mild man when dealing with others, brought his fist down on to the table with a loud bang that so terrified his wife that she threw a shawl over her head and ran out to borrow the clothes.

Left alone, the priest thought for a moment, and then said to himself, as he pulled out a small tin trunk from under his bed: 'Of course it is rather hard on a woman.' He opened the trunk and tossed out a number of magazines that were lying on the top: *The Russian Pilgrim* for the year 1903; a fairly bulky volume, *The History of the Schism*; and a pamphlet called *Russians in Italy*, which had a picture of Vesuvius in eruption on the cover. He thrust his hand down to the bottom of the trunk and pulled out

an old bonnet belonging to his wife. A smell of naphthaline made him screw up his nose and eyes. He pulled out of a bundle a heavy little roll made of linen in which he found some twenty gold pieces of ten roubles each. This was all that was left of Father Theodore's ventures in business. He lifted the hem of his cassock, thrust the money into his striped trousers pocket, and then went up to the chest of drawers. Here he took out an old chocolate box in which he found fifty roubles in notes, and, leaving twenty roubles behind, he put the rest into his pocket.

'That'll be enough for the housekeeping,' he decided.

CHAPTER IV

THE MUSE OF DISTANT JOURNEYS

AN hour before the arrival of the evening express Father Theodore, dressed in a short overcoat reaching just below his knees, and carrying a basket in his hand, stood in the queue at the ticket-office. He cast furtive glances towards the door, for he was terrified that his wife would not obey him and would run to the station to see him off. Then, of course, a friend of his who was sitting in the refreshment-room treating another man to beer would recognize him immediately.

It was the usual disorderly business trying to get into the train, where none of the seats could be reserved. The passengers, bent down under the weight of enormous bundles, ran hither and thither from one end of the train to the other, looking for seats. Father Theodore, like all the rest of them, was running about like a madman, and like all the rest he spoke to the guard politely and was afraid they'd given him the wrong ticket. It was only when he got into the train and sat down that he began to feel better and to cheer up again.

The engine blew its whistle and the train began to move out, taking Father Theodore on a strange, mysterious mission which promised great things.

As soon as a man sets out on a journey he changes his life completely. He is immediately approached by porters in white overalls, who wear nickel labels over their hearts and who obligingly seize his luggage. From that moment the traveller ceases to belong to himself. He is a passenger and he has to do what other passengers do.

A passenger eats a great deal. Ordinary people do

not eat in the middle of the night, but a passenger always does. He eats a roast chicken which at other times he cannot afford. He eats hard-boiled eggs that are indigestible and bad for him. When the train bumps, numerous kettles clatter about on the floor, and parcels get lost. But the passengers do not bother about this. They exchange anecdotes, and regularly every three minutes the whole carriage roars with laughter. A moment's silence and then somebody else begins another tale, and then again laughter.

The Muse of Distant Journeys lures a man. She has already made Father Theodore forsake his quiet home, and now the former member of the nobility, Hippolyte Matveyevich Vorobianinov, has been moved by her call and has made heaven knows what kind of plans.

The day after the funeral, which was conducted by the undertaker Bezenchuk, Hippolyte went to work as usual and, fulfilling his duty, registered the death of his own mother-in-law. 'Clavdia Ivanovna Petukhov, aged fifty-nine, householder, non-party, domiciled in the provincial town N——, originating from the town of Stargorod.' After this he asked for a fortnight's leave, received forty-one roubles, and after saying good-bye to his colleagues went home. On his way he dropped in to see the chemist. The chemist, Leopold, was standing behind the counter surrounded by little bottles of poison, and was busy selling some Crême Angot to a relation of the captain of the fire brigade. As a matter of fact, she was asking him for Poudre Rachel, but as he had not any of this powder in stock he was trying to get rid of some Crême Angot. He succeeded in the end, but it took him half an hour to persuade the lady. At last he turned to Hippolyte.

'What can I do for you?'

'I want something for my hair.'

'To make it grow? To remove hair or to dye it?'

'To make it grow! What nonsense!' said Hippolyte. 'I want a good dye.'

'Oh! if you want to dye it, here's a wonderful preparation called "Titanic". I've just got it in from the customs' office; it's contraband. It won't come off either with hot or cold water, soap, or even petrol. It's deep black, and a bottle that will last you half a year costs only three roubles and twelve copecks. And as you're a good customer of mine, I don't mind telling you I can most strongly recommend it.'

Hippolyte turned the square bottle of 'Titanic' round in his hand, examined the label, sighed, and then put his money down on the counter.

At home he began to sprinkle his head and moustache with the dye. There was a most appalling stench.

After dinner the smell was not so bad, but his moustache was dry and glued together. It was with great difficulty that he combed it out. The black colour seemed to have a green sheen on it, but there was no time to dip his hair a second time.

He took a list of jewels out of his mother-in-law's box, which he had found the previous day. He then counted all his ready money, locked up the house, put the key in his pocket, and taking Express Number 7 set off for Stargorod.

CHAPTER V

THE GREAT SCHEMER

AT half-past eleven one morning a young man of about twenty-eight arrived in Stargorod. An urchin came running up to him.

'Give us a copper!' he asked cheekily.

The young man pulled a warm apple out of his pocket and gave it to the boy, but the urchin would not leave him alone. The man stopped, looked down at the boy, and said sarcastically: 'Perhaps you'd like the key of my room where I keep my money?'

The ragamuffin saw it was hopeless and ran away.

The young man was a liar. He neither had money, nor a room to put money in, nor a key to lock up the room. He did not even possess an overcoat. He was wearing a tight-fitting suit made of green cloth, an old woollen scarf which was wound twice round his neck, patent leather boots with bright yellow suède tops; and no socks. In his right hand he was holding an astrolabe.

'Tralalee, tralalo, tralalum,' he hummed as he went up the street towards the market. Here he had work to do. He pushed his way into a line of hawkers, held out the astrolabe, and began to shout: 'Who wants an astrolabe? An astrolabe! Going cheap. Discount allowed for delegates and women's educational societies!'

There was no demand for this curious article. The housewives were too interested in the haberdashery booths. A secret agent of the police passed the young man twice, but, as the astrolabe did not in the least resemble the typewriter which had been stolen from the Butter Trust, he stopped trying to hypnotize the young man and walked on.

Towards dinner-time a locksmith bought the astrolabe for three roubles.

'It measures all right,' said the young man to his customer, 'so long as there is something to measure.'

Having got rid of his curious instrument the young man went into 'The Corner of Taste' for dinner. After that he set off to have a look round the town. In Soviet Street he stopped outside a fine-looking, two-storied building marked 'Number 28. S.S.R., R.S.F.S.R. Second House of Social Assurance.' He stopped to get a light from the porter who was sitting on a stone bench outside the gate.

'Well, old man,' said he, taking a puff at his cigarette, 'any young women to marry in your town?'

The old man did not show any surprise.

'Some like fine mares and some like nags. Tastes differ,' he replied, being quite ready to talk.

'I've no more questions to ask,' said the young man rapidly, and immediately asked another: 'Such a fine house and no girls?'

'Girls? Why they've been hunting with lanterns for our girls in the next world for many a long day. They've left us only the old crocks. Don't you know what this is? It's the State workhouse, where everything is found for 'em and full board included.'

'Oh! I see,' said the young man. 'So this lot were born before the historical materialism came into fashion?'

'That's right. They were born when they were born.'

'And what was here before then?'

'When?'

'Why, then, in the old days before the revolution.'

'Oh, then! Why, my master lived here.'

'Was he a *bourgeois*?'

'*Bourgeois* yourself. He was no *bourgeois*. He was a marshal of nobility.'

'You mean a proletarian?'

'Proletarian yourself. He was a marshal, I tell you.'

This conversation with the clever porter, who seemed a little weak in disentangling the differences between the social classes, would have gone on for ever if the young man had not taken the matter into his own hands.

'I tell you what,' he said, 'it wouldn't be a bad idea if we went and had a drink.'

'All right. You can treat me,' said the porter.

They disappeared for about an hour, and when they returned the porter was the young man's best friend.

'I think I'll stop the night with you,' said the young man.

'Oh! you seem a decent enough fellow; you can stop the rest of your days here, if you like.'

Now that he had got what he wanted so quickly, the young man hurried into the porter's room, took off his boots, stretched himself on a bench, and began to think out his plan of action for the morrow.

The young man's name was Ostap Bender. Whenever he talked about himself and his life he would give only one detail.

'My father,' he used to say, 'was a Turkish subject.'

Throughout his career this son of a Turkish subject had jumped from occupation to occupation. He was so energetic that he had never been able to devote himself to any one particular job. He had been tossed from one end of Russia to the other, and now fate had tossed him into Stargorod without socks, without a room to call his own, without a key, and without money.

As he lay in the porter's stuffy room he began to think over two possible plans for his future which he had long had in mind. He might become a polygamist and roam from town to town taking his last wife's valuables with him in a trunk. He might try the orphanage authorities and ask them to distribute a picture he had not yet painted—a really good picture, something like Repin's famous canvas: 'The Cossacks

writing a letter to the Sultan', only his would be called: 'The Bolsheviks writing a letter to Austen Chamberlain'. If his work of art were successful it might bring in as much as four hundred roubles.

He had thought out these ideas the last time he was in Moscow. The first had come to him after reading in the evening papers that a polygamist had been sentenced to two years only, and without any solitary confinement. The other idea had come into his head in the picture gallery. But both projects had their drawbacks. He could not very well make much of a show as a polygamist unless he had an immaculate grey suit and ten roubles for expenses. Of course he could get married in his green suit, for he was quite handsome and irresistible enough for any provincial Marguerite, but he would not be able to get hold of the right type of girl. And it would not be so easy with the picture. There might be technical difficulties. What would happen if he were to paint Comrade Kalinin in a high Cossack hat, and what would Comrade Chicherin think if he were to see himself naked to the waist in a picture? Of course he could leave the various people in their everyday clothes, but that would not be the same thing.

'No!' he said aloud, 'it wouldn't be so effective.'

Then he suddenly realized that the porter was talking animatedly to him, and was pouring out his reminiscences about the former owner of the house.

'Yes, and the head of the police always used to salute him. . . . I used to go and see him on New Year's Day to wish him a happy new year and he'd give me three roubles. . . . And at Easter another three roubles. And on his birthday I'd go and wish him many happy returns. And out of those congratulations I'd make something like fifteen roubles. . . . He even promised me a medal once. "I want my porter to wear a medal," he said. "So you just consider you've got one."'

'Did you get one?' asked Bender.

'You wait,' said the other. 'He used to say: "I've no use for a porter without a medal." He went to Petersburg for the medal, but nothing happened. Those gentlemen in the Civil Service wouldn't hear of it. "The Tsar has gone abroad," they said, "and it's quite impossible at present." So my master told me to wait. "You wait," says he. "I'll see you get a medal."'

'What happened to your master? Was he shot?' suddenly asked Bender.

'Shot? No one shot him. He went off on his own. What was there for him to do here? Sit round with the soldiers? And they don't give medals out nowadays.'

'Of course they do,' said Bender, 'I can see to that for you.'

The porter looked at Bender with admiration.

'Yes,' he said, 'I ought to have a medal. It's no joke being without a medal.'

'Where did your master go to?'

'Goodness knows. Some said he went to Paris.'

'Oh! So he ran off abroad, eh?'

'Abroad yourself. He went to Paris and they took his house for the old women. You can go and say: "Many happy returns" to them as long as you like, but you won't get anything for it. Eh! he was a good master, he was.'

At that moment a rusty bell was pulled at the door. The porter grumbled, shuffled off, opened the door, and started back. To his amazement there stood on the top step Hippolyte Matveyevich Vorobianinov with a black moustache, black hair, and his eyes shining behind a pair of pince-nez as they used to shine before the War.

'Master!' shouted the porter excitedly. 'From Paris!'

Hippolyte was confused by the presence of a stranger.

Over the top of the table he caught sight of two bare feet, and he immediately turned to go out again. But Bender jumped up and bowed deeply from the waist.

'Of course this isn't Paris,' said Bender. 'But welcome—welcome, my dear sir!'

'Paris?' said Hippolyte. 'I've not been anywhere near Paris.' And he turned to the porter. 'What put that idea into your head?'

But Bender did not give the porter a chance to speak.

'Splendid!' said he, squinting out at Hippolyte cunningly. 'Splendid! You've come, no doubt, from the village to visit your late grandma?'

Having said this he put his arms round the porter and very gently pushed him out of the room and closed the door. When he had recovered from his surprise the porter realized that his master had come from Paris, that he, the porter, had been put out of his own room, and that he was clutching a rouble note in his left hand. He was so delighted at the sight of the money that he went to the nearest inn and ordered himself several pints of good beer.

After carefully locking the door behind the porter, Bender turned to Hippolyte, who was still standing in the middle of the room, and said to him: 'Keep calm, my dear friend. My name is Bender. Perhaps you've heard of it before?"

'I have never heard of it,' said Hippolyte rather nervously.

'Now I come to think of it, they probably don't know the name of Ostap Bender in Paris. Was it warm when you left Paris? It's a fine town. I have a married cousin living there. Not long ago she sent me a silk handkerchief in a registered letter.'

'What nonsense!' said Hippolyte. 'What do you mean with your silk handkerchief? I've not come from Paris but from——'

'Oh! well,' said Bender, 'perhaps it was Morshansk?'

Hippolyte had never had to deal with any one like Bender before and he felt uncomfortable.

'Well,' said Hippolyte, 'I think I must be going.'

'Going?' said Bender. 'There's no need for you to hurry, I'm sure. The secret police will come soon enough to see you.'

Hippolyte could not think of an answer. He unbuttoned his shabby overcoat, sat down on the bench, and glowered at Bender.

'I don't know what you're driving at,' he said rather weakly.

'It's not difficult. You'll soon understand. Just wait a bit.'

Bender put his boots on, started to walk up and down the room, and then began: 'Which frontier did you cross? The Polish? French? Rumanian? An expensive pleasure, no doubt. A friend of mine crossed the frontier recently. He lives on our side of the frontier and his wife's relations are on the other side. Then he had a quarrel with his wife. She ran across the frontier back to her parents. My friend sat alone for three days and saw it was no laughing matter. There was no dinner and the rooms were getting dirty, so he decided to make it up with her. He set out one evening to cross the frontier, but he was collared and put into prison for six months, and now they say the wife has come back, the fool, but her husband is sitting in prison. . . . So you also crossed the Polish frontier?'

'I didn't do anything of the kind,' said Hippolyte. 'My word of honour I didn't,' he added, for he felt that this young man was obstructing his way to the diamonds. 'I am a subject of Soviet Russia. After all, I can show you my passport.'

'With the present rapid development of printing in the West it is easy enough to make a Bolshevik passport. It's even silly of you to mention it. One of my friends went so far as to print American dollars,

and you know how difficult it is to forge dollars. You need special technical knowledge for that. He managed to pass them on the Moscow Exchange, and then it turned out that his grandfather had bought them down in Kiev and was completely ruined. For, after all, the dollars were false. So you never know, there may be a slip with your passport.'

Hippolyte was furious that instead of looking for the diamonds he was fastened in here in the porter's room listening to the rattling tongue of an impudent fellow who went on and on about the shady transactions of his friends. But he could not get away, and he was beginning to be afraid of this young man. He might go about the town telling people that the late marshal of nobility had returned, and that would be an end to everything. They might even put him in prison.

'You won't tell any one that you've seen me?' said Hippolyte pleadingly. 'They might really think that I'd come back from abroad.'

'Now that's excellent!' said Bender. 'First there's the truant who comes back to his native town and then he's afraid of prison!'

'But I've told you a thousand times that I've not been abroad.'

'Well, where have you been? And why have you come here?"

'I've come—— Well, I've come from another town on business.'

'What business?'

'Well, if you must know, on personal business.'

'And then you try to make out that you're not one of the old régime. One of my friends also came back and——'

At this, Hippolyte was almost desperate and gave in.

'All right,' he said. 'I'll tell you everything.'

'After all,' he thought to himself, 'it will be difficult without some assistance. And this fellow seems to be a thorough rogue. Such a man may be very useful.'

CHAPTER VI

DIAMOND DREAMS

HIPPOLYTE took off his shabby felt hat, combed his moustache, and after resolutely clearing his throat told Ostap Bender, the first man he had happened to meet, all that he had learnt from his dying mother-in-law about the diamonds.

During the story Ostap jumped up several times, went across to the stove, and shouted: 'Gentlemen of the jury, the ice is broken! The ice is broken!'

An hour later the two men were sitting at a rickety table. Their heads together, they were reading a long list of jewellery which had at one time decorated the mother-in-law's fingers, neck, ears, breast, and hair. Hippolyte was constantly adjusting his pince-nez and repeating: 'Three strands of pearls. How well I remember them! Two with forty pearls and the large one with a hundred and ten pearls. A diamond necklace. My mother-in-law used to say it was an antique and had cost four thousand . . .'

Then there were rings, not thick or clumsy engagement rings, but thin, elegant rings set with beautiful diamonds; there were dazzling ear-rings, bracelets shaped like serpents with emerald scales, a necklace that had cost a harvest from five hundred dessiatines of land, a pearl ring, and, to crown all, a tiara worth forty thousand roubles.

Hippolyte looked round. He thought he could see emeralds glowing in the corners of the porter's dingy room, diamonds sparkling up near the ceiling, and pearls rolling over the table and jumping about the floor. His dream was broken by Bender's voice.

'It's not such a bad selection. The stones seem to have been chosen with taste. What's it all worth?'

'Seventy, perhaps seventy-five, thousand.'

'H'm, that means it's worth a hundred and fifty thousand to-day.'

'What? As much as that?' Hippolyte asked.

'Certainly not less. But you, my friend, you should leave this matter alone. Nothing will come of it.'

'What do you mean?'

'Just what I say. How many chairs were there?'

'A dozen. It was a drawing-room suite.'

'The suite has probably gone up in smoke long ago.'

Hippolyte was so alarmed at this that he jumped up from his seat.

'Gently, gently,' said Bender. 'I'm taking this matter in hand. The conference is not yet at an end; you and I must draw up a little agreement together.'

Breathing heavily, Hippolyte expressed his consent with a nod, and Bender began to work out the conditions.

'In the event of our realizing the treasure, I, as a participator and technical adviser in this affair, shall receive sixty per cent. You don't need to worry about paying insurance for me—that doesn't matter to me.'

'Why, it's daylight robbery!' said Hippolyte, turning pale.

'But how much did you think of offering me?'

'Well, perhaps five per cent or ten per cent at the most. After all, that is fifteen thousand roubles.'

'Are you quite sure you don't want anything else out of me?'

'N-no.'

'Oh! I thought you might want me to work for nothing and give you the key of my room where I keep my money and tell you how to escape the police.'

'Excuse me,' said Hippolyte. 'I have every reason to believe I can manage this business by myself.'

'Oh!' said Bender, 'in that case you must excuse me, for I too have every reason to believe I can manage this business alone.'

'You bounder!' shouted Hippolyte, trembling with rage.

But Bender remained perfectly calm.

'Listen, my friend. Don't you know the diamonds are almost in my pocket, and that you only interest me because I want to provide for your old age?'

It was only then that Hippolyte realized what an iron grip held him by the throat.

'Twenty per cent,' he said gloomily.

'And my board?' asked Bender sarcastically.

'Twenty-five.'

'And the key of my room?'

'But that means thirty-seven and a half thousand!'

'Why such accuracy? Well, then, let's say fifty per cent. Half to you and half to me.'

The bargaining continued until in the end, out of respect for Hippolyte, Bender agreed to work for forty per cent.

'Sixty thousand!' cried Hippolyte.

'You're rather a mean fellow. You love money more than you should.'

'Don't you love money?' said Hippolyte.

'Certainly not!'

'Then what do you want sixty thousand for?'

'On principle.'

Hippolyte sighed.

'Well,' asked Bender, 'is the ice broken?'

Hippolyte groaned and then said meekly: 'Yes, it's broken.'

'Let's shake hands on it, old marshal of the district scouts. The ice is broken!"

Hippolyte was offended at being called the marshal of the district scouts. He insisted on an apology, and after Bender had called him a field-marshal in his apology they began to work out the plan.

. . . . .

At midnight the porter came home; after hanging

on to all the railings he managed to drag himself down to his room.

'Welcome, O brother proletarian of intellectual work! Brother of the broom, welcome!' cried Bender as he caught sight of the drunken porter.

The porter muttered something unintelligible.

'Your porter,' said Bender, turning to Hippolyte, 'isn't up to much. How can a fellow get so drunk on a rouble?'

'He can,' said the porter suddenly.

'Listen, my man,' began Hippolyte. 'Have you any idea what happened to my furniture?'

Bender was carefully holding the porter up, so that they could hear what he would say. Hippolyte was eagerly waiting for his reply, but all that he said in a deafening roar was: 'Those were jolly-olly-olly days.'

Then there was an uproar in the room. The porter began to bellow a song as he threw himself round the room—now diving under the table, now banging himself against the furniture, and finally falling down on his knees. He was very merry.

'We shall have to suspend the cross-examination of witnesses until the morning,' said Bender. 'Let us go to bed.'

They carried the porter, who by now was sleeping like a log, on to the bench, and they decided to share the porter's single bed. Bender was wearing a red and black check shirt under his coat, but he was naked under the shirt, whereas Hippolyte was wearing two waistcoats, a shirt, and an undervest.

'You should sell me one of those waistcoats,' said Bender as he looked at the bright blue one enviously. 'It would suit me beautifully. Sell it to me.'

Hippolyte did not like to refuse his new companion, and, although he frowned, he agreed to sell the waistcoat for eight roubles.

'Payment,' said Bender as he took hold of the waistcoat, 'shall be made on realization of the treasure.'

'No, no!' said Hippolyte, going red in the face, 'I can't agree to that. Give me that waistcoat back.'

Bender's sensitive nature was disgusted.

'That's being petty!' he shouted. 'Fancy beginning a business of one hundred and fifty thousand roubles and then quarrelling about eight roubles. You should be more generous.'

Hippolyte grew redder in the face, pulled out a small memorandum block, and entered into it: '25.4.27. Given to Bender: eight roubles.' Bender looked over his shoulder.

'Oho!' said he, 'so you're opening my personal account, are you? Then you should keep it properly. You should draw up a debit as well as a credit. Don't forget to enter sixty thousand roubles on the debit side and the waistcoat can go to your credit. Total in my favour equals fifty-nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-two roubles. That's something to be going on with.'

After this Bender went to bed and slept the sleep of the just. Hippolyte took off his boots and trousers, kept his darned Jaeger underwear on, and then crept under the blanket. He was very uncomfortable. He was cold, there was not enough blanket, and Bender took up too much room. All three had dreams.

Hippolyte had black dreams. He saw microbes, the police, and Bezenchuk the undertaker.

Bender dreamt of the volcano, Fujiyama, and of Taras Bulba selling picture post cards of the new electric power station on the Dnieper.

And the porter dreamt that a horse had run out of its stable. He searched for it all night but without finding it, and next morning he woke up worn out and depressed. For a long time he looked with amazement at the two men sleeping in his bed, and, unable to make anything of it, he went out with his broom to clean up the road, pick up the rubbish and shout at the old women from the workhouse.

CHAPTER VII

TRACES OF THE 'TITANIC'

HIPPOLYTE woke up as usual at half-past seven. He mumbled '*Guten Morgen*' to himself and then went off to wash. He thoroughly enjoyed himself as he splashed about and shook his head trying to get the water out of his ears. He always enjoyed drying himself, but this time, as he looked at the towel, he suddenly noticed that it was smeared with the black stuff he had used on his moustache. His heart sank; he took out his pocket mirror and looked into it. He saw a large nose and the left side of a moustache which was as green as grass. He hastily shifted the mirror so that he could see the right side of his moustache. It was the same disgusting colour. He lowered his head as he if were going to butt at the mirror and saw that the centre of his hair was black while the edges were bright green.

Hippolyte groaned so loudly that Bender heard him and opened his clear blue eyes.

'You've gone mad!' he exclaimed, and promptly closed his eyes again.

'Comrade Bender!' whispered the 'Titanic's' victim.

Bender woke up after many prods and digs in his ribs. He sat up, looked at Hippolyte attentively, and then burst out laughing.

'You're a heartless beast!' said Hippolyte as his moustache trembled nervously.

This only made Bender more hilarious, and he went into fits of laughter which lasted for at least ten minutes. Then growing more serious he said: 'What are you looking at me like that for? You and your green moustache! You're looking at me as if I were a louse. Just you look at yourself!'

'But the chemist swore it was a fast dye and would neither wash off in hot or cold water, soap water, nor even in petrol. And he said it was contraband.'

'Contraband! Anything contraband comes out of Odessa. Show me the bottle. I thought so. Look at that. Did you read that?'

'Yes.'

'No, I mean this—these words in small letters. It says quite distinctly that after washing the hair in hot or cold water, soapy water, or even in petrol that you ought never to rub the hair with a towel, but dry it in the sun or before a "Primus" stove. Why didn't you do what it told you? Now where can you go with such a lime-tree?'

Hippolyte was crestfallen. The porter came in and on seeing his master's moustache got such a shock that he immediately crossed himself. Then he asked his master for some money for a drink so that he might clear his head.

'Give him a rouble,' said Bender. 'After all, he's a hero of toil. Only don't put it down to my account. It's a personal matter between you and your former servant.' And then turning to the porter he continued: 'Hi! wait a minute, uncle; we've got something to say to you.'

Bender drew the porter into conversation about the furniture, and in five minutes the partners knew everything. In 1919 all the furniture had been removed to the House Department with the exception of one drawing-room chair, which had stood in the porter's room at first, but later it had been confiscated by the superintendent of the workhouse.

'Oh! so it's in this house?'

'Yes, it's here.'

'Then tell me,' said Hippolyte, almost bursting with excitement, 'when you had the chair did you mend it at all?"

'Mend it? No, it didn't need mending. Work was

done well in the old days. Why, such a chair would have lasted another thirty years.'

'Well, my friend, here's a rouble for you. Mind you don't tell any one that I've come back to the town.'

'I'll be as silent as the grave, Citizen Vorobianinov.'

The porter went out and Bender again turned to the subject of Hippolyte's moustache.

'You'll have to dye it again. Give me some money and I'll go to the chemist. That "Titanic" of yours isn't any earthly use. It wouldn't even dye a poodle.'

Bender soon returned with a fresh bottle of dye.

'I've brought you some "Naiad". Perhaps that will be better than your "Titanic". Take off your waistcoat.'

The business of re-dyeing began, but the blending of the new auburn dye and the remains of the 'Titanic' only resulted in a mixture of all the colours of the rainbow.

Hippolyte, who had not had any breakfast, stormed up and down the room and raged against all manufacturers of hair dyes, both Government and contraband.

'You can't walk round Soviet Russia with an ultra-violet moustache. You'll have to shave it off.'

'I can't,' said Hippolyte. 'It's impossible!'

'What? Is your moustache such a treasure?'

'I can't!' repeated Hippolyte, in a dejected voice.

'Oh! well, you can stop here for the rest of your days and I'll go and find the chairs. By the way, the first chair is just over our heads.'

'All right. Shave it off!'

Bender looked round the room for the scissors, found them, and clipped off the ends of the moustache, which fell noiselessly to the floor. Taking the last razor blade from his pocket-book he began to shave Hippolyte's head. Hippolyte was almost weeping.

'I'm wasting my last razor blade on you,' said Bender. 'Don't forget to put it down to my credit. Two roubles, please, for a cut and a shave.'

Hippolyte was trembling with emotion.

'Why such a price? It only costs forty copecks anywhere else.'

'Because of our conspiracy,' said Bender.

A man suffers incredible torture when his head is being shaved with a safety razor. Hippolyte knew this from the start, but he had to go through with it.

'Now, now,' said Bender, 'that's all right. It's all over.'

Hippolyte shook the bits of green hair from his shoulders and looked at himself in the mirror. He was agreeably surprised. A face distorted with suffering looked out at him. It was the face of a fairly young actor who had no engagement.

'Now then, advance, quick march!' said Bender, 'the trumpet calls. I'll go to the House Department, or rather to the place where it used to be. Meanwhile, you go and see the old women.'

'I can't!' said Hippolyte. 'It'll be too painful. It'll be too much for me to go into my old home again.'

'Ah! yes. I forgot. It would be upsetting. The baron returns from abroad. All right, you can go to the House Department and I shall work here. Our rallying point: the porter's room. Now then, quick march!'

CHAPTER VIII

A NERVOUS THIEF

THE superintendent of the home for the aged was a faint-hearted thief. He protested with all his being against theft, but he could not refrain from thieving. He stole and was ashamed of stealing. He stole constantly and was constantly ashamed of himself, and as a result his cheeks glowed from a mixture of shame and embarrassment. His name was Alexander Yakovlevich and his wife was called Alexandra Yakovlevna. He called her Sashkin and she called him Alkin. The world had never known such a thief as Alexander Yakovlevich.

He was not only the superintendent of the home for the aged but the director as well. The former superintendent had lost his job for bad treatment of the inmates. Alkin was in no way like his ignorant predecessor—he treated the inmates politely, and introduced important reforms and improvements.

Ostap Bender opened the heavy oak door of Hippolyte's former home and went into the hall. He could smell burnt porridge, and he could hear people talking loudly in the rooms above. From the distance it sounded as if they were cheering, but there was no one in the hall and no one appeared. There were two flights of stairs leading up from the hall, which had at one time been polished. On the stairs the eyes had been left in their places, but the rods that used to press the carpet down had long since disappeared.

'This fellow Hippolyte knew how to live,' thought Bender as he went up the staircase. 'Such luxury is positively indecent.'

He found a circle of some eighteen old women sitting in the first room. They were all dressed in the cheapest

mouse-coloured material. They were straining their necks towards a young man who was standing in the middle of the ring. This was the choirmaster, dressed in a coat and trousers of the same grey cloth, and he was beating time with both hands.

'Softer there, sopranos,' he was saying. 'Gentler, Kokushkina!'

He turned round and saw Bender, but, unable to control his hands, he simply glared at him and went on conducting. The choir made a great effort, but it sounded as if the music were coming through a pillow.

'Ta-ra-ra, ta-ra-ra, ta-ra-ra-ra-ra-ra!'

'Ta-ra-rum, ta-ra-roo, ta-ra-ra-ra-ra-ra!'

'Tell me,' said Bender, 'where can I find the head of this home?'

'Why, what d'you want, comrade?'

Bender went forward, shook hands with the conductor, and asked him genially: 'Folk songs? Very interesting! I am the inspector of fire preventives.'

The superintendent blushed. 'Oh! yes,' he said, 'you've just come at the right time. I was just thinking of writing a report.'

'Don't you bother,' said Bender magnanimously. 'I can write the report myself. Well now, let's have a look at the building.'

Alkin dismissed the choir with a wave of the hand, and the little old women tripped away with small, mincing steps.

'Kindly follow me,' invited the superintendent. But before moving Bender had a good look at the furniture in the room, which consisted of a table, two garden benches, and an old harmonium.

'Any "Primus" stoves lit in this room? Any oil stoves or such like?'

'No, no,' said the superintendent. 'Various groups meet here: the choir, the dramatic society, and the musical society——'

At the word 'musical' Alkin blushed. He was

ashamed, for he had long since sold all the instruments, and in any case the lungs of the old women could only squeak like puppies. It was ridiculous to have all those brass instruments about the place. There was nothing else to do but steal them ; but he was terribly ashamed now. A slogan was hanging on the wall stretched from window to window and printed on the same mouse-coloured material : ' A brass band is the first step towards collective creation.'

' Excellent ! ' said Bender. ' This room, used as it is for such admirable purposes, does not seem to present any dangers of fire.'

They walked rapidly through the front rooms of the house, but Bender did not see the walnut chair with bent legs upholstered in bright English chintz. Notices were fixed on all the walls. Bender read them, and from time to time he would ask briskly : ' Chimneys swept regularly ? Stoves in order ? ' And after receiving exhaustive replies he would move on.

The inspector of fire prevention looked in every corner of the house to see if there was any possible danger. Everything was perfectly satisfactory, but there was no sign of the treasure.

Bender went into the dormitories, and as the old women caught sight of him they all bowed deeply. Their beds were covered with blankets as rough as hairy terriers and on one end of them was woven the word ' Feet '. There was a small trunk under each bed, and by order of Alkin, who loved military precision, exactly one-third of each trunk protruded from beneath.

Everything in the home was extremely modest. The furniture consisted of garden benches brought in from the boulevard, and the paraffin lamps and blankets with their terrifying inscription ' Feet ' came from the market. But there was one thing in the place that was good, even luxurious—the door-springs.

The superintendent had a passion for door-springs. He had taken great trouble to fit all the doors with

springs of the most varied shapes and patterns. There were simple springs and complicated springs, and they were all very effective and strong. As soon as a door was opened, it sprang to again with the same force as the lid of a mousetrap. The whole house shook when one of these springs came into action. The old women would squeak plaintively as the doors slammed to on them, but they did not always manage to escape. The doors would catch them in the back and shoot them forward.

As the two men went through the various rooms of the house the doors saluted them with loud bangs, but there were no chairs to be seen anywhere. In continuing his search the inspector presently found himself in the kitchen, where porridge was being cooked in a large cauldron. Bender had smelt this when he had first come into the house. He sniffed the air and then asked: 'Cooked on train oil?'

'No! I swear it's cooked with fresh farm butter,' said Alkin, going as red as a beetroot. 'We always get it from the farm.' He was terribly ashamed.

'Still, there's no danger of fire taking place here.'

The chair was not in the kitchen. There was only a stool on which the male cook, dressed in an overall and cap of the same mouse-coloured material, was sitting.

'Why are they all dressed in the same grey colour?' Bender asked the superintendent, 'and of such a quality that it's not fit for anything else except cleaning windows?' Alkin was more confused than ever.

'We don't get sufficient credit.' He hated himself for saying this.

Bender looked at him suspiciously and then said: 'Of course, this has nothing to do with safeguards against fire, in which I am interested at the moment.'

Alkin grew alarmed.

'We have taken every precaution against fire. We've even got a fire-extinguisher. It's a "Lightning" extinguisher.' But Bender was not interested in the extinguisher.

'Where can that chair be?' thought Bender. 'I'm beginning to enjoy myself.' And he decided not to leave this mousetrap of a place until he had been everywhere. While the two men were clambering about the attics and going into every detail about the prevention of fire, life was going on as usual in the home for the aged. Dinner was ready. The smell of burnt porridge increased and overpowered all the other smells of the place. There was a rustle in the corridors, and the old women, carrying tin mugs full of porridge, went slowly and carefully out of the kitchen and sat down at a common table in the dining-room, trying not to take any notice of the slogans that were hanging on the walls. These slogans had been personally composed by Alkin and artistically executed by his wife. This is what they said: 'Food is the source of health', 'One egg contains as much fat as half a pound of meat', 'Look after your teeth', 'In chewing your food remember you are helping society', and finally, 'Meat is bad for you'. These words of inspiration revived in the old women memories of teeth that had disappeared long before the revolution, of eggs that had vanished approximately at the same time, and of the society they had been deprived of helping by chewing their food.

Apart from the old women sitting at the table there were Isidor, Athanasius, Cyril, Oleg, and Paul. Neither in age nor sex did these young men harmonize with the aims of the institution. The first four were Alkin's younger brothers, while Paul was his wife's nephew. These young men, the eldest of whom was thirty-two years old, did not consider that their presence in this home for the aged was in any way unnatural. They had the same rights as the old women. They slept in Government beds with blankets marked 'Feet', and they were dressed in the same mouse-coloured material. But as they were young and strong they ate far more than the old women. They stole whatever Alkin did

not have time to steal. Paul could swallow five pounds of porridge at a sitting, which he did once, leaving the whole house without dinner.

To-day the old women had hardly had time to taste the porridge when the young men gulped theirs down and went into the kitchen to hunt for something else to eat.

The meal continued. The old women began to grumble : ' That's all they do. They guzzle up their food and then begin bawling for more.'

' Yes,' said one of them, ' and this morning Paul sold the chair that used to stand in the corner. I saw him carry it down the back stairs to a man who bought it.'

' You'll see,' said another, ' he'll come back drunk to-night.'

At that moment their conversation was interrupted by a violent buzzing from the loud-speaker.

The old women bent over their plates and went on eating without paying any attention to the loud-speaker, but a voice began to talk to them : ' A valuable . . . crrch . . . buz . . . buz . . . invention . . . the . . . director of the Murmansk railway . . . Comrade Sokutsky . . . S for Samara . . . O for Orel . . . K for Kazan . . . U for Uganda . . . TS for Tsaritsin . . . K for Kiev, and Y for York . . .SO-KUTSKY.' The loud-speaker buzzed again and then continued : ' invented signalling by means of light. The invention has been approved by——' The old women waddled out of the room like so many grey birds and the loud-speaker continued to address an empty room.

In the meantime Bender, feeling very depressed, had gone down the back stairs to the kitchen, where he saw the five young men digging their fingers into a barrel of sour cabbage and enjoying themselves hugely. They were having a thoroughly good feed and were eating in silence. Paul was the only one who spoke : ' It's wicked eating such good cabbage without a drop of vodka.'

'Is this a fresh batch of old women?' Bender asked Alkin.

'N-no. They are orphans,' answered Alkin, tactfully drawing Bender away and threatening the gluttons with his fist behind the fire-inspector's back.

'Children from the Volga?'

Alkin did not know what to say. He shrugged his shoulders and mumbled something about the orphans being a terrible heritage from the Tsarist days.

'Do you have co-education here?'

Instead of answering, Alkin invited Bender to take pot-luck with him. The 'pot-luck' that day consisted of a bottle of vodka, pickled mushrooms, mashed herrings, Ukranian *borshch* made of prime quality meat, a chicken with rice, and stewed apples.

'Sashkin,' Alkin said to his wife, 'let me introduce you to our comrade the fire-inspector.'

Bender bowed gracefully to his hostess and made her such an involved and dubious compliment that he had to break off in the middle because he did not know how to finish it. Sashkin laughed quietly and drank a glass with the men.

'I drink to your communal household!' said Bender.

The dinner went merrily, and it was only as he was eating the stewed apples that he remembered the object of his visit.

'Why is there so little furniture in your institution?' he asked.

'How d'you mean?' said Alkin. 'What about the harmonium?'

'Oh! I know all about the *vox humanum*,' said Bender, 'but there's nothing on which one can sit down. There's nothing but garden benches.'

'Oh, dear me, no!' said Alkin rather offended. 'There's a chair in one of the rooms. It's an English chair. I'm told it is one of the chairs that formerly belonged to the furniture of the house.'

'I'd like to see the chair. Is there any danger of fire in the room where you keep it? I shall have to look at it.'

'Certainly. Certainly.'

Bender thanked the hostess for her dinner and set off with Alkin to see the chair. They went into the room. No 'Primus' stoves were used there—there was no stove; the chimneys were in good order and cleaned regularly, but to Alkin's utter amazement the chair was not there. He bustled about looking for it, he searched under the beds and under the garden benches, he moved the harmonium out of its place, he questioned the old women, who looked furtively at Paul, but the chair could not be found. Paul was more energetic than any one in looking for the chair, and when they had all calmed down again he was still wandering in and out of the rooms, lifting up water-jugs, moving tin mugs, and muttering to himself: 'Now where can it be? It was here this morning. I saw it with my own eyes. It's really too odd!'

'It's a pity it can't be found,' said Bender icily.

'It's simply ridiculous,' said Paul brazenly.

Presently Bender found himself alone with the old women, and they immediately began to air their grievances to him.

'He's settled his relations in here and they eat their heads off,' said one.

'He feeds the pigs on milk, but he gives us burnt porridge,' said another.

'He's taken everything out of the place.'

'Gently, gently, young women,' said Bender, stepping back. 'The labour inspector will come to you about this. I have no instructions from the Senate to attend to this matter.'

The old women would not be quiet.

'And that wretch Paul took the chair away this morning. I know, for I saw him.'

'Took it away?' said Bender. 'To whom?'

'I don't know, but I know he sold it. He wanted to sell my blanket one day.'

The inspector went out of the room and found Paul.

'One of my friends,' said Bender, emphasizing each word, 'also used to sell Government furniture, but now he's a monk, as it were. He's sitting in prison.'

'Your groundless accusation sounds rather strange to me,' said Paul .

'Who's got that chair ? ' Bender asked threateningly.

Paul, who was gifted with supernatural intuition, suddenly realized that he would either be kicked or beaten if he did not tell him.

'A dealer has got it.'

'And his address ? '

'I've never seen him before.'

'Never ? '

'No. I swear.'

'I'd beat your face in,' said Bender quietly, 'but Zarathustra does not allow it. Go to the devil ! '

Paul grinned obsequiously and began to move away.

'Now then, you bastard ! ' shouted Bender, 'don't you slide away like that. Was the dealer fair or dark ? '

Paul began to describe him ; Bender listened attentively to the end and then said : 'That of course has nothing to do with safeguards against fire.'

As he was about to leave the home Alkin slyly approached Bender in the corridor and offered him some money.

'That means Article 114 of the Criminal Code,' said Bender, 'a bribe to an official during the execution of his orders.' But he took the money and without saying good-bye to Alkin he moved towards the front door. The heavy oak door, weighing at least a ton and a half, was fitted with such powerful springs that when Bender opened it with great difficulty it slammed behind him and shot him out into the street.

'That'll do ! That'll do ! ' said Bender as he rubbed the part that had been hit. 'Let the good work go on.'

CHAPTER IX

WHERE ARE YOUR LOCKS?

WHILE Bender was inspecting the home for the aged, Hippolyte left the porter's room, and feeling the cold air on his shaved head he hurried down the streets of his native town.

The pavements were wet and there was a ceaseless dripping of water from the roofs of the houses. Sparrows were busy pecking in the gutter. The sun was shining brightly. Advertisements on the damp telegraph poles were wrinkled and the printed letters of the notices: 'I can teach you to play the guitar by the numerical system', 'I give lessons in social science to those about to enter the Academy of Music', were all smeared. A detachment of Red soldiers wearing winter helmets were tramping through the puddles.

As Hippolyte walked along he examined the passers-by with interest. He, who had lived in Russia all his life and during the revolution, saw how the old manners and customs were being effaced and new ones taking their place. He had grown used to this in the town of N——, but now that he had returned to his native place he discovered that it upset him. He could not make anything of it: he felt uncomfortable and strange, as though he really had been abroad and had just returned from Paris. In the old days, when he used to drive through the town in his carriage, he used to meet friends or at least people known to him, but he had now walked through four different districts without meeting a soul he knew. They had vanished or perhaps they had grown so old that he could not recognize them, or perhaps they were unrecognizable because they were wearing other clothes and other hats. Perhaps they had changed the way they walked.

Whatever the reason was, he did not meet any one he knew.

Hippolyte walked about with a pale face, feeling cold and lost. He had quite forgotten that he was supposed to be looking for the House Department. He crossed over from pavement to pavement and turned aimlessly into side-streets, where the snow was still thick on the ground. The houses that had been previously painted blue were now green ; the yellow ones were grey, and there seemed to be more noise in the streets. He was surprised to see tram-lines in the town ; he had never noticed them before. At one moment he felt he had never been out of Stargorod, and at the next he felt he had never been in the place before.

Thinking such thoughts, he walked down Marx and Engels Streets.

Suddenly Hippolyte went hot and cold all over. Coming straight towards him was a stranger with a kind face who was carrying a chair on his head. Hippolyte gasped with astonishment, and immediately recognized the chair.

Yes, there it was : the chair made by Gambs, upholstered with English chintz, and slightly soiled by revolutionary storms. It was the walnut chair with bent legs. Hippolyte felt as though he had been shot.

Not far away some men were calling :

' Any knives to grind ? Any knives to grind ? '

' Pots to mend ? Pots to mend ? '

' Paper ! Paper ! '

A car rushed through the street ; a window pane broke ; life was busy here. There was no time to be lost. Hippolyte pounced upon the stranger like a leopard, and without saying a word pulled the chair away from him. The stranger tugged it back again. Then Hippolyte got hold of one of the legs with his left hand and tried to tear the stranger's fingers from the chair.

'You're a thief!' said the stranger in a whisper, hanging on to the chair more firmly.

'Give it to me! Let go at once!' stammered Hippolyte as he tried to release the chair from the man's grasp.

A crowd began to gather. Three people were close to them, watching the development of the conflict. Both men looked round furtively and, without looking at each other or loosening their hold on the chair, walked rapidly down the street as though nothing unusual was happening. They began to walk more quickly, and on noticing an empty side-street, they turned into it as if by prearrangement. Here Hippolyte's energy increased fourfold.

'Let go!' he shouted.

'Help! Help!' called the stranger weakly. As both of them were hanging on to the chair they began to kick each other vigorously under it. The stranger's boots had irons under the heels, and at first Hippolyte got the worst of it, but he soon adapted himself and escaped the kicks by dancing about from right to left. Then he tried to hit his enemy in the stomach. The chair was in the way, but he managed to kick the stranger's knee-cap so forcibly that his enemy could only kick out with his left foot.

'Oh, God!' groaned the stranger.

And at this Hippolyte discovered that the stranger who was hanging on to the chair was none other than Father Theodore.

Hippolyte was dumbfounded.

'Father Theodore!' he exclaimed, and in his surprise he let go of the chair.

Father Theodore went purple in the face and also released his hold on the chair. Since no one was holding it, the chair fell on to the pavement.

'But where's your moustache?' asked the priest venomously.

'And where are your locks? You did have locks, didn't you?' There was undisguised contempt in

Hippolyte's voice. He looked Father Theodore up and down, picked up the chair, and turned on his heel. But the priest had recovered from his surprise and was determined not to allow Hippolyte score such an easy victory. With a shout of: 'No! I insist!' he again seized hold of the chair. Again both of them stood with the chair between them and eyed each other like cats or boxers.

'So it's you, holy father!' hissed Hippolyte through his teeth. 'It's you who are on the hunt for my goods!' And having said this he kicked him.

Father Theodore retaliated with a kick which made Hippolyte wince.

'It's not yours!'

'Then whose is it?'

'Not yours!'

'But whose then?'

'Not yours, in any case.'

There were more kicks.

'Whose is it then?' shouted Hippolyte as he landed a kick in the holy father's stomach.

'It is nationalized property.'

'Nationalized?'

'Yes, nationalized.'

They spoke rapidly.

'By whom?'

'By the power of the Soviet.'

'What power?'

'The power of the workers.'

'Oh!' said Hippolyte. 'Did you say by the power of the workers and peasants?'

'Ye-e-es!'

'So you're a party man, holy father, are you?'

'Per-haps.'

Hippolyte could not stand it any longer. He pushed his enemy over. The priest fell with the chair and dragged Hippolyte down with him. They struggled together on the pavement.

Suddenly there was a crash. The front legs broke, and, forgetting each other, the rivals began to tear the walnut treasure to pieces. The English chintz was ripped open. The back of the chair flew off. The treasure-seekers tore the lining into shreds, and, scratching their hands on the springs, they plunged their fingers into the wool stuffing. Five minutes later the chair was stripped bare. The springs were rolling about on the pavement; the wind was blowing the wool stuffing in all directions; the bent legs were lying in the gutter, but there were no diamonds.

'Well, have you found them?' sneered Hippolyte.

Father Theodore, covered with tufts of wool, was puffing and blowing. He was silent.

'You're a scoundrel!' shouted Hippolyte. 'I'll beat your face in, Father Theodore!'

'Your arms are too short!' retorted the priest.

'Where can you go now with all that fluff sticking to you? Look what a sight you are!'

'That's none of your business.'

'Shame on you, Father Theodore. You're a thief!'

'I haven't stolen anything from you.'

'Then how did you find out about it? You've used the sacrament of confession for your own ends. Very nice! Very pretty, I must say!' And with a snort of disgust Hippolyte brushed the fluff from his coat as he walked rapidly away from the priest. A few streets ahead he suddenly noticed his friend Bender, who was standing at a corner, having his boots cleaned.

'Well, how's the House Department?' said Bender in a business-like voice, and immediately added: 'Wait a bit. You're far too excited. Calm yourself.'

He paid the bootblack, took Hippolyte by the arm, and went down the street with him. Bender listened with the greatest interest to everything he had to tell him.

'Ah! yes,' said Bender. 'A small black beard?

Quite right! A coat with a Persian lamb collar? I know. That was the chair from the home for the aged. It was bought this morning for three roubles.'

'But wait a minute. Listen!' said Hippolyte.

And Hippolyte told his partner about Father Theodore's treachery. Bender was solemn.

'That's bad,' he said. 'A mysterious rival. We must forestall him. Later on we'll have plenty of time to take our revenge.'

The two friends went into the 'Stenka Razin' for a snack, and Bender asked where the House Department had been and what other Government institution occupied its premises now.

As it was evening, Bender and Hippolyte decided to return to the porter's room.

'I shall find them,' thought Hippolyte, and he was full of confidence.

CHAPTER X

A LOCKSMITH, A PARROT, AND A FORTUNE-TELLER

NUMBER 7 Pereleshinsk Street was not one of the best houses in Stargorod. Its two stories, built in the style of the Second Empire, were ornamented with broken lions' heads. There were eight lions' heads, but there were two other decorations of a purely commercial character on the house. On one side hung a bright blue sign : ' The Odessa Bakers' Union. Moscow Cracknels '. On the other side a packing firm called ' Rapidpack ' advertised itself on a black sign in round gilt letters. In spite of the considerable difference between the two signs and the size of their working capital, both firms were occupied with one and the same business. They were speculating in coarse wool, fine wool, and cotton materials, and when they could get hold of silk materials then they also speculated in silk.

At the end of an arch leading to the yard there were two doors on the right-hand side. One of the doors had an unpolished brass plate bearing the name ' V. M. Polesov '. The other door had a tin plate fastened to it : ' Modes and Hats '. But these nameplates were only for the sake of appearance. Inside the flat marked ' Modes and Hats ' there were neither modes nor hats, nor stands waiting for hats, nor figures waiting to be dressed ; instead, there lived in this three-roomed flat a spotless white parrot in red breeches. The parrot was eaten up with fleas, but he could not complain to any one, for he had never been taught to speak. All day long he cracked seeds and spat the husks on to the carpet. Dark brown curtains hung at the windows, and over the piano hung

a reproduction of Böcklin's famous picture, ' The Island of the Dead '. It was in a dark polished oak frame and under glass. One corner of the glass had been broken a long time ago and had fallen out, but that corner of the picture had been so walked over by flies that the colour blended with the frame. It was quite impossible to make out what was happening in that corner of the island of the dead.

The owner of the flat was sitting on her bed in the bedroom. She was leaning on a small octagonal table, covered with a dirty, embroidered cloth, and was laying out some cards. The widow Gritsatsuev, wearing a fluffy shawl, was sitting in front of her.

' I must warn you, young woman, that I never take less than fifty copecks for a consultation.'

The widow, who refused to be daunted in her search for a new husband, immediately agreed to pay the fixed price.

' Only, please, also tell me the future,' she said plaintively.

' You're the Queen of Clubs.'

' I've always been the Queen of Hearts,' retorted the widow.

The fortune-teller was indifferent and began to arrange the cards. A few minutes later she told the widow her fate. There were great and small worries ahead. The King of Clubs lay on her heart, but he was friendly with the Queen of Diamonds.

Then she read the client's palm. The lines on the widow's hand were very distinct. Her life line was so long that it curved round as far as the pulse, and if this line spoke the truth then the widow would have to live until the Day of Judgment. The head line and the line of fate gave every promise that the widow would give up the grocery business and would endow humanity with unsurpassable masterpieces in any sphere of art, science, or sociology she might pursue. The mound of Venus was enormous and showed marvellous reserves of love and tenderness.

The fortune-teller explained all this to the widow, using words and terms accepted by graphologists, palmists, and horse-dealers.

'Thank you,' said the delighted widow. 'I know who the King of Clubs is and the Queen of Diamonds too. Tell me, is the King eligible?'

'Yes, he is eligible.'

The widow went home on wings. The fortune-teller tossed her cards into a box, yawned, and went into the kitchen. There she fussed about with her dinner, which was cooking on the stove, and after wiping her hands on her apron picked up an enamel pail and went out into the yard for some water.

She walked along the yard. Her hair was going grey; she was old and dirty, suspicious of every one, and fond of eating sweets. If Hippolyte had seen her at this moment, he would never have recognized Elena Bauer, his old love. Madam Bauer was greeted at the well by her neighbour, Viktor Mikhaylovich Polesov, a locksmith and an intellectual. He was also fetching water. After exchanging greetings the two neighbours began to talk about the proposed tram-service about which the whole of Stargorod was talking.

'That's what we've come to!' said Polesov ironically. 'I ran round the whole town yesterday trying to find an inch of solder. There wasn't any to be found, and yet they're thinking of running trams.'

The fortune-teller had as much idea what solder was as the moon, but she expressed her sympathy.

'Just look at the shops nowadays,' she said. 'There's nothing but queue after queue and no shops worth talking about. And the names they put up! Why, they're absurd!'

'Of course the trams won't be of any use whatever,' the locksmith persisted. 'They'll go for a mile and then break down. I know, I've had a look at them.'

The locksmith was silent for a moment. His dirty

face gleamed in the sun. The whites of his eyes were a pale yellow. Among the workers in Stargorod, Viktor Mikhaylovich Polesov was one of the most incompetent. This was because of his excitable nature. He was always in a state of irrepressible excitement. His workshop was in the second yard of house Number 7 Pereleshinsk Street, but he was never to be found there. The workshop was crowded with an odd assortment of things. In one corner lay a pile of rusty locks ; in another a child's perambulator, leather straps that were rotting to pieces, an old Austrian bayonet and other miscellaneous junk. People would come to give orders, but they never found the locksmith, for he was always out. He was far too busy for work. He could never allow a horse and cart to come into the yard without dashing out and shouting instructions to the driver. He would waste half an hour on the horse and cart and then go back to his workshop to finish repairing an old bicycle pump. But it was not very long before he was out in the street again looking to see what was going on and being a general nuisance. If a fresh telegraph pole was being erected, he would interfere and tell the workmen that the pole was not perpendicular.

At times, however, Polesov was engrossed in work. He would shut himself up in the workshop for several days on end and work in absolute silence. Children could play in the yard to their hearts' content, lorries could pass in and out of the yard, the fire brigade could rush down the street—Viktor Mikhaylovich would work on. Nothing disturbed him.

One day, after a long spell of sustained work, he tugged a motor-bike out of his workshop as though he were dragging a ram by its horns. He had assembled it out of the spare parts of motor-cars, fire-extinguishers, bicycles, and typewriters.

A crowd gathered. Without paying any attention he began to turn one of the pedals vigorously with his

right hand, but there was not a spark for ten minutes. Then there was a terrific rattling of metal, a series of explosions, and the motor-bike was enveloped in a cloud of smoke. Viktor Mikhaylovich hurled himself on to the saddle, and at an unearthly speed the motor-bike carried him out through the arch into the middle of the street and then stopped dead. He was just going to leap off and examine his mysterious machine when it unexpectedly set off backwards, dived through the archway and stopped dead in the middle of the yard, where it let off a piercing scream and blew up. Viktor Mikhaylovich escaped by a miracle. He collected the fragments of the motor-cycle, and after another period of strenuous work he produced a dynamo which looked extraordinarily effective but did not work.

The crown of his activity as a locksmith was the incident connected with the gates of the house next door. The House Committee had made an arrangement with him by which he was to overhaul the iron gates, repair them thoroughly, and paint them in some economical colour, while they undertook to pay him twenty-one roubles seventy-five copecks after the work had been inspected and passed by a special commission. The stamp on the agreement was to be paid for by Polesov.

Viktor Mikhaylovich took the gates off their hinges and like a Samson carried them into his workshop. There he set to work with enthusiasm. It took two days to take the gates to pieces. He did it so thoroughly that the place was littered with the various parts. The screws were thrown into the perambulator, and the iron poles and other pieces were piled up on the floor. Another two days were spent in examining the parts that had to be repaired. Then a most unpleasant thing happened in the town. A water main burst in one of the principal streets and Viktor Mikhaylovich spent the rest of the week leaning over the hole and

shouting instructions down to the workmen. When his interest in the water main slackened he set to work again, but it was too late, for the children had been in his workshop during his absence and were now busy playing with the screws and iron poles belonging to the gates of house Number 5. As soon as they caught sight of the irate locksmith they took fright and threw away the nuts and screws. He tried to collect the various parts, but half the nuts and screws were missing and he could not find them anywhere. After this he lost all interest in the gates.

Meanwhile terrible things were happening in house Number 5, where the courtyard had been left open to the street. Some washing that had been hung out to dry was stolen, and one evening a samovar disappeared. Viktor Mikhaylovich took part in chasing the thief, but although the thief was carrying a samovar with boiling water in it, he was running well ahead of his pursuers and soon disappeared. The night porter of house Number 5 suffered most of all, for there was now no reason for late-comers to give him tips for opening the gates.

At first the porter came to inquire when the gates would be ready, then the House Committee sent written reminders to Viktor Mikhaylovich, but he took no notice. The situation was becoming serious.

As they stood by the well in the yard, the locksmith and the fortune-teller continued their conversation.

'When will it all end?' sighed the fortune-teller. 'We live here like savages.'

'There's no end to it—— By the way, who do you think I saw to-day?'

'I've no idea. Who was it?'

'Hippolyte Vorobianinov.'

The fortune-teller was so astonished that she leant against the well.

'Yes,' continued the locksmith. 'I was in the Administrative Department to see about the lease of

my workshop, and I was just walking along a corridor when suddenly two men came towards me. I looked at them. There was something familiar about one of them. He looked like Vorobianinov. "Can you tell me what Government office used to be in this building?" he asked me. I told him there had been a girls' high school at first and then the House Department. "What do you want to know for?" I asked, but he thanked me and walked on without answering. And then I realized that it actually was Vorobianinov, but he had shaved off his moustache. Now where could he have come from? The man with him was a fine-looking fellow, obviously an ex-officer. And then I thought to myself——'

At that moment the locksmith noticed something unpleasant, and without finishing what he was saying he seized his pail and hid behind a dustbin. The night porter from house Number 5 had come up to the well and was looking round the yard, but as he could not see Viktor Mikhaylovich his face fell.

'I suppose he's out again,' he said, looking at the fortune-teller.

'How should I know?' she snapped.

The night porter turned on his heel and went out of the yard. As soon as he had gone Viktor Mikhaylovich came out from behind the dustbin, and the fortune-teller invited him to come into her flat for a minute.

She offered the locksmith a plate of stewed fruit, and, walking up and down, she asked him questions about Hippolyte.

'But I tell you it was Vorobianinov!' shouted the locksmith. 'I know him perfectly well. It was Hippolyte Vorobianinov, only without his moustache!'

'For heaven's sake, don't shout so! Why do you think he's come back?'

The locksmith smiled ironically.

'Why do I think he's come back? Well, he's not come back to sign agreements with the Bolsheviks.'

" Do you think he's running a great risk by returning ? '

The locksmith's irony was inexhaustible. It had been increasing during the ten years of the revolution. He smiled sarcastically.

' Who doesn't run a risk in Soviet Russia ? Especially a man like Vorobianinov. A moustache, my dear lady, is not shaved off for nothing.'

' Do you think he's been sent from abroad ? ' asked the fortune-teller breathlessly.

' Undoubtedly ! ' answered the knowing locksmith.

' What can his object be ? '

' Don't be so childish ! '

' Whatever happens, I must see him.'

' I suppose you know what you're risking ? '

' Oh ! it doesn't matter. After a separation of ten years I must see him. I can't resist it.' And she really felt that fate had separated them at the height of their love for each other. ' I implore you, go and find him ! Find out where he is ! You go about everywhere—it won't be difficult for you ; and tell him that I want to see him. Do you hear ? '

The parrot in red trousers, who was fast asleep on his perch, was wakened by this noisy conversation and suddenly turned a somersault.

' Well,' said the locksmith as he got up to go away, ' I'll find him and have a word with him.'

' Perhaps you'd like some more stewed fruit ? ' said the fortune-teller, feeling generous.

The locksmith did not refuse another plate of stewed fruit, and all the time that he was eating he told her how badly the parrot cage had been made and soldered. Then he stood up, said good-bye, and warned the fortune-teller to keep all he had told her as a dead secret.

CHAPTER XI

THE ALPHABET OF 'THE MIRROR OF LIFE'

THE next day the two conspirators were quite convinced that it would not be wise for them to stay any longer in the porter's room. The porter had begun to grumble and was quite bewildered at having seen his master first with a black moustache, then a green one, and finally without any moustache at all. There was no bed to sleep in, and there was such a stench in the room from the porter's new felt boots that Hippolyte and Bender decided to leave.

'It is high time for this evening of reminiscences to come to an end,' said Bender. 'We must move over to an hotel.'

Hippolyte jumped.

'That's impossible!'

'Why?'

'We shall have to sign our names in the hotel register.'

'Isn't your passport in order?'

'My passport is in order, but my name is well known in the town, and there'll be talk.'

'Do you like the name of Michaelson?' asked the resourceful Bender.

'Which Michaelson? The senator?'

'No, a member of the union.'

'I don't understand you.'

'Oh! that's only because you've not had sufficient experience. Don't be such a fool!'

Bender took his professional union book out of his breast pocket and handed it to Hippolyte.

'Konrad Karlovich Michaelson, aged forty-eight, non-party, bachelor, member of the union since 1921, a highly dependable person, my good friend, and I

believe a friend of children. . . . But you don't need to be friendly with children. The police will not expect that of you.'

Hippolyte blushed scarlet.

'But how can I?'

'In comparison with our scheme this action, even though it is dealt with by the criminal code, is mere child's play.'

But Hippolyte was nervous.

'You're an idealist, Konrad Karlovich. You're really lucky, for how would you like to be called Papa Khristozopulo or Zlovunov?'

Hippolyte rapidly agreed and they both went out without saying anything to the porter.

They stopped at the 'Sorbonne' furnished rooms, where Bender created a commotion by insisting on seeing all the rooms. He examined the seven-rouble rooms, but he did not like the furniture; he liked the five-rouble rooms a little better, but the carpet was shabby and the rooms were stuffy; the three-rouble rooms were all right with the exception of the pictures.

'I can't live in a room with landscapes,' said Bender. At last they settled in a room costing one rouble and eighty copecks. There were no landscapes or carpets in it and the furniture was strictly modest: two beds and a night-table.

'In the style of the Stone Age,' said Bender approvingly. 'Are there any prehistoric animals in your mattresses?'

'That depends on the season,' said the servant. 'If there is some provincial conference being held, then of course there aren't any, for so many visitors are expected that everything is thoroughly spring-cleaned before they arrive. But at other times there may be a few. They run in from the "Livadia" next door.'

That same day the two conspirators went to the Administrative Department, where they received the

necessary information. It turned out that the House Department had been closed down in 1921 and that all the archives had been added to the archives of the present Administrative Department.

Bender set to work alone, and by the evening he knew the home address of the former superintendent of the archives, Bartholomew Korobeynikov, who had been a Government official in pre-revolutionary Russia.

Bender put his waistcoat on, shook the dust from his coat, demanded one rouble and twenty copecks from Hippolyte, and set off to see the superintendent of the archives. Hippolyte was left alone in the 'Sorbonne'. He walked up and down the room in great agitation. The fate of their whole enterprise was being decided that evening. If they succeeded in getting hold of the copies of the orders by which the confiscated furniture from his house had been distributed, then the matter could be considered as half accomplished. Of course there would be difficulties ahead, perhaps incredible difficulties, but the thread would be in their hands.

'If only we could get hold of those orders,' he thought as he tossed about on his bed. He was not at all clear what they would do after getting hold of the orders, but he was confident that everything would go quite smoothly.

Meanwhile Bender had to go right across the town, for Korobeynikov lived on the outskirts of Stargorod in a district mainly inhabited by railway employees.

At last he stopped outside a door, rang the bell, and after a number of lengthy questions of why and wherefore, he was asked to come in. He found himself in a dark entrance hall crowded with cupboards. Some one was breathing heavily on to him in the darkness.

'Does Citizen Korobeynikov live here?' he asked.

The man who was breathing so heavily took Bender by the hand and led him into a brightly-lit dining-room. Bender saw before him a little old man who was very

clean and who had an unusually flexible spine. There was no doubt whatever that this was Citizen Korobeynikov himself. Without waiting to be asked, Bender took a chair and sat down. The old man looked at Bender without saying a word, and Bender was the first to begin an amiable conversation.

'I have come to see you on a matter of business. You work, I understand, in the archives of the Administrative Department?'

The old man nodded.

'And before that you worked in the House Department?'

'I've worked everywhere,' said the old man cheerfully.

'Perhaps in a Government office before the revolution?' And Bender smiled amiably.

The old man's expression showed that he considered his pre-revolutionary services belonged to the past and were not to be spoken of now.

'But allow me to ask why you have come to see me?' said the old man, looking at his guest with interest.

'Certainly. Certainly,' answered the guest. 'I am Vorobianinov's son.'

'Now which one might that be? The marshal of nobility?'

'Exactly!'

'Where is he? Is he still alive?'

'No, he is dead,' said Bender in a sorrowful voice. 'He has departed this life.'

'Ah! well,' said the old man, without showing any particular signs of grief, 'it is sad news. But I didn't know he had any children?'

'He hadn't,' Bender confirmed amiably.

'But then——'

'Oh! that's nothing. I'm the son of a morganatic marriage.'

'Perhaps you are Elena Bauer's son?'

'Yes, that's it!'

'And is she in good health?'

'Oh! Mamma passed away some time ago.'

'Oh! really? How very sad!'

The old man looked at Bender and tears came into his eyes in spite of the fact that he had seen Elena Bauer buying meat in the market earlier on in the day.

'They all die,' he said mournfully. 'Now my grandmother is taking a long time to die. But perhaps you'll allow me to know what your business is, dear—— Excuse me, I don't know your name.'

'Vladimir,' said Bender quickly.

'Vladimir Hippolytovich? Well, I'm ready for what you have to say to me, Vladimir Hippolytovich.'

The old man sat down at the table, which was covered with a patterned American oilcloth, and then he looked Bender straight in the eyes.

Bender picked his words carefully and expressed his sorrow for the loss of his parents. He apologized for disturbing Korobeynikov at such a late hour, and hoped that he would be forgiven when he told him what feelings had prompted him to visit him.

'I should like to find some of papa's furniture,' said Bender with the utmost filial devotion, 'so as to preserve his memory. Do you happen to know who received the confiscated furniture from papa's house?'

'That's a complicated matter,' answered the old man after thinking for a minute. 'It's only possible for a man of means to find that out—— But, excuse me, what is your occupation?'

'I am a freelance. I own a slaughter-house and a frozen-meat store run on communist lines down in Samara.'

The old man looked at young Vorobianinov suspiciously, but he did not contradict him. 'This is a smart young man,' he thought. But Bender, who had been looking closely at Korobeynikov, decided that the old man was a beast.

'Well?' asked Bender.

'Well, then,' said the old man, 'it is difficult, but possible.'

'Will it entail much expense?' asked the frozen-meat expert.

'A small sum——'

'Then let's talk business,' said Bender. 'Your information shall be paid for.'

'Say seventy roubles.'

'Why so much? Is wheat so expensive?'

The old man laughed: 'You're joking.'

'Perhaps I am. I'll pay, and you'll give me the orders. When may I come for them?'

'Have you got the money with you?'

Bender tapped his breast pocket confidently.

'Then you can have them now, if you like,' said Korobeynikov.

He lit a candle and led Bender into the room next door, where apart from a bed, on which he evidently slept, there was a writing-desk with piles of ledgers on it. There were some long, open shelves along one wall and the printed letters of the alphabet were glued to the edges of the shelves. Bundles of order forms tied up with string were lying on the shelves.

'Oho!' exclaimed Bender delightedly, 'the complete archives in your own home!'

'Absolutely complete,' answered the superintendent modestly. 'You see, I have done this in case of emergency. The Administrative Department does not require them, whereas they may be useful to me one day in my old age. As you know, we live on the brink of a volcano. . . . Anything may happen. . . . People will then rush about trying to find their furniture. And where is their furniture? That is where it is!' And he pointed dramatically towards the shelves. 'And who has preserved their furniture? Who has saved it? Korobeynikov! And then the people will thank the old man and help him in his old age. . . . I shall not ask for much. Ten roubles for each order,

and I'll be grateful to get even that. And that's all I want in return for my services. And how can they find their furniture without me? They can't!'

Bender looked at the old man with admiration.

'A wonderful office,' he said. 'Complete mechanization. You really are a demon for work.'

The flattered archivist began to explain to his guest the details of his pet hobby. He opened the fat volumes of confiscation and distribution records and began to read one of them.

'Now here,' he said, 'is the whole of Stargorod. All the furniture, when it was taken and from whom, and when and to whom it was given. This is the index book. I call it "The Mirror of Life". Now about whose furniture would you like to know? The merchant Angelov? Here you are! Turn up the letter A. Letter A, Ak, Am, An, Angelov. Number? Here it is: Number 82742. Now let us look at the confiscation records. Page 142. Where is Angelov? Here he is. "Taken from Angelov on the 18th December 1918: one Becker piano, No. 07012; an upholstered piano-stool, two writing-desks, four wardrobes (two of mahogany), one chest of drawers given to the barracks, three wardrobes sent to the children's home called 'The Lark', and a fourth wardrobe for the personal use of the secretary of the Starprodkomgub." And where did the piano go? Ah! yes, the piano went to the home for the aged, and it is there to this very day.'

'I don't seem to remember having seen a piano there,' thought Bender.

'Or take the name of Murin,' said the archivist. 'Letter M. Here you are. Everything is here. The whole town. The pianos, arm-chairs, divans, chandeliers, even the dinner-services.'

'Well,' said Bender, 'I consider you ought to have a monument put up to you. But let's get to work. What about the letter V?'

'Letter V?' said Korobeynikov. 'Certainly. Here it is. Vm, Vn, Vo. Here we are. No. 48238. Vorobianinov, Hippolyte Matveyevich. Your father, God rest his soul, for he was a good man. . . . "One Becker piano, No. 5480009; Chinese vases, four Sèvres vases, Aubusson carpets; two Gobelin tapestries, 'A Shepherd' and 'A Shepherdess'; two Persian rugs, one Indian carpet, a stuffed bear holding a dish, a bedroom suite of twelve pieces, a dining-room suite of sixteen pieces, a drawing-room suite of fourteen pieces, walnut and the work of Gambs——"'

'And to whom has it been distributed?' asked Bender impatiently.

'We'll come to that all in good time. "The stuffed bear to the police; one Gobelin—'A Shepherd'—to the Fund of Artistic Valuables; the other Gobelin—'A Shepherdess'—to the Workers' Club; the carpets to the Chamber of Commerce; the bedroom suite to the Hunters' Union; the dining-room suite to the Central Stargorod Office; the walnut drawing-room suite to various people and institutions; the round table and one chair to the home for the aged; the divan to the House Department" (where, by the way, it stands in the hall to this day and the dirty pigs have made it all greasy); "one chair to Comrade Gritsatsuev, disabled soldier of the Imperialistic War; ten chairs sent to Moscow to the Museum of Furniture, on the instructions of the circular letter received from the Commissariat of Public Instruction. Chinese vases to——"'

'Splendid!' interrupted Bender. 'That's excellent! I'd like to have a look at the confiscation orders.'

'Now, now,' said the old man. 'Wait a bit. Wait a bit. We'll come to the confiscation orders in due time. Now, what letter was it? Ah yes, letter V. Number 48238.'

The archivist went slowly up to the shelf, stood on

tiptoe, and brought down the necessary bundle of papers.

'Here we are! All your dear papa's furniture is here. Do you want to see all the orders?'

'No. What should I do with them? Memories of childhood, you know. . . . The drawing-room furniture. . . . How well I remember playing on that Persian rug in the drawing-room and looking up at that Gobelin, that "Shepherdess". Ah! those were good days, happy days! The golden age of childhood! I think I shall limit myself to dear papa's drawing-room suite.'

The archivist began to take the orders from the bundle. He took out five orders; one for ten chairs, two for one chair, one for the round table, and one for the 'Shepherdess' Gobelin.

'Look at these!' he said proudly. 'Every one of them in order. All the addresses neatly entered, together with the signature of each recipient. No one can deny such facts. Perhaps you would like to see the furniture belonging to Madam Popov, the general's wife? It's very fine and is also Gambs' work.'

But Bender, moved solely by filial love, pocketed the five orders, and refused to be interested in anybody else's furniture.

'Perhaps you will give me a receipt for the orders?' said the archivist.

'Certainly,' said Bender readily.

They went into the other room again. Korobeynikov wrote out a receipt in his best handwriting and handed it over to his guest. Bender took the paper with the utmost courtesy and put it into the same pocket as the orders.

'Well,' he said, 'I think I have troubled you a great deal. I dare not burden you any longer with my presence. May I shake you by the hand, sir?'

The amazed archivist limply shook the outstretched hand.

'Good-bye,' said Bender as he moved towards the door.

Korobeynikov did not know what to think. He looked at the table to see if his guest had left any money, but there was no money there. The archivist then said in a quiet voice: 'And the money?'

'What money?' said Bender as he opened the door.

'For the furniture! For the orders!'

'My dear friend,' said Bender, 'I swear by the honour of my late father I would willingly pay you for the orders, but very foolishly I forgot to get any money from the bank and I haven't any with me at present.'

The old man began to tremble and he stretched out his hand to keep his visitor from leaving.

'Be quiet, you old fool!' said Bender threateningly. 'I'll let you have it to-morrow, and when I say to-morrow I mean to-morrow. Good night!'

Bender went out and slammed the door.

Korobeynikov opened the door again and ran out into the street, but Bender had disappeared. The old man cursed loudly and went back into his room. He stood in the middle of the room and in a towering rage began to kick his writing-table. Never before had Bartholomew Korobeynikov been so basely deceived. He could cheat any one, but here he had been cheated with such marvellous simplicity that he had to confess he had much to learn before he died. In the past when people came to him in distress and asked for help they used to pledge their things with him, and he always charged an exorbitant commission. He had done this for years and had never been found out, and now he had been plucked like a chicken.

'Why was I such a fool? Fancy giving that walnut furniture away with my own hands! Why, the Gobelin alone is priceless!'

The bell had been ringing for some time now, and

Korobeynikov scarcely had time to realize he had left the front door open when he heard a voice in the hall.

'May I come in?'

Korobeynikov went out into the hall, felt some one's coat, tugged at it, and pulled the person into his dining-room.

'Pray, excuse me,' said Father Theodore.

After a series of hints and suggestions which lasted about ten minutes, Korobeynikov understood that he was supposed to have some information about Vorobianinov's furniture and that Father Theodore was willing to pay for this information. Also, to Korobeynikov's amazement, it turned out that Father Theodore was the brother of the former marshal of nobility, that he was ardently longing to preserve his brother's memory and to find his brother's walnut suite. The warmest memories of his youth were associated with this furniture. Korobeynikov asked for a hundred roubles. The visitor valued his brother's memory at a lower figure and said he was only willing to pay thirty. In the end they agreed to fifty roubles.

'I must ask for the money to be paid in advance,' said the archivist. 'That is my customary practice.'

'Certainly. Certainly,' replied Father Theodore. 'Will it be all right if I pay you in gold?' He was in such a hurry to get the money out of his pocket that he tore the lining. He shook five yellow coins out of a little bundle, added two and a half roubles in silver to it, and pushed the pile of money over the table towards the archivist.

Korobeynikov counted the money twice, shovelled it into his hand, asked his visitor to wait a minute, and then went to fetch the orders. He did not waste any time in his private office. He went straight to 'The Mirror of Life', opened it at the letter P, found the necessary number, took out the packet referring to the furniture belonging to General Popov's wife, took out an order given to Comrade Bruns, Number

34 Vinogradsky Street: twelve walnut chairs made by Gambs. Surprised at his own ingenuity, the old man smiled to himself and took the confiscation order to Father Theodore.

'All in one place?' asked Father Theodore surprised.

'Yes, they are all in the same place. You'll be delighted. It's a wonderful suite. But then why should I describe it to you? You know what it's like, don't you?'

Father Theodore shook the archivist's hand warmly for a long time, and after stumbling a number of times against the cupboards in the hall he ran out into the darkness.

Korobeynikov chuckled over the customer he had managed to fool so easily. He put the gold coins down on the table and stared sleepily at them.

'What's made them all go mad on the Vorobianinov furniture?' he thought.

He undressed, said his prayers absent-mindedly, got into his narrow bed, and fell asleep with a worried look on his face.

CHAPTER XII

A PASSIONATE WOMAN—A POET'S DREAM

THE frost had vanished in the night. It was a warm spring morning and there were noises in the bedroom as though a horse were neighing and snorting. It was Hippolyte, who was washing himself. He was in a good mood. Bender was still in bed.

'By the way,' said Bender, 'I must ask you to settle your debt.'

Hippolyte tossed his towel to one side and glared at his partner.

'Why are you staring at me as if I were a louse? What are you so surprised about? The debt? It's quite right, you owe me money. I forgot to tell you last night that I paid for the confiscation orders in accordance with your wishes. I paid seventy roubles. Here's the receipt. Toss over thirty-five roubles! Since we're partners, the expenses had better be fifty-fifty.'

Hippolyte put on his pince-nez, read the receipt, and grudgingly paid the money, but not even that could throw a shadow over his happiness. The treasure was his. The thirty-five roubles were dust in comparison with the mountain of diamonds.

Hippolyte was smiling radiantly as he went into the corridor and began to walk up and down. Plans for a comfortable life came into his head, and he chuckled to himself at the thought of Father Theodore. 'The fool remains a fool. He's no more likely to get those chairs, or even a sight of them, than he is ever to see his beard again.'

He turned round when he got to the end of the corridor. The white door of room Number 13 opened

and Father Theodore almost fell over him. His kind face was beaming with happiness. He too had come out on to the corridor to take a short walk. The rivals passed each other several times, and after throwing triumphant looks at each other they walked on. Hippolyte was bubbling over with delight and Father Theodore was equally delighted. Each of them was overcome with feelings of pity for his vanquished rival. At last, as they met for the fifth time, Hippolyte could not resist saying something, and with inexpressible sweetness he said : ' Good morning, Father Theodore ! '

' Good morning, Hippolyte,' replied Father Theodore with all the sarcasm he could summon.

The enemies parted. As they passed each other again Hippolyte remarked : ' Tell me, did I hurt you last time we met ? '

' Not at all ! Not at all ! I was very happy to meet you,' said Father Theodore with a smile.

Again they separated. Father Theodore's face was beginning to annoy Hippolyte.

' Don't you hold Mass any more ? ' he said as he passed the priest again.

' How can I ? ' said Father Theodore. ' All the congregation are scattered looking for treasure in the towns. I don't know whose treasure it is, but I know they are looking for it.'

Hippolyte wanted to be insulting and opened his mouth to say something, but he could not think of anything strong enough to say, and, feeling annoyed, he went back into his room. A minute later Bender came out in his pale blue waistcoat and, tripping over his boot-laces, walked up to Father Theodore. The priest turned pale.

' Do you buy antiques ? ' asked Bender severely. ' Chairs ? Giblets ? Old tins ? '

' What d'you mean ? ' said Father Theodore in a frightened voice.

'I want to sell you a pair of old trousers.'

The priest shuddered and turned away.

'Well? Haven't you anything to say for yourself?'

Father Theodore walked towards his room.

'We buy old things,' Bender called out after him, 'and we steal new ones!'

The priest stopped outside his door and Bender went on taunting him: 'What about those breeches? D'you want them? I've got the sleeves of a waistcoat, the ring of a cracknel, and the ears of a dead donkey. You can have the whole lot cheap. And they're not inside a chair, so you won't need to look for them.'

Father Theodore banged his door behind him.

Bender was quite pleased with himself, and turned round to go into his bedroom, when Father Theodore poked his head out of his room and shouted: 'You're a fool!'

'What?' shouted Bender as he dashed back. But the priest slammed the door and locked it. 'What price opium for the people?' Bender bellowed through the keyhole.

There was no answer.

'You're a bounder, holy father!' shouted Bender.

A sharply-pointed pencil was pushed through the keyhole and Father Theodore tried to wound his enemy. Bender recoiled in time, seized the end of the pencil, and the two enemies silently tugged at it. Youth triumphed and the pencil slowly emerged from the keyhole. Bender returned to his room with the trophy, and Hippolyte and he were hilarious. Bender took his pen-knife, opened it, cut an insulting word on the side of the pencil, ran out into the corridor, pushed the pencil through the keyhole, and came back to his room. The friends began to examine the confiscation orders.

'The order for the "Shepherdess" Gobelin,' said Hippolyte meditatively. 'I bought that Gobelin from an antique-dealer in Petersburg.'

'"The Shepherdess" can go to the devil!' shouted Bender as he tore the order to ribbons.

'The round table.'

'Let me have that round table. That too can go to the devil!'

There were two orders left. One was for ten chairs and the other for a chair given out to Comrade Gritsatsuev in Stargorod.

'Get your money ready,' said Bender. 'You may have to go to Moscow.'

'But there's a chair here,' said Hippolyte.

'That's one chance against ten, isn't it?' said Bender. 'And it's quite possible that Comrade Gritsatsuev has had it broken up for firewood long ago.'

'I think your joke is out of place,' said Hippolyte.

'Never mind, dear Konrad Karlovich Michaelson, we'll find those diamonds and we'll wear silk shirts before we're very much older, and eat caviare too!'

'I can't say why,' said Hippolyte, 'but for some reason or other I feel absolutely convinced that the diamonds are in that very chair.'

'Oh! you feel that, do you? Do you feel anything else? Nothing? All right, we'll work in the Marxist way; we'll leave the sky to the birds and turn to the chairs. I'm longing to meet the disabled soldier of the Imperialist War, Comrade Gritsatsuev of Number 15 Plekhanov Street. Hurry up, Konrad Karlovich, we'll form our plan on our way there.'

As they passed Father Theodore's room, Bender could not resist kicking the door.

'I hope he won't follow us,' said Hippolyte nervously.

'After to-day's interview between the ministers no further negotiations are possible. He's afraid of me,' said Bender.

The friends returned in the evening. Hippolyte was worried, but Bender was radiant. The latter was wearing new boots, with bright yellow suède tops

and rubber heels, green and black check socks, a cream-coloured cap, and an artificial silk scarf.

'It's ours right enough,' said Hippolyte, thinking of their visit to Gritsatsuev's widow; 'but how can we get hold of the chair? Shall we buy it?'

'How can we?' retorted Bender. 'Apart from the expense, it'll only cause talk. And why buy one chair, and precisely that chair?'

'Well, what are we to do?' asked Hippolyte.

Bender looked down at his boots with pride.

'*Chic moderne!*' he said. 'What are we to do? Don't you worry, Mr. President; I shall take this little affair on to my own shoulders. Not a single chair will be able to resist these boots.'

'Do you know,' said Hippolyte excitedly, 'while you were talking to Madam Gritsatsuev about the flood, I sat down on our chair and, honour bright, I felt something hard under me. They are there! I swear they are!'

'Now, now, don't get so excited, Citizen Michaelson.'

'We'll have to steal it at night. Yes, we'll have to do that.'

'Well, I must say for a marshal of nobility you've got some pretty poor ideas,' said Bender. 'D'you know the technique of the business? Perhaps you've got a skeleton key in your trunk? No, no, put that right out of your head. That's mean; you can't plunder a poor widow.'

'But I should like to get hold of it quickly,' said Hippolyte.

'Quickly!' said Bender scornfully. 'Only kittens are born quickly! I shall marry her!'

'Marry?'

'Yes, marry Madam Gritsatsuev.'

'But why?'

'So as to be able to rummage in the chair in peace.'

'But you're tying yourself up for a lifetime!'

'What will a man not do for a couple of diamonds?'

'But it's for life! What a sacrifice!'

'Life?' said Bender. 'A sacrifice? What d'you know about life and sacrifices? Simply because you've been pushed out of your own home you think you know what life is. And because one of your Chinese vases was confiscated you think that is a sacrifice. Life is a complicated affair, but, my dear sir, it opens as simply as a box. All you want is the key to it. If you haven't got the key, then you're lost.'

Bender then polished his new boots with his sleeve and left Hippolyte. Towards morning he came back, took off his boots, put them on to his night-table, fell on to his bed, and stroked his boots: 'My dear little friends!' he said to them tenderly.

'Where have you been?' said Hippolyte half asleep.

'With the widow, of course,' said Bender.

'Well,' asked Hippolyte, as he raised himself on his elbow, 'and are you going to marry her?'

Bender's eyes shone.

'Being an honest man, I must marry her now.'

Hippolyte grinned stupidly.

'A passionate woman,' said Bender, 'is a poet's dream. Provincial simplicity. Such women are scarce nowadays.'

'When is the wedding?'

'The day after to-morrow. To-morrow is out of the question. It is the first of May and everything will be closed.'

'Then what about our plans? You're getting married—— And we may have to go to Moscow.'

'Well? What are you so worried about? That's no obstacle. Let the good work go on!'

'But your wife?'

'My wife? The diamond widow? Oh, that's nothing. Business in Moscow. A tender farewell and a chicken for the journey. We'll travel in comfort. You go to sleep. We'll take a holiday to-morrow.'

CHAPTER XIII

MAY DAY

IT was the first of May, and early in the morning Viktor Mikhaylovich Polesov hurried out of the yard to see the celebrations. At first he could not find anything to look at ; there were only a few people about, and the platforms that had been erected during the night were empty and were being guarded by mounted militiamen. By nine o'clock there were various signs of a holiday. Bands began to play, women ran out into the streets from their kitchens, columns of workers marched down the streets, and a lorry gaily decorated with bunting drove towards the workmen.

'Hi, there!' shouted the workmen to the lorry driver. 'What d'you think you're doing? Can't you see you're blocking the way?'

Viktor Mikhaylovich was in his element.

'Of course you shouldn't be here!' he shouted. 'Can't you see you're blocking the way? You should turn into the side-street. Come on, this way! This way! It's a positive disgrace! They can't even organize a holiday properly! Come on, this way! This way!'

Other lorries were loaded with children. The smallest children were pressed against the sides of the lorries, the taller ones were behind them, and the tallest stood in the centre, so that they formed a kind of pyramid. The children were enjoying themselves thoroughly. They were waving paper flags, shouting and singing and stamping their feet.

The Young Pioneers were beating their drums ; their chests well forward, they were trying hard to keep in step. One of the groups mistook Viktor Mikhaylovich for one of their leaders and began to cheer him.

An effigy of Austen Chamberlain in a top-hat was carried down the street, and a worker with a hammer in his right hand was beating the hat on which was written : ' The League of Nations '.

Three members of the League of Communist Youth, dressed in evening dress and wearing white gloves, drove past in a motor-car. They looked uncomfortable.

' *Bourgeois !* ' came a voice from the pavement. ' Throw us your braces ! '

The procession was moving towards the new tram depot. Promptly at one o'clock the first Stargorod electric tram was to come out of its shed.

Scarcely any one could remember when the idea of having electric trams in Stargorod had first started. Some time in 1922 a few workmen came and dug holes in the principal street. They made a number of large, deep holes, and a man wearing an engineer's cap walked to and fro, followed by a few men who measured out the ground. A week later they were still working in the same place. Holes had been made where they were not required and they had to be filled in again. The engineer shouted at the workmen and demanded an explanation. Then fresh holes were dug, deeper still and wider. Bricks were brought and the bricklayers came to lay the foundation. Gradually everything quietened down and the work stopped. The engineer came occasionally to look at the foundations and to examine the holes, which had been lined with bricks. He would tap the foundations with his walking stick and then walk away again. The engineer's name was Treukhov.

The construction of the tramway stopped with the foundations. Treukhov had thought out the project as far back as 1912, but the Town Council had turned it down. Two years later Treukhov again tried to persuade the council to take up his scheme, but the War interfered. Then after the War there was the Revolution, and after the Revolution there was the New

Economic Policy and other obstacles. Grass and flowers grew over the foundations during the summer, and in the winter children made ice-hills there. Treukhov dreamt of putting his plan into action. Various departments either passed or rejected his scheme, but the town refused to spend the necessary money.

'It's an absolute disgrace!' Treukhov would shout to his wife. 'No money! And yet the Stargorod cabmen are paid exorbitant fares. Of course the profiteers have the monopoly. You try carrying your luggage five miles to the railway station. . . . Why, the tram service would pay for itself in six years.' And for the thousandth time he would show the plans to his wife—plans for a tramway depot and twelve tram-lines.

'Twelve lines? That is for the future, but three lines are absolutely essential, and Stargorod will be no good without them.' And then Treukhov would snort and go into the kitchen to chop wood.

One day he took his plans to a new member of the council who had been transferred to Stargorod from Samarkand. He listened to Treukhov without paying much attention to what he was saying, fingered the plans and then said: 'We had no need for trams in Samarkand.'

'Yes, but that was Asia!' said Treukhov. 'I can see that you're not much good.' And he went out of the room and banged the door behind him.

Each time the man from Samarkand met Treukhov he would look at him with amusement and say: 'Well, what about that tram?'

But two months later he sent for the engineer and said: 'Next Friday there is to be an important meeting and I shall bring up your scheme.'

At that meeting the question was settled favourably, and Treukhov set to work, but there were many hitches. The wrong material was sent, the rails were delayed in transit, and there were disputes among the workmen.

The building of the Stargorod tramway provided the town with much amusement, and there were numerous jokes about it in the papers.

At last the depot was built, the tram-lines were laid from the railway station to the slaughter-house, and from the market to the cemetery.

The opening ceremony was supposed to take place in October, but the trams did not arrive in time and the inauguration had to be postponed until the first of May. On that day everything was ready.

The whole of Stargorod was out in the streets. The new tram depot was hung with flags, garlands, and slogans. A militiaman was galloping after an ice-cream merchant who had managed to slip through the cordon. A microphone had been fastened on to one of the gates. Delegates crowded round a platform, and an orchestra began to tune up. A drum lay on the ground.

Ten new trams numbered from 701 to 710 stood in the brightly-lit depot. A journalist from Moscow was looking for the engineer to ask him some questions about the trams. Although he knew perfectly well what he was going to say about the opening ceremony, including the speeches which had not yet been given, he continued to look for the engineer.

The crowd shouted, sang, and chewed sunflower seeds as they waited for the first tram to come out of the depot.

A man climbed on to the platform and began to address the crowd: 'I declare this tram depot of Stargorod to be now open.'

The orchestra played the 'International' three times.

There were speeches.

'And, comrades,' concluded one of the speakers, 'I think that this tram which is about to run out of the depot has been brought into existence through the efforts of you, comrades, the workers, who have worked so very conscientiously, and too through the devoted service of that honest Soviet specialist, chief engineer Truekhov.'

Treukhov was not to be found. The speech was vigorously applauded by the crowd. The meeting was becoming tedious, but the speakers had grown so used to talking that they could not stop.

At last Treukhov was found. His hands and face were smeared with oil, and before going on to the platform he insisted upon scrubbing his face and hands.

It was his turn to make a speech. He wanted to say a great deal about hard work, about what had been done and was still to be achieved. He opened his mouth and began to stammer : ' C-C-Comrades ! The inter-ter-international position of our country is——'

The crowd which was listening to the sixth international speech was entirely unresponsive. It was only when he had finished his speech that he realized he had not said a word about the tram.

' How stupid ! ' he thought. ' We Russians simply don't know how to make speeches. It would be much better if we didn't talk at all ! '

It was quite dark by the time the red ribbon across the entrance to the depot was cut with a sharp pair of scissors. Workers and representatives of various societies crowded into the trams. A bell rang and the first tram, driven by Treukhov himself, ran out of the depot amid deafening cheers from the crowd.

Viktor Mikhaylovich Polesov had managed to scramble on to the platform of the last tram. He was interested in the tram and was very surprised to find that, contrary to his prophecy, it ran very smoothly and that the windows did not rattle. He exchanged a few opinions with the driver, and the distinguished guests of the Town Council thought that he was a tramway specialist from the West of Europe.

After a triumphant tour of the town the trams ran back into the depot, where the crowd was waiting for them.

As Viktor Mikhaylovich was getting out of the tram

he suddenly noticed a familiar face. It was none other than Hippolyte Matveyevich Vorobianinov, who was walking away from the depot with a young friend of his.

When the opening ceremony was over a Ford car suddenly arrived at the depot. A cinema operator jumped out and Treukhov went up to him and said: 'Are you the cinema? Why didn't you come this afternoon?'

'When was the opening?'

'It's all over long ago!'

'Yes, yes, we may be a little late. Come along now, turn the handle! Take a picture of the crowd. That'll do, thank you! Now, the moving feet of the crowd. That'll do, thank you! Now, the chief engineer, Comrade Treukhov, is it? No, no, not like that, but with a tram in the background. That's it! Many thanks. Stop!'

The cinema operator put his apparatus into the Ford again and drove off.

Polesov had managed to push his way out of the crowd and was now following Hippolyte and his friend. He was waiting for an opportunity to go up to Hippolyte.

'Good evening, Mr. Vorobianinov,' he said respectfully.

Hippolyte was startled.

'I haven't the honour,' he mumbled.

Bender pushed his way in between them and turned to Polesov.

'Now, now,' he said, 'what do you want to say to my friend?'

'You don't need to worry,' said Polesov, looking round. 'I've come from Elena Bauer.'

'What? Is she here?'

'Yes, she is, and she is very anxious to see you.'

'Why?' asked Bender; 'and who are you?'

'You needn't be nervous,' said the locksmith. 'You

may not remember me, but I remember you very well.'

'I'd like to see Elena Stanislavovna,' said Hippolyte hesitantly.

'She invites you to come and see her.'

'But how did she know I was here?'

'I saw you in the corridor at the House Department, and for a long time I thought "That face seems familiar," and then I remembered. You don't need to be afraid. It will be kept a secret.'

'A woman you know?' asked Bender in a business-like way.

'Er—yes, an old friend.'

'Well, perhaps we can go and see her and have supper with your old friend. I, for one, am dying for something to eat, and all the restaurants are closed.'

'All right. Let us go.'

'Come on then,' said Bender. 'Lead on, mysterious stranger.' And the locksmith, casting furtive glances over his shoulder, led them through back streets and yards until they came to the fortune-teller's house.

CHAPTER XIV

THE SECRET UNION OF THE SWORD AND PLOUGH

WHEN a woman grows old all sorts of unpleasant things can happen to her: her teeth may fall out, her hair turn grey, she may have palpitation, be overwhelmed with fat or afflicted with extreme scragginess, but her voice does not change. She has the same voice she had as a young woman.

The locksmith knocked at the door and Elena Stanislavovna called out: 'Who's there?' Hippolyte trembled. His love's voice was just as it had been in 1899, but when he saw her there was not a trace of her former self left.

'How you have changed!' he said involuntarily.

The old woman threw her arms round his neck.

'Thank you,' she said. 'I know what you are risking by coming to see me! You are the same generous knight you always were! I do not ask you why you have come from Paris. I am not inquisitive.'

'But I haven't come from Paris,' said Hippolyte, rather confused.

'My colleague and I have just come from Berlin,' corrected Bender, nudging Hippolyte, 'but it is not advisable to speak of these matters.'

'Oh, how happy I am to see you!' gushed the fortune-teller. 'Come in here, into this room.' Then she turned to the locksmith: 'And you, you will excuse us. You will come and see us in half an hour's time, won't you?'

'A first meeting,' said Bender to the locksmith. 'Awkward moments! Will you allow me to come with you?' The locksmith was delighted, and took

Bender to his home, where they were soon engrossed in conversation.

An hour later they returned and found Hippolyte and the fortune-teller talking of old times.

'And do you remember—— ?' the fortune-teller was saying.

'Yes, but don't you remember—— ?' Hippolyte replied.

'I think the psychological moment for supper has arrived,' thought Bender, and interrupting their reminiscences, he remarked: 'There is a strange custom in Berlin. People eat so late there that it is quite impossible to know whether it is early supper or late dinner.'

The fortune-teller jumped up, looked lovingly at Hippolyte, and went into the kitchen to prepare supper.

'And now we must act,' said Bender in a low voice. 'We must act.' He shook the locksmith by the hand. 'The old woman won't give us away, will she? Can we rely on her?'

Polesov nodded.

'What is your political credo?'

'Always!' said the locksmith enthusiastically.

'A Tsarist, I hope?'

'Of course!'

'Russia will not forget you!' said Bender dramatically.

Hippolyte, who was biting into a cake, listened in absolute astonishment, but there was no holding Bender. He was inspired, and was pacing up and down the room like a wild animal. The fortune-teller brought a samovar from the kitchen. Bender gallantly jumped up, took the samovar from her, and placed it on the table. The samovar whistled and Bender decided to act.

'Madam,' he said, 'we are happy to read in your face——' He did not know what he was happy to

read in her face, so he began again in a business-like way: 'A strict secret—a State secret!' He pointed at Hippolyte. 'Who do you think this gentleman really is? You need not answer. You cannot guess. He is a giant of thought, the father of Russian democracy, and a person very near to the Tsar.'

Hippolyte drew himself up and looked rather bewildered. He did not understand, but he knew from experience that Ostap Bender never spoke without purpose. The locksmith began to tremble. He was standing with his chin in the air, like a man ready to set off in a royal procession. The fortune-teller sat down on the nearest chair and looked at Bender with awe.

'Are there many of us in the town?' asked Bender. 'What is the general feeling?'

The locksmith began to give a vague and muddled reply, but Bender interrupted: 'Good. That will do. Now, with your help, Elena Stanislavovna, we should like to meet the best people of the town, especially those whom fate has persecuted. Who can you invite?

'Who can I invite?' said the fortune-teller. 'What about Maxim Petrovich and his wife?'

'Without his wife,' corrected Bender. 'No wives allowed. You shall be the only pleasant exception. Who else?'

There followed a discussion, and they decided to invite Maxim Petrovich Charushnikov, a former member of the Town Council and now a model example of a man working for the Soviet; Dyadiev, the proprietor of 'Rapidpack'; Kislyarsky, the chairman of the Moscow Cracknels; and two other young men who were thoroughly reliable.

'Please ask them to come here for a secret meeting,' said Bender.

The locksmith ran off to invite them. The fortune-teller went into the kitchen, and Hippolyte turned to Bender: 'What do you mean by it?'

'Mean? It means that you are very slow, my friend.'

'Why?'

'Because! Forgive me if I ask you a prosaic question, but how much money have you got?'

'What sort of money?'

'Any money, including all your small change.'

'Thirty-five roubles.'

'And do you mean to say that you thought you could pay for all the expenses of our enterprise?'

Hippolyte could not think what to say.

'Now then, my dear patron, I think you are beginning to see daylight. You'll have to play the giant of thought for an hour and pretend that you are a person close to the Tsar.'

'Why?'

'Because we need working capital. I am to be married to-morrow. I am not a beggar. I wish to feast on that important day.'

'What do you want me to do?' groaned Hippolyte.

'You're to be silent, and every now and then, for the sake of making an impression, just blow out your cheeks.'

'But that is . . . cheating.'

'Who says so? Tolstoy or Darwin? No. I hear this from the lips of a man who only last night was thinking of climbing into Madam Gritsatsuev's house to steal the poor widow's furniture. Don't worry; just keep silent and don't forget to blow out your cheeks.'

'Why start such a dangerous business? We may be reported.'

'Oh! don't worry about that. The matter will be conducted in such a way that no one will understand anything. Let us have some tea.'

While Bender and Hippolyte were drinking tea the guests began to arrive.

Nicholas and Vladimir, the two young men, came in with the locksmith. They were not introduced to

the giant of thought. They were louts of about thirty, and were obviously very pleased to have been invited. They sat in a corner and watched the father of Russian democracy consume cold veal.

Charushnikov, the former member of the Town Council, a heavy old man, shook Hippolyte warmly by the hand and looked straight into his eyes. After they had exchanged a few reminiscences about the town, Bender turned to Charushnikov: 'Which regiment were you in?'

'I—I—so to speak, was not in any regiment because——'

'Are you a member of the nobility?'

'Yes, I was.'

'You are still, I hope. Be strong. Your help will be needed. I suppose Polesov has told you? We shall have help from abroad. We have a complete secret organization.'

Bender moved over to the two louts and asked them with undisguised severity: 'Which regiment were you in? You will have to serve your country. Members of the nobility? Splendid!' and without giving them time to answer he added: 'The West will help us. We have a complete secret organization.'

Bender was enjoying himself, for everything was going splendidly. When introduced to the proprietor of 'Rapidpack' he asked him about his regiment, promised help from abroad, and told him about the complete secret organization. The proprietor's first instinct was to run away from this conspiracy. He considered his firm was far too important for him to be taking part in such a risky business; but as he looked across at Bender he hesitated, and then decided to stay.

Kislyarsky was the last to arrive, and as he had never served in a regiment and had not been a member of the nobility, Bender told him to pluck up courage, which Kislyarsky promised to do.

'As a representative of private capital,' said Bender, 'you cannot afford to remain deaf to the groans of your country.'

Kislyarsky sighed.

'You know who that is?' said Bender as he pointed to Hippolyte.

'Of course,' answered Kislyarsky. 'That is Mr. Vorobianinov.'

'That,' said Bender, 'is the giant of thought, the father of Russian democracy, and a person very close to the Tsar.'

'This means at least two years' solitary confinement,' thought Kislyarsky. 'Why ever did I come here?'

'The Secret Union of the Sword and Plough,' whispered Bender into his ear.

'Ten years!' thought Kislyarsky.

'Of course you can go away if you wish, but I warn you our arm is long,' said Bender. 'I'll teach him something,' thought Bender to himself. 'I shan't let him go under a hundred roubles.'

Kislyarsky stayed.

'Citizens!' said Bender, opening the meeting, 'Life dictates its laws—its cruel laws. I shall not speak of the objects of this meeting. They are sufficiently well known to you all. The aim of this meeting is holy. We hear cries for help from every corner of our country. We must extend a helping hand, and we shall extend a helping hand. Some of you are working and have butter on your bread, while others are eating caviare sandwiches. All of you have beds and warm blankets, but there are little children in the streets who deserve a better fate. Gentlemen, we must help those little children, and we shall help them!'

This speech raised various feelings in the minds of the listeners. Polesov did not understand his new friend. 'Children?' he thought. 'Why children?' Hippolyte did not attempt to understand it. He sat in silence and blew out his cheeks. Elena Stanislavovna

was wistful. The two louts stared devotedly at Bender's blue waistcoat. The proprietor of 'Rapidpack' was delighted: 'Very nicely put,' he thought. 'I can give some money, and if we're caught I can always say that I was helping the children.' Charushnikov exchanged a knowing look with Dyadiev. Kislyarsky was in the seventh heaven of delight. He had never loved destitute children so much as he loved them that night.

'Comrades,' continued Bender, 'we want immediate help. We must tear the children out of the clutches of the street. Let us remember that children are the flowers of life. I invite you to give your contributions here and now. For the children, and no one but the children, you understand.'

Bender took a receipt-book from his pocket.

'I must ask you to give me your donations. Hippolyte Matveyevich will confirm my authority.'

Hippolyte blew out his cheeks and nodded.

'In order of seniority, please, gentlemen. Let us begin with Maxim Petrovich.'

Maxim Petrovich wriggled in his chair and gave thirty roubles.

'In better days,' he said, 'I should have given more.'

'Better days will soon be here,' said Bender; 'but that has nothing to do with the destitute children.'

The two young men gave eight roubles between them.

'That's not enough, my friends.'

The young men blushed. Polesov ran home and brought fifty roubles.

'Bravo, hussar!' said Bender. 'That's splendid for a hussar. But what do the merchants say?'

Dyadiev and Kislyarsky bargained for a long time and grumbled about business being bad. Bender was adamant.

'In the presence of a man like Hippolyte, I consider such wrangling is superfluous, and, to say the least of it, in bad taste.'

Hippolyte bowed. Each of the merchants contributed two hundred roubles for the destitute children.

'Four hundred and eighty-eight roubles in all,' proclaimed Bender. 'What a pity! Twelve roubles short of a round sum!'

Elena Stanislavovna, who had been trying to make up her mind, went into her bedroom, brought out an old-fashioned handbag, and took out the necessary twelve roubles.

The meeting did not last for very much longer, and presently the guests began to disperse.

'We shall let you know the date of the next meeting,' said Bender as he said good-bye. 'But remember this is a dead secret. It is in your own interests to keep it a secret.'

Kislyarsky made up his mind that he would never come near the place again and left in a hurry.

'You, Hippolyte,' said Bender, 'will, I hope, accept Elena Stanislavovna's invitation to stay the night here. I must be off.'

Hippolyte winked frantically at Bender, but Bender pretended he had not seen these signs and went out into the street. He thought of the five hundred roubles he had honestly earned.

'Hi!' he called to a cabman. 'Take me to "The Phoenix".'

The restaurant was closed.

'Why is it closed?' asked Bender.

'The first of May,' said the cabman.

'Drat them! Here am I with lots of money and nowhere to go. Take me to Plekhanov Street. I suppose you know where it is?'

Bender decided to visit his fiancée.

'What was the street called before?' asked the cabman.

'I don't know.'

'Then how can I take you there?'

For an hour and a half they drove through the

empty town, and at last they discovered that Plekhanov Street was none other than the former Government Street.

'Government Street?' said the cabman. 'Why, I've been taking people to Government Street for the last twenty-five years.'

But when they got to Government Street it was not Plekhanov Street, but Karl Marx Street.

All night long they searched for Plekhanov Street until in exasperation Bender shouted to the cabman to take him back to 'The Sorbonne'.

'What a man!' said he. 'Fancy you not knowing where Plekhanov Street is!'

. . . . .

The widow Gritsatsuev's house was as clean as a new pin. At the head of the wedding table sat Bender, the eligible King of Clubs promised by the fortune-teller. He was very smartly dressed and decidedly drunk. The guests were shouting and singing.

The bride was no chicken, for she was well over thirty, but Nature had been generous. She had a large bosom, a thick nose, bright red cheeks, and a big head. She adored her new husband and was very frightened of him, and because of this she did not call him by his Christian name or patronymic, but addressed him as 'Comrade Bender'.

Hippolyte was again sitting on his own walnut chair, and during the whole of the wedding-feast he was constantly jumping up and down to see if there was anything hard in it.

Bender made endless speeches and proposed a number of toasts, including one to Public Instruction and one to the irrigation of Uzbekistan.

Presently the guests began to disperse, and in the entrance hall Hippolyte whispered knowingly to Bender: 'Don't waste any time! They are there!'

'You're a regular taskmaster,' said Bender, who was

very drunk. 'Don't go. Don't go away. Wait for me in "The Sorbonne". I may come back at any minute. Settle the bill. Let everything be ready. Farewell! Field-Marshal, wish me good-night!'

Hippolyte returned to 'The Sorbonne' and waited until five o'clock in the morning, when Bender suddenly appeared with the chair. Hippolyte trembled with excitement as Bender put the chair in the middle of the room and sat down on it.

'How on earth did you manage it?' asked Hippolyte.

'Quite simply,' said Bender. 'The little widow is fast asleep and dreaming. It seemed a pity to wake her, so alas! I was compelled to leave a note for my love: "I am off to Novokhopersk on business. Don't wait for me for dinner. Your pet." And then I took the chair. There are no trams at this time of day, so I took short rests on the way and sat on the chair.'

Hippolyte rushed across the room to the chair.

'Be quiet!' said Bender. 'We mustn't make a noise.'

He took a pair of pincers out of his pocket and the work began.

'Have you locked the door?' asked Bender. He pushed Hippolyte to one side and carefully took the cover from the chair-seat so as not to damage the English chintz.

'You don't find such material nowadays,' said Bender. 'We must take care of it.'

He was so slow that Hippolyte was growing more and more impatient and annoyed.

'Now!' said Bender as he lifted up the upholstery and began to search among the springs with both hands.

'Well?' cried Hippolyte excitedly. 'Well?'

'Well,' answered Bender irritably. 'one chance in eleven and this chance——' He groped among the springs and upholstery again, and then added: 'And this chance is no good.'

He stood up and brushed his knees while Hippolyte fell upon the chair. There were no diamonds. Hippolyte was depressed, but Bender was as cheerful as ever.

'Our chances have increased,' said Bender encouragingly as he walked up and down the room. 'Never mind; that chair cost the widow more than it cost us.' And he pulled out of his pocket a gold brooch, a bracelet, half a dozen gilt spoons, and a tea-strainer. Hippolyte was so distressed that he did not even realize he had been the accomplice in a common theft.

'It's rather mean of me,' said Bender; 'but you must agree that I couldn't leave my beloved without taking some little souvenir. However, there is no time to be lost. We're only at the beginning of things here, whereas the end is in Moscow. And I'm sure the Furniture Museum won't be like the widow: it'll be far more difficult there.'

The two partners stuffed the bits of chair under the bed, and after counting up their money, which came to five hundred and thirty-five roubles, they left to catch the Moscow express.

They had to drive through the town in an open cab and were terrified of being seen, but when at last they were safe in the train, Bender slapped Hippolyte on the back, and said in a cheerful voice: 'Never mind, my friend; don't be downhearted. We shall be in Moscow to-morrow. Let the good work go on!'

PART II

IN MOSCOW

CHAPTER XV

THE CHAIRS AND A HOSTEL

STATISTICS know everything and there is no getting away from them. They not only know how many dentists, porters, film-producers, bicycles, monuments, and sewing-machines there are in the country, but they even know the number of statisticians it contains.

There is one thing, however, they do not know. They do not know how many chairs there are in Soviet Russia.

There are a great number of chairs in Russia. The last census showed that the population of the several republics in Russia numbered one hundred and forty-three million people. If we exclude the ninety million peasants who prefer to sit on stoves and benches, or those in the East who sit on carpets and rugs, even then there are fifty-three million people to whom chairs are a first necessity of life.

If we take into account the mistakes which may have been made in taking the census and the habit of certain citizens to sit between two chairs, then taking two as the average number of chairs per head we find that there must be at least twenty-six and a half million chairs in the country. To be on the safe side, let us ignore the six and a half million and we see that the minimum is twenty million chairs.

In this ocean of chairs made of walnut, oak, and ash, of mahogany and carelian birch wood, of pine and fir, the heroes of our novel have to find one walnut chair

with bent legs, upholstered in English chintz, made by Gambs, and hiding somewhere inside itself Madam Petukhov's diamonds.

The train carrying Bender and Hippolyte was slowly approaching Moscow. The passengers had exhausted all the anecdotes they knew. Last Tuesday's Stargorod newspaper had been read from cover to cover, including the advertisements, and was now a mass of grease-spots. All the roast chickens, hard-boiled eggs, and olives had been eaten, but the last wearisome part of the journey—the last hour before they reached Moscow—was still ahead of them.

While the rest of the passengers went on talking, Hippolyte tried to picture to himself what the Museum of Furniture would look like. He saw it as a long corridor extending for miles with chairs lined up on either side and he could see himself walking through the two rows of chairs.

'I wonder what will happen at the Museum of Furniture?' he said to Bender, and then added anxiously: 'Do you think it will be all right?'

'My dear marshal of nobility, it's high time you had some electrical treatment. There's no need for you to have hysterics quite so soon. Of course, if you can't help having them, then at least you might suffer in silence.'

At last the train reached Moscow and they steamed slowly into the cleanest and newest station, the Ryazan.

Hippolyte and Bender pushed their way through the crowd and found themselves in Kalanchev Square. It was ten o'clock in the morning. They took a cab, and after a few minutes' furious driving Hippolyte asked where they were going to.

'To good people,' said Bender. 'There are plenty of them in Moscow, and they are all my friends.'

'Are we going to stay with them?'

'It's a community. We can always stay with one or other of them.'

The cabman pulled up outside a house in Sivtsev-Urazhka Street.

'What is this house?' asked Hippolyte.

'A hostel for students of chemistry, and it is named after a monk called Berthold Schwartz.'

'Surely not a monk?'

'Oh! well, I was only joking. It is really called Comrade Semashko Hostel.'

Like every student-hostel in Moscow it had long since been filled with people whose connexion with chemistry was very vague. The students had dispersed. Some of them had finished their course and had found work in other towns. Others had been expelled for having failed in their examinations, and it was precisely these whose numbers were increasing from year to year that had formed themselves into something between a feudal village-settlement and a union of lodgers. Generations of new students had tried in vain to come and live in the hostel. The ex-chemists were unusually ingenious and resisted all attacks, and in time the students gave up trying to get accommodation there. It was a wild place and had been struck off all the registers of the M.U.N.I. It was as though it had never existed, and yet it did exist, for people were actually living in it.

Hippolyte and Bender went up to the first floor, and turned into a dark corridor.

'How light and airy!' said Bender.

Suddenly some one grunted sarcastically at Hippolyte's elbow.

'Don't be frightened,' said Bender. 'It's not in the corridor. It's on the other side of the wall. Wood, as we know from physics, is the best conductor of sound. Gently, take my arm, there is an iron safe somewhere about.' But a groan from Hippolyte showed that he had already hit his chest against the sharp iron corner of the safe.

'Are you hurt?' asked Bender. 'That's nothing;

it's only physical suffering. It makes me shudder to remember all the moral suffering that used to go on here. In those days a skeleton used to stand next to that safe. It belonged to a student, Ivanopulo, who bought it and was then afraid to keep it in his own room. The other people used to hit themselves on the safe and the skeleton would fall on them.'

The two friends went up a spiral staircase until they reached a place which had once been a large room, but was now divided up by partition walls to form long cubicles each two yards wide. Each cubicle was like a schoolboy's pencil-box, but instead of pencils and penholders there were people and ' Primus ' stoves in them.

' Are you in, Nicky ? ' asked Bender in a low voice as he stopped at the central door.

In reply to this question, talking immediately began in the five pencil-boxes.

' Yes, I am,' came a voice from behind the door.

' That fool has got early visitors again ! ' whispered a woman's voice, coming from the farthest pencil-box to the left.

' Can't you let a fellow sleep ? ' growled pencil-box number two.

There was a malicious whisper from number three : ' They've come for Nick from the militia. It must be about the broken window-pane.'

Pencil-box number five was silent except for the roar of a ' Primus ' stove and the sound of two people kissing.

Bender kicked the middle door open. The whole partition rocked and he and Hippolyte pushed their way into Nick's cubicle. It was a terrible place. The only furniture was a red-striped mattress raised on four bricks. That did not disturb Bender, and Nicky did not even move. He was sitting on the mattress with his feet under him, and next to him was such a heavenly creature that Bender immediately became

glum. Such young women are never any good when there is any business about. Their eyes are far too blue and their necks are too clean. Either they are mistresses or adored wives. This beauty was called 'Liza', and Nicky seemed to be devoted to her.

Hippolyte took off his felt hat and Bender called Nicky out into the corridor, where they whispered together for some time.

'A fine morning, madam,' said Hippolyte shyly.

The blue-eyed damsel laughed, and quite irrelevantly began to tell Hippolyte what fools the people were in the next pencil-box.

'They light that "Primus" stove on purpose so that their kissing should not be heard. It's absurd, isn't it? You see, we can all hear them, but of course they can't hear anything because of their wretched "Primus." Just listen!'

And Nicky's wife, who had fathomed all the secrets of a "Primus" stove, said in a loud voice: 'The Zverevs are fools!'

There was a fiendish hissing from the 'Primus' and more kissing.

'You see? They can't hear anything.' And again she said loudly: 'The Zverevs are fools, idiots, and neurotics! You see?'

'Yes,' agreed Hippolyte.

'Now we don't keep a "Primus",' she went on. 'Why should we? We dine in a vegetarian restaurant. I don't believe in vegetarian cooking, but before we got married Nicky was always dreaming about our going to this vegetarian place together, and so we go. I'm very fond of meat, but the cutlets there are made of macaroni. Please don't say anything about this to Nicky.'

Nicky came into the room again with Bender.

'Well, if it's impossible for us to stay here, we must go to Panteley,' said Bender after a pause.

'Splendid!' shouted Nicky. 'You go to Ivanopulo He's a fine lad.'

' Come and see us again, won't you ? ' said Nicky's wife. ' My husband and I will be very pleased.'

' They're inviting guests again ! ' said a disgusted voice from next door. ' As though they don't have enough visitors ! '

' What's that got to do with you, you fools ? ' said Nicky's wife in quite a level voice.

' You see ! ' said an excited voice from next door. ' Your wife is being insulted and you don't say anything ! '

Voices began to shout from the other cubicles as Hippolyte and Bender went downstairs to find Ivanopulo.

The student was not at home, but after striking a match, Hippolyte found a note pinned to the door : ' Back at nine.'

' Never mind,' said Bender, ' I know where he keeps the key.'

He fumbled about under the safe, produced a key, and unlocked the door. Ivanopulo's cubicle was the same size as Nicky's, but because it was in the corner one of the walls was made of brick. The student was very proud of this fact. To his dismay Hippolyte noticed that the student did not even have a mattress.

' Oh ! we'll manage splendidly,' said Bender. ' It's a very decent cubicle for Moscow. If we all three lie in a row there'll still be plenty of floor-space. But what the devil has he done with his mattress ? '

Bender spread a newspaper on the floor. Hippolyte pulled out a travelling pillow, and it was not long before they were both fast asleep.

CHAPTER XVI

A QUARREL

THE next day Liza and Nicky were in a bad temper.

'Liza, we must go to dinner.'

'I don't want to. I had dinner yesterday.'

'What d'you mean?'

'I don't want any mock hare!'

'That's silly.'

'Well, I can't feed on vegetarian sausages any more.'

'You needn't. You can have apple charlotte to-day.'

'I don't feel like it,' shouted Liza.

'Don't shout so! Everybody can hear you.'

The young married couple lowered their voices to a tense whisper, and two minutes later Nicky understood for the first time that his beloved was not so fond of sausages made of peas, carrots, and potatoes as he was.

'I see,' he said. 'You prefer to eat dogs instead of living on proper dietetic nourishment.'

'Be quiet!' shouted Liza. 'I like to eat meat. There's nothing wrong in that.'

Nicky was silent for a moment. If they were to become meat-eaters, it would make an enormous difference to his budget, and as he walked up and down the cubicle he made desperate calculations. He was a designer and never made any more than forty roubles a month. They did not pay any rental. Ten roubles went for Liza's sewing-classes. The vegetarian dinners cost thirteen roubles a month, and the rest went in one way and another, but where it went to he did not know. If they began to eat meat he would be ruined.

'Fancy eating carcasses!' he said. 'It's simply cannibalism under a mask of culture. All diseases can be attributed to meat.'

'Of course,' said Liza sarcastically. 'Angina pectoris, for instance.'

'Certainly! Any organ weakened by constant meat-eating cannot possibly withstand infection. Why, just think of it, a pork chop takes a whole week out of a man's life.'

'Well, let it!' said Liza. 'Mock hare takes half a year out of mine! Yesterday when I was eating that roast carrot I felt I should die, but I didn't want to tell you.'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'I couldn't. I was too ill.'

Liza began to weep.

'Leo Tolstoy didn't eat meat,' said Nicky in a trembling voice.

'I dare say,' said Liza, gulping her tears. 'The Count ate asparagus.'

'Asparagus isn't meat.'

'No, but he ate meat when he was writing *War and Peace*. Yes, meat, meat, meat! Yes, and when he wrote *Anna Karenina* he simply guzzled meat, meat, meat!'

'Oh, shut up!'

'I tell you he did! He guzzled meat, meat!'

'And when he wrote *The Kreutzer Sonata* did he also eat meat?' asked Nicky bitingly.

'*The Kreutzer Sonata* is only a short thing. He couldn't have written *War and Peace* on vegetarian sausage.'

'Well, what are you bringing in Tolstoy for?'

'I bringing in Tolstoy?' Liza went hastily across the cubicle and put on her beret.

'Where are you going to?'

'On business. Leave me alone.' And Liza hurried out of the room.

'Where can she have gone?' thought Nicky.

'Women have been given far too much freedom under the Soviet rule,' said a voice from the farthest pencil-box on the left.

'She'll drown herself,' said a voice on the right.

Meantime, Liza was angry and ran down the street, swallowing her tears. As she went on she grew calmer. 'It would be quite all right if only we had a table and two chairs,' she thought, 'and, after all, a "Primus" would be useful.' Then she felt hungry and remembering her quarrel with Nicky she was furious again. She hated her husband.

'It's simply disgusting!' she said aloud as he hunger increased. She bought herself a sausage sandwich, and as she did not like eating in the street, she went into a doorway and enjoyed it. When she had finished eating she wiped her mouth and brushed the crumbs from her coat. Then she felt better; looked round and saw that she was standing on the steps of the Museum of Furniture. She did not feel like going home, and she had nowhere else to go. She had twenty copecks in her pocket, so she decided to begin her independent life by visiting the Museum.

CHAPTER XVII

THE MUSEUM OF FURNITURE

SUNDAY in Moscow is a museum day. There is quite a special category of people in Moscow who know nothing about art, who have not the slightest interest in architecture, and do not like the monuments of bygone days. These people visit museums only because of the fine buildings in which the collections are arranged. As they wander about the brilliantly-lit halls, looking with envy at the painted ceilings and touching every article they are particularly requested not to touch, they always exclaim: 'To think that people once lived here.'

It does not interest them in the least that the friezes were painted by some famous French artist. All they want to know is how much the former owner had to pay for the house. They go up the marble staircase and try to imagine how many footmen stood against the walls, what wages they received, and how much each footman made in tips. Porcelain is arranged on the mantelpiece, but without looking at the porcelain they decide that an open fireplace is not a practical thing to have because it burns far too much wood.

In the oak-panelled dining-room they do not examine the magnificent carvings; they are tormented by one thought: 'What did the former owner eat in this dining-room which has now become part of a museum? How much would the food have cost to-day with the present high prices?'

Such people are to be found in any museum. While groups of excursionists are being marshalled from one masterpiece to another, there is always a visitor who stands in the middle of the hall and, without looking at anything in particular, mutters to

himself: 'To think that people once lived here! How grand!'

As Liza walked into the Museum she knocked against a man who was staring at a malachite column and was wistfully saying to himself: 'Just imagine it. People once lived here.'

She looked at the column with awe and then went upstairs. She wandered about for ten minutes in rooms that were so small and had such low ceilings that every person who came in looked like a giant. The rooms were stuffed with furniture, and as she looked at it with forced admiration she began to think: 'How nice that Paul the First arm-chair would look if only it were in our room next to the mattress.' She would have liked to rest in one of these chairs, but it was against the regulations. She looked down, and to her astonishment she could see through the thick sheets of glass set into the floor. She saw an enormous hall in which there was more furniture and where some visitors were wandering round. She had never seen a hall under her feet before, and she stared down in amazement. Suddenly she noticed two men; they were her new friends, Comrade Bender and the elderly bald gentleman. 'That's good,' she said to herself, 'it won't be so dull now,' and she immediately ran downstairs. She found herself in a large red drawing-room in which there were about forty pieces of furniture. It was walnut furniture with bent legs. She could not find a way out from the room, so she had to hurry back through the round room that had a glass ceiling, past the brocade arm-chairs of the Italian Renaissance, past the Dutch cupboards, past an enormous Gothic bed, and at last found herself in another large room. She walked to the other end, where Comrade Bender was having an animated conversation with his friend. As Liza came up to them she heard Bender say: 'The furniture is very stylish, but I don't think it is what we want.'

'But there are other rooms here,' the elderly gentleman replied. 'We must examine everything systematically.'

'How do you do?' said Liza cheerfully.

Both men turned round quickly and they both frowned.

'How do you do, Comrade Bender? I'm so glad I've found you, it's very dull being alone here. Shall we all look at the furniture together?'

The two men exchanged glances. Hippolyte tried to look amiable although he was annoyed, for Liza might disturb them in their important search for the diamonds.

'We are typical provincials,' said Bender impatiently, 'but you are a Moscow woman. What are you doing here?'

'Oh! I've come quite by chance. I've had a row with Nicky.'

'Well, come on,' said Bender. 'We can leave this room.'

'Oh! but it's so nice, and I haven't seen it yet.'

Bender turned to Liza and told her there was nothing in it worth looking at, for it was furniture belonging to the Kerensky period.

'I've been told that there is some furniture here made by Gambs. Let's go and look at that.'

Liza readily agreed, and taking Hippolyte's arm went towards the door. Bender walked behind the couple, smiling to himself.

Liza was a dreadful nuisance to them, for while they could see at a glance that a room did not contain the furniture they were looking for and were ready to go on to the next, she wanted to linger in each section. She read out the inscriptions on each piece of furniture and made pointed remarks about the other visitors. She was enjoying herself, and she did not notice the bored faces of her companions, who were too polite to hurry off to the Gambs room.

'We must be patient,' said Bender. 'The furniture won't run away.'

There did not seem to be any end to the collection.

'Look! Look!' shouted Liza, pulling Hippolyte by the sleeve. 'Do you see that writing-table? Wouldn't it be lovely in our room?'

'Charming,' said Bender.

'I've been in here before,' said Liza as they came into the red drawing-room. 'There's nothing in here.'

But to her surprise the two men, who had so far seemed to be quite indifferent to the furniture, suddenly stopped at the door.

'What are you standing here for? Come on. I'm tired.'

'Wait a minute,' said Hippolyte as he dropped her arm.

The room was packed with furniture. The Gambs chairs stood all round the walls and round a table in the middle of the room. A divan was also surrounded by chairs. Their bent legs and comfortable backs were strikingly familiar to Hippolyte. Bender looked inquiringly at him and Hippolyte flushed with excitement.

'You're tired,' he said to Liza. 'Just sit down here while we have a look round. It seems quite an interesting room.'

Liza sat down while the adventurers moved away to the window.

'Are these the ones?' asked Bender in a low voice.

'They look like it, but we shall have to examine them,' said Hippolyte cautiously.

'Are all the chairs here?'

'I'll just count them. Wait a bit. . . . Wait a bit.'

Hippolyte looked at the chairs and counted them one by one.

'Twenty chairs,' he said at last; 'but I don't understand. There should be only ten.'

'But have a good look at them. Perhaps they are not your chairs.'

They began to walk round the room and to examine the chairs.

'Well?' said Bender impatiently.

'The backs don't seem to be the same as mine.'

'So they're not yours?'

'No, they're not.'

'Well, all I can say is, I seem to have joined up with you for nothing.'

Hippolyte was downcast.

'Never mind,' said Bender. 'Let the good work go on. After all, a chair isn't a needle, and we're sure to find it. We'll find it. Pass me those orders. We'll have to have an unpleasant interview with the curator of this museum. You sit down with the girl and stay there. I'll be back in a minute.'

'Why are you so sad?' Liza asked several times. 'Are you tired?'

Hippolyte was silent.

'Have you got a headache?'

'Yes, slightly. Worries, you know, and the absence of feminine charm.'

At first Liza was surprised, but after looking at him she began to pity him. His eyes were sad, and there were shadows under them. The rapid change from the quiet life of a registrar to the anxious life of an adventurer and diamond-hunter had left its marks. Once alone for a minute with this delightful young woman he felt a sudden longing to tell her all about his troubles, but he did not dare.

'Yes,' said he, looking at her tenderly and taking hold of her hand, 'such is life.' And he began to talk ardently about Paris. He longed to be rich, extravagant, irresistible; he wanted some one to fall in love with him; he ached for love, for music, and champagne. What could he say to this young woman who knew nothing about music or champagne and little enough about love? But Liza was charmed with his stories of Paris.

'Are you a scientist?' asked Liza.

'In a way,' answered Hippolyte, who was learning Bender's tricks.

'And may I ask how old you are?'

'That has nothing to do with the science which I represent at this moment.'

'But tell me, are you thirty? Forty?'

'Almost. I am thirty-eight.'

'Oh! you look much younger.'

Hippolyte felt gratified.

'When shall I have the pleasure of seeing you again?' he asked.

Liza was embarrassed, she began to fidget on her chair, and felt uncomfortable.

'Where's Comrade Bender gone to?' she asked.

'When?' he repeated, 'when shall we meet again?'

'Oh! I don't know. When you like.'

'To-day?'

'To-day?'

'I implore you!'

'Oh! all right. Come and see us.'

'No! Let us meet outside. It's such wonderful weather these days. Where can we meet?'

'How funny you are! Wherever you like. Would you like to meet me near the safe? You know where I mean? But not until it gets dark.'

Hippolyte just managed to kiss Liza's hand, when Bender came back.

'Excuse me,' said Bender in a business-like voice, and added rapidly: 'We are very sorry, but my friend and I will not be able to see you home. We have some urgent business to attend to and we must go at once.'

Hippolyte was astonished.

'Good-bye,' he said hastily to Liza. 'Good-bye. We're in a terrible hurry.' And the two men hurried out of the room, leaving Liza to recover from her surprise.

'If it hadn't been for me,' said Bender, 'you wouldn't

have discovered anything. You should go down on your knees to me. Listen! Your furniture is of no value whatever to a museum. It's place is not in a museum, but more likely a barracks.'

'What rot!' shouted Hippolyte indignantly.

'Silence!' said Bender coldly. 'You don't know what has been happening. If we don't get hold of our furniture at once it'll be too late and we'll never see it. I've just had an extremely difficult talk with the curator of this historical rubbish-heap.'

'Well,' shouted Hippolyte, 'what did he say?'

'He told me all I wanted to know. Now don't get excited. "Tell me," I said, "how do you account for the fact that the furniture sent to you under a confiscation order from Stargorod is not to be found in the Museum?" Of course I was amiable, and he said: "What furniture do you mean?" I immediately showed him the confiscation orders. He dived into his books, searched for about half an hour, and, what do you think? Where do you think it is?'

'Lost?' said Hippolyte.

'No,' said Bender. 'Imagine it: it has been preserved through all the upheaval. As I have already told you, it has absolutely no museum value, and for seven years it has been stacked in a shed; and yesterday—notice, only yesterday—it was sent away to be auctioned. If it has not been sold either yesterday or to-day then the chairs are ours. Now are you satisfied?'

'Quick!' shouted Hippolyte.

'Cab!' yelled Bender as they tore down the steps of the Museum of Furniture. 'You should go down on your knees to me. Don't be nervous. We shall have wine and women and cards, and I'll be able to pay you for your blue waistcoat.'

They dashed into the auction-room like two wild ponies and saw what they had been looking for all this time. The ten chairs were lined up against the

wall and their upholstery was neither faded nor soiled. They were in such good condition and so clean that they looked as though they were still in the care of Hippolyte's mother-in-law.

'Are these the ones?' asked Bender.

'Yes! Yes!' replied Hippolyte excitedly. 'The very chairs! There's absolutely no doubt this time!'

'I think we had better make sure,' said Bender in a calm voice.

He went up to one of the men in the room.

'Can you tell me whether these chairs have come from the Museum of Furniture?'

'These?' said the man. 'Yes.'

'Are they for sale?'

'Yes, they are.'

'What is the price?'

'There is no price. They are to be auctioned.'

'Oh! To-day?'

'No. The auction is over for to-day. It'll be to-morrow, from five o'clock.'

'Can't they be sold to-day?'

'No. I said to-morrow from five o'clock.'

Bender and Hippolyte could not leave the chairs so quickly.

'May we have a look round?' asked Hippolyte.

'If you like,' said the man.

The two friends examined the chairs for a long time. They sat down on them several times and examined other things in the room so as not to arouse suspicion, while Hippolyte kept on nudging Bender.

'You should go down on your knees,' said Bender. But Hippolyte was so wildly excited he would have gone down and kissed the soles of Bender's feet.

'To-morrow!' he said. 'To-morrow!' And he felt like singing.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHERE ARE THE OTHERS?

WHILE the two friends were busy in Moscow visiting museums and auction-rooms, the doubly-bereaved widow Gritsatsuev, who was terribly upset, was discussing her loss with the neighbours. They all examined the note Bender had left her. Three days passed, but there was neither a sign of him nor of the tea-strainer, the bracelet, or chair. They had all mysteriously vanished. At last she took matters into her own hands and went to the offices of a Stargorod newspaper, where they immediately wrote out an announcement for her:

I IMPLORE

Those persons knowing the whereabouts of Comrade Bender, aged 25–30, brown hair, who left home dressed in a green suit, yellow boots, and pale blue waistcoat, to send information to Madam Gritsatsuev, 15 Plekhanov Street, Stargorod

REWARD OFFERED

'Is it your son?' they asked her sympathetically in the newspaper office.

'It is my husband,' said the martyr, burying her face in her handkerchief.

'Oh! your husband.'

'Yes, my legal husband. What of it?'

'Oh! nothing, nothing. I think you had better apply to the militia.'

The widow was alarmed, for she was afraid of the militia.

Three days running she made a ringing appeal from the pages of the Stargorod *Truth*, but there was no response. There was no one who knew the whereabouts of the gentleman in yellow boots, and no one claimed the reward. The neighbours gossiped while the widow grew more and more depressed. It was a strange business. Her husband had flashed across the sky like a meteor, taking in his wake a perfectly good chair and a tea-strainer. But the widow still loved him. Who can understand the heart of a woman, and especially the heart of a widow?

. . . . .

The citizens of Stargorod had long since grown accustomed to the tram. They climbed in and out of it without the slightest nervousness. The conductor shouted: 'Full up!' and everything went on as if the tram had been in the town ever since the days of the Flood. Unruly passengers, women and children, and Viktor Mikhaylovich Polesov insisted upon getting into the tram from the front instead of through the door at the back. To the demand of: 'Fares, please!' Polesov always replied grandly: 'Season ticket'; but of course he had not got a season ticket, for there were none issued.

The visit of Hippolyte and Bender had made a deep impression on the town.

There were others in Stargorod besides the widow Gritsatsuev who were wondering where Comrade Bender and his friend had vanished to; these were the members of the 'Secret Union of the Sword and Plough', who were carefully guarding the secret entrusted to them. Viktor Mikhaylovich Polesov was longing to confide in some one, but remembering Bender's powerful shoulders and stony glare he refrained. He could not discuss the matter with any one except the fortune-teller.

'And what do you think about it?' he would say.

'What possible explanation can you give for their disappearance?'

Elena Stanislavovna was also most interested, but she had no solution to offer.

'And don't you think,' continued the irrepressible locksmith, 'that they are probably executing some special mission?'

The fortune-teller was convinced that that was what they were doing.

'And don't you think that we ought to go on with the work? After all, we can't sit with our hands folded.'

The fortune-teller agreed, and remarked that Hippolyte was a hero.

'Of course he's a hero! That's obvious. And that splendid officer with him is a very business-like man. You can say what you like, but the matter ought not to be left at a standstill.'

And Polesov set to work. He paid regular visits to all the members of the 'Secret Union of the Sword and Plough'; he was particularly assiduous in paying attention to Kislyarsky, and Kislyarsky would turn pale every time he saw Polesov, for he was terrified of this secret organization.

At the end of the week the members met in the fortune-teller's room. The parrot was also present. Polesov was bursting with excitement.

'Viktor, you're a fool!' Dyadiev called across the room. 'What do you manage to do with yourself running about the town all day?'

'We must act!' Polesov shouted back.

'Of course we must act, but there's absolutely no reason why you should shout. Now, gentlemen, this is how I understand the matter. If Hippolyte has said that the mission is a holy one, then it is a holy one, and we must take it that we haven't much longer to wait. How it will happen we don't need to know. There are military people to attend to

all that ; we are simply concerned with the civil side. We are the representatives of the merchants and the intelligentsia. What is the most important thing for us to do ? The most important thing for us is to be ready. Have we anything ready ? Have we a centre ? No ! Who will be the mayor of the town ? We have no one. And that, gentlemen, is the most important question. The English will not stand on ceremony with the Bolsheviks, you'll see, and I can assure you that things will change very rapidly.'

' We don't doubt it,' said Charushnikov sulkily.

' Well, that's splendid ! What is your opinion, Mr. Kislyarsky ? And yours, young men ? '

The two louts, Nicky and Vlady, expressed their conviction that there would soon be a rapid change, and Kislyarsky, who had discovered that he would not be expected to take any active part, signified his approval by nodding.

' Well, what do you want us to do ? ' asked Viktor Mikhaylovich impatiently.

' You wait ! ' said Dyadiev. ' You should remember Mr. Vorobianinov. What cautiousness ! Didn't you notice how quickly he changed the subject round to helping the destitute children ? We are to help the children. So, gentlemen, let us nominate the candidates.'

' We propose Hippolyte as marshal of nobility,' shouted the two young men.

Charushnikov gave his assent and then said : ' Vorobianinov will never be less than a minister and probably a dictator ! '

' Gentlemen,' said Dyadiev, ' that's the last thing we should be deciding. Let us begin with the governor. I propose——'

' Mr. Dyadiev ! ' shouted Polesovecst atically. ' Who else could take on such a responsibility ? '

' I am highly flattered,' began Dyadiev, but Charushnikov suddenly interrupted.

'I think such an important question should be debated.'

'Take a vote!'

They voted by ballot in the honest European way. Dyadiev was not chosen and the fortune-teller felt sorry for him. The ballot was continued and each member had allocated to him a future position in the town. At last, after a long discussion, the meeting came to an end and the members dispersed.

CHAPTER XIX

FROM PILLAR TO POST

AND where was Father Theodore all this time? We left him intending to go and see Citizen Bruns at Number 34 Vinogradny Street. Greed had taken possession of him. He had been overcome with a desire for wealth, and now he was travelling about Russia in search of the chairs and writing letters to his wife.

A Letter from Father Theodore to his Wife written on the Kharkov Railway Station.

'My Darling Katerina Alexandrovna,

'I feel very guilty towards you. I have deserted you, my poor Katerina, and left you alone at such a difficult time.

'I must tell you everything. You will understand everything, and I hope you will approve.

'Of course I have not joined the Living Church. May the Lord preserve me from it! Now read this letter carefully. You and I will soon begin a new life. Do you remember I once spoke to you about a candle factory? Well, we shall have one, and perhaps something else besides. Yes, we shall have a factory and you won't need to cook dinners for strangers any more. We shall go to Samara and keep a servant.

'Now I shall tell you what I am doing, but you must keep it a dead secret. Don't tell any one, not even Marie Ivanovna. I am looking for treasure. Do you remember the late Clavdia Ivanovna Petukhov, Hippolyte's mother-in-law? Well, just before she died she revealed to me that she had hidden her diamonds in one of her drawing-room chairs (there were twelve chairs in all in their Stargorod home).

'You mustn't think, Katinka, that I am a thief, for she left these diamonds to me and instructed me to keep them away from Hippolyte, her old tormentor.

'And that is why, you poor dear, I had to leave you so suddenly.

'Don't be angry with me.

'I arrived at Stargorod, and who do you think should turn up? That lascivious old fool, Hippolyte Vorobianinov; he must have discovered about the diamonds somehow or other. He must have dragged it out of the old woman before she died. An awful man! And he has got some dreadful criminal to travel about with him. I think he has hired a bandit. Both of them fell upon me and wanted to push me into the next world, but I'm not so easy to get rid of. I'm not going to be sat on by any one.

'At first I got on to the wrong track. I found only one chair in Vorobianinov's house (it is a home for the aged now). I was just carrying it to my room in "The Sorbonne" when suddenly from round a corner a man fell upon me, and, roaring like a lion, he seized the chair. I looked at him closely and saw that it was Vorobianinov. He had shaved himself, and, just imagine it, his head was shaved as well. The swindler! Fancy a man disgracing himself like that at his time of life! We broke the chair between us, but there was nothing in it. At the time I was very disappointed, but I realized later on that I had been on the wrong track. I was disgusted with Vorobianinov, and I told the old wretch what I thought of him.

'"What a disgrace!" said I. "A nice disgrace for your old age! Such hooliganism, and in Russia too! A pretty sort of thing," I said, "a marshal of nobility attacking a servant of the Church!" And I reproached him for being a non-party man. "You are a bad fellow," I said; "a wicked man and Clavdia Ivanovna's tormentor. A hunter after other people's

goods which never belonged to you and now belong to the Government."

'He was quite ashamed of himself and soon slunk away. I went back to my rooms in "The Sorbonne" and began to think out my future plans. And I thought of something that would never even enter the head of such a shaved old fool. I decided to find the man who had distributed the confiscated furniture. And what do you think, Katinka, my studies in the Faculty of Law are after all proving to be quite useful: I found the man. I found him the very next day. He was a very decent old man and he gave me all the documents. Of course I had to give him something for his trouble, so I am left without any money, but we'll speak of that later. It turns out that the twelve chairs from Vorobianinov's drawing-room were handed over to an engineer called Bruns, who lives at Number 34 Vinogradny Street. All the twelve chairs were sent to one man, which I had never anticipated. I was afraid they would have been scattered. I was very pleased about this. Then I suddenly came across that wretch again. This time it was in "The Sorbonne". I gave him a piece of my mind, and I did not spare his friend, the bandit. I was very much afraid they would discover my secret so I stayed in my room until they left.

'I hear that Bruns left Stargorod in 1923, because he was appointed to a better position in Kharkov. I discovered from the porter that he had taken all his furniture with him and that he looks after it very carefully. I am told he is a very respectable man.

'I am now sitting on the Kharkov railway station, and this is why I am writing to you: (1) Because I love you very much and often think of you, and (2) to tell you that Bruns has left Kharkov. But don't be sad, Bruns is now working in Rostov. I have only just enough money for the journey. I am leaving

in an hour's time by the goods train, and you, my darling, please go to your relation and ask him for the fifty roubles (he owes them to me and promised to pay me back) and send them poste restante, General Post Office, Rostov.

'What is going on at home? Has anything exciting been happening? Did Kondratievna come to see you? Tell Father Cyril that I shall soon be home again, and tell him that I have gone to see a dying aunt in Voronezh. Do be economical. Does Evstigneyev still come in for dinner? Remember me to him and tell him I have gone to see my aunt.

'What sort of weather are you having? It is just like June in Kharkov. It is a busy town, a great centre in the Ukranian Republic. After the provinces this feels like being abroad. Please do this for me: (1) Send my summer cassock to be cleaned (better pay three roubles to have it cleaned than spend money on a new one), (2) take care of your health, and (3) when you write to Gulenka, mention casually that I have gone to visit an aunt in Voronezh.

'Give everybody my love. Tell them I shall be home soon.

'I kiss you tenderly and send you my blessing.

'Your husband

'THEODORE'

'*Nota Bene:* Where is Hippolyte Vorobianinov chasing about now I wonder?'

. . . . .

But Hippolyte was not doing what Father Theodore thought. He had fallen in love and was beginning to lose his appetite. He left Bender and the student Ivanopulo eating their dinner in a cheap restaurant while he found his way back to the hostel and took up his position by the safe in the corridor. His heart was thumping wildly, and it was very cold in the corridor.

Gramophones were screeching in the various pencil-boxes. The numerous ' Primus ' stoves were hissing.

Hippolyte had fallen head over heels in love with Liza Kalachev.

A number of people smelling of tobacco or cabbage soup groped their way past Hippolyte, but they could only be distinguished by the way they walked. Liza had not passed him. He was certain of that, because she neither smoked nor drank vodka, and she did not wear hobnailed boots.

At last he heard light, uncertain steps. Some one was coming towards him down the corridor.

' Is that you, Elizaveta Petrovna ? ' asked Hippolyte in an excited whisper.

' Can you tell me whether the Peppercorns live here ? I can't see anything in this darkness.'

Hippolyte did not answer. The visitor was surprised not to receive any reply and passed him.

It was nearly nine o'clock by the time Liza joined him, and they went out into the street.

' Well, where are we going to ? ' said Liza.

Hippolyte looked at her face, and instead of immediately declaring his love he began a long and boring tirade about Moscow, which he had not visited for some time, and about Paris which was a far more beautiful city.

' I remember Moscow when it was quite different from what it is now. You know we never spared money in those days. It reminds me of a song, " You only live once ".'

They walked through the streets and Liza took his arm. She confided all her worries to him ; about the quarrel with her husband, the difficult life they led in the hostel, and about the monotonous vegetarian food.

As he listened to her talk he began to dream of a wonderful supper. At last, he came to the conclusion that such a young woman should be entertained in some way.

'Would you like to go to the theatre?' he suggested.

'I think we'd better go to a cinema,' said Liza; 'it's cheaper.'

'What's money got to do with it? Such an evening, and here you are thinking of money!'

The demon of extravagance had taken possession of him. Without bargaining with the driver, he bundled Liza into a cab and told the driver to take them to the best cinema.

Hippolyte was generous and Liza had to follow him into the most expensive seats. But they did not wait for the end of the programme, for Liza, who was accustomed to sit in the cheap seats close to the screen, was not able to see anything from the expensive thirty-fourth row.

Half the money that had been collected from the Stargorod conspirators was lying in Hippolyte's pocket. It was unusual for him to have so much money, he had forgotten long ago what it felt like to be rich. But now he was longing to impress Liza and dazzle her by his lavishness. He remembered with pride how he had conquered the heart of the beautiful Elena Bauer, for he used to spend his money freely in those days and had become famous in Stargorod for his ability to converse with women.

Bender had told him that 'The Prague' was the best restaurant in Moscow, so he took Liza there and she was immensely impressed by the number of mirrors, electric lights, and flower-pots, for she had never been in an expensive restaurant before. The mirror hall made a curious impression on Hippolyte. He had lost the habit of going to good restaurants, and as he looked at his own reflection, he was ashamed of his square-toed boots, pre-war trousers and silver-grey waistcoat.

They were both embarrassed, and stood still at the sight of so many people.

'Let us go over there to that corner table,'

suggested Hippolyte, although there was an unoccupied table close to the orchestra.

Liza felt that every one was staring at her, so she rapidly agreed. The one-time social lion and lady-killer of Stargorod shyly followed her, sat down at the table and began to polish his glasses to try and overcome his embarrassment.

The waiters ignored them. Hippolyte had not expected this, and instead of conversing gallantly with his companion he was silent and wretched. He rattled the ash-tray on the table and kept clearing his throat.

Liza looked round the room. The silence was becoming unnatural, but Hippolyte could not think of anything to say, nor could he remember what was usually said on such occasions. He was oppressed because the waiters paid no attention to their table.

'Be so kind!' he kept calling to the waiters as they hurried past them.

'Just a minute! Just a minute!' they called as they ran on.

At last the menu was brought to them. Hippolyte sighed gratefully and began to study the card.

'Good gracious!' he exclaimed. 'A veal cutlet, two roubles twenty-five! A fillet of steak, two roubles twenty-five! Vodka, five roubles!'

'It's a large bottle for five roubles,' said the waiter, looking round impatiently.

'What am I doing?' thought Hippolyte, beginning to feel ridiculous.

'Don't you think we'd better choose something?' asked Liza politely. 'What are you going to have?'

Liza was ashamed of Hippolyte's behaviour. She could see the haughty way in which the waiter was looking down at him, and she was made to feel that he was not doing the right thing.

'I'm not in the least hungry,' she said in a trembling voice, and then turned to the waiter: 'Have you any vegetarian dishes here?'

The waiter began to shuffle his feet impatiently.

'We don't have vegetarian dishes here. Perhaps you'd like a ham omelet?'

'Bring us some sausages,' said Hippolyte, having just made up his mind. 'You'll eat sausages, won't you, Elizaveta Petrovna?'

'Yes, thank you, I will.'

'Well then, this dish—one rouble twenty-five—and a bottle of vodka'

The waiter looked at Liza.

'Anything with the vodka? Fresh caviare? Smoked salmon? Fish or meat patties?'

But Hippolyte interrupted him with a curt refusal.

'How much do you charge for pickled cucumbers? Very well, bring us two.'

The waiter hurried away, and again there was silence. Liza was the first to begin talking.

'I've never been here before. Isn't it nice?'

'Ye-e-es,' drawled Hippolyte, as he calculated how much the food would cost.

'Oh! it doesn't matter,' he thought to himself. 'I'll have some vodka and then perhaps I'll cheer up. It's rather dull as it is.'

But even after drinking the vodka and eating the cucumber he did not feel at all cheerful. Indeed he was more depressed than ever, for Liza would not drink anything. The tension between them did not diminish, and matters were made worse by the appearance of a man who came up to the table and began to cast amorous glances at Liza. He was selling flowers, and suggested to Hippolyte that he should buy a bunch for the lady.

Hippolyte pretended that he had not heard, but the man would not move away from their table. It was absolutely impossible to talk confidentially with Liza so long as the stranger was standing there.

For a time the concert programme saved the situation. A man came on to the platform and announced

that the next item would be folk-songs rendered by a famous Russian singer, Varvara Ivanova Godlevskaya. Hippolyte drank vodka and was silent, and as Liza was not drinking anything and was obviously longing to go home, he began to hurry so as to get to the end of the bottle.

By the time the famous singer had finished the folk-songs Hippolyte was slightly light-headed. He tried to beat time to the music as the accompanist began to play a few passages at the beginning of the next item on the programme.

Other people in the restaurant were beginning to notice Hippolyte. With great determination Liza got up from the table.

'I'm going,' she said. 'You can stay here if you like, but I'm going home. I can find my way back.'

'Oh, no!' said Hippolyte. 'After all, I'm a gentleman. I can't allow that. Waiter! The bill, please.'

Hippolyte examined the bill for a long time as he swayed in his chair.

'Nine roubles and twenty copecks!' he said incredulously. 'Perhaps you'd like me to give you the key of the room where I keep my money?' he remarked, using Bender's favourite expression.

In the end Hippolyte had to be led out of the restaurant. Liza could not run away, because the Stargorod lion had the cloak-room ticket in his pocket.

As they turned into a side-street, Hippolyte leaned heavily against Liza and tried to kiss her. Liza avoided his embrace, and without saying a word punched the lady-killer's nose with her fist. Hippolyte's glasses fell to the ground and were smashed to pieces.

Liza, swallowing her angry tears, ran home down the side-street, while Hippolyte ran in the opposite direction shouting: 'Stop thief!' But no one stopped, so he burst into tears and bought the entire contents of

an old woman's basket of cracknels. He wandered into the Market Square, and walking up and down he kept scattering the cracknels like a sower sowing his seed. As he did this he began to sing in a loud voice.

After that he made friends with a cabman. He opened his heart to him and told him a very muddled story about diamonds.

'What a merry gentleman!' thought the cabman.

Hippolyte actually was 'merry', and his good humour took such a form that by eleven o'clock the following morning he woke up and found himself in the cells. He had only twelve roubles left of the two hundred with which he had begun the previous disastrous evening.

He thought he was dying. His back was breaking, his liver ached, and he felt as though he had a bowler hat made of lead pressing down on to his temples. The worst part of the whole business was that he could not remember how or where he had spent such an enormous sum of money. As soon as they released him from the cells, he went to the nearest optician, bought himself fresh lenses for his pince-nez, and then he went home.

Bender stared at Hippolyte in astonishment, but did not say a word. He was cold and distant.

CHAPTER XX

THE AUCTION

THE auction began at five o'clock. People were allowed to inspect the goods between four and five. Bender and Hippolyte were there at three, and for a whole hour they waited in the motor exhibition next door.

'I think we shall be able to buy this little car tomorrow,' said Bender. 'It is a pity there is no price on it. After all, it would be rather nice to have a car of our own.'

Hippolyte was rather depressed. Nothing would comfort him but the chairs, and as soon as the doors were opened he went into the auction-room and stood by the chairs. The auction began and the two friends stood in the fourth row to the right. Hippolyte grew very excited. He imagined that the chairs would be put up for sale at once, but they were Number 43 on the list and the usual things of no value were being sold first: a sauceboat, a silver stand, a landscape, a bead bag, a bust of Napoleon, and a new wick for a 'Primus' stove.

They had to be patient and wait, but it was very difficult for them to do so, for the chairs were there; the goal was so near that they could almost touch it.

'What an auction there would be,' thought Bender, 'if they only knew what was inside that chair!'

'A figure representing Justice!' shouted the auctioneer, 'made of bronze, in perfect condition. Five roubles. What offers? Six and a half on my right. Seven at the back of the room. Eight in the first row. Eight roubles. Eight roubles. Going! Going! Eight roubles. Gone!'

A young woman went up to the man in the front row

to take his money and to give him a receipt. The auctioneer's hammer rose and fell many times. The suspense was unbearable.

'A bronze bust of Alexander III. Could be used as a paper-weight. I must say it's not fit for much else!'

The public laughed.

Hippolyte did not take his eyes off the chairs.

'Ten chairs from the Palace,' shouted the auctioneer.

'Why from the Palace?' asked Hippolyte.

'Shut up!' snapped Bender. 'Go to the devil! Don't interrupt!'

'Ten chairs from the Palace. Walnut, Alexander II period, in perfect condition, the work of Gambs. . . . Basil, pass me one of the chairs.' Basil handled the chair so roughly that Hippolyte jumped up from his seat.

'Sit down, you idiot!' hissed Bender. 'You're an absolute pest! Sit down!'

Hippolyte's lips were trembling, and Bender's eyes were shining.

'Ten walnut chairs. Eighty roubles.'

The room grew animated. This was a useful lot. One hand after another shot up. Bender kept calm.

'Why don't you bid?' asked Hippolyte.

'Leave me alone,' retorted Bender sharply, clenching his teeth.

'One hundred and twenty roubles in the back row. Hundred and thirty-five also in the back row. Hundred and forty——'

Bender turned his back on the auctioneer and superciliously examined the crowd.

The auction was at its height and the room was packed. A lady just behind Bender fancied the chairs and put up her hand: 'What beautiful chairs, darling! What wonderful work! And they're from the Palace too!' she exclaimed ecstatically.

'A hundred and forty-five in the fifth row to the right. Going——

No response from the room. The price was too high.

'A hundred and forty-five. Going——

Bender was calmly examining the ceiling. Hippolyte was trembling; his head was bent.

'A hundred and forty-five——' But before the auctioneer's hammer fell, Bender turned round, raised his right hand and said quietly: 'Two hundred!'

All eyes turned towards him, and the auctioneer looked at him intently.

'Two hundred. Going—— Two hundred. Are there no other bids? Two hundred. A walnut suite from the Palace. Ten pieces. Two hundred roubles. Going . . . Going . . . Gone!'

Hippolyte gasped. Bender was smiling and the auctioneer shouted: 'Sold, miss! That gentleman in the fourth row to the right.'

'Well, marshal of nobility,' said Bender, turning towards Hippolyte, 'I wonder what you would do without a keeper?'

Hippolyte grinned stupidly as the young woman came up to them.

'Did you buy the chairs?'

'Yes!' shouted Hippolyte, who had been restraining himself for so long. 'They're ours! They're ours! When can we take them away?'

'Whenever you like. Now if you wish.'

'The chairs are ours, ours, ours!' Hippolyte kept saying to himself. He was delighted. He could see a train approaching the St. Gothard; he was on the observation platform dressed in white trousers and smoking a cigar, while the petals of edelweiss were falling gently on to his head.

'And why two hundred and thirty and not two hundred?' he heard Bender say.

'Fifteen per cent for commission,' answered the young woman.

'All right. I suppose it can't be helped. Take it!'

Bender pulled out his pocket-book, counted two hundred roubles, and turned to Hippolyte.

'Come on, my friend, add thirty roubles, and hurry up. Can't you see the young lady is waiting? Well?'

But Hippolyte did not make any attempt to take the money out of his pocket.

'Well? What are you staring at me for? Has it gone to your head?'

'I haven't any money,' said Hippolyte slowly.

'What d'you mean you haven't any money?'

'I haven't any.'

'But the two hundred roubles I gave you?'

'I have l-l-lost it!'

Bender stared at Hippolyte.

'Come on,' he said peremptorily. 'Give me the money, you old scoundrel!'

'Are you—or are you not—going to pay?' asked the young woman.

'One moment, please,' said Bender, with a charming smile. 'There's a slight hitch.'

There was still a hope left. They might be able to persuade the auctioneer to wait for the money.

Suddenly Hippolyte came to his senses and said indignantly: 'Excuse me, but why should there be any commission? We knew nothing about the commission. Why should we pay it? I refuse to pay the extra amount.'

'Very well,' said the young woman amiably. 'I'll see what I can do. I'll try and arrange the matter.'

She went back to the auctioneer and spoke to him. The auctioneer immediately stood up and said in a ringing voice: 'The rule is that a person who refuses to pay the full sum for any article must leave the auction-room. The sale of the chairs is invalid.'

The friends were dumbfounded.

'I must ask you to leave,' said the auctioneer.

The excitement was intense. The public tittered

malevolently, but Bender did not move. He had not experienced such a blow for a long time.

'*I must ask you to leave the auction-room,*' said the auctioneer more firmly. The tittering became louder and louder. Bender and Hippolyte went slowly out of the room.

Hippolyte went first, and with his bent shoulders and short coat he looked exactly like a dejected stork. They stopped in the next room, and from there they watched the proceedings in the auction-room through a glass door. Bender was silent.

'What revolting regulations!' said Hippolyte timidly. 'It is absolutely disgusting! They should be reported to the militia.'

Bender was silent.

'The devil only knows what they meant by it,' continued Hippolyte heatedly. 'They are plunderers! Two hundred and thirty roubles for ten old chairs! It is abominable!'

'Yes,' said Bender heavily.

'It is abominable, isn't it?'

'It is.'

Bender went close up to Hippolyte, and after looking round gave him a quick and painful dig in the ribs.

'Take that, you old fool!'

Hippolyte did not utter a sound.

'Now,' said Bender, 'you can clear out!' And he turned his back on Hippolyte and continued to watch the auction. A minute later he looked round, but Hippolyte was still standing behind him.

'What, are you still here? Go on! Clear out! D'you hear?'

'Comrade Bender!' pleaded Hippolyte. 'Comrade Bender!'

'Be off! Be off! And don't you come to Ivanopulo's room either or I'll run you out!'

'Comrade Bender——'

Bender took no notice. Something so interesting

was happening in the auction room that he quietly opened the door and listened to the proceedings.

'It's no good,' he murmured.

'What's no good?' asked Hippolyte obsequiously.

'They're selling the chairs separately. Perhaps you would like to buy them. . . . You can if you like. I'm not keeping you back. But I doubt if they'll let you in. And besides, you don't seem to have brought much money with you,' Bender said sarcastically.

Meanwhile the auctioneer, who had felt he would not be able to get two hundred roubles out of the public so easily (it was far too large a sum for the rabble who had remained in the auction-room), had decided to get the money by dividing up the chairs into separate lots. They were again put up for auction.

'Four upholstered chairs from the Palace, walnut, the work of Gambs. Thirty roubles. Any offers?'

Bender suddenly became calm. His determination had returned.

'Now then, you old fool, you stop here and mind you don't go away anywhere. I'll be back in five minutes. Keep your eyes open and see who buys them, and don't let a single chair leave the place without watching who takes it.'

Bender had thought of a scheme, the only possible one in such difficult circumstances.

He ran out into the street and had a talk with several urchins. As promised he returned to Hippolyte within five minutes. The urchins stood in readiness at the door leading to the auction-room.

'They're being sold! They're being sold!' whispered Hippolyte to Bender. 'One lot of four and one lot of two have already been sold.'

'Well, you're responsible for that,' said Bender. 'You should be glad. The chairs were ours—actually ours, do you understand that?'

The auctioneer was shouting: 'And a half to my

left. Three. Another chair from the Palace, walnut, in very good condition. And a half straight ahead of me. Going ! Going ! Gone ! '

Three chairs were sold separately, and then the auctioneer put up the last chair. Bender was almost choking with rage. Again he attacked Hippolyte. He was showering sarcastic remarks on him when he was suddenly interrupted by a man who said : ' Tell me ' —and he spoke rapidly to Bender—' tell me, is there an auction here ? '

The man hurried into the auction-room and rapidly bought the last chair. He took his receipt and went up to the counter.

' Tell me, can I take the chair at once ? Oh, that's splendid ! '

The stranger hurried out of the auction-room, put the chair into a cab, and drove away. One of the urchins immediately ran after the cab.

One by one the purchasers of the chairs dispersed, and were immediately followed by Bender's young agents.

Bender also left the auction-room, and Hippolyte timidly followed him. The day had seemed like a dream to him, for everything had happened so rapidly and so unexpectedly.

As they approached the hostel they met Nicky, who bowed politely to Bender, and then went up to Hippolyte, who greeted him amiably. Nicky did not waste any time.

' Good evening,' he said firmly, and gave him a box on the ear. ' That's what happens to those who try to——'

Nicky did not finish his sentence, but hit out at Hippolyte again. Hippolyte raised his elbow to protect himself, and did not utter a sound.

' That'll do for you,' said Nicky, as he put his hands in his pockets and walked away towards the hostel with Bender.

Hippolyte was left alone leaning against the railings.

Presently he went up the hostel stairs and joined Bender in Ivanopulo's room.

Suddenly there was a whistle from the street and Bender went down to receive the reports of his young agents, who had managed their business splendidly. Four chairs had been taken to the Columbus Theatre, and one of the lads told him in great detail how these chairs had been taken to the theatre in a barrow, how they were unloaded and dragged into the building through the stage-door. Bender knew exactly where the theatre was. Another lad told him that two chairs had been taken away in a cab by a ' smart bird ', but he was evidently not a very intelligent boy, for although he knew that the chairs had been taken to Varsonofiev Street and the flat was Number 17, he could not remember the number of the house.

' I ran so fast,' said the urchin, ' that it must have flown out of my head.'

' Well, you won't get your money then,' said the taskmaster.

' But I can show you where it is.'

' All right. We'll go together later on.'

The stranger who had questioned Bender was found to be living on the Sadovaya-Spaskaya Street, and Bender made a note of the exact address.

The eighth chair had gone to the House of Nations. The boy who had followed that chair was very nimble, for he had overcome countless obstacles. He had even been able to get inside the house and had discovered that the chair had been bought by the *Stanok* newspaper office.

Two boys were still missing, but they ran up almost simultaneously, panting and tired.

' Barracks Street ! '

' What number ? '

' Nine. Flat Number nine. Tartars living next door. Entrance through the yard. I carried the chair for them. We walked.'

The next runner brought bad news. At first all went well, and then everything went badly. The purchaser of the chair had walked into the goods yard of the October railway station, and it was absolutely impossible to follow him, because there were sentries at the gate.

'He has probably left Moscow,' said the boy.

This greatly upset Bender. After paying the urchins handsomely—a rouble per head—with the exception of the one who had forgotten the house number and was told to come early the next day, Bender returned to his room and without answering Hippolyte's questions he began to form his plans. Hippolyte was in disgrace.

Nothing had been lost so far. Bender had the addresses, and there were many old and tried methods which he would use so as to get hold of the chairs: (1) Ordinary acquaintance, (2) a love intrigue, (3) acquaintance followed by theft, (4) exchange, (5) money. The last was the surest, but there was very little money.

Bender looked at Hippolyte with disgust, but it was not long before his usual optimism returned. Of course they could always get hold of some money; there was that picture he could paint; there was the tea-strainer, and his career as a polygamist.

But he was worried about the tenth chair. He had a clue, but what a clue! It was a very vague one.

'Well,' said Bender aloud, 'we've still got a chance—a nine to one chance. Let the good work go on! Do you hear, you over there? Let the good work go on!'

CHAPTER XXI

LITTLE ELLA

SCHOLARS have calculated that William Shakespeare's vocabulary comprised some twelve thousand words. The cannibal race of Mumbo Jumbo have a vocabulary of three hundred words, but Ella Shchukin managed quite well with a vocabulary of thirty words. Here are the words, phrases, and exclamations which she had chosen from out of the rich and expressive Russian language :

(1) You're a fool.

(2) Ho ! Ho ! (which according to the circumstance expressed sarcasm, surprise, delight, hatred, joy, scorn, and satisfaction).

(3) Marvellous !

(4) Black (used for everything ; for instance : ' Black Peter has come.' ' What black weather ! ' ' Oh ! the black cat ! ' etc.).

(5) Darkness.

(6) Terror *or* terrible (for instance, when you meet a good friend it is a ' terrible meeting ').

(7) A lad (used for all male acquaintances irrespective of age or social position).

(8) Don't teach me how to live !

(9) Like a child (' I beat him like a child '—this when playing cards. ' I shut him up like a child,' used in conversation with some one important).

(10) Beauty !

(11) Fine *and* Fat (used to describe both the animate and inanimate).

(12) Let us take a cab (when speaking to her husband).

(13) Let us take a taxi (when speaking to any male acquaintance).

(14) Your back is all white (a joke).

(15) Fancy that !

(16) The suffix ' -kin ' (used for its caressing quality, e.g. Peterkin, Sashkin).

(17) Oho ! (sarcasm, surprise, delight, hatred, joy, scorn, and satisfaction).

(18) You're joking !

If you were to examine the photographs of Ella which hung over her husband's bed, one full face and the other profile, you would see a pleasant high forehead, large shining eyes, the sweetest little nose, and a chin with a little brown mole on it. Ella was pretty, and her height flattered men. She was small, and even the smallest man felt tall and powerful by her side.

The two hundred roubles which was her husband's monthly salary at the ' Electrolustre ' factory was an insult to Ella. It was totally inadequate in her struggle to try to make ends meet, for she was very extravagant ; and this life had been going on for four years. To try to help matters, her husband, Ernest Pavlovich Shchukin used to bring work home with him from the office. They gave up having a servant and they had a ' Primus ' stove. He would empty the rubbish into the dustbin and fry his own cutlets. But it did not help, for Ella was always buying *crêpe de Chine* blouses and other fineries.

One morning a friend of hers brought in a fashion journal in which a photograph caught her eye. It was a photograph of the American millionaire's daughter, Miss Vanderbilt, taken in evening dress. She was wearing furs and feathers, silk and pearls ; her dress was wonderfully designed, and her hair was most beautifully dressed.

' Oho ! ' said Ella to herself, and made up her mind to be like the American. She imitated her by buying an evening frock and by having her hair well dressed. Then she decided she must be in the fashion and have

some smart furniture, so she went to a sale and bought two upholstered chairs.

'A wonderful chance,' she said to herself; 'not to be missed.' And without asking her husband she took the price out of the housekeeping money.

She brought the chairs home triumphantly. Her husband was not at home, but he soon returned from the office.

'The black husband has come,' said Ella.

'Hullo, darling! What's this? Where have these chairs come from?'

'Ho! Ho!' said Ella.

'No, seriously?'

'Beauty!'

'Yes, they are good chairs.'

'Marvellous!'

'Are they a present?'

'Oho!'

'What? You surely haven't bought them? Not out of the housekeeping money? Haven't I told you a thousand times——'

'You're a fool!'

'But how can you do such things? We'll have nothing to eat!'

'Fancy that!'

'But it's simply disgusting! You're living beyond your means!'

'You're joking!'

'I tell you you're living beyond your means!'

'Don't teach me how to live!'

'Ella, be serious. My salary is only two hundred roubles——'

'Darkness!'

'Look here. You know I don't take bribes, and I don't steal money. I'm an honest man.'

'Ter-r-rible!'

Her husband was silent. At last he said: 'We can't go on living like this.'

'Ho! Ho!' said Ella as she sat down on one of the new chairs.

'We'll have to separate.'

'You're joking!'

'We are utterly incompatible. I——'

'You're a fine, fat lad!'

'How many times have I told you not to call me a lad?'

'Fancy that!'

'Where have you learnt this idiotic jargon?'

'Don't teach me how to live!'

'Oh, damn!' he shouted. 'We shall have to separate; only, for goodness' sake, let it be done amicably.'

'Oho!'

'I shall go and fetch a van and we can divide the furniture between us.'

'Dreadful!'

'You can have a hundred roubles a month and you can keep the room. You can live as you like, but I'm not going on any more in this way——'

'Marvellous!' said Ella sarcastically.

'I shall go over to Ivan Alekseyevich.'

'Oho!'

'He's gone to the country and I can use his flat. He's given me the key, but there isn't any furniture.'

'Beautiful!'

Five minutes later he returned with a van.

'I shall take the writing-table,' he said, 'and one of these chairs. I think I'm entitled to it.'

He made a bundle of his personal belongings and moved towards the door.

'Your back is all white!' said Ella in a gramophone voice.

'Good-bye, Ella!'

He expected his wife to drop her jargon at least for once. Ella too felt it was an important moment: she tried hard to find suitable words for their parting, but

all she could summon up was : ' Are you taking a taxi ? Beautiful ! '

Her husband raced downstairs.

. . . . .

At ten o'clock in the morning Bender turned into Varsonofiev Street, and the urchin who was running ahead of him pointed out the house.

' Sure you're not lying ? '

' Of course not. Here you are ; it's this one ! '

Bender gave the lad his honestly earned rouble, and knocked at the door without knowing what excuse he could give for calling. He relied on inspiration when dealing with women.

' Oho ! ' came from behind the door.

' On business,' said Bender.

The door opened and Bender walked into a room, where he found Ella sitting in a dressing-gown trimmed with fur. He knew what to do on such occasions, so he stepped back and exclaimed : ' What a wonderful fur ! '

' You're joking,' said Ella shyly.

He started to talk about furs, and without giving her a chance to speak he went on to tell her all he knew about silk, and wound up by promising his delightful hostess a present of a few hundred silk cocoons from Uzbekistan.

' You're a fine lad ! ' said Ella.

' No doubt you are surprised at receiving such an early visitor ? ' said Bender.

' Ho ! Ho ! ' answered Ella.

' But I have come to see you about a delicate business matter.'

' You're joking ! '

The conversation went on in this strain for some time until Bender realized that the second chair was not in the room. He would have to be tactful and discover the trail, but very gradually he found out what had happened between Ella and her husband.

'I wonder if you would care to sell me that chair?' said Bender presently. 'I do like it, and I know that only a woman of taste could have chosen such a chair. Do sell it to me. I will give you seven roubles for it.'

'Oho!' said Ella slyly.

'I shall have to use the method of exchange with her,' thought Bender.

'Do you know that in Europe and in the best houses of Philadelphia they have revived the old-fashioned habit of pouring out tea through a strainer? It is extraordinarily effective and most elegant.'

Ella was immediately interested.

'One of my friends, a diplomat, has just arrived from Vienna and has brought me one as a present. It is a nice little thing.'

'It must be marvellous!' said Ella.

'Shall we exchange? You give me the chair and I'll give you the tea-strainer. How would you like that?'

Bender took the gilt tea-strainer out of his pocket, and as the sun shone down on to the strainer, Ella was tremendously impressed. Presently she said quietly: 'Ho! Ho!'

Without giving her time to change her mind, Bender put the tea-strainer down on the table, asked for her husband's address, which she gave him, bowed most gallantly to the charming lady and ran downstairs with the chair.

CHAPTER XXII

ABSALOM VLADIMIROVICH IZNURENKOV

A DIFFICULT time began for the two adventurers. Bender insisted that they should strike while the iron was hot. Hippolyte was no longer in such disgrace, but from time to time Bender would attack him: 'What the devil did I link up with you for? What's the good of you? You should go home and back to your office. The dead and the newly-born are waiting for you. Pack up and go!'

But in his heart Bender had grown quite fond of Hippolyte. Life would be dull without him, he thought, and there would be plenty of work for him in the new scheme. As soon as Ivanopulo had gone out of his room Bender used to coach his friend in the best way of finding the treasure.

'You must act boldly. Never ask for any one's advice, and the more cynical you are the better. People like it. Never undertake anything through a third party; there are no fools left. No one will pull those diamonds out of a stranger's pocket for you. Only don't commit any crimes, for we must respect the law.'

And yet the results of their investigations were none too brilliant. The law was an obstruction; so was the number of *bourgeois* prejudices which the Moscow citizens still retained. For example, they resented nocturnal visits through their windows. Yes, they would have to keep within the law.

Their third trophy, the chair which had been exchanged for a tea-strainer, now stood in Ivanopulo's room. The time had gone by when the chase for diamonds created such strong emotions in the two

friends that they would tear the chairs to pieces with their nails.

'Even if we don't find anything in the chair,' said Bender, 'we can consider that we have earned ten thousand roubles, for each chair we rip up adds to our chances. What does it matter if there is nothing in the good lady's chair? We don't need to break it because of that. Let it furnish Ivanopulo's room. It will make it more comfortable for us.'

The same day they went out of the house together, but they separated and went in different directions. Hippolyte had been told to visit the stranger in Sadovaya-Spaskaya Street. He had been given twenty-five roubles for expenses and had been warned not to go into public-houses and not to return without the chair. Bender decided to deal with Ella's husband.

Hippolyte took bus Number 6 to the other end of the town. He got out at the Red Gates, found the right house, and began to walk up and down the street, trying to make up his mind to go in. It had been a dirty old Moscow hotel which had since been converted into a hostel, and judging from its dilapidated condition it was occupied by incurable bankrupts. Without having formulated any particular plan, he at last went up to the first corridor, in which he found a number of different doors. Hippolyte timidly approached room Number 41. There was a dirty visiting card fixed to the door by a drawing-pin. He read the name: 'Absalom Vladimirovich Iznurenkov.'

Hippolyte was so excited that he forgot to knock. He opened the door, walked in, and found himself in the middle of a room.

'Excuse me,' he said, 'but may I see Comrade Iznurenkov?'

There was no reply. The room was empty. It was impossible to tell from the appearance of the room what kind of man the occupant was, but it was obvious that he was a bachelor and had no servant. A paper

littered with sausage-skins was on the window-sill. The divan by the wall was covered with newspapers. A few dusty books stood on a small shelf, some photographs of cats were hanging on the walls, and in the middle of the room stood the walnut chair. Each piece of furniture in the room, including the chair, had a large red seal fastened to it, but Hippolyte did not pay any attention to this. He immediately forgot all about the criminal code, he forgot Bender's instructions, and moved rapidly towards the chair. At that moment the newspapers on the divan began to move. Hippolyte was terrified. The papers slid down on to the floor and a kitten quietly came out from under them. It looked indifferently at Hippolyte and began to wash its face with its paw.

'Well, I'm bothered!' said Hippolyte as he dragged the chair towards the door, but the door opened before he could reach it and the owner of the room stood on the threshold. He had on an overcoat and a pair of mauve pants, and was carrying his trousers in one hand.

It could quite safely be said that there was not another man like Absalom Vladimirovich Iznurenkov in the whole of Russia. The Republic valued his services, for he was most useful to it, and yet he was practically unknown, although in his art he was as great a master as Chaliapin in singing, Gorky in literature, or Capablanca in chess. Chaliapin was singing, Gorky was writing a long novel, Capablanca was getting ready to meet Alekhine, and Absalom Iznurenkov was busy making jokes. He made jokes for humorous newspapers. Famous men usually make two good jokes in a lifetime, which increase their fame and in course of time become ancient history; but Iznurenkov invented at least sixty first-class jokes in a month, and these were repeated with a smile by every one. But he still remained unknown, for his name never appeared under his own jokes.

'It's ridiculous,' he would say. 'Of course I can't sign my name. How do you want me to sign? Under two lines?'

And he continued to fight against the enemies of society, bad workmen as well as bureaucrats; with his wit he could kill profiteers and hooligans, dishonest servants of the Republic and scores of others. His witticisms were repeated at the circus and reappeared in the evening papers. The marvel of it was that he always managed to say something funny when everybody else felt there was nothing left to be funny about.

As soon as he realized there was a stranger in his room who was taking one of his chairs away Iznurenkov waved his trousers in the air and began to shout: 'What do you think you're doing? You can't! You've no right! After all, there is such a thing as the law. It may be an unwritten law, but you ought to know about it. You know perfectly well the furniture can stay here for another two weeks. I'll complain about this. Dash it all, I'd rather pay!'

Hippolyte stood still while Iznurenkov put his trousers on. Hippolyte felt that in two minutes he would be seized and dragged off to the militia, and he was therefore most surprised when the other man suddenly became quite calm.

'You know,' he said quietly, 'I simply cannot agree to this——'

If Hippolyte had been in his place he too would never have agreed to having his chair stolen in broad daylight, but he could not think of anything appropriate to say, and was therefore silent.

'It isn't my fault—really it isn't. I admit I did not pay for the piano I hired, but after all, I did not sell it, although I had every chance of doing so. I acted honestly and not like a thief. They've taken the piano and apart from that they are suing me and have seized my furniture. But they've no right to take anything from me.'

Hippolyte began to understand what it was all about.

'Drop that chair!' Iznurenkov suddenly shouted. 'You bureaucrat, you, do you hear?'

Hippolyte meekly dropped the chair and mumbled: 'Excuse me, there must be some misunderstanding. I am only doing what I have been told to do.'

At this Iznurenkov cheered up and began to prance up and down the room, waving his arms about and singing. Presently he turned and said:

'So you won't take the furniture to-day? That's good!'

Hippolyte moved towards the door.

'Wait a minute!' said Iznurenkov, and thrust half a rouble into his hand.

'No, no. Please don't refuse All honest work should be paid for.'

'Much obliged,' said Hippolyte, delighted with his own clever acting, and glad to escape from such an awkward position. It was only when he got out into the street again that he remembered Bender, and he began to tremble with fright.

. . . . .

Meanwhile Ernest Pavlovich Shchukin was wandering about his friend's flat, which had been kindly lent to him for the summer. He was trying to make up his mind whether he should or should not have a bath.

The three-roomed flat was high up on the top landing of a nine-story house, and there was no other furniture in it except a looking-glass, a writing-table, and the Vorobianinov chair. The sun was shining on to the looking-glass. The engineer lay flat on the table as if it were a bed, but he immediately jumped up again.

'I'll go and have a bath,' he decided, so he undressed and went into the bathroom. He stepped into the

bath, and, after pouring some water over himself out of a pale blue enamel jug, he began to soap himself vigorously. He was soon covered all over with soap and looked like a snowman.

'That's better!' he said to himself; and it certainly was better, for he had got rid of his wife and there was complete freedom for the future. The engineer bent down in the bath and turned the taps on, intending to wash off the soap. The tap gurgled, but no water came out of it. He thrust a soapy finger into the tap, but that did not improve matters; only a few drops of water trickled out, but no more. He frowned, got out of the bath and went to the kitchen tap, but he could not get any water out of that either.

He walked up and down in dismay. The soap was making his eyes smart, his back was itching, and the foamy water was dripping off his arms and legs on to the floor.

Ernest Pavlovich decided to call the house porter.

'He'll bring me some water,' said the engineer to himself. 'It's positively absurd. I can't understand it.'

He looked out of the window and saw some children who were playing in the yard below.

'Porter! Porter!' he shouted.

There was no answer, and then he remembered that the porter had his room at the bottom of the front staircase. He went out on to the landing and, holding the front door with his hand, he hung over the banister. There was only this one flat on the landing, and he was not afraid of being seen in this soapy condition.

'Porter!' he shouted, and the word 'Por . . . ter!' boomed out and re-echoed down the well of the stairs.

'Porter! Porter!' he shouted again, and the staircase re-echoed again and again 'ter! . . . ter!'

At this point the engineer stamped his foot, slipped, and on trying to regain his balance, he let go of the door. The door swung to and he heard the Yale lock click.

Not believing that the door was locked, he pulled at the handle, but the door would not yield.

The engineer tugged at the door several times and listened with a beating heart. It was dark by now and the house was unusually quiet.

'What a situation to be in!' he thought. He could hear voices downstairs, then a dog began to bark and a perambulator was taken downstairs.

Ernest Pavlovich walked up and down the landing.

'It's enough to make a man go mad!' he exclaimed. Again he went up to the door and again he listened. This time he heard a curious new sound. At first it seemed as if there were somebody walking about in the flat.

'Perhaps some one has got in from the back staircase,' he thought; but then he remembered that the door leading to the back staircase was locked. The monotonous sound persisted and the engineer held his breath, for he suddenly realized that the noise was coming from running water. It was evidently running out of all the taps in the flat. He was almost weeping, for he was in a terrible position.

Here, in the centre of Moscow, on the top landing of a nine-story house, was a full-grown man, a man of good education, standing absolutely naked except for a layer of soap. There was nowhere for him to go, and he would have rather sat in prison than be seen in such a condition.

The soap was beginning to dry and was making his face and back itch. Half an hour passed, during which the engineer tried several times to break the door open. He looked dirty and most forbidding. At last he decided to pluck up courage and go down to the house porter.

'There's no other way out of it,' he said to himself. 'I'll have to hide in the porter's room.'

Feeling terribly nervous and trembling all over, Ernest Pavlovich began to creep very slowly down-

stairs. His figure was lit up by the different-coloured lights in the landing window, so that he looked like a harlequin.

He was about to pass down the next flight of stairs when suddenly the door of one of the flats below was flung open and a young woman carrying a suit-case came out of the flat. The engineer dashed up to his landing again ; he was almost deafened by the sound of his own thumping heart.

Half an hour later he again tried to go downstairs, but this time he decided to run down without paying any attention to anything on the way and to go straight into the porter's room.

He set off at a great pace, jumping down four steps at a time, and only stopped to recover his breath on the sixth landing. But that was his ruin, for somebody was coming upstairs. He turned tail like a cat chased by a terrier and tore up to the ninth story again. Back on his landing, he sank down on the floor, tore his hair, and sobbed convulsively, so that great tears chased each other down his cheeks.

' Oh, God ! ' he moaned.

He made several other attempts to get downstairs, but it was no use ; he fell against the door and tried to ram it with his head, but he only bruised himself.

The most rational thing, of course, would have been to shout until somebody came up, but by now the engineer had completely lost his head and, breathing heavily, he kept running up and down the landing.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE AUTOMOBILE CLUB

IN the office of the large daily paper *Stanok* they were busy selecting copy which had been left over from the previous day's issue. Different notes, articles, and reports were being gone through and counted to see how much space they would occupy. Then the usual wrangling began as to whose article should be put in and where it should be placed. The whole paper of four pages comprised some four thousand four hundred lines, into which everything had to be spaced : telegrams, articles, current events, letters from worker correspondents, one serial in verse and two in prose, cartoons, photographs, and special articles on the theatre, chess, sport, and news of the Soviet party and professional organizations, a novel in serial form, literary sketches of town life, popular articles on various subjects, a wireless section, and other miscellaneous subjects. They usually had sufficient material to fill about ten thousand lines, so that the question of space was discussed with great heat, and there was always a great deal of quarrelling.

The first man to run to the sub-editor of the paper was the chess editor, Sudekin. ' What's this mean ? ' he asked with biting politeness. ' There'll be no chess news to-day ? '

' There's no room for it,' said the sub-editor. ' We've got far too much copy as it is.'

' But it's Saturday to-day, and the readers are waiting for the Sunday article. I have got solutions to problems, an excellent study by " Hopeful ", and I've also got a——'

' Oh ! all right. How much space do you want ? How many lines ? '

'Not less than a hundred and fifty.'

'All right. If you've got solutions to problems we'll let you have sixty.'

The chess expert did his best to persuade the sub-editor to give him another thirty lines, but he was repulsed.

The reporter Persitsky came in.

'Do you want the impressions from the Plenum?'

'Of course!' shouted the sub-editor. 'They spoke two nights ago.'

'Well, we've got the report and two sketches, but they won't give us any space.'

'Why won't they give you any space? Who won't give you space? What's the matter with them all? Are they going mad?'

The sub-editor got up and went to the compositors' room. Persitsky followed him and men from the advertising department hurried after him. Behind them came a man carrying a walnut chair which had been bought for the editor at an auction. A few minutes later the sub-editor returned and sat down again to read the leading article, but he was immediately interrupted by the artist.

'Ah!' said the sub-editor. 'That's splendid. I believe you have some idea of a cartoon based on the last telegram received from Germany?'

'Yes, I think something like this would do: a steel helmet and then the general situation in Germany.'

'All right. You do what you like and then bring it to me.'

The artist went away. He took a square piece of Whatman paper and sketched a lean dog. He drew a German spiked helmet on its head and then he began to write. He wrote 'Germany' on the dog's body and on its tail he wrote 'The Danzig Corridor'; 'Dreams of Revenge' on its jaws'; 'The Dawes Plan' on the collar, and 'Stresemann' on its outstretched tongue. Next, he drew Poincaré standing in front of the dog and

holding a piece of meat in his hand. He wanted to write something on the meat, but it was too small, so he drew a label and wrote on it : ' French guarantees of safety '. In order that Poincaré should not be mistaken for any other European statesman he wrote ' POINCARÉ ' in block letters on his stomach.

On the tables in the art department lay masses of foreign newspapers as well as large cutting-out scissors, little bottles of Indian ink, and Chinese white. The floor was littered with clippings of photographs ; somebody's shoulders, another person's legs, and bits of a landscape. Five artists were scraping photographs with razor blades and making them lighter. They were touching them up, making some darker and others lighter, writing the title and size on the back—' Three and three-quarter inch square ', ' Two columns ', and so on, which were the necessary instructions for the printers.

A deputation of foreigners was sitting in the editor's room, and the official interpreter was staring at one of the foreigners, who was speaking to the editor. He was saying : ' Comrade Arnaud would like to know——'

The conversation was about the way in which Soviet newspapers were run, and while the interpreter was explaining to the editor what Comrade Arnaud wanted to know, Arnaud himself, dressed in velvet cycling breeches, and all the other foreigners were examining a huge red penholder with a nib Number 86 that was propped up in one of the corners of the room. The nib was almost touching the ceiling, the barrel of the pen was as fat as an average-sized man, and the pen could be used, for it was a real one.

' Ha, ha ! ' laughed the foreigners. ' That's good.'

' Yes, colossal ! '

The pen had been presented to the newspaper office by the conference of worker correspondents.

The editor was sitting on Hippolyte's chair. He was

smiling and nodding first at the pen and then at the guests.

The shouting in the sub-editor's room continued. Persitsky brought in an article by Semashko, while the sub-editor was hastily crossing out the whole of the chess section, which had been put into the third column of the paper. The chess editor had to give up struggling for space and in the end was given a few lines at the expense of the ' Law and Life ' section. The sub-editor then went on writing his leading article. He had just determined to read it through and had got to the middle of a sentence when he was interrupted by a representative of the ' Law and Life ' section.

The sub-editor deliberately went on reading, making unnecessary alterations and ignored the man.

' Law and Life ' walked round until he came to the side of the sub-editor's chair and then said in an offended voice : ' I don't see why. I don't understand——'

' What's that ? ' said the sub-editor, trying to delay the attack. ' What's the matter ? '

' The matter is that there was no " Law and Life " in the paper on Wednesday or Friday ; on Thursday there were only a few lines, and now on Saturday they are cutting out the case which is being written about in all the papers and yet we are the only ones to——'

' Which papers are writing about it ? I've not seen anything,' shouted the sub-editor.

' It'll be in all the papers to-morrow. And again we'll be the only ones not to give any news about it.'

After a long argument the sub-editor cut out the chess article altogether and inserted the copy for ' Law and Life '.

It was five o'clock, the busiest time in the newspaper office. The reporters were dictating to the stenographers, and the head typist was shouting at some sneaks who were pushing their copy out of their turn.

The staff poet was walking up and down the corridor. He was in love with one of the typists, whose slender hips inspired poetic feelings in him. He would lead her down to the other end of the corridor and whisper passionately to her, to which she would reply: 'I have some very urgent work to do to-day and I'm terribly busy', which really meant that she was in love with some one else.

The poet kept getting into everybody's way and went round to each of them in turn with the same monotonous request: 'Just let me have eight copecks for the tram.' He went into the worker correspondents' department to try to collect this small sum of money, and after going all round, in and out of the tables where the readers were sitting, and after fingering the piles of letters on the tables, he began again: 'Just let me have eight copecks for the tram.' The readers, who were the most serious people in the office, took no notice of him. The reason for their being so serious and severe was that they had to read at least a hundred letters each day scrawled by hands more used to wielding an axe or a painter's brush or wheeling a barrow than holding a pen and writing a letter.

The poet went back to the general office, but he could not collect the eight copecks, and was attacked by Avdotiev, a member of the Union of Communist Youth, who asked him to become a member of the automobile club. The poet remembered the smell of petrol and disappeared at top speed.

'Listen,' said Avdotiev as he sat on the edge of the sub-editor's table. 'Just stop for a minute and listen. It's serious. We've formed an automobile club and I was just wondering whether the paper would give us a loan of, say, five hundred roubles for eight months?'

'You don't need to wonder,' said the sub-editor.

'What? Don't you think there's a hope?'

'I don't think—I know. How many members have you got?'

'Oh! quite a large number.'

The group consisted so far of only one organizer, but Avdotiev did not elaborate that point.

'We're buying a car from the dumping ground for five hundred roubles. Egorov has already got his eye on one and he says the repairs won't cost any more than five hundred, so that makes a thousand. I'm thinking of finding twenty members, each one to subscribe fifty roubles. It'll be fine. We'll all learn to drive. Egorov will be the head of the show, and in three months' time, round about August, we'll all know how to drive the car. The car will be ours and each one in turn will be able to drive wherever he likes.'

'Yes,' said the sub-editor; 'but what about the purchase-money—the five hundred roubles?'

'Oh! the Mutual Credit will give it us on a percentage basis. We'll soon be able to pay that back. Well, what about you? Shall I put your name down as a member?'

Now the sub-editor was going bald; he was an exceptionally busy man, and a slave to his family and home; he loved to take a nap on the sofa after dinner and to read the *Pravda* before dropping off to sleep, so he thought about the automobile club for a minute and then refused.

'You old stick!' said Avdotiev, and moved away to repeat his fiery speech to other people in the office.

His remarks had little effect on the older men, and by 'older men' he meant any one above the age of twenty. They all made excuses by saying they were already 'Friends of the Children' and regularly paid twenty copecks a year in aid of the poor little mites. They said they would gladly join the new club if——

'If what?' shouted Avdotiev. 'And what if the car were here now, eh? Supposing we were to bring a six-cylinder Packard in here now for fifteen copecks

a year with petrol and oil supplied by the Government. What would you say then ? '

' Oh ! go away. Go away ! We're working,' said the ' old ' men.

The idea of the club was dying a natural death when suddenly a pioneer came forward. Persitsky, who had been listening to Avdotiev, said very confidently : ' You're not going about it in the right way. Give the list to me and we'll begin again.' And the two men went round the various tables.

' Here, you, you old mattress ! ' said Persitsky to a blue-eyed youth, ' you don't need to give any money. Have you any certificates for the 1927 Loan ? Come on ; how many have you got ? For fifty roubles ? All the better. Just hand them over to our club and they'll form the capital and by August we'll be able to realize all the certificates and buy the car.'

' But what if my certificate wins ? '

' How much do you expect to win ? '

' Fifty thousand roubles.'

' Well, we'll buy cars with the fifty thousand. And if I win I'll do the same. And if Avdotiev wins he'll do the same. In fact, whoever wins will buy cars with the money. Now do you understand ? You'll be able to go to the Caucasus in your own car, you silly fool, and the others too—" Law and Life ", " Current Events ", and the lady who does film notes. Why, they'll all be driving behind you ! Well, what d'you say to that ? '

Not every holder of a certificate believes he will win, and that is why he is interested in the certificates held by his friends and neighbours. He is always terrified that they will win and that he will not. The idea of a neighbour winning prompted all the certificate-holders to join the club. The only anxiety was that none of the certificates would win, but that did not seem possible.

Within five minutes there were twenty members,

and presently the sub-editor came in and also decided to become a member.

'Why not?' said Avdotiev, 'but not in our club. You're a bit too late. Our membership is closed for 1929. You'd better join the "Friends of the Children". It's cheap and quiet. It only costs twenty copecks a year and you don't need to go anywhere by car.'

The sub-editor felt it was just as well, for he was getting on in years. He sighed and was going back to his leading article, when a handsome man stopped him in the corridor.

'Tell me, comrade,' he said, 'where is the editor's office?'

It was the great schemer again, Ostap Bender.

CHAPTER XXIV

A CONVERSATION WITH A NAKED ENGINEER

OSTAP BENDER'S appearance in the newspaper office had been preceded by several important events. He had been to see the engineer, Ernest Pavlovich Shchukin, but had not found him at home. The flat was locked up and the owner was probably at work, so Bender decided to go and see him later on in the day and meantime went for a walk in the town. He was aching for activity ; he therefore crossed streets rapidly, stopped in some of the squares, winked at militiamen, and helped ladies into omnibuses ; altogether it looked as though he were entertaining the whole of Moscow, its statues, trams, railway stations, and advertisements. He walked among his guests chatting pleasantly and finding a kind word for any one he came across. But it tired him, and when it was almost six o'clock it was time for him to go to see the engineer Shchukin.

But fate arranged that instead of going to find Shchukin he was delayed for about two hours by having to give evidence before the militia. Quite unexpectedly a white horse, a timid animal, had rushed at him in Theatre Square and had knocked him down. Bender picked himself up rapidly. He was not even scratched, but it gave him an opportunity to create a disturbance, and he went up to the cabman and thumped him on the back. The old man took his punishment without saying a word.

' I insist on redress ! ' shouted Bender. ' I insist on evidence being taken.' His voice was shrill, as if he had been deeply injured. Then, as he stood by the wall of the Little Theatre, he gave a short account of the affair to Persitsky, the reporter, who had hurried

up to see what it was all about. The reporter took a few notes, wrote down the name of the injured party, and then ran on to the next excitement. Bender, feeling very proud of himself, went on his way, regretting that he had not given the cabman a good thrashing. Presently he found he was near to the block of flats where Shchukin lived. He ran up the stairs two at a time and when he was near the top a splash of water fell on to his head. He looked up and a rush of dirty water poured on to his face.

'People should be had up for allowing such things,' thought Bender as he climbed up to the top landing. A naked man covered with soap-suds was sitting on the floor with his back to Shchukin's flat. His head was bent and he was swaying from side to side. Water was coming in a stream from under the door, and the man was sitting in a pool of water. He was groaning to himself.

'Look here,' said Bender in an irritated voice, 'are you the idiot who is pouring all this water over the place? What d'you want to take a bath here for?'

The man looked stupidly at Bender and began to sob.

'Listen, my friend,' said Bender; 'instead of sitting there crying, wouldn't it be better if you got into a bath? Look at yourself!'

'The key,' moaned the engineer. 'The key.'

'What key?' asked Bender.

'The key of the flat.'

Bender began to understand and almost fell downstairs with laughter which he could not suppress.

'You can't get into your flat? That's easy enough.' And carefully avoiding the wet man, Bender leant forward, poked at the lock with his thumb-nail, and the door of the flat immediately opened. The naked man got up, shouted with delight, and ran into the flat. The taps were gurgling, the dining-room was flooded and his slippers were floating

like two dignified swans on a pond in the middle of the bedroom. A number of cigarette ends had been washed into one of the corners and Hippolyte's chair was in the deepest part of the water in the dining-room. It was swaying slightly and looked as though it were getting ready to float away at any minute from its pursuer. Bender sat down on it and tucked his legs up under him.

The engineer soon recovered himself, and with shouts of, 'Excuse me a minute', ran to turn off the taps, washed himself, and then came out again stripped to the waist and in a pair of trousers rolled up to the knees.

'You've saved my life!' he shouted excitedly. 'You must excuse me, but my hands are wet. You know, I almost went mad.'

'Yes, I saw that. Pretty obvious.'

And the engineer told Bender all that had happened to him.

'I don't know what would have happened if it hadn't been for you,' he added gratefully.

'Yes,' said Bender, 'the same thing once happened to me, only it was much worse. I was once locked out like that in the street when there were twenty degrees Réaumur of frost. And I went on knocking for hours. Do you think they would open the door? No! They were certain it was some one who had come to search their rotten place and they were far too busy sewing up their money in their pillows. When they did open the door I almost killed them.'

'How awful!' said the engineer as he stopped baling the water out of the dining-room.

'So you are the engineer Shchukin?' said Bender.

'I am,' said Shchukin; 'but please don't tell any one about this. It would be very awkward for me.'

'Oh! of course not,' said Bender. 'It will be absolutely between ourselves. I've come to see you on a matter of business.'

'I shall be delighted.'

'Thanks. It's only a small matter. Your wife asked me to come round and get this chair for her. She wants it to make up the pair, and in return she'll send you an arm-chair.'

'Oh! certainly,' said Shchukin. 'I'm delighted. But why should you trouble? I can take it round myself to-day.'

'Not at all,' said Bender. 'I wouldn't dream of troubling you. After all, why should you? I don't mind carrying it in the least. I live quite near to your wife, and it's really no trouble—no trouble at all!'

The engineer bustled about and saw Bender to the door, but he was afraid to cross the threshold, although this time the key was safely in his pocket.

. . . . .

The student Ivanopulo was presented with another Gambs chair. It is true that its upholstery was slightly damaged, but it was exactly the same in design and pattern as the first chair. Bender was not at all disturbed by the fact that this new chair did not bring them any luck, for he knew the tricks of fate. The only thing he worried about was the chair that had found its way into the goods yard of the October railway station. His thoughts about that chair were unpleasant and greatly depressed him. He was in the position of a roulette player, who stakes everything on one number; only his position was worse, for, although the twelfth chair might contain the diamonds, it was probably in some outlandish part of Russia.

The sequence of his melancholy thoughts was broken by the arrival of Hippolyte, but he saw from the expression on Hippolyte's face that he had nothing successful to report.

'Hello!' said Bender, 'you're improving. But why play tricks on me? Why have you left the chair behind the door?'

'Comrade Bender,' mumbled Hippolyte.

'Come along now,' said Bender. 'What d'you want to irritate me for? Bring it in. You can see that the one I'm sitting on isn't worth much.'

He bent his head to one side and scrutinized Hippolyte.

'Come on, come on! Where's the chair? Why haven't you brought it?'

Hippolyte's lame account was interrupted by Bender's questions and ironical applause.

'What about my instructions?' said Bender severely. 'How many times am I to tell you that it is a sin to steal anything? Why, you even wanted to rob Madam Gritsatsuev, my wife, that time when we were in Stargorod. I saw then that you were no better than a petty thief. The most you would ever get would be six months without solitary confinement. That's not much for a giant of thought or a father of Russian democracy. Now what's happened? You've simply let the chair slip out of your hands. And besides, you've spoilt an easy prey. You try and go there again! Why, he'd simply tear you limb from limb. You're jolly lucky to be here and not sitting behind a grid waiting for me to come and pull you out. But why should I? After all, you're nothing to me.'

Hippolyte, who had long since realized how insignificant he was, stood in silence with head bowed in front of Bender.

'Well, all I've got to tell you is this—I see absolutely no point in you and I going on working together. It's absolutely absurd for me to go on working with such an unintelligent person, simply for the sake of a paltry forty per cent. Whatever happens, I must propose fresh conditions.'

Hippolyte took a deep breath.

'Yes, my old friend, you are suffering from organic impotence and complete incapacity, and on account of this you should receive less. Are you agreeable to twenty per cent?'

Hippolyte shook his head vigorously.

'What's the matter with that? What have you got against it?'

'It's too little. Yes, it's too little.'

'Too little, eh? Well, I'm bothered! It's thirty thousand roubles. How much more do you want?"

'I agree to forty per cent.'

'Why, that's daylight robbery!' mocked Bender as he imitated Hippolyte's voice during the famous scene in the porter's room.

'Thirty thousand roubles too little for you?' Bender continued. 'What more do you want? Perhaps you'd like the key of my room?'

'It's you who wants to have the key of my room,' said Hippolyte.

'You take my advice and agree to the twenty per cent before I change my mind. I'm in a good mood now.'

Hippolyte had lost the confident air he had had when he set out on his search for the treasure. Fate was tossing him hither and thither, now taking him close to the diamonds, now pushing him away from them. He was suspicious and terrified of every one and everything. He could not see an end to his adventure. He felt he was being carried along by the stream, and he had neither the strength nor the wish to swim against the current. He felt he was being swept out to the open sea of adventure.

CHAPTER XXV

TWO VISITS

ABSALOM IZNURENKOV was always in a state of perpetual agitation. He would shuffle his feet, fidget on his chair, sigh and groan, and wave his arms about like a lunatic. He led a very busy life. He went everywhere, flying down the streets like an agitated hen, and giving advice liberally to everybody he met. He was incapable of concentrating upon any one thing for longer than a minute at a time. If one of his jokes did not go well and did not produce immediate laughter, he did not try like many other people to convince the editor that it was a good joke and only required a little thought for it to be appreciated ; he simply made a fresh joke. If only he had kept still, say, for two hours the most unexpected things would have happened. He might have written a wonderful tale, perhaps a book; but he could not possibly do that. His restless legs would drag him away, the pencil would shoot out of his hand like an arrow, and his thoughts would simply leap about.

Iznurenkov was pacing up and down his room, and the seals were dangling from his furniture like the ear-rings of a dancing gipsy girl. A giggling young woman was sitting on Hippolyte's chair.

'Ah!' shouted Iznurenkov, 'you are divine! You are wonderful! You are the Queen Margot!'

Queen Margot, who did not understand a word of what he was saying, laughed politely.

'Have some chocolates,' said Absalom. 'Yes, do have some! Charming!' And every few minutes he kissed the queen's hands. He was delighted with her simple dress and pushed the cat into her arms.

'Isn't he a marvel? Isn't he a parrot—a lion? Yes, a lion! A real lion! And what a tail! Have you ever seen such a tail?'

The cat jumped down and escaped into a corner of the room, and Absalom went on flattering his guest about her physical and spiritual qualities.

'Tell me,' he said, 'is this brooch made of glass? How it glitters! Do you know, you simply dazzle me? I swear you do. You positively dazzle me. And tell me, is Paris really such a large town? And is the Eiffel Tower really there? What hands! What a nose you have!'

He did not embrace the girl, nor did he stop complimenting her. On and on he went, and his flow of words was only interrupted by the sudden appearance of Bender. The great schemer stood in the doorway, twisting a small piece of paper in his hands.

'Does Iznurenkov live here?' he asked sternly. 'Are you Iznurenkov?'

Absalom looked nervously at the stranger. What did he want? Had he come to collect the fine for the window-pane he had broken when arguing with some one in the tram? Or had he come to serve a writ on him for non-payment of rental?

'What do you mean by sending a Government official away like that?' asked Bender tersely.

'A Government official? What Government official?' said Iznurenkov, horrified.

'You know perfectly well what I mean. The furniture must go at once.' Then he turned to the young woman and said: 'I must ask you, comrade, to get off that chair.'

The young woman stood up.

'Sit down!' shouted Iznurenkov, as he stood between Bender and the chair. 'They've no right to do this.'

'I shouldn't say much about rights if I were you. Give me that chair. You must obey the law.'

Having said this, Bender seized the chair and held it over his head.

'I shall remove the furniture,' said Bender with great determination.

'You can't! You can't!'

'What do you mean I can't? You see that I can,' retorted Bender as he went out into the corridor carrying the chair.

Absalom kissed his queen's hand and ran out after Bender, who was calmly going down the stairs.

'But you've absolutely no right to do this. According to the law the furniture can stay here for a fortnight, and it has only been under seal for three days. Perhaps I shall pay. How do you know?'

Iznurenkov was buzzing round Bender like a fly, and followed him to the corner of the street. Here he suddenly noticed some sparrows fighting in the gutter, thought of a joke, ran home to write it down, and only remembered the chair again as he came into his flat and found the girl standing in the middle of the room.

Meanwhile Bender took a cab and brought the chair to Hippolyte.

'You see,' he said, 'that's the way to get hold of a chair. It has cost me absolutely nothing.'

Another chair was added to the furniture in Ivanopulo's room, but after opening it up Hippolyte was more depressed than ever.

'Our chances are growing,' said Bender, 'but there is still no money. Tell me, was your late mother-in-law fond of practical jokes?'

'Why?' said Hippolyte. 'What do you mean?'

'Perhaps there are no diamonds.'

Hippolyte was disgusted.

'Well, if that's how you feel,' said Bender, 'there's still a hope. Perhaps we'll only need to have one more chair in here.'

'Your name was in the paper this morning,' said Hippolyte quietly.

Bender frowned. He did not like the idea of the Press taking any interest in him.

'Which paper?' he said.

Hippolyte showed him the newspaper *Stanok*.

'Here it is,' he said, 'in the column "News of the Day".'

Bender looked at it.

KNOCKED DOWN BY A HORSE

Yesterday, in Sverdlov Square, Comrade Ostap Bender was knocked down by a horse belonging to Cabman Number 8974. Comrade Bender was unhurt and escaped with a fright.

'It was the cabman who had a fright, not I,' said Bender. 'They're perfect idiots. They scribble away and don't know what they're scribbling about. Did you say it was the *Stanok*? That's very helpful indeed. Do you know, Hippolyte, this very note was probably written by a journalist as he sat on our chair? It's really quite amusing!'

The great schemer grew thoughtful, for at last he had found a reason for calling at the newspaper office.

After discovering that all the rooms on the right and on the left of the corridor belonged to the newspaper, he decided that he would go into each room to find the chair. First he walked into the room where the young members of the automobile club were having a discussion, but he saw at a glance that the chair was not there, so he went into the next room. He passed from room to room making all sorts of different inquiries until he reached the editor's room, where he found the editor sitting on Hippolyte's chair and shouting something into the telephone.

After examining the place very carefully, Bender turned to the editor.

'Your paper,' he said, 'has slandered me.'

'Slandered you?'

Bender took a long time in unfolding the newspaper. He looked at the door and noticed that it had a Yale lock. If a piece of glass in the door were cut out, then it would be quite easy to slip a hand through and open the door from the inside.

The editor read the paragraph which Bender pointed out to him.

'Well,' said the editor, 'where do you see the slander?'

'Of course it's slanderous. What do you mean by saying that I escaped with a fright?'

'I don't understand.'

Bender looked at the editor.

'As though I should be afraid of a cabman! Why, you've disgraced me in the eyes of the whole world and I must claim redress.'

'But I assure you,' said the editor, 'no one has disgraced you, and we would not dream of making redress for such a trifling matter.'

'All the same,' said Bender, as he went out of the room, 'I assure you I shall not let the matter drop.'

Bender had seen the chair, and that was all he wanted.

CHAPTER XXVI

STARGOROD

ALL the members of the Secret Union of the Sword and Plough and the young men from 'Rapidpack' were standing in a long queue, waiting for flour. Passers-by stopped every now and then to ask what the queue was waiting for. In any of the queues you find outside a shop there is always one man who is more garrulous than the rest, and the farther away he is from the shop door the more garrulous he is. Such a man was Polesov in the flour queue. He was busy proving to the rest of the people that there was sufficient flour in the town to last only four days. There had been a food crisis for three days, but Polesov simply joined the queues out of principle. He had no money, and of course could not buy anything, but he would move from queue to queue, listen to conversations, pass caustic remarks, raise his eyebrows significantly, and make prophetic utterances.

As a result of his whispering the town became full of rumours about the arrival of a secret organization. Kislyarsky heard these rumours, spent a sleepless night because he belonged to the Secret Union of the Sword and Plough, and decided that it would be better for him if he were to confess about it to a Government official. He went to head-quarters and was dumbfounded to find that all the other members of the Sword and Plough had arrived there first. They too had come to confess.

'Here he comes!' shouted Dyadiev. 'This is the ringleader!'

'First of all,' said Kislyarsky as he went up to the desk, 'I should like to say that I am always in sympathy

with the Soviet. Secondly, I am not the ringleader. Comrade Charushnikov is the leader, and his address is——'

'Red Army Street,' shouted Dyadiev.

'Number three!' chorused the two louts, Nicky and Vlady.

'Through the yard and to the left,' added Viktor Mikhaylovich. 'I can show you.'

Twenty minutes later Charushnikov was brought in; he announced that he had never seen any of these people before, and then he immediately denounced Elena Stanislavovna Bauer.

. . . . .

Madam Gritsatsuev-Bender had managed to buy in sufficient provisions during the food crisis to last her for at least four months. As soon as she ceased to worry about the shortage of food, she began to pine again for her young husband. A visit to the fortune-teller had not brought her any consolation, for the cards suggested first an increase in salary, then the end of the world, and finally a meeting with her husband in a public building in the presence of an enemy, the King of Spades. The fortune-telling ended strangely for Elena Stanislavovna, for the door opened and in came the militia. They had come to take the member of the Sword and Plough.

The widow Gritsatsuev-Bender ran home, where she found Varfolomeich waiting for her.

'I've been waiting two hours for you,' he said. 'I've come about your advertisement.'

The widow had a dreadful presentiment.

'I can't bear it!' wailed the widow.

'Didn't you put the advertisement in the paper?'

The widow sat down on a bag of flour.

'What a delicate constitution!' said Varfolomeich sweetly. 'First of all, I should like to be quite clear about the reward you offer.'

'Take everything,' said the widow. 'Anything you like.'

'Well now, I happen to know where your son, Ostap Bender, is to be found. What reward are you offering?'

'Take everything—everything,' repeated the widow.

'Twenty roubles,' said Varfolomeich dryly.

The widow stood up. Her clothes were covered with flour.

'How much did you say?' asked the widow incredulously.

'Fifteen roubles,' said Varfolomeich, feeling he would be lucky to get three roubles from the wretched woman. She went up to the old man, prayed heaven for assistance, and beat him down to five roubles.

'Well, well, let it be five, only I must have the money in advance. That's my usual practice.'

Varfolomeich took two newspaper cuttings from his pocket-book and, without allowing her to touch them, began:

'Now just let us examine the whole matter in the right order. You wrote:

I IMPLORE

Those persons knowing the whereabouts of Comrade Bender, aged 25–30, brown hair, who left home dressed in a green suit, yellow boots, and pale blue waistcoat, to send information to Madam Gritsatsuev, 15 Plekhanov Street, Stargorod

REWARD OFFERED

That's correct, isn't it? Well, that was in the Stargorod newspaper, but now your little son is being written about in the newspapers of big cities. Look at this:

KNOCKED DOWN BY A HORSE

Don't be alarmed, just listen to what follows :

KNOCKED DOWN BY A HORSE

Yes, yes, he's alive all right. You don't think I'd be taking money about a dead man, do you ? Now listen :

KNOCKED DOWN BY A HORSE

> Yesterday, in Sverdlov Square, Comrade Ostap Bender was knocked down by a horse belonging to Cabman Number 8974. Comrade Bender was unhurt and escaped with a fright.

Now, I'll let you have these documents and you'll give me the money in advance. That's my usual practice.'

The widow paid him the money, and great tears were in her eyes. Her husband, her darling husband, was lying on the ground in some distant Moscow street and a fire-breathing horse was trampling him down, crushing his chest and his pale blue waistcoat.

Varfolomeich was perfectly satisfied with his reward, and went home after explaining to the widow that further traces of her husband would no doubt be found in the *Stanok* newspaper office, where they knew something about everything.

. . . . .

A Letter Written from Rostov by Father Theodore to his Wife.

' My Dear Katya,

' A fresh disappointment has befallen me ; but about that later. I received the money in time and thank you for it most heartily. The moment I arrived I hurried to the address of the cement factory. It was quite a large building, but no one had ever heard of the engineer Bruns. I was almost desperate when

some one suddenly told me to go and look in the directory lists. So I went and I asked at an inquiry office. " Yes," they said, " we have had a man of that name on our lists. He was doing responsible work, but he left us last year. He has gone to Baku to work at the oil wells."

' Well, my love, my journey is not to be as short as we imagined. You write that your money is coming to an end, but we cannot help that, Katerina Alexandrovna ; you must be patient. The end is quite near. Arm yourself with patience, pray to God, and sell my old overcoat. We may have to meet some very heavy expenses, and you must be ready for anything.

' Life is terribly expensive in Rostov. I have had to pay two roubles twenty-five copecks for a room in the hotel. I shall have enough money to take me to Baku. In case of success I shall wire to you from there.

' The weather here is so very hot that I have to carry the borrowed overcoat over my arm. I am afraid of leaving it in my room, for you never know it might be stolen. The people here are rather rough.

' I don't like Rostov. It is considerably inferior to Kharkov, both in population and geographical situation. But never you mind, my dear, with God's help we shall pay a visit to Moscow together, and then you will see what a West European town it is. And then we shall settle in Samara, close to our own little candle factory.

' Has Hippolyte returned yet ? I wonder where he is. Racing about somewhere, I suppose ! Does Evstigneyev still come in for dinner ? Have the cleaners returned my cassock yet, and what does it look like now that it has been cleaned ? Whenever you speak about me to people, be sure you tell them I am still at my aunt's bedside.

' I almost forgot to tell you about a terrible thing

that happened to me to-day. As I was admiring the peacefulness of the River Don and was lost in thought about our future happiness, a wind suddenly rose and swept the hat off my head. It was the hat you had borrowed for me from your brother, the baker. It fell into the river and that was the last I saw of it. Here was another expense, for I had to buy an English cap, which cost me two roubles and thirty copecks. Mind you don't tell your brother, the baker, about this. Tell him I am in Voronezh.

'My underclothes are a great nuisance to me here. I wash them in the evening and in the morning, if they are not dry, I have to put them on damp. But it is really quite pleasant in the present heat.

'I kiss you.

'Your devoted husband

'THEODORE'

CHAPTER XXVII

HUSBAND AND WIFE

THE reporter Persitsky was actively preparing for the bicentenary of the great mathematician Isaac Newton. At the height of his work Stepan came in from the 'Science and Life' section and a fat woman came trailing in after him.

'Comrade Persitsky,' he said, 'this citizen has come to see you on business.' Then he turned to the woman and said: 'Come in, citizen, come in. Comrade Persitsky will explain everything to you.' He grinned at Persitsky and then went out of the room.

'Well,' said Persitsky, 'what can I do for you?'

The widow Gritsatsuev, for it was she, looked sadly at the reporter and without saying a word thrust a piece of paper at him.

'Yes,' said Persitsky. '"Knocked down by a horse. . . . Escaped with a fright." . . . Well, what of it?'

'The address,' murmured the widow pleadingly. 'Can you tell me what the address is?'

'Whose address?'

'Ostap Bender's.

'Why should I know what his address is?'

'But the other comrade told me you would know it.'

'I don't know anything of the sort. Go and ask at the post office.'

'But perhaps you'll remember it. He was wearing yellow boots——'

'But, my dear woman, I'm wearing yellow boots, and there are two hundred thousand other people in Moscow who, for all I know, are walking about in yellow boots. Perhaps you'd like me to find out their addresses for you? Of course I can easily stop what I'm doing and

help you. I'd be able to send the addresses to you in about six months' time, shouldn't I?' And then dropping his sarcastic tone he continued: 'I'm very busy, citizen.'

But the widow, who had listened to Persitsky with great respect, bustled out of the room and down the corridor after him repeating her request: 'The address, comrade. The address.'

'What a wretch that Stepan is!' thought Persitsky. 'I'll pay him out for this.'

He turned round and faced the widow.

'What d'you think I can do?' he asked in an irritated voice. 'Where do you think I can get Ostap Bender's address from? Do you think I'm the horse that knocked him down? Or the cabman he punched?'

But the widow persisted: 'Comrade, . . . I implore you——'

The day's work was over and the offices and corridors in the building were rapidly becoming empty. Somewhere or other the last page of a letter was being tapped out on a typewriter.

'You must excuse me, madam,' said Persitsky, 'but you can see I am busy.'

With these words he disappeared into a room, and after wasting ten minutes or so he came out again. The widow was bustling up and down the corridor. As soon as she saw him, she began all over again about Bender's address until Persitsky was furious.

'Confound you!' he shouted. 'I'll tell you where you'll find your Bender. Go straight down the corridor, turn to the right, and then straight on until you come to a door. Go in and ask for Cherepennikov. He'll be able to help you.' And, delighted with his trick, Persitsky disappeared so rapidly that the widow had not even time to ask him anything else.

Madam Gritsatsuev sailed down the corridor, and after turning to the right she began to hurry. A man in

a pale blue waistcoat was coming towards her. It was obvious from the expression on his face that his visit to the newspaper office at such a late hour was most important, but he certainly had not expected to meet his wife.

As soon as he saw the widow, Bender turned on his heel and, keeping close to the wall, hurried along the corridor.

'Comrade Bender!' she screamed with delight. 'Where are you going?'

The great schemer increased his pace, but the widow also increased hers.

'Wait! Wait!' she shouted. 'I want to tell you something.' But her words did not reach Bender's ears, for he was already four corridors away, racing along and bounding upstairs. All she could hear was the echo of his footsteps.

'Thank you very much,' Bender said to himself as he took a rest on the fifth corridor. 'A nice time to choose for a rendezvous! What does she want here? It is high time for us to liquidate the Moscow part of our adventure, or it may end badly for me.'

Meanwhile the widow, who was separated from him by three stories, several hundred doors, and a dozen corridors, mopped her face with the hem of her skirt and then set out again in pursuit of her love. She wanted to meet him as quickly as possible and come to some understanding with him. But all the corridors and all the doors were alike, and she was frightened. She wanted to get out, and faster and faster she ran down the corridors, until she could hardly stop herself, and as she ran the doors of the various departments seemed to flash past her at a terrific rate.

At last she came out on to a landing. It was dark, but she overcame her fear, ran downstairs, and tugged violently at the handle of a door that had glass panels in it. The door was locked, so she rushed upstairs

again, but the door through which she had just come had been quietly shut and locked by some careful hand. She ran downstairs again to the glass-panelled door, sat down, and began to think of her miserable plight. Now and again she dozed as she waited for the morning to come.

A yellow light from the corridor lamps poured through the glass panels on to the widow, and the grey morning light began to creep through the staircase window. Suddenly the widow heard footsteps in the corridor on the other side of the door, and as she stood up and pressed her face against the glass, she saw a pale blue waistcoat flash at the other end of the corridor. Bender came slowly towards the door, flicking the dust from his coat.

'My pet!' called the widow through the door. 'Darling! Swee-t-heart!' She breathed on the glass panel with inexpressible tenderness until a warm haze came over it, and through the haze she could see that exquisite colour, pale blue.

Bender had not heard the widow's cooing, for he was too worried. Another minute and he would vanish out of her sight. With a desperate cry of 'Comrade Bender!' the poor wife began to strum on the glass with her knuckles.

The great schemer turned round.

'Oho!' he said, as he realized that he was separated from his wife by a locked door. 'Are you here too?'

'Yes! Yes!' she panted joyfully.

'Put your arms round me, my love,' said Bender mockingly. 'It is so long since we were together.'

The widow grew agitated and threw herself against the door like a bird in a cage.

Bender stretched out his arms.

'Why don't you come to me, my darling wife? Your husband is so tired of being alone.'

'Darling!' she implored for the fifth time. 'Open the door, Comrade Bender!'

'Not so much noise,' said Bender. 'A woman should be more modest. Why all these little jumps?'

The widow was in agony.

'What's the matter with you?' called Bender.

'Fancy asking such a thing,' said the widow, as she began to weep.

'Wipe your eyes, my dear. Each of your tears is but a molecule in the cosmos.'

'I've been waiting and waiting for you. I've closed my shop and I've come all this way to look for you.'

'Well, how do you like your new home on the stairs? Is it draughty?'

The widow's sorrow turned to rage.

'Traitor!' she suddenly hissed.

Bender had very little time left. He snapped his fingers at her and was about to turn on his heel.

'May you burst!' shouted the widow through the door. 'You've stolen my bracelet, and it was my husband's present to me. And what possessed you to take that chair?'

'I think you're beginning to be personal,' said Bender coldly.

'You're a thief! You're a thief!' shouted the widow.

'Now then, my lady, just you remember that Ostap Bender has never stolen anything in his life.'

'Who took the tea-strainer?'

'Oh! the tea-strainer? You consider that a theft? In that case our views on life are diametrically opposed.'

'You took it! You're a thief!'

'If that's what you think we shall have to separate. I am quite agreeable to a divorce.'

The widow hurled herself against the door, and the glass panels rattled.

Bender realized that it was time for him to go.

'There is no time for embraces,' he said. 'Good-bye, my love. We meet and part like ships in the night.'

'Help! Help!' yelled the widow. But Bender was at the other end of the corridor by now. He climbed on to a window-sill, jumped down to the ground and disappeared round the corner.

The widow shouted so loudly that she roused the night porter, who began to prowl round the building, grumbling as he went up and down the corridors. At last he found the prisoner and released her, but not before he had threatened her with a fine.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A POET

AFTER Madam Gritsatsuev had left the inhospitable newspaper office the humblest people who worked in that building began to come in again for their day's work. Messengers, shorthand typists, telephone operators, and office boys streamed into the various offices.

Nikifor Lyapis moved about among them. He was a very young man with a curly head like a lamb and an impudent face. He had come into the building through the back way, for he felt quite at home there and knew all the short-cuts that led to the cashier's desk. He went up to an automatic machine, put a coin in, and took out a sandwich, a glass sealed in paper, and a cream bun. After this he had a drink of tea, and then went to have a look round. He wandered into the offices of a hunters' journal *Gerasim and Mumu*, but his friend was out, so he moved on to the offices of the *Hygroscopic Messenger*, a weekly journal through which pharmaceutical workers kept in touch with the outside world.

'Good morning,' said Nikifor. 'I've written some wonderful poetry.'

'What about?' asked the editor of the literary page. 'Don't you know that this is a hygroscopic journal?'

The poet looked at the floor, then threw his head back and said in a sonorous voice: 'A ballad on gangrene.'

'Interesting!' remarked the editor. 'It's high time we spread prophylactic ideas in popular form.'

Lyapis immediately began to declaim:

'Gavrila suffered from gangrene,
It was gangrene that laid him low. . . .'

And the poem went on to describe how, out of ignorance, Gavrila did not go to the chemist in time and how he died, because he had not painted his wound with iodine.

'Yes, you're getting on,' said the editor encouragingly; 'but, you understand, we should prefer something different.' All the same he took the ballad and promised to pay for it on the following Tuesday.

Then the poet went to the next office, belonging to the *Daily Gossip*, where he was very welcome.

'You've just come in time, for we're wanting some poems. None of your lyrics, but life! life! life! Something to do with the postal telegraph workers.'

'How funny,' said Lyapis. 'Only yesterday I was thinking about postal telegraph workers. I've got a poem about them. Here it is:

'Gavrila served as postman
He carried letters round. . . .'

This went on for seventy-two lines, until in the end Gavrila is mortally wounded by a Fascist bullet; but despite this he delivers his last letter to the right address.

'Where does all this take place?' Lyapis was asked. The question was a legitimate one, for there are no Fascisti in Soviet Russia and the postmen abroad are not called Gavrila.

'Why, what's wrong?' said Lyapis. 'The action takes place in Russia, of course, and the Fascist is only a Russian dressed up to look like a Fascist!'

'No, my friend. I think you'd better write us some verses about the radio.'

'But why don't you want the postman?'

'You can leave it here. We'll take it provisionally.'

Nikifor Lyapis went back to the *Gerasim and Mumu* offices, where he found his competitor, a poet from one of the suburbs of Moscow.

Again he offered a poem about Gavrila, but this time

it had a hunting theme, and it was called ' The Poacher's Prayer '.

> Gavrila sat in wait for a rabbit,
> He shot it and killed it at once. . . .

' That's splendid,' said the editor, ' but you must alter it slightly. You must throw out the word " prayer " and also the word " rabbit ", because both are out of season.'

By the time all the changes had been made the poem was entirely different.

Several editors gave him orders for poems, but the saddest part about it all was that Lyapis was not given any money. Some of them promised to pay him on Tuesday, others on Thursday or Friday, and others in a fortnight's time. In the end he had to borrow some money in another office, where they never gave him any orders for poetry.

Lyapis came down from the fifth floor to the second and walked into the office of the *Stanok*, where to his utter dismay he ran straight into the arms of the reporter, Persitsky.

' Ah, Lapsus ! ' exclaimed Persitsky.

' Listen,' said Nikifor. ' Lend me three roubles. *Gerasim and Mumu* owe me a fortune.'

' I'll give you half a rouble. Wait a minute. I'll be back in a minute.'

Persitsky returned with some collaborators of the *Stanok*, who teased Lyapis whenever they saw him. They all began to talk.

' Well, how's business ? ' asked Persitsky.

' I've written some wonderful poetry.'

' About Gavrila ? Something taken from peasant life ? ' said another.

They teased Lyapis about his poetry until Persitsky dragged him into the next room.

' Wait a minute and I'll bring you that half-rouble,' he said. But he did not bring the half-rouble.

Instead, he brought a friend of his who asked the poet why he did not find something more sensible to do with his time than scribbling poetry.

'Why don't you learn a trade?'

'Because I need money,' said Lyapis.

'But you never have any. You're always borrowing roubles.'

'I've just bought some furniture and I'm out of pocket.'

'What? You've been buying furniture? What can you buy with the few miserable coppers you earn?'

'Coppers? I've bought such a chair at an auction that——'

'I say, what's it like?'

'It was from the Palace, but I've had a terrible misfortune. Last night when I went to my room I found the window open and I knew at once that something was wrong. Some rogue must have climbed into my room, for the chair had been ripped up. And that's why I want five roubles. It's to mend my chair.'

'Oh, we can't give you money for mending chairs. You'll have to compose a new poem about Gavrila and a wondrous chair!'

After so much teasing Lyapis walked disconsolately out of the office and immediately began to compose another poem about Gavrila.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE COLUMBUS THEATRE

IT was so hot in Ivanopulo's room that Hippolyte's chairs were beginning to crack like logs in a fire.

The great schemer was resting, and the pale blue waistcoat was serving as a pillow under his head. Hippolyte was standing by the window looking out into the street.

'I say,' said Bender suddenly, 'what did they call you when you were a boy?'

'What do you want to know for?' asked Hippolyte.

'Oh, just so. I don't know what to call you. I'm tired of calling you Hippolyte, and Hippolyte Matveyevich is far too long. What did they call you? Did they call you Hippo?'

'No! They called me Pussy,' said Hippolyte, smiling.

'Most appropriate!' said Bender. 'Well, Pussy, just have a look at my back. I've got a pain in my ribs.'

Bender pulled his shirt over his head and Hippolyte saw a strong, brawny back. It was a very well-shaped back, but rather dirty.

'It's slightly red,' said Hippolyte, and then he realized that there were purple and rainbow-coloured patches in the middle of the back, bruises of strange shape and outline.

'Why, there's a figure eight on your back!' exclaimed Hippolyte. 'I've never seen a bruise like that before.'

'Can't you see any other number?' asked Bender calmly.

'There's something that looks like the letter P.'

'I don't need to ask anything else. I understand. It's

that cursed pen ! You see, Pussy, how I suffer because of your damned chairs. What risks I have to take ! That huge pen with a Number 86 nib in the editor's office fell on my back just as I was plunging my hand into the stuffing of the editor's chair, and that's how those figures got on to my back. And you ? You can't do anything sensibly ! Who was it made a hash of that Iznurenkov business so that I had to go for the chair and put matters right ? And the auction ? And then the time you went courting a girl ? A nice time to choose, not to speak of the fact that it is dangerous at your time of life. Really, Pussy, you must take greater care of your health. Now, I'm quite different: I got the widow's chair ; I got the two Shchukin chairs, and in the end I had to get hold of Iznurenkov's chair. I went to the newspaper office and I got the chair from Lyapis. And you ? You have only brought one chair to a triumphant end, and that with the aid of our holy enemy, the priest.'

As he walked up and down the room barefoot, Bender was trying to knock some sense into the submissive Pussy.

The chair that had disappeared into the goods yard of the October railway station was still a black spot on their horizon. There were four chairs in the Columbus Theatre, but they seemed to be an easy haul. The theatre company was going on tour into the Volga district and were to travel on the steamer *Scriabin*. On this particular evening they were going to present Gogol's *Marriage*, which was to be their last performance before leaving the town, and would be the last night of the season. Bender and Hippolyte had to decide whether they should stay in Moscow and follow up the chair that had disappeared into the railway station, or join up with the theatrical company and go on tour with them. Bender wanted to join the actors.

' Or shall we separate ? ' said Bender. ' I'll follow

the actors and you can look for the chair that went into the goods yard.'

But Pussy looked so disconsolate that Bender did not press the suggestion.

'When there are two rabbits to choose from, always take the fatter one of the two,' said Bender. 'Let us keep together. The Volga seems to be more promising, but our expenses will be heavy and we shall need money. I have sixty roubles left. How much have you? Of course, I forgot, your courting was an expensive affair. I suggest that we go to-night to see Gogol's *Marriage*, and don't forget to wear evening dress. If the chairs are still there and have not been sold, then we shall leave to-morrow. Remember, Pussy, this is the beginning of the last act of the comedy entitled "My Mother-in-Law's Treasure". *La comedia é finita!* Hold your breath, Pussy, my old friend! Hold your breath. Oh, the smell of grease paint! The wings! What memories! What intrigues! What a Hamlet I made! Let the good work go on!'

. . . . .

Out of economy they walked to the theatre. It was still quite light, but the lamps were already lit in the streets. It was the end of spring. Young women were walking up and down in Theatre Square; cyclists were racing along, and an ice-cream man was pushing his barrow, glancing furtively every now and then at the militiamen.

The two friends pushed their way through the crowd. There were temptations on all sides — restaurants and public-houses and a huge cinema called 'The Great Dumb One'—but they had to hurry, and at last they walked into the noisy vestibule of the Columbus Theatre. Hippolyte went up to the box office and began to read the prices of the seats.

'It's very expensive,' he said. 'Three roubles for the sixteenth row.'

'How I detest these petty provincial simpletons!' remarked Bender. 'What do you think you're doing?'

'What else am I to do? They won't let us in without a ticket.'

'Pussy, you're a fool! Don't you know that in every well-arranged theatre there are two windows—one for lovers and people with money and one for the rest of us who want a word with the manager?'

There were a few people standing before the first window, but there was quite a long queue in front of the other. Young men were in the queue holding notes from members of the caste, producers, newspaper offices, theatrical costumiers, the head of the district militia, and from people closely associated with the theatre, such as film critics and various educational authorities.

Bender forced his way into the queue by pushing people to one side and shouting: 'I only want to make an inquiry. You see, I haven't even taken my goloshes off yet.' He managed to get up to the window and pushed his head in through the opening. The manager was working like a steam engine, and beads of perspiration were running down his fat face. The telephone was persistently ringing.

'Be quick!' he shouted to Bender. 'Where's your slip?'

'Two seats,' said Bender quietly. 'Stalls.'

'For whom?'

'For me.'

'But who are you? Why should I give you seats?'

'You know me, don't you?'

'No, I don't seem to recognize you,' said the manager. But the stranger's eyes were so honest and clear that the manager wrote out a slip for two seats in the seventh row of the stalls.

'All sorts of people come here,' said the manager to himself, 'and goodness knows where they come from.

Perhaps he is from the Narkompros. I seem to remember having seen him there.'

As he went on handing out slips to the rest of the queue the manager tried to remember where he had seen those clear eyes before, but it was only when all the passes had been handed out and the lights in the theatre had been lowered that the manager suddenly remembered where he had seen that confident look before. It was in 1922 in the Taganka prison, when he was sitting in there himself for some very trifling offence.

There was laughter in the seventh row of the stalls. Bender was enjoying the overture, which was being executed by the orchestra on bottles, saxophones and large regimental drums. There was a shrill whistle from a flute and the curtains blowing a slight draught on to the audience were drawn aside.

Hippolyte, who had been accustomed to a classical interpretation of Gogol's *Marriage*, was surprised that the central character, Podkolesin, was nowhere to be seen. He looked for him everywhere, but all he could see were triangles dangling from the ceiling and painted in all colours of the rainbow. There were no doors or windows. Ladies in large black hats cut out of cardboard were dancing under the triangles. Suddenly Podkolesin appeared, riding on his servant's back. He was dressed in the uniform of a court chamberlain, and after chasing away the ladies he yelled : ' Stepan ! ' and at the same moment he leaped off his servant's back to one side of the stage, where he stood still in a difficult pose.

' Stepan ! ' he repeated as he made another leap into the air.

But as Stepan, who was standing next to him dressed in a leopard-skin, did not trouble to answer him, Podkolesin asked him in a tragic voice : ' Why are you as dumb as the League of Nations ? '

' Because Austen Chamberlain has frightened me so ! ' answered Stepan as he scratched his leopard-skin.

It looked as though Stepan were going to push Podkolesin into the background, while he became the central character of the play.

'Is that tailor getting the suit ready for me?' Podkolesin asked, and gave another leap into the air. The orchestra thundered a few bars of music and Stepan struck a curious pose and answered: 'Yes, he is getting it ready.'

The orchestra then played a potpourri while Stepan stood on his hands until the blood rushed to his head.

'Did the tailor ask you why your master had ordered such good cloth?' said Podkolesin.

Stepan jumped over the footlights and down into the orchestra. He put his arms round the conductor and replied: 'No. He's not an English M.P.!'

'And did he ask you if your master intended getting married?'

'He did not. He asked whether you would pay up.'

At this the lights went out and the audience began to stamp their feet. They went on stamping their feet until Podkolesin's voice was to be heard from the stage: 'Don't worry, friends,' he shouted, 'the lights have been put out on purpose. It is all part of the play. It is necessary.'

The audience understood what he meant and became quiet again, but the lights did not go up again until the end of the act. The drums thundered away in pitch darkness, and a number of soldiers dressed like hotel porters walked across the stage carrying lanterns. Then Kochkorev arrived on a camel. This was deduced from the following dialogue:

'Good heavens! What a fright you gave me! Fancy arriving like that on a camel!'

'Oh, you can see it then, in spite of the darkness? I wanted to give you a surprise.'

Then came the interval during which Hippolyte and Bender read the programme.

THE MARRIAGE

TEXT BY N. V. GOGOL

Lyrics by M. CHERCHEZLAFEMMEV.
Music: IVANOV.
Producer: NIKOLAS SESTRIN.
Lighting: P. PLASHCHUK.
Noises: MALKIN, GALKIN, PALKIN, CHALKIN, and ZALKIND.
Wigs: THOMAS KOCHUR.
Furniture from the Workshops of Fortinbras.
Instructress in Acrobatics: GEORGETTE TIRASPOLSKIKH.
The Hydraulic Press is under the direction of MECHNIKOV.
The Programme has been set up and printed in the F.Z.U.K.R.U.L.T. School.

'How do you like it?' asked Hippolyte timidly.

'How do you?' said Bender.

'I think it's very interesting, but Stepan is rather odd, don't you think?'

'I don't like it at all,' said Bender, 'especially as it says the furniture comes from some Fortinbras workshop. How do we know they haven't been breaking up our chairs?'

His fears turned out to be unnecessary, for at the beginning of the second act all four chairs were brought on to the stage by niggers wearing top-hats. The courting scene aroused the greatest interest in the audience. Agafiya Tikhonovna began to slide down a wire which was stretched from the top of the back of the theatre over the heads of the audience and orchestra and down on to the stage. At that moment Ivanov's rowdy orchestra struck up such a hideous noise that it was enough to make Agafiya Tikhonovna fall off the

wire, but she did not fall. Dressed in a flesh-coloured bathing suit and wearing a man's bowler, she was balancing herself beautifully with the aid of a green umbrella on which was written : ' I want Podkolesin ! ' She jumped lightly from the wire straight on to a chair, and simultaneously with this the niggers, Podkolesin, Kochkorev, who were dressed in ballet costume, together with the matchmaker all turned head over heels backwards. Then they all rested for five minutes, and again the lights went out, and after a lot of horse-play the curtain fell.

' I'm quite satisfied with the play,' said Bender. ' The chairs are intact, but we have no time to waste. If Agafiya Tikhonovna is going to jump on to them like that every day they won't last out very much longer.' And then he added : ' Well, Pussy, it's time to go to bye-bye, for we'll have to stand in the queue at the railway station to-morrow. The company are leaving by the seven o'clock express for Nizhni-Novgorod and we'll have to reserve two seats. It'll be pretty uncomfortable, but we can manage. After all, it's only one night in the train.'

. . . . .

The next day the whole of the Columbus Theatre company were sitting in the refreshment room of the Kursk railway station. Agafiya Tikhonovna was sitting at a separate table, and Malkin, Galkin, Palkin, Chalkin, and Zalkind were bustling round her. The producer was walking up and down the platform with his wife, while Bender and Hippolyte, who had come to the station two hours before the train was due to leave, were walking round the station square for the fifth time, so that Hippolyte was feeling quite dizzy. The chase for the chairs was in its final stages. The station was buzzing with people.

' We must be going,' said Bender.

Hippolyte turned round and was about to follow

Bender when he suddenly came face to face with the undertaker Bezenchuk.

'Bezenchuk!' he said in a surprised voice, 'wherever have you sprung from?'

Bezenchuk took off his hat and was delighted.

'Mr. Vorobianinov!' he exclaimed. 'What a pleasant meeting!'

'Well, and how's business?'

'Business is bad,' answered the coffin-maker.

'Really? How's that?'

'Looking for clients, but the clients don't come.'

'Why? Are the Nymphs getting them all?'

'Of course not, but there's absolutely nothing happening. Apart from your dear mother-in-law there's only been "Pierre and Constantine" to turn up his toes.'

'You don't mean to say he's dead?'

'Yes, Mr. Vorobianinov, he's turned up his toes all right. He was just shaving the chemist, Leopold, when suddenly he fell over and died. Folk say there was some internal combustion, but I think the poor fellow must have breathed the fumes coming from the chemist and was gassed.'

'That's bad,' said Hippolyte. 'Did you bury him?'

'Of course I buried him. Who else? You know yourself that the Nymphs don't provide fringes.'

'So you won, eh?'

'Yes, I won; but I also got a beating and they would have killed me if it had not been for the militia. I was in bed for two days.'

'What are you doing here?'

'I've brought some goods.'

'What sort of goods?'

'My own goods.'

Hippolyte then noticed that there was a number of coffins on the ground.

'Eight of them,' said Bezenchuk proudly.

'But who do you think wants your coffins here? There are quite enough undertakers in Moscow without you.'

'But what about the epidemic?'

'Epidemic? What epidemic?'

'I was told that there was an epidemic in Moscow and that there weren't enough coffins to go round. So I thought I might mend matters.'

Bender, who had been listening attentively to this conversation, now interrupted: 'Listen, old man,' he said. 'You've made a mistake. There isn't an epidemic here—it's in Paris.'

'In Paris?'

'Yes. You must go to Paris. You'll find masses of work to be done there. There are hundreds of undertakers in Moscow without you adding to the number.'

Bezenchuk looked round, saw that people were quite hale and hearty and that some of them were even laughing.

Long after the train had carried away Hippolyte, Bender, the Columbus Theatre company and various other passengers, Bezenchuk was still standing on the platform gazing hopelessly down at his coffins.

PART III

MADAM PETUKHOV'S TREASURE

CHAPTER XXX

A MAGIC NIGHT ON THE VOLGA

TO the left of the landing-stage of the Volga River Steamship Company stood the great schemer Bender, together with his friend and helper Pussy Vorobianinov.

Flags were flying over the landing-stage. Smoke was curling out of the steamers' funnels and the *Anton Rubinstein* was being loaded at landing-stage Number 2. Heavy machinery, various agricultural implements, and baskets of herrings were stacked ready to be put into the hold. The steamer *Scriabin* had not come in yet, and this greatly disturbed Hippolyte.

'Why should you be so upset?' asked Bender. 'Supposing the *Scriabin* were here, how would you get on to it? Even if you had enough money to buy a ticket, it wouldn't help you, because that steamer isn't taking any passengers.'

Bender had managed to have a talk in the train with Mechnikov, who was in control of the hydraulic press, and had discovered all the details from him. The *Scriabin* had been chartered by the Commissariat of Finance and was supposed to be plying between Nizhni and Tsaritsin, stopping at each landing-stage so as to organize a State lottery. For this purpose a whole institution had left Moscow, comprising the Lottery Commission, the clerical staff, a brass band, a cinema operator, Press correspondents, and the Columbus Theatre company. It was intended that the theatrical company should give plays at the various

stopping-places, and the plays were supposed to popularize the idea of State loans. As far as Stalingrad the theatre company were to be at the disposal of the Financial Commission, and after that it was to make an independent tour of the Crimea and the Caucasus with Gogol's *Marriage*.

The *Scriabin* was overdue. It was not expected to be in before the evening because of certain preparations, and all the passengers from Moscow were waiting on the landing-stage. The typists were sitting on bundles of rope, their suit-cases and 'Underwoods' at their feet, and rugs over their knees. Some writing-tables were piled up in a corner. A soldier was walking up and down guarding the safe, while Persitsky the reporter from the *Stanok* was standing to one side and was examining the crowd through a pair of binoculars.

The *Scriabin* came in slowly. The siren whistled and the financial-theatrical crowd grew animated. Malkin Galkin, Palkin, Chalkin, and Zalkind ran out of the public-house. The safe was hoisted up by the crane. The acrobatic instructress, Georgette, ran nimbly up the gangway. The cinema operator lifted his apparatus above the heads of the crowd and insisted on having a four-bunk cabin as a laboratory.

In the general confusion Hippolyte crept up to the chairs, and, without realizing what he was doing, began to drag one of them to one side.

'Drop that chair at once!' said Bender. 'Have you no sense? We'll get one chair, yes, and the rest will be lost to us for ever. It would be more to the point if you tried to get on to the steamer.'

Members of the brass band passed up the gangway and looked scornfully at the saxophone and flexotone players.

The lottery wheels were brought up on a small Ford van. The wheels were of a complicated construction, consisting of six revolving cylinders, and it took a long time to install them on the lower deck. There was a

platform arranged; different slogans and placards were nailed to the walls; wooden benches were put round for the visitors, and electricity was being installed to work the revolving cylinders. The writing-tables were brought on board and the sound of laughter and the clicking of machines came from the typists' rooms. A pale young man was walking up and down the steamer fixing enamel signs on various doors: 'The Department of Mutual Credit', 'Private', 'General Office', 'Typing Department'; and under these he nailed smaller ones: 'No Admittance Except on Business', 'No Admittance', 'All Inquiries should be Directed to the Registrar'. The first-class saloon was arranged for an exhibition, which raised a storm of indignation from Malkin, Galkin, Palkin, Chalkin, and Zalkind.

'Where are we going to eat? And what if it rains?' they shouted excitedly.

Then there was a louder shout. The 'Five Noises' had discovered that the producer had taken the four chairs into his own cabin.

'That's very nice,' they shouted sarcastically. 'We'll have to rehearse sitting on hard bunks while the producer and his fat wife are using four chairs. Besides, what's his wife got to do with the company? We too might like to have our wives here.'

Bender stood on the landing-stage and looked wistfully at the steamer.

Suddenly Bender and Hippolyte heard a fresh outburst of shouts.

'Why didn't you tell me before?' shouted a member of the commission.

'How was I to know he'd fall ill?'

'It's damnable! Go straight back and insist on an artist being sent to us at once.'

'Where am I to go? It's six o'clock and the place will be closed. Besides, the steamer leaves in half an hour's time.'

'Very well then, you can do the painting. If you've taken on the responsibility of decorating the steamer, you must see to it yourself.'

Bender rushed up the gangway, pushing people to one side, but he was stopped by an official.

'Where's your pass?'

'Comrade!' shouted Bender. 'Hi! You over there, Fatty! You said you wanted an artist.'

Five minutes later he was sitting in Fatty's cabin discussing the conditions of work.

'Now, comrade, you understand what we want. You will be responsible for the artistic placards, inscriptions, and the finishing of our poster. Our artist began it and then fell ill and we've had to leave him in hospital. And then, of course, you'll have to supervise the whole of the artistic side of our organization. Are you willing to take it on? I warn you there is a great deal of work.'

'I understand,' said Bender. 'I can certainly take it on. I've done this kind of work before.'

'Can you come with us straight away?'

'Well, it will be rather difficult, but I'll do my best.'

A great load of anxiety fell from the other man's shoulders and he looked at the new artist with childlike delight.

'And your terms?' asked Bender brusquely.

'The pay is according to the customary rate.'

Bender frowned.

'But, apart from that,' added Fatty hurriedly, 'you will have your board and a separate cabin.'

'Very well,' said Bender with a sigh. 'I agree; but I have a boy with me, an assistant.'

'Oh, I don't know about a boy. There is no credit allowed for a boy, but of course if you want to pay for him out of your own salary you can do so, only he'll have to live in your cabin.'

'All right,' said Bender, 'as you say. My assistant is quite a bright lad and is accustomed to a Spartan existence.'

Bender was given a pass for himself and his assistant, and after slipping his cabin key into his pocket, he came up on deck. He felt great satisfaction as he touched the key in his pocket. For the first time in his life he had a key and a room, only he had no money. But the money, no doubt, was not far off in one of the chairs on board.

The great schemer walked up and down the deck without looking at Hippolyte, who had been left on the landing-stage.

At first Hippolyte made signs to him. Then he tried shouting across to him, but Bender was deaf. He turned his back on Hippolyte and watched the hydraulic press being lowered into the hold. Everything was ready and the siren let off a piercing scream. The sun was setting and the street-lamps were being lit in the town. Hippolyte was shouting something, but no one was listening to him. He felt deserted and alone.

Bender loved dramatic effects, and it was only a few seconds before the siren screamed for the third time, just as Hippolyte had given up all hope, that Bender looked over the side of the steamer and called out to him : ' What are you doing standing there like a fool ? I thought you were on the steamer long ago. They're just taking in the gangways. Come on, quick ! ' Then he turned to the sailors : ' Let the citizen through, please. Here's the pass.'

Hippolyte, almost in tears, ran on to the ship.

' Is that your boy ? '

' Boy ? ' said Bender. ' Of course it is. He's not a girl.'

' Now, Pussy,' said Bender to Hippolyte, ' we'll have to set to work to-morrow morning. I hope you know how to mix paints, for I'm an artist. I've been through the School of Fine Arts in Moscow and you are my assistant. If you don't want to be my assistant, then jump ashore quickly.'

The dark green water was being churned up at the

stern of the ship and the steamer moved slowly forward. The band played a wonderful march and the steamer moved on the current of the river into the darkness. The street lamps and signals on the landing-stage receded and the lights of the town gradually disappeared. The typewriters were still clicking and the members of the commission were sipping tea. There was a warm wind, the river was calm, the band had stopped playing, and it was a beautiful, peaceful night. One of the passengers began to sing 'Volga, Volga . . .' and somewhere or other Ivanov, the musician, was drawing tender sounds from a piano, while in a corner of the upper deck Malkin, Galkin, Palkin, Chalkin, and Zalkind were practising their jazz noises. Bender was lying on a leather sofa in a first-class cabin. He was looking thoughtfully at Hippolyte and every now and then he would ask him a question.

'So you can't draw? That's a great pity. Unfortunately I can't either.' He was silent for a minute and then continued: 'And lettering? Can you do that? What? You can't do that either? Well, I must say that's serious. After all, you and I are supposed to be artists. We can probably fool them for two days, but they'll throw us out after that, I know. And we've got to see to our own business in those two days. The position is more difficult than I imagined, for I've just heard that the chairs are in the producer's cabin. But that's not really so terrible. The important thing is that we're on the steamer and we must examine those chairs before they throw us out. It's too late to-night; I expect the producer is asleep in his cabin.'

CHAPTER XXXI

A SHADY PAIR

MORNING. The passengers on the *Scriabin* were beginning to stir. Ropes were thrown out at the Barminov landing-stage and the *Scriabin*, amidst shouts and yells, slowly came in to the side. It was still early in the morning, and it was decided that the draw in the lottery should take place at nine o'clock.

Work on the *Scriabin* began punctually at nine o'clock, just as on land, and every one remained true to his habits. Whoever was late on land was also late here, although his office was his bedroom, and the employees of the Commissariat of Finance soon became accustomed to their new way of life.

Office boys were sweeping the cabin floors and were just as indifferent about it as if they were in the Moscow offices. Messenger girls carried tea round and ran about taking papers from one department to another, and the adding machines and typewriters were clicking merrily away. Some one was being scolded in the captain's cabin.

The great schemer was walking barefoot round a long narrow strip of red cloth. He was busy painting a slogan on it, and every now and then he would refer to something written on a small piece of paper.

'Everything for the State! Every worker should have a Government loan certificate in his pocket!'

The great schemer was doing his best, but the absence of talent was obvious: the letters were sloping badly and the piece of red cloth was irretrievably spoilt. Then with the help of Hippolyte he turned the cloth over and again began to daub, but this time he was more careful; before splashing the paint on

for the letters he drew two parallel chalk lines ; and quietly cursing at the innocent Hippolyte, he set to work again.

Hippolyte conscientiously did all that a youthful assistant should do. He fetched hot water, he melted the glue, he sneezed as he poured the dry colour powder into pails, and listened obediently to his exacting master. As soon as the slogan was ready and the letters were dry, the two conspirators lifted the cloth carefully and nailed it to the side of the steamer.

The fat man who had engaged Bender hurried down the gangway to examine the new artist's work from the shore. The letters were of varying size and were slanting in various directions. There was nothing to be done, however ; he would have to put up with it.

The brass band went ashore and began to play rousing marches. The children of the place immediately ran up and they were soon followed by the peasants. The band went on thundering until the members of the Finance Commission came ashore. The meeting began. The first part was taken up with the reading of a report on the international situation, which was delivered from the steps of a tea-room.

The Columbus Theatre company had remained on board and were watching the meeting from a distance. They could see the white headkerchiefs of the women who stood to one side of the tea-room. They could see a stolid, immovable group of men who were listening to the orator, and they could see the orator himself, who waved his arms about from time to time. Then the band began to play again. The first part of the meeting was over ; the band continued to play as it moved towards the steamer, and the crowd followed. The apparatus for the lottery was methodically throwing out combinations of numbers, and as the wheels turned round, the numbers were shouted out. The Barminov inhabitants watched and listened intently.

Bender joined the crowd, looked round, saw that all

the *Scriabin* passengers were safely out of the way in the lottery-room, and then ran up on deck again.

'Hippolyte,' he whispered, 'there's an important bit of artistic work for you to do. Go to the exit of the first-class corridor and stand there, and if any one passes you sing louder.'

'What do you mean? What am I to sing?'

'Sing? Sing anything; only mind it isn't "God Save the Tsar". Sing something passionate, but I warn you that if you don't sing at the right moment I'll knock your head off.'

The great schemer pattered into the corridor, and for a second Hippolyte could see his reflection in the mirror at the end of the corridor as he read the notice on one of the doors:

'NIKOLAS SESTRIN, PRODUCER'

A few seconds later, he was running along the corridor carrying a chair with bent legs. He came up on deck and after exchanging glances with Hippolyte, took the chair into a corner. 'The chair must remain here until the evening,' he said rapidly. 'I have thought the whole thing out. Hardly any one comes to this part of the boat. Cover the chair with our canvases and when it's dark we can quietly rip it open.'

A minute later the chair was hidden under canvases and bunting. Hippolyte was again overcome with anxiety and nervousness.

'Why not take it to our cabin?' he said impatiently. 'We could examine it then and there, and if the diamonds are in it we can go ashore at once.'

'And if we don't find them, what are we to do with the chair? Perhaps you'd like me to return it to Comrade Sestrin and say politely: "Excuse us, comrade, we stole your chair, but unfortunately we did not find what we were looking for. You can have it back now, although we're afraid it is in a slightly damaged condition." Is that what you'd do?'

The great schemer was right, as usual, and Hippolyte only recovered from his confusion as he heard the sounds of an overture being played on deck.

The financial transactions were over for the day, and the spectators on the river-bank were noisily showing their approval of the jazz band. The ' Five Noises '—Malkin, Galkin, Palkin, Chalkin, and Zalkind —were as proud as could be, and the expression on their faces seemed to be saying : ' You see ! You tried to make out that the masses would not understand or appreciate, but Art always penetrates ! '

Then on an improvised stage the Columbus Theatre company gave a light vaudeville performance of song and dance. A story was centred round a certain Vavila, who had won fifty thousand roubles in a lottery, and his subsequent adventures. The actors enjoyed themselves, they danced energetically and sang pleasantly, and the audience on the river-bank was satisfied.

The second number on the programme was a *balalaika virtuoso* during which the faces of the audience were wreathed in smiles. This item was followed by the acrobatic antics of Georgette Tiraspolskikh, and the entertainment closed with a number of Russian dances.

The *Scriabin* was getting ready to leave Barminov. The captain yelled instructions down the speaking-tube to the engine-room. While the stokers were busy with the furnaces, the brass band went on shore again and to the delight of the crowd began to play dance music. The people danced and the cinema operator took pictures.

Once again the siren began to scream and again the sun began to set. A second night was falling. The steamer was ready to leave.

Bender was very anxious about the next day, for he had to cut out of cardboard the figure of a sower scattering loan certificates, and he had not the slightest

idea how to do it. He might manage to paint letters, but he had absolutely not the slightest idea what a sower looked like.

'It's got to be ready by to-morrow night,' Fatty had said to him.

'You needn't worry,' Bender had replied. 'It'll be done.'

Night fell. A slight wind rose and stars appeared. All the passengers were asleep, but the shady pair were wideawake. Shortly after midnight Bender crept out of his cabin, and the faithful Hippolyte shadowed him like a ghost.

They went up on deck and came to the place where the chair was buried under the canvases. Very carefully they cleared it, set it upright, and Bender began to unpick the upholstery. This done, he thrust his hand into the stuffing.

The wind was whistling over the deck. Overhead stretched the starry sky and below them the splashing water. The river-banks were out of sight. Hippolyte was shivering with excitement.

'They're here!' said Bender in a muffled voice. 'They're here!' he repeated. 'Take this!'

And Hippolyte took hold of a flat wooden box, while Bender continued to burrow in the chair.

'Well, I'm damned!' said Bender; 'there's nothing else here!'

'N-n-nonsense!' stammered Hippolyte.

'Look for yourself then!' said Bender.

Hardly daring to breathe, Hippolyte thrust his hand into the seat of the chair. He felt the springs with his fingers and they were the only hard objects he could feel. The chair smelt musty.

'Well,' said Bender, 'anything there?'

'Nothing,' said Hippolyte.

Bender picked up the chair and flung it overboard. A loud splash and it had gone Both men were shivering as they went down again to their cabin.

'Never mind,' said Bender. 'At any rate we've found something.'

Hippolyte pulled the little box out of his pocket and looked at it stupidly.

'Come on; pass it over! What's the use of staring at it like that?'

They opened the little box and they found inside it a small brass disk on which was written:

With this chair
Master Gambs begins his
new design.
St. Petersburg, 1865.

Bender read the inscription.

'But where are the diamonds?' asked Hippolyte.

'You are amazingly intuitive, my dear friend,' said Bender. 'As you see, there are no diamonds here.'

Hippolyte was a pathetic sight. His moustache was trembling, his glasses were misty, his face was drawn, he looked desperate.

'Never mind, Pussy, never mind! Stifle your sorrow. One of these days, we'll have a good laugh over the eighth chair. Pull yourself together. There are three more chairs here and ninety-nine chances to a hundred. Let the good work go on.'

CHAPTER XXXII

A LETTER

A Letter from Father Theodore written to his Wife from Baku.

'MY DARLING AND PRECIOUS KATYA,

'Every hour brings us nearer to our happiness. I am writing to you from a furnished room, which I have taken after having been on my feet all day attending to various little affairs. Baku is a very large town. I am told that there are oil wells here, but you have to go by an electric train if you want to see them, and I have no money. This picturesque town is on the edge of the Caspian Sea, which is immense. The heat is appalling. I always carry my overcoat over one arm and my short coat over the other, for it is almost too hot to breathe. My arms are always bathed in sweat and I drink lots of tea. I have hardly any money left, but that doesn't matter, my darling, for very soon we shall have masses of money. We shall travel and then settle down in Samara near to our little candle factory and we shall drink liqueurs.

'But now to business: Baku is considerably superior to Rostov, both in its geographical position and in the number of its inhabitants, but I think Kharkov is a busier town. There are many foreigners here, especially Armenians and Persians, for we are not very far from Turkey. I went to the market and found many Turkish things and some scarves. I wanted to buy you a Mussulman veil as a present, but I had no money, so I decided that when we are rich—and it is only a matter of days now—I shall buy you a veil.

'Oh, my dear! I almost forgot to tell you about two terrible calamities that have happened to me here: (1) I dropped your brother's coat into the Caspian Sea, and (2) a camel spat on me when I was at the market. Both these events greatly surprised me. I can't understand why the authorities allow such things to happen to visitors to the town, especially as I didn't even touch the camel. I only tickled one of its nostrils with a straw. I thought it would amuse it. As for the coat, lots of people helped me to fish it out, but when it was rescued it was simply reeking of oil. I don't know what I'll say to your brother, the baker, but mind you keep this to yourself, my love.

'Does Evstigneyev still come in for dinner? And if not, why not?

'I've just read through this letter and I see I've not yet told you anything about the principal business. The engineer Bruns does work at the oil wells, but he is not in Baku at present. He has gone on leave to Batum. His home is there, and his family lives there. I have talked to several people here and I have been told that Bruns has his own furniture in Batum. He lives somewhere in the country (an expensive place, I am told). The fare from here to Batum is fifteen roubles, so wire me twenty roubles and I shall wire all details to you from Batum. Please spread the rumour that I am still at my aunt's bedside in Voronezh.

'Your faithful husband

'THEODORE'

'P.S.—I've just opened this letter to tell you that your brother's coat, the one which was reeking of oil, has been stolen, and I am in despair. It is just as well it is the summer, but don't say anything to your brother about it.'

CHAPTER XXXIII

EXPULSION FROM PARADISE

HIPPOLYTE woke up with an enormous boil on his face. All his misfortunes, all his sufferings and failures, and all his anxiety in his search for the diamonds seemed to be concentrated in that terrible boil.

'You've done this on purpose,' said Bender unkindly.

Hippolyte sighed heavily and went to fetch the paints. Soon they were busy at work on the poster, and the third day on the steamer began. It began with a short conflict between the brass band and the 'Five Noises' about a place for rehearsing. After lunch both the brass band and the noises went to a bench at the stern of the steamer. The first to settle himself down on a bench was Galkin, but a man from the brass band soon came up to him.

'This seat is reserved,' said Galkin.

'By whom?'

'By me—by Galkin.'

'Who else?'

'By Malkin, Palkin, Chalkin, and Zalkind.'

'That's nothing. This is our place.'

Reinforcements came up from both parties until the trombones faced the saxophones, and the brass glittered in the sunshine.

'This gang of ear-splitters has taken our place,' complained the clarinet-player.

'Oh you——' said Zalkind, trying to find an insulting expression. 'You musical conservatives!'

'You're preventing us from rehearsing.'

'Nonsense! It's you who are preventing us from rehearsing!'

'Rot! The less you practise on your tin cans the better!'

As neither side would give way they all began to rehearse simultaneously. The brass band played a march, while the jazz band played a negro dance called 'The Antelope of the Zambesi'. The effect was ghastly and the director of the Financial Commission was so exasperated that he came out and stopped the performance.

By eleven o'clock the great work was finished, and Bender and Hippolyte began to walk backwards dragging 'The Sower' towards the captain's bridge. Fatty was running ahead waving his arms excitedly. Everybody helped and 'The Sower' was soon lifted up and hung as a poster. In half an hour's time the electrician had fitted three lights at the back of the poster, and the only thing left to be done was to switch on the lights. The steamer was approaching the town of Vassuki, and all the passengers on board the *Scriabin* had been summoned on deck. Hippolyte and Bender stood near the poster, watching the crowd. The typists, the messengers, the actors, the brass band, and all the rest of them were craning their necks to see the poster.

'Put on the lights!' shouted Fatty.

The lights were switched on and Bender looked at the crowd. A pink light was shining on to their faces. The audience roared with laughter and then became ominously silent. A stern voice said: 'Where's the manager?' It was so commanding that Fatty rushed down the ladder from behind the poster.

'Look at this!' said the voice. 'Look at your work!'

'We'll be turned out in a minute,' whispered Bender to Hippolyte.

Fatty swooped down on Bender like an eagle.

'Well,' said Bender brazenly, 'what do you think of it? Do you approve?'

'Collect your things and clear out!' shouted Fatty.

'Why such a hurry?'

'Col-lect your things,' said Fatty in a steady voice, 'and clear out! If you don't take care you'll find yourself in court. Our directors haven't time for stupid jokes.'

'Throw them out!' shouted the stern voice.

'Do you mean to say you don't like the poster? No, seriously?'

But there was no sense in keeping up this game, for the *Scriabin* had reached Vassuki and they could see the people crowding on to the landing-stage. They were gazing solemnly at the poster. There was no response to the appeal, and no one invested money in the loan. Bender and Hippolyte wasted no time in getting clear of the ship, and once on the landing stage they stopped and looked back at the poster.

'Yes, it is pretty bad,' said Bender.

Instead of a sower scattering loan certificates Bender had drawn a square for the body and a sugar-loaf for the head, and as for a hand, there were two thin streaks and nothing else.

'I review the situation,' said Bender cheerfully. 'Debit: not a copeck of money; three chairs steaming down the Volga on board that ship, and nowhere to spend the night. Credit: a Volga guide-book for the year 1926. We shall have to spend the night on the landing-stage.'

The two friends sat down on a bench, and by the light of a lantern Bender opened the guide-book and began to read: 'On the high right bank of the River Volga lies the town of Vassuki. The exports from here are timber, tar, mats, and pulp. Various imports are brought here for use in the district, which is 50 miles from a railway station. There are 8,000 inhabitants in the town and a Government cardboard factory employing 320 workers. Also there is a small iron

foundry, a brewery, and a tannery. Apart from ordinary schools, there is a school of forestry.'

'The position is more serious than I anticipated,' said Bender. 'It will be pretty difficult to get money out of the inhabitants of Vassuki. I haven't found a solution for that problem yet, but we must have at least thirty roubles. In the first place, we must feed, and secondly we must overtake that rotten little steamer and meet the Columbus Theatre company in Stalingrad.'

Hippolyte curled himself up on the bench and fell asleep, but Bender walked up and down the landing-stage plotting and scheming. By midnight he had evolved a magnificent plan, and, after smiling confidently to himself, curled up on another bench and fell fast asleep.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE INTERPLANETARY CHESS CONGRESS

AT an early hour a tall old man in gold pince-nez and boots splashed with paint was going round the town of Vassuki pasting notices on the walls. The placards were written in a large bold hand.

A LECTURE
AND
SIMULTANEOUS CHESS DISPLAY
ON 160 BOARDS
WILL TAKE PLACE ON
JUNE 22ND, 1927
IN THE
CARDBOARD WORKERS' CLUB-ROOM
BY THE
Champion: OSTAP BENDER
ALL PLAYERS SHOULD BRING THEIR OWN CHESS-BOARDS

Players . . . . . 50 copecks
Admission for Spectators . . 20 copecks

The Display Commences at 6 p.m. prompt

Administrator: K. MICHAELSON

The champion chess-player had lost no time. He had hired the club for three roubles and then went to the chess section where he found a man with one eye, reading a novel by Spielhagen.

'I am the chess champion, Ostap Bender,' he said as he perched himself on a corner of the table. 'I'm arranging a chess display here.'

The single eye of the Vassuki chess-player opened wide.

'One moment, comrade,' he said. 'Sit down, please. I'll be back in a minute.'

He ran out of the room, and while he was out Bender looked round the chess section. There were photographs of racehorses on the walls and a dusty report on the table with the title : ' Achievements of the Vassuki Chess Section for the year 1925.'

The head of the chess section returned with a dozen citizens of various ages. They each came up to Bender, introduced themselves, and respectfully shook hands with him.

' I am on the way to Kazan,' said Bender briefly. ' Yes, yes, the display is to-night. Please excuse me now. I am not in good form. I am rather tired after the Carlsbad tournament.'

The Vassuki chess-players listened to him with awe, and Bender was in his element. He felt an access of fresh energy and innumerable ideas about chess came into his head.

' You simply wouldn't believe me,' he said, ' if I were to tell you what fresh developments there are in the game. It's quite impossible to play with Lasker these days. He does nothing but puff his cigar in your face, and he smokes cheap ones so that the smoke shall be really unpleasant. I can assure you the chess world is very disturbed about his behaviour.'

The champion then passed on to more local themes.

' Now, why is there so little chess in the provinces ? Take your chess section, for instance. Why do you call it a section ? That's dull, my friends, why not give it some typically chess name ? You'd get far more members if you did. Why not call it " The Four Knights' Chess Club " ? It sounds well, doesn't it ? '

His suggestion met with success.

' Why shouldn't we give our section a new name ? ' said some of the members, and as they happened to be in the general office of the chess section, they held a short meeting at which Bender presided and the section was renamed ' The Four Knights' Chess Club '. The champion then used the knowledge he had gained

on board the *Scriabin*. He drew a sign for them on which four knights appeared and an appropriate motto.

'Chess,' continued Bender. 'Do you know what chess is? It not only helps culture forward, but economics also. Do you realize that your 'Chess Club of the Four Knights', if it were properly organized, could completely revolutionize the town of Vassuki?'

Bender had not eaten anything since the previous day, and as a result he was unusually eloquent.

'Yes!' he shouted, 'chess enriches a country. If you agree to my project, then you will have marble steps to your landing-stage and Vassuki will be the capital city of ten provinces. Now, whoever heard of Semmering before the international tournament was held there? And now it is both rich and famous. Therefore I say to you, we must arrange an international chess tournament in Vassuki.'

'How?' they all shouted.

'It is quite an easy matter,' said the champion. 'My personal connexions and your self-confidence are all that is necessary to organize an international Vassuki tournament. Capablanca, Lasker, Alekhine, Nimzowitsch, Boguljubow, Rubinstein, Maroczi, Tarrasch, Vidmar, and Doctor Grigoriev will most certainly come here. And I too promise you my support.'

'But how shall we get the money?' groaned the Vassuki citizens. 'They'll want to be paid. Why, it would cost thousands!'

'The money would be forthcoming.'

'But the citizens couldn't pay the money.'

'What do you mean? The citizens won't be asked to pay any money. They will receive money. It's quite simple. A tournament where such stars are taking part will attract chess-lovers from all corners of the earth. Hundreds of thousands of wealthy people will stream into Vassuki until the river transport will not be able to cope with the number of passengers. A

direct railway will have to be built between Moscow and Vassuki, and hotels and skyscrapers will spring up to accommodate the visitors. There will be an enormous agricultural development within a radius of a thousand miles, for the visitors will have to be supplied with vegetables, fruit, caviare, and chocolates. A palace will be built for the tournament and garages will have to be built for the visitors' motor-cars. A powerful radio station will have to be erected so as to announce the results to the whole world. The Moscow-Vassuki railway line will not be able to cope with the number of people who will want to come here. We shall have to create an aeroport with a regular service of aeroplanes to all corners of the earth, including Los Angeles and Melbourne. Don't be afraid! My scheme promises an amazing development to your town. Picture to yourselves what will happen when the tournament is over and the visitors depart. The citizens of Moscow, suffering as they are from a housing shortage, will flock to your magnificent town, and automatically Vassuki will become the capital of Russia. The Government will move to Vassuki. Vassuki will cease to be Vassuki. It will be called New Moscow, while Moscow will be called Old Vassuki. The citizens of Kharkov and Petrograd will grind their teeth with rage, but they will be helpless. New Moscow will become the most fashionable city of Europe and soon of the whole world!'

'Of the whole world!' gloated the citizens of Vassuki.

'Yes, of the whole world,' continued Bender, 'and subsequently of the whole universe. Chess that has converted a humble provincial town into a world capital will become an applied science which will bring about the discovery of interplanetary communication. Signals will be sent from Vassuki to Mars, Jupiter, and Neptune. Communication with Venus will be easier than a journey from Vassuki to Moscow. And then —who knows?—perhaps in eight years' time, there will

be an interplanetary chess congress in Vassuki, the first in the history of creation.'

Bender mopped his noble brow. He was so hungry that he would have gladly eaten a roasted pawn.

'Yes,' said the one-eyed man as he looked round the room, 'but how can we bring your theory into practice? How can we, so to speak, find a basis for your structure?'

The members gazed at Bender.

'The practical side of the question depends entirely on your own self-confidence. I repeat, I will take the whole of the organization on to my own shoulders. There is absolutely no material expenditure required except, of course, for a few telegrams.' Then he continued: 'Well, what do you say?'

'We'll do it! We'll do it!' shouted the citizens. 'How much money do you want for the telegrams?'

'A paltry sum,' said Bender—'a hundred roubles.'

'We've only twenty-one roubles and sixteen copecks in our cash.'

But the champion said: 'That's all right. Give me the twenty roubles.'

'Is that enough?' asked the man with one eye.

'It will do for the present,' said Bender. 'It will do for the first few telegrams; and after that voluntary contributions will simply pour in. Why, we shan't know what to do with the money.'

He put the money into his pocket, reminded his audience of the lecture and simultaneous chess display on one hundred and sixty boards, bade them an amiable farewell, and left them staring after him. He went to the Cardboard Workers' Club, where he met Hippolyte.

'I'm dying of hunger,' said Hippolyte, almost weeping. He was sitting at the cash desk, but he had not sold a single ticket and he had not been able to buy himself a crumb.

'Look here, Hippolyte,' shouted Bender. 'Stop

your cash operations for an hour or so and let us go and dine. I'll explain the situation on the way. You look an absolute tramp, and a champion cannot have such suspicious-looking friends. You must have a shave and brush-up.'

'I haven't sold a single ticket.'

'Never mind. They'll all flock in this evening. The town has already contributed twenty roubles towards an international chess tournament.'

'Then why must we have this simultaneous display this evening? You may lose, whereas with twenty roubles we can get our tickets. The steamer *Karl Liebknecht* has just come in and we can travel in peace to Stalingrad and wait there for the theatre company. Perhaps we'll manage to get hold of the chairs, open them, and then you and I will be rich men.'

'You shouldn't talk such nonsense on an empty stomach,' said Bender. 'It has a negative effect on the brain. We might get as far as Stalingrad on twenty roubles, but who'll pay for our food? Vitamins, my dear friend, are not given out gratis to any one. But we may be able to pluck some thirty roubles from these generous citizens of Vassuki.'

'But they'll beat you,' said Hippolyte bitterly.

'Yes, there's a risk,' said Bender. 'They may even beat your face in. Still, I have one little idea that may save you, but about that later. Meantime let's go and sample the local dishes.'

By six o'clock in the evening the champion came up to the cash desk at the club. He had had a good meal. He was shaved and he smelt of eau-de-Cologne. Hippolyte, who was also feeling and looking much better, was doing a brisk trade with the tickets.

'How are you getting on?' asked the champion quietly.

'Thirty tickets of admission and twenty players,' replied Hippolyte.

'Sixteen roubles. That's not much.'

'But look at the queue! What are you thinking about? Of course you'll be beaten.'

'Don't you worry your head about that. We can talk about that later. Meantime attend to your business.'

An hour later there were thirty-five roubles in the till. The public in the club-room was growing excited.

'Now, shut the cash desk. Hand over the money, and listen to me. Here are five roubles. Go to the landing-stage, hire a boat for two hours, and wait for me by the shore a little beyond the warehouse. You and I will then go for a row somewhere about midnight. And, whatever you do, don't worry about me, for I'm in very good form.'

The champion walked into the club-room. He was feeling very pleased with himself, for he knew that his first move P—K4 did not present any difficulty. He was very hazy about the other moves, but that did not disturb the great schemer. He knew how to save himself even in the most difficult situation.

The champion was met with applause. The room had been decorated with a number of multi-coloured paper flags left over from a party held by the Life Saving Society.

Bender bowed, held up his hand to check the applause, and walked on to the platform.

'Comrades!' he said in an eloquent voice. 'Comrades and chess brothers! The subject of my lecture to-day is the same as the lecture I delivered a week ago in Nizhni-Novgorod, not without considerable success, if I may say so. The subject of my address is "The Fruitful Idea". Now, comrades, what is an idea? An idea is human thought expressed in a logical chess form. With almost negligible talent you can gain a mastery over the whole of the chess-board. Everything depends on the separate individual. For instance look at that fair man over there in the third row. Let us assume that he plays well——'

The fair man in the third row blushed scarlet.

'Now that dark man over there. Let us suppose that he plays badly——'

The audience craned their necks and stared at the dark man.

'What do we see? We see that the fair-haired man plays well and the dark-haired man plays badly, and no amount of lectures will alter those facts unless each separate individual has constant practice in draughts—er—I mean in chess. And now, comrades, I will give you a few helpful stories from the experiences of our respected hyper-moderns Capablanca, Lasker, and Doctor Grigoriev.'

Bender told the audience a few very well-known anecdotes and then concluded his speech.

Every one was slightly surprised at the brevity of the lecture, and the one-eyed head of the chess section looked at Bender suspiciously.

The chess display began. Thirty amateur players sat down to play and faced the champion. Many of them were very nervous and kept diving into chess manuals, with the aid of which they hoped that the champion would not beat them before the twenty-second move.

Bender glanced at the players, went up to the first board and moved the king's pawn P—K4. The player immediately clapped his hands over his ears and began to concentrate, while the row of amateurs whispered along the line that the champion had moved P—K4. Bender did not favour his opponents with a variety of moves, but made the same move on each of the twenty-nine other boards. One after another the amateurs ruffled their hair and plunged into deep thought, and the spectators watched the champion with awe. The only amateur photographer in the town had clambered on to a chair, and was about to set light to the magnesium, when Bender began to wave his arms furiously, and, interrupting his play, shouted in a loud,

angry voice: 'Turn that photographer out! He is disturbing my thoughts!'

'Why should I leave a record of myself in this absurd place?' he thought to himself; 'and I don't want to be associated with the militia.'

'Sh!' said the indignant players, and the photographer was forced to give up the idea of taking a photograph of the champion. The indignation was so great that he was turned out of the room.

At the third move it was quite clear that the champion was playing the Ruy Lopez on eighteen boards and was adopting a rather obsolete but fairly good reply to Philidor defence on the other twelve. Had Bender known that he was playing such intricate games, he would have been most surprised, for the fact of the matter was that the great schemer was playing chess for the second time in his life.

At first the players were terrified of the champion. The dark-haired man felt like giving in, but with a great effort of will he forced himself to continue the game, and five minutes later a cloud gathered on the horizon.

'Mate!' muttered the dark-haired man, after Bender had sacrificed piece after piece. 'Mate, Comrade Champion.'

Bender analysed the situation and haughtily congratulated the young man on his victory.

'Time to get out,' he thought as he moved from board to board carelessly moving the pieces without thinking.

'You've placed the knight on a wrong square,' said one of the players. 'The knight doesn't move like that.'

'Pardon! Pardon!' said Bender hastily. 'My mistake. I'm rather tired after my lecture.'

Within the next ten minutes the champion had lost another ten games.

Cries of astonishment were heard in the chess club.

The conflict was ripening, for Bender lost fifteen games one after the other, and after that three more. The last player left was the one-eyed head of the chess section, who had made a number of mistakes at the beginning, but was now bringing the game to a triumphant end. Without any of the others noticing what he was doing, Bender took one of the pieces from the board and slipped it into his pocket.

The crowd surged round the two players.

'My knight was standing here a minute ago and now it's gone!' shouted the one-eyed player.

'Well, if it's not here now, it means that it wasn't here before!' retorted Bender rudely.

'What d'you mean it wasn't here before? I know it was here.'

'You know nothing of the sort!'

'Well? Where's it gone to? Did you win it?'

'I did.'

'When? Which move?'

'Why all this unnecessary talk about the knight? If you want to give up the game, then say so.'

'Excuse me, comrade, but I have made a note of all the moves. It's positively disgusting! Give me back my knight!'

'Will you or will you not give up the game?'

'Give-me-back-my-knight!' shouted the one-eyed man. At this the champion saw it was no good delaying matters any longer. He took a handful of pieces and flung them at his opponent.

'Comrades!' roared the amateur, 'look what he's doing to me!'

The Vassuki chess-players were dumbfounded.

Without wasting any more precious time, Bender hurled a chess-board at the lamp. There was a crash of glass and the room was plunged into darkness. Bender dashed into the street and the Vassuki chess-players, jostling each other furiously, rushed out after him in hot pursuit.

It was a moonlight night. Bender was flying down the street like an angel shaking the dust of this wicked world from his feet.

'Stop him! Catch him!' yelled the crowd.

'Stop thief!' they shouted.

'Help! Help!' shouted the one-eyed chess-player.

Bender ran down to the edge of the river, turned to the right, and feverishly searched for Hippolyte and the boat.

Hippolyte was there. Bender jumped into the boat and began to row wildly out from the shore, and a minute later a shower of stones fell on them. The chess-players were pelting them from the shore. A stone hit Hippolyte's face, just an inch above his boil. He ducked, tried to hide his head, and began to moan.

'What a coward!' said Bender. 'My head has nearly been torn from my shoulders, but I'm still happy and bright. And if you take into account that we've got fifty roubles clear profit then we've not done so badly.'

Meanwhile the chess-players had realized that the plan of transforming Vassuki into New Moscow had crashed and that the chess champion was disappearing with fifty roubles belonging to the town. They jumped into a large boat and rapidly pulled out into the middle of the river, shouting threats across the water. There were about thirty of them in the boat, for each of them wanted to have a personal reckoning with the champion.

The one-eyed man was in command of the expedition.

'Come on, Pussy; if you don't pull more rapidly they'll overtake us, and I shan't be able to vouch for either of us.'

Both boats were going downstream and the distance between them was rapidly diminishing. Bender's strength was beginning to give out.

'You cheat!' the chess-players shouted. 'You're not going to escape us!'

Bender had no time to argue with them and he continued to row frantically, but Hippolyte was in despair. The enemy were almost upon them and were trying to force the champion's boat into the shore. A sad fate was in store for the chess swindlers. The Vassuki players rejoiced and moved over to the right side of their boat, ready to hurl themselves on Bender as soon as they came level with him.

'Take care of your glasses!' shouted Bender, as he threw an oar overboard. 'We're in for it!'

'Gentlemen!' screamed Bender, 'you're surely not going to beat us?'

'Indeed we are!' shouted the chess-players, getting ready to jump into the other boat. But at that moment their own boat lurched over on to its right side and a rush of water came into the boat.

'Steady there!' shouted the one-eyed captain. But it was too late. So many amateurs had crowded to the right side of the Vassuki dreadnought that the centre of gravity was displaced, and, in complete conformance with the laws of physics, the boat capsized.

There was a wail of despair as thirty amateur chess-players fell into the water. They rapidly came up to the surface again, and one after another tried to scramble on to the overturned boat.

'Cowards!' shouted Bender. 'Why don't you beat the champion? Wasn't that your original intention? Why, I could drown you one by one, but I will grant you your lives. Go on living, citizens, only for heaven's sake, stop playing chess! You simply don't know the first rules of the game. Poor fools! Come along, Hippolyte, we must be going. Good-bye, dear amateurs. I'm afraid Vassuki will not become the centre of the universe. I do not think the international champions would visit such idiots, not even if you begged them on your knees. Good-bye, my friends. Three cheers for the "The Four Knights' Chess Club"!'

CHAPTER XXXV

ETCETERA

THE next morning the two adventurers were approaching Cheboksar. Bender was dozing at the rudder and Hippolyte was rowing sleepily. Both of them were shivering with cold. The sun was slowly rising in the east and birds were singing loudly on the river-banks.

Bender opened his eyes and stretched himself.

'Good morning, Pussy,' he said, suppressing a yawn.

'There's a landing-stage ahead of us,' said Hippolyte.

Bender pulled the guide-book out of his pocket and consulted it.

'Judging from what it says here it must be Cheboksar. "We must now draw the reader's attention to the beautiful situation of the town of Cheboksar." Well, Pussy, do you think it is beautifully situated? "At the present time there are 7,702 inhabitants." Oh! Pussy, let us give up chasing diamonds and raise the population of Cheboksar to 7,704. What do you say to that? I think it is a very good plan. Well, well, let us see what else it says. "Founded in A.D. 1555, there are several very interesting churches in the town. Apart from the administrative offices of the Chuvash Republic, there are a workers' faculty, a party school, a pedagogical institute, two schools, a museum, a scientific society and a library. The Chuvash and Cheremiss peoples are to be seen on the landing-stage and in the market-place."'

But before the two friends arrived at the landing-stage their attention was drawn to an object that was floating down the river a short distance away from their boat.

'The chair!' shouted Bender. 'Pussy! it's our chair!'

And the friends rowed up to the chair. It was bobbing up and down in the water and was steadily floating away from their boat. The water was lapping its sides. This was the chair they had thrown overboard, and it was slowly wending its way towards the Caspian Sea.

'Hallo, my old friend! Why, we haven't seen each other for many a day! You know, Pussy, this chair reminds me of our own life, for we too are floating down with the current. We sink, we come up again, although no one is excited about it. Nobody loves us. Not a soul worries about us, and if the chess amateurs had managed to drown us yesterday there would have been nothing but an inquest held. "Both bodies were lying with their feet south-east and their heads north-west. There were several wounds on the bodies, evidently inflicted by some blunt instrument." For the amateurs would most certainly have beaten us with their chess-boards, and there's no need to tell you that a chess-board is a very blunt instrument. "The first corpse was of a man of fifty-five, dressed in a torn coat, a shabby pair of trousers, and old boots. In one of the pockets there was an identification certificate in the name of Konrad Karlovich Michaelson." Yes, Pussy, that's all they'd say about you.'

'And what would they have to say about you?' asked Hippolyte glumly.

'Oh! they'd say something quite different about me. "The second corpse was of a man aged about twenty-seven. He had loved and suffered: he had loved money and suffered from the lack of it. His face, with a noble forehead and a mop of curly black hair, was turned towards the sun. His beautiful feet, clad in boots size seven, were stretched towards the aurora borealis. His body was enveloped in pure white underclothes and on his heart lay a golden harp

inlaid with mother-of-pearl and a roll of exquisite music, " Good-bye, my Gipsy ". It was obvious that the youth's occupation had been poker work, for there was a certificate in his coat pocket issued by the Craftsmen's Union ' Pegasus and Parnassus ' on the 23, viii, 24, Number 86/1562." And, Pussy, they would give me a wonderful funeral, with an orchestra and many speeches.'

As they went on talking, the two friends approached the Cheboksar landing-stage. In the evening they managed to increase their capital by five roubles by selling the Vassuki boat, which they had hired. Then they went on board the steamer *Uritsky* and were soon on their way to Stalingrad, where they expected to meet the Columbus Theatre company, for they hoped to overtake the *Scriabin* on the way.

The *Uritsky* sailed down the river.

The *Scriabin* put in at Stalingrad at the beginning of July, and the two friends watched it come in as they hid behind some packing-cases on the landing-stage. Before unloading there was a lottery on board, and large money prizes were offered. They had to wait about four hours before the chairs were taken off. The Columbus Theatre company were the first to leave the steamer, and Bender recognized Persitsky's shining face among them. From their ambush the two conspirators heard him shout : ' Yes, I'm going to Moscow at once. I've already sent them a telegram, and what d'you think I said to them ?—" I rejoice with you." Let them guess what it means ! '

Persitsky then examined a motor-car carefully, and after feeling the radiator, decided to hire it, got in, and drove away to the mysterious accompaniment of ' Hurrah ! Hurrah ! ' from the other passengers.

The hydraulic press was lifted out of the hold, the Columbus Theatre properties came next, and it was only when it was quite dark that the chairs were taken off the steamer.

The Columbus Theatre company got into five motor-lorries and, shouting gaily, were taken straight to the railway station.

'I don't think they are going to give a performance in Stalingrad,' said Hippolyte.

Bender was decidedly puzzled.

'We'll have to follow them. But how can we when we haven't any money? Anyhow, we can go to the station and see what we can do.'

At the railway station they discovered that the company was going to Pyatigorsk via Tikharetskaya and Mineralnye Vody.

The two friends had not enough money for more than one ticket.

'Do you know how to travel without a ticket?' asked Bender.

'I'll try," said Hippolyte timidly.

'Oh, the devil! I think I'd better do the trying. I'll forgive you this time. I'll go without a ticket.'

A ticket was bought for Hippolyte in an unreserved compartment, and in time the former marshal of nobility arrived at the Mineralnye Vody station in the Caucasus. As he got out of the train he did his best not to be seen by any of the members of the Columbus Theatre company and started to look for Bender.

The actors left for Pyatigorsk, but Bender had not yet arrived. At last he arrived in the evening and found Hippolyte in great agitation.

'Where have you been?' moaned Hippolyte. 'I'm so worn out.'

'So worn out, are you? You who have had a ticket in your pocket. And I'm not supposed to be tired. It wasn't I who was pushed off the buffers of your train at Tikharetskaya, was it? It wasn't I who sat there for three hours like a fool waiting with empty mineral bottles for a train! You're a beast! Where's the theatre company?'

'Gone to Pyatigorsk.'

'Then we must go there too. I've managed to scrape a little money together on the way—a clear profit of three roubles. Not much, I admit, but it'll be enough for our tickets and a bottle of Narzan water.'

The train rattled along like an old cart, and within fifty minutes it managed to take the passengers to Pyatigorsk. Bender and Hippolyte found themselves at last at the foot of the mountain Mashuk.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE VIEW ON TO THE MALACHITE POOL

IT was Sunday evening. Everything was clean and tidy, even the mountain Mashuk, overgrown with bushes and trees, looked as if it had been carefully combed. Men wearing white trousers of every conceivable material—cotton, leather, and flannel—were darting up and down the platforms of the railway station. There were men in sandals and shirts open at the throat, and Bender and Hippolyte, who had arrived in heavy, dirty boots, dusty trousers, hot waistcoats, and thick coats, felt quite out of place amongst these people. Young women were dressed in the most delicate sprig muslins, and the smartest of them all was the young station-mistress. The two friends were astonished to see a woman in such a position. Red curls pushed their way from under her red cap that had silver braid on the peak, and she was wearing a white uniform coat and skirt.

After having admired the station-mistress, the two friends studied the bill that had been freshly posted advertising the Columbus Theatre company in Pyatigorsk. Then they each drank two glasses of Narzan water, and after that they jumped into a tram marked 'Station—Gardens.' It cost them ten copecks to go into the gardens. There was music there, a number of cheerful-looking people, and very few flowers. The symphonic orchestra was playing 'The Mosquito Dance'. Narzan mineral water was being sold in the Lermontov Gallery. It was also being sold in kiosks, and people were carrying it about on trays. Narzan water seemed to be everywhere.

No one took the slightest notice of the shabby diamond-seekers.

' Well, Pussy,' said Bender, ' we're strangers in such a holiday crowd.'

The friends spent the first night at the Narzan spring.

It was only after the third performance of Gogol's *Marriage* that the two friends realized the difficulties of their search for the treasure. It was not such an easy matter as they had thought to find a way into the theatre, because Galkin, Palkin, Malkin, Chalkin, and Zalkind slept at the back of the stage, for their paltry wages did not give them a chance of living in an hotel.

Day after day passed and the friends were almost desperate. They were beginning to feel weak from trying to sleep on the spot where Lermontov had fought his famous duel, and they were tired of trying to get money in casual tips from tourists.

On the sixth day Bender managed to make friends with Mechnikov, whose business it was to look after the hydraulic press. At that time Mechnikov was in a terrible state. He had no money for drinks, and Bender noticed that he had begun to sell some of the stage properties in the market. Gradually their friendship ripened to such a degree that one morning at the springs they confided in each other. Mechnikov called Bender ' a good sort ' several times and was ready to agree to anything.

' All right,' said he. ' That's quite easy. With the greatest of pleasure, my dear fellow.'

It did not take Bender long to discover that Mechnikov had a good business head, and after discussing the matter in detail, the two schemers slapped each other on the back and laughed heartily.

' Well,' said Bender, ' I'll give you ten roubles.

' My dear fellow,' said Mechnikov astonished, ' you positively startle me ! I'm absolutely exhausted from drinking this Narzan.'

' How much do you want then ? '

'Say fifty roubles. After all, it's Government property, and I'm a sick man.'

'All right. Will you take twenty? You agree? Now, now, I can see from your eyes that you're willing.'

'Agreement is the result of perfect accord between two parties.'

'Well, when will you bring the chairs?'

'You give me the money and I'll give you the chairs.'

'That's all right,' said Bender, without thinking.

'Money in advance,' Mechnikov announced suddenly. 'Money in the morning—chairs in the evening; or money in the evening—chairs the next morning.'

'What about chairs to-day and the money to-morrow?' asked Bender.

'I may be a sick man, my dear fellow, but I can't accept such terms.'

'But,' said Bender, 'I shan't get my money until to-morrow. It's being sent by wire.'

'Then we can discuss the matter to-morrow,' said Mechnikov obstinately. 'Meanwhile, so long! And may you spend a comfortable night at the spring! I've a great deal to do with my press, and I've no strength left. How can a man live on Narzan water?'

Mechnikov walked away and Bender looked at Hippolyte sternly.

'Time,' he said, 'which we have, is money, but money we lack, Pussy. We must succeed. One hundred and fifty thousand roubles and nought nought copecks lie before us. We need only twenty roubles for the treasure to be ours. We must not disdain any means whatsoever. Either we win or we lose.'

Bender walked round Hippolyte pensively.

'Take off your coat!' he said suddenly.

Hippolyte handed him his coat and Bender immediately threw it on to the ground and began to tread on it with his dusty boots.

'What are you doing?' screamed Hippolyte. 'I've

been wearing that coat for the last fifteen years, and it's still like new.'

'Don't get excited! It'll soon look old. Now give me your hat! And now make your trousers look dusty and pour some Narzan over them. And hurry up!'

A few minutes later Hippolyte was disgustingly dirty.

'There now, you're ready; and you've every opportunity of earning money by honest work.'

'What do you want me to do?' asked Hippolyte mournfully.

'Can you speak French? I hope you can.'

'Very badly. Only schoolroom French.'

'Well, well, you'll have to use what you know. Could you say this sentence in French: "Gentlemen, I have had nothing to eat for six days"?'

'*Monsieur,*' began Hippolyte haltingly. '*Monsieur . . . er . . . er . . . je . . . ne . . .* Is that it? *Je . . . ne . . . mange . . . pas . .* Six, now what is that in French? *Un, deux, trois, quatre, cinq, six . . . Six jours.* Yes, that's it: *Je ne mange pas six jours.*'

'A nice pronunciation, I must say,' said Bender sarcastically; 'but never mind; you don't expect much from a beggar. A beggar in Russia will always speak French worse than a beggar in France. How much German do you know?'

'What do I want German for?' said Hippolyte.

'You'll want German,' said Bender as he emphasized each word. 'You'll want German because you're going to the gardens to-night, and there you will take up a stand in the shade, and you will beg in French, German, and Russian. And you will impress people with the fact that you are a former member of the State Duma and that you belonged at one time to the Cadet Party. Your net earnings will go to Mechnikov. You understand?'

Hippolyte's face changed in the twinkling of an eye. He drew himself up to his full height and his eyes flashed, so that Bender almost expected fire would come out of his nostrils.

'Now, now, now!' said the great schemer, not in the least afraid. 'Just look at him!'

'Never!' cried Hippolyte with great determination, 'never has a Vorobianinov stretched out his hand for charity!'

'One day you'll have to stretch your legs out for good, you old fool!' shouted Bender. 'Do you mean to tell me that you've never stretched out your hand?'

'Never!' shouted Hippolyte.

'Well, I like that! He's been living on me for three months. Here have I been feeding him, nursing him, and educating him for nothing. And now, this good-for-nothing dares to stand there and pretend—— Well, well, that'll do, that'll do! You will do one of two things: either you go to the gardens at once and bring me ten roubles this evening, or you refuse, and I shall automatically exclude you from the partnership. I shall count five. Now, yes or no? One . . . Two . . . Three . . .'

'Yes,' murmured Hippolyte.

'In that case, repeat the formula. *Monsieur, je ne mange pas six jours, Geben sie mir bitte etwas Copeck auf dem Stuck Brot,* and *Please give something to a former deputy of the State Duma.* Now say it, and in a plaintive voice. Come on—quick!'

Hippolyte repeated the phrases.

'Yes, that'll do,' said Bender. 'You've had a talent for begging ever since you were an infant. You're a born beggar. Now be off! I'll meet you at the springs at midnight. Not for the sake of anything romantic, remember, but simply because people are more generous in the evening.'

'And what are you going to do?'

'Don't worry about me. As usual, I'm taking the more difficult job on to my own shoulders.'

The two friends parted. Bender went into a stationery shop, bought a receipt-book with his last ten copecks, sat down, and was busy for about an hour renumbering the receipts and signing each one.

'The main thing is system,' he said to himself. 'Every copeck of public money must be properly accounted for.'

The great schemer walked rapidly up the road, which wound round the mountain, past sanatoria and workers' rest-houses, until he reached the spot where Lermontov had fought his celebrated duel with Martynev. Here there was a small gallery hewn out of the rock leading to a precipice, and the gallery ended in a small balcony from which there was a splendid view on to the bottom of the precipice, where there was a pool of stagnant water. This precipice was one of the sights of Pyatigorsk, which was visited each day by a number of tourists and foreigners.

Bender immediately realized that the precipice might be a great source of income.

'What an amazing thing!' he thought. 'It's extraordinary that the town has never thought of charging admission to that balcony. I should think it is the only place in Pyatigorsk where people aren't charged anything. I shall remove this stain from the reputation of the town. I must remedy this omission!'

And Bender did what his reason and the force of circumstances prompted him to do. He stopped at the entrance to the balcony and began to wave the receipt book in the air. From time to time he shouted: 'This way for your tickets, citizens. Children and soldiers of the Red army: gratis. Students: five copecks. Non-members of the professional union: thirty copecks.'

Bender knew what he was about, for none of the citizens of Pyatigorsk ever went near the precipice, and

it was the easiest thing in the world to fleece a tourist of ten copecks for admission anywhere. By five o'clock he had collected six roubles, being helped in this by selling tickets to several non-union people. They all paid their money without a murmur, and one rosy-cheeked tourist said to his wife when he saw Bender: 'You see, Tania. What did I tell you last night? You said you wouldn't need to pay anything for seeing the precipice, but that's nonsense, isn't it, comrade?'

'Quite true,' confirmed Bender. 'There's a charge of ten copecks for union members. Children and soldiers of the Red Army gratis. Students five copecks. Non-union members thirty copecks.'

Towards evening an excursion of Kharkov militiamen came up in buses. Bender grew alarmed and tried to pretend he was an innocent tourist, but the militiamen flocked round the great schemer and were quite ready to pay the money. There was no way of retreat, so Bender began to shout boldly: "Members of the union: ten copecks, but militiamen, students and children: five copecks.'

The militiamen paid their money after inquiring politely for what object the charge was made.

'For repairing the precipice,' announced Bender. 'To prevent any landslides.'

While the great schemer was having a busy time selling tickets to view the Malachite Pool, Hippolyte was standing under an acacia-tree, bent and huddled with shame. He did not look at the passers-by and kept repeating to himself the three set phrases: '*Monsieur, je ne mange pas. Geben sie mir bitte . . . Please help a former member of the State Duma.*' It was not that people did not give him anything, but they gave very little. However, he had managed to collect about three roubles in coppers.

The gravel scrunched under the feet of the passers-by; the orchestra played various pieces by Strauss,

Brahms, and Grieg, and a gay, chattering crowd walked up and down past the former marshal of nobility.

'Help a former member of the State Duma,' Hippolyte mumbled.

'Do tell me, were you really a member of the State Duma?' a voice whispered into his ear. 'And were you really present at sittings? Oh, how wonderful!'

Hippolyte looked up and turned pale, for hopping about in front of him like a sparrow was none other than Absalom Vladimirovich Iznurenkov. He was dressed in a white coat and grey trousers. He was amazingly lively and every now and then seemed to leap as much as five inches from the ground. Iznurenkov had not recognized Hippolyte, and continued to plague him with questions.

'Tell me,' he said, 'have you actually seen Rodzianko? And is it true that Purishkevich was bald? Oh, how wonderful!' And continuing to twist and twirl, he managed to thrust a three-rouble note into Hippolyte's hand and then darted into the crowd again.

Hippolyte remained standing under the acacia-tree, his eyes glued to the ground. It was a pity he stood like that, for he might have seen much that was beautiful around him. At last, the band packed up their music-stands and Hippolyte moved towards the springs. Gradually the holiday crowd dispersed and left some loving couples sitting on benches in the gardens.

'How much did you get?' asked Bender as he came up to Hippolyte.

'Seven roubles and twenty-nine copecks. One three-rouble note, some silver, and the rest in coppers.'

'Not at all bad for a first appearance,' said Bender. 'You've earned your money well. Really, Pussy, I'm touched to the quick. But who was the fool who gave you three roubles? Or did you have to give him change?'

'It was Iznurenkov.'

'Nonsense! Absalom? Well, I never! Fancy Iznurenkov turning up! And you talked to him? And he didn't recognize you?'

'He asked me about the Duma.'

'You see, it's not so bad being a beggar, especially one with only a moderate education and a thin voice. And you kicked at the idea! Well, Pussy, I've not been wasting my time, for I've managed to collect fifteen roubles and one copeck. Total? We'll have enough.'

The next morning Mechnikov received the money and in the evening he produced two chairs, but according to him it was absolutely impossible to bring the third because the 'Five Noises' were using it as a card-table.

So as not to be disturbed while ripping up the chairs, the two friends climbed almost to the summit of Mashuk until the dim lights of Pyatigorsk glimmered below them and they could see Kislovodsk in the distance.

Bender then looked up at the sky and took a pair of pincers out of his pocket.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE ENGINEER BRUNS

THE engineer Bruns was sitting on the veranda of his country house. The leaves of a large palm-tree cast sharp and narrow shadows on to his closely shaved head, on to his white shirt, and on to the Gambs chair belonging to the suite that had formerly belonged to General Popov's widow. He was sitting on the Gambs chair, waiting for dinner.

'Darling!' he called in a baby voice. The house was silent.

Tropical flora surrounded the engineer. There were prickly cactus leaves, banana and sago palms, and roses were growing over the veranda, but all this beauty was wasted on the engineer: he wanted his dinner. Feeling irritated, he called again to his wife, but there was no answer. He began to think of a large, well-roasted goose with a crackling fat skin, and unable to contain himself any longer he shouted: 'Darling! Isn't that goose ready yet?'

'Andrey Mikhaylovich!' a woman's voice shouted back, 'don't bother me!'

The engineer curled his lips and rapped back: 'Aren't you sorry for me?'

'Be quiet, you glutton!'

But the engineer did not want to be quiet, and he was just thinking of a suitable retort when an unexpected rustle at his side made him turn his head. A man in a ragged blue shirt and shabby trousers came from behind a palm-tree. He was carrying a coat over his arm.

'Can you tell me where I can find the engineer Bruns?' asked the stranger in a pleasant voice.

'I am the engineer Bruns. What can I do for you?'

The stranger fell on to his knees in silence. It was Father Theodore.

'What on earth are you doing that for?' asked the engineer jumping up. 'Get up!'

'I shan't get up,' said Father Theodore, staring up at the engineer with crystal clear eyes.

'Get up!' repeated the engineer.

'I shan't get up.' And Father Theodore, careful not to hurt himself, began to knock his head against the ground.

'Darling! Darling!' shouted the engineer, feeling slightly alarmed, 'come and see what's happening.' And then turning to Father Theodore he continued: 'Do get up. I implore you.'

'I shall not get up.'

Darling ran out on to the veranda. She knew by the sound of her husband's voice that he was serious.

The moment Father Theodore saw the lady, he crawled towards her on his knees, bowed to her, and said imploringly: 'All my hopes, my dear lady, are centred in you.'

The engineer flushed with rage. He seized the stranger under the arms and tried to lift him up, but Father Theodore was cunning. He had his knees tucked firmly under his body and was an absolutely dead weight. Bruns was so indignant that he dragged his strange guest into a corner and forced him on to a chair. It was a Gambs chair, not one of Hippolyte's, but one from the Popov drawing-room.

'I daren't,' muttered Father Theodore. 'I simply dare not sit in the presence of such exalted personages,' and he made another attempt to fall on his knees. With a quick move the engineer caught him by the shoulders and stopped him in time.

'Darling,' he said to his wife, 'do speak to the citizen. There must be some misunderstanding.'

Speaking in a matter-of-fact voice, Darling turned

to Father Theodore : ' I must ask you not to fall on your knees in my home.'

' Oh ! my dear lady, my dear lady,' said Father Theodore plaintively.

' Look here ! ' said Darling indignantly. ' I'm not your dear lady. What is it you want ? '

Father Theodore mumbled something unintelligible, and it was only after many questions that they managed to extract from him that he was asking them, as a special favour, to sell him the suite of twelve chairs on one of which he was sitting at that moment.

The engineer was so surprised that he let go of Father Theodore's shoulders. Father Theodore immediately flopped down on his knees again and began to crawl round the engineer's feet like a tortoise.

' Why should I ? ' said the engineer as he tried to escape Father Theodore's clutching hand. ' Why should I sell my chairs to you ? You can go down on your knees as often as you like, but that won't help matters.'

' But they are my chairs,' Father Theodore groaned.

' What d'you mean, they are your chairs ? How do you make that out ? ' The engineer turned to his wife : ' This man is mad, darling ! '

' They are mine ! ' said Father Theodore quietly.

' Do you mean to tell me that I've stolen them from you ? ' said the engineer angrily. ' Well, have I stolen them from you ? Do you hear what the fellow says ? It's positively disgusting ! '

' No ! No ! ' whispered Father Theodore.

' If I've stolen them from you, why don't you go to court about it instead of creating a disturbance here ? What cheek ! A man can't even have his dinner in peace ! '

But Father Theodore did not want to take the matter to court : he certainly did not. He knew that the engineer Bruns would not dream of doing such a thing as steal his chairs. Oh, no ! Such a thought had never entered his head. But those chairs had

belonged to Father Theodore before the revolution, and they had been a most precious possession of his wife, who at this moment was dying in Voronezh. He was merely fulfilling her wish in discovering where the chairs were. He was not asking engineer Bruns for charity. Dear me, no! He was sufficiently well provided for. He had a candle factory in Samara, but he wanted to sweeten the last moments of his dear wife's life by buying the chairs. He was no miser. He was ready to pay twenty roubles for the set of twelve chairs.

'What?' shouted the engineer, going purple in the face. 'Twenty roubles for that magnificent drawing-room suite? Do you hear what he says? Why, he's mad!'

'I am not mad,' said Father Theodore. 'I'm only trying to fulfil my wife's last wish.'

'Oh, the devil! He's beginning to crawl round on his knees again.'

'Please state your price,' groaned Father Theodore as he knocked his head against a palm-tree.

'Now then, don't damage that tree,' said the engineer, and then turned to his wife: 'Of course the man is mad. He's gone mad as the result of his wife's illness. What do you think? Shall we sell the chairs to him? At least we'll get rid of him; he's a perfect menace!'

'And what shall we sit on?' asked the wife.

'Oh, we can buy others.'

'For twenty roubles?'

'No, not for twenty. I don't know that I'd sell them for two hundred. But I might accept two hundred and fifty.'

There was no response from Father Theodore. He was banging his head against the tree.

'I'm getting tired of all this,' said the engineer, and he walked up to Father Theodore and issued an ultimatum: 'First of all, come away from that palm-tree.

Three paces. Secondly, you must stand up at once. Thirdly, I'll sell you the furniture for two hundred and fifty roubles; not less than two hundred and fifty.'

'It is not out of avarice,' wailed Father Theodore. 'I've simply come to fulfil my wife's dying wish. She is very dangerously ill.'

'Well, my wife is also ill. Isn't it true, darling, that your lungs are weak? But that's no reason why you should sell your shirt, say, for thirty copecks.'

'Please, take it for nothing!' exclaimed Father Theodore.

The engineer waved the suggestion aside and said coldly: 'Stop joking! I refuse to discuss the question any further. I have valued the chairs at two hundred and fifty roubles, and I won't be beaten down.'

'Fifty roubles,' offered Father Theodore.

'Call Bagration,' said the engineer to his wife. 'He'll soon escort the citizen to the gate.'

'I'm not a miser——'

'Bagration!'

Father Theodore bolted in terror, and the engineer went into the house to enjoy his goose. It was his favourite dish and he began to calm down. He had just wrapped a piece of tissue paper round the end of a drumstick, and was about to gnaw it, when Father Theodore's pathetic face appeared at the window.

'I'm not a miser,' he said in a gentle voice. 'Fifty-five roubles!'

With his back turned to the window the engineer growled and Father Theodore disappeared.

All day long Father Theodore's figure kept appearing in various parts of the garden. It would run out of the copse; a few minutes later it would come out of the orange grove, cross the back-yard, and rapidly disappear again into the garden. The engineer complained to his wife about the madman and about his own headache. Towards evening Father Theodore's

voice was heard shouting : ' One hundred and thirty-eight.' A minute later his voice was heard coming from somewhere near to the house : ' One hundred and forty-one. I'm not a miser, Mr. Bruns, but——'

At last the engineer could stand it no longer. He went on to the veranda, looked out into the darkness, and shouted in a loud, angry voice : ' The devil take you ! Two hundred roubles, and take yourself off ! '

There was a rustle among the bamboo trees, a quiet groan, and the sound of retreating footsteps. Silence. The stars came out and glow-worms seemed to be pursuing Father Theodore. He had taken the last motor-bus along the coast to Batum, and that evening he dispatched the following telegram to his wife Katerina Alexandrovna :

' Goods found. Wire two hundred and thirty roubles. Sell what you can.—THEODORE.'

For two days he wandered round the engineer's house with a radiant face, bowing to them from a distance, and from time to time calling out : ' I'm not a miser. I'm only doing what my poor wife has asked me to do.'

On the third day he received the money, together with a desperate telegram :

' Sold everything. Left without a single copeck. Kisses. Waiting. Evstigneyev still dines here.—KATYA.'

Father Theodore counted the money, crossed himself devoutly, hired a lorry, and set out for the Bruns' house. He told the driver to wait and then went in to get the chairs.

' I've brought the money,' he said ; ' but I do wish you'd reduce the price a little.'

' I can't stand this any longer,' said the engineer.

' But I've brought you the money,' said Father Theodore rapidly. ' You said two hundred roubles.'

'Darling, take the money and give him the chairs. And be as quick as you can. My head is simply splitting!'

Father Theodore had reached the goal of his whole life. The Samara candle factory was within his grasp, and the diamonds would pour into his pockets like sunflower seeds. One after the other, the twelve chairs were taken out of the house and piled on to the lorry. They were very like the Vorobianinov chairs, but with this difference, they were not upholstered in flowered chintz, but in blue repp with a pink stripe.

Father Theodore was possessed with impatience. He had tucked a small axe into his belt under his coat, and from his seat next to the driver, he turned round every few minutes to take a look at the chairs. They were going towards Batum. There was a strong wind, and Father Theodore noticed that the sea was rough. As they approached Makhindzhauri, Father Theodore shouted to the driver and told him to stop. Trembling with excitement he began to take the chairs from the lorry and put them down on a deserted part of the beach. The driver was not at all interested. He took his fare, whipped up his horses, and drove away.

Father Theodore looked round to make sure that no one was watching him. Then he dragged the chairs on to a narrow strip of dry sand and pulled out the axe.

For a moment he was in doubt. He did not know on which chair to begin, and then like a lunatic he rushed up to the third chair and struck it a heavy blow. The chair fell over.

'Aha!' shouted Father Theodore. 'I'll show you!' And he fell upon the chair as though it were alive. In a trice the chair was reduced to splinters, but Father Theodore could not hear the blows of the axe against the repp or woodwork, for the roar of the sea and wind muffled them.

'Aha!' he kept saying as he hacked at the chairs.

One by one the chairs were demolished and Father Theodore's feverish excitement grew to an alarming degree. The storm was growing and huge waves were beginning to lap Father Theodore's feet. The sea was raging and foaming. The Black Sea was in a turmoil, and Father Theodore stood bathed in sweat, hacking the last chair to pieces. A minute later all was over. Father Theodore was seized with despair. He looked with horror at the mound of legs, backs, and springs. He stepped back, but his feet were in water. He ran forward and on to the road. A large wave dashed over the place on which he had been standing, and as it rolled back it took with it the wreckage of General Popov's suite of furniture. But Father Theodore did not realize this ; his back was bent, and as he stumbled down the road, he kept beating his breast with his fist. He found himself in Batum without knowing how he had got there. He was in a terrible position : five thousand kilometres away from home, twenty roubles in his pocket, and absolutely no way of getting back to his native town. He wandered through the Turkish bazaar, where merchants tried to persuade him to buy face powder, silk stockings, and contraband tobacco, until at last he dragged himself to the railway station and was soon lost in the crowd of porters and passengers.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

UNDER THE CLOUDS

THREE days after Mechnikov had disposed of the two chairs the Columbus Theatre company left Pyatigorsk and went by train to Tiflis. Not satisfied with the contents of the two chairs which they had taken to the summit of Mashuk, the two friends had been waiting for the promised third chair, but Mechnikov had exchanged the twenty roubles for vodka and had got himself into such a state that he could not come out of his room at the back of the stage.

'What a beast!' said Bender when he discovered that the company had left the town. However, he was undismayed and was more active than ever, for he considered that the chances of discovering the treasure had been enormously increased.

'We've no time to lose,' he said. 'We need money for our fare to Vladikavkaz, and from there we shall travel to Tiflis by car along the Georgian military road. What views! What landscapes we shall see! What beautiful mountain air we shall breathe! And in the end? One hundred and fifty thousand roubles, nought nought copecks! Yes, there's good sense in letting the good work go on.'

But it was not so easy to leave Pyatigorsk. Hippolyte had absolutely no talent for travelling without a ticket, and as all his efforts to get into a train had failed, he had to go on begging in order to collect some more money. But that too was not very successful, for after twelve hours of weary and humiliating work he had managed to collect only two roubles. This was sufficient, however, for the fare to Vladikavkaz.

Just as they were approaching Beslan, Bender, who had been travelling without a ticket, was turned out

of the train, but he managed to jump on to the steps of a carriage, and from here he enjoyed the glorious panorama of the Caucasian mountains.

At the Vladikavkaz station the train was met by a large open bus, and a voice called out: 'If any one is going by the Georgian military road they'll be taken into the town for nothing.'

'What are you thinking about, Pussy? Get in and let them take us for nothing.'

They got in and a few minutes later they were in the town. The bus drew up outside the booking office. Bender was in no hurry to book a seat for travelling along the Georgian military road, so keeping up an animated conversation with Hippolyte he walked rapidly away from the bus. They had to stay several days in Vladikavkaz. All their efforts to get some money for their journey along the Georgian military road were either fruitless or only provided them with sufficient money for food. There was no opportunity here to collect money from sightseers, for the mountains in the Caucasus were too high and too obvious to be shown as a special exhibit. They could be seen everywhere, and there was nothing else to be shown off in Vladikavkaz. Their joint efforts at begging brought in thirty copecks in two days.

'Well,' said Bender, 'there's only one thing to be done: we shall have to walk to Tiflis. We can easily do two hundred versts in five days. Don't you worry, old man; just think of the wonderful mountain views and fresh air. We don't need anything else except a little money for bread and sausage. Perhaps you can add a few Italian phrases to your vocabulary. Do whatever you like, but you must bring in two roubles by this evening. And, my dear friend, we shall have to cut out our dinner to-night. Alas! it is a weary world!'

Early the next morning Bender and Hippolyte crossed the little bridge over the River Terek, walked

past the barracks, and plunged into the green plain leading towards the Georgian military road.

'We're lucky,' said Bender. 'It has been raining during the night and we shall not need to swallow dust. Breathe the pure air, my friend, and sing some Caucasian songs or recite some poetry!'

But Hippolyte could not sing nor could he remember any poetry, for the road was uphill, his back was aching, his legs were heavy from all the nights he had had to spend out of doors, and he had terrible indigestion from the sausage he had eaten. He walked slightly weighed down to one side because of a five-pound loaf which he was carrying, and he could hardly drag his feet along.

They walked on and on towards Tiflis along the most beautiful road in the world; but Hippolyte did not care how beautiful it was. He could not enjoy the scenery like Bender; he did not even notice the River Terek, which was beginning to roar at the bottom of the valley. When the sun lit up the snow-clad mountain-tops he was merely reminded of the glitter of diamonds and of Bezenchuk's white coffins.

After Balta the road lay between rocks; it rose upwards in a spiral, and by the evening Bender and Hippolyte found themselves at Lars, three thousand feet above sea-level.

They spent the night in a humble cottage, for which they did not have to pay anything: their host had been so entertained by their card tricks that he insisted on rewarding them with a glass of milk each.

The following morning was so beautiful that even Hippolyte felt better. He was able to walk more rapidly than before. Beyond Lars they came in sight of a magnificent range of mountains where the valley of the River Terek was hidden from them by rocks. The landscape became more and more sinister and the inscriptions on the rocks grew more and more numerous. At a certain point, where the huge rocks were almost

choking the river so that the bridge across it was only seventy feet in length, the two friends read so many inscriptions on the rocky walls that Bender forgot all about the majesty of nature and tried to shout against the noise of the rushing waters: 'Oh! What great people. Just look at this: "Nicky and Micky 1914." An unforgettable sight! See how artistic it is! Each letter is a yard long and is painted in oils. Where are you now, Nicky and Micky?'

'Pussy!' shouted Bender, 'let us immortalize ourselves. Let us surpass Nicky and Micky. I've got some chalk. I'll climb up and write "Pussy and Ossy have been here."'

Without hesitation Bender put the last remnants of their sausage on the parapet of the road that separated them from the raging waters of the Terek and began to climb up the rock.

At first Hippolyte watched him climb, then he lost interest, and turning away began to examine the ruins of the castle of Tamara.

Meanwhile, and two miles away from the two friends, Father Theodore was coming away from Tiflis by the Georgian military road. He was walking along with a measured soldier's step, staring straight ahead of him, and leaning slightly on a long stick with a shepherd's crook.

Father Theodore had reached Tiflis on his last money, and was now walking home. He was entirely dependent on the generosity of others for his food. On one of the mountain peaks, which was seven thousand and thirty-five feet above sea-level, he was bitten by an eagle, but he beat the bird off with his shepherd's crook and continued on his way. As he walked on and through the clouds he muttered to himself every now and then: 'I'm not a miser. . . . I am simply fulfilling my wife's last wish.'

The distance between the enemies was shrinking. Turning a sharp corner, Father Theodore suddenly

came face to face with an old man wearing gold-rimmed pince-nez. Father Theodore recognized Hippolyte. After his terrible experience in Batum, where all his hopes had been dashed to the ground, this fresh opportunity of discovering where the treasure was hidden had a curious effect on the priest. He clutched Hippolyte by the throat and shouted in a hoarse voice: 'Where are those diamonds that belonged to your mother-in-law? Yes, to your mother-in-law, whom you killed?'

Hippolyte, who had been taken completely by surprise, could not say a word; his eyes were almost darting out of his head.

'Tell me!' commanded Father Theodore. 'Confess, you sinner!'

Hippolyte felt he was being throttled. Suddenly, just as Father Theodore thought he had triumphed over Hippolyte, he saw Bender leaping down the rocks. He was coming down blissfully unconscious of what was going on and was gaily whistling a tune.

Father Theodore was overcome with fear. Quite mechanically he continued to hold Hippolyte by the throat, but his knees were shaking.

'Aha!' shouted Bender in a friendly way, 'who is this I see before me? Our competitor?'

Father Theodore wasted no time, and obeying his instincts he seized the sausage and bread which Bender had left on the parapet and ran off as fast as his legs could carry him.

'Chase him!' shouted Hippolyte, who was now able to breathe freely again.

Bender began to call and shout after the priest.

'Hi!' he shouted. 'Look out! Bender's on the hunt! Where are you going? I can let you have a splendid chair without any stuffing in it.'

Father Theodore could not bear the torture of being pursued and began to climb a steep rock. His heart was thumping loudly, but his cowardice urged him on.

'Seize him!' shouted Bender.

'He's taken our food!' yelled Hippolyte as he ran after Bender.

'Stop!' roared Bender. 'Stop, I tell you!'

But these words only added fresh energy to Father Theodore, and a few minutes later he was some seventy feet above the highest inscription on the rock.

'Give us that sausage back,' yelled Bender, 'and I'll forgive you everything!'

But Father Theodore could not hear what was being said, for he had managed to climb up a rock that had never been climbed before. He found he was on a small, flat space at the top of the rock, and as he looked down he was horrified. He suddenly realized that he would never be able to get down again; that it was an absolutely sheer drop from where he was down to the high road, and it was hopeless even to think of trying to descend. He looked down and saw Bender and Hippolyte far below on the road.

'I'll give you the sausage back,' shouted Father Theodore. 'Only help me to get down.'

But no one could hear what he said.

'Help me down!' cried Father Theodore piteously.

He could see Bender and Hippolyte, and judging from their gestures they were furiously angry.

An hour later he lay down on his stomach and craned his neck over the edge of the rock. Bender and Hippolyte were moving away; they were evidently walking towards Tiflis.

Night fell. Father Theodore shivered and wept in the darkness as he lay under the clouds. He was ready to give up all earthly treasures; he only wanted one thing, and that was to be taken down from the rock.

He shouted and bellowed all night, and in the morning, after fortifying himself with sausage and bread, he roared with demoniac laughter as he saw motor-cars chasing along the road. He spent the rest of the day in contemplating the mountains and the sun.

The next night he saw Queen Tamara. She came flying to him from her castle and said playfully : ' We shall be neighbours.'

And he replied with considerable vehemence : ' I'm not a miser.'

The Queen said : ' I know,' and then flew away.

The third day Father Theodore began to preach to the birds.

' Birds ! ' he said to them in a ringing voice, ' confess your sins in public ! '

On the fourth day he was pointed out to tourists.

' On the right is the castle of Tamara,' said the experienced guide. ' On the left is a live man. How he climbed up that rock and what he lives on no one knows.'

' What strange people ! ' said one of the tourists. ' He must be a child of the mountains.'

Clouds gathered and eagles began to soar overhead. The boldest among them swooped down and stole the last piece of sausage, while a second eagle lifted the last piece of bread in its beak and then dropped it into the Terek. Father Theodore threatened the eagles with one finger and began to recite a nursery rhyme. The eagles looked at Father Theodore ; then they gave a piercing screech and flew away.

Ten days later the fire-brigade came from Vladikavkaz with the necessary equipment and hauled Father Theodore down. As they were bringing him down he was clapping his hands and singing, but once on the ground he turned to the superintendent of the fire-brigade and shouted :

' I am not a miser. I'm only—— Ha, ha, ha ! ' And the priest, roaring with laughter, was taken by the fire-brigade to the nearest lunatic asylum.

CHAPTER XXXIX

AN EARTHQUAKE

'WELL, what d'you think?' said Bender, as the two friends were approaching Sioni. 'What can we do to earn money in this wretched place, seven thousand odd feet above sea-level?'

Hippolyte was silent. His only means of earning a livelihood was begging, but there was no one from whom he could beg on these lonely paths. Besides, there was poverty here too, a special kind of poverty, an alpine poverty. Each motor-bus or private car that passed slowly through the village up here was followed by the children, who, after dancing the *lezghinka*, would run after them shouting: 'Give us a copper! Give us a copper!'

The passengers would throw coins to them and the cars would move on.

'A good idea,' said Bender. 'No outlay of capital required. Small profits, but extremely useful for us in our present position.'

At two o'clock on the afternoon of the second day of their march Hippolyte, under the supervision of the great schemer, performed his first dance in public. The dance was similar to the mazurka, but the tourists were so intoxicated with the wild beauty of the Caucasus that they thought it was the national dance—the *lezghinka*—and rewarded him with three coppers. When the next car arrived, which turned out to be a motor-bus going from Tiflis to Vladikavkaz, Bender began to dance and leap in the air.

'Give us money! Give us money!' he shouted angrily. The passengers roared with laughter and generously rewarded his antics. Bender picked up

thirty copecks, but at that moment the Sioni children began to hurl stones at their rivals. Bender and Hippolyte fled from the attack and walked rapidly to the next village, where they spent their well-earned money on bread and cheese. In this way the two friends went on for several days. They spent the night in mountain caves, and on the fourth day they came down a zigzag path into the Kaishaur Valley. The sun beat down on to them and they began to feel warm again after being so high up. They found a number of people from whom they could beg, borrow, or steal, which cheered them up enormously, and they began to walk faster until they came to a place called Passanaur. There was an hotel there and a number of houses. The two friends were given some bread, and they lay down in the bushes opposite to the Hôtel de France, that had a garden in which two bear cubs were fastened to a chain. Bender and Hippolyte enjoyed the delicious bread and a well-earned rest.

Their rest, however, was soon disturbed by the hooting of motor-cars, the crunching of wheels on gravel, and the sound of voices. The two friends peered out through the bushes and saw two new cars draw up at the entrance to the hotel. Persitsky jumped out of the first car and the head of the 'Law and Life' section jumped out after him, and these two were soon followed by the various other members of the *Stanok* automobile club.

'Here we are!' shouted Persitsky. 'Proprietor, we want fifteen *shashlyks*.'[1]

'Don't you recognize him?' asked Bender. 'It's the reporter from the *Scriabin*, one of the critics of our masterpiece. But fancy arriving so grandly. I wonder what it means.'

Bender went up to the visitors, who by now were devouring *shashlyk*, and bowed in the most elegant fashion to Persitsky.

[1] A favourite dish in the Caucasus.

'*Bonjour*,' said the reporter. 'I think I have met you before. Ah! yes, I remember, of course—you're the artist from the *Scriabin*.'

Bender put his hand on his heart and made a deep bow.

'But let me see,' said the reporter, who had an amazing memory. 'Weren't you knocked down by a horse in Moscow? It was in Sverdlov Square, I think.'

'I was,' said Bender, 'and according to your clever account I escaped with a fright.'

'Are you still an artist?'

'No, I'm on holiday at present.'

'Walking?'

'Yes, walking. Experts maintain, you know, that it is simply absurd to travel by car along the Georgian military road.'

'Not always absurd, my dear friend—not always. Now we, for instance, are not travelling so absurdly, for the cars, as you can see for yourself, are our own. I repeat our own, collectively owned. A direct route from Moscow to Tiflis—hardly any petrol required, great comfort, speed and well-sprung seats. Quite European.'

'Where have you got them from?' asked Bender enviously. 'Have you won a hundred thousand?'

'Not a hundred, but we've won fifty thousand.'

'At cards?'

'No. We won it on our certificate which belonged to the automobile club.'

'I see. And you've bought cars with the money?'

'Yes.'

'Perhaps you want a guide? I know of a young man who is very sober and most reliable.'

'I don't think we do.'

'You don't?'

'No, and we don't want an artist either!'

'Well, if that's so, give me ten roubles.'

'Avdotin,' said Persitsky, 'give him three roubles on my account. I don't want a receipt.'

'That's very little,' said Bender; 'but I'll accept it. I can understand your difficulties. Of course, if you had won a hundred thousand you would probably have given me five roubles. In any case, many thanks.'

Bender raised his hat politely, Persitsky bowed, jumped into one of the magnificent cars, and drove away, leaving Bender with his fool of a companion standing in the dusty road.

'Weren't they smart?' said Bender. 'They've won fifty thousand roubles, Pussy, and you can see for yourself how they have bought up all sorts of mechanical rubbish. Now, when we get our money we'll spend it much more rationally, won't we?'

The two friends left Passanaur, building castles in the air and dreaming of what they would buy when they were rich. Hippolyte could see himself buying new socks and setting out for a long holiday abroad, but Bender had more ambitious schemes. He wanted to erect a dam across the Blue Nile, he wanted to open a casino in Riga with affiliations in all countries of the world.

On the third day they reached Mtskhet, the ancient capital of Georgia, where they were not far from Tiflis. A kind peasant gave them a lift as far as Tiflis, and they arrived at eleven o'clock at night, the very hour when the citizens come out into the cool evening to enjoy the fresh air after the heat of the day.

'It's not a bad little town,' said Bender. 'You know, Pussy, we——'

But Bender did not finish his sentence. He ran after a man, overtook him, and began an animated conversation with him. Shortly afterwards he came back to Hippolyte, dug him in the ribs, and said in a quick undertone: 'Do you know who it is? It's Kislyarsky from Stargorod. Come on, let us go and

have a word with him. Once again, paradoxical though it may seem, you are a giant of thought and the father of Russian democracy. Now, don't forget to blow out your cheeks and try to look important. What a stroke of luck! What a fortunate meeting! If I don't get fifty roubles out of him within the next ten minutes I'll eat my hat!'

It really was Kislyarsky, who was standing a few yards away from the two men. He was dressed in a tussore suit, and was looking absolutely terrified.

'I think you have met before,' said Bender in a whisper. 'You will remember that this gentleman is near to the Emperor, a giant of thought, and the father of Russian democracy. Don't take any notice of his clothes. He's dressed like that because of the conspiracy. Take us somewhere at once! We must discuss matters with you!'

Kislyarsky had come to the Caucasus to take a rest cure and to leave all the Stargorod worries behind. He was very downcast and muttered something about business being bad, but he took the two friends in a carriage to David's Mount, where they got into the funicular and went up to an open-air restaurant. Tiflis and its thousands of lights were soon left far below them. They seemed to be going straight up to the stars.

Tables were arranged on a lawn where a Caucasian orchestra was playing and a little girl was dancing the *lezghinka* in and out of the tables much to the delight of her parents who were watching her.

'Order something!' said Bender to Kislyarsky. Kislyarsky ordered wine, salad, and salt Georgian cheese.

'And something to eat,' added Bender. 'If you only knew what we have had to live through to-day, Mr. Kislyarsky, you'd be astounded at our courage.'

'Again,' thought Kislyarsky, 'again all my sufferings will begin. Why didn't I go to the Crimea? I thought

of going to the Crimea, and Henrietta advised me to go to the Crimea.' But he ordered two *shashlyks* without a murmur and turned politely to Bender.

'Well,' said Bender, looking round and lowering his voice, 'I can tell you all about it in two words. We've been watched for the last two months, and to-morrow we expect to be raided in our head-quarters. We shall have to defend ourselves with revolvers.'

At this Kislyarsky's face turned ashen.

'In such a difficult time,' continued Bender, 'we are fortunate in meeting such a devoted patriot.'

'Er—yes,' said Hippolyte suddenly.

'Yes,' said Bender, 'with your help we hope to repulse the enemy. I can give you a revolver.'

'You don't need to,' said Kislyarsky firmly. And they learnt that it was quite impossible for him to take part in the battle; that he was very sorry, but he could not, for he knew nothing at all about military matters. He was extremely sorry, but he could only help to save the life of the father of Russian democracy by rendering some slight financial assistance.

'You are a faithful son of your country!' said Bender triumphantly as he stuffed his mouth with *shashlyk*. 'Five hundred roubles will save the giant of thought.'

'Tell me,' said Kislyarsky plaintively, 'won't two hundred roubles be enough?'

Bender could not control himself any longer and kicked Hippolyte under the table.

'I think,' said Hippolyte grandly, 'that bargaining is rather out of place.'

Bender kicked him again, which meant, 'Bravo, Pussy! You've learnt your lesson.'

It was the first time in his life that Kislyarsky had heard the giant of thought speak, and he was so surprised that he immediately handed five hundred roubles to Bender, promptly paid the bill, left the two friends at the table, and excused himself by saying that he had

a terrible headache. Half an hour later he sent a telegram to his wife in Stargorod :

' Following your advice. Going to Crimea.'

The long privations which the great schemer had endured required immediate compensation, and he got so drunk that night that he nearly fell out of the funicular on the way down to the hotel. The next day he bought himself a wonderful grey suit. He was very hot in the suit, but that did not matter ; he insisted upon walking about in it although he was bathed in perspiration. Hippolyte bought a ready-made white *piqué* suit and a naval cap with gold braid on it and a badge belonging to some unknown yachting club fastened to the front of the cap. He looked like a musical comedy sailor, but he carried himself well and walked with a firmer step.

' You look splendid ! ' said Bender. ' And now we can enjoy ourselves for a while.'

' Comrade Bender,' said Hippolyte, ' what about that chair ? We must find out what has happened to the Columbus Theatre company.'

' Don't teach me what to do or how to live,' said Bender, prancing round one of the hotel chairs. ' I've got money, but I am magnanimous. I will give you twenty roubles and three days in which to paint the town red. Go and enjoy yourself, Pussy.'

The friends drank heavily all the week until Hippolyte's suit had wine spilt over it and Bender's new suit was ruined.

' Good morning,' said Bender on the eighth day, for he woke up with a clear head and had been reading the morning paper. ' Listen, you old drunkard over there—just listen to what sensible people write in the papers :

THEATRE NEWS

Yesterday, the third of September, after having given several performances in Tiflis, the Columbus

Theatre company left for Yalta. The company intend to stay in the Crimea until the beginning of the winter season in Moscow.

'Well, what did I tell you?' said Hippolyte.

'What did you tell me?' snapped Bender. However, he was worried. He did not like the mistake he had made, for it meant that instead of ending their search for the diamonds in Tiflis, they would have to go to the Crimea.

Bender set to work at once, took tickets for Batum, and booked second-class passages on the steamer *Pestel*, which was due to leave Batum for Odessa on September 7th at 23 o'clock, by Moscow time.

Three days later, as the *Pestel* was being tossed about on the Black Sea, Hippolyte had a bad dream. He dreamt that he was dressed in his admiral's suit and was standing on the balcony of his Stargorod home. He knew that the crowd waiting below was expecting something from him, when suddenly a large crane swung over and dropped a black pig at his feet. Then the porter, Tikhon, appeared in a well-cut suit and, seizing the black pig by its hind legs, said: 'It's no use! The Nymphs never provide fringes.' Hippolyte suddenly discovered that he was holding a dagger in his hand. He thrust it into the pig's back and diamonds poured out of the deep wound and began to jump about on the balcony. Louder and louder they rattled, until the noise was so terrifying and intolerable that Hippolyte woke up and heard the wind howling and roaring over the ship. The sea was raging.

They approached Yalta in glorious sunshine and Hippolyte soon recovered from sea-sickness. He could see little shops and restaurants on the shore and a row of cabs, motor-cars, and buses that were lined up by the landing-stage. The two friends were the first to come down the gangway.

At the sight of Hippolyte and Bender, a man in a

tussore suit, who had been watching the passengers disembark, darted to one side and tried to escape. It was too late. Bender's eagle eye had recognized that tussore suit.

'I shan't be a minute, Pussy,' shouted Bender. 'Wait for me.'

He ran so quickly that he soon overtook the man in the tussore suit, and within two minutes returned with a hundred roubles in his hand.

'He wouldn't give me any more. However, I didn't insist, as he only had his return fare with him.'

Within half an hour Kislyarsky fled by motor-car to Sevastopol, and travelled third-class from there to Stargorod.

The two friends spent the day in an hotel. It was so hot that they lay stretched out naked on the floor, and every few minutes they would run to the bath-room for a shower-bath. But the water was tepid and they could not escape the heat.

At about eight o'clock in the evening they cursed all the chairs in the world, put on their hot clothes, and set out for the theatre.

The play was Gogol's *Marriage*. The adventurers were delighted to see their chair on the stage, together with three new chairs. They hid in one of the boxes and waited for the end of the play, but it seemed as if it would never come to an end.

At last the audience began to put on their coats and the actors went to change. The theatre was soon empty.

'Follow me,' said Bender. 'If anything happens, you and I are provincials who have not been able to find an exit.'

They climbed on to the stage, and after striking matches and stumbling over the hydraulic press they looked round for the chair. The great schemer climbed up a ladder.

'Come up!' he shouted, and Hippolyte followed him up the ladder.

'Can you see?' asked Bender as he struck another match.

The Gambs chair was in one of the dark corners.

'There stands our future, our present, and our past,' said Bender as he hurried down to the stage again. 'Now, come along, keep on striking matches, Pussy, and I'll rip it open.'

Bender fumbled in his pocket for a tool.

'Now,' he said as he stretched out his hand to take hold of the chair, 'just one more match, if you please.'

The match flared up, and suddenly a strange thing happened. The chair was jerked to one side and fell through the floor under the very eyes of the two men.

'Mother!' cried Hippolyte as he ran to the wall for protection.

The theatre rocked, the panes fell out of the windows. and Bender lay on the floor almost crushed by scenery that had fallen on to him. It was midnight. It was the first tremors of the great Crimean earthquake of 1927.

This shock that caused untold misery to the whole peninsula had wrenched the treasure out of the adventurers' hands.

'Comrade Bender!' yelled Hippolyte in a terrified voice. 'What's happening?'

Bender was beside himself with rage. The earthquake had played him a shabby trick, and it was the first time that such a thing had ever happened to him.

'What is it?' wailed Hippolyte.

Shouts and yells came from the street. People were rushing about outside.

'We must get into the street before we are buried alive,' shouted Bender. 'Be quick! Be quick! Come on; give me your hand, you old fool!'

They ran to one of the exits of the theatre and to their surprise the Gambs chair was lying intact near the door. With a screech of delight Hippolyte clutched at the chair.

'Give me the pincers!' he shouted to Bender.

'You're a fool!' yelled Bender. 'The ceiling will fall in. Be quick, you idiot! Get into the open!'

'The pincers!' yelled Hippolyte.

'Go to the devil! You can die with your chair if you want to, but I value my life, thank you.' And with these words Bender rushed through the door.

Hippolyte picked up the chair and chased after Bender. No sooner were they in the street than the earth trembled and the roof of the theatre fell in.

'Now then, hand over that chair,' said Bender. 'I see you are tired of carrying it.'

'I shall do nothing of the kind,' retorted Hippolyte.

'What's this mean? Revolt? Give me that chair at once! Do you hear?'

'It's my chair.'

'Well, in that case, take this, you old fool!' said Bender and punched Hippolyte's head.

At that moment a fire-engine raced down the street and in the glare of the headlights Hippolyte saw such a terrible expression on Bender's face that he immediately let go of the chair.

'That's better,' said Bender. 'The meeting is at an end. Pick up that chair and carry it behind me, and remember you're responsible for the safety of it no matter what the earthquake does to you. You've got to save that chair. Do you understand?'

'Yes,' said Hippolyte meekly.

All night the friends wandered about among the panic-stricken crowds, feeling, like every one else, that they dared not return to their rooms in case there was a fresh shock.

At dawn, when the panic had subsided a little, Bender chose a place far away from walls that might crash on them or people who might disturb him, and began to rip up the chair.

They were dumbfounded. There was nothing but tuffing in the chair, and Hippolyte, who had been

greatly shaken by the earthquake, could not control himself and began to roar with laughter. Immediately after this there was a fresh shock: the earth cracked almost under their feet and swallowed the Gambs chair and upholstery that was lying about. Hippolyte was crawling round on all fours, his face turned up towards the sun: the great schemer had fainted. When Bender came to again, he saw that Hippolyte was lying at his side; he too had fainted.

'After all,' said Bender in a weak voice, 'we've still one chance left. The last chair——' At the sound of the word 'chair' Hippolyte opened his eyes. 'The last chair disappeared into the goods yard of the October railway station,' continued Bender, 'but it has certainly not been swallowed up in an earthquake. Why worry? Let the good work go on!'

CHAPTER XL

THE TREASURE

ONE rainy day at the end of October, Hippolyte was fussing about in Ivanopulo's room. He was in his shirt-sleeves and was working at the window-sill, for there was still no table in the room. Bender had received a commission to paint some house signs and had entrusted the work to Hippolyte. Ever since they had arrived in Moscow, nearly a month ago, Bender had been hanging about the goods yard of the October railway station hoping to discover some trace of the last chair, which undoubtedly concealed Madam Petukhov's diamonds.

Hippolyte was working hard at the metal disks and was frowning. The search for the diamonds during the last six months had completely changed him. At night he dreamt of mountains, of Iznurenkov's eyes, of sinking ships and drowning men. He thought he saw bricks falling from the sky and a yawning chasm at his feet.

Bender had been with Hippolyte all the time and had not noticed any difference in him, but actually he was extraordinarily changed. He did not walk as he used to do ; the expression of his eyes was wild, and his moustache had grown enormously and stuck out fiercely over his mouth. But it was not only his outward appearance that had changed : his character had developed new traits—determination and harshness. Three episodes had helped to bring out these new feelings : his miraculous escape from the Vassuki chess-players ; his first appearance as a beggar in Pyatigorsk ; and finally the earthquake, from which date he had nursed a secret hatred for Bender.

Hippolyte had grown suspicious. He was afraid that Bender would find the chair, open it without

saying anything to him, and after pocketing the treasure would decamp and leave him in the lurch. He did not dare to voice his suspicions, for he knew Bender's character and heavy hand. Each day as he worked at the window-sill, cleaning the paint with an old jagged razor, he grew more and more dejected. Each day he wondered whether Bender would come back, or whether he, a former marshal of nobility, would have to die of starvation in Moscow.

But each morning Bender came back, although he did not bring any good news. His energy and cheerfulness were inexhaustible, and he never lost heart.

One day Hippolyte heard some one hurrying along the corridor and knocking against the iron safe ; then the door was flung open. The great schemer, drenched to the skin, was standing on the threshold. His cheeks were glowing like two red apples. He was breathing heavily.

' Hippolyte Matveyevich ! ' he shouted, ' listen ! Listen ! Hippolyte Matveyevich ! '

Hippolyte was surprised. Bender rarely called him by his name and patronymic. Then he suddenly realized . . .

' You've found it ! ' he gasped.

' Yes ! I've found it ! '

' Don't shout ! Every one can hear us ! '

' Yes, that's true ! ' said Bender breathlessly. ' It's found ! It's found ! I can show it to you now, if you like. It's in the Railway Workers' Club. . . . It's a new club. . . . Opened yesterday. . . . How did I find it ? It was most terribly difficult. A marvellous plan, brilliantly executed ! It was wonderful ! '

Without waiting for Hippolyte to pull on his coat, Bender ran out into the corridor and Hippolyte joined him on the stairs. Both men threw excited questions at each other. Soon they were racing down the streets towards Kalanchev Square. They did not even think of getting into a tram ; they were too excited.

'Look at the way you're dressed,' chattered Bender. 'No one would dream of going about like that. You must have a smart shirt, silk socks, and, of course, a top hat. There's something noble in your face, Pussy. Tell me, were you really a marshal of nobility?'

They went into the club and Bender pointed out the chair to Hippolyte. It was standing in the chess-room and looked quite an ordinary Gambs chair although it contained the treasure.

Bender dragged Hippolyte out into the empty corridor. Then he went up to a window, unscrewed the catch and put it in his pocket.

'Now,' he said, 'we can easily slip through the window to-night and get into the club. Remember, Pussy, it's the third window from the front door.'

The friends wandered round for some time and examined the club. 'Come on, old man,' said Bender, at last, 'I've still got twenty roubles left. We must have some beer before our visit to-night. What? You're turning your nose up at beer? Never mind, Pussy, to-morrow you can drink as much champagne as you like.'

On their way home from the restaurant Bender was in a very good humour. He had his arm round Hippolyte's shoulder and was teasing him.

'You know, Pussy, you're a very nice old man, but I shan't give you more than ten per cent. I swear I shan't. Now what do you want money for?'

'What d'you mean, what for?' said Hippolyte testily.

Bender laughed good-temperedly and went on teasing him.

'What will you buy, Pussy? You know you haven't any imagination, and I'm quite sure fifteen thousand will be ample for you. After all, you'll soon die; you're getting on, you know, and what will you want money for? When I come to think of it, I don't think I'll give you anything at all; it would absolutely

ruin you. But I tell you what, you can be my secretary. What d'you say to that? Forty roubles a month and your keep, and four free evenings a week. Your clothes, tea money, and insurance. Well, what do you say to the offer?'

Hippolyte pushed his tormentor to one side and walked on rapidly. Such jokes roused him to a pitch of frenzy.

Bender overtook Hippolyte outside Ivanopulo's room.

'Are you really offended?' he asked. 'I was only joking. You'll get your three per cent. Believe me, Pussy, three per cent is quite enough for you.''

Hippolyte glowered at him and walked into the room.

'Listen, Pussy,' said Bender. 'Say you agree to three per cent. Say you agree. Anybody else would. You won't need to pay rental, thanks to Ivanopulo, who is in Tver for a year, and if you don't want to stay here, then you can always come and be my valet. It'll be a nice soft job.'

When Bender saw that Hippolyte refused to be provoked any further he yawned, stretched himself, took a deep breath, and then said: 'Well, my friend, get your pockets ready. We shall go to the club at dawn. That's the best time. The night watchman will be asleep and will be dreaming sweet dreams for which they often lose their jobs. And, meanwhile, dear friend, I advise you to have a rest.'

Bender lay down on the three chairs, which had been gathered from various parts of Moscow, and before falling asleep, he mumbled something about: 'As my valet. Good wages. . . . Keep. . . . Tea money. . . . Well, well, I was only joking. . . . Let the good work go on.' Then the great schemer went to sleep. He fell into a deep, peaceful and dreamless sleep.

Hippolyte went out into the street. He was angry and felt desperate. The moon was shining and there

were a few clouds in the sky. The street lamps were burning. A drunken man, who was struggling and screaming, was being thrown out of a public-house. Hippolyte frowned and went back to his room. His one wish was to end everything as quickly as possible.

He walked into the room, looked sternly at Bender, who was sleeping peacefully, took off his glasses, polished them, and then put them on again. He picked up the razor off the window-sill. There were daubs of dry oil paint on its rough edge. He put the razor in his pocket, passed Bender without looking at him, but he could hear his even breathing. He went out into the corridors, where everything was unusually quiet. Every one had gone to bed. Hippolyte smiled to himself in a most sinister manner, passed his hand over his forehead and smiled again. He went as far as the staircase and listened attentively. There was not a sound. He stole back into the room, took the twenty roubles from Bender's coat, which was hanging over the back of a chair, put the pincers into his pocket, pulled his cap well over his eyes, and then listened again.

Bender was still fast asleep and was breathing evenly. Hippolyte's head was throbbing. Without hurrying he rolled up his right sleeve well above his elbow, wound a towel round his bare arm, went to the door, took the razor from his pocket, and after measuring with his eye the distance between Bender and the door, he switched off the light. But the room remained slightly lit by the street lamp.

'All the better,' thought Hippolyte as he went up to Bender's side. Then he stretched out his right arm; with all his strength he slashed at Bender's throat with the razor, immediately withdrew it, and jumped away to the wall. The great schemer uttered a sound like water gurgling in a tap. Hippolyte, avoiding any bloodstains, crept towards the door and looked over his shoulder at Bender who was lying

stretched out. A black pool was at the foot of one of the chairs.

'What's that pool?' thought Hippolyte. 'Of course, blood. . . . Comrade Bender is dead.'

Hippolyte threw the towel away, carefully put the razor on the floor, walked out of the room, and quietly closed the door behind him.

The great schemer had died on the threshold of happiness.

Out in the street Hippolyte frowned and muttered: 'Three per cent! The diamonds are mine now!'

He walked towards Kalanchev Square and stopped outside the third window of the Railway Workers' Club. The windows of the new building were glistening in the grey morning light, and he had no difficulty in climbing nimbly on to the window-sill. He opened the window and jumped noiselessly into the corridor. Knowing his way, he went into the chess-room, and soon found the chair. He was in no hurry, now that the great schemer was dead.

Hippolyte sat down on the floor, held the chair between his legs, and began to draw the nails out of the upholstery. He did not miss one of them and at the sixty-second nail his work was done. The English chintz and the canvas under it were loose. All he had to do was to lift them up to find the large cases and small cases and the various boxes which were all filled with precious stones.

'I shall get into a car immediately,' he thought, for he had learnt wisdom from Bender; 'and I shall go straight to the railway station, and from there I shall make for the Polish frontier. It will cost me a diamond or two, but once there——' And longing to be in Poland as quickly as possible, he dragged the chintz and the canvas off the chair. His eyes saw springs, beautiful English springs, and stuffing, wonderful pre-War quality stuffing such as you do not see nowadays. But there was nothing else in the chair.

Hippolyte fingered the stuffing mechanically, and with his legs still gripping the chair he continued to repeat: 'Why aren't they here? Why aren't they here?'

It was almost daylight when Hippolyte left the chair, and forgetting the pincers and his cap he climbed slowly and wearily out of the window and dropped into the street.

'I can't understand it! I can't understand it!'

He began to walk up and down in front of the building and his lips were saying: 'I can't understand it! I can't understand it!'

Now and again he would shake his head and exclaim that he did not understand. The excitement had been too much for him. He had grown old in the space of five minutes.

'All sorts of people come here,' he suddenly heard a voice say. Hippolyte looked round and saw a watchman standing at his side. The watchman was an old man and had a kind face.

'Yes, they come and come,' said the old man communicatively, for he was tired of his night watch. 'And I see that you're interested too, comrade. Our club, I may say, is a most unusual one.'

Hippolyte looked agonizingly at the old man.

'Yes,' said the watchman, 'it is a most unusual club. There isn't another club like it.'

'What is there so unusual about it?' asked Hippolyte, trying to collect his thoughts.

The old man was delighted to be asked such a question, for it was obvious that he was fond of telling the story about the unusual club.

'Well,' began the old man, 'I've been a watchman here for ten years, and just you listen to what happened. You see, there was a club here—an ordinary kind of club—and I was the watchman. It was a poor sort of club. . . . We heated it and heated it, but we could never get it warm. One day Comrade Krasilnikov

comes up to me and asks : " Where's all the firewood going ? What are you doing with it ? " " Firewood ?" said I. " What d'you think I'm doing with the firewood ? I can't eat it, now can I ? " Comrade Krasilnikov did what he could with the place, but it was no good. If it wasn't the damp, it was the cold. Then the musical circle hadn't a room to practise in, and the dramatic society simply froze at their rehearsals. They asked for a five years' credit to build a new club, but I don't think anything came of it. And then in the spring Comrade Krasilnikov bought a chair for the stage. It was a good chair, a nice soft one——'

Hippolyte leant forward and listened intently. He was almost fainting, and the old man chuckled with delight as he told him how one day he was standing on the chair to take an electric bulb out of a lamp when he slipped and fell.

' Yes,' said the old man, ' and as I fell I ripped the chair seat—the cover I mean. And what d'you think I saw ? Little bits of glass came pouring out of the hole and white beads on a thread ! '

' Beads ? ' Hippolyte repeated.

' Yes, beads,' said the old man ; ' and I looked and I saw some little boxes. I didn't touch them. I went straight to Comrade Krasilnikov, and I told him what I'd found. And then I had to report about it to the committee. I didn't touch the little boxes. No, not I ! Just as well I didn't ! What do you think ? I'd found a treasure that had been hidden by a *bourgeois* ! '

' Where is the treasure ? ' shouted Hippolyte.

' Where ? Where ? ' repeated the old man. ' Ah ! you need to have some imagination, my dear man. The treasure is here ! '

' Where ? Where ? ' asked Hippolyte excitedly.

' Here in front of you ! ' shouted the old man, feeling delighted at the effect of his story. ' Here in front of you ! Polish your glasses, my friend, and take a good look at it ! A club has been built out of it. Don't

you see? The club! Central heating, a restaurant, a theatre: everything you can possibly want!'

Hippolyte was speechless, and without moving he stared helplessly at the watchman.

'So that's where my mother-in-law's diamonds are!' he thought. 'All here. All the hundred and fifty thousand roubles and nought nought copecks, as Bender used to say.'

The diamonds had been turned into glass for the windows; the pearls had been turned into a cool gymnasium; a diamond tiara had become a theatre with a revolving stage; the rubies had been changed into electric lamps; the emeralds had provided a wonderful library; and the other 'beads' had been turned into a children's crêche, work-rooms, a chess club, and billiard-tables.

The treasure was all there. It had been preserved and had even increased. It could be touched, but it could not be carried away; it had passed into the service of others.

Hippolyte touched the granite front of the club. It was cold; it sent a shiver down his spine. He gave a shout and a cry; it was a mad, savage cry—the cry of a wounded animal. . . .

He pushed the watchman to one side, stumbled down the street, and disappeared round a corner.

The autumn sun had risen and Moscow stirred into life again.

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