

Arkady and Boris Strugatsky.

Monday begins on Saturday

MONDAY BEGINS ON SATURDAY
A tale for research fellows of a junior age

"But what is the strangest, the most incomprehensible of all, is the fact that authors can undertake such themes—I confess this is altogether beyond me, really... No, no, I don't understand it at all."

N.V. Gogol

THE FIRST TALE. Run Around a Sofa

Chapter 1

*Teacher: Children, write down the sentence:
"The fish was sitting in a tree."*

Pupil: But is it true that fish sit in trees?

Teacher: Well.. it was a crazy fish.

School Joke

I was approaching my destination. All around, pressing up against the very edge of the road, the green of the forest yielded now and then to a meadow overgrown with yellow sedge. The sun had been setting for an hour and still couldn't make it, hanging low on the horizon. The car rolled along, crunching on a gravel surface. I steered around the bigger rocks, and each maneuver caused the empty canisters to rattle and clang in the trunk.

A couple of men came out of the woods on the right and stopped on the shoulder, looking in my direction. One of them raised his hand. I took my foot off the gas, scrutinizing the pair. They seemed to be hunters, young, maybe a bit older than myself. Deciding I liked their looks, I stopped. The one who had raised his hand stuck his swarthy, hawk-nosed face through the window and asked, grinning, "Could you give us a lift to Solovetz?"

The second man, with a reddish beard and without a moustache, peering over his shoulder, was also smiling. These were positively nice people.

"Sure thing. Get in," I said. "One in the front and one in the back, for I have stuff on the backseat.

"A true philanthropist," pronounced the hawk-nosed one joyfully as he slid the gun off his shoulder and sat down next to me.

The bearded one was looking through the rear door in a quandary of indecision and said, "Eh, could I maybe move it a little?"

I leaned over the back of the seat and helped him clean off a space occupied by a sleeping bag and a rolled-up tent. He sat down gingerly, placing his gun between his knees.

"Shut the door tighter," I said.

Everything was going along normally. The car started off. The hawk-nosed one turned around and started an animated discourse about how much nicer it was to be riding in a passenger car than to be traveling on foot. The bearded one mumbled assent and kept slamming the door. "Pick up the raincoat," I counseled, looking at him through the rear-view mirror.

"You're pinching it in the door." After five minutes everything finally settled down. I asked, "Is it some ten kilometers to Solovetz?"

"Right" answered Hawk-nose, "or a little more. Though, in truth, the road isn't very good, made mostly for trucks."

"The road is quite decent," I contradicted. "I was promised I couldn't get through at all."

"On this road you can get through even in the fall."

"Here, maybe, but from Korobetz on it's just a plain dirt road."

"It's a dry summer this year; everything is dried out from the drought."

"Over by Zatonyie there have been some rains, they say," noted the bearded one on

the rear seat

"Who said?" asked Hawk-nose.

"Merlin said."

For some reason they both laughed. I fished out my cigarettes, lighted up, and passed them around.

"Clara Tsetkin brand," said Hawk-nose, studying the pack. "Are you from Leningrad?"

"Yes."

"Touring?"

"Touring," I said. "And you— are you from around here?"

"Native," said Hawk-nose.

"Me, I am from Murmansk," offered the bearded one.

"For Leningrad it must be all the same— North, whether it's Murmansk or Solovetz," said Hawk-nose.

"Well, not really," I said politely.

"Are you going to stop over in Solovetz?" asked Hawk-nose.

"Of course," I said. "It's Solovetz I am going to."

"You have friends or relatives there?"

"No," I said, "just going to wait up for some friends. They are taking the shore route and Solovetz is our rendezvous point"

I saw a heap of gravel piled up ahead, braked, and said, "Hang on tight." The car bounced and pitched. Hawk-nose banged his nose on the gun barrel. The engine roared, rocks flew up against the undercarriage.

"Poor old car," said Hawk-nose.

"That's that," I said.

"It's not everyone who would drive on a road like this with his own car."

"I would," I said. The freshly graveled section came to an end.

"Oh, so it's not your own car," guessed Hawk-nose with some tone of disappointment, it seemed to me. I felt piqued.

"And what sense would there be in buying a car so you could drive on pavement? Where there is pavement there is nothing of interest and where it's interesting—there's no pavement."

"Yes, of course," Hawk-nose commented diplomatically.

"It's dumb to make an idol out of a car," I asserted.

"So it is," said the bearded one. "But not everyone thinks so."

We started talking cars and came to the conclusion that if you were going to buy anything at all, a GAZ-69 would be best, but unfortunately they were not for sale to the public. Later Hawk-nose asked, "So, where do you work?"

I answered, "Colossal!"

Exclaimed Hawk-nose, "A programmer! That's exactly what we are looking for. Listen. Quit your institute and join up with us!"

"And what do you have to offer?"

"What do we have?" asked Hawk-nose, turning around.

"Aldan-three," said The Beard.

"A well-endowed machine," I said. "Has it been running well?"

"Well, how shall I say..

"I get it," I said.

"As a matter of fact, it hasn't been debugged yet," said The Beard.

"Stay here with us and fix it up."

"We'll arrange your transfer before you can count to two," added Hawk-nose.

"What are you working on?" I asked.

"As with all science—the happiness of man."

"Understood," I said. "Something to do with space?"

"That too," said Hawk-nose.

"Well, you know what they say—let well enough alone," said I.

"Big city and good pay," said The Beard in a low voice, but I heard him.

"Don't," I said, "don't judge it in terms of money."

"No, really, I was just kidding," said The Beard. "It's his idea of a joke," said Hawk-nose "You couldn't find more interesting work anywhere else than with us."

"Why do you think so?"

"I am positive."

"But I am not convinced."

Hawk-nose chuckled. "We'll talk about that some more," he said. "Are you going to stay long in Solovetz?"

"Two days maximum."

"So we'll talk on day two."

The Beard announced: "Personally, I see the hand of fate in this. There we were walking through the woods and we meet a programmer. I sense that we are meant to be."

"You really need a programmer that badly?" I asked.

"Our need is dire indeed."

"I'll talk to the fellows," I promised. "I know some who are unhappy."

"We don't need just any programmer," said Hawk-nose. "Programmers are in short supply, and are spoiled, but we don't need a prima donna."

"That's more complicated," I said.

Hawk-nose started counting his fingers. "We need a programmer who: a — is not spoiled; b — is a volunteer; c — is willing to live in a dorm — "

"D," picked up The Beard, "will take one hundred and twenty rubles."

"And how about wings?" I asked. "Or, say, a halo around the head? You are searching for one in a thousand!"

"But all we need is just that one," said Hawk-nose.

"But what if there's only nine hundred?"

"We'll settle for nine-tenths."

The forest fell away on either side; we crossed a bridge and ran along between potato fields.

"Nine o'clock," said Hawk-nose. "Where are you planning to spend the night?"

"I'll sleep in the car. How late are the stores open?"

"The stores are already closed," said Hawk-nose. "You could stay in the dorm," said The Beard. "I have an extra bunk bed in my room."

"You can't park near the dorm," Hawk-nose said dreamily.

"Yeah, I guess so," said The Beard, chuckling for some private reason.

"We can park the car over by the police," said Hawk-nose.

"That's a lot of folderol," said The Beard, "Here I am prattling nonsense, and you trail right along. How's he going to get in the dorm?"

"Right, right, damn it," said Hawk-nose. "Quite so; can't get through a day off without forgetting one of these sidelights."

"How about transvecting him?"

"That's a no-no," said Hawk-nose. "You are not dealing with a sofa, you know. And

you are no Cristobal Junta, and neither am I..."

"Don't worry yourselves," I said. "It's not the first time I slept in the car."

Suddenly I felt a terrible yen to sleep between sheets. It had been four nights that I had been sleeping in a bag.

"I've got it," said Hawk-nose. "Ho-ho — Iznakurnozh!"¹

"Right!" exclaimed The Beard. "Over to Lukomoriye with him!"

"Honest to God, I can sleep over in the car," I said.

"You are going to sleep in a house," said Hawk-nose, "on relatively clean sheets. There must be some way we can repay you...."

"You wouldn't want us to push a ruble on you, would you?" said The Beard.

We entered the town. Ancient stout fences, mighty log houses with blackened timbers and narrowish windows, decorated with carved aprons on windows and carved wooden cockerels on the roofs, stretched on both sides of the street. Here and there a dirty brick structure with iron doors evoked the half-known word for granary. The street was wide and straight and bore the name of Peace Prospect. Up ahead, toward the center of town, I could make out some two-story town houses with interspersed open squares.

"Turn right at the next alley," said Hawk-nose.

I switched on the turn signal, braked, and turned right. Here the road was overgrown with grass, but a brand-new Zaporozhets was snuggled up against one of the gates. House numbers were hung over the posterns, and the numerals were almost invisible against the rusty tinplate.

The alley was elegantly titled Lukomoriye² Street. It was rather narrow and squeezed between sturdy palisades that must have been erected in those times when Swedish and Norwegian pirates raided the lands.

"Halt," said Hawk-nose. I braked, and he bumped his nose on the gun barrel again. "Now, then," he said, massaging his nose, " You wait for me here and I will go to arrange everything."

"Really, you shouldn't," I said, for the last time.

"No more arguments. Volodia, keep him in your sights."

Hawk-nose climbed out of the car, and, bending down, squeezed through the low gate. The house was invisible behind the towering gray stockade. The postern was altogether remarkable, big enough for a locomotive depot, hung on rusty hinges that must have weighed a stone apiece.

I read the signs with growing astonishment. There were three. On the left wing, coldly gleaming with thick glass, there was an imposing blue sign with silver letters:

1. Izba na kuryikh nozhkakh: Log cottage on hen's legs, of Russian folklore.

2. A magical place in Russian literature.

SRIWaT
Izba on Hen's Legs
Monument
of
Solovetz Antiquity

On the right wing hung a rusty sheet-metal tablet reading, Lukomoriye St., No. 13, N.K. Gorynitch,¹ while under it, standing ut in all it's beauty, a piece of plywood bore in inked letters leaning every which way:

CAT OUT OF ORDER

Administration

"What CAT?" I asked. "Committee for Armament Technology?"

The bearded one tittered. "Main thing is — don't worry about it," he said. "It's quite amusing here with us, but everything will be quite under control."

I got out of the car and proceeded to wipe the windshield. Something suddenly scuffled overhead. I took a look. Settling in and propping himself comfortably on the gate was a gray-and-white tomcat of gigantic proportions such as I had never seen before. Having settled himself to his satisfaction, he bestowed me with a sated and indifferent gaze out of his yellow eyes.

"Puss-puss-puss," I said mechanically. The cat politely but coldly opened his huge and toothy jaws, delivered a dull throaty growl, and turned away to look inside the yard. The voice of Hawk-nose issued thence:

"Basil, old friend, may I be permitted to disturb you?"

The bolt squealed. The cat got up and noiselessly dived into the yard. The gates swayed heavily, there was an awful cracking and screeching, and the left wing of the gate slowly swung open, followed by Hawk-nose's straining and reddened face.

"Benefactor!" he called. "Drive in!"

I got back in the car and slowly drove into the yard. The yard was quite extensive. In its depths stood a house constructed of huge logs, and in front of it a squat giant of an oak with a thick, wide, and heavy crown, which screened the roof from view. A path paved with flagstones led from the gate to the house, curving around the oak. To the right there was a vegetable garden, and to the left, in the middle of the lawn, reared a well-house with windlass, blackened by time and covered with moss. I parked the car off to the side, turned off the engine, and got out.

1. Reference to Zmei Gorynitch, a fire-breathing dragon of Russian folklore.

The bearded Volodia also climbed out, leaned the gun against the body of the car, and started to shrug on his rucksack.

"Here you are, all settled," he said.

Hawk-nose was closing the gates with groanings and squealings for accompaniment while I, feeling a bit out of place, was looking about, not quite knowing what to do with myself.

"Ah, and here's the landlady!" cried The Beard, "And how be ye, Granny-, Naina, light of my eyes, Kievna!

The landlady must have been well on the other side of a hundred. She came toward us slowly, leaning on a knobby cane, dragging her feet clad in felt boots with galoshes over them. Her face was a dark sepia web of wrinkles, out of which jutted a nose as sharp and curved as a yatagan and her eyes peered pale and dim, as though obscured by cataracts.

"Greetings, greetings, grandchild," she pronounced in an unexpectedly resonant basso. "So this will be the new programmer? Hello, friend, welcome, and make yourself at home!"

I bowed, feeling well advised to keep quiet. Over the black kerchief tied under her chin, the old hag's head was covered with a nylon scarf, which was gaily decorated with a picture of the Atomium and bearing the same inscription in several languages: Brussels World Fair. Sparse bristles stuck out under her nose and on her chin. She was dressed in black broadcloth and a quilted vest.

"Here's the situation, Naina Kievna," said Hawk-nose, wiping rust from his palms, "We have to put up our new colleague for two nights. May I present.. - Mmm.."

"Don't bother," said the crone, scrutinizing me. "I can see for myself. Privalov, Alexander Ivanovich, 1938, male, Russian, member of VLKSM, no, no, has not participated, had not, was not, but will have, my crystal one, a long, long road and an interest in a government house, and what you should fear and avoid, my very diamond, is an ill-willed redhead man, and won't you gild my palm, my precious..."

"Ha-hm!" Hawk-nose pronounced loudly, and the crone stopped short.

"Just call me Sasha..." I squeezed out the previously prepared phrase.

"And where shall I put him?" inquired the crone.

"In the spare room, of course," said Hawk-nose in a somewhat irritated manner.

"And who will be responsible?"

"Naina Kievna!" roared Hawk-nose in the best rolling tones of a provincial tragedian. He grabbed the old hag under the arm and dragged her off toward the house. You could hear them arguing.

"But we agreed!"

"And what if he swipes something?"

"Can't you be quiet! He is a programmer, don't you understand? Komsomolec! Scientist!"

"And what if he starts sucking his teeth?"

I turned toward Volodia, ill at ease. Volodia tittered.

"It's a bit embarrassing," I said.

"Don't worry; it's going to work out just fine." He was going to say something else, when the crone started shouting: "And the sofa— how about the sofa?"

I started nervously and said, "You know what? I think I'd better go, no?"

"Let's have no more of that kind of talk," Volodia said decisively.

"Everything will be worked out. It's just that the old woman is looking to have her due, and Roman and I don't have any cash."

"I will pay," I said. Now I wanted to leave very badly. I can't stand these so-called daily-life collisions.

Volodia shook his head, "Nothing of the sort. Here he comes. Everything's in order." The hawk-nosed Roman came up to us, took me by the arm, and said, "Well, it's all fixed. Let's go."

"Listen. It doesn't feel right, somehow," I said. "After all, she is not obliged..."

But we were already on the way to the house.

"She is obliged — she is obliged," repeated Roman.

Having circumnavigated the oak, we came up to the rear entrance. Roman pushed on the dermatin-covered door, and we found ourselves in a large, clean but poorly lighted entryway. The old hag waited for us with compressed lips, and hands folded on her stomach.

At the sight of us, she boomed out vindictively, "And the statement — let's have that statement now! Stating thus and so: have received such and such, from such and such; which person has turned over the above-mentioned to the undersigned..."

Roman yelped weakly, and we entered the assigned room. It was cool, with a single window hung with a calico curtain.

Roman said in a tense voice, "Make yourself at home."

The old woman immediately inquired from the entry in a jealous tone, "And he won't be sucking his teeth?"

Roman barked without turning around, "No, he won't! I'm telling you there are no teeth to worry over."

"Then let's go and write up the statement."

Roman raised his eyebrows, rolled his eyes, shook his head, but still left the room. I looked around. There wasn't much furniture. A massive table covered with a worn-out gray cloth with a fringe stood by the window, and in front of it — a rickety stool. A vast sofa was placed against a bare wood wall, and a hanging rack hung on the other wall, which was decorated with assorted wallpaper. The hanging rack was stuffed with old trash (felt boots, bald fur coats, torn caps, and earmuffs). A large Russian stove jutted into the room resplendent with fresh calcimine, and a large murky mirror in a peeling frame hung in the opposite corner. The floor was scoured clean and covered with striped runners.

Two voices boomed on in a duet behind the wall: the old woman's voice buzzed on the same note; Roman's went up and down.

"Tablecloth, inventory number two hundred and forty-five.."

"Are you going to list each floorboard?"

"Table, dining..."

"Put down the stove, too."

"You must be orderly.... Sofa.."

I went up to the window and drew the curtain. Outside was the oak, and nothing else could be seen. Quite evidently it was a truly ancient tree. Its bark was gray and somehow dead looking, and its monstrous roots, which had worked out of the ground, were covered with red-and-white lichen. "Put down the oak, too!" said Roman behind the wall. A fat, greasy book lay on the windowsill. I ruffled it absentmindedly, came away from the window, and sat down on the sofa. All at once, I felt sleepy. Remembering that I had driven the car for fourteen hours that day, I decided that perhaps there was no point in all this rush, that my back ached, that everything was jumbled in my head, that I didn't give a hang about the tiresome hag, and that I wished everything would get settled so I could lie down and go to sleep....

"There you are," said Roman, appearing in the doorway. "The formalities are over." He waved his hands, fanning ink-stained fingers. "Our digits are fatigued; we wrote and wrote... Go to bed. We are leaving, and you can rest easy. What are you doing tomorrow?"

"Waiting," I said, listless.

"Where?"

"Here, and at the post office."

"You'll not leave tomorrow. probably?"

"Probably not. Most likely—the day after tomorrow."

"Then we'll see you again. Our liaison is still ahead of us." He smiled and went out with a wave of his hand. I should see him out and say goodbye to Volodia, I thought lackadaisically, and lay down. And there was the old woman in the room again. I got up. She looked hard at me for some time.

"I fear me, old fellow, that you'll be sucking your teeth," she said.

"No I won't be," I said. Then, exhausted, "It's sleeping I'll be."

"Then lie down and sleep... Just pay me and snooze."

I reached for my wallet in the back pocket. "What do I owe you?"

The crone raised her eyes to the ceiling. "Let's say a ruble for the quarters... Fifty kopecks for the bed-clothes — that's my own, not GI.

For two nights, that comes out to be three rubles... As to what you'll throw in for generosity's sake — that's for my troubles, you know— that I couldn't say...

I proffered her a five-ruble note.

"Make it a ruble out of generosity for now," said I, "and then we'll see."

The crone snatched the money and retired, muttering something about change. She was absent a fair time and I was about to forget the change and the bed-sheets, but she came back and laid a handful of dirty coppers on the table.

"And here's your change, governor," she said. "One nice ruble, exactly; you needn't count."

"I won't count," I said. "How about the sheets?"

"I'll make your bed right away. You go take a walk in the yard, and I'll get right to it."

I went out, extricating my pack of cigarettes. The sun had finally set and the white night had arrived. Dogs were barking somewhere in the distance. I sat down by the oak on a garden bench that had sunk into the ground, lighted up, and stared at the pale, starless sky. The cat appeared noiselessly out of somewhere, glanced at me with his fluorescent eyes, and then rapidly climbed up the oak and disappeared in its foliage. I forgot about him at once, and flinched when he began pottering above me. Some sort of rubbish fell on my head. "You darned..." I said aloud, and shook myself. The desire to sleep became overwhelming. The crone came out, and trudged her way to the well, not seeing me. I took this to mean that the bed was ready, and went back to the room.

The perverse crone had made my bed on the floor. Oh no you don't, I thought, slid the bolt on the door, dragged the bedding over onto the sofa, and began to undress. The somber light fell through the window; the cat was thrashing about noisily in the oak. I shook my head, to dislodge the rubbish from my hair. It was strange and unexpected rubbish: largish dry fish scales. Prickly to sleep on, I thought. I fell on the pillow and was immediately asleep.

Chapter 2

The deserted house became the lair of foxes and badgers, and that is why weird spirits and shape-shifters can now appear here.

A. Weda

I woke up in the middle of the night because a conversation was going on in the room. Two voices were talking in a barely audible whisper. They were very similar, but one was a bit stifled and hoarse and the other betrayed an extreme irritation.

"Stop wheezing," whispered the irritated one. "Can't you do without it?"

"I can," responded the stifled one, and began to hack.

"Be quiet!" hissed the irritated voice.

"It's the wheezes," explained the stifled one. "The morning cough of the smoker..." He started hacking again.

"Get out of here," said the irritated one.

"He is asleep, in any case..."

"Who is he? Where did he come from?"

"How should I know?"

"What a disgusting development... such phenomenal bad luck."

Again the neighbors can't get to sleep, I thought, half awake. I imagined I was at home. I have these neighbors there, two brother physicists, who adore working through the night. Toward two A.M. they run out of cigarettes and then they invade my room and start feeling about for them, banging the furniture and cursing at each other.

I grabbed the pillow and flung it at random. Something fell with a crash, and then silence ensued.

"You can return my pillow," I said, "and welcome to leave. The cigarettes are on the table."

The sound of my own voice awakened me completely. I sat up. Somewhere dogs were barking despondently; behind the wall the old woman snored menacingly. At last I remembered where I was. There was no one in the room.

In the dim light I saw the pillow on the floor and the trash that had fallen from the hanging rack. The old crone will have my head, I thought, jumping up. The floor was icy and I stepped over on the runners. The snoring stopped. I froze. The floorboards creaked; something crackled and rustled in the corners. The crone gave a deafening whistle and continued her snoring. I picked up the pillow and threw it on the sofa. The trash smelled of dog. The hanging rack had fallen off its support on one side. I re-hung it and began picking up the old trash. No sooner had I hung up the last coat, than the rack came away again and, sliding along the wallpaper, hung by one nail again. The crone stopped snoring and I turned cold with sweat. Somewhere, nearby, a cock crowed loudly. To the soup pot with you, I thought venomously. The crone behind the wall set to turning, the bedspring snapping and creaking. I waited, standing on one foot.

Someone in the yard said softly, "Time for bed; we have sat up too long today." The voice was youthful and female.

"So be it, it's off to sleep," responded the other voice. There was a protracted yawn.

"No more splashing for you today?"

"It's too cold. Let's go rock-a-bye."

All was quiet. The old hag growled and muttered, and I returned cautiously to the sofa. I'll get up early in the morning and fix everything up properly.

I turned on my right side, pulled the blanket over my ear, and it suddenly became crystal clear to me that I wasn't at all sleepy — that I was hungry. Oh-oh, I thought. Severe measures had to be taken at once, and I took them.

Consider, for instance, a system of integral equations of the type commonly found in star statistics: both unknowns are functions to be integrated. Naturally the only solutions possible are by successive numerical approximations and only with computers such as the RECM. I recalled our RECM. The main control panel is painted the color of boiled cream. Gene is laying a package on the panel and is opening it unhurriedly.

"What have you got?"

"Mine is with cheese and sausage." Polish, lightly smoked, in round slices.

"Poor you, it's married you should be. I have cutlets, with garlic, homemade. And a dill pickle."

No, there are two dill pickles.. Four cutlets, and to make things even, four pickles. And four pieces of buttered bread.

I threw off the blanket and sat up. Maybe there was something left in the car? No— I had already cleaned out everything there was. The only remaining item was the cookbook that I had got for Valya's mother, who lived in Liezhnev.

Let's see, how does it go? Sauce piquant... half a glass of vinegar, two onions, and a pinch of pepper. Served with meat dishes... I can see it now with miniature beefsteaks. What a rotten trick, I thought, not just any old beefsteaks, but miniature ones. I jumped up and ran to the window. The night air was distinctly laden with the odor of miniature beefsteaks. Out of some nether depths of my subconscious this floated up: "Such dishes were usually served him in the taverns as: marinated vegetable soup, brains with fresh peas, pickles [I swallowed], and the perpetual layer cake..." I must distract myself, I thought, and took the book on the windowsill. It was A Gloomy Morning by Alexis Tolstoi. I opened it at random.

"Makhno, having broken the sardine can opener, pulled out a mother-of-pearl knife with half a hundred blades, and continued to operate with it, opening tins with pineapple [Tough luck, I thought], French pate, with lobsters, which filled the room with a pungent smell."

Gingerly I put down the book and sat down on the stool by the table. At once a strong, appetizing odor permeated the room: it must have been the odor of lobsters. I began to ponder why I had never tried a lobster before, or, say, oysters. With Dickens, everybody eats oysters; working with folding knives, they cut huge slabs of bread, spread them thickly with butter...

I began to smooth the tablecloth with nervous movements. On it, latent food stains appeared clearly visible. Much and tasty eating has been done on it, I thought. Probably lobsters and brains with peas. Or miniature beefsteaks with sauce piquant. Also large and medium-sized beefsteaks. People must have sighed, replete with food, and sucked their teeth in huge satisfaction. There was no cause for sighing and so I took to sucking my teeth.

I must have been doing it loudly and ravenously because the old woman behind the

wall creaked her bed, muttered angrily, rattled something noisily, and suddenly entered my room. She had on a long gray nightshirt, and she was carrying a plate, so that a genuine and not an imaginary odor of food spread through the room. She was smiling, and set the plate directly in front of me and rumbled sweetly, "Dig in, dear friend Alexander Petrovitch. Help yourself to what God has sent, by me as messenger...."

"Really now, really, Naina Kievna," I was stammering, "you shouldn't let me disturb you so..."

But my hand was already holding a fork with a horn handle, which had appeared from somewhere, and I began to eat while the old woman stood by and nodded and repeated, "Eat, my friend, eat to your health..."

And I ate it all. The dish was baked potatoes with melted butter.

"Naina Kievna," I said earnestly, "you have saved me from starving to death."

"Finished?" said Naina Kievna, in a voice somehow tainted with hostility.

"Yes, and magnificently fed. A tremendous thanks to you! You can't even imagine how
— "

"What's there to imagine?" she interrupted, now definitely irritated.

"Filled up, I say? Then give me the plate.... The plate I say!"

"P-please," I mumbled.

— "Please, please..." I have to feed you here just for "please"...

"I can pay," said I, growing angry.

— "Pay, pay»... — She moved towards the door. — "Perhaps price of such things is not paid for at all? And you needn't have lied..."

"What do you mean— lied?"

"Lied, that's how. You said yourself you wouldn't suck your teeth!"

She fell silent and disappeared through the door.

What's with her? I thought. A strange old hag.

Maybe she noticed the clothes rack? There was the sound of creaking springs as she tossed in her bed, grumbling and complaining. Then she started singing softly to some barbarous tune: "I'll roll and I'll wallow, fed up on Ivash's meat."¹

Cold night air drew from the window. Shivering, I got up to return to the sofa, and it dawned on me that I had locked the door before retiring. Discomfited, I approached the door and reached out to check the bolt, but no sooner had my hand touched the cold iron, than everything began to swim before my eyes. I was, in fact, lying on the sofa, facedown in the pillow, my finger feeling the cool logs of the wall.

I lay there for some time in a state of shock, slowly growing aware that the old hag was snoring away somewhere nearby, and a conversation was in progress in the room. Someone was declaiming tutorially in a quiet tone:

"The elephant is the largest of all the animals on earth. On his face there is a large lump of meat, which is called a trunk because it's empty and hollow like a pipe. He bends and stretches it every which way and uses it in place of a hand.."

Growing icy cold and curious, I turned over gingerly on my right side. The room was as empty as before. The voice continued, even more didactic. "Wine, used in moderation, is exceedingly salutary for the stomach; but when drunk to excess, it produces vapors that debase the human to the level of dumb animals. You have seen drunks on occasion, and still remember the righteous indignation that welled up in you.."

I sat up with a jerk, lowering my feet to the floor. The voice stopped. It was my impression that it was coming from somewhere behind the wall. Everything in the

1. Phrase from the fairytale "Ivashka and Baba Yaga"

room was as before; even the coat rack, to my astonishment, hung in its proper place. And to my further surprise, I was again very hungry.

"Tincture, ex vitro of antimony," announced the voice abruptly. I shivered. "Magiphterium antimon angelii salae. Bafllii oleum vitri antimonii elixiterium antimoiale!" There was the sound of frank tittering. "What a delirium!" said the voice and continued, ululating "Soon these eyes, not yet defeated, will no longer see the sun, but let them not be shut ere being told of my forgiveness and salvation. This be from The Spirit or Moral Thoughts of the Renowned Jung. Extracted from his Nighttime Meditations. Sold in Saint Petersburg and Riga, in the bookstore of Sveshnikov for two rubles in hard cover." Somebody sobbed "That, too, is delirium," said the voice, and declaimed with expression:

"Titles, wealth, and beauty,

Life's total booty.

They fly, grow weaker, disappear

O, ashes! and happiness is fakel

Contagion gnaws the heart

And fame cannot be kept..."

Now I understood where they were talking. The voice came from the corner, where the murky mirror hung.

"And now," said the voice, "the following: I: this I is cosmic. The union with disunion, arising from the eclipse of enlightenment, the I sublimates with spiritual attainment."

"And where is that derived from?" I said. I was not expecting an answer. I was convinced I was asleep.

"Sayings from the Upanishads," the voice replied readily.

"And what are the Upanishads?" I wasn't sure I was asleep anymore.

"I don't know," said the voice.

I got up and tiptoed to the mirror. I couldn't see my reflection. The curtain, the corner of the stove, and a whole lot of things were reflected in the cloudy glass. But I wasn't among them.

"What's the matter?" asked the voice. "Are there questions?"

"Who's talking?" I asked, peering behind the mirror. Many dead spiders and a lot of dust were there. Then I pressed my left eye with my index finger. This was an old formula for detecting hallucinations, which I had read in To Believe or Not to Believe?, the gripping book by B. B. Bittner.

It is sufficient to press on the eyeball, and all the real objects, in contradistinction to the hallucinated, will double. The mirror promptly divided into two and my worried and sleep-dulled face appeared in it. There was a draft on my feet. Curling my toes, I went to the window and looked out.

There was nobody there and neither was the oak. I rubbed my eyes and looked again. The moss-covered frame of the well with its windlass, my car, and the gates were distinctly visible directly in front of me. Still asleep, I decided, to calm myself. My glance fell on the disheveled book on the windowsill. In the last dream, it was the third volume of The Road to Calvary; now I read the title as: P.I.Karpov, Creativity of the Mentally Ill and Its influence on the Development of Science, Art, and Technology. Teeth chattering from a sudden chill, I thumbed the pages and looked through the colored illustrations. Next I read "Verse No. 2":

Up high in a cumulus ring
An ebon-winged sparrow
With loneliness shuddering
Glides swift as an arrow.
He flies through the night
By the pale moonlight
And, through all undaunted,
Sees all below him.
Proud predator enraged
Flying silent as a shadow,
Eyes ablaze with fire.

The floor suddenly swayed beneath me. There was a piercing and prolonged creaking, then, like the rumble of a distant earthquake, sounded a rolling "Ko-o Ko-o...Ko-o.." The house swayed as though it were a boat in the waves. The yard behind the window slid sideways, and a gargantuan chicken leg stretched out from beneath, stuck its claws into the ground, raked deep furrows in the grass, and disappeared below. The floor tilted steeply, and I sensed that I was falling I grabbed something soft, struck something solid with head and side, and fell off the sofa. I was lying on the boards clutching the pillow that had fallen with me. It was quite bright in the room. Behind the window somebody was methodically clearing his throat.

"So-o, then" said a well-poised male voice. "In a certain kingdom, in an ancient tsardom, there was and lived a tsar by the name of mmm.. well, anyway, it's really not all that important. Let's say me-eh.. Polouekt. He had three sons, tsareviches. The first.. me-eh.. the third was an imbecile, but the first...?"

Bending down like a trooper under fire, I sneaked up to the window and looked out. The oak was in its place. Tomcat Basil stood on his hind legs with his back to it, immersed in deep thought. In his teeth, he clamped the stem of a water lily. He kept looking down at his feet and sounding a drawn-out "Me-eh-eh." Then he shook his head, put his front legs behind his back, and, hunching over like a lecturing professor, glided smoothly away from the oak.

"Very well," he enunciated through his teeth, "So, once upon a time there lived a tsar and tsarina. And they had one son..me-eh.. an imbecile, naturally..." Chagrined, he spit out the flower, and, frowning mightily, rubbed his forehead.

"A desperate situation," he stated. "But I do remember this and that! 'Ha-ha-ha! I'll have my snacks: horse for lunch, lad for supper.' Now, where would that be from? But, Ivan, you can figure out for yourself, the imbecile replies: "You, disgusting beast, stuffing yourself before you caught the snow-white swan!" And later, of course, the tempered arrow and off with all the three heads. Ivan removes the three hearts and carts them home to his mother; the cretin... Now, how do you like that for a gift!" The cat laughed sardonically, and then sighed. "Then there is that sickness— sclerosis," he remarked.

Sighing again, he turned back toward the oak and began to sing. "Krou, krou, my little ones! Krou, krou, my pigeonlets! I... me-eh... I slaked your thirst with the dew of my eyes... more exactly— watered you.

He sighed for the third time and walked on silently for some time. As he reached the oak, he yelled out abruptly in a very unmusical voice, "Choice morsel she finished

not!"

A massive gusli suddenly appeared in his paws; I didn't notice at all how he came by it. Desperately he struck with his paw, and, catching the strings with his claws, bellowed even louder, as though trying to drown out the music:

"Doss im tann void foster ist
Doss macht dos hoitz
Dass... me-eh.. mein shatz... or katz?"

He stopped and paced a while, banging the strings in silence; then he sang in a low, uncertain voice:

"Oi, I been by that there garden That I'll tell as gospel truth:
Thus and snappy, They dug the poppy."

He returned to the oak, leaned the gusli against it, and scratched behind his ear with a hind leg.

"Work, work, work," he said, "and nothing but work!"

He placed his paws behind his back again and went off to the left of the oak, muttering, "It has come to me, oh great tsar, that in the splendid city of Baghdad, there lived a tailor, by the name.." He dropped to all fours, arched his back, and hissed angrily "It's especially bad with the names! Abu.. Au Somebody Ibn, whoever... So-o, all right, let's say Polouekt. Polouekt Ibn, me-eh. Poluektovich.. In any event, I can't recall what happened to him. Dog take it, let's start another."

I lay with my stomach on the sill in a trance-like state, watching the unfortunate Basil wandering about the oak, now to the left and then to the right, muttering, coughing, meowing and mooing, standing on all fours in his efforts — in a word, suffering endlessly. The diapason of his knowledge was truly grandiose. He did not know a single tale or song more than halfway, but to make up for this, the repertoire included Russian, Ukrainian, West Slavic, German, English — I think even Japanese, Chinese, and African — fairy tales, legends, sermons, ballads, songs, romances, ditties, and refrains. The malfunction drove him into such a rage that several times he flung himself at the oak, ripping its bark with his claws, hissing and spitting while his eyes glowed with a satanic gleam and his fury tail, thick as a log, would now point at the zenith, then twitch spasmodically, then lash his sides. But the only song he carried to the end was "Tchizhik Pizhic,"¹ and the only fairy tale he recounted at all coherently was "The House that Jack Built" in the Marshak translation, and even that with several excisions. Gradually— apparently fatiguing— his speech acquired more and more catlike accent. "Ah me, in the field and meadow," he sang. "the plow goes by itself, and.. me-e.. ah.. me-a-ou...and behind that plow god himself has paced... or wended.. ?"

Finally, altogether spent, he sat down on his tail and stayed thus for some time, his head bent low. Then, meowing softly and sorrowfully, he took the gusli under his arm and wandered off on the dewy grass, haltingly on three legs.

I climbed off the sill and dropped the book. I distinctly remembered that the last time it was Creativity of the Mentally Ill, and was sure that was the book which had fallen on the floor. But the book I picked up and placed on the sill was The Solution of Crimes by A. Swanson and O. Wendell. Dully I opened it, scanned a few samples, and at once I was sure that I sensed there was someone strangled hanging in the oak. Fearfully I raised my eyes. From the lower branches, a wet silvery shark tail hung. It was swinging heavily in the gusts of the morning wind.

I shied violently and struck the back of my head on something hard. A telephone rang loudly. I looked around. I was lying crosswise on the sofa, the blanket had slid to the floor, and the early sun was shining into the window through the oak leaves.

1. Well-known folk song

Chapter 3

*It entered my head that the usual interview with
the devil or a magician could be successfully
replaced by a skillful exploitation of the postulates of science.*

H. G. Wells

The phone kept ringing. I rubbed my eyes, gazed through the window (the oak was in its place), studied the coat hanger (it, too, was in place). The telephone kept on. Behind the wall it was quiet in the old woman's room. So I leaped to the floor, opened the door (the bolt was shot), and came out in the entry. The telephone rang insistently. It stood on a shelf above a large water cask—a quite modern white plastic phone, such as I have seen in the movies and the director's office. I picked up the receiver.

"Hello."

"Who's this?" asked a piercing female voice.

"Whom do you want?"

"Is that Izbakurnozh?"

"What?"

"I am saying—is it the Izba on Hen's Legs or not? Who is talking?"

"Yes," I said. "It's the Izba. Whom do you want?"

"Oh, hell," said the female voice. "Take this telephonogram."

"Let's have it."

"Write it down."

"One minute," I said. "I'll get pencil and paper."

"Oh, hell," said the female voice

I brought over a notebook and a pencil.

"I am listening."

"Telephonogram number two hundred and six," said the female voice, "to Citizeness Gorynitch, Naina Kievna.

"Not so fast... Kievna... Next?"

"You are hereby requested.. to appear today the twenty-eighth of July.. of this year at midnight at the annual all-union fly-in... Have you got that down?"

"I have."

"The first meeting will take place on Bald Mountain. Formal dress. Employment of mechanized transport at your own expense. Signed.. Department Manager...Eich.. Em... Viy..."¹

"Who?"

"Viy! Eich Em Viy."

"I don't understand."

"Viy! Hron Monadovitch. Don't you know the department manager?"

"I don't know him," I said. "Spell it."

"Hell's bells! All right: Vampire, incubus, yang-yin... Have you got it down?"

1. Leader of ghost goblins and supernatural monsters.

"I think so," I said. "It comes out: Viy."

"Who?"

"Do you have polyps or something? I can't understand you."

"Vladimir, Ivan, Yakov."

"Right. Repeat the telephonogram." I repeated it.

"Correct. Sent by Onoukina. Who took it?"

"Privalov."

"Greetings, Privalov! Been in service here long?"

"Poodles serve," I said angrily. "I work!"

"Good, good. Work on. See you at the fly-in."

Tones sounded. I hung up and returned to my room. The morning was cool so I did my morning exercises hurriedly and dressed. What was transpiring seemed exceedingly curious and interesting to me. The telephonogram seemed to associate strangely in my consciousness with the events of the night, although I had no specific idea whatsoever exactly in what way. However that might be, certain ideas were beginning to circulate in my head, and my imagination was definitely aroused.

Everything that I was here witness to, was not altogether unfamiliar to me. I had read of such incidents before and remembered how the behavior of people finding themselves in analogous situations seemed to me extraordinarily and irritatingly inept. Instead of fully exploiting the enticing perspectives that were presented to them through a fortunate opportunity, they became frightened and struggled to return themselves to the humdrum and routine. One such exponent actually advised the reader to keep a good distance from the veil dividing our world from the unknown, threatening physical and spiritual maiming. I did not yet know how the events would develop, but I was already prepared to immerse myself in them enthusiastically.

Wandering about the room in search of a pitcher or mug, I went on with my inner discourse. These poltroons, I thought, resembled certain scientist-experimenters—very persistent, very hard-working, but totally lacking in imagination and consequently very cautious. Having obtained a non-trivial result, they shied away from it, precipitately explaining it as experimental contamination, and were in fact fleeing from the innovative, because they were, in truth, much too tied to the old concepts comfortably pigeonholed within the boundaries of authoritative theories. I was already designing some experiments with the shape-shifter book—it was still lying on the sill, but was now *The Last Exile* by Oldridge—and with the mirror and with tooth-sucking. I had several questions for tomcat Basil, and the mermaid living in the oak also presented a definite puzzle, although at times it seemed to me that I had only dreamed of her. I have nothing against mermaids, but I couldn't picture how one could be climbing trees... But on the other hand, what about the scales?

I found a dipper on the bucket by the telephone, but the bucket was empty and I went off to the well. The sun had already risen quite high. There was the distant hum of cars, a policeman's whistle, and the sound of a helicopter making its way ponderously across the sky. I approached the well and, noting with satisfaction that a battered tin bucket hung from the chain, began to unwind the windlass. The bucket, bouncing on the walls, went down into the black depth. There was a splash, the chain growing tight. I turned the crank, eyeing my car, which had a tired, dirty look, the windshield plastered with bugs. I decided it would be a good idea to fill up the radiator.

The bucket seemed inordinately heavy. When I stood it on the frame, a huge pike's head poked out of the water, all green and mossy. I jumped back.

"Going to drag me off to the market again?" inquired the pike, with strong okanye.

Bewildered, I kept quiet. "Can't you let me be in peace? Will you never have enough, biddy? How much can one stand? No sooner do I quiet down, to relax and doze a bit, than I get h-hauled out again! After all, I'm not young anymore — older than you maybe... The gills don't work so well, either." It was quite funny to see how she talked, just like a pike in the puppet theater. She opened and closed her toothy jaws with all her might and with a disturbing lack of synchronization with the pronounced sounds. She said the last phrase with the jaws convulsively clamped shut.

"Also the air is bad for me," she continued. "What are you going to do when I croak? It's all the fault of your female and stupid miserliness... You save and save and don't even know what for... Didn't you go bust on the last reform — well, didn't you? There you are! And what about the Catherine notes? You lined trunks with them! And the Kerensky rubles— didn't you fuel your stove with them?"

"You see—" said I, somewhat regaining my composure.

"Oi — who's that?" worried the pike.

"I... I am here just by chance. I was going to wash up a bit."

"Wash! And I thought it was the old hag again. Don't see so well— getting old. Furthermore, the refraction coefficient with the air is quite different. I ordered glasses for air, but I have lost them and can't find them. And who would you be?"

"A tourist," I said briefly.

"Oh, a tourist... And I thought it was that hag again. You can't imagine what she does with me. First she catches me, then drags me off to the market and sells me as an ingredient for a fish soup. So what can I do? I talk to the buyer: thus and thus, let me go back to my little ones— though why little ones, they are not children but granddaddies by now. You let me go, and I will serve you well. Just say, 'the pike's command, this wish of mine.' So they let me go. Some out of fear, some out of the goodness of their hearts, and some out of greed. Then I swim about in the river, but with my rheumatism, back to the warm well I go, and back again is the crone with the bucket." The pike retreated under the water, bubbled a bit, and came up again "Well, what is your wish, my fine one? But keep it simple, and not like some who want those new-fangled TV's or transistor radios. One lout went altogether ape: yearly plan at the sawmill for me. Cutting logs at my age!"

"Aha," I said. "Can you still do the TV?"

"No," the pike owned up. "I can't do a television receiver. Also, I can't do that automated combine with separator. I don't believe in them. Think of something more simple. Let's say thousand-league boots or an invisibility cloak... Well?"

My rising hope of escaping the greasing of the car began to fade.

"Don't worry yourself, ma'am," I said, "I really don't require anything. I'm going to just let you go."

"That's good," said the pike calmly. "I like people like you. The other day, too, there was this case. Some guy bought me in the market and I had to promise him a tsar's daughter. So there I am, swimming along in the river, full of shame, not knowing where to hide myself. Next thing, not looking where I am going, I barge right into a net. They lug me up. Again, I figure I'll have to lie my way out. So what do you think the man does? He grabs me right across the teeth so I can't open my mouth so that I can't open it. Here I go, I thought, I'll be boiled. But no, he hitched something on my fin and back in the water I go. See?"

The pike raised herself out of the bucket and placed a fin on the edge. At its base was a metal clamp on which I read: This specimen released in the Solovei River in the year 1854. Deliver to H.I.M. Academy of Science.

"Don't tell the hag," warned the pike. "She'll tear it out with the fin. Greedy, she is, the miser.

What should I ask her? I thought feverishly.

"How do you work your miracles?"

"What miracles?"

"You know — wish fulfillments."

"Oh, that? How do I do it? Been taught from infancy, that's how. I guess I don't really know... The Golden Fish,¹ she did it even better than I, but she is dead now. You can't escape your fate."

It seemed to me she sighed.

"From old age?" I asked.

"Old age, nothing! Young she was, and spritely. They dropped a depth charge on her, my fine friend. So belly-up she went, and some kind of vessel that happened nearby also sank. She would have bought herself off, but they didn't ask. No sooner sighted, than blam with the bomb.. That's the way of it." She was silent a while. "Well, then, are you going to let me go? It feels close somehow; there is going to be a thunderstorm."

"Of course, of course," I said, startled back to reality. "How should I do it? Throw you in, or in the bucket?"

"Throw me in, my good man, throw me in."

Carefully I dipped my hands into the bucket and extracted the pike— it must have weighed in at around eight kilos. She kept on murmuring, "And how about a self-serving tablecloth or a flying carpet— I'll be right here. You can count on me..."

"So long," I said, and let go. There was a noisy splash. For some time, I stood there gazing at my hands, covered with green slime. I experienced some kind of strange feeling. Part of the time an awareness came over me, like a gust of wind, that I was sitting on the sofa in the room, but all I had to do was shake my head and I was back at the well. The feeling dissipated. I washed in the fine ice-cold water, filled the car radiator, then shaved. The old woman was still out.

I was getting hungry, and it was time to go to the post office, where my friends might be waiting for me already. I locked the car and went out the gate.

I was unhurriedly sauntering down Lukomoriye Street, hands in the pockets of my gray GDR jacket, looking down at my feet. In the back pocket of my favorite jeans, crisscrossed with zippers, jingled the crone's coppers. I was reflecting. The skinny brochures of the "Znanie" society had accustomed me to the concept that animals were incapable of speech. Fairy tales from childhood, on the other hand, had insisted on the opposite. Of course, I agreed with the brochures, since never in my life had I seen talking animals. Not even parrots. I used to know one parrot who could growl like a tiger, but human speech he could not do. And now— the pike, the tomcat Basil, and even the mirror. Incidentally, it is precisely the inanimate objects that speak the most often. And, by the way, it's this last consideration which would never enter the head of my great granddaddy. In his ancestral viewpoint, a talking cat would be a much less fantastic item than a polished wood box, which howls, whistles, plays music, and talks in several languages. As far as the cat goes, it's more or less clear. But how about the pike? A pike does not have lungs. That's a fact. True, they do have an air ballast bladder whose function as far as I know is not entirely understood by ichthyologists. My ichthyologist acquaintance, Gene Skoromahov, postulates that it is truly totally unclear,

1. Reference to fairy tale "The Tale of the Fisherman and the Fish" by Alexander Pushkin.

and when I attempt to reason about it with arguments from the "Znanie" brochures, old Gene growls and spits in contempt. His rightful gift of human speech seems to desert him completely.

I have this impression that as yet we know very little about the potential of animals. Only recently it became clear that fish and sea animals exchange signals underwater. Very interesting pieces are written about dolphins. Or, let's take the ape Raphael. This I saw for myself. True, it cannot speak, but instead it has this developed reflex: green light — banana; red light — electric shock. Everything was just fine until they turned on the red and green lights simultaneously. Then Raphael began to conduct himself just like, for instance, old Gene. He was terribly upset. He threw himself at the window behind which the experimenter was seated, and took to spitting at it, growling and squealing hideously. And then there is the story — "Do you know what a conditioned reflex is? That's what happens when the bell rings and all these quasi-apes in white coats will run toward us with bananas and candies," — which one ape tells the other.

Naturally, all of this is not that simple. The terminology has not been worked out. Under the circumstances, any attempt to resolve the questions involving the potential and psychology of animals leaves you feeling totally helpless. But, on the other hand, when you have to solve, say, a system of integral equations of the type used in stellar statistics, with unknown functions under the integral, you don't feel any better. That's why the best thing is to— cogitate. As per Pascal: "Let us learn to think well— that is the basic principle of morality."

I came out on the Prospect of Peace and stopped, arrested by an unusual sight. Marching in the middle of the pavement was a man with flags in his hands. About ten paces behind him, engine revving and laboring, a huge white truck was drawing a gigantic cistern-like silvery trailer, from which issued wisps of smoke. Fire Danger was written all over the cistern, and busy little fire engines, bristling with fire extinguishers, were rolling along, keeping pace on its right and left. From time to time, mixing in with the steady roar of the engine, a different sound issued forth, somehow chilling the heart with a strange malaise. Simultaneously yellow tongues of flame spurted out of the cistern's ports. The faces of the firemen, hats pushed low on their ears, were stern and manly. Swarms of children swirled around the cavalcade, yelling piercingly, "Ti-li-lee ti-li-lay, they're caning the dragon away." Adult passersby fearfully hugged the fences. Their faces clearly depicted a desire to save their clothing from possible damage.

"There they go with dear Unc," a familiar raspy bass pronounced in my ear.

I turned around. Behind me, looking dejected, stood Naina Kievna with a shopping bag full of blue packets of granulated sugar.

"Trucking him off," she repeated. "Every Friday they take him."

"Where to?" I asked.

"To the test pad, old friend. They keep experimenting. Nothing else to do!"

"And whom are they taking, Naina Kievna?"

"What do you mean— whom? Can't you see for yourself?"

She turned and strode off, but I caught up with her.

"Naina Kievna, there was a telephonogram for you."

"From whom would that be?"

"From H.M. Viy."

"What about?"

"You are having some kind of fly-in today," I said, looking at her hard. "On Bald Mountain. Dress — formal."

The old woman was obviously pleased.

"Really?" she said. "Isn't that nice! Where is the telephonogram?"

"In the entry, by the phone."

"Anything about membership dues in it?" she asked, lowering her voice.

"In what sense?"

"Well, you know, such as, from seventeen hundred..." "No," said I. "Nothing like that was mentioned."

"Well enough. And how about transportation? Will there be a car to pick me up?"

"Let me carry your bags," I offered.

She sprang back.

"What do you have in mind?" she asked suspiciously.

"You cut that out — I don't like it. The bag he wants! Starting in young, aren't you?"

No way do I like old crones, I thought.

"So how is it with transportation?" she repeated.

"At your own expense," I gloated.

"Oh, the skinflints!" moaned she. "They took the broom for the museum, the mortar is in the shop, contributions are levied by the five-ruble bill, but to Bald Mountain — at your expense, please! The meter won't read low, my good fellow, and then he has to wait..."

Muttering and coughing, she turned from me and walked away. I rubbed my hands and went off in my own direction. My suppositions were being borne out. The skein of wondrous events was getting tighter. And, shame to admit, but this seemed a lot more fascinating at the moment than, say, even the modeling of a reflex process.

The Prospect of Peace was now deserted. A gang of kids were loitering at the cross street, apparently playing tip-cat. Catching sight of me, they quit the game and took off in my direction. Sensing unfavorable developments, I passed them quickly and bore off toward downtown. Behind my back a stifled and excited voice exclaimed, "Stilyaga." I quickened pace. "Stilyaga," bawled several at once. I was almost running, pursued by yells of, "Stilya-aga! Spindle-legs! Papa's Pobeda-driver..". Passersby were looking at me with compassion.

In such eventualities, it's best to dive into some refuge. I dived into the nearest door, which turned out to be a food store. I walked up and down the counters, assured myself that there was plenty of sugar, and found the choice of sausages and candies rather limited, which was amply compensated by the variety of fish products surpassing all expectations. Such appetizing and variegated salmon! I had a glass of soda water, and scanned the street.

The kids were gone. Thereupon I left the store and continued my journey. Presently the grain stores and log-cabin fortresses came to an end and were replaced by modern two-storied houses, interspersed with small parks. In the parks, small children were running about, old women were knitting warm things, and old men were playing dominoes as if for keeps. A spacious square turned up in the center of town, surrounded with two- and three-story buildings. It was paved with asphalt, punctuated in the center by the greenery of a garden. Above it rose a large red poster titled Honor Roll and several smaller posters with plotted curves and diagrams. I discovered the post office right there, in the square. The fellows and I had agreed that the first one to get to the town would leave a note with his coordinates in general

delivery. There was no note, and I left a letter with my address and instructions on how to find the cottage on hen's legs. Next I decided to have breakfast

Circling the square, I found a cinema playing Kozara; a bookstore, closed for inventory; the town hall with several dusty cars in front; the Hotel Frigid Sea, without vacancies as per usual; two kiosks with soda and ice cream; one general goods store, No. 2; an agricultural goods store, No. 18; dining room No. 11, which opened at noon; and a buffet, No. 3, closed without explanation. Next I observed the town police station and had a chat in its open doorway with a very young policeman about the location of the gas pump and the state of the road to Lezhnev.

"But where is your car?" inquired the policeman, looking around the square.

"Over with some people I know," I replied.

"Aha, with acquaintances" he said meaningfully. I felt he took note of me. Timidly I bowed off.

Next to the three-storied building of the local fisheries co-op, I finally located a small, clean tearoom, No. 16/27. It was a pleasant sort of place. There weren't too many customers, but those were indeed drinking tea, talking about simple and comprehensible things such as that over by Korobetz the little bridge had finally fallen in and one had to ford the stream; that it was a week since they had removed the Main Motor Vehicle Inspection Station at the fifteen-kilometer milepost and that, "The spark is a beast — it will knock an elephant down — but won't do its job worth a damn." There was a smell of gasoline and fried fish. Those who were not involved in conversation were eyeing my jeans, and I was happy to recall that on my rear there was a highly professional spot — the day before yesterday I had sat down most propitiously on my grease gun.

I took a full plate of fried fish, three glasses of tea, three sandwiches, paid up with a heap of the coppers from my crone friend ("Been out begging on the church steps." muttered the cashier), and settled in a cozy corner and proceeded to eat, enjoying the sight of those hoarse-voiced, heavy-smoking types. It was a pleasure to take in their sunburned, wiry, independent countenances with that I've-seen-it-all look, and watch how they ate with appetite, smoked with appetite, and talked with appetite. They were making use of their free time to the last second before the long hours on a bumpy, tiresome, dusty road in their hot and stuffy cabs under a hot sun. If I weren't a programmer, I would surely become a driver, and, of course, of no light-weight truck or even a bus, but of some freight monster with a ladder to the cab and a small crane for changing a wheel.

The neighboring table was occupied by a pair of young men who didn't look like drivers, and for this reason I didn't pay them any heed at first. Just as they didn't notice me, either. But as I was finishing my second glass of tea, the word "sofa" floated into my consciousness. Then, one of them said, "... In that case it doesn't make sense to have the hen's-legs cottage at all," so I began to listen. To my regret, they spoke quietly, and I had my back to them, so I couldn't hear too well. But the voices seemed familiar.

"no thesis... the sofa only..."

"... to such a hairy one?"

"...sofa.. the sixteenth stage"

"...with only fourteen stages in transvection..."

"...it's easier to model a translator."

"...does it matter who's tittering!"

"...I'll make a gift of a razor..."

"...we can't do without the sofa..."

At this point, one of them began to clear his throat, and in such a familiar way that I associated it instantly with last night and I turned around, but they were already on their way to the exit— two big men with square shoulders and strong, athletic necks. For some time, I could see them through the window as they crossed the square, circumnavigated the garden, and disappeared behind the diagrams. I finished my tea and sandwiches and also went out. There you have it. The mermaid didn't excite them. The talking cat did not intrigue them. But they couldn't do without the sofa.

I tried to remember what that sofa looked like, but nothing unusual came to mind. A proper sofa. A good sofa. Comfortable. Except when one slept on it, one dreamed of a strange reality.

It would have been good to return home at that point and get into all those sofa affairs in earnest. To experiment a bit with the shape-shifter book and have a heart-to-heart talk with Basil the tomcat and poke around the hen's-legs cottage to see if there were other interesting things in it.

But the car was also waiting there for me, which necessitated both a DC and a TS. I could put up with DC— it was only the Daily Care, calling for the shaking out of floor mats and the washing of the body with a stream of water under pressure, which washing, incidentally, could, in case of necessity, be performed by the substitute method of ablution with a watering can or a pail. But the TS.. that was a frightening concept for a neat person on a hot day. Because TS was none other than Technical Service, which technical service consisted of my lying under the car with the grease gun and gradually transferring its contents to the grease fittings and equally well to my person. It's hot and stuffy under a car and its undercarriage is covered with a thick layer of dried mud. In short, I was not very anxious to go home.

Chapter 4

*Who has permitted himself this diabolical jest?
Seize him, and tear off his mask so that we
may know whom we shall hang this morning
from the castle wall.*

E. Poe

I bought a two-day-old *Pravda*, drank a glass of soda water, and settled down on a bench in the park, in the shade of the Honor Roll. It was eleven o'clock. I looked through the paper carefully. This took seven minutes. Then I read the article about hydroponics, the feature about the doings in Kansk, and a long letter to the editor from the workers of a chemical plant. This took altogether twenty-two minutes.

Perhaps I should visit the cinema, I thought. But I had already seen *Kozara*, once in the theater and once on television. So I decided to have something to drink, folded the paper, and stood up. Of all the copper collection from the old hag, there remained only a single five-kopeck piece.

Finish it up, I decided; had a glass of soda with syrup, got a kopeck back, and bought a box of matches in the adjoining stall. There was nothing else to do downtown. So I started off at random— into a narrow street between store No. 2 and dining room No. 11.

There were almost no pedestrians. A huge dusty truck with a rattling trailer passed by. The driver, head and elbow stuck out of the window, was tiredly scanning the Belgian block pavement. Descending, the street turned sharply to the right, where the barrel of an ancient cast-iron cannon, frill of cigarette butts and dirt, was stuck in the ground. Soon the street ended at the cliff by the river. I sat a while on the edge admiring the landscape, then crossed over to the other side and strolled back to the center of town.

Curious, where did the truck go? I thought suddenly. There was no way down the cliff. I started looking around, searching for a gate, and then discovered a small but very strange-looking building squeezed in between grim brick warehouses. The windows of the lower story were set with iron bars, and the bottom halves were painted white. As to doors, there weren't any. I noticed this at once because the usual sign, which is normally placed next to the gates, was here hung between two windows. It read: Academy of Sciences, U.S.S.R., SRIWaT. I went back to the middle of the street. Sure enough — two stories with ten windows apiece and not a single door. Warehouses to the right and left. SRIWaT, thought I. Scientific Research Institute of Wat? Meaning what — Warfare and Technology, Water and Terrain ? The cottage on hen's legs, it occurred to me is a museum of this SRIWaT. My hitchhikers are probably also from here. Also those two in the tearoom... A flock of crows took off from the roof of the house and began circling about, cawing loudly. I turned around and started back toward the square.

We are all naive materialists, I thought, and also rationalists. We demand that everything should be explained immediately in rationalist terms; that is, reduced to fit

in with the handful of known facts. No one applies a penny's worth of dialectics. It enters nobody's head that between the known data and some new phenomena, there could be an ocean of unknowns, and so we declare the new phenomenon to be supernatural and therefore impossible. Say, for instance, the way Maitre Montesquieu would take the message about the resuscitation of a dead man forty-five minutes after his heart stopped beating. He'll be up in arms over it, that's how he would take it. Toss it on pikes, so to speak. He would no doubt dub it obscurantism and clericalism. That is, if he would not just wave such a datum away. If it happened right in front of his own eyes, he would be placed in an extremely difficult position. Such as my own at the moment, except that I was more accustomed to it. But for him, it would be necessary either to consider it a fraud, or to disbelieve his senses or even to renounce materialism. Most likely he would opt for fraud. Nevertheless, to the end of his days the memory of this adroit trick would irritate his thinking, like a mote in the eye... But we, we are the children of a different age. We have seen a lot: the live head of a dog sewn to the body of another; the artificial kidney as big as a closet; the iron hand operated by the nerve signals from a live one; the people who can say, casually, "This was after I had died for the first time.."

Yes, in our times Montesquieu would have had a poor chance of remaining a materialist. Nonetheless we remain materialists and there is no harm done!

True enough, this can get to be difficult sometimes when a chance wind, blowing across the ocean of the unknown, will carry our way some strange petals from unexplored continents. Most often it happens when one finds that which one was not looking for. Soon enough there will appear new and amazing animals from Mars or Venus in our zoos. Of course, we will be ogling them and slapping our sides, but we have been waiting for them a long time, and we are prepared for their appearance. We would be much more astounded and disappointed if there would not be any such animal or if they would be like our cats and dogs. As a rule, science, in which we have faith (and often, blind faith), prepares us well in advance for the coming miracles, so that a psychic shock occurs in us only when we collide with something unpredicted — some hole into a fourth dimension, or biological radio communication, or a living planet. Or, say, a cottage on hen's legs. Anyway, that hawk-nosed Roman was right with a vengeance; it's very, very, and very fascinating here with them.

I came out on the square and stopped by the soft-drink kiosk. I remembered that I didn't have any change and that I would have to break a bill. I was formulating an ingratiating smile, knowing full well that the girls who sold the drinks couldn't stand changing bills, when I felt a five-kopeck piece in my jeans pocket. I was both astonished and delighted, but more the latter. I drank up my soda water with fruit syrup, accepted a wet kopeck in change, and chatted with the girl about the weather. Next I set out homeward with great determination so as to finish with the DC and the TS and be free to continue with my dialectic and rationalist explanations. I shoved the kopeck down into my pocket and stopped, discovering that there was another five-kopeck piece already in it. I took it out and studied it. It was somewhat damp and on it was stamped 5 kopecks, 1961, and the numeral 6 was marred with a small gouge. It may be that even then I would not have paid this little incident any attention, except for that instant feeling, with which I was already familiar, that I was simultaneously standing in the Prospect of Peace and sitting on the sofa looking at the coat hanger. And just as before the feeling disappeared when I shook my head.

For a while I kept on walking slowly, absentmindedly tossing the piece (it kept landing heads-up in my palm) and attempting to focus my thoughts. Then I saw the food store

where I had fled from the kids in the morning, and entered. Holding the coin between two fingers, I went up to the counter and drank, this time without any pleasure at all, a glass of plain seltzer.

Next, gripping the change in my hand, I went aside and checked the pocket. It was one of those cases where there was no psychic shock. More likely I would have been surprised if the piece had not been in my pocket. But it was — damp, 1961, and with a gouge in the numeral 6. Someone bumped into me and inquired as to whether I was taking a nap. Apparently I was standing in the line for the cashier. I said I wasn't and punched a ticket for three boxes of matches. Standing in line for the matches, I verified that the piece was back again in my pocket. I was absolutely calm. Having received my three boxes of matches, I returned to the square and proceeded to experiment.

The experiment took about an hour. During this hour, I circumnavigated the square ten times, swelled up from the seltzer, accumulated match boxes and newspapers, got acquainted with all the clerks, male and female, and arrived at a series of interesting conclusions. The five-kopeck piece came back if you paid with it. If you just simply threw it away, or dropped it, it stayed where it fell. The coin returned to pocket at the moment when the change moved from the hands of the seller to the hands of the buyer. If you kept your hand in one pocket, it appeared in the other. It never appeared in a zippered pocket. If you kept a hand in each pocket, and accepted the change with your elbow, the coin appeared anywhere on your body (In my case, it turned up in my shoe.) The disappearance of the piece from the saucer with the coppers cannot be observed: it is immediately lost to sight in the pile of other coppers, and no motion of any kind takes place in the instant of the transfer to the pocket.

And so, we were faced with a so-called unspendable five-kopeck piece in the process of its functioning. In itself the fact of the unspendability did not interest me. My imagination was primarily overwhelmed by the possibility of an extra-dimensional transference of a material object. It was abundantly clear that the mysterious move of the coin from seller to buyer represented none other than a special case of the legendary matter transmission, so well known to the friends of science-fiction under the pseudonyms of hyper transposition, similarization, Tarantog's phenomenon. The unfolding perspectives were overpowering.

I didn't have any instruments. An ordinary minimum-recording lab thermometer could tell a lot, but I didn't even have that. I was forced to limit myself to purely visual subjective observations. I started my last tour of the square, with the following self-assigned task: "Having placed the coin next to the change saucer, and impeding to the maximum possible extent the cashier's mixing it with the rest of the coins before passing the change, to trace visually the process of transference in space, attempting simultaneously to determine, even qualitatively, the change in the temperature of the air near the presumed Trajectory of Transit" However, the experiment was cut short right at the start.

When I approached Manya, my first seller, I was already expected by the same young police sergeant whom I had met before.

"So," he said in a professional tone.

I looked at him searchingly, with a premonition of disaster.

"May I see your papers, citizen," he said, saluting and looking past me.

"What's the problem?" I asked, taking out my passport.

"And I'll be asking you for the coin, too," said the policeman, accepting the passport. I handed him the five-kopeck piece in silence. Manya was regarding me with accusing eyes. The policeman studied the coin and, stating with satisfaction, "Aha," opened the

passport. He studied that passport like a bibliophile would study a rare incunabulum. I waited, mortified. A crowd grew slowly around us. Various opinions about me were expressed by its members.

"We'll have to take a walk," the policeman finally said.

We took a walk. While we walked, several variants on my unsavory biography were created in the accompanying crowd, and a series of antecedents was formulated for the investigation that was initiated right in front of everybody's eyes.

In the station house, the policeman handed the passport and the five-kopeck piece to the lieutenant on duty. He examined the coin and offered me a chair. I sat down. The lieutenant said disdainfully, "Hand in the change," and also immersed himself in the study of my passport. I shoved out the coppers. "Count them, Kovalev," said the lieutenant and looked at me steadily.

"Bought much?" he asked.

"A lot," I answered.

"Hand it in, too," said the lieutenant.

I laid out four issues of two-day-old Pravdas, three issues of the local Fisherman, two issues of the Literary Gazette, eight boxes of matches, six pieces of Golden Key butter scotch, and a marked-down wire brush for cleaning kerosine stoves.

"I can't hand in the drinks," I said dryly. "Five glasses with syrup and four without syrup."

I was beginning to comprehend what was involved, and I was extremely nauseated and discomfited at the idea that it would be necessary to find excuses for myself.

"Seventy-four kopecks, comrade Lieutenant," reported the youthful Kovalev.

The lieutenant pensively regarded the pile of newspapers and match boxes.

"Were you amusing yourself, or what?" he asked me.

"Or what," I said gloomily.

"Not prudent of you," said the lieutenant. "Not prudent, citizen. Tell me about it."

I told. At the end of the story, I asked the lieutenant most earnestly not to interpret my actions as an attempt to save up the price of a car. My ears were burning. The lieutenant chuckled.

"And why not so interpret it?" he inquired. "Cases of it have been attempted."

I shrugged.

"I can assure you such a thought couldn't enter my head... What am I saying? It couldn't, when, in fact, it didn't!"

The lieutenant was silent for a long time. The young Kovalev took my passport and again set to studying it.

"It would be rather ridiculous to suppose" I said, distraught.

"An altogether loony concept.. to save by the kopeck" I shrugged again. "You'd be better off begging on the church steps, as they say."

"As to begging, we try to combat that," said the lieutenant significantly.

"And that's correct and only natural. I just don't understand what that has to do with me..." I caught myself shrugging once more, and resolved not to do it again.

The lieutenant was silent for a tiresomely long time, examining the coin.

"We'll have to make out a report," he said finally.

"Please, of course.. although" I didn't know exactly what followed the "although."

For a while, the lieutenant looked at me in expectation of a continuation. But I was busy figuring as to which section of the criminal code my actions came under, so he drew a sheet of paper toward him and set to writing.

The young Kovalev returned to his post. The lieutenant was squeaking away with his

pen, and dipping it often and noisily into the inkwell. I sat, dully staring at the posters hung on the walls and thinking, listlessly, how, in my place, Lomonosov, for example, would have grabbed his passport and jumped out the window. What's at the core of it all? I thought. The essence of the matter is that a man does not regard himself as guilty. In that sense, I was not guilty. But guilt, it seems, can be objective and subjective. And a fact is a fact: all that copper money in the amount of seventy-four kopecks, juridically speaking, was the result of theft, carried out by technical means in the form of an unspendable coin.

"Read it and sign, please," said the lieutenant.

I read According to the report it was manifest that I, the undersigned, Privalov, A.I., had, by means unknown to me, come into the possession of a working model of an unspendable five-kopeck coin, All-union Government Standard type 7 18-62, and had willfully misused same; further, that I, the undersigned Privalov, A.I., allegedly carried out my operations with the aim of conducting a scientific experiment, and without any intent to defraud; that I was prepared to make restitution for the losses suffered by the state in the amount of one ruble and fifty-five kopecks; and, finally, that in accordance with the resolution of the Solovetz City Council of March 22, 1959, I had handed over said working model of the unspendable five-kopeck coin to the lieutenant on duty, Sergienko, V.V., and received in return five kopecks in monies of legal tender on the territory of the Soviet Union. I signed.

The lieutenant verified my signature with the one in the passport, again meticulously counted the coppers, rang up somebody to confirm the prices of the butter scotch and the wire brush, and wrote out a receipt and handed it to me together with five kopecks in monies of legal tender on the territory of the Soviet Union.

Returning the papers, matches, candies, and wire brush, he said, "As to the soft drinks, you have consumed those as you have already admitted. Altogether, you owe eighty-one kopecks."

I paid up with a feeling of tremendous relief. The lieutenant having leafed through my passport once again, handed it back to me.

"You may go, citizen Privalov," he said, "And be careful from now on. Are you in Solovetz for long?"

"I'll be leaving tomorrow," I said.

"Well then, be careful until tomorrow."

"Oh, I will!" I said, putting the passport away. Then, responding to an impulse and lowering my voice, I asked, "Would you mind telling me, comrade Lieutenant, don't you find it a bit strange here in Solovetz?"

But the lieutenant was already absorbed in his paperwork.

"I've been here a long time," he said absentmindedly. "I'm used to it."

Chapter 5

*"And do you believe in ghosts?" asked someone from the audience.
"Of course not," replied the speaker, and melted slowly in the air.*

A Truthful Story

All the time, until the evening arrived, I concentrated on being extremely careful went directly home from the police station to Lukomoriye Street and immediately crawled under the car. It was very hot. A menacing dark cloud was creeping in from the west. While I was lying under the car, dripping oil on my person, old Naina Kievna become most benign and friendly, twice approaching me to take her to Bald Mountain.

"They tell me, governor, that it's bad for a car to stand still," she cooed in her creaky voice, peering under the front bumper. "They say it's good for it to drive it around. And have no fear, I'd make sure to pay..."

I was not inclined to drive to Bald Mountain. In the first place, my friends could show up any minute. In the second place, the old woman was even more distasteful to me in her cooing version that in her snarling mode.

Further, it developed that it was ninety versts¹ one way to Bald Mountain, and when I asked the old lady about the condition of the road, she joyfully told me not to worry — that it was quite smooth, but that in case of any trouble, she would push it out herself. ("Don't assume that I am plain old, governor; I am still quite vigorous.") After the first unsuccessful assault, the crone retreated temporarily and went off into the cottage. At which point Basil the tomcat came to visit me under the car. For a long minute, he watched my manipulations and then enunciated in a low voice, but very clearly, "I don't advise it, citizen, mn-e-eh I don't advise it. "You'll be eaten," after which he departed precipitately, tail a-quiver.

I wanted badly to be very careful, and so when the crone launched her second attack, I demanded fifty rubles, so as to put an end to the game once and for all. She desisted at once, regarding me with fresh respect.

I did the DC and the TS, drove to the gas station to fill up with the greatest of care, had dinner in dining room No. 11, and was once again subjected to document inspection by the vigilant Kovalev. To clear my conscience, I inquired of him the state of the road to Bald Mountain. The young sergeant considered me with vast disbelief and said, "Road? What are you talking about, citizen? What road? There isn't any road." When I returned home, it was already raining heavily.

The crone had departed. Tomcat had disappeared. In the well, someone sang in duet voices, and that was both frightening and somehow woeful. Soon the shower was replaced with a dismal fine rain. It grew dark.

I retreated to my room and attempted to experiment with the changeling book. However, it had somehow broken down. Maybe I was doing something wrong, or the weather influenced it, but it remained as it had been, Practical Exercises in Syntax and Punctuation by F.F. Kuzmin, no matter what I tried. Reading such a book seemed simply impossible, so I tried my luck with the mirror. But it reflected anything at all and remained silent.

1. Approximately sixty-three miles.

There was nothing to do but to lie down on the sofa.

Lulled by boredom and the sound of the rain, I was beginning to doze when the telephone rang. I went out in the hall and picked up the receiver.

"Hello."

There was a silence against a background of static.

"Hello," I said, blowing into the mouthpiece. "Press the button."

There was no reply.

"Tap on the set," I counseled. The receiver was quiet. I blew again, pulled on the cable, and said, "Call again from a different set."

Then there was a rude query.

"Is this Alexander?"

"Yes." I was surprised.

"Why don't you answer?"

"I am answering. Who's this?"

"This is Petrovski, bothering you. Go on over to the pickling shop and tell the master to give me a call."

"What master?"

"Well, who's there today?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean "Look here, citizen," I said. "What number are you calling?"

"Number seventy-two... Is that seventy-two?" I couldn't tell.

"Apparently not," I said.

"Why do you say you are Alexander?" "Because I really am Alexander."

"Drat... is this the agency?"

"No," I said. "This is the museum."

"Ah.. in that case, I apologize. You can't call the master "

I hung up. I stood a while looking around the entry. It had five doors. One to my room, one to the yard, one to the crone's room, one to the washroom, and one other covered with iron sheeting with a huge padlock.

It's dreary, I thought. Lonely. And the lamp is dim and dusty...

Dragging my feet, I returned to my room and stopped at the threshold.

The sofa was not there.

Everything else was exactly as before: the table, the stove, the mirror, the clothes rail, and the stool. The book, too, lay on the windowsill just as I had left it. On the floor, where the sofa had been, there remained only a very dusty, littered rectangle. Then I saw the bedclothes very tidily put away under the rail.

"Just now there was a sofa here," I said aloud. "I was lying on it."

Something about the house had changed. The room was filled with an indefinable noise. Someone was talking, there were strains of music, somewhere people were laughing, coughing, scraping their feet. A dim shadow momentarily shut off the light from the lamp; the floorboards creaked loudly. Next there was an abrupt medicinal smell, and a chill blew into my face, I backed up. At the same time, there was a clear and insistent knocking on the outside door. The noise died away instantly. Looking over at the spot previously occupied by the sofa, I went out in the entry again and opened the door.

Standing before me in the drizzle was an elegant man of smallish stature, wearing a short cream-colored raincoat of immaculate cleanliness, with its collar raised. He removed his hat and pronounced with dignity:

"Begging your pardon, Alexander Ivanovich. Would you be so kind as to allow me five

minutes to converse with you?"

"Of course," I said distractedly. "Come in...."

I saw this man for the first time in my life, and the thought flashed through my mind that he might be connected with the local police. The stranger stepped into the hall and made a motion to enter my room directly. I blocked his way. I don't know why I did it; most likely I did not relish the prospect of questions about the dust and litter on the floor.

"Excuse me," I mumbled. "Perhaps we can talk here..my place is in disorder. And there's nothing to sit on...."

He jerked his head in reaction.

"How's that — nothing?" he said quietly. "And the sofa?"

We stood a good minute regarding each other in silence.

"Mmm what — the sofa?" I asked in a whisper for some reason.

The stranger lowered his eyes.

"Oh, so that's the way it is?" he said slowly. "I understand. Too bad. Well, in that case, excuse me..."

He nodded his head politely, put on his hat, and advanced determinedly toward the washroom door.

"Where are you going?" I cried. "You are going the wrong way!"

Without turning around, the stranger muttered, "Oh, it doesn't matter," and disappeared behind the door. Automatically, I turned on the light, waited a while, listening, and then threw the door open. There was nobody in the washroom. Carefully I drew out a cigarette and lighted it.

The sofa, I thought. What has the sofa to do with it? I had never heard any fairy tale about a sofa. There was a flying carpet; there was the magical tablecloth. There was the invisibility hat, the seven-league boots, the self-playing harp. There was the magic mirror. But there was no magic sofa. Sofas were for sitting or lying on; there was something respectable and ordinary about them... In fact, what fantasy could be inspired by a sofa?

Returning to my room, I was at once aware of The Small Man. He was sitting on top of the stove, up against the ceiling, twisted into an uncomfortable pose. He had a puckered unshaved face and hairy gray ears.

"Hello there," I said tiredly.

The Small Man twisted his long lips in a grimace of suffering.

"Good evening," he said. "Please excuse me. I've been shunted here some way I don't quite understand. It's about the sofa."

"You are a bit late about the sofa," I said, sitting down at the table.

"I can see that," said The Small Man in a low voice, twisting about clumsily. Bits of plaster rained down. I smoked, regarding him pensively.

The Small Man looked down at the floor in indecision. "You need help?" I said, making a move toward him.

"No, thank you," The Small Man said drearily. "I'd better do it myself."

Smearing himself with calcimine, he worked his way to the edge of the shelf and, pushing off in an ungainly manner, dived down head first. My heart flipped, but he hung in midair and began to descend slowly, arms and legs spread-eagled convulsively. It wasn't very aesthetic, but it was quite amusing. Landing on all fours, he stood up and wiped his wet face with his sleeve.

"Getting really old," he croaked. "Now, a hundred years ago, say in the reign of Gonzast, I would have been drummed out without a diploma for such a descent, you

may be sure, Alexander Ivanovich."

"Diploma in what?" I inquired, lighting my second cigarette.

He wasn't listening to me. Having sat down on the stool, he continued mournfully.

"In the old days, I levitated as well as Zex. But now, forgive me, I can't eradicate the growth in my ears. It's so untidy... But if you have no talent? There is a vast number of attractions around, all kinds of degrees, titles, but no talent! Many get overgrown in their old age. Of course, this does not apply to the luminaries. Gian Giacomo, Cristobal Junta, Giuseppe Balsamo or, say, comrade Feodor Simeonovich Kivrin — not a trace of hairy growth!" He looked at me triumphantly. "Not— a— trace! Smooth skin, elegance, suppleness..."

"Forgive me," I said. "You said— Giuseppe Balsamo but that's the same as Count Cagliostro! And according to Tolstoi, the count was fat and very unpleasant to look at..."

The Small Man looked at me with sadness and smiled condescendingly.

"You are simply not informed, Alexander Ivanovich," he said. "Count Cagliostro is something entirely different from Giuseppe Balsamo. It's, how shall I put it.it's not a very successful copy. Balsamo matricized himself in his youth. He was most extraordinarily talented, but you know how it is done when one is young... Hurry up, make it more amusing, slam bam, and it'll get by...Yes-s. Never say that Balsamo and Cagliostro are one and the same. It could be embarrassing."

I was embarrassed.

"True," I said" Naturally, I am not an expert. But, excuse my indiscreet question, what has the sofa to do with it? Who needed it?"

The Small Man started.

"Inexcusable arrogance," he said loudly, getting up. "I committed an error and I am prepared to admit it with complete candor. When such giants and even these cheeky youngsters.." He began to bow, pressing his pale hands to his heart, "Please forgive me, Alexander Ivanovich, I have importuned you so... Let me apologize once again most sincerely. I am departing at once." He approached the Russian stove and looked up queasily.

"Old is what I am, Alexander Ivanovich," he said, with a deep sigh.

"Old indeed..."

"Maybe it would be more congenial for you through the..eh... There was a chap came through here before you, and he used the..."

"Oh, no, my friend, that was Cristobal Junta! What's it to him to percolate through the plumbing for a distance of ten leagues ?" The Small Man waved his hands in grief. "As for me, I take the simpler way... Did he take the sofa with him or did he transvect it?"

"I don't know," I said. "Fact is, he, too, was late."

Overwhelmed, The Small Man pulled on the hairs of his right ear.

"Late? Him? Most improbable! However, how can we be the judge of that? Farewell, Alexander Ivanovich, I'm profoundly sorry.."

With obvious effort, he passed through the wall and disappeared. I threw the cigarette butt into the litter on the floor. Some sofa! That was no simple talking tomcat; that was something a bit more substantial — some sort of drama. Perhaps it was even a drama of concepts. Maybe more would come, the late ones. For sure, more would come. I regarded the litter. Where had I seen a broom?

The broom stood by the cask under the telephone. I set to sweeping up the dust and debris, when something heavy caught in the broom and rolled out into the middle of the room. I stared at it. It was a shiny elongated cylinder about the size of my thumb. I

poked at it with the broom. The cylinder swayed, something crackled crisply, and the room filled with the smell of ozone. I threw the broom aside and picked up the cylinder. It was smooth, finely polished, and warm to the touch. I tapped it with my nail and again it crackled. I turned it to see the other end, and at the same moment, felt the floor sway under my feet. Everything turned before my eyes. I struck something most painfully with my heels, then my shoulder, and then with the top of my head, dropped the cylinder, and finished my fall. I was thoroughly disoriented and did not immediately grasp that I was lying in the narrow space between wall and stove. The lamp was swinging overhead, and, raising my eyes, I was surprised to discover the prints of my rib-soled shoes on the ceiling. Groaning, I climbed out of the crack and looked at my soles. They had calcimine on them.

"How about that," I speculated aloud. "I should be careful not to percolate through the plumbing next..."

I searched visually for the cylinder. It stood, touching the floor with an edge of its flat end, in an attitude defying all the laws of balance. I approached it cautiously and squatted down next to it. It was swaying to and fro and crackling softly. I looked at it for a long time, stretching my neck, and then blew on it. The little cylinder rocked harder and leaned over, at which point there was a stir of wind and a sound of hoarse clucking behind my back. I turned to look and sat down hard on the floor. There on the stove, folding its wings, sat a colossus of a vulture with a bald neck and menacingly curved beak.

"How do you do," I said. I was convinced that the vulture was of the talking variety.

It looked at me with one eye, which made its appearance instantly resemble a hen. I waved my hand in a gesture of greeting. The vulture opened its beak, but no words came forth. It raised its wing and took to clicking its beak, searching under its armpit. The cylinder kept swaying and crackling. The vulture quit its hunt, drew its head down into its shoulders, and covered its eyes with a yellow membrane. Trying not to turn my back to it, I finished my clean-up and threw the litter out the door into the rainy blackness. Then I returned to my room.

The vulture slept and the ozone stank. I checked my watch: it was twenty past midnight. I stood a while looking down at the cylinder, cogitating on the conservation of energy and of matter, too. It wasn't likely that vultures condensed out of nothing. If the given vulture had materialized here in Solovetz, then it must be that a vulture (not necessarily this given one) disappeared in the Caucasus, or wherever it was they lived. I estimated the energy of transport and eyed the cylinder warily. Best not to touch it, I thought. Better cover it up with something and let it stay there. I brought in the dipper from the hall, took careful aim, and, holding my breath, let it settle over the cylinder. Next I sat down on the stool and waited for whatever would come next. The vulture snored with remarkable clarity. In the light of the lamp its feathers had a coppery sheen, and its huge claws were sunk into the plaster. A stench of decay slowly expanded from its vicinity.

"You shouldn't have done it, Alexander Ivanovich," said a pleasant male voice.

"Done what?" I said, looking around at the mirror.

"I am referring to the umclidet..."

It was not the mirror talking. It was somebody else.

"I don't understand what you are talking about," I said. There was no one in the room and I was beginning to feel irritated.

"I am talking about the umclidet," said the voice. "It was entirely incorrect of you to cover it with an iron dipper. The unclidet — or, as you call it, the magic wand —

requires extremely careful handling."

"That's why I covered it... Why don't you come on in, comrade? It's most unhandy to talk this way otherwise."

"Thank you," said the voice.

Right in front of me, a most assiduously dressed, pale man in a gray suit of superb cut slowly took shape. His head bent slightly aside, he inquired with exquisite politeness, "Dare I hope that I did not unduly disturb you?"

"Not at all," I said, rising. "Please be seated and feel at home. Would you like some tea?"

"Thank you," said the stranger and sat down opposite me, hitching his trousers with a decorous gesture, "As for tea, please let me beg off, Alexander Ivanovich; I just had supper."

He looked me in the eye a while, wearing a drawing-room smile. I smiled back.

"You are after the sofa, right?" I said. "Alas, the sofa is not here. I am very sorry, and I don't even know.."

The stranger threw up his hands.

"Such trifles!" he said. "Such a commotion over a lot of nonsense, forgive me, in which no one really believes. Judge for yourself, Alexander Ivanovich — to engage in mysteries and repulsive cinematic pursuits, to disturb people over the mythical. I don't fear this word, yes, the mythical White Thesis... Any sane thinking man considers the sofa as a universal translator, somewhat oversize, but quite well made and stable in operation. The old ignoramus prattling about the White Thesis are all the more ludicrous... No, I don't even wish to talk about this sofa."

"As you wish, sire," I said, concentrating my best high-society tone into the phrase.

"Let's talk of something else...

"Superstitions... bigotry..." he murmured absentmindedly.

"Laziness of thought and envy, arrant tentacle-sprouting envy..." He cut himself off.

"Forgive me, Alexander Ivanovich, but may I take it upon myself to ask your permission to remove the pitcher? Regretfully the iron is not transparent to the hyperfield, and the rise in the tension of the hyperfield in a restricted space.."

I raised my hands.

"By all means, take anything you wish! Take the pitcher away... Take even that um.. um.the magic wand..." There I stopped, noticing with astonishment that the pitcher was no longer there. The little cylinder stood in a pool of liquid resembling tinted mercury. The liquid was evaporating rapidly.

"It's better that way, I assure you," said the stranger. "As to your high-minded suggestion to remove the umclidet, I am unfortunately unable to make avail of it. That is a question of ethics and morals, a matter of honor if you will... Conventionalities are so strong! I shall permit myself to advise you not to touch the umclidet again. I can see you hurting yourself, and then the eagle I surmise you detect the.. eh..a certain aroma."

"Indeed," I said with feeling. "It stinks atrociously. Like a monkey house."

We looked at the eagle. The vulture slept, its feathers fluffed out.

"To employ the umclidet properly," said the stranger, "is a complex and fine art. You must not by any means reproach yourself or feel chagrined. The course on the usage of the umclidet takes eight semesters and requires a thorough knowledge of quantum alchemy. As a software expert, you would probably assimilate the electron-level umclidet operation without undue effort, the one designated as the UEU-Seventeen. but the quantum umclidet hyperfield matter translation Lomonosov's generalized law

— Lavoisier.." He spread his hands apologetically.

"I get it!" I said precipitately. "I don't even pretend.. . Of course, I am totally unprepared."

Here I caught myself and offered him a cigarette.

"Thank you very much," said the stranger. "I don't use them, to my everlasting regret."

Undulating my finger in a gesture of politeness, I inquired—not asked, mind you, but inquired—"Would it be improper of me to learn to what I owe the pleasure of our meeting?"

The stranger looked down in some embarrassment.

"At the risk of appearing immodest," he said, "I must, alack, confess that I have been present here for some time. I would wish to avoid naming names, but I think that even to you, Alexander Ivanovich, who are remote from all this, it must be obvious that a certain unhealthy fuss has arisen around the sofa, that a scandal is brewing, the atmosphere is heating up, and the tension is rising. Errors and highly undesirable coincidences are inevitable in such an environment... We don't have to look far for some examples. A certain personage—I repeat I don't wish to name names, especially as a colleague is involved, who deserves every respect, and I have in mind a huge talent and self-denial, if not good manners—so, a certain personage, being in a hurry and in a state of nervous tension, loses an umclidet here and this umclidet becomes the center of a sphere of activity, into which someone, who has no relation whatever to these activities, is drawn..." He bowed in my direction. "In such instances, a counteraction somehow neutralizing the bad influences is absolutely required..." He glanced at the boot prints on the ceiling with stern significance, then smiled at me. "But I wouldn't want to appear as an abstract altruist. Naturally, all these events are of immense interest to me, both as a specialist and as an administrator... Anyway, I don't intend to importune you any longer, and, inasmuch as you have assured me that you will not experiment any further with the umclidet, I would like to ask your permission to retire."

He got up.

"How can you!" I exclaimed. "Don't leave—it's so nice talking to you. I have a thousand questions for you."

"I value your sensitivity most highly, Alexander Ivanovich, but you are fatigued, you must rest."

"Not at all!" I countered hotly. "Just the opposite."

"Alexander Ivanovich," pronounced the stranger, smiling tenderly and looking fixedly in my eyes, "but you are indeed tired. And you really want to rest."

At once I felt that I was falling asleep. My eyelids seemed glued together. I wasn't interested in talk. I wasn't interested in anything. I had an overpowering desire to sleep.

"It has been an exceptional pleasure to make your acquaintance," the stranger said quietly.

I watched as he grew paler and paler and slowly dissolved in the air, leaving behind a scent of expensive cologne. Somehow I spread the mattress on the floor, stuck my face in the pillow, and was instantly asleep.

I was awakened by the flapping of wings and unpleasant clackings of beak. The room was filled with a peculiar bluish glow. On the stove, the vulture rustled about, beat his wings on the ceiling, and screamed disgustingly. I sat up and looked about. Right in the middle of the room, a burly fellow dressed in working pants and loud striped

hawaiian shirt hung suspended in the air. He soared over the umclidet, and without touching it, made smooth swimming motions over it with his great bony hands.

"What's going on?" I asked.

The lout glanced at me briefly under his shoulder and turned away. "I don't hear a reply," I said angrily. I was still very sleepy.

"Quiet, you mortal," the lout said hoarsely. He ceased his passes and took the cylinder off the floor. His voice seemed familiar.

"Hey, friend!" I said menacingly. "Put the gadget back and clear out."

The fellow looked at me, his jaw outthrust. I threw off the sheet and stood up.

"What say you put down the umclidet!" I said in full voice.

The fellow sank slowly down, and planting his feet firmly on the floor, took a stance. It got a lot lighter in the room, though the little lamp was not on.

"Child," said the fellow. "Night is for sleeping. Best you lie down."

The fellow clearly didn't mind a good bout. But then, I didn't either.

"Shall we go out in the yard?" I offered in a businesslike manner, hitching up my shorts.

Someone suddenly declaimed with expression, "Concentrating my thoughts on the highest, I, delivered of lust and self-love, cured of mental arrogance, fight on, Arjuna!"

I started. So did the sporty fellow.

"Bhagavad Gita," said the voice. "Song the third, verse thirty."

"It's the mirror," I said automatically.

"I know that myself," said the fellow.

"Put down the umclidet!" I demanded.

"What's with you, screaming like a sick elephant?" said my man "It's not yours, is it?"

"And maybe it belongs to you?"

"Yes, it does!"

I was struck with a surmise.

"So you dragged off the sofa, too?"

"Don't stick your nose in other people's business," advised he.

"Give back the sofa," I said. "A receipt has been made out for it."

"Go to hell!" said the fellow, glancing behind him.

At which point, two more appeared in the room: one portly and one thin, both in striped pajamas, reminiscent of Sing-Sing inmates.

"Korneev!" yelled Portly, "So it's you thieving the sofa? What a disgrace!"

"You can all go — " said the lout.

"You are a foul-mouthed ruffian!" yelled Portly, "You should be expelled! I will put in a complaint about you!"

"So, go ahead," Korneev said gloomily. "It's your favorite occupation."

"Don't you dare talk to me in that vein! You are a callow youngster! You are impudent! You have forgotten your umclidet here! The young man could have been injured."

"I've been injured," I mixed in, "The sofa is gone, I have to sleep like a dog, every night there are arguments and the eagle there stinks."

Portly turned to me instantly.

"An unheard-of violation of discipline," he proclaimed. "You should complain. As for you, you should be ashamed!" he said, turning to Korneev again.

Korneev was dourly stuffing the umclidet behind his cheek.

The thin man suddenly spoke out softly but ominously.

"Did you remove the Thesis, Korneev?"

The lout grinned darkly.

"There is no Thesis, of course," he said. "Why do you keep on simpering about it? If you don't want us to steal the sofa, then let us have another translator..."

"You did read the order forbidding the removal of items from the keep?" the thin man demanded, all grim.

Korneev stuck his hands in his pockets and gazed at the ceiling.

"Are you informed of the decision of the Scientific Council?" inquired the thin man, again.

"I am informed, comrade Demin, that Monday begins on Saturday," Korneev said gloomily.

"Don't start in with that kind of demagogy," said the thin man. "Return the sofa at once and don't dare come back here again."

"I will not return the sofa," said Korneev. "When the experiment is finished, then we'll return it."

Portly made a revolting spectacle of himself. "Insubordination!" he screeched, "Hooliganism!"

The vulture took to agitated screaming again. Without taking his hands out of his pockets, Korneev turned his back on them and stepped through the wall. Portly took off after him, yelling, "Oh, no! You are going to return the sofa!"

The thin man said to me, "It's all a misunderstanding. We'll take measures so it won't happen again." He nodded his head and also advanced toward the wall.

"Wait!" I cried out. "The eagle! Take the eagle! With the stench!"

The thin man, already half imbedded in the wall, turned around and beckoned the eagle with his finger. The vulture flung itself noisily off the stove and was drawn in under his fingernail. The thin man disappeared. The blue light faded slowly. It became dark and rain resumed its drumming on the windowpanes. I turned on the light and looked the room over. Everything in it was as before, except for the deep gouges on the stove from the griffin's claws and the senseless and wild footprints on the ceiling.

"The clear butter, formed in cows," pronounced the mirror with idiotic profundity, "does not contribute to its nourishment, but it provides the best food value, when properly processed."

I turned off the light and lay down. I am going to hear plenty from the crone tomorrow, I thought.

Chapter 6

"No," he replied in answer to the insistent question in my eyes.

"I am not a member of the club, I am a — ghost."

"Very well, but that does not give you the right to saunter about the club."

H. G. Wells

In the morning, it turned out that the sofa was standing in its place.

I was not surprised. I only thought that, one way or the other, the crone had achieved her purpose: the sofa was in one corner and I was lying in the other. Picking up the bedding and doing my exercises, I cogitated that there probably existed some limit to the capacity of being surprised. Apparently I had overstepped that limit by a large margin. I was actually experiencing a sort of lassitude. I attempted to imagine anything that could now astonish me, but all my fantasizing proved inadequate. I didn't like that the least bit since I couldn't stand people incapable of being astonished. True, I was far from the attitude of "So what, I've seen it before." My condition more closely approximated that of Alice in Wonderland. I was in a dreamlike state and accepted, or was ready to accept, any wonder that called for a more varied reaction than an open mouth and blinking eyes, as something I should expect.

I was still doing my morning exercises, when a door banged in the entry, heels tapped and scraped, someone coughed, something crashed and fell, and an authoritative voice called out: "Comrade Gorynitch!"

The old woman did not respond, and voices in the entry began to converse.

"What is that door.. 7" Aha, I see. And this one?"

"This is the entrance to the museum."

"And here? What's this— everything is locked up..."

"An exceedingly well-managed woman, Janus Poluektovich. And this is the telephone."

"And where is the famous sofa? In the museum?"

"No. The repository should be right here."

"It's here," said a familiar gloomy voice.

The door to my room swung open and a tall, spare old man with magnificent snow-white hair but black eyebrows, black moustache, and deep black eyes, appeared on the threshold. Seeing me (I stood in shorts only, arms to the side, feet apart to the breadth of my shoulders), he stopped and said in a resonant voice, "So!"

To his right and left more faces were peering into the room. I said, "I beg your pardon," and trotted toward my jeans. However, no attention was paid me. Four came into the room and crowded around the sofa. I knew two of them: the gloomy Korneev, unshaved, with red eyes, and in the same frivolous Hawaiian shirt; and the swarthy hawk-nosed Roman, who winked at me, made incomprehensible hand gesture and turned back away at once. The white-haired one, I didn't know. Likewise, I didn't know the portly tall man in the black suit with shiny back and wide proprietary gestures.

"This sofa, here?" asked the shiny-suited man.

"It's not a sofa," Korneev said morosely. "It's a translator."

"To me it's a sofa," declared the shiny-suited one, looking at a notebook, "Sofa, stuffed, oversize, inventory number eleven twenty-three."

He bent down and palpated. "Now you got it wet, Korneev; you've been lugging it about in the rain. Consider now: the springs rusted through, the upholstery rotting."

"The value of the subject item," said hawk-nosed Roman, in a mocking vein, it seemed to me, "does not lie at all in the upholstery and not even in the springs, of which there aren't any".

"You will please desist, Roman Petrovich," suggested the shiny one with dignity, "Don't be protecting your Korneev. The sofa is registered at the museum, as far as I am concerned, and that's where it must be."

"It's an apparatus," Korneev said hopelessly. "It's being used in serious work."

"I don't know about that," declared the shiny one, "I don't know what kind of work that would be with the sofa. I have a sofa back at home, and know what kind of work is done there."

"But some of us do know," said Roman very softly.

"You will desist," said the shiny one, turning on him. "You are not in a beer hall, you are in a place of work here. What do you have in mind, substantively?"

"I am considering the fact that it's not a sofa," said Roman, "or in terms more within your reach, it's not only a sofa. It's an apparatus having the external appearance of a sofa."

"I would ask you to desist from these insinuations," said the shiny one with determination. "Regarding forms within reach and so forth. Let's each of us do his job. My job is to stop this wanton misuse—and I am stopping it."

"So," said the white-haired one clearly. All were quiet at once. "I have been conversing with Cristobal Joseevich and Feodor Simeonovich. They suggest that the sofa represents purely a museum value. In its time, it belonged to King Rudolph the second, so that its historical value is beyond dispute. Besides, if my memory serves me right, about two years ago we ordered a standard translator. Do you remember who ordered it, Modest Matveevich?

"One minute," said the shiny Modest and started to leaf through his notebook rapidly. "One moment translator, dual-powered, TDX-eight-OE, Kitezhgrad factory per request of comrade Balsamo."

"Balsamo works it round the clock," said Roman.

"Brummagem, is what the TDX amounts to," added Korneev "It's selectivity is on the molecular level."

"Yes, yes," said The Gray-hairs. "I am remembering now. There was a report on the test of the TDX. It's true that the selectivity curve is not smooth.. yes. And this...eh.. sofa?!"

"Handwork," said Roman quickly, "Faultless. The craftsmanship of Leo Ben Beczalel. He assembled and tuned it for three hundred years.."

"There you are!" said the shiny Modest. "That's the way to work! He was an old man, but he did it all himself."

Suddenly the mirror coughed and said, "They all became younger, after staying an hour in the water, and came out of it just as rosy, good-looking, youthful. Healthy, and full of joie de vivre as they were at twenty."

"Precisely," said Modest. The mirror was talking in the gray-haired one's voice.

The gray-haired one grimaced with distaste.

"Let's not decide this question right now," he said.

"When, then?" asked the rude Korneev.

"Friday, at the Scientific Council."

"We can't devalue our relics," inserted Modest Matveevich.

"And what are we going to do?" asked the rude Korneev.

The mirror boomed forth in a menacing voice as from beyond the grave:

"I saw it for myself, how, picking up their black skirts, there went,
The barefooted Kanidia, hair undone, and howling,
and with her, Sagana, the elder in years, both white of face and fearful to look upon.
Then they both tore at the earth with fingernails
and ripped the black lamb with their bare teeth."

The gray-haired one, still grimacing in distaste, went up to the mirror, inserted his arm into it up to the shoulder, and snapped something inside. The mirror became quiet.

"So," said the gray-haired one, "the question of your group will also be resolved at the council. As for you" — you could tell by his face that he had forgotten Korneev's name-surname — "refrain for the time being eh, from visiting the museum."

With these words he left the room. Through the door.

"You've got your way," said Korneev through his teeth, looking at Modest Matveevich.

"Wanton misuse, I'll not allow," he answered shortly, shoving the notebook in his inside pocket.

"Misuse!" said Korneev, "You don't care about it all that. Accountancy is what bothers you. Reluctance to enter an extra item."

"Will you desist," said the unbending Modest, "We'll appoint a commission yet and we'll see if perhaps the relic has been damaged."

"Inventory number eleven twenty-three," added Roman in a small voice.

"That's how you have to accept it," pronounced Modest Matveevich majestically. Then he turned and saw me. "And what are you doing here?" he inquired. "Why are you sleeping here?"

"I—" I began.

"You slept on the sofa," proclaimed Modest in icy tones, boring through me with the gaze of the counterspy. "You know that it is an apparatus?"

"No," I said. "I mean that now I know, of course."

"Modest Matveevich!" exclaimed the hawk-nosed Roman. "But that's our new computer expert, Sasha Privalov!"

"So, why is he sleeping here? Why isn't he in the dorm?"

"He is not registered yet," said Roman, grabbing me around the waist.

"All the more reason!"

"You mean, let him sleep in the street?" Roman asked angrily.

"You will kindly desist with that," said Modest. "There's the dorm, there is a hotel, and this here is a museum, a state institution. If everyone will take to sleeping in museums.. Where are you from?"

"From Leningrad," I said gloomily.

"And what if I come to Leningrad and go to bed in the Hermitage?"

"You are welcome to it," I said, shrugging my shoulders. Roman kept holding me around the waist.

"Modest Matveevich, you are quite right, it is disorderly, but tonight he will sleep at my place."

"That's a different matter; that you are welcome to do," Modest allowed magnanimously. He looked the room over with a proprietary eye, saw the prints on the ceiling, and immediately looked at my feet. Fortunately I was barefooted. "That's how you have to accept it," said he, then straightened the trash on the hanger and left the room.

"D-dumbbell," squeezed out Korneev, "Blockhead." He sat down on the sofa and lowered his head on his hands. "To hell with them all. Tonight I'll drag it off again."

"Take it easy," Roman said gently. "Nothing terrible has happened. We just had some bad luck. Did you notice which Janus that was?"

"So?" said Korneev, despondent.

"That was Janus-A."

Korneev raised his head. "And what's the difference?"

"Tremendous!" said Roman and winked. "Because Janus-U has taken a plane to Moscow. And, it's important among other things, in relation to this sofa. Did you grasp that, pillager of museum treasures?"

"Listen. You are my savior," said Korneev, and for the first time I saw how he smiled.

"You see, Sasha," said Roman, addressing me, "we have an ideal director. He is one director in two individuals. There is a Janus-A Poluektovich and a Janus-U Poluektovich. Janus-U is an important scientist with international stature. As for Janus-A, he is a rather ordinary administrator."

"Twins?" I inquired cautiously.

"Of course not; it's one and the same man. Only he exists as two persons."

"Obviously," I said, and started to put on my shoes.

"That's all right, Sasha, you'll get to know it all soon," Roman said encouragingly.

I raised my head. "Meaning what?"

"We must have a computer man," said Roman with deep sincerity.

"I need one very badly," said Korneev, becoming animated.

"Everybody needs a programmer," I said, returning my attention to the shoes. "And, please, no hypnotism or some charmed environments."

"He's catching on," said Roman.

Korneev was going to say something when voices erupted outside the window.

"That's not our five kopecks!" yelled Modest.

"Whose is it, then?"

"I don't know whose it is! That's not my affair! That's your affair — to catch the counterfeiters, comrade Sergeant!"

"The five-kopeck piece was extracted from a certain Privalov, who is living here with you in the Iznakurnozh!"

"Aha, from Privalov? I knew right away that he was a thief!"

The reproachful voice of Janus-A broke in: "Tut, tut, Modest Matveevich!"

"No— excuse me, Janus Poluektovich, it can't be let go at that! Comrade Sergeant, let's go in! He is inside. Janus Poluektovich, stand by the window, so he'll not jump out of it. I'll prove it! I'll not allow aspersions to be cast on comrade Gorynitch!"

A nasty, cold sensation began to spread in my stomach. But Roman had already assessed the situation. He grabbed a greasy cap off the hanger and clapped it down on my ears.

I disappeared. It was a very strange sensation. Everything remained in place, except myself. But Roman would not permit me to absorb the new sensations.

"It's an invisibility cap," he hissed. "Move off to the side and be quiet."

I ran to the corner on tiptoes and squatted under the mirror. At the same instant,

Modest, beside himself, burst into the room, dragging the young Sergeant Kovalev by his sleeve.

"Where is he?" hollered Modest looking about. "There," said Roman, pointing at the sofa. "Don't worry, it's where it should be," added Korneev.

"I am asking— where is he, that programmer of yours?" "What programmer?" Roman feigned puzzlement. "Now, you will stop that!" said Modest. "There was a programmer here. He stood there with his pants on and no shoes."

"Oh, so that's what you have in mind," said Roman. "But we were just kidding, Modest Matveevich. There wasn't any programmer here! It was just a — " He made a gesture with his hands and a man appeared in the middle of the room, dressed in jeans and sport shirt. I saw him from the back, and can't say anymore about him, but the young Kovalev shook his head and said, "No, that's not him."

Modest walked around the apparition, mumbling, "Sport shirt... pants ... no shoes... It's him, it's him."

The apparition vanished.

"No, no, that's not the man," said Sergeant Kovalev. "The other was young, without a beard."

"Without a beard?" demanded Modest. He was seriously embarrassed.

"No beard," confirmed Kovalev.

"Mmm— yes," said Modest, "But I was sure he had a beard..."

"I am handing you the notification," said Sergeant Kovalev, and offered Modest an official-looking sheet of paper, "It's up to you to figure out what's what between your Privalov and your Gorynitch..."

"And I am telling you, it's not our five-kopeck piece!" yelled Modest.

"I am not saying a word about Privalov. Maybe Privalov doesn't even exist, as such.... But comrade Gorynitch is a colleague!"

Young Kovalev, pressing his hands to chest, was trying to say something.

"I demand that this be cleared up at once!" yelled Modest. "You stop that, comrade Sergeant! The notification, as given, casts a shadow on the whole collective! I insist that you make certain!"

"I have my orders — " Kovalev began, but Modest, with a cry of, "You stop that! I insist," flew at him and dragged him out of the room."

"Off to the museum," said Roman. "Sasha, where are you? Take off the cap; let's go see...."

"Maybe I'd do better not to remove it," I said.

"Take it off, take it off," said Roman. "You are now a phantom. No one believes in you, neither the administration nor the police."

Korneev said, "I am off to get some sleep. Sasha, come on around after dinner. You'll see our collection of machines, and in general..."

I took off the cap.

"You stop that," I said. "I'm on vacation."

"Let's go, let's go," said Roman.

In the hall, Modest was opening the massive padlock with one hand and clutching Kovalev with the other. "I'll show you our coin right now!" he yelled. "Everything is registered.... Everything is in its place."

"I'm not saying anything at all," Kovalev defended himself weakly. "I'm only saying that there may be more than one coin..

Modest threw open the door and we all went into a spacious chamber.

It was quite a proper museum, with stands, diagrams, windows, mock-ups, and

moulages. Its general appearance was more reminiscent of a criminology museum than anything else: lots of photographs and unappetizing displays. Modest immediately dragged Kovalev behind the stands, where they took to boozing as in a hollow barrel.

"Here's our coin..."

"I didn't say—"

"Comrade Gorynitch—"

"I have my orders!"

"You stop that!"

"Be inquisitive, be inquisitive, Sasha," said Roman, making a wide gesture and sitting down in the easy chair by the entrance.

I went along the wall. I was not astonished by anything. I was just immensely interested. Living Water, Effectivity 52%, Permissible Sediment 0.3: (ancient square bottle with water; cork sealed with colored wax); Diagram of Commercial Process for Manufacturing Living Water; Mock-up of Live-Auto-Conversion Cube; Changeling Salts of Veshkovsk-Traubebach (a drugstore bottle with viciously yellow paste); Bad Blood, Ordinary (a soldered ampul with black liquid). Over this entire stand hung a tablet: ACTIVE CHEMICAL AGENTS XII — XVIII CENTURIES. There were many more little bottles, jars, retorts, ampuls, test tubes, working and nonworking models for extraction, distillation, and concentration, but I went on.

Enchanted Sword (very rusty two-handed sword with a wavy blade, shackled with a chain to an iron counter, window meticulously sealed); Right Eyetooth [Working] of Count Dracula (I'm no Cuvier, but judging by that tooth, Count Dracula must have been a most unusual and unpleasant person); Footprint, Normal, and Footprint, Extracted (to my eye, they looked the same, but one had a crack in it); Mortar on Launching pad, IX Century (massive construction of porous gray cast iron); Dragon Gorynitch, Skeleton, 1/25 Natural Size (similar to a diplodocus with three heads); Schematic of Fire-breathing Gland, middle Head; Seven-league Boots, Gravitic, Working Model (very large rubber boots); Flying Carpet, Anti-gravitic, Operational Model (a rug, about four by five with a he-Circassian embracing a young she-Circassian against a background of piled mountain peaks).

I arrived at the display Development of the Concept of the Philosopher's Stone, when Sergeant Kovalev and Modest Matveevich reappeared in the aisle. By all indications, they had not been successful in moving off their dead center.

"You can stop that," Modest kept saying tiredly.

"I have my orders," replied Kovalev just as wearily.

"Our coin is in its place..."

"Let the old woman come in and make a deposition..."

"So then, according to you, counterfeiters?"

"I didn't say that..."

"We'll get to the bottom of it..."

Kovalev didn't notice me, but Modest stopped, looked me over dully from head to foot, screwed up his eyes, and lectured aloud drearily,

"Ho-mun-culus, laboratory model, general type," and went on.

I started off after them, sensing a bad premonition. Roman was awaiting us by the door.

"How goes it?" he asked.

"It's a disgrace," said Modest in a wilted tone. "Bureaucrats!"

"I have my orders," Kovalev repeated stubbornly from the entry.

Roman went out. I made to move after him, but Modest stopped me.

"Excuse me," he said. "Where are you going?"

"How do you mean— where?" I said in a fallen voice.

"To your place, go to your place."

"What place?"

"Well, wherever it is that you stand. You are— pardon me— a ho-munculus? Then be kind enough to stand where you are supposed to stand."

I understood that I was lost. And I probably would have been, because Roman apparently also lost his presence of mind, but just then Naina Kievna lumbered into the entry, stomping and clacking and pulling along a hefty black goat on a rope. At the sight of the policeman, the goat bleated in a sick tone and took off. Naina Kievna fell down. Modest flew to the entry and a horrendous commotion ensued. The empty vat rolled off its stand with a thunderous rumble. Roman grabbed me by the hand, and whispering, "Move, move!" flew into my room. We shut the door and fell against it, breathing heavily. Yells wafted from the entry.

"Present your documents!"

"Mercy, governor, what's that for?"

"Why the goat? Why a goat in the house!"

"Now you stop that; this is not a beer hall."

"I don't know about your five-kopeck piece, and it's no business of mine."

"Me-eh-eh!"

"Citizeness, remove the goat!"

"Stop it! The goat is registered!"

"Registered? How?"

"It's not a goat! He is our colleague!" -

"Then let him present— "

"Out the window and into the car!" ordered Roman.

I grabbed my jacket and jumped out. Basil scuttled out from under my feet, meowing. Bending low, I ran to the car, threw open the door, and jumped behind the wheel. Roman was already opening the gate. The engine wouldn't start. Torturing the starter, I could see the door to the cottage open and the black goat running out, bounding off with gigantic leaps somewhere around the corner. The engine caught and roared. I swung the car around and lurched out into the street. The oaken gate shut with a crash. Roman popped out behind the small gate and flung himself on the seat beside me.

"Go!" he said vigorously. "Downtown!"

While we were turning onto the Prospect of Peace, he asked, "So, how do you like it here with us?"

"I like," I said. "Only it's very raucous."

"It's always raucous at Naina's," said Roman. "A contrary old hag. She hasn't wronged you?"

"No," I said. "We had almost no truck with each other."

"Wait up," said Roman. "Slow down."

"What's up?"

"There goes Volodia. Remember him?"

I braked. The bearded Volodia climbed into the back seat, and, beaming happily, shook our hands.

"Great!" he said. "I was just on my way to your place."

"That's all we needed there — you," said Roman.

"How did it all end?"

"No how," said Roman.

"Where are you going now?"

"To the Institute," said Roman.

"What for?" I asked.

"To work," said Roman.

"I'm on vacation."

"That's immaterial," said Roman, "Monday begins on Saturday and August will begin in July, this time."

"My friends are waiting," I said, pleading.

"We'll take care of that," said Roman, "Your friends will notice absolutely nothing."

"How maddening," I said.

We drove in between retail store No. 2 and dining room No. 11.

"He already knows where to go," noted Volodia.

"Stout fellow," said Roman. "A giant!"

"I took a liking to him right from the start," said VoIodia.

"Obviously you desperately need a programmer," I said. "We need far more than just any programmer," contradicted Roman.

I braked alongside the strange building with the SRIWaT sign between the windows.

"What does it mean?" I asked. "Could I at least learn where I am being pressed to work?"

"You may," said Roman. "You are now permitted everything. It is The Scientific Research Institute for Thaumaturgy and Spellcraft... Well, why are you standing? Drive in!"

"Where?" I asked.

"Don't tell me you don't see it!"

And I saw.

But that is altogether a different tale.

THE SECOND TALE. Vanity of Vanities

Chapter I

Among the heroes, one or two stand out; all others are regarded as secondary.

Methodology for Teaching Literature

About two o'clock in the afternoon, when the input equipment breaker blew again, the telephone rang. Modest Matveevich Kamnoedov¹, Deputy Director of Administration and Plant, was on the line.

"Privalov," he said severely, "why are you not at your post again?"

"What do you mean, not at my post?" I said in a hurt tone. My day turned out to be particularly busy, and I forgot everything else.

"You will be noted down for that," said Modest Matveevich, "You were due here with me for your instruction five minutes ago."

"Damn," I said, and hung up.

I turned off the machine, took off my lab coat and reminded the girls not to forget to turn off the power. The wide corridor was empty; a blizzard blew behind the frosted windows. Putting on my jacket on the run, I hurried to the plant department.

Modest Matveevich, in his shiny suit, awaited me regally in his private reception room. Behind him, a small gnome with hairy ears was running his finger through a page of a monstrous ledger, looking both dismal and diligent.

"You, Privalov, you are like some sort of homunculus," pronounced Modest. "Never in your place."

Everyone tried to maintain only the nicest of relations with Modest Matveevich, inasmuch as he was a man of power, unbending and monumenally ignorant. Therefore, I barked, "Yes, sir," and clicked my heels.

"Everyone must be at his post," continued Modest. "Always. And there you are with a higher education, wearing glasses and growing a beard, yet you can't seem to grasp this simple theorem."

"It won't happen again!" I said, bulging my eyes.

"I will hold you to that," said Modest Matveevich, softening. He drew out a sheet of paper from his pocket and looked at it a while. "So then, Privalov," he said finally, "today you will come on duty. Watching over the Institute during a holiday is a responsible duty. There's more to it than pressing push buttons. In the first place—we have the fire precautions. That's number one. No auto-combustion is to be allowed.

You will see to it that all the production areas entrusted to you have the power switched off. You will see to it personally, without any of your doublings and triplings. Without any of your facsimiles. At any inkling of combustion factors, you will call

1. Literally — Rock-eater

extension oh-one at once and take preventive measures yourself. Take this alarm horn for calling the fire brigade for such a contingency." He handed me a platinum whistle stamped with an inventory number, "Likewise, nobody's to be let in. Here is a list of persons allowed the use of the laboratories at night, but they are not to be let in either, on account of it being a holiday. There's not to be a single living soul in the Institute. The entry and exit demons are to have a spell cast on them. Do you grasp the situation? Living souls are not to be permitted in, and all others are not to be permitted out. Because there was a precedent. One of the devils escaped and stole the moon. A widely known incident, which was even recorded in the movies." He looked at me meaningfully and suddenly asked for my documents.

I obeyed. He looked at my pass with deep attention, returned it, and pronounced, "Everything is in order. Actually, I had a suspicion that you might still be a double. So much for that. Well then, at fifteen hundred-zero-zero, in accordance with labor laws, the working day will end, and everyone will deposit with you the keys to all production areas. After which, you will personally inspect the territory. Thereafter, you will conduct tours every three hours with regard to auto-combustion. You will visit the vivarium not less than twice during the period of your watch. If the supervisor is drinking tea, you will note that down. There have been signs: it's not tea that he is drinking there. Acknowledge the above in all respects. Your post is in the director's reception room. You can rest on the couch. Tomorrow at sixteen hundred-zero-zero, you will be replaced by Pochkin, Volodia, from the laboratory of comrade Oira-Oira. Have you got that?"

"Entirely," I said.

"I will be calling you during the night and tomorrow. Personally. A checkup is also possible by the manager of Industrial Relations."

"I understand," said I, looking through the list.

The first thereon was the director of the Institute, Janus Poluektovich Nevstruev, with a penciled note: IN DUPL. Next came Modest Matveevich himself. The third was the manager of Industrial Relations, Cerber Curovich Demin, and then came names that I had never seen before.

"Is something beyond you?" inquired Modest Matveevich, jealously following my perusal.

"Here," I said ponderously, stabbing my finger at the list, "comrades are present in the number of. mmm.. twenty-one, not known to me personally. I would like to go over these names with you personally." I looked him straight in the eye and added firmly, "Just in case."

"It's all correct," he said condescendingly. "It's just that you are not aware, Privalov. The persons listed, starting with number four through number twenty-five, last and inclusive, have been admitted to night work posthumously. In recognition of past contributions. Now do you have it?"

I was still a little dazed, as getting used to it all was yet a bit much for me.

"Assume your post," Modest Matveevich said grandiosely. "As for me, and also in the name of the administration, I congratulate you, Privalov, with the coming New Year, and wish you, in that new year, every success both in your work and in your personal life."

I, in turn, wished him corresponding successes and went out into the hall.

Having learned yesterday that I had been designated to stand watch, I was pleased as I intended to finish a computation for Roman Oira-Oira. But now I felt that the matter was not all that simple. The prospect of spending the night at the Institute suddenly

appeared in an altogether different light. I had already stayed late at work on previous occasions when the economy-minded personnel left in charge had turned off every four out of five lights in the halls and I had to grope my way out past startled, fury shapes. At first, this sort of thing had a heavy impact on me, then I became used to it. Then I became unused to it again the time when, passing along the main hall, I heard behind me the measured clack, clack, clack of claws on the parquet floor, and turning, discovered a certain phosphorescent animal running unequivocally along my tracks. True, when they took me down off the cornice, it developed that it was an ordinary live dog belonging to one of my colleagues. The colleague came to apologize, and Oira-Oira read me a scathing lecture on the evils of superstition, but nevertheless some sort of unpleasant sediment remained in my soul. First thing, I thought, was to cast the proper spell on the demons.

At the entrance to the director's reception room, I met up with the gloomy Victor Korneev. He nodded at me glumly and started to pass me by when I caught him by the sleeve.

"Well?" said the rude Korneev, stopping.

"I am on watch, today," I informed him.

"Too bad about you," said Korneev.

"You really are a boor, Victor," I said. "Here is where I part company with you."

He tugged at the turtleneck of his sweater with a finger, and contemplated me with interest.

"Then what will you do?" he asked.

"I'll find something," I said, somewhat taken aback.

Suddenly, he perked up.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Is this your first watch?"

"Yes."

"Aha," said Victor. "And how do you intend to proceed?"

"In accordance with instructions," I replied. "I'll cast the spell on the demons and lie down to sleep. That's with regard to auto-combustion. And where are you off to?"

"Well, there's company coming together over at Vera's," said Victor indefinitely. "And what's this?" He took my list. "Oh, the Dead Souls..."

"I'll not let anyone in," I said, "neither the live nor the dead."

"A correct decision," said Victor. "The very essence of correctness. But keep an eye on my laboratory. I'll have a double working there."

"Whose double?"

"Mine, naturally. Who is going to give me his? I locked him in there; here, take the key, since you are on watch."

I took the key.

"Listen, Victor. Up to ten o'clock or so, he can carry on, and then I'll switch everything off. That is in accordance with the legislation."

"All right, we'll see about it then. Have you seen Eddie?"

"No, I haven't," I said. "And don't do a snow job on me. Ten o'clock— all the power goes off."

"Did I say anything against it? Power off and welcome. The whole town, for all I care."

At which point the reception-room door opened and Janus Poluektovich came out into the hall.

"So," he enunciated, seeing us.

I bowed respectfully. It was obvious from the expression on his face that he had forgotten my name.

"Please," he said, handing me keys. "You are standing watch, if I am not mistaken. By the way"— he hesitated—"Did I talk to you yesterday?"

"Yes," I said. "You came by the Electronics section." - He nodded.

"Yes, yes, indeed.. we were talking about trainees..."

"No," I contradicted respectfully. "Not quite. It was about your letter to Centracademprom. About the peripheral equipment."

"Oh, so that's it," he said. "Well, all right... I wish you a quiet watch... Victor Pavlovich, may I have your attention a minute?"

He took Victor under the arm and led him off down the hall. I went into the reception room. There the second Janus Poluektovich was locking up the safes. Seeing me, he said, "So," and resumed clicking his keys. This was Janus-A, as I had learned to distinguish somewhat between them. Janus-A looked somewhat younger, was a bit standoffish, always correct, and laconic.

It was said that he worked hard, and the people who knew him had been insisting for a long time that this mediocre administrator was slowly but surely turning into an outstanding scientist. Janus-U, on the other hand, was always gentle, very attentive, and had the strange habit of unfailingly asking, "Were we talking yesterday?" It was hinted that he had begun to slip badly of late, although remaining a scientist of world renown. Nevertheless, Janus-A and Janus-U were one and the same man. That's just the part that wouldn't fit in my head. There seemed something arbitrary about that.

Janus-A clicked his last lock, gave me some of the keys, and left with a frigid farewell. I sat down at the reviewer's table, laid the list in front of me, and rang up the Electronics Department. No one answered— apparently the girls had already left. It was fourteen hours and thirty minutes.

At fourteen hours and thirty-one minutes, the renowned Feodor Simeonovich Kivrin barged into the room breathing heavily, the parquet creaking under his weight. This was the great magus and wizard, who headed the Department of Linear Happiness. Feodor Simeonovich was famed for his incorrigible optimism and faith in a beautiful future. He had a very stormy past. During the reign of Ivan Vasilievich the Terrible, the retainers of then-Minsiter of Homeland Security Maliuta Skuratov burned him, joking and jesting, in a wooden bath as a sorcerer after being told on by his sexton neighbour; in the reign of Alexis Mikhailovich the Quiet, they beat him mercilessly with cudgels, and burned the entire collection of his manuscripts on his bare back; during the reign of Peter the Great, he rose at first as a learned chemist and mining expert, but somehow displeased the prince Romodanovsky and wound up condemned to hard labor at the Tula gun works, whence he fled to India, traveled a great deal, was bitten by poisonous snakes and crocodiles, easily transcended Yoga, returned to Russia at the height of the Pugachev rebellion, when he was accused of doctoring the insurgents, was de-nostriled, and exiled to Solovetz in perpetuity. At Solovetz he continued to have a myriad of difficulties until he was picked up by SRIWAT, where he soon became head of a department.

"Greetings!" he boomed, laying down before me the keys to his laboratories. "P-poor chap, h-how did you get stuck like that? Y-you should be celebrating on a night like this. I'll call Modest Matveevich. Such n-nonsense; I'll stand watch myself."

It was evident that the idea had just bit him and he was all fired up with it.

"O.K. Where is his phone number? D-damnation, can't even remember telephone numbers... One fifteen or five eleven..."

"No, no, Feodor Simeonovich, no thank you!" I exclaimed, "It's not necessary. I was looking forward to getting some work done."

"Ah, to work! That's a different in-matter! That's good, that's g-great, you are a f-fine young man! M-me — I don't know a damn thing about electronics... I sh-should study! Or else all this rn-magic is nothing b-but words, old s-stuff, hocus-p-pocus, with psi-fields and primitivism... granddaddy imitators.

Right there, without moving a step, he created two large pale Antonovka apples, gave me one, bit a half right out of the other, and proceeded to crunch on it juicily.

"D-damnation, made a wormy one again... How's yours— good? That's g-good... I'll d-drop by to see you again l-later, Sasha, as I just d-don't get this system of the management... Just give me t-time to nab some v-vodka and I'll be by again... There is that twenty-ninth instruction in your machine... Either th-the machine is lying or I don't understand something. I'll bring you a d-detective story— Gardner's. You do read English? G-good, the son-of a-gun writes really well! He has that P-Perry Mason, the tough attorney, you know! Then I'll give you something else from science-fiction, some A-Asimov or B-Bradbury..."

He went over to the window and said with immense delight, "B-blizzard, devil take it! I just I-love it!"

Cristobal Joseevich Junta came in, slim and elegant, wrapping up in a mink coat. Feodor Simeonovich turned around.

"Ah, C-Cristo!" he exclaimed. "B-behold, that cretin Kamnoedov j-jailed this young chap to stand w-watch on New Year's Eve. Shall we liberate him? The two of us can stay here, r-reminisce on the old days, have a d-drink or two? W-why should he suffer? He should be out there, cutting capers with the girls..."

Junta placed the keys on the table and said negligently, "Association with girls brings pleasure only on those occasions when it is achieved through the surmounting of obstacles..."

"There you go!" roared Feodor Simeonovich "A great d-deal of blood, a great d-deal of singing, pours out for the attractive ladies... How does that goes?... Only one that don't know the w-word "fear", will achieve his goal?"

Only he attains his purpose who knows not the word for "fear"..."

"Exactly," said Junta. "Further— I can't stand charity."

"He can't stand ch-charity! And wh-who lured Odemantiev away from me? Enticed this lab technician from me! Now you have to put up a b-bottle of champagne, n-no less. No, listen, n-no champagne! Amontillado! You still have some left from the Toledo reserves?"

"They are waiting for us, Feodor," Junta reminded him.

"T-true. I still have to f-find a tie.. and felt boots... We won't get a taxi. We're off, Sasha. D-don't get bored.."

"On New Year's Eve, the watch in the Institute does not get bored," Junta said quietly, "especially a novice."

They went toward the door; Junta let Feodor Simeonovich go first, and before exiting, gave me an askance look. Precipitately he traced Solomon's Star with his finger on the wall. It glowed and began to fade like electron beam trace on an oscilloscope. I spit thrice over my left shoulder.

Cristobal Joseevich Junta, head of the Meaning of Life Department, was a remarkable man, but apparently completely heartless. Long ago, in his early youth, he was for a long time the Grand Inquisitor, and has to date retained some of the mannerisms, quite useful to him, according to rumors, during the fight against the fifth column in Spain. He carried out most of his obskure experiments either on himself or on his co-workers, and this had already been discussed in outraged tones in my presence at

the union meeting. He was involved in studies of the meaning of life, but had not made any extraordinary progress, though he did obtain some interesting results when he proved, on a theoretical basis, that death is not an invariant attribute of life. That particular latest discovery was also the subject of outraged opposition at the philosophical seminar. Almost no one was allowed in his office, and vague gossip went about the Institute that he had a multitude of intriguing items there. They said that the corner was occupied by a magnificently executed stuffed figure of one of Cristobal Joseevich's old acquaintances, an S.S. standartenfuhrer, in full dress uniform, with monocle, ceremonial dagger, iron cross, oak leaves, and other such appurtenances. Junta was an excellent taxidermist. According to Cristobal Joseevich, so was the standartenfuhrer. But Cristobal Joseevich was quicker. He liked to be a quicker in anything he undertook. Neither was a certain amount of skepticism foreign to him. A huge sign hung in one of his laboratories: Do we need ourselves? An uncommon man indeed.

At exactly three o'clock, and in accordance with the labor laws, the doctor of science, Ambrosi Ambruosovitch Vibegallo¹ brought in his keys. He was dressed in felt boots with leather soles and a coachman's parka, whose collar could not contain his unkempt grayish beard. He' has a bowl cut, so that no one ever saw his ears.

"Concerning." he said, approaching. "I could be having something hatch out today. In the laboratory, that is. You should.. eh.. have it looked at I have laid in supplies for him— that is, bread, maybe five loaves, a couple of buckets of steamed bran. So, then, when be finishes eating all that, he'll start running about. So you, mon cher², you might give me a buzz."

He laid down a bundle of warehouse keys, and stared at me with his mouth open as if struggling with some inner conflict. He had strange translucent eyes and there was birdseed in his beard.

"Where should I buzz you?" I asked.

I disliked the man thoroughly. He was a cynic and a fool to boot. The work he performed, for three hundred and fifty rubles a month, could boldly be called eugenics, but no one called it that-out of reluctance to get involved. This Vibegallo insisted that all the troubles that were came from unsatisfied desires, and if man was given everything, such as plenty of bread and steamed bran, then you'd not have a man, but an angel. He pushed this uncomplicated idea in tireless ways, waving classical volumes out of which he tore citations by their bloody roots, leaving out and extirpating anything that did not suit his purpose. At one time, the Scientific Council fell back under the press of his overwhelming and primeval demagogic and the Vibegallo concept was included in the plan.

Acting strictly in line with the plan, diligently measuring his accomplishments in percentages of completion, never forgetting budgets and productivity as well as keeping an eye on practical applications, Vibegallo laid out three experimental models; model of Man, totally unsatisfied; model of Man, unsatisfied stomachwise; and model of Man, completely satisfied. The totally unsatisfied anthropoid matured first — he'd hatched two weeks before. The miserable creature, covered like Job with

1. Vibegallo has the connotation in Russian of "running out in front."

2. Vibegallo loves inserting odd combinations of words in French "dialect", as he puts it. Without any responsibility for his propounication we took upon us the task of translating them. (Authors note)

boils, half decomposed, tortured with all the known and unknown ailments, suffering from heat and cold simultaneously, wandered out into the hall, filled the Institute with the sounds of its inchoate complaints, and expired. Vibegallo was triumphant. Now one could consider it a proven fact that if a man was not fed and given water, was not doctored, then he could be considered to be unhappy — and might even die. As this one had.

The Scientific Council was shocked. Vibegallo's undertaking was turning out to have a very dark side. A commission was instituted to review his work. But he, in no way shaken, presented two depositions, from which it developed that three of his lab technicians took leave yearly to work in the local Sovkhoz, and, secondly, that he, Vibegallo, had once been a prisoner of the tsar and was now a regular lecturer on popular topics both in the city auditorium and the environs. While the stunned commission was attempting to make sense of the logic in all this data, Vibegallo unhurriedly shipped four truckloads of herring heads from the fish-food factory (as a matter of proper communications with the production sector) intended for the maturing model of Man, unsatisfied stomachwise. The commission was composing a report, and the Institute was fearfully waiting the coming developments. Vibegallo's neighbors on the same floor were taking leaves of absence at their own expense.

"Where shall I buzz you?" I asked.

"Buzz me? At home! Where else on New Year's Eve? Morality is what we need. My good man, New Year's Eve should be celebrated at home. That's our way— n'est pas?**"

"I know it's your home. What's the number?"

"Look it up in the book. Are you literate? Then look it up, in the book, that is. We have no secrets, like some others. En mase."

"All right," I said. "I'll buzz you."

"Do buzz me, mon cher. And if he should start in biting, then you can punch him. Don't be bashful. C'est la vie."

I gathered my nerve and muttered, "We haven't drunk our toast to the familiar relationship."

"Pardon?"

"Never mind, I was just talking," I said.

He looked at me for some time with his translucent eyes in which nothing at all was expressed, and then pronounced, "Well, if it's nothing; then that's good. Congratulations on the coming holiday. Be well. Au revoir, that is." He pulled on his earmuffed cap and left.

I opened up the ventilator in a hurry. Roman Oira-Oira flew in wearing a green overcoat with a mutton collar, twitched his hump nose, and inquired, Vibegallo was through?"

"He was through," I said.

"Mmm, yes," he said. "That's some herring! Hold on to the keys. You know where he dumped one of the trucks? Right under Gian Giacomo's windows. Directly under his office. A New Year's gift. I think I'll have a cigarette with you..."

He fell into the huge leather armchair, unbuttoning his coat, and lighted up.

"Consider this," he said "Given: The odor of herring marinade, intensity sixteen microaxes¹, volume— " He looked around the room. "Say, but you can figure that yourself. The year is in transition, Saturn is in Libra. Refine!"

I scratched behind the ear.

"Saturn... why are you giving me Saturn. ? What about the magistatum vector?

"That, chum," said Oira-Oira, "that you have to do yourself.."

I scratched behind the other ear, estimated the vector, and pronounced, stuttering, the acoustic enabler (incantation). Oira-Oira pinched his nose. I pulled two hairs out of my eyebrow (very painful and stupid) and polarized the vector.

The smell increased some more.

"Bad," Oira-Oira rebuked. "Can't you see that the ventilator is open?"

"Ah," I said, "that's right."

I took divergence into account and also the rotation, attempted to solve the Stokes equation in my head, became confused, pulled two more hairs, breathing through the mouth, checked the smell, and recited the Auers incantation. I was prepared to pull another hair, when it became evident that the reception room was aired out in a natural way, and Roman advised me to close the ventilator and economize on my eyebrows.

"Mediocre," he said. "Let's try materialization."

We were busy with materialization for a while. I made pears and Roman insisted that I eat them. I refused, and he ordered me to make more. "You'll work until you'll make something edible," he kept saying. "This stuff you can give to Modest. As his name implies, he's our incinerator."

Finally, I concocted a real pear, large, yellow, soft as butter, and as bitter as cinchona. I ate it and Roman allowed me to rest. At this point, the baccalaureate of black magic, Magnus Feodorovich Redkin, brought in his keys, looking obese, customarily preoccupied, and hurt. He obtained his baccalaureate three hundred years ago for inventing the invisibility slacks. Since then, he has been improving them over and over. The slacks became culottes, and then pants, and now they are referred to as trousers. Still, he remained unable to make them work properly. At the last session of the seminar on black magic, when he made his serial presentation "On Certain Novel Aspects of the Redkin Invisibility Trouser," he was once more overtaken by disaster. During the demonstration of the updated model, something in its inner workings stuck, and the trousers, with a sonorous click, became invisible themselves, instead of their wearer. It was most embarrassing. However, Magnus Feodorovich worked mostly on a dissertation whose subject sounded something like "The Materialization and Linear Naturalization of the White Thesis, as an Argument of the Sufficiently Stochastic Function Representing the Not Quite Imaginable Human Happiness."

Here he had achieved significant and important results, from which it followed that humanity would be literally swimming in not quite imaginable happiness, if only the White Thesis itself could be found, and most importantly if we could understand what it is and where it could be found.

Mention of the White Thesis could be found only in Ben Beczalel's diaries. It was alleged that he distilled it as a by-product of some alchemical reaction, and not having the time to waste on such trifles, he built it into some apparatus of his as an auxiliary subsystem. In one of his last memoirs, written while he was already in prison, Ben Beczalel proclaimed, "And can you imagine? That White Thesis did not come up to my expectations, not at all. And when I comprehended what use could have been made of it — I am referring to the happiness of all men, no matter how many — I had already forgotten where I had inserted it."

The Institute numbered seven apparatus that had once belonged to Beczalel. Redkin

1. untranslatable pun — “you can hang axe in here” is equivalent to “there is fune in the air you could cut with a knife”

had disassembled six of them down to the last bolt and had not found anything special. The seventh apparatus was the sofa-translator. But Victor Korneev had laid his hands on the sofa, and the blackest suspicions had crept into Redkin's simple soul. He began to spy on Victor. Victor became instantly incensed. They quarreled, became confirmed enemies, and remained such.

Magnus Feodorovich was friendly toward me as a representative of the hard sciences, though he criticized my friendship "with that plagiarist."

Altogether Redkin was not a bad fellow, very hard working, very persistent, and totally lacking in the avarice. He carried out an immense work, collecting a gigantic collection of the multifarious designations of happiness. There you could find the simplest of negative definitions ("Happiness is not found in money"), the simplest positive definitions ("The highest satisfaction is in complete plenty, success, recognition"), casuistic definitions ("Happiness is the absence of unhappiness"), and paradoxical definitions ("The most happy of all be the fools, the imbeciles, the dumb, and the unsightly, as they know not the stabs of conscience, fear not ghosts or any of the unliving, are not struck by the terror of impending events; neither are they seduced by the hopes of future bliss").

Magnus Feodorovich laid down his key in a small box, and looking at us under his eyebrows, said diffidently, "I found yet another definition."

"What is it?" I said.

"Something like verse. But without rhymes. Do you want to hear it?"

"Of course we do," said Roman.

Magnus Feodorovich took out a notebook and read haltingly:

" You ask me:

What is the greatest happiness on earth?

Two things:

Changing my mind

As I change a penny for a shilling;

And,

Listening to the sound

Of a young girl

Singing down the road

After she has asked me the way."

"Didn't understand a thing," said Roman. "Let me see it with my own eyes."

Redkin gave him his notebook and clarified, "It's Christopher Logue. From the English."

"Excellent verse," said Roman.

Magnus Feodorovich sighed. "It's hard," I said sympathetically.

"Isn't that the truth? How are you going to combine all that? To hear a maiden's song.. not just any song, but the maiden must be young, not on his way, and on top of that she would be singing after inquiring the way from him... How can that be? How can you set up an algorithm for such things?"

"Very iffy," I said. "I wouldn't undertake it."

"There you are!" took up Magnus Feodorovich, "And you are our computer facility director. Who then could do it?"

"What if there can't be any such thing?" said Roman, sounding like a provocateur in a film.

"How's that?"

"Happiness."

Magnus Feodorovich was instantly offended.

"How can there not be any," he said with dignity, "when I myself have experienced it many a time?"

"By changing a penny for a shilling?" asked Roman.

Magnus Feodorovich became even more offended and tore the notebook out of his hands.

"You are still too young — " he began.

But at this juncture there was a roar, a crack, a flash of flame, and a stench of sulphur. Merlin appeared in the middle of the reception room.

"Good God!" said Oira-Oira in English, rubbing his eyes. "Canst thou not come in by the usual way as decent people do? Sir..." he added.

"Beg thy pardon," Merlin said smugly, and looked at me with a satisfied mien. I must have been very pale, as I was very much afraid of auto-combustion.

Merlin straightened his moth-eaten mantle, threw a bunch of keys on the table, and pronounced, "Did you notice the weather lately, sirs?"

"As forecast," said Roman.

"Exactly, Sir Oira-Oira. Exactly as forecast!"

"It's a useful device, the radio," said Roman.

"I don't listen to the radio," said Merlin. "I have my own methods." He shook the hem of his mantle and rose a meter above the floor.

"The chandelier," I said. "Be careful."

Merlin looked at the chandelier and began, completely out of context, "I cannot forget, dear sirs, how last year, I and Sir Chairman of the Regional Soviet, comrade Pereyaslavski..."

Oira-Oira yawned agonizingly, and I felt very dejected too. Merlin probably would have been worse than Vibegalo, if he weren't so archaic and self-assured. Due to someone's absentmindedness, he had succeeded in promoting himself into a directorship of the Department of Prophecies and Forecasting, because in all of his forms he had written about his unremitting struggles with Yankee imperialism even as far back as the early Middle Ages, and attaching to them notarized copies of the appropriate pages from Mark Twain. Subsequently, he was transferred to his proper place as director of the weather bureau and now, even as a thousand years ago, he occupied himself with foretelling atmospheric phenomena — both by magical means and on the basis of the behavior of tarantulas, the increase in rheumatic pains, and the tendency of Solovetz pigs to lie down in the mud or to arise therefrom. As a matter of fact, the basic sources of his prognoses were the crudest intercepts of radio forecasts, carried out by means of a simple detector receiver, which, it was rumored, he stole in the twenties from a Solovetz exhibit of the work of young technicians. He was a great friend of Naina Kievna, and the two of them spent their time together collecting and broadcasting rumors about the appearance of a gigantic hairy woman in the forests, and the capture of a student by a snowman from Elbrus. It was also said that, from time to time, he took pad in the night vigils at Bald Mountain with H.M. Viy, Brutus, and other hooligans.

Roman and I kept quiet and waited for him to disappear. But he, wrapping himself in his mantle, made himself comfortable under the chandelier, and droned on with his tale about how he and comrade Pereyaslavski traveled about the region on a tour of inspection. The entire story, which had become obnoxious to everybody, was pure hocus-pocus, a graceless and gratuitous paraphrase of Mark Twain. He spoke of himself in

the third person, while occasionally, in confusion, called the chairman King Arthur.

"And so, the Chairman of the Regional Soviet and Merlin set off on their journey and came to the beekeeper, Hero of Labor, Sir Otshelnikov¹, who was a good knight and a renowned collector of honey. And Sir Otshelnikov reported on the success of his labors and treated Sir Arthur with bee venom for his arthritis. And so, Sir Chairman stayed there for three days, his arthritis quieted down, and they set out on their way, and on the way Sir Ar... Chairman said, "a large lake, and Arthur saw an arm rise out of the lake..."

The telephone then rang, and I seized the receiver with joy.

"Hello," I said. "Hello, I'm listening."

Something was mumbling in the receiver while Merlin droned on in his nasal voice, "And by the Lezhnev lake they met Sir Pellinor. However, Merlin arranged it so that Pellinor did not notice the chairman..."

"Sir citizen Merlin," I said. "Could you be a bit quieter? I can't hear anything."

"Hello," I said again into the phone.

"Who's there?"

"Whom do you want?" I said, as a matter of habit.

"You will desist this. You are not in a side show, Privalov."

"My fault, Modest Matveevich. Privalov on watch, at your service."

"All right. Report."

"Report what?"

"Listen, Privalov. You are again behaving like I don't know what. Whom are you talking with? Why are there others at your post? Why are there people in the Institute after the end of the working day?"

"It's Merlin," I said.

"Throw him out!"

"With pleasure," I said. (Merlin, who was obviously eavesdropping, became covered with spots, said, "Bo-o-or," and melted away.)

"With pleasure or without pleasure — that does not concern me. But there was a signal received here that the keys entrusted to you are piled in a heap on the table instead of being locked up in a box."

Vibegallo must have informed him, I thought.

"Why are you silent?"

"It will be done."

"Acknowledge in that form," said Modest Matveevich. "Vigilance must be kept high.

Are you up to it?"

"I'm up to it."

Modest Matveevich said, "That's all from here," and hung up.

"Well, all right," said Oira-Oira, buttoning his green coat. "I'm off to open cans and uncork bottles. Be well, Sasha. I'll come by again later."

¹literally — hermits'

Chapter 2

I went, descending into dark corridors and ascending again. I was alone; I called out but no one answered; I was alone in that vast house, as convoluted as a labyrinth.

Guy de Maupassant

Dumping the keys in my jacket pocket I set off on my first round.

Taking the front staircase, which to my memory was used only once when the most august personage from Africa came to visit, I descended into the limitless vestibule decorated with a multi-century accumulation of layers of architectural excesses, and peered into the gatehouse window. Two Maxwell macro-demons were oscillating about in its phosphorescent gloom. They were playing at the most stochastic of all games - pitch-and-toss. They occupied all their free time with this diversion. Looking more like poliomyelitis virus colonies under an electron microscope than anything else, they were huge, indescribably inept, lethargic, and dressed in worn liveries. As befit Maxwell demons, they opened and closed doors throughout all their life. They were experienced, well-trained exemplars, but one of them, the one in charge of the exit door, had reached retirement age, which was comparable to the age of the galaxy, and now and then reverted into second childhood, malfunctioning ignominiously. Thereupon, someone from Technical Maintenance would put on a diving suit, enter the gatehouse with its argon atmosphere, and bring the oldster back to reality.

Following instructions, I cast a spell on both of them, that is, I crossed the information channels and locked the input-output peripherals to myself. The demons did not react, being otherwise absorbed. One was winning, and, correspondingly, the other was losing, which greatly disturbed them, since it upset the statistical equilibrium. I covered the window with a shutter and circled the vestibule. It was damp, dark, and full of echoes.

The Institute was obviously old, but apparently the building had been started at the vestibule. Bones of shackled skeletons whitened in moldy corners; somewhere water dripped in rhythmic splashes; statues in rusty armor and unnatural poses stood about in niches; shards of ancient idols were piled up to the right of the entrance, with a pair of plaster legs in boots crowning the lot. Looking sternly down from blackened portraits near the ceiling were the venerable images of old men, whose features bore obvious resemblances to Feodor Simeonovich, comrade Giacomo, and other masters. All this archaic junk should have been thrown out long ago, windows should have been cut into the walls and daylight let in, but it was all registered and inventoried, and forbidden to be squandered, by Modest Matveevich personally. Bats and flying dogs rustled in the capitals of the columns and in the gigantic chandelier, hanging from the blackened ceiling.

With these, Modest Matveevich waged a never-ending struggle. He doused them with turpentine and creosote, dusted them with powder, sprayed them with hexachloroethane. They died by the thousands and pro-created by the tens of thousands. They mutated, and talking and singing variants appeared among them,

while the descendants of the more ancient breeds now subsisted surely on pyrethrins, mixed with chlorophoss. The Institute cinephotographer, Sanya Drozd, swore that he saw a vampire that looked as much like the personnel director as two peas in a pod.

Someone moaned and rattled chains in a deep niche, which exuded an icy stench. "You will kindly stop that," I said severely. "What is that — some kind of mysticism? You ought to be ashamed!" The niche became quiet. I straightened the crooked rug with an executive mien and mounted the stairway.

As is well known, the Institute from the outside appeared to have two stories. In reality, it had at least twelve. I had simply not gone above the twelfth floor, because the elevator was constantly under repair, and I still hadn't learned to fly. The front with ten windows was also an optical illusion, like most fronts. The Institute stretched at least a kilometer to the right and left of the vestibule, but nonetheless all the windows decidedly faced on the same crooked street and the same grain storehouse.

This amazed me thoroughly. At first I pestered Oira-Oira to explain to me how this could be reconciled with classical, or at least relativistic, concepts of space. I didn't understand a thing from the explanations, but gradually I became adjusted to the whole thing and ceased to be amazed. I am now fully convinced that in some ten or fifteen years any schoolboy will find his way around the general theory of relativity more easily than a contemporary expert. To achieve this, it is not at all necessary to comprehend how the space-time curvature comes about, but only to have such a concept inculcated in us from early childhood, so that it can become habitual.

The entire first floor was occupied by the Department of Linear Happiness. This was the kingdom of Feodor Simeonovich; here was the smell of apples and pine forests, here worked the prettiest girls and the handsomest young men. Here there were no gloomy perverts, experts, and adepts in black magic; here no one tore out his hair, hissing and grimacing in pain; no one muttered conjurations that sounded like indecent street rhymes; no one boiled live toads and crows at midnight at the full moon on the eve of John the Baptist Day or evil-omen days. Here they worked on the basis of optimism. Here everything possible was done within the framework of white, submolecular, and infraneuron magic in order to raise the spiritual tone of each individual as well as of entire human collectives. Here they condensed and dispersed throughout the world the happiest good-natured laughter; developed, tested, and implemented behavioral and relational models that strengthened friendship and dissolved strife; distilled and sublimated extracts of grief palliatives, which did not contain a single molecule of alcohol or other narcotics. Currently they were preparing for the field trials of a portable disrupter of evil, and were designing new versions of the rarest alloys of intelligence and goodwill.

I unlocked the door to the central room and stood on the threshold admiring the working of the gigantic Children's Laughter Still, which bore some resemblance to a Van de Graaff generator. In contrast to the generator, however, it operated in complete silence and there was a lovely smell around it. According to instructions, I had to turn off two large switches on the control panel, so that the golden glow in the room would fade, so that it would grow dark and still. In short, the instruction said I must turn off all power in this production section. I didn't even hesitate, but backed out into the corridor and locked the door behind me. To de-energize anything in the laboratories of Feodor Simeonovich seemed to be pure sacrilege.

I went slowly along the corridor, studying the sketches on the doors to the laboratories, and met Tichon, the house brownie, at the corner. He drew and nightly changed the sketches. We exchanged handshakes. Tichon was a pleasant grayish

brownie from the Ryazan oblast, exiled to Solovetz by Viy for some infraction: It seems he either didn't greet someone properly, or refused to eat a boiled viper. Feodor Simeonovich welcomed him, cleaned him up, cured him of chronic alcoholism - and he made his home here on the first floor. He drew superbly, in the style of Bidstrup, and was renowned among his local peers for good sense and sober comportment.

I was about to go up to the second floor, but remembered the vivarium and directed my steps to the basement. The vivarium supervisor, a middle-aged emancipated vampire by the name of Alfred, was drinking his tea.

Seeing me, he attempted to hide the teapot under the table, broke the glass, reddened, and hid his eyes. I felt sorry for him.

"Congratulations on the coming New Year," I said, pretending that I didn't notice anything.

He coughed, covered his mouth with his palm, and replied thickly, "Thank you, and the same to you."

"Everything in order?" I asked, surveying the rows of cages and stalls.

"Briareus broke a finger," said Alfred.

"How did he do that?"

"Just like that. On his eighteenth right hand. He was picking his nose, turned clumsily— they are very ungainly, these hekatocheires— and broke it."

"So we need a veterinarian," I said.

"He'll be all right. It's not his first time."

"No, we can't leave it at that. Let's go and see."

We went into the depths of the vivarium, by the perch of the harpies, who looked at us with sleep-dulled eyes, by the Lernean hydra, who was dour and silent at this time of year... The hekatoeheires— hundred-armed and fiftyheaded twins, the firstborn of Heaven and Earth— were housed in a large concrete cave guarded with heavy iron rods. Gyes and Cottus slept curled up in knots, from which protruded bluish shaved heads with closed eyes arid hairy, flaccid arms. Briareus was rocking to and fro. He was sitting on his haunches with his hand, supported by seven others, stuck out into the passage. With his ninety-two other hands, he held on to the iron rods and propped up his heads. Some of the heads were asleep.

"How is it?" I said sympathetically. "Does it hurt?"

The waking heads set up a clamor in Hellenic Greek and woke up a head that knew Russian.

"It's awful, how it hurts," it said. The rest stopped talking and stared at me.

I looked the finger over. It was dirty and swollen and not broken. It was simply sprained. In our gymnasium we fixed such a trauma without benefit of a doctor. I grasped the finger and jerked it toward me with all my might. Briareus howled with all of his fifty throats and fell back.

"There, there," I said, wiping my bands with a handkerchief. over..."

Briareus, sniveling through all his noses, peered at his finger. The near heads eagerly stretched their necks, biting the ones in front on the ears in their impatience, so they would not obstruct their view. Alfred was grinning.

– Bloodletting would do him good, – he said with a long-forgotten expression on his face, then sighed and added, "Problem is, what sort of blood does he have? Must be something just for show. Not a very viable specimen."

Briareus got up. All fifty heads smiled blissfully. I waved at him and started on my way back. I slowed up by Koschei the Deathless. The great evildoer lived in a comfortable private cage, with rugs and bookshelves. The walls were hung with portraits of

Genghis Khan, Himmler, Catherine de Medicis, one of the Borgias, and another — either that of McCarthy or Goldwater. Koschei himself, dressed in a colorful robe, stood with his legs crossed before a huge lectern, reading an offset copy of *Malleus Maleficarum*. By way of self-accompaniment, his long fingers wove a sinister pattern: he was either turning a screw or sticking something in or ripping something off. He was kept in indefinite preliminary confinement while an interminable investigation was being conducted into his innumerable crimes. He was highly prized in the Institute, as he was concurrently employed in certain unique experiments and also as interpreter for Zmey Gorynitch. (The latter was locked up in the boiler room, whence issued his metallic snoring and sleepy roarings.) I stood and thought about the fact that if some time in the infinitely remote future Koschei should be sentenced, then the judges, whoever they might be, would find themselves in a very strange situation; the death sentence could not be applied to a deathless criminal, and external imprisonment, considering the preceding term, he had served already.

Suddenly I was grabbed by my pants leg, and a besotted voice cried out, "What say, buddy, who'll go against us three?"

I succeeded in wrenching free. Three vampires in the adjoining roost regarded me greedily, pressing their purplish faces against the metallic screen, which was maintained at two hundred volts.

"Crushed my hand, tough guy!" said one.

"Don't grab," I said. "Looking for a quaking asp?"

Alfred ran in, snapping his whip, and the vampires retreated into the darkness of their cage, where they immediately began cursing in the foulest of language and playing with homemade cards.

I said to Alfred, "Well enough. It seems everything is in order. I'll go along."

"Happy traveling," Alfred replied readily.

Going up the stairs, I could hear him clinking his teapot as he poured his tea. I looked into the mechanical section and checked the operation of the energy generator. The Institute was not dependent on the city for its power. Instead, after refining the principle of determinism, it was decided to utilize the well-known Wheel of Fortune source of free energy. Only a small section of the brightly polished rim of the wheel could be seen above the cement floor. Its axis was located somewhere in infinity, so that the rim looked like a conveyor belt moving out of one wall and into the other. At one time it was fashionable to write dissertations on the wheel's radius of curvature, but inasmuch as all of these dissertations yielded results of extremely low accuracy, on the order of ten megaparsecs, the Scientific Council of the Institute passed a resolution to stop reviewing the papers on that subject, at least until such time as the creation of transgalactic means of communication would permit the expectation of raising the accuracy substantially.

Several demons from the plant department were playing at the wheel — jumping on the rim, riding to the other wall, jumping off and running back at top speed. I called them to order decisively. "You will cut that out," I said. "This is not a carousel, you know." They hid behind the transformer and set to bombarding me with spitballs. I decided not to get involved with the whelps, walked along the control panels, and, verifying that all was well, ascended to the second floor.

Here everything was quiet, dark, and dusty. At the low half-open door, a feeble old soldier, dressed in a Preobrazhensk regimental uniform and tricornered hat, dozed, leaning on a long-barreled flintlock. Here was the home of the Defensive Magic Department, among whose personnel there hasn't been a living soul for quite some

time. All our old men, with the possible exception of Feodor Simeonovich, had at one time or another given it their due of infatuation. Ben Beczalel had successfully employed Golem in palace revolutions; the clay monster, impervious to poisons and bribery, guarded the laboratory and the imperial treasury as well. Giuseppe Balsamo had founded the first airborne squadron on brooms, which gave a good account of itself in the Hundred Year War engagements. However, the squadron soon fell apart when some of the witches were married and the rest took off after the regiments as canteen-keepers. King Solomon caught and spellbound a gross of afreets and hammered them into an excellent anti-elephant destroyer fire-throwing brigade. Young Cristobal Junta brought a Chinese dragon conditioned against the Moors into Charles the Great's company, then upon learning that the Emperor was not campaigning against the Moors but the kindred tribes of the Basques, he was enraged, and deserted.

Throughout the many-centuried history of wars, various magicians suggested the use of vampires (for night reconnaissance), basilisks (for striking the enemy with such terror that they would turn into stones), flying carpets (for dropping offal on enemy cities), magic swords (for compensating inferiority in numbers), and much else. But, after World War I and after Big Bertha, poison gas, and tanks, defensive magic began to fade.

Resignations spread like wildfire through the Department. The last survivor was a certain Pitirim Schwartz, an erstwhile monk and inventor of the forked musket rest, who was selflessly laboring on the jinn bomber project. The essence of the project was to drop on the enemy cities bottles with jinns who had been held imprisoned no less than three thousand years. It is well known that jinns in their free state are capable only of destroying cities or constructing palaces. A thoroughly aged jinn, reasoned Schwartz, was not about to start building palaces, and therefore things would go badly for the enemy. A definite obstacle to the realization of this concept was an insufficient supply of bottled jinns, but Schwartz counted on overcoming this through the deep dragging of the Red and Mediterranean Seas. It was said that having heard about fusion bombs and bacteriological warfare, the old man lost his psychic equilibrium, gave away the jinns he had collected to various departments, and left to study the Meaning of Life with Cristobal Junta. No one ever saw him again.

When I stopped at the doorway, the soldier looked at me out of one eye and croaked, "It's not allowed to go in any farther," and dozed off again. I looked over the bare junk-laden room with shards of strange models and fragments of unprofessional drawings, paused by the door to poke my shoe at the folder bearing the smudged legend *Absolutely Secret: Burn Before Reading*, and went on. There was no power here to switch off, and as to auto-combustion, everything that could auto-combust had already done so years ago.

The same floor contained the book archives. This was a gloomy area, not unlike the vestibule but considerably larger. As to its real size, the story went that a fairly good paved highway started about half a kilometer from the entrance and ran along the bookshelves with kilometer marks on posts. Oira-Oira had walked as far as the number 19, and the persistent Victor Korneev, searching for technical documentation on the sofa-translator, had obtained a pair of seven-league boots, and had run as far as the number 124. He would have gone farther, but his way was blocked by a squad of Danaides in stuffed vests, and armed with paving hammers. Under the supervision of fat-faced Cain, they were breaking up the asphalt and laying some sort of pipes. Over and over, the Scientific Council had raised the question about constructing a

high-voltage line along the highway, for transmitting the subscribers by wire, but every positive suggestion had been turned down for lack of funds.

The repository was stuffed with the most fascinating books in all the languages of the world, past and present, from Atlantian up to and including pidgin English. But I was most intrigued by the multi-volume edition of the Book of Fates. The Book of Fates was printed in three-and-a-half-point excelsior on the finest of rice paper and contained, in chronological order, data on 73,619,024,511 intelligent individuals.

The first volume began with Pithecanthropus Ayyoukh (Born 2 Aug. 965543 B.C.; died 13 Jan. 96522 B.C. Parents: Ramapithecus; wife: Rarnapithecus. Children: male Add-Am; female Eihoua. Wandered as a nomad with a Ramapithecus tribe on the planes of Ararat. Ate, drank, and slept to his content. Drilled the first hole in a stone; devoured by a cave bear on one of the hunts). The last name— in the last tome of the regular edition, which came out last year was Francisco-Gaetano-Augustine-Lucia-y-Manuel-Jose-Miguel-y-Augustine-Gaetano-Francisco-Trinidad and Maria Trinidad. (See): Portuguese. Acephalus. Cavalier of the Order of the Holy Ghost; colonel of the guard.

From the editorial data it was evident that the Book of Fates was published in 1 (one) exemplar, and this last one was printed in the time of the Montgolfier Brothers. Apparently, in order to satisfy somehow the needs of contemporaries, the editorial board undertook the publication of extra irregular editions in which only the dates of birth and death were given. In one of these I found my own name. But due to the rush, errors had crept into these editions by the thousand, so that I saw to my amazement that I would die in 1611. In the eighth volume errata, they had not as yet reached my name. A special group in Prophecies and Forecasts served as consultants for the editing of the Book of Fates. The department was anemic, neglected, and unable to rid itself of the effects of the short-lived directorship of Sir Merlin. The Institute repeatedly ran a competition for the vacant post, and each time there was but one applicant— Merlin himself.

The Scientific Council conscientiously reviewed the application and safely voted it down— by forty-three votes "against" and one "for." (In accordance with tradition, Merlin was a member of the Scientific Council.)

The Department of Forecasts and Prophecies occupied the whole third floor. I strolled past doors with the signs Coffee Grounds Group, Augurers Group, Pythian Group, Synoptic Group, Solitaire Group, Solovetz Oracle.

There was nothing to switch off, inasmuch as the department labored by candlelight. The notation Dark is the Water in Ye Clouds¹ had already appeared in chalk on the Synoptic Group door. Every morning, Merlin, cursing the intrigues of detractors, erased this message with a wet rag, and every night it renewed itself. In general, it was entirely unclear to me as to what it was that maintained the credibility of the Department. From time to time its workers issued reports on rather strange themes such as: "On the Eye Expression of the Augur," or "Prediction Properties of Mocha Coffee Grounds, Vintage 1926." Once in a while the Pythian Group succeeded in predicting something correctly, but each time they appeared so startled and intimidated by their success that the effect was entirely dissipated. Janus-U, a most sensitive individual, could not, as was often noted, control a wan smile each time he was present at the seminar sessions of the Pythians and Augurs.

On the fourth floor, I finally found something to do: I turned off the lights in the cells

1.Quote from The Book of Psalms, Psalm 18:11, tends to refer to unclear matters

of the Department of Eternal Youth. There were no youths there, and its thousand-year oldsters, suffering from sclerosis, constantly forgot to switch off their lights when they left. However, I suspected that the matter involved something more than just sclerosis. Many of them, to this day, feared a shock. They insisted on calling electric train "the crude-ironer." In the sublimation laboratory, the listless model of a perpetual youth wandered yawning, hands in its pockets, among the long tables. Its gray two-meter-long beard dragged on the floor and kept catching in the chair legs. Just in case, I put away, in the cabinet, a bottle of aqua regia that was placed on top of a stool, and started toward my own place, the electronic section.

Here was my "Aldan." I admired it a bit for its compactness, beauty, mysteriousness, and soft highlights. The Institute had rather diverse reactions toward us. Accounting, for example, met me with open arms, and the chief accountant, smiling avidly, loaded me at once with tedious computations of pay scales and productivity. Gian Giacomo, director of the Universal Transformations Department, was also overjoyed at first, but after realizing that Aldan was incapable of calculating even the elementary transformation of a lead cube into a gold cube, cooled off toward my electronics and granted us only rare and sporadic assignments. In contrast, there was no respite from his subordinate, and favorite pupil, Victor Korneev. Oira-Oira, too, was constantly on my back with his overspecified problems in irrational mathematics. Cristobal Junta, who loved to be first in everything, regularly connected his central nervous system to the machine at night, so that the next day something in his head audibly hummed and clicked, while the derailed Aldan, in some manner incomprehensible to me, switched from the binary to the ancient hexadecimal system, and, on top of that, changed its logic, totally disregarding the law of excluded middle. Feodor Simeonovich, on the other hand, amused himself with the machine like a child with a toy. He played tick-tack-toe with it for hours, taught it Japanese chess, and in order to make it more interesting, infused it with someone's immortal soul—which was, incidentally, quite jolly and hard working. Janus Poluektovich (I don't remember anymore whether -A or -U) used the machine only once. He brought with him a small semi transparent box, which he connected to the Aldan. In approximately ten seconds of operation with this device, all the circuit breakers blew, and Janus Poluektovich apologized, took his box, and departed.

But, in spite of all these petty interruptions, in spite of the fact that the animated Alden sometimes printed out, "I am thinking, please don't interrupt," in spite of the insufficiency of spare subassemblies, and the feeling of helplessness that took hold of me when it was required to conduct a logical analysis of the "incongruent transgression in the psi-field of incubal transformation," in spite of all that, it was devilishly interesting to work here, and I was proud of being so obviously needed. I carried out all the calculation in Oira-Oira's work on the heredity mechanisms of hi-polar homunculi. I constructed tables of the M-field potential around the sofa-translator in the ninth dimension. I carried the routine accounting for the affiliated fish-products factory. I computed the conceptual design for the most economic transport of the Elixir of Children's Laughter. I even calculated the probabilities of solving the "Great Elephant," "Government House," and "Napoleon's Tomb" solitaires for the humorists in solitaire group, and also did all the quadratures for Cristobal Joseevich's numerical solution method, for which accomplishment he taught me how to achieve nirvana. I was satisfied; the days were in short supply, and my life was full of meaning.

It was still early—just after six. I switched on Aldan and worked a while. At nine

o'clock I caught myself, turned off the power with regret, and set off to the fifth floor. The blizzard was not about to quit. It was a true New Year's Eve storm. It howled and moaned in the old abandoned chimneys, it piled drifts in front of the windows, madly shook the infrequent street lamps.

I passed through the territory of the Plant and Administration Department. The entrance to Modest Matveevich's reception room was interdicted with crossed six-inch girders, flanked by two huge afreets in turbans, full battle dress, and with naked sabers. Each had his nose, red and swollen from a cold, pierced with a massive gold ring on which hung a tin inventory tag. It stank of sulphur, burned fur, and antibiotics. I stayed for some time, examining them because afreets were a rare phenomenon in our latitudes. But the one on the right, unshaved and with a black patch over his eye, began to bore into me with the other eye. He had a bad reputation, allegedly with a cannibal past, so I hurried along. I could hear him slurping his nose and smacking behind me.

All the window ventilators were open in the Department of Absolute Knowledge, because the stench from Vibegallo's herring heads was seeping in.

Snow had drifted on the sills, and puddles stood under the radiators. I closed the ventilators and strolled past the virginally clean tables of the departmental staff. New writing sets, which had not seen any ink and were stuffed with cigarette stubs, graced the desks. Strange department, this.

Their motto was, "The comprehension of Infinity requires infinite time." I didn't argue with that, but then they derived an unexpected conclusion from it: "Therefore work or not, it's all the same." In the interests of not increasing the entropy of the universe, they did not work. At least the majority of them. "En masse," as Vibegallo would say. In essence, their problem boiled down to the analysis of the curve of relative knowledge in the region of its asymptotic approach to absolute truth. For this reason, some of the colleagues were constantly busying themselves by dividing zero by zero on their desk calculators, while others were requesting assignments in infinity. From there they returned looking energetic and well fed and immediately took a leave of absence for reasons of health. In the intervals between travels, they sauntered from department to department with smoking cigarettes, taking chairs by the desks of those who were working, and recounting anecdotes about the discovery of indeterminacy by de l'Hôpital. They were easily recognized by their empty look, and their ears, which were perpetually nicked from constant shaving. During my half-year tenure in the Institute, they submitted just one problem for Aldan, and it reduced to the same old division of zero by zero without any content of absolute truth. It is possible that some of them did do something useful, but I had no information to that effect. At ten-thirty I arrived at Ambrosi Arnbruosovitch Vibegallo's floor. Covering my face with a handkerchief and trying not to breathe through my nose, I went directly to the laboratory generally known among the colleagues as the "Maternity Ward." Here, in retorts, as Professor Vibegallo said, were born models of the ideal man. Hatched out, that is; *comprenez vous?*

It was stuffy and dark in the lab. I turned on the lights. The illumination revealed smooth gray walls hung with portraits of Asclepius, Paracelsus, and Ambrosi Ambruosovitch himself. He was depicted in a small black cap, with noble curls, and an indecipherable medal shining starlike on his chest.

An autoclave stood in the middle of the floor and another bigger one hulked in the corner. Around the central autoclave, piled on the floor, were loaves of bread, several galvanized pails with bluish slops, and a huge tank with steamed bran. Judging by the

smell, the herring heads were also nearby, but I couldn't discern where they were actually located. Silence reigned against a background of rhythmic clicks in the depths of the autoclave.

Not knowing why, I tiptoed over and looked into the viewing port. I was already nauseous from the smell, but now I felt really ill, though I didn't see anything special: something white and shapeless slowly swaying in the greenish murk. I turned off the lights, went out, and diligently locked the door. I was troubled with vague premonitions. Only now I noticed that a thick black magic line with crude cabalistic signs was drawn around the doorsill. On looking closer, it became evident that it was conjuration against Gaki, the hungry demon of hell.

I left the domain of Vibegallo with some sense of relief and started my ascent to the sixth floor, where Gian Giacomo and his associates were occupied with the theory and practice of Universal Transformations. A colorful poster in verse hung on the stair landing, exhorting contributions to a general-interest library. The idea belonged to the local committee, but the verse was mine:

Search through your attic nooks
Your shelves and cabinets please scan
Bring us the magazines and books
As many as you can.

I blushed and went on. Stepping onto the sixth floor, I saw at once that the door to Victor's lab was half open, and heard hoarse singing. I tiptoed to the door.

Chapter 3

*Thee for my recitative
Thee in the driving storm even as now, the snow, the winter day declining,
Thee in thy panoply, thy measur'd dual throbbing and thy beat convulsive.*

W. Whitman

A while back Victor said that he was going off to a party, leaving a double in the laboratory to work. A double — that's a very interesting item. As a rule it's a fairly accurate copy of its creator. Let's say a man doesn't have enough hands— he makes up a double that is brainless, mute, who knows only how to solder contacts, or lug weights, or take dictation, but knows how to do these things very well indeed. Or he needs a model anthropoid, also brainless and mute but capable only of walking on ceilings or taking telepathgrams and doing that well. Or again, take the simplest of cases. Say the man is expecting to receive his salary, but does not wish to lose time getting it, so he sends his double in his place, who knows only how to keep anyone from getting in front of him in the queue, to sign his name in the record book, and to count the money before leaving the cashier. Of course, not everyone can create doubles. I, for one, was unable to do it. So far, whatever I put together couldn't do a thing— not even walk. There you would think you are standing in line with Victor and Roman and Volodia Pochkin, but there would be no one you could talk to. They would stand like stone monuments, not shifting their weight, not breathing, not blinking, and there would be nobody to ask for a cigarette.

True masters can create very complex, multiprogrammed, self-learning doubles. It was such a super-double that Roman sent off in my place last summer in the car. None of my friends guessed that it was not me. The double drove the car very competently, cursed when the mosquitoes bit him, and sang joyfully in chorus. Having returned to Leningrad, he dropped everybody off, turned the car in all by himself, paid for it, and disappeared right then and there before the eyes of the stunned rental agent.

At one time I thought that Janus-A and Janus-U were an original and a double. However, it wasn't like that. First, both directors had a passport, a diploma, passes, and other necessary documents. On the contrary, the most complex of doubles, could not have any personal identifications. At the mere sight of a government stamp on their photographs they get in a bate, and immediately tear the documents to shreds. Magnus Redkin studied this mysterious characteristic for a long time, but the problem was clearly too much for him.

Further, the Januses were protein-based beings. The argument between the philosophers and the cyberneticists as to whether doubles should be regarded as living or not has still not been resolved. Most doubles were silico-organic in structure, some were based on germanium, and lately doubles composed of alumopolymers were coming in fashion.

And finally, and most importantly, no one ever created either Janus-A or Janus-U artificially. They were not original and copy, nor brothers or twins; they were a single man— Janus Poluektovich Nevstruev. No one in the Institute could understand it, but they knew it so well that they did not even try to understand.

Victor's double stood, palms braced on the laboratory table, and followed the working

of a small Ashby homeostat with a fixed gaze. He accompanied himself with a soft little song to a once-popular tune:

"We are not Descartes or Newtons
Science to us is a dark forest
of wonders.
While we, normal astronomers— yes!
Snatch stars from the skies."

I had never heard of doubles singing before. But one could expect anything from one of Victor's doubles. I recollect one such, which dared argue about the excessive expenditure of psychic energy with Modest Matveevich himself. And this happened while the scarecrows I constructed, without legs or arms, feared him to the point of convulsion, entirely by instinct.

In the corner, to the right of the double, stood the two-speed translator, TDX-80E, covering under its canvas. It was the detrimental product of the Kitezhgrad magitechnic factory. Next to the table stood my old friend the sofa, its restitched leather gleaming in the glare of three spotlights. A baby bath, filled with water, in which a dead perch floated belly up, sat on top of the sofa. Also in the laboratory were shelves loaded with instruments, and near the door, there was a large green bottle covered with dust. In the bottle was a sealed-up jinn, and one could see him moving about in there and flashing his little eyes.

Victor's double quit examining the homeostat, sat down on the sofa next to the bath, ogled the dead fish with the same fixed stare, and sang the following verse:

"With the aim of taming nature
And scattering ignorances'
Darkness
We take the universe — yes!
And dully look at what goes which way and how."

The perch maintained its status quo. Then the double plunged its arm deeply into the sofa and started to turn something there, puffing with great effort.

The sofa was a translator. It erected an M-field around itself, which, simply stated, converted normal reality into imaginary reality. I had experienced this myself on that memorable night when boarding with Naina Kievna, and the only thing that had saved me was that the sofa was operating at one quarter of its standard output; otherwise I would have ended up as Tom Thumb or something similar. For Magnus Redkin the sofa was a possible container of the White Thesis. For Modest Matveevich it was a museum exhibit, inventory number 1123, and any squandering was strictly forbidden. For Victor it was Device Number One. For this reason he stole it every night, then Magnus Feodorovich, being jealous, reported this to Personnel Director Demin, while the activities of Modest Matveevich boiled down to putting an end to all that. Victor kept stealing the sofa until Janus Poluektovich took a hand — in close cooperation with Feodor Simeonovich, and with the active support of Gian Giacomo — relying on an official letter of the Academy Presidium signed personally by four academicians. They were able to neutralize Redkin completely, and press Modest Matveevich somewhat back from his entrenched position. The latter then announced that he, as the person officially accountable, didn't want to hear any more about that matter and

desired that the sofa, inventory number 1123, be placed in its own special room. Should this not be done, Modest Matveevich threatened, then everyone, including the academicians, must blame themselves. Janus Poluektovich agreed to blame himself, so did Feodor Simeonovich, and Victor quickly lugged the sofa to his laboratory.

He was a serious worker, not one of those loafers from the Department of Absolute Knowledge, and he intended to transform all the water in the seas and oceans of our planet into living water. To date, it is true, he was still in the experimental stage.

The perch in the bath stirred and turned belly down. The double took his arm out of the sofa. The perch moved its fins apathetically, opened its mouth as though in a yawn, fell over on its side, and turned belly up again.

"B-beast," said the double with expression.

I snapped to full alertness at once. This was said with emotion. No laboratory double could talk like that. The double put his hand in his pocket, got up slowly, and saw me. We looked at each other for a few seconds.

Then I inquired sarcastically, "Working, aren't we?"

The double looked at me dully.

"Give it up," I said. "Everything is clear."

The double was silent. He stood like a stone and didn't blink.

"I'll tell you what," I said. "It's now ten-thirty. I am giving you ten minutes. Clean up, throw out the carrion, and run along to the dance. I'll turn the power off myself."

The double puckered his lips into a tube and started to back up. He did this very carefully, skirting the sofa, and stopped when the lab was between us. I looked at my watch demonstratively. He mouthed an incantation. A calculator, pen, and a stack of clean paper appeared on the table. The double bent his legs so that he hung seated in the air, and started to write, looking at me cautiously now and then. It was done so naturally that I began to doubt myself. But I had a sure method for establishing the truth of the matter. Doubles were, as a rule, completely insensitive to pain. Searching in my pocket, I drew out a pair of small sharp pincers, and snapping them meaningfully, moved toward the double. He stopped writing. Looking him steadily in the eye, I snapped the head off a nail sticking out of the table and said, "Well?"

"Why are you pestering me?" asked Victor. "Can't you see a man is at work?"

"But you are a double," I said. "Don't you dare talk back to me."

"Get rid of the pincers," he said.

"Stop playing the fool," I said. "Some double you are!"

Victor sat on the edge of the table and tiredly rubbed his ears.

"Nothing works for me today," he informed me. "Today I am a blunderhead. Made a double and it came out totally brainless. Dropped everything, sat down on the umclidet... the animal... I hit him in the neck and hurt my hand... and even the perch croaks systematically."

I went over to the sofa and looked in the bath.

"What's the matter with him?"

"How do I know?"

"Where did you get it?"

"At the market."

I picked up the perch by the tail.

"So what do you expect? It's an ordinary dead fish."

"Oaf," said Victor. "That's living water, of course!"

"A-ah," I said as I tried to figure out how to advise him. I had but a fuzzy understanding of the mechanism of the living water. Basically all I knew was derived

from the well-known fairy tale of Ivan the Tsarevitch and the Gray Wolf.

The jinn in the bottle kept moving about and every so often rubbed the glass, which was dusty on the outside, with the palm of his hand.

"You could wipe the bottle, you know," I said, not having come up with anything at all.

"What?"

"Wipe the dust off the bottle. He's bored in there."

"To the devil with him! Let him be bored!" Victor said absentmindedly.

He shoved his hand in the sofa, and again twisted at something in there. The perch revived.

"Did you see that?" said Victor "When I give it the maximal voltage — everything works."

"It's an unfortunate choice of sample," I said, guessing.

Victor extracted his arm from the sofa and stared at me.

"Unfortunate.." he said. "Sample.." His eyes took on the aspect of the double. "Sample to sample lupus est..."

"Furthermore, it's probably been frozen," I said, growing bold.

Victor wasn't listening.

"Where could I get a fish?" he said, looking around and slapping his pockets. "Just one little fish...."

"For what?" I asked.

"That's right," said Victor. "For what? If there isn't another fish," he pronounced thoughtfully, "why not take another water sample? Right?"

"Oh, but no," I contradicted. "It won't do."

"Then what?" Victor asked eagerly.

"Trundle yourself out of here," I said. "Leave the premises."

"Where to?"

"Wherever you like."

He climbed over the sofa and took me by shirtfront.

"You listen to me, do you hear?" he said threateningly. "Nothing in the world is identical. Everything fits the Gaussian distribution. One water is different from another... This old fool didn't reckon that there is a dispersion of properties..."

"Hey, friend," I called to him. "The New Year is almost here; don't get carried away!" He let me go, and hustled about.

"Where did I put it... ? What a dope... ! Where did I stick it.? Ah, here it is..." - He ran toward the stool, where the umclidet stood upright. The very same one.

I jumped back toward the door and said pleadingly, "Get your wits together! It's going on twelve! They are waiting for you! Vera is waiting!"

"Nah," he replied. "I sent them a double. A good double, a hefty type. - dumb as they come. Tells jokes, does handstands, dances with the endurance of an ox."

He turned the umclidet in his hands, estimating something, looking, calculating, and squinting with one eye.

"Out— I'm telling you! Out!" I yelled in desperation.

Victor looked at me briefly, and I fell back. The fun was over with. Victor was in the condition of a magus who, enthralled by his work, would turn those in his way into spiders, wood lice, lizards, and other quiet animals. I squatted by the bottle with the jinn and looked.

Victor froze in the classical imprecation pose involving materialization (the "Matrikhor" position), and a pink fog rose over the table; batlike shades flitted about,

the calculator vanished, the paper vanished, and suddenly the whole surface of the table was covered with vessels filled with a transparent liquid. Victor thrust the umclidet at the stool without looking, and grabbed one of the vessels and studied it with great absorption. It was obvious that he was not going anywhere, anytime soon. Quickly he removed the bath from the sofa, was at the shelf in one jump, and started dragging a cumbersome copper aquavitometer to the table. I arranged myself more comfortably, rubbed clear an observation window for the jinn, when voices sounded in the corridor, accompanied by the sound of

running feet and slamming doors. I jumped up and charged out of the lab.

The feeling of nighttime emptiness and darkened quiet in the huge building had vanished without a trace. Lights blazed in the corridor. Someone ran at a breakneck speed on the stairs; someone yelled, "Valka! The potential is falling! Get to the battery room!" Someone was shaking his coat out on the landing, flinging snow in all directions. Coming straight at me, bending elegantly and looking pensive, was Gian Giacomo, followed by a trotting gnome carrying a huge briefcase under his arm and a walking stick in his teeth. We bowed to each other. The great prestidigitator smelled of good wine and French suffimen. I didn't dare stop him and he went through the locked door into his office. The gnome pushed through the portfolio and stick in his wake, but dived into a radiator himself.

"Why the deuce?" I cried, and ran to the stairs.

The Institute was stuffed to the gills with employees. It seemed there were even more of them than on a working day. In offices and laboratories the lights were full on, doors were wide open. The usual business hum pervaded the Institute: there was the crack of discharges, the monotonous voices dictating numbers or pronouncing incantations, the staccato pounding of calculators and typewriters. Above it all was the rolling and victorious roar of Feodor Simeonovich: "That's good! That's great! You are a good man, old thing! But who's the imbecile who shut off the generator?"

I was struck in the back with a sharp corner and grabbed the railing. I was enraged. It was Volodia Pochkin and Eddie Amperian, who were carrying a coordinate-measuring apparatus that weighed half a ton up to their floor.

"Oh, Sasha?" friendly said Eddie. "Hello, Sasha."

"Sasha, make way!" hollered Volodia, backing up. "Swing it around, swing it around!" I seized him by the collar.

"Why are you at the Institute? How did you get here?"

"Through the door, through the door! Let go...!" said Volodia. "Eddie, more to the right. Can't you see it's not getting through?"

I let him go and darted off to the vestibule. I was burning with administrative indignation. "I'll show you," I grated, jumping four steps at a time "I'll show you how to goof off. I'll show you how to let anyone in without distinction!"

The In and Out macro-demons, instead of tending to their business, were playing roulette, shaking with a gambling frenzy and phosphorescing feverishly. Under my very eyes, "In," oblivious of his duties, took a bank of some seventy billion molecules from "Out." I recognized the roulette at once. It was my roulette. I made the thing for a party and kept it behind the cabinet in Electronics, and the only one who knew about it was Victor Korneev. A conspiracy. I decided. I'll blast them all. And all the time merry, rosy-cheeked colleagues kept coming and coming through the vestibule.

"Some wind! My ears are stuffed..."

"So you left too?"

"It's a bore...Everyone got loaded. I'd be better off doing some work, I thought to

myself. So I left them a double and went."

"You know, there I was dancing with this girl and I could feel I was growing fur all over. Downed some vodka — it didn't help."

"And what if you use an electron beam? Too much mass? Then we use photons..

"Alexis, do you have an extra laser? Let me have one even if it's a gas type.

"Galka, how come you left your husband alone for the evening?"

"I left an hour ago, if you must know. Fell right into a snow bank, up to my ears, almost got buried."

It came to me that I wasn't making it as watchman. There was no sense in taking the roulette from the demons anymore; all that was left was to go and have a tremendous row with the provocateur Victor, and let come what may thereafter. I shook my fist at the demons and hauled myself up the stairs, trying to visualize what would happen if Modest Matveevich should look in at the Institute now.

On the way to the director's reception room, I stopped at the bench-scale hall. Here they were taming a released jinn. The jinn, huge and blue from rage, was flinging himself about in the open cage, which was surrounded with Gian Ben Gian shields and closed from above with powerful magnetic fields. Stung with high-voltage discharges, he howled, and cursed in several dead languages, leaped about, and belched tongues of flame. Out of sheer excitement he would start building a palace and would immediately destroy it. Finally he surrendered, sat down on the floor shuddering with each shock, moaned piteously, and said, "Enough, leave off! I won't do it any more... Oi, oi, oi.. I am all quiet now..."

Calm, unblinking young men, all doubles, stood by the discharge-control console. The originals, on the other hand, crowding around the vibration stand, were glancing at their watches and uncorking bottles.

I went over to them.

"Ah, Sasha!"

"Sasha pal, I hear you are on watch today... I'll be over to your section later..."

"Hey there, somebody, make up a glass for him — my hands are loaded..

I was stunned and didn't notice how a glass appeared in my hand. Corks fired into Gian Ben Gian shields, icy champagne flowed, hissing and sparkling. The discharges silenced, the jinn stopped whining and started sniffing the air. In the same instant the Kremlin clock started striking twelve.

"Friends! Long live Monday!"

The glasses clinked together. Later someone said, looking the bottle over,

"Who made the wine?"

"I did."

"Don't forget to pay tomorrow."

"How about another bottle?"

"Enough, we'll catch cold."

"That's a good jinn, this one. A bit nervous, maybe."

"One does not look a gift horse.."

"That's all right, he'll fly like a doll, hold out for the forty maneuvers, and then — good riddance to him with his nerves."

"Hey, guys," I said timidly. "It's night out there and it's a holiday. How about going home.."

They looked at me, patted me on the back, told me, "It's OK, it'll pass," and moved in a body toward the cage. The doubles rolled away one of the shields and the originals surrounded the jinn in a businesslike manner, firmly took him by his hands and feet

and started carrying him toward the vibro stand. The jinn was timidly begging for mercy and vacillatingly promising all the riches of the tsars of the Earth. I stood alone to the side and watched them attaching microsensors to the various parts of his body. Then I touched one of the shields. It was huge, heavy, dented with potholes from the ball lightning strokes, and charred in several places. Gian Ben Gian's shields were constructed out of seven dragon hides glued together with the bile of a patricide, and rated for direct lightning hits. Attached to each shield with upholstery tacks were metallic inventory tags. Theoretically, the outer sides of the shields should have depicted all the famous battles of the past and the inner sides all the great battles of the future. In practice, the face of the shield I was studying showed something like a jet attacking a motorized column, and the inner side was covered with strange swirls reminiscent of an abstract painting.

They started shaking the jinn on the vibro-stand. He giggled and squealed, "It tickles.. ! Ai, I can't stand it!" I returned to the corridor. It smelled of Bengal light. Girandoles swirled under the ceiling, banging into walls; rockets, trailing streams of colored smoke, streaked overhead. I met Volodia Pochkin's double carrying a gigantic incunabulum bound with brass bands, two doubles of Roman Oira-Oira collapsing under a ponderous channel beam, then Roman himself with a stack of bright blue folders from the archives of the Department of Unassailable Problems, and next a furious lab technician conveying a troop of cursing ghosts in crusader cloaks, to be interrogated by Junta. Everyone was busy and preoccupied...

The labor legislation was being flagrantly ignored and I began to feel that I had lost all desire to struggle against this law-breaking, because, tonight at twelve o'clock on New Year's Eve, plowing through a blizzard, they came in, these people who had more interest in bringing to a

conclusion, or starting anew, a useful undertaking than stunning themselves with vodka, mindlessly kicking with their legs, playing charades, and practicing flirtations in various degrees of frivolity. Here came people who would rather be with each other than anywhere else, who couldn't stand any kind of Sunday, because they were bored on Sunday. They were magi, Men with a capital M, and their motto was "Monday begins on Saturday." True, they knew an incantation or two, knew how to turn water into wine, and any one of them would not find it difficult to feed a thousand with five loaves. But they were not magi for that. That was chaff, outer tinsel. They were magi because they had a tremendous knowledge, so much indeed that quantity had finally been transmuted into quality, and they had come into a different relationship with the world than ordinary people. They worked in an Institute that was dedicated above all to the problems of human happiness and the meaning of human life, and even among them, not one knew exactly what was happiness and what precisely was the meaning of life. So they took it as a working hypothesis that happiness lay in gaining perpetually new insights into the unknown and the meaning of life was to be found in the same process. Every man is a magus in his inner soul, but he becomes one only when he begins to think less about himself and more about others, when it becomes more interesting for him to work than to recreate himself in the ancient meaning of the word. In all probability, their working hypothesis was not far from the truth, for just as work had transformed ape into man so had the absence of it transformed man into ape in much shorter periods of time. And even into something worse than an ape.

We don't always notice these things in our daily life. The loafer and sponger, the careerist and the debauchee, continue to walk about on their hind extremities and to

speak quite articulately (although the roster of their subjects shrinks to a cipher). As to tight pants and infatuation with jazz, there was an attempt to use these factors as indices of apeward transformation, but it was quickly determined that they were often the property of even the best of the magi.

However, it was impossible to conceal regression at the Institute. It presented limitless opportunities to transform man into magus. But it was merciless toward regressors and marked them without a miss. All a employee had to do was to give himself over to egotistical and instinctive behavior (and sometimes just thinking about it), and he would notice in terror that the fuzz on his ears would grow thicker. That was by way of warning. Just as a police whistle warns of a fine, or a pain warns of a possible trauma. Then everything depended on oneself. Quite often a man could not contend with his sour thoughts, that's why he was a man—the passing stage between neanderthal and magus. But he could act contrary to these thoughts, and then he still had a chance. Or he could give in, give it all up ("We live only once," "You should take all you can out of life," "I am no stranger to all that's human"), but then there was only one thing to do: leave the Institute as soon as possible. There, on the outside, he could still remain at least a decent citizen, honestly if flabbily earning his pay. But it was difficult to decide on leaving. It was cozy and pleasant at the Institute, the work was clean and respected, the pay was not bad, the people were wonderful, and shame would not eat one's eyes out. So they wandered about, pursued with compassionate glances, through the halls and the labs, their ears covered with gray bristles, aimless, losing clarity of speech, growing more stupid before one's very eyes. Still, you could pity them, you could try to help and hope to revert them to human aspect.

But there were others. With empty eyes. Those knowing with certainty on which side their bread was buttered. In their own way they were not stupid. In their own way they were not bad judges of human nature. They were calculating and unprincipled, knowledgeable of all the weaknesses of man, clever at turning any bad situation into a good deal for themselves, and tireless at that occupation. They shaved their ears painstakingly and kept inventing the most marvelous means for getting rid of their hairy coverings. Quite often, they succeeded in attaining considerable heights and great success in their basic purpose—the construction of a bright future in a single private apartment or on a single private suburban plot, fenced off with barbed wire from the rest of humanity.

I returned to my post in the director's reception room, dumped the useless keys into the box, and read a few pages from the classic work of J.P. Nevstruev, "Mathematical Equations in Magic". The book read like an adventure novel, as it was stuffed with posed and unsolved problems. I began to burn with a desire to work and almost decided to chuck my watch responsibilities so I could go to my Aldan, when Modest Matveevich called.

Chewing crunchily, he inquired, "Where are you, Privalov? I'm calling for the third time. It's disgraceful!"

"Happy New Year, Modest Matveevich," I said.

He chewed in silence for some time and replied in a lower tone, "The same to you. How's the watch going?"

"I just finished my tour of the building," I said. "All is normal."

"There wasn't any auto-combustion?"

"None at all."

"Power off everywhere?"

"Briareus broke a finger," I said.

He was worried "Briareus? Wait a while. Ah, yes, inventory number fourteen-eighty-nine... Why?"

I explained.

"That was a correct solution," said Modest Matveevich". Continue standing watch. That's all here."

Immediately after Modest Matveevich, Eddie Amperian, from Linear Happiness, called, and politely asked me to calculate the optimal coefficients of freedom from care for those working in positions of responsibility. I agreed and we worked out a time of meeting for two hours later in Electronics. After that, Oira-Oira's double came in and asked for the safe keys in a colorless voice. I refused. He insisted. I chased him out. In a minute, Roman himself came running.

"Give me the keys."

I shook my head. "I won't."

"Give me the keys!"

"Get lost! I am the person materially accountable."

"Sasha! I'll carry it off!"

I grinned and said, "Help yourself."

Roman glared at the safe and strained his whole body, but the safe was either spellbound or screwed to the floor.

"What do you want in there, anyway?" I asked.

"Documentation on RU-Sixteen," said Roman. "How about it? Let's have the keys!"

I laughed, and reached for the box with the keys. In the same instant a piercing scream sounded somewhere above us. I jumped up.

Chapter 4

*Woe! I am not a robust fellow;
The vampire will have me in one swallow.*

A.S. Pushkin

"It's hatched," said Roman, calmly looking at the ceiling.

"Who?" I was ill at ease, as the cry was feminine.

"Vibegallo's monster," said Roman. "More precisely, his cadaver."

"Why was there a woman's cry?"

"You'll soon see," said Roman.

He took me by the hand, jumped up, and we streaked through the floors. Piercing the ceilings, we wedged into floors like a knife into frozen butter, then worked through with a sucking sound, burst out into the air, and again charged the next floor. It was dark between the ceilings and

floors, and small gnomes mixed with mice scattered away from us with frightened squeals. In the labs through which we flew colleagues were staring upward with worried faces.

We pushed our way through a crowd of the curious that had accumulated at the Maternity Ward, and saw an entirely nude Professor Vibegallo at the table. His bluish-white skin gleamed wetly, his beard hung limply in a cone, wet hair plastered his low forehead, on which flamed a functional volcanic pimple. His empty, translucent eyes wandered aimlessly about the room, blinking sporadically.

Professor Vibegallo was eating. Steaming on the table in front of him was a large photographic tray, filled to the brim with bran. Not paying any special attention to us, he scooped the bran with his palms, kneaded it into a lump, and conveyed it into his mouth orifice, liberally sprinkling his beard with stray bits. With this he crunched, smacked, grunted, and slurped, bent his head to the side, and squinted his eyes as though experiencing an unbearable pleasure. From time to time he became agitated and without interrupting his swallowing and chewing, grasped the rim of the tub with bran and the pails with slops, which stood by him on the floor, and pulled them closer and closer. At the other end of the table, Stella, a young undergraduate witch with clean pink ears, pale and tear-stained, was cutting loaves into huge slabs and handing them to Vibegallo with outstretched hands, turning her face away. The center autoclave was open and overturned, and a greenish puddle oozed around it.

Vibegallo suddenly said indistinctly, "Hey, wench let's have some milk! Pour it right here in the bran, I mean. S'il vous plaît, I mean."

Stella hurriedly picked up a pail and splashed its contents into the tray.

"Eh!" exclaimed Professor Vibegallo. "The dish is small! You, girl. what's your name.. pour it right into the tub. I mean, we'll eat right out of the tub..."

Stella started pouring pailfuls into the tub, and the professor, grasping the tray like a spoon, took to ladling the bran into his maw, which suddenly opened incredibly wide.

"Will somebody please call him!" Stella cried piteously. "He'll eat it all up in no time."

"We've already called," said someone in the crowd. "You'd better move away from him. Come on over here."

"Will he come? Will he?"

"He said he was leaving. Putting on galoshes, I mean, and going out. We're telling you—move away from him."

Finally I understood what was going on. That was not Professor Vibegallo. It was the newborn cadaver, the model of Man, unsatisfied stomachwise. I thanked God, for I thought the professor had had a stroke as a result of intensive overwork.

Stella moved back cautiously. People took her by the shoulders and drew her into the crowd. She hid behind my back, grasping my elbow, and I immediately squared my shoulders, though I still did not comprehend what it was all about and why she was so frightened. The cadaver gorged himself. A stunned silence filled the lab — full of people, but the only sound was that of him, slurping and snuffling like a horse, and scrubbing on the tub walls with the tray. We looked on. He slid off the chair and submerged his head in the tub. The women looked away. Lilechka Novosmekhova became ill and they escorted her out into the hall. Then the clear voice of Eddie Amperian was heard.

"All right. Let's be logical. In a minute he'll finish the bran, then he'll eat the bread. And then?"

There was movement in the front ranks. The crowd backed toward the door. I began to comprehend.

Stella said in a thin little voice, "There are still the herring heads."

"A lot?"

"Two tons."

"Hmm" said Eddie. "And where are they?"

"They were supposed to be supplied by conveyor. But I tried it and it's broken," said Stella.

"By the way," said Roman loudly, "it's now been two minutes since I've been trying to pacify him and entirely without effect."

"I, too," said Eddie.

"For that reason," said Roman, "it would be a very good thing if one of the less squeamish among you got busy with fixing the conveyor. As a palliative. Are there any other magisters here? I see Eddie. Anybody else? Korneev! Victor Pavlovich, are you here?"

"He is not. Maybe he went to look for Feodor Simeonovich..."

"I think we shouldn't bother him for now. We'll manage somehow. Eddie, let's try concentrating together."

"Which approach?"

"The braking regime. Up to tetanus. Guys! Everyone pitch in who can."

"Wait a minute," said Eddie. "And what if we damage him?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah!" I said. "Maybe you'd better not. Better he should eat me."

"Don't worry, don't worry. We'll be careful. Eddie, let's try the contact method. One touch."

"Let's begin," said Eddie.

The silence became even more intense. The cadaver worried the basin, and volunteers exchanged comments and clattered behind the wall, working on the conveyor. A minute passed. The cadaver climbed out of the tub, wiped his beard, looked at us sleepily, and suddenly extended his arm to an impossible length and snatched the last of the loaves of bread with a deft movement. Next he gave forth a rolling belch and fell back on the chair, folding his arms on a hugely distended belly. Ecstasy flowed over his face. He snuffled and smiled inanely. He was undoubtedly happy, as a terminally tired man is happy on finally reaching the longed-for bed.

"It seems to have worked," someone in the crowd said. Roman compressed his lips in doubt.

"I don't have that impression," Eddie said politely.

"Maybe his spring has run down," I said hopefully.

Stella piteously informed, "It's only a temporary relaxation.., a paroxysm of satiety. He'll wake up again soon."

"You masters just haven't got the strength," said a manly voice.

"Let me go; I'll call Feodor Simeonovich."

We all looked at each other, smiling uncertainly. Roman pensively toyed with the umclidet, rolling it about in his palm. Stella shivered, whispering, "What's going to happen, Sasha? I am frightened!" As for me, I stuck my chest out, furrowed my brows, and struggled with an overwhelming desire to call Modest Matveevich. I had a terrible urge to get out from under my responsibility. It was a weakness and I was powerless before it.

Modest Matveevich appeared to me at that moment in an entirely different light. I was convinced that all Modest Matveevich had to do was show up here and roar at the monster, "You will cut that out, comrade Vibegallo!" and the thing would quit at once.

"Roman," I said carelessly, "I suppose that in the extreme case you could dematerialize it."

Roman laughed and patted me on the back. "Fear not," he said. "This is just a toy. I just don't feel like tangling with Vibegallo... Don't mind this one, but beware of that one!" He pointed at the second autoclave clicking away peacefully in the corner.

In the meantime, the cadaver started to stir uneasily. Stella squeaked softly and pressed herself against me. The cadavers eyes opened wide. First he bent over and balanced in the tub. Then he banged the empty pails about.

Then he was still and sat motionless in the chair for some time. The expression of satisfaction on his face was replaced by one of bitter insult. He raised himself up, sniffed, rapidly twitching his nostrils, and, deploying a long red tongue, licked the crumbs off the table.

"Hold on, folks..." whispered someone in the crowd.

The cadaver reached into the tub, pulled out the tray, looked over on all sides, and bit at its edge. His eyebrows rose in pain. He bit another piece out and crunched on it. His face turned blue, as though in irritation; his eyes watered, but he kept biting time after time until he had chewed up the whole tray. For a minute he sat in thought, fingering his teeth, then he slid his gaze slowly over the stilled crowd. It was not a nice gaze; it was somehow evaluative and selective.

Volodia Pochkin said involuntarily, "No, no, take it easy, you.."

The empty translucent eyes fixed on Stella, and she let out a scream, the same soul-rending scream, reaching up into the supersonic range, that Roman and I had heard four floors below in the director's reception room just a few minutes before. I shuddered. The cadaver was also discomfited; he lowered his eyes and started drumming his fingers nervously on the table.

There was a commotion at the entrance. Everyone moved about, and Ambrosi Ambruosovitch Vibegallo pushed through the crowd, elbowing the entranced onlookers and plucking icicles out of his beard. He smelled of vodka, overcoat, and frost.

"Dear me!" he hollered. "What's all this? Queue situation! Stella, what are you doing just gaping there? Where is the herring? He has needs! They are increasing! You should have read my papers!"

He approached the cadaver, who immediately started to sniff him greedily. Vibegallo gave the cadaver his coat.

"The needs must be satisfied!" he said, hurriedly flicking the switches at the conveyor control board. "Why didn't you give it to him at once? Oh, these les femmes. Who said it's broken? It's not broken at all; it's spellbound."

A window opened in the wall, the conveyor clattered, and a flood of stinking herring heads flowed right onto the floor. The cadavers eyes gleamed. He fell on all fours, trotted smartly to the window, and set to work. Vibegallo stood alongside, clapped his hands, exclaimed joyfully, and, brimming with feelings, scratched the cadaver behind the ear now and then.

The crowd sighed in relief. It developed that Vibegallo had brought two regional newspaper correspondents with him. The correspondents were familiar— G. Perspicaciov and B. Pupilov. They, too, smelled of vodka. Setting off their flashes, they proceeded to take pictures and notes.

The two specialized in scientific reporting. G. Perspicaciov was famous for the phrase: "Oort was the first to look at the starry sky and to note the rotation of the galaxy." He was also the owner of the literary writings of the saga of Merlin's journey with the Chairman of the Regional Soviet and an interview (conducted in ignorance) with Oira-Oira's double. The interview bore the title, "Man with a Capital M," and started with the words, "Like every true scientist, he was not talkative." B. Pupiov thrived on Vibegallo. His daring sketches about boots that put themselves on, about self-harvesting, self-loading carrots, and about other Vibegallo projects were widely known in the region, while the article "Magician from Solovetz" even appeared in one of the national magazines.

When the cadaver finally reached another of his paroxysms of satiation and dozed off, Vibegallo's newly arrived laboratory assistants dressed the monster in a two-piece suit and hoisted him into the chair. Having been rudely extirpated from their New Year's repasts, they were unaffable about it. The correspondents placed Vibegallo alongside the monster with his hand on the monster's shoulder, and taking aim with their lenses, asked him to continue.

"What, then, is most important?" Vibegallo went on readily "The most important thing is that man should be happy. I note this in parentheses: Happiness is a human concept. And what is man, philosophically speaking? Man, comrades, is Homo sapiens, who has desires and abilities. Perhaps, I mean, he wants, and he wants all that he can. N'est pas, comrades? If he — man, that is — can have all that he wants and wants all that he can have, then he is truly happy. We will define him so. And what have we here in front of us, comrades? We have a model. But this model has desires, and that is all to the good. So to speak, excellent, exquis, charmant. And furthermore, comrades, it is capable. This is even better because, that being the case, it.he, I mean is happy. We have here a metaphysical transformation from unhappiness to happiness, and this does not surprise us, since people are not born happy, but, I mean, that is, they become happy. Here it is waking up.. it desires. For this reason it is temporarily unhappy. But it is able, and through this, dialectic jump occurs. There, there! Look at that! Did you see how able it is? Oh, you dear! My joy! There, there! And how it is able! It is able for ten-fifteen minutes... You there, comrade Pupilov. Why don't you put away your still camera and use your movie camera, because we have here a dynamic process, here everything is in motion! Rest is as it should be, a relative phenomenon, but movement is absolute. There you are. Now it has been able to move dialectically into the region of happiness. To the realm of satisfaction, that is. You see

it has closed its eyes. It's enjoying itself. It feels good. I tell you, in a scientific sense, I would be willing to change places with him, right now, of course... Comrade Perspicaciov, write down everything I say and then let me have a look at it. I'll smooth it out and add references... Now it is sleeping, but that's not all. Our needs must go deeper as well as wider. That would be the only correct process. On dit que Vibegallo is allegedly an enemy of the spiritual. That, comrades, is a label. We should have put aside such labels in scientific discussions a long time ago, comrades. We all know that all that is material leads the way and all that is spiritual brings up the rear. Satur venter, as is well known, non studit libentur.¹ Which we will translate, as it applies to this situation, in this way: Bread is always on the mind of the hungry."

"It is the other way around," said Oira-Oira.

Vibegallo looked at him vacantly for some time and then said, "The commentary from the audience, comrades, will be noted with indignation. It is regarded as unformed. Let us not be diverted from the main topic— from the practical aspects. I continue and turn to the next stage of the experiment. I am clarifying my presentation for the sake of the press. In accordance with the materialist concept, and material consumption needs having been temporarily satisfied, we can turn to the satisfaction of spiritual needs. Such as go to a movie, enjoy watching television, listen to folk songs or sing oneself, or even read a book, say Krokodil² or a newspaper. ... Comrades, we do not forget that abilities are required for all that, while the satisfaction of material needs does not require any special abilities, which are always present, since nature follows the materialistic viewpoint. As yet we cannot say anything about this model's spiritual capabilities, inasmuch as the seed of its rationality resides in alimentary hunger. But we shall expose these spiritual capabilities now."

The dour technicians deployed a tape recorder, a radio, a movie projector, and a small portable library on the table. The cadaver scanned the instruments of culture with an indifferent gaze and sampled the tape for taste. It became evident that the spiritual capabilities of the model would not develop spontaneously. And so Vibegallo ordered a forceful infusion of cultural habits, as he put it. The tape recorder sang in sugary tones, "My darling and I were parting, we swore everlasting love." The radio whistled and gargled. The projector displayed the animated film, Wolf and the Seven Young Goats. Two technicians stood one on each side of the cadaver and started to read aloud simultaneously. As should have been expected, the alimentary model responded to all this noise with complete indifference.

While it desired to stuff itself, it couldn't care less about its spiritual world, because it wanted to stuff itself, and it did just that. Having satisfied its hunger, it ignored its spiritual self, because it went limp and temporarily did not desire anything at all. The sharp-eyed Vibegallo managed, nevertheless, to observe an unmistakable connection between the drumbeats (from the radio) and the reflex quiverings in the model's lower extremities. This jerking threw him into a fit of joy.

"The leg!" he cried, seizing B. Pupilov by the sleeve. "Photograph the leg! Close-up. La vibration de son mollet gauche est un grand signe.³ This leg will sweep away all the intrigues and tear off all the labels that have been hung on me. Oui, sans doute, someone who is not a specialist could be surprised at my reaction to the leg. But, comrades, all great things are manifest in small, and I must remind you that this

1. A full belly is deaf to learning.

2. Humorous periodical magazine.

3. The quivering of its left calf is an important sign.

model is a model of limited needs— speaking concretely, with only one need, and calling a spade a spade, just between us, without any obfuscation, it's a model with alimentary needs only. That is why it has such limited spiritual needs. We assert, however, that only a variety of material needs could guarantee a variety in spiritual needs. I clarify for the press with an example in terms comprehensible to them. If, for instance, it had a strongly developed desire for the tape recorder — the Astra-Seven, worth a hundred and forty rubles — it would play that tape recorder; for you can understand there would be nothing else to do with it, if it could get it. And if it played it, then there would be music, and one would have to listen to it, or dance to it. And what, comrades, is listening to music, with or without dancing? It is the satisfaction of spiritual needs. Comprenez vous?"

I had noticed for some time that the cadaver behavior had undergone a substantial change. Whether something had gone wrong with it or whether it was normal, the periods of its relaxation had grown shorter and shorter, so that toward the end of Vibegallo's speech, it no longer left the conveyor. Although it could have been that it became more and more difficult for it to move.

"May I be permitted a question?" Eddie said politely. "How do you explain the cessation of the satiation paroxysms?"

Vibegallo stopped talking and looked at the cadaver. It was stuffing itself. He looked at Eddie.

"I'll answer you," he said smugly. "The question, comrades, is a good one. I'd even say an intelligent question, comrades. We have before us a real model of perpetually increasing material needs. It would appear that the satiation paroxysms have ceased, but only to the superficial observer. In reality they have been dialectically transformed into a new quality.

Comrades, they have spread to the very process of the satisfaction of needs. Now it's not enough for the model to be well fed. Now its needs have grown, now it needs to eat all the time, now it has taught itself that chewing is so wonderful. Do you understand, comrade Amperian?"

I looked at Eddie. Eddie was smiling politely. Next to him, arm in arm, stood the doubles of Feodor Simeonovich and Cristobal Joseevich. Their heads with widely spaced ears were turning slowly to and fro like airport radar antennas.

"May I ask another question?" said Roman.

"Please," said Vibegallo, looking tiredly condescending.

"Ambrosi Ambruosovitch," said Roman. "And what will happen when he has consumed it all?"

Vibegallo looked around angrily.

"I request that everyone present here note this provocative question, which stinks of Malthusianism, neo-Malthusianism, pragmatism, existentialism, and a lack of faith, comrades, in the inexhaustible might of mankind. What are you trying to say with your question, comrade Oira-Oira? That in the future of our scientific organization there will come a time of crisis, of regression, when our consumers will not have enough consumer products? That's not nice, comrade Oira-Oira! You didn't think it through! But we cannot allow, comrades, that shadows should be cast, and labels hung on our work. And we will not permit that to happen, comrades."

He took out a handkerchief and wiped his beard. G. Perspicaciov, his face twisted in concentration, asked the next question.

"I am not an expert, of course. But what is the future of this model? I understand that the experiment is proceeding successfully. But it is consuming most energetically."

Vibegallo smiled a bitter little smile.

"There you are, comrade Oira-Oira," he said. "That's how unhealthy rumors are started. You asked your question without adequate thought. Right away a layman becomes incorrectly oriented. He does not consider the correct ideal. You are not looking at the right ideal, comrade Perspicaciov." He addressed the correspondent directly. "This model is already a passing stage. Here is the ideal that you should consider!". He walked up to the second autoclave and laid his red-haired hand on its polished side. His beard assumed an upward thrust "Here is our ideal!" he announced". Or, expressing myself more precisely, here is the model of our common ideal. We have here the universal consumer who desires everything and, correspondingly, is capable of everything. He has in him all the needs that exist in our world. And he is capable of satisfying all of them. With the help of our science, of course. I am elucidating for the press. The universal consumer model, enclosed in this autoclave — or as we say, here in the auto-locker — has unlimited desires. All of us, comrades, with due respect to us, are simply ciphers in comparison. Because it desires such things as we cannot even conceive of. And it won't wait for a gift from nature. It will take from nature all that it needs for its complete happiness, which is its satiation. Magi-materialistic forces will extract for it all that it needs from the surrounding environment. The happiness of the model will be indescribable. It will not know hunger, nor thirst, nor toothache, nor personal problems. All its needs will be immediately satisfied upon their appearance."

"Excuse me," said the polite Eddie. "And will its needs be material?"

"Of course!" cried Vibegallo. "Spiritual needs will develop in parallel. I have already noted that the more material needs there are, the more variegated will the spiritual needs become. That will be a giant of the spirit and a super artist."

I surveyed those present. Many were flabbergasted. The correspondents wrote desperately fast. Some, as I noticed, constantly shifted their attention from the autoclave to the cadaver who ate without interruption, and back again. Stella, pressing her head against my shoulder, sobbed and whispered, "I am going to leave, I can't stand it, I'm going..."

"I thought that I, too, was beginning to understand what Oira-Oira feared. I visualized a huge open mouth, into which, thrown by the force of magic, animals, people, cities, continents, planets, and suns were falling in an endless stream..."

B. Pupilov again addressed Vibegallo. "When will the universal model be demonstrated?"

"The answer is," said Vibegallo, "that the demonstration will take place here in my laboratory. As to time, the press will be notified further."

"Will that be in the next few days?"

"There is an opinion that it will be in the next few hours. So the comrades of the press had best stay and wait."

At this point, the doubles of Feodor Simeonovich and Cristobal Joseevich turned as though on command, and left.

Oira-Oira said, "Don't you feel, Ambrosi Ambruosovitch, that carrying out such experiments in a building and in the center of a town is dangerous?"

"There is nothing to fear," Vibegallo said weightily "Let our enemies be afraid."

"You remember, I told you that it is impossible— "

"Comrade Oira-Oira, you have not done your homework. You should distinguish, comrade, possibilities from realities, happenstances from necessities, theory from practice, and in general— "

"Still, wouldn't it be better done on the polygon?"

"I am not testing a bomb," Vibegallo said loftily "I am testing the model of an ideal man. Are there any other questions?"

Some egghead from the Absolute Knowledge Department started inquiring into the autoclave operational regime. Vibegallo launched gladly into explanations. The dour lab technicians were collecting their technology for the satisfaction of spiritual needs. The cadaver continued eating. The black suit was parting and splitting along the seams.

Oira-Oira looked at it appraisingly. Suddenly he said loudly, "Here is a suggestion. All those not personally involved should leave the room."

Everybody turned toward him.

"Very soon it's going to get very filthy here," he explained.

"Unbearably filthy."

"That's a provocation," Vibegallo said with dignity.

Roman grabbed me by the sleeve and started urging me toward the door. I dragged Stella after me. The rest of the spectators streamed after us. They trusted Roman in the Institute, but not Vibegallo. Only the correspondents, of those not associated with Vibegallo, remained behind, while we crowded into the hall.

"What's the matter?" they asked Roman. "What will happen? Why filthy?"

"He'll let go any minute now," he answered, not taking his eyes off the door.

"Who'll let go? Vibegallo?"

"I feel sorry for the correspondents," said Eddie. "I say, Sasha, is the shower turned on today?"

The door of the laboratory opened and two technicians came out, dragging the tub and empty pails; the third, glancing behind him fearfully, was bustling about and muttering, "Let me give you a hand, guys— it's too heavy for you....

"Close the door," advised Roman.

The bustling technician quickly closed the door and walked up to us, taking out a pack of cigarettes. His eyes were big and shifty.

"It's going to happen now," he said. "Perspicaciov is a fool. I kept winking at him! How the cadaver is eating! It's enough to drive you out of your mind..."

"It is now twenty-five minutes past two—" Roman began.

But here a rumble sounded. There was a crash of broken glass. The door groaned and flew off its hinges. A camera and someone's tie was carried out in a flood through the crack. We all shied away. Steila squealed again.

"Be calm," said Roman "It's all over. There is one less consumer on earth."

The technician, as white as his coat, smoked, drawing on his cigarette without a pause. Coughings, gurglings, and curses sounded in the laboratory. A bad smell wafted out.

I mumbled indecisively, "Shouldn't we take a look?" No one responded. Everyone looked at me with empathy. Stella was crying quietly and held me by the jacket. Someone was explaining to somebody in a whisper, "He is on watch today, get it? Somebody has to go rake out..."

I took a few uncertain steps toward the door when, clutching at each other, Vibegallo and the correspondents came staggering out.

Good God, what a sight!

Regaining my presence of mind, I drew out the platinum whistle and blew. The house

brownie sanitation brigade was hurrying toward me, pushing the colleagues aside.

Chapter 5

Believe me, it was the most awful sight in the world.

F.Rabelais

I was the most surprised by the fact that Vibegallo was not the least discomfited by what had happened. While the brownies were working him over, dousing him with absorbents and plying him with deodorants, he was orating in a falsetto.

"There you are, comrades Oira-Oira and Amperian, with your constant fears. Implying this will happen and that, and how are we going to stop him... There is in you, comrades, that which I might call an unhealthy skepticism. A lack of confidence in the forces of nature and the potentialities of man, I would say. And where are your doubts now? Exploded! Exploded, comrades, in plain view of the public, and spattered me and the comrades of the press here."

The press were at a loss for words, docilely presenting themselves to the stream of hissing absorbents. G. Perspicaciov was trembling uncontrollably, while B. Pupilov was shaking his head to and fro and compulsively running his tongue over dry lips.

When the brownies had cleaned up the laboratory to a first approximation of cleanliness, I looked in. The emergency squad was proceeding in a businesslike manner, replacing broken glass and burning the remains of the model in a vented furnace. The remains, however, were few. There was a pile of buttons labeled For Gentlemen, the sleeve of a jacket, an unbelievably stretched pair of suspenders and a lower jaw, reminiscent of an archaeological exhibit of Neanderthal man. The rest had apparently been blown to dust.

Vibegallo looked over the autoclave, which was also a self-locker, and announced that all was in order. "The press is invited to join me," he said. "I suggest the rest return to their respective duties." The press drew forth their notebooks and all three sat down at the table to polish the sketch, "The Birth of a Discovery," and the informative remark, "Professor Vibegallo Tells All."

The onlookers left. Oira-Oira also departed, having taken the safe keys from me. Stella, too, left in desperation, as Vibegallo refused to let her go to another department. The much-relieved technicians also left. So did Eddie, surrounded by a crowd of theoreticians peripatetically figuring the minimal pressure that must have been obtained in the stomach of the exploded cadaver. I, too, departed for my post, having ascertained that the testing of the second cadaver was not to take place before eight in the morning.

The experiment left me in an oppressed mood, and, settling in the huge reception-room armchair, I tried to decide whether Vibegallo was a fool or a clever demagogue. The scientific value of all of his cadavers was obviously equal to zero. Models based on the original could be produced by any colleague who had successfully defended his thesis and had completed the two-year specialized course in nonlinear transgression. Endowing the models with magical properties was also trivial, because applicable references, tables, and textbooks were available to all undergraduate magi. Such models did not prove anything in their own right, and were equivalent to card tricks and sword-swallowing, from a scientific viewpoint. These miserable

correspondents, who clung to him like flies to manure, could be easily understood. Because, from a layman viewpoint, all this was tremendously spectacular and evoked shivering awe and vague expectations of some sort of tremendous possibilities. But it was harder to understand Vibegallo with his pathological passion for putting on circuslike shows and public blowouts, pandering to the curious, who were deprived of the opportunity (and desire) to fathom the essence of the problem. Leaving out one or two absolutists, returned from overlong trips, who loved to give interviews on the situation in infinity, no one in the Institute, to put it mildly, took advantage of contacts with the press: this was regarded as being in bad taste, and with good reason. The fact is that the most fascinating and elegant scientific results quite often have the characteristic of appearing precious and dully incomprehensible to the uninitiated. Today, people far removed from science expect miracles from it, and only miracles, and are functionally incapable of distinguishing a true miracle from a trick or some intellectual somersault. The science of thaumaturgy and spell-craft is no exception. Many are capable of organizing a convention of famous ghosts in a TV studio, or boring a hole in a foot-and-a-half concrete wall with their look, and this no one needs, but it can drive the vulnerable public into fits of ecstasy, since it is incapable of visualizing to what extent science has intertwined and intermixed the concepts of reality with those of fairy tales. But try instead to find the profound inner relationship between the drilling look and the philological properties of the word concrete. Try to solve the small particular problem, known as Auers' Great Problem! It was solved by Oira-Oira, who created the Theory of Fantastic Commonality, and who laid down the framework for an entirely new field of mathematical magic.

Nevertheless, almost no one heard of Oira-Oira, while everyone was fully informed about Professor Vibegallo ("Oh, you work at SRIWaT? And how is Professor Vibegallo? What has he invented lately?") This had come about because only two or three hundred people on this entire globe were capable of grasping Oira-Oira's ideas. Among them were several corresponding members but, alas, not one correspondent. The classic work of Vibegallo, Fundamentals of Production Technology of Auto-attiring Footwear, on the other hand, which was stuffed with demagogic prattling, made quite an impact at one time due to B. Pupilov's efforts (Later, it became evident that auto-attiring shoes cost more than a motorcycle and were sensitive to dust and humidity.)

The time was late. I was quite tired and drifted off imperceptibly into a fitful sleep. All kinds of unseemly trash populated my visions: multilegged gigantic mosquitoes bearded like Vibegallo, talking pails with sour milk, the tub on stubby legs running up and down stairs. Occasionally, some indiscreet brownie would look in on my dream but, seeing such terrors, would hastily depart in fear. Finally I woke up in pain and saw a sullen mosquito, with a beard, standing next to me trying to sink his stinger, as big as a fountain pen, into my calf.

"Shoo!" I yelled, and hit him on his bulging eye.

It hummed disappointedly and ran off a ways. It was reddish, with spots, and the size of a dog.

Apparently I had pronounced the materialization formula in my sleep and had thus brought this nasty creature out of nonexistence. I was unable to drive it back into nothingness. So I armed myself with a volume of Equations of Mathematical Magic, opened the window ventilator, and chased the critter out into the frost. The blizzard caught it at once and it disappeared in the swirling darkness. That's how unwholesome sensations originate, I thought.

It was six o'clock in the morning. I listened. Silence reigned in the Institute. Either they were all working diligently or had scattered to their homes. I was due to make another tour, but I was just not in the mood to go anywhere, and the only thing I was in the mood for was to have something to eat, as my last meal had been eighteen hours ago. I decided to send a double in my place.

In general I'm still a very uncertain magus. Inexperienced. Had there been anyone nearby, I would never have risked exposing my ignorance. But I was alone and decided to take a chance and practice up at the same time. I found the general formula in Mathmagic Equations, substituted my own parameters, carried out all the necessary manipulations, and pronounced all the requisite expressions in ancient Chaldean. It is said that hard work and patience overcome all obstacles. For the first time in my life, I managed to make a decent double. Everything about him was in the right place and he even looked a little like me, except that his left eye wouldn't open for some reason, and he had six fingers on each hand. I explained his task to him, he nodded, bowed and scraped, and went off, swaying slightly. We never met again. Maybe he strayed into S. Gorynitch's bunker or maybe he set off on an infinite voyage on the rim of the Wheel of Fortune... I just don't know. The fact is I quickly forgot about him since I determined upon making myself a breakfast.

I am not a demanding person. All I needed was a plain sandwich with some so-called doctor's bologna and a cup of black coffee. I don't know how it came out that way for me, but at first a doctor's coat, thickly buttered, appeared on the table. After the first shock of astonishment passed, I examined the coat attentively. The butter was not dairy and not even a vegetable oil. So what I had to do now was to eradicate the coat and begin anew. But, being revoltingly self-assured, I pictured myself as a god-demiurge, and proceeded along with the method of consecutive transformations. A bottle with a black liquid appeared next to the coat, and the coat itself started to char around the edges. Hurriedly, I made my imaging more precise, with special emphasis on the images of a cup and beef. The bottle turned into a cup, the liquid remained unchanged, one of the sleeves grew long, thin, and brown, and started to twitch. Perspiring in dismay, I recognized that it was now a cow's tail. I got out of the chair and went into a corner. The whole business did not go beyond the tail formation, but the spectacle was frightening enough by itself. I tried once more and the tail bloomed into an ear. I took myself well in hand, shut my eyes, and started to visualize, with the utmost detail, a slice of ordinary rye bread as it gets cut from a loaf, and buttered with natural butter from a cut-glass butter dish, and a round of bologna placed upon it. Forget the doctor's bologna — I'll take any kind let it be the plain half-smoked kind. As to coffee, let it wait. I opened my eyes cautiously. A large crystal lay on the coat, and something dark lurked inside it. I picked up the crystal, the coat following, as it was inexplicably attached, and discerned the longed-for sandwich inside. I groaned and attempted to split the crystal mentally. It became covered with a fine network of cracks so that the sandwich was almost lost to view.

"Numbskull," said I to myself, "you have eaten a thousand sandwiches and you can't even approximately, accurately visualize one. Don't get excited, there is no one here, no one can see you. This is not a test, nor a crucial paper, nor an examination. Try again." I tried. It would have been better if I hadn't. My imagination grew wilder, the most unexpected associations flared up in my mind, and as I kept trying, the reception room kept filling with strange objects. Many of them were born, apparently, out of the subconscious, the brooding jungles of hereditary memory, out of primeval fears long suppressed by the higher levels of education. They had extremities and kept moving

about, they emitted disgusting sounds, they were indecent, they were aggressive and fought constantly. I was casting about like a trapped animal. All this vividly reminded me of the old cuts with scenes of St. Anthony's temptations. Particularly vile was the oval dish on spider legs, covered with a straight, sparse fur on the edges. I couldn't imagine what it wanted from me, but it would back off into a distant corner, then charge, trying to buckle me at the knees. This went on until I squeezed it between wall and chair. I finally succeeded in destroying a part of the mess and the rest wandered off into corners and hid. The remainder consisted of the dish, coat with crystal, and the mug with black liquid, which had grown to the size of a pitcher. I picked it up in both hands and smelled. Seemingly it contained black fountain-pen ink. The oval dish behind the chair kept squirming and scrabbling its legs on the colored linoleum, hissing vilely. I felt most uncomfortable.

I heard steps in the hall, then voices; the door flew open and Janus Poluektovich appeared on the threshold and as usual said his "So." I flew into a frenzy of activity. Janus Poluektovich went into his office, eliminating negligently as he walked, with one universal flick of his eyebrow, my entire chamber of horrors. He was followed by Feodor Simeonovich, Cristobal Junta with a fat black cigar in the corner of his mouth, a surly Vibegallo, and a determined-looking Oira-Oira. They were all very preoccupied, very much in a hurry, and didn't pay me any attention.

The door to the office remained open. I sat down in my old place with a sigh of relief and thereupon discovered that a large china cup of steaming coffee and a plate of sandwiches was waiting there for me. Some one of the titans had looked after me, after all. I attacked my breakfast, listening to the voices from the office.

"Let's start with the fact"— Cristobal Joseevich was saying with cold disdain—"that your, pardon me, Maternity Ward is situated directly under my laboratories. You have already arranged one explosion, as a result of which I was obliged to wait ten minutes while they replaced the blown-out glass in my office. I understand full well that arguments of a more general nature will have no effect on you and, for that reason, restrict myself to purely egotistical aspects..."

"It's my business, dear friend, what I do in my place," answered Vibegallo's falsetto "I don't interfere on your floor, despite the living water, which flows there without interruption and which has wet my ceilings. Besides, bedbugs are encouraged by this. But I don't interfere in your affairs, so don't interfere in mine!"

"M-my dear friend," boomed Feodor Simeonovich "Ambrosi Ambruosovitch! You must take into account the possible complications. After all, no one works the dragon in the building, even though there are fire-resistant shields, and—"

"I don't have a dragon, I have a blithesome man. A colossus of the spirit! That's a peculiar logic you are deploying, comrade Kivrin, with strange and extraneous analogies! The model of an ideal man compared to an nonclass fire-breathing dragon..."

"My dear one, the crux of the matter is not whether he is nonclass, but that he can start a fire..."

"There you go again! The ideal man can start a fire! Really, you haven't thought it through, comrade Feodor Simeonovich!"

"I—I am talking about the dragon..

"And I am talking about your incorrect framework! You are smearing it all up, Feodor Simeonovich! You are confusing the issue every way you can! Of course we are erasing the contradictions... between the mental and the physical... between the rural and the urban... between man and woman, finally. But we will not allow you to paste over an

abyss, Feodor Simeonovich!"

"What abyss? What sort of deviltry is this? R-Roman, s-say something! Didn't you explain to him in my presence? I am t-telling you, Ambrosi Ambruosovitch, that your experiment is d-dangerous, d-do you understand?"

"I understand, all right. I'll not permit the ideal man to hatch in an open field, in the wind!"

"Ambrosi Ambruosovitch," said Roman. "I could go through my argument once again. The experiment is dangerous because — "

"And I, Roman Petrovich, have been looking at you for a long time and no way can I understand how you can apply such terminology to the ideal man. Behold! The ideal man is dangerous to him!"

Here, Roman, apparently in youthful impatience, lost his temper. "Not an ideal man," he roared, "but your all-out consumer!"

An ominous silence reigned.

"How did you say?" Vibegallo inquired in a terrible voice. "Will you repeat that! What did you call the ideal man?"

"J-janus Poluektovich," said Feodor Simeonovich , "this simply won't do, my friend..."

"Won't do!" exclaimed Vibegallo "You are quite right, comrade Kivrin, it won't do! We have here a scientific experiment of international caliber! The colossus of the spirit must appear here within the Institute walls! This is symbolic! Comrade Oira-Oira with his pragmatic proclivities takes a divisive approach to the problem. And comrade Junta, also, takes the narrow-minded view! You don't have to give me that look, comrade Junta: the tsarist gendarmerie did not frighten me, and you don't frighten me either! Is it in our spirit, comrades, to fear an experiment? Of course, it's understandable that comrade Junta, as a one-time church-worker and foreigner, could wander in his judgment, but you, comrade Oira-Oira, and you, Feodor Simeonovich, you are simple Russian people!"

"L-leave off the d-demagogy!" Feodor Simeonovich exploded finally.

"H-how can your c-conscience permit you to c-carry on with such d-drivel? W-what sort of s-simple man am I? And what kind of word is that— 'simple'? Our d-doubles are simple!"

"I can say one thing," Junta said indifferently. "I am a simple former Grand Inquisitor, and I will close off access to your autoclave until such time as I receive a guarantee that the experiment will be conducted on the polygon."

"N-no closer than f-five kilometers from the town," added Feodor Simeonovich. "Or even ten."

Obviously Vibegallo was awfully reluctant to drag his apparatus and himself to the polygon, where a blizzard blew and the light was inadequate for a documentary film.

"So," he said, "I understand. You wish to fence our science off from the public. Well then, maybe instead of ten kilometers we should go ten thousand, Feodor Simeonovich! To someplace on the other side? Somewhere in Alaska, Cristobal Joseevich or wherever you are from? Then say so directly. And, as for us, we'll take it all down— on paper..."

Silence reigned once more and Feodor Simeonovich, who had lost the power of speech, was breathing heavily.

"Some three hundred years ago," coldly pronounced Junta, " I would've invited you out for such words; for a walk out of town, where I would rattled the dust off your ears and run you through."

"Easy, easy there," said Vibegallo. "This is not Portugal for you. You can't stand criticism. Three hundred years ago I'd not stand on ceremony with you either, not-yet-killed-off catholic."

I was contorted with disgust. Why was Janus keeping quiet? How much could one take? Footsteps broke the silence and a pale Roman entered with bared teeth. Snapping his fingers, he created a Vibegallo double. Next, he joyfully seized it by the chest, shook it rapidly, grabbed it by the beard and jerked it with passionate might several times, calmed down, dissolved the double, and went back into the office.

"Well now, it seems you should be d-drummed out of here, V-Vibegallo," pronounced Feodor Simeonovich in an unexpectedly calm voice. "It turns out you are quite an unsavory figure."

"It's criticism, criticism that you can't abide," responded Vibegallo, puffing.

And here, at last, Janus Poluektovich spoke up. His voice was powerful and even, like that of a Jack London captain.

"The experiment, in accordance with Ambrosi Ambruosovitch's request, will take place today at ten-zero-zero. In view of the fact that the experiment will be accompanied by considerable destruction, which could include human casualties, I designate the far sector of the polygon fifteen kilometers outside the city limits as the site of the experiment. I take this early occasion to thank Roman Petrovich for his initiative and courage."

Apparently everyone was digesting this decision for some time. Janus Poluektovich had an undoubtedly strange manner of expressing his thoughts. But everyone willingly accepted that his vision was the better. There were precedents.

"I'll go call for the truck," Roman said suddenly, and probably went through a wall, as he didn't pass me by in the reception room.

Feodor Simeonovich and Junta probably were nodding agreement, while Vibegallo, regaining his composure, cried out, "A correct decision, Janus Poluektovich! You have given us a timely reminder of our forgotten vigilance. Farther, yes farther, from extraneous eyes. Only thing is, I'll need some stevedores. My autoclave is heavy; that is, it is a good five tons.

"Of course," said Janus. "Issue your orders."

Chairs were being moved in the office and I quickly finished my coffee. During the next hour, in the company of those who still remained in the Institute, I hung about the entrance watching the autoclave, stereo telescopes, armored shields, and homespun coats (just in case) being loaded. The blizzard had blown itself out and the morning was clear and frosty.

Roman drove up in a half-track truck. Alfred, the vampire, herded in the hekatocheire stevedores. Cottus and Gyes came willingly, conversing animatedly in a hundred voices, rolling up their sleeves on the go. Briareus dragged behind, displaying his damaged finger, and complaining that several of his heads were dizzy, that it hurt, and that he didn't sleep last night.

Cottus took the autoclave, Gyes carried everything else. When Briareus saw that there was nothing left for him, he began giving orders, directions, and helping with advice. He ran ahead, opened and held doors, kept squatting down, looking under the loads, yelling "Steady as she goes," or "Bear off to the right. You're getting snagged!" In the end he got his hand stepped on, and his body squeezed between the autoclave and a wall. He broke into sobs and Alfred walked him back to the vivarium.

Quite a few people climbed aboard the truck. Vibegallo got into the cab. He was considerably put out and kept asking everyone what time it was. The truck started off,

but came back in five minutes, as it developed that the correspondents had been forgotten. While they were being sought, Cottus and Gyes started pelting each other with snowballs to warm up and broke two window panes. Then Gyes quarreled with an early drunk who was yelling, "All against one, right?" He was dragged back and stuffed into the van. He kept swiveling his eyes and cursing in ancient Greek. G. Perspicaciov and B. Pupilov showed up, shivering and half awake, and the truck finally drove off.

The Institute emptied out. It was half-past eight. The whole town was asleep. I was very eager to go to the polygon with everyone else, but there was no way for me to leave, so I sighed and started on another round.

Yawning, I went up and down the halls, turning off lights until I came to Victor Korneev's lab. Victor was not interested in Vibegallo's experiments. He was wont to say Vibegallo and his ilk should be mercilessly handed over to Junta as experimental animals to determine whether they were reverse mutations. Consequently, Victor didn't go anywhere, but sat on the translator-sofa, smoking a cigarette and lazily conversing with Eddie Aisperian. Eddie reclined nearby, sucking on a hard candy and pensively contemplating the ceiling.

The perch was vigorously swimming about in the tub.

"Happy New Year," I said.

"Happy New Year," Eddie responded cheerily.

"Let Sasha decide," offered Korneev. "Sasha, is there such a thing as nonprotein life?"

"I don't know," I said. "I haven't seen any. Why?"

"What do you mean, you haven't seen any? You have never seen an M-field either, but you compute its intensity."

"And so?" I said. I was watching the perch in the tub. It was going around and around, leaning hard into the turns, so that you could see that it had been gutted. "Victor," I went on, "did it work after all?"

"Sasha is reluctant to talk about nonprotein life," said Eddie. "And he is right"

"It's possible to live without protein," I said, "but how does he live without innards?"

"But here is comrade Amperian, who says that there can be no life without protein," said Victor, forcing a stream of tobacco smoke to turn into a miniature tornado that traveled about the room, curving around the furniture.

"I say that life is protein," argued Eddie.

"I don't sense the distinction," said Victor. "You say that if there is no protein, there is no life."

"Yes."

"And what, then, is this?" asked Victor. He waved his hand feebly. On the table next to the tub appeared a revolting creature resembling both a hedgehog and a spider. Eddie raised himself up and looked at the table.

"Ah," he said, and lay down again. "That's not life. That's un-life¹. Isn't Koschei the Undead nonprotein life?"

"What more do you want?" asked Korneev. "Does it move? It moves. Does it eat? It eats. It can reproduce, too. Would you like it to reproduce right now?"

Eddie raised up for the second time and glanced at the table. The hedgehog-spider was shuffling about clumsily. It seemed to be trying to move in all four directions simultaneously.

1.literally "undead"

"Un-life is not life," said Eddie. "Un-life exists only insofar as there is intelligent life. You could even say more accurately— only insofar as there are magi. Un-life is a by-product of their activity."

"All right," said Victor.

The hedgehog-spider vanished. In its place appeared a miniature Victor Korneev, an exact copy the size of an arm. He snapped his tiny fingers and created a micro-double of even smaller size. This one did the same. A fountain-pen-sized double materialized. Then one the size of a matchbox. Then a thimble.

"Enough?" asked Victor. "Each of them is a magus. Not one has a single protein molecule."

"An untoward example," Eddie said with regret "In the first place, they do not, in principle, differ from a programmed lathe. In the second place, they are not a product of development but of your protein mastery.

It's hardly worth arguing whether evolution could produce self-reproducing programmed lathes."

"A lot you know about evolution," Korneev said rudely. "A new Darwin! What's the difference whether it's a chemical process or a conscious act? Not all your ancestors were protein either. Your

great-great-great-grandmother also, though quite complicated, I admit, was not a protein molecule. It may be that our so-called conscious activity is also a variety of evolution. How do we know it was the aim of nature to create a comrade Amperian? Maybe the aim of nature was the creation of un-life at the hands of Amperian. It could be."

"Indeed, indeed. First an anti-virus, then protein, then comrade Amperian, and then the whole planet is filled with un-life."

"Exactly," said Victor.

"And all of us died out of sheer uselessness..."

"And why not?" said Victor.

"I have an acquaintance," said Eddie. "He asserts that man is just an intermediary link that nature requires for the crown of its creation: a glass of cognac with a lemon slice."

"And why, in the final analysis, not?"

"Just because it doesn't suit me," said Eddie. "Nature has her aims and I have mine."

"Anthropocentric," Victor said in revulsion.

"Yes," Amperian said proudly.

"I'll not debate with anthropocentrists."

"In that case, let's tell anecdotes," Eddie calmly offered and stuffed another rock candy in his mouth.

Victor's doubles continued their labors on the table. The smallest was now the height of an ant. While listening to the argument between the anthropocentric and the cosmocentric, a thought entered my head.

"I say, chums," I came out with ersatz animation. "Why aren't you at the polygon?"

"And why should we be?" asked Eddie.

"Well, it is still quite interesting.

"I never go to a circus," said Eddie. "Besides: ubi nil vales, ibi nil velis."¹

"That's in reference to yourself?" asked Victor.

"No. It's in reference to Vibegallo."

1. Where you are worth nothing, there you will wish for nothing.

"Chums," I said. "I like a circus very much. Isn't it all the same to you where you are going to tell jokes?"

"Meaning?" said Victor.

"Stand watch for me, and I'll run off to the polygon."

"It's cold," reminded Victor. "Frost, Vibegallo."

"I have a great yen," I said. "It's all so mysterious."

"Shall we let the child go?" asked Victor of Eddie.

Eddie nodded.

"Go, Privalov," said Victor "It will cost you four hours of computer time."

"Two," I said quickly. I was expecting something like that.

"Five," Victor said boorishly.

"Then three," I said. "I am working for you all the time as it is."

"Six," Victor said coolly.

"Vitya," said Eddie, "fur will grow on your ears."

"Red," I said, gloating. "Maybe even shot through with green."

"All right, then," said Victor. "Go for free. Two hours will fix me."

We went to the entry together. On the way, the magi took up an incomprehensible debate about something called cyclotation, and I had to interrupt them to get transgressed to the polygon. They had already tired of me, and being in a rush to get rid of me, they transgressed me with such energy that I had no time to get prepared, and was flung backward into the crowd of spectators.

Everything was ready at the polygon. The public hid behind the armored shields. Vibegallo, poking out of the freshly dug trench, was looking jauntily through the big stereo periscope. Feodor Simeonovich and Cristobal Junta, forty-power binoculars in hand, were exchanging words quietly in Latin. Janus Poluektovich, in a heavy fur coat, stood to the side, dabbling his walking stick in the snow. B. Pupilov sat on his haunches by the trench with an open notebook and pen at the ready. G. Perspicaciov, hung about with still and movie cameras, was rubbing his frozen cheeks and stamping his feet behind him.

The sky was clear and a full moon was sinking in the west. Blurred shafts of the northern lights appeared shimmering amid the stars and disappeared again. The snow glistened on the plain, and the large rounded cylinder of the autoclave was clearly visible some one hundred meters away.

Vibegallo tore himself from the periscope, coughed, and said, "Comrades! Com-m-r-ades! What are we observing in the periscope? Overwhelmed with complex feelings and faint with expectations, comrades, we are observing how the protective lock is beginning to unscrew itself automatically. Write, write," he said to B.Pupilov. "And most accurately... That is, unscrewing automatically. In a few minutes we will see the appearance among us of an ideal man— chevalier, that is, sans peur et sans reproche!"

I could see with my naked eye as the lock turned and fell soundlessly in the snow. A long streamer of steam shot out of the autoclave, all the way, it seemed, to the stars.

"I am clarifying for the press—" Vibegallo started to say, when a horrendous roar sounded.

The earth slid and tossed. A huge snow cloud soared upward. Everyone fell against each other and I, too, was thrown and rolled. The roar kept increasing, and when I stood up with an all-out effort, grasping the treads of the half-track, I saw, in

horrified terror, that the horizon was curling up and rolling like a bowl's edge toward us. The armored shields were swaying threateningly, and the people were running and falling and jumping up again covered with snow. I saw Feodor Simeonovich and Cristobal Junta, encased in the rainbow-hued caps of their protective shields, backing under the press of the storm and raising their hands trying to stretch their defenses over the rest of us. I saw, too, the gusts tearing that defense into shreds that were carried off across the plain as huge soap bubbles bursting against the starry sky. I saw Janus Poluektovich, collar raised, standing with his back to the wind, planted firmly on his walking stick buried in the bared earth, looking at his watch. Over there, at the site of the autoclave, a thick cloud of steam, red and lighted from within, twisted in a tight vortex, while the horizon steeply curved higher and higher till it seemed we were at the bottom of a vast pitcher. And then, right near the epicenter of this cosmic abomination, Roman suddenly appeared, his green coat flying from his shoulders. He flung his arm in a wide arc, threw something large and glinting like a bottle into the howling steam, and immediately fell to the ground, covering his head with his arms.

The foul and enraged face of a jinn rose above the cloud, eyes rolling in fury. His mouth gaping in soundless laughter, he flapped his extensive hairy ears. A burning stench permeated the blizzard and then the ghostly walls of a magnificent castle arose and slumped, oozing down, while the jinn himself, turned into a long tongue of orange flame, vanished into the sky.

There was quiet for several seconds. The horizon sank back down with a heavy rumble. I was thrown high and regaining my senses, discovered that I was sitting not far from the truck, my arms braced against the earth. The snow was all blown away. The field around us was bare and black. Where the autoclave had stood a minute before now yawned a large crater. A wisp of white smoke curled above it, and there was a smell of fire.

The spectators started climbing back upon their feet. Faces were dirty and distorted. Many were speechless, coughed, spit, and moaned softly. They set to cleaning themselves up a bit, whereupon it developed that quite a few were disrobed down to underwear. There was grumbling, then cries of, "Where are my trousers? Why am I without trousers? I was dressed in trousers!"

"Comrades, has anyone seen my watch?"

"And mine, also!"

"Mine, too, has disappeared!"

"Platinum tooth is gone! It was put in just this summer."

"Oh, no! My ring is gone.. and my bracelet."

"Where is Vibegallo? What sort of disgrace is this? What's it all mean?"

"To hell with all the watches and teeth! Are the people all right? How many were there?"

"What has actually happened? Some sort of explosion the jinn.. And where is the colossus of the spirit?"

"Where is the consumer?"

"Where is Vibegallo, damn it!"

"Did you see that horizon? Do you know what that implies?"

"The roll-up of space. I know about these tricks.."

"It's cold in my shirt sleeves; can someone let me have something.."

"W-where is that Vi-Vibegallo? W-where is th-that moron?"

The earth heaved and Vibegallo clawed his way out of the trench. He was without his boots.

"I elucidate for the press," he said huskily.

But he was not allowed to elucidate. Magnus Feodorovich Redkin, who came especially to find out once and for all what true happiness was, ran up to him and, shaking his clenched fists, yelled, "Charlatan! You'll answer for this! Buffonery! Where is my hat? Where is my fur coat? I will put in a complaint about you! I am asking you, where is my hat?"

"In complete accord with the program," mumbled Vibegallo, glancing around. "Our dear colossus—"

Feodor Simeonovich advanced on him "You, my fine friend, are bu-burying your talents in the g-ground. They should be used to s-strengthen the de-department of Defensive Magic. Your ideal in-men should be d-dropped or enemy bases. To throw fear into the ag-aggressors."

Vibegallo backed away, covering himself with the sleeve of his coat. Cristobal Joseevich approached silently measuring him with his eye, flung his dirty gloves at his feet, and left.

Gian Giacomo, hurriedly concocting the image of an elegant suit, cried from afar, "This is truly phenomenal signores! I always felt a certain antipathy toward him, but I couldn't ever imagine anything like this.."

Here, finally, G. Perspicaciov and B. Pupilov figured out the real situation. Until then, smiling uncertainly, they had hoped to be at least partially enlightened. Now it dawned on them that all had not gone in complete conformity to plan.

G. Perspicaciov, moving with firm steps, accosted Vibegallo, laying his hand on his shoulder, and saying in an iron voice, "Comrade Professor, where can I get my cameras back? Three still cameras, and one movie camera."

"Also, my wedding ring," added B. Pupilov.

"Pardon," Vibegallo said with dignity "You'll be called on when needed," he said in his affected French. "Wait for explanations."

The correspondents were thrown for a loss. Vibegallo turned and walked toward the crater. Roman already was standing over it.

"Simply everything is in there.." he said from afar.

There was no consumer colossus in the crater. Instead, everything else was there and much more. There were still and movie cameras, wallets, overcoats, rings, necklaces, trousers, and a platinum tooth. There were Vibegallo's felt boots, and Magnus Feodorovich's hat. My platinum whistle for calling the emergency squad turned up too. Further we discovered two Moskvich and three Volga cars, an iron safe with the local savings-office seals, a large piece of roasted meat, two cases of vodka, a case of Zhiguli beer and an iron bed with nickel-plated knobs.

Having pulled on his boots, Vibegallo, smiling condescendingly, announced that now the discussion could get started. "Let's have your questions," he said. But discussions did not take place. The enraged Magnus Fedorovich had called the police. Young Sergeant Kovalev dashed up in his police car. We all had to be recorded as witnesses. Sergeant Kovalev went around and around the crater, trying to discover traces of the criminal. He found a huge lower jaw and examined it minutely. The correspondents, having received their instruments back, saw everything in a new light and were listening attentively to Vibegallo, who again poured forth a litany of demagogic about limitless and variegated needs. It was becoming dull and I was freezing.

"Let's go home," said Roman.

"Let's," I said. "Where did you get the jinn?"

"Drew it out of the stores yesterday. For entirely different purposes."

"And what really happened? Did he overeat again?"

"No, it's simply that Vibegallo is a moron," said Roman.

"That's understood," I said. "But why the cataclysm?"

"All from the same quarters," said Roman. "I told him a thousand times: material valuables he can lay his hands on, then he'll fold space, wrap himself up in a cocoon, and stop time...Vibegallo can't grasp that the true colossus of the spirit does not consume so much as he thinks and feels."

"That's all too clear. But you tell me, where did Janus-U learn that everything would turn out just so and not otherwise? He must have foreseen everything, both the vast destruction and that I would figure out how to terminate the colossus in embryo."

"That's right," I said. "He even commended you in advance."

"Isn't that really strange?" said Roman. "All this needs thorough thinking through."

And we did start to think through thoroughly. It took us a long time.

Only by spring, and only by chance, were we able to decipher the mystery.

But that's an altogether different story.

Chapter 1

When God created time, say the Irish — he created it in adequate amounts.

H. Boll

Eighty-three percent of the days in a year begin the same way: the alarm clock rings. This clamor intrudes into the final dreams sometimes as the frenetic clatter of the paper perforator, sometimes as the angry rolling of Feodor Simeonovich's bass, or, again, as the scrabbings of basilisk claws frolicking in a thermostat.

On that particular day, I dreamed of Modest Matveevich Kamnoedov. He had become the director of the computer center and was teaching me to operate the Aldan. "Modest Matveevich," I kept saying, "everything you are telling me is a sick delirium." And he thundered back, "You will note that down-n-n for me! Everything you have here is j-u-n-k, bru-m-magem!" At last I realized that it was not Modest Matveevich I heard, but my alarm clock, Friendship, with eleven jewels and a picture of an elephant with upraised trunk. Mumbling, "I hear you, I hear," I banged my hand on the table in the vicinity of the clock.

The window was wide open to a bright blue spring sky and its sharp coolness. Pigeons were strutting and pecking on the cornice. Three tired flies were buzzing around the glass shade of the ceiling light, apparently the first arrivals of this year. From time to time, they suddenly went berserk and flung themselves about from side to side. Into my sleepy head came the brilliant thought that they were surely trying to escape from the plane that passed through them, and I felt a deep compassion for their hopeless endeavors. Two of them sat on the shade and the third vanished, and that woke me completely.

First thing, I threw off the blanket and attempted to soar over the bed. As usual, before my morning exercises, shower, and breakfast, this led only to the reactive component driving me forcefully down into the mattress, causing springs to twang and creak in complaint below me. Next, I remembered the previous evening and felt very chagrined because all day I would not have any work to do. The night before, at eleven o'clock, Cristobal Joseevich had come to Electronics and, as usual, had connected himself to the Aldan in order to solve the next problem in the meaning of life, jointly with it. In five minutes, Aldan was on fire. I didn't know what could burn in it, but it had gone out of commission for good, and that was why, instead of working, I, like those hairy-eared loafers, would have to wander aimlessly from department to department, grousing about my circumstances and telling jokes.

I made a wry face, sat on the bed, and breathed in a chestful of prana mixed with the cool morning air. For the required time I waited until the prahna was assimilated and thought happy and radiant thoughts, as recommended. Next I breathed out the cold morning air and started on the complex of morning gymnastics. They tell me that the old school prescribed yoga exercises, but the yoga-complex and the

now-almost-forgotten maya-complex took up fifteen to twenty hours a day, and the old school had to give in when the new president of the U.S.S.R Academy of Sciences was appointed to the post. The young people of SRIWaT broke old traditions with relish. At the hundred and fifteenth leap, my roommate, Victor Korneev, fluttered into the room. As usual in the morning he was brisk, energetic, and even good-natured. He slapped me on my bare back with a wet towel, and went flying around the room making breaststroke swimming motions with his arms and legs. While so doing, he recounted his dreams and simultaneously interpreted them, according to Freud, Merlin, and the maiden Lenorman. I went to wash; then we straightened the room and set off to the dining room.

In the dining room, we took our favorite table, under the large but already faded banner "Bravely, comrades! Snap your jaws!" G. Flaubert, opened bottles of kefir, and set to eating while lending an ear to the local gossip and news.

The previous night, the traditional spring fly-in had taken place on Bald Mountain. Participants had deported themselves most disgustingly. Viy and Homa Brutus went arm in arm, cruising the town streets at night, accosting passers-by, foulmouthed and drunk, and then Viy stepped on his eyelid and went totally ape. He and Homa had a fight, turned over a newspaper kiosk, and landed in the police station, where they were given fifteen days each for hooliganism.

Basil the tomcat had taken a spring vacation— to get married. Soon Solovetz would once more be graced by talking kittens with inherited arteriosclerotic memory.

Louis Sedlovoi had invented some kind of time machine and would be reporting on it today at the seminar.

Vibegallo again appeared at the Institute. He went everywhere and bragged that he had been illuminated with a titanic idea. The speech of many apes, you see, resembles recorded human speech played backward at high speed. So he recorded the conversations of baboons at the Sukhumi preserve and, having heard them through, played them in reverse at low speed. Something phenomenal had been produced, he declared, but what exactly he did not say.

In the computer center, the Aldan had again been burned, but Sasha Privalov was not at fault; Junta was the guilty one, as he had been interested lately in only those problems having been proved to have no solutions.

The elderly sorcerer Peruhn Markovich Chinup-Oafus, from the Department of Atheism, had taken a leave of absence for his regular reincarnation.

In the Department of Perpetual Youth, after a long and extended illness, the model of an immortal man had died.

The Academy of Science had allotted nth sum to the Institute for the improvement of the grounds. Modest Matveevich was planning to use it for an ornate cast-iron fence to surround the Institute, with allegorical decorations and flowerpots on the pillars. The backyard was to have a fountain with a forty-foot jet, between the substation and the fuel dump.

The sport bureau had requested money for a tennis court, but Modest refused this, declaring that the fountain was needed for scientific meditations, while tennis was nothing but leg-kicking and arm-swinging.

After breakfast, everybody scattered to their labs. I, too, looked in on my place, and sorrowfully ambled around my Aldan with its exposed circuitry in which dour technicians from Engineering Maintenance were poking their instruments. They were in no mood to talk to me and suggested sourly that I go somewhere else and mind my own business. I shuffled off to visit friends.

Victor Korneev threw me out because I hampered his concentration. Roman was lecturing to undergrads. Volodia Pochkin was conversing with a correspondent. Seeing me, he was delighted and cried, "A-ah, here he is. Meet our director of the Computer Center. He will tell you how— ". But I very cleverly pretended to be my own double, and having thoroughly frightened the correspondent, ran off. At Eddie Amperian's I was offered some fresh cucumbers, and a very animated discussion was in the making about the advantages of a gastronomic view of life, but suddenly their distillation polyhedron blew and they forgot about me at once.

In complete despair I went out into the hail and bumped into Janus-U, who said, "So," and hesitating, inquired whether we had a talk yesterday.

"No," I said, "regretfully we didn't." He went on and I heard him ask the same standard question of Gian Giacomo.

Finally I drifted over to the absolutists, arriving just before the start of the seminar. The colleagues, yawning and cautiously stroking their ears, were seating themselves in the small conference auditorium. The head of the department of All White, Black, and Gray Magics, magister-academician Maurice Johann Lavrentii Poopkov-Lahggard, sat in the chairman's post, his fingers calmly intertwined, and gazed benevolently at the bustling lecturer, who, together with two badly executed hairy-eared doubles, was installing on the exposition stand some sort of contrivance with saddle and pedals, resembling an exerciser for the overweight. I sat down in the corner, as far as I could from the rest of the audience, and, taking out pen and notebook, assumed an interested mien.

"Now then," emitted the magister academician, "do you have everything ready?"

"Yes, Maurice Johannovich," responded Sedlovoi. "All set, Maurice Johannovich."

"Then, we might begin? It seems I don't see Smoguli..."

"He's away on a trip, Johann Lavrentievich," someone said from the auditorium.

"Oh yes, I remember now. Exponential investigations? Aha,... Well, all right. Today our Louis Ivanovich will make a short report regarding certain possible types of time machines. - Am I correct, Louis Ivanovich?"

"Eh. as a matter of fact.. as a matter of fact I would title my report in such a way, that
— "

"Ah, well then, that's fine. Please do title it."

"Thank you. Eh I would title it as Machine for Motion Through the Time Dimensions, Constructed Artificially!""

"Very interesting," voiced the magister-academician. "However, I seem to recollect that we already had a case when our associate— "

"Forgive me. I was about to start with that."

"Oh, so that's it... then please do proceed, please."

At first I listened quite attentively. I was even interested. It seemed some of these fellows were occupied with the most intriguing projects. It appeared that some of them, to this day, were attacking the problem of moving in physical time, though admittedly without success. However, someone, whose name I forgot, someone of the old ones, the famous, had proved that it was possible to achieve the transfer of material bodies into the ideal worlds, that is, worlds created by man's imagination. Apparently, besides our customary world with Riemann's metric, the principle of indeterminacy, physical vacuum, and the drunk Brutus, there exist other worlds, possessing strong characteristics of reality. These worlds were formed by man's creative imagination, over our entire history. For example, there exist the world of the cosmological structurings; the world created by painters; and even the half-abstract

world impalpably constructed by the generations of composers.

A few years ago, the pupil of that same famous one assembled a machine on which he set out on a voyage into the world of cosmological constructs. For some time, unidirectional communication was maintained with him and he had time to transmit that he was on the edge of a flat earth, and could see below him the upreared trunk of one of the atlas-elephants, and that he was about to start his descent toward the turtle. No further messages were received from him.

The lecturer, Louis Ivanovich Sedlovoi — obviously not a bad scientist and magister, though suffering badly from certain paleolithic hold-overs in his consciousness, and forced for this reason to shave his ears regularly — had constructed a machine for traveling in this subjective time. In his words, there really existed a world in which Anna Karenina, Don Quixote, Sherlock Holmes, Grigory Melikhov, and even Captain Nemo, lived and acted.

This world exhibited its own very curious properties and laws, and the people inhabiting it had the brighter personalities and were the more real and individual, as a function of the talent, the passion, and the truthfulness with which their authors described them in their corresponding works.

All this interested me greatly because Sedlovoi, carried away by his subject, was lively and picturesque in his presentation. But then he brought himself up short, thinking that it was all rather unscientific, and hung various schematics and graphs all over the stage, and started to expound in dull and extremely specialized terms on conical decremental shafts, polyvelocity temporal transmissions, and some type of space-piercing steering wheel. I lost the thread of the discussion very quickly and turned my attention to the audience.

The magister-academician slept majestically, occasionally and purely in reflex raising his right eyebrow as though to signify a certain doubt in the lecturer's words. A hot game of functional naval warfare in transcendental space was going on in the back rows. Two lab-technician day students were copying down everything, hopeless despair and total submission to fate congealed on their faces. Someone lighted a cigarette surreptitiously and was blowing smoke between his knees and under a table. Magisters and bachelors in the front row listened with accustomed attention, preparing questions and comments. Some smiled sarcastically, others displayed expressions of puzzlement. Sedlovoi's scientific adviser nodded approvingly after each of the lecturer's sentences. I tried looking out the window, but there was nothing there except the same old warehouse and an occasional boy running by with his fishing rod.

I came to, when the lecturer declared that the introductory portion of his presentation was completed and that he would next like to demonstrate the machine in action.

"Interesting, interesting," said the awakened magister academician. "Now then, will you take a ride yourself?"

"You see," said Sedlovoi, "I would like to remain here, to provide a commentary on the progress of the journey. Perhaps one of those present?"

Those present exhibited a retiring attitude. They all must have remembered the mysterious fate of the voyager to the edge of the world. One of the magisters offered to send a double. Sedlovoi replied that that would not be of interest because doubles had a low sensitivity to external excitation and would make poor transmitters of information for this reason. What sort of external excitations could be expected? they asked from the rear row. All the usual, Sedlovoi replied: visual, acoustic, odoriferous, tactile. Again someone asked from the rear row: What type of tactile sensations would be the most prevalent? Sedlovoi spread his arms in disclaimer and said that it would

depend on the conduct of the traveler in the places where he would find himself. "Aha.." they said in the rear row and didn't ask any further questions. The lecturer glanced here and there helplessly. In the auditorium everyone also looked here and there, but always to the side. The magister-academician repeated good-humoredly, "Well? How about it? Youth! Well? Who?"

So I stood up and went to the machine. I just can't stand an agonized lecturer; it's a shameful, pitiful, and tortured spectacle.

The back row yelled, "Sasha! Where are you going? Come to your senses!" Sedlovoi's eyes glittered.

"Permit me," I said.

"Please, please, of course!" lisped Sedlovoi, seizing me by a finger and dragging me to the machine.

"Just one minute," I said, pulling away decorously. "Will it take long?"

"Any way you like!" cried out Sedlovoi. "I'll do just as you tell me..."

But you'll be steering yourself. It's all very simple." He seized me again and again drew me toward the machine. "Here's the wheel. Here is the pedal for coupling into reality. This is the brake. And this is the gas pedal. You drive a car, don't you? Wonderful! Here is the push button... Where do you want to go? The past or the future?"

"The future," I said.

"Ah," he enunciated, in disappointment, it seemed to me. "Into the described future.... That means all those fantastic novels and utopias. Of course, that's interesting, too. But take into consideration that the future is probably discrete; there must be tremendous gaps, not covered by any authors. However, it's all the same. - OK, then, you will press this button twice. Once, now at the start, and the second time when you wish to return. Do you understand?"

"I understand," I said. "And what if something should malfunction?"

"Absolutely safe!" He windmilled his arms. "The instant anything goes wrong, even a speck of dust on the contacts, you will immediately be returned here."

"Go boldly, young man," continued the magister-academician. "You'll be telling us everything that is going on in the future. Ha, ha, ha..."

I climbed ponderously into the saddle, trying not to look at anyone and feeling exceedingly stupid.

"Press it, press it!" the lecturer whispered passionately.

I pressed the button. It was obviously something similar to a starter. The machine jerked, wheezed, and settled down to a regular vibration.

"The shaft is bent," Sedlovoi whispered in disappointment, "but it's allright, it's nothing.. put it in gear. That's right. Now give it some gas, more gas.

I fed it gas, at the same time smoothly letting out the clutch. The world began to darken. The last I heard in the auditorium was, "And how are we going to keep track of him..

Everything vanished.

Chapter 2

*The only difference between time and any of the three space dimensions
is that our consciousness moves along it*

H. G. Wells

At first the machine moved in jumps, and I was hard put to stay in the seat, wrapping my legs around the frame and clutching the steering wheel with all my strength. Out of the corner of my eye I could see fuzzily some kind of magnificent ghostly structures, muddy green plains, and a cold luminary in a gray fog somewhere near the zenith. Then I figured out that the jerking and jumping were the consequence of my having taken my foot off the accelerator and (just as in a car) the power feed was insufficient so that the machine moved unevenly, bumping now and then into the ruins of ancient and medieval utopias. I fed it more "gas," and the motion at once- became smooth, so that I could settle myself more comfortably and look around.

I was immersed in a ghostly world. Huge structures of multicolored marble, embellished with colonnades, towered over small houses with rural appearance. All around wheat fields swayed in the complete calm. Herds of plump, transparent cattle grazed on the grass and handsome gray-haired herdsmen sat on hillocks. Everyone, without exception, was reading books and ancient manuscripts.

After a time two translucent individuals appeared nearby, assumed poses, and began to converse. Both were barefooted, draped in chitons, and crowned with wreaths. One held a spade in his left hand and a parchment scroll in his right. The other leaned on a mattock, and absentmindedly toyed with a vast copper inkwell hung on his belt. They talked strictly in turn and to each other, as it first appeared to me. However, I quickly realized that they were really addressing me, although neither one of them even glanced in my direction. I listened hard.

The one with the spade expounded monotonously and at length on the foundations of the political order of the beautiful country of which he was a citizen. The arrangement was unimaginably democratic, there could be no possibility of any constraint on the citizens (he underlined this several times with special emphasis), everyone was rich and free of care, and even the lowliest farmer had at least three slaves. When he stopped for breath, and to lick his lips, the one with the inkwell would pick up his part. He bragged that he had just finished his three hours as a ferry man, hadn't taken a penny from anyone because he did not know what money was, and was now on his way to enjoy rest and recreation.

They talked for a long time — for several years, judging by the speedometer — and suddenly disappeared, and all was empty again. The motionless sun shone through the transparent buildings. Unexpectedly, some heavy flying machines with membranous pterodactyl wings swam slowly across at a low height. For a moment I thought they were on fire, but then I noticed that the smoke issued from large conical funnels. They flew overhead, ponderously flapping their wings. Some ashes fell and someone dropped a knobby log on me.

Subtle alterations began in the magnificent buildings around me. The number of columns did not diminish and the architecture remained as magnificent and unique as

before, but new coloration appeared and the marble seemed to be replaced with some other, more modern material. Instead of blind busts and statues, glittering arrangements resembling antennas and radio telescopes arose on the roofs. There were more people in the streets, and huge numbers of cars. The herds and herdsmen vanished, but the wheat continued to wave, though as before there was no wind. I pressed on the brake and stopped.

Looking about, I discovered that I stood with my machine on the surface of a moving sidewalk. The people swarmed around me, and it was a most variegated crowd. Mostly, however, the people were rather unreal, much less real than the powerful, complex, and almost silent mechanisms. Consequently, when one of these machines collided with a person, there was no crash. I had little interest in the machines, probably because on top of each one sat, inspired to semi-transparency, its individual inventor, engaged in voluminous exposition of the configuration and purpose of his brainchild. No one listened to anyone else and no one seemed to be addressing anyone, either.

The pedestrians were more fun to watch. I saw big feb lows in union suits walking about arm-in-arm and belting out some unmelodious songs in bad verse. Over and over strange people appeared dressed only partially: say, in a green hat and red jacket and nothing else; or in yellow shoes and a loud tie (but no pants, shirt, or even underwear); or in elegant footwear on bare feet. The others reacted calmly to them, but I was embarrassed until I remembered that certain authors have the habit of writing something like "The door opened and an muscular man in a furry cap and dark glasses appeared on the threshold."

Fully clothed people also appeared, though in rather strangely cut clothes, and here and there a sunburned bearded male would push through the crowd, dressed in a spotless white chlamys with a horse collar or some implement in one hand and a palette or pencil box in the other. The chlamys wearers had a lost look, and they shied from the many machines and kept glancing about like hunted animals. Disregarding the mumbling of the inventors, it was reasonably quiet. Most people were generally keeping their mouths shut.

On the corner, two youths were struggling with a mechanical contrivance. "The developer's thought cannot stand still. That's a law of societal evolution. We will invent it. We will definitely invent it. Despite bureaucrats such as Ingrade or conservatives such as Hardbrau." The other youth carried on with his own line. "I found out how to apply non-wearing tires here, made of polystructural fibers with denatured amino-bonds and incomplete oxygen groups. But I don't know as yet how to employ the regenerative subthermal neutrons, Misha, Mishok! What to do with the reactor?" After a closer look at the contrivance, I easily recognized a bicycle.

The sidewalk carried me out on a huge plaza, packed with people and liberally emplaced with spacecraft of the most varied designs. I walked off the sidewalk and hauled the time machine after me. In the beginning I couldn't comprehend what was transpiring. Music played, speeches were made, here and there rosy-cheeked, curly-headed youths—barely managing to control their unruly locks, which constantly kept falling on their foreheads—were reading verses soulfully. The verses were either familiar or plain bad, but tears flowed abundantly from the eyes of the listeners.

The tears were hard to extract from the men, bitter from the women, and pure from the children. Stern-looking men embraced each other, and, playing their jaw muscles, slapped each other on the back—inasmuch as many were not dressed, the slaps sounded like hand-clapping. Two toned lieutenants, with tired but kind eyes, dragged

by me sleek man, twisting his arm behind him. The man thrashed about and yelled something in broken English. I far as I understood him, he was exposing everybody and recounting how and for whose money he had put a bomb in the starship's power plant. A few youngsters, clutching small volumes of Shakespeare and glancing around stealthily, were sneaking up to the exhaust port of the nearest astroplane. The crowd did not notice them.

Soon I understood that one half of the crowd was saying good-bye to the other half. It was total mobilization. From the speeches and conversation it became clear that the men were departing into the cosmos — some to Venus, some to Mars, and some, with completely hopeless faces, were getting ready to go to other stars, and even to the galactic center. The women were staying to await their return. Many took their place in a line to a vast, ugly building, which some called the Pantheon, and the others, the Refrigerator. I thought that I'd arrived at a good point in time. Had I been even one hour later, there would be none but the women left in the city, frozen for a thousand years. Later my attention was attracted by a high gray wall, fencing off the plaza to the west. Billows of black smoke rose behind it.

"What is that over there?" I asked a beautiful woman ambling listlessly to the Pantheon-Refrigerator.

"It's the Iron Wall," she replied without stopping.

With each passing minute I was becoming more and more tired of the whole thing. Everyone was crying; the orators had grown hoarse. Next to me a young man in a light blue one-piece suit was saying good-bye to a girl in a pink dress. The girl monotonously intoned, "I would like to become a cloud of stardust. As a cosmic mist I would embrace your ship..." The young man harkened. Then orchestral music broke out over the crowd, and my nerves could not stand any more and I jumped onto the seat and fed the machine some "gas." I still caught the sight and the roar of the planetary ships, the starships, the ion ships, the astroplanes, the photon flyers, and the astromats leaping up over the city, and then everything but the gray wall was enveloped in a luminescent fog. After the year 2000, rifts in time started to appear. I flew through times devoid of matter. In such spots it was dark, and only occasionally explosions flared and fires cast a glow into the sky behind the gray wall. Now and again the city crowded back around me, and each time, the buildings were taller, its rounded domes more

transparent, its parked spaceships fewer in number. Smoke rose from behind the wall without interruption.

I stopped for the second time when the last astromat disappeared from the plaza. The sidewalks were moving. There were no noisy stalwarts in unionsuits. No one swore. Some colorless individuals diffidently strolled about the streets in twos and threes, dressed either weirdly or poorly. As far as I could tell, they were all talking science. Someone was about to be revived and the professor of medicine — an athletic intellectual, looking most uncommon in his lonely vest — was explaining the procedure to a giant of a biophysicist, who was introduced to all comers as the author, initiator, and main implementer of this undertaking. Somewhere they were going to bore a hole right through the earth. The project was being discussed right on the street with a considerable gathering of people, drawings being made with chalk on the sidewalks and walls. I thought I might listen in, but it became so boring, including sallies against an unknown conservative, that I heaved the machine on my shoulders and moved away. I was not surprised that the discussion of the project stopped at once and everyone got down to business. But as soon as I stopped, some citizen of indefinite

profession began a discourse. For no apparent reason he carried on about music. Listeners converged from all sides. They looked totally absorbed and asked questions attesting to a hoary ignorance. Suddenly, a man ran screaming down the street. He was being pursued by a spider-like mechanism. Judging by the cries of the pursued, it was "an autoprogramming cybernetic robot with trigonic quoators with inverse feedback, which were malfunctioning, and oi-oi, he is going to dismember me!"

Strange, no one as much as lifted an eyebrow. Obviously no one believed in machine mutiny.

Two more spider-like mechanisms of smaller size suddenly jumped out of an alley. Before I could begin to react, one of them quickly shined my shoes and the other washed and pressed my handkerchief. A large white tank on treads drew up and, blinking with numerous lights, sprayed me with perfume.

I was about ready to move on when a thunderous crash sounded in the plaza as an enormous rusty rocket fell from the sky. At once the crowd started commenting.

"It's the Star of Reverie!"

- "Yes, that's it."

"Of course it is. That's the one that left two hundred and eighteen years ago, and has been all but forgotten. But due to the Einstein time-contraction brought on by sublight speeds, the crew is only two years older!"

"Due to what? Oh, Einstein... Yes, yes, I recollect I covered that in my second year at school."

A one-eyed man, without his, right leg and left arm, struggled out of the rocket.

"Is this Earth?" he asked irritably.

"Earth! Yes!" responded the crowd.

Smiles began to bloom on their faces.

"Thank God," said the man, and everyone exchanged glances. Either they did not understand him or pretended that they didn't understand.

The amputee astronaut took up a pose and launched into a speech in which he called on all humanity, each and every man, to go to the planet Willy-Ni-lly in the Aeolian star system, in the Minor Magellanic Cloud, in order to free their brothers in reason, lamenting under a bondage to a fierce cybernetic dictator(He said this: "lamenting") The roar of exhausts drowned him out. Two more rockets, also rusty, were descending on the plaza. Frosted women ran out of the Pantheon-Refrigerator. A crush ensued. I knew I had landed in the epoch of returns and hurriedly pressed the gas pedal.

The city vanished and did not reappear for a long time. Behind the wall, blinding flashes and sky-lighting fires continued with depressing regularity. Then, finally, the world became brightly illuminated and I stopped immediately.

A blooming, unpeopled landscape stretched around me. Wheat fields waved. Fatted herds grazed, but cultured herdsman were not in evidence.

Familiar transparent cupolas, viaducts, and helical ramps glimmered on the horizon.

Quite nearby, to the west, the wall continued to tower over me.

Someone touched me on the knee and I jumped. A small boy with deep-set eyes stood alongside.

"What is it, little boy?" I asked.

"Apparatus busted?" he inquired in a melodious voice.

"You should address your elders politely, you should vousvoyeur" I said tutorially.

He was very astonished, then his face cleared.

"Ah, yes, I remember. If my memory does not betray me, that was customary in the Epoch of Compulsory Politeness. If to tutoyer is disharmonious to your emotional

rhythm, I am prepared to address you in any manner you find in consonance with your inner equilibrium."

I was at a loss to answer, so he squatted by my machine and touched it here and there, commenting in terminology with which I was totally unfamiliar. A nice youngster, very clean, very well groomed, healthy, but a bit too serious for his age in my opinion.

"Listen, kid," said I. "What wall is that?"

He turned his attentive, shy eyes on me.

"It's called the Iron Wall," he replied. "I regret to say, I am not versed in the etymology of both these words, but I am informed that it divides two worlds—the World of Humanist Imagination and the World of Fear of the Future." He was quiet and then added, "The etymology of the word "Fear" also unknown to me."

"Curious," I said. "Would it be possible to see? What is that World of Fear?"

"Of course it's possible. Here is the communication port. You may quench your curiosity."

The communication port had the appearance of a low arch closed with an armored door. I approached and grasped the bolt with some trepidation. The boy followed up on his comments.

"I cannot refrain from warning you. If some misadventure should befall you there, you will be required to present yourself before the United Council of One Hundred and Forty Worlds."

I pushed the door ajar. Crash! Bang! W-o-o-w! A-y-i-i! Toot-toot-toot!

All of my five senses were instantly traumatized. I saw a good-looking blond with an indecent tattoo between her shoulder blades, all nakedness and long legs, firing two automatics into an ugly brunette, who showered red drops with each shot. I heard the thunder of explosions and the soul-rending cries of monsters. I smelled the indescribable stench of rotting and burned nonprotein flesh. The searing wind of a proximate nuclear explosion burned my face and I felt on my tongue the repulsive taste of pulverized protoplasm scattered through the atmosphere. I shied back and shut the door in haste, almost slamming it on my head. The air now seemed sweet and the world beautiful. The boy had disappeared. I was slowly reconstituting myself and then became concerned that the pest might have run to his United Council to complain. I ran to my machine.

Once more, the dusk of dimensionless time closed over me. But I did not take my eyes off the Iron Wall, as my curiosity was aroused. In order not to lose time for nothing, I jumped a whole million years into the future in one leap. Jungles of atomic mushrooms grew behind the wall and I was overjoyed when light again glimmered on my side of it. I braked and groaned in disappointment.

The vast Pantheon-Refrigerator towered not far away. A rusty spaceship of spherical shape was descending from the sky. There was no one around; wheat fields waved. The sphere landed and the erstwhile pilot in blue came out. The girl in pink appeared at the door of the Pantheon. She was covered with the red spots of bedsores. They ran toward each other and clasped hands. I turned away, feeling ill at ease. Some old man stood indifferently aloof and somewhat shyly fished for golden fishies. The blue pilot and the pink girl started a dreary dialogue.

I got off the machine to flex my legs and only then noticed that the sky behind the wall was unprecedently clear. There were no roars of explosions nor cracks of shots. Emboldened, I went to the communications port.

A perfectly flat field extended on the other side of the wall, cleft all the way to the horizon with a deep ditch. There was not a living thing to the left and the entire area

was covered with low metallic domes, not unlike bulging manhole covers. Horsemen were prancing about on the horizon on the right side. Then I noticed a squat dark-faced man in armor sitting with his legs dangling over the edge of the ditch. Something resembling an automatic rifle with a very thick barrel was hung on his chest by a leather strap. He was chewing slowly, spitting every minute, and regarded me without any particular interest. I held the door open and looked at him too, not daring to speak. His appearance was just too strange. Uncommon. Savage. Who knew what sort of man he was?

Having looked his fill, he reached under his armor and pulled out a flat flask, pulled the cork out with his teeth, took a swig, spit into the ditch again, and said in a rusty voice in English, "Hello! You from that side?"

"Da," I said. "I mean, yes."

"And how is it going on out there?"

"So-so," said I, shutting the door. "And how is it going on here?"

"It's OK," he said phlegmatically, and was silent.

After a while I asked what he was doing there. At first, he replied reluctantly, but then gradually grew more talkative. I learned that, to the left of the ditch, humanity was living out its last days under the heel of savage robots. The machines there had become more intelligent than men, had seized power and were now basking in all the delights of life, and had driven the men underground to work on the conveyors. To the right of the ditch, on the territory guarded by him, the men were enslaved by wanderers from a neighboring galaxy. They, too, had seized power, installed a feudal order, and were making the fullest use of the right of first night. They lived quite well, these wanderers, and this and that goody fell to those who served them well. About twenty miles from here along the ditch, there was a region where men were enslaved by conquerors from Altair, intelligent viruses which invaded people and forced them to do what they willed. Even farther to the west there was a large colony of the Galactic Federation. The men there were also enslaved, but their lot wasn't all that bad because His Highness the Viceroy fed them well and enlisted them into the personal guard of His Majesty and Galactic Emperor E-U 3562-nd. There were also regions enslaved by intelligent parasites, intelligent plants, and intelligent minerals. Finally, over the mountain there were areas enslaved by still others, but all sorts of fairy tales were told about them, which no serious man could accept...

Here our conversation was interrupted. Several saucer-shaped flying machines flew low over the plain. Tumbling and twisting, bombs fell out of them. "It's started up again," growled the man, and he lay down with his feet toward the explosions and opened fire on the horsemen prancing on the horizon. I jumped out the gate, slammed the door, and leaning on it with my back, listened for some time to the bombs whisfling, roaring, and thundering. The pilot in blue and the girl in pink on the steps of the Pantheon still had not concluded their dialogue. Once more I looked behind the door cautiously: over the plain, fireballs slowly bloomed. The manhole covers opened one after another, and pale, tattered men with bearded savage faces were pouring out, brandishing iron staves. The horsemen had ridden up to my erstwhile interlocutor, and were cutting him to ribbons with long swords, while he hollered and tried to parry their blows with his automatic rifle.

I closed the door and carefully drew the bolt shut.

Returning to my machine, I sat in the saddle. I was tempted to fly another million years forward and view the dying earth described by Wells. But here, for the first time, something got stuck in the machine; the clutch did not seem to engage. I pressed it

once, twice, then pushed the pedal with all my strength; something cracked, rang, the waving wheat fields stood on end, and I had the feeling of coming out of a profound sleep. I was sitting on the viewing stand on the stage of the small auditorium of our Institute and everyone was looking at me with awe.

"What happened to the transmission?" I asked, looking around in search of the machine. There was no machine. I had come back alone.

"That's not important!" cried out Sedlovoi. "A big Thanks to you! You have really helped me out... Now, that was interesting: isn't that a fact, comrades?"

The auditorium buzzed loudly to the effect that, yes, it was interesting.

"But I have read all of it somewhere," one of the magisters in the first row said dubiously.

"And how else? How else?" cried L. Sedlovoi. "Was he not in the described future?"

"Not much adventure," said the players of the Functional Sea Warfare game in the rear row. "Conversations, endless conversations"

"Well, I can't help that," Sedlovoi said forcefully.

"Just talk, eh?" I said, getting off the stand. I recollect how they had chopped my dark-visaged conversationalist and felt ill.

"No, after all, some interesting spots had occurred," said one of the baccalaureates. "That machine, for instance do you remember? With trigonic quoaters that's really something.."

"Now, then," said Poopkov-Lahggard. "It seems we are already having a discussion. But then, perhaps, someone has a question for the lecturer?"

The dreary baccalaureate at once asked about the polyvelocity transmission (you see, he was interested in the coefficient of volume expansion) and I quietly withdrew.

I was experiencing a novel sensation. Everything around me seemed so real, solid, and material. People were passing by, and I could hear their shoes squeaking and feel the breeze from their motion. They were all very laconic, they were all working, thinking, and no one was prattling, reading poetry, or pouring forth bombastic speeches. Everyone knew that the laboratory was one thing and the stage of the union meeting, another, while a holiday meeting was something else altogether. So much so, that when Vibegallo passed me, slithering his leather-soled felt boots, I was almost sympathetic toward him, just because he had the usual bits of millet in his beard and was picking his teeth with a long fine nail and didn't even say hello. He was a live, visible, and ponderable boor; he didn't wave his arms, or strike academic poses.

I looked in at Roman's because I wanted badly to tell someone about my adventures. Roman, chin in hand, was standing over a lab table, staring at a small green parrot lying in a Petri dish. It was quite defunct, its eyes covered with a dead whitish film.

"What is the matter with him?" I asked.

"I don't know," said Roman. "Just croaked, as you can see."

"Where did you get it?"

"I have no idea", said Roman.

"Perhaps it's artificial," I offered.

"Not at all; it's a parrot, all right"

"Probably Victor sat on the umclidet again."

We bent over the bird and examined it attentively. It had a ring on its black stiff claw.

"Photon," read Roman "And some numbers..nineteen, oh-five, seventy-three."

"So," said a familiar voice behind us.

We turned and stood respectfully.

"Good day," said Janus-U, walking up to the table. He had come out of his laboratory

door in the back of the room, and he somehow projected a very tired and very sad look. "Good day, Janus Poluektovich," we said in a chorus of utmost respect.

Janus saw the parrot and again said, "So." He took the small bird in his hands, very gently and tenderly, stroked its bright red crest, and said softly, "What happened, little Photon?"

He wanted to say something more, but glanced at us and remained silent. We stood together and watched him, walking with an old man's gait, slowly go to the far corner of the room, open the door of the electric furnace, and drop the little green corpse in.

"Roman Petrovich," he said. "Be so kind, throw the switch, please."

Roman obeyed. He had that look of having been struck with a far-out idea. Janus-U, head bowed, stood a while by the furnace, scraped out the hot ashes carefully, and opening the window ventilator, threw them out into the wind. He looked out the window for some time, then told Roman that he was expecting him in his office in half an hour, and left.

"Strange," said Roman, following him with his eyes.

"What is strange?" I asked.

"The whole thing is strange," said Roman.

It seemed strange to me too, both the appearance of the green parrot, apparently so well known to Janus Poluektovich, and the altogether unlikely ceremony of the fiery funeral with the scattering of ashes on the wind, but I couldn't wait to tell about my journey into the imagined future, so I began my tale.

Roman listened inattentively, looked at me in a resigned way, nodded in the wrong places, and then suddenly said, "Go on, go on, I am listening," crawled under the table, came out with the wastebasket, and started to paw through the crumpled paper and pieces of magnetic tape. When I finished my story he asked, "Didn't this Sedlovoi try traveling in the described present? In my opinion that would have been much more amusing..."

While I was thinking about this suggestion and appreciating the acuity of Roman's wits, he turned the basket over and poured its contents on the floor.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Lost your dissertation?"

"You know, Sasha," he said, looking at me with unseeing eyes, "it's a curious thing. Yesterday I was cleaning out the furnace and found a charred green feather in it. I threw it into the basket, but it's not here today."

"What feather?" I asked.

"You know very well that green bird feathers occur quite rarely in our latitudes. And the parrot we just burned was green."

"What sort of nonsense is that?" I said. "Didn't you find the feather yesterday?"

"That's the point," said Roman, putting the litter back in the basket.

Chapter 3

"Poetry's unnat'ral; no man ever talked poetry 'cept a beadle on boxin' day, or Warren's blackin', or Rowland's oil, or some o' them low fellows; never you let yourself down to talk poetry, my boy"

C.Dickens

They kept on repairing the Aldan all night. When I went to Electronics next morning, the sleepy and annoyed engineers were sitting on the floor berating Cristobal Joseevich in uninspired invective. They were calling him a Scythian, barbarian, and Hun, who had gained access to computers. Their despair was so complete that for a while they actually listened to my advice and attempted to follow it. But then the chief arrived, a certain Savaof Baalovich Odin, and I was immediately displaced from the machine. Moving out of the way, I sat down at my desk and observed how Savaof Baalovich was divining the essence of the damage.

He was very old, but strong and sinewy, sunburned with a shiny bald head and closely shaved cheeks, dressed in a blinding white tussah suit. This man was regarded with great reverence by everyone. I saw for myself once how he was reading Modest Matveevich a lecture in a soft voice, and the menacing Modest Matveevich was bowing and repeating, "I understand. My fault. It won't happen again." A kind of monstrous energy emanated from Savaof Baalovich. It was noted that in his presence watches gained time, and the tracks of elementary particles, curved by a magnetic field, would straighten out. All the same, he was not a magus. At least, not a practicing magus. He didn't go through walls, never transgressed anyone, and never created his own doubles, though he worked an inordinate lot. He was the head of the Technical Maintenance Department, knew all the technology in the Institute to the finest detail, and was a consultant to the Kitezhgrad magitechnic plantIn addition, he was involved in the most unexpected matters far removed from his profession.

I learned about his past only recently. In olden times, S.B. Odin was the leading magus on Earth. Cristobal Junta and Gian Giacomo were pupils of his students. Evil was exorcised with his name. Jinn bottles were sealed with his name. King Solomon wrote him letters of passionate admiration and erected temples in his honor. He seemed to be all-powerful. And then, sometime in the middle of the sixteenth century, he did become all-powerful.

Having achieved a numerical solution of the integro-differential Equation of Perfection, which was postulated by some titan before the Ice Age, he acquired the ability to perform any miracle. Each of the magi had his own limits. Some were unable to rid themselves of the growth on their ears. Others were in possession of the generalized Lomonosov-Lavoisier law, but were powerless before the second law of thermodynamics. Still others — and they were very few — could stop time, but only in Riemann space and only for a short period. Savaof Baalovich was omnipotent. He could do anything. And he could do nothing. Because the limiting boundary of the Equation of Perfection proved to be the condition that the miracle must not harm anyone.

Not one intelligent being. On Earth or anywhere in any other part of the universe. But no one could envisage such a miracle, not even Savaof Baalovich himself. And so, S.B. Odin renounced forever the practice of magic and became the Head of the Department

of Technical Maintenance at SRIWaT....

With his arrival, the affairs of the engineers quickly got on the mend. Their movements became purposeful and their nasty comments withered away. I got out the folder with my current assignments and was about to go to work, when Stellotchka, that very sweet, gray-eyed, and retrousse-nosed undergraduate witch in Vibegallo's lab, came in and invited me to join her in the composition of the Institute gazette.

Stella and I were on the editorial staff, and we wrote satirical verses, fables, and captions for the illustrations. In addition to all this, I also drew clever pictures of a mailbox for notices, with winged letters converging on it from all sides. In general, the gazette artist was my namesake, Alexander Ivanovich Drozd, cinephotographer, who had successfully infiltrated the Institute. He was also our specialist on headlines. The editor-in-chief was Roman Oira-Oira, and Volodia Pochkin was his assistant.

"Sasha," said Stellotchka, gazing at me with her honest gray eyes.

"Let's go."

"Where to?" I said. I knew where.

"Make up the issue."

"Why?"

"Roman is asking for it, very insistently, because Cerberus is complaining. He says there are only two days left and there's nothing ready."

Cerberus Curovich Demin, comrade Personnel Director, was the curator of our paper and its chief expeditor and censor.

"Listen," I said. "Let's do it tomorrow, OK?"

"I can't, tomorrow," said Stellotchka. "Tomorrow I'm flying to Sukhumi, to tape baboons. Vibegallo says that we should make records of the leader, as the most responsible of the baboons... He himself is afraid to go near the leader because he is jealous of him. What do you say, Sasha? Let's go."

I sighed, put away my worksheets, and followed Stellotchka, since I couldn't compose verse alone. I needed Stellotchka. She always suggested the first line and the basic idea and, in my view, that was the main thing in poetry.

"Where are we going to work?" I asked on the way. "Over at the local committee room?"

"That's taken, for putting Alfred on the carpet. On account of his tea. As for us, Roman has made room in his lab."

"So what do we write about this time? About the steam-baths again?"

"About the steam-baths, too. About that, about Bald Mountain, and, also, we have to roast Homa Brutus."

"Homa Brutus— how badly you treat us."

"Et tu, Brutus," said Stella.

"That's a thought," I said. "I'll have to work on that."

On the table in Roman's laboratory the paper was laid out— a huge, virginally clean sheet of drafting paper. Reclining next to it, among the gouache containers, atomizers, and notes, was our artist and cinephotographer Alexander Drozd, a cigarette hanging from his lip. As usual, his shirt was open, displaying a hairy potbelly through the crack.

"Greetings," he said.

"Hello," I said.

There was loud music— Sanya was exercising his portable receiver.

"What have you here?" I said, collecting the notes. There wasn't much.

There was the lead article, "Towards the Holiday." There was the item from Cerberus Curovich, "Results of the Investigation of the Status of Conformance to Management

Directives Regarding Work Discipline for the Period from the End of the First to the Start of the Second Quarter." There was a Professor Vibegallo article, "Our Duty— Is the Duty to Subsidiary Rural and City Economics." There was an article by Volodia Pochkin, "All-Union Conference on Electronic Thaumaturgy." There was the note from some house ghost, "When Will the Steam Pipes in the Fourth Floor Be Blown Clear?" There was the article of the Chairman of the Mess Committee, "Neither Fish Nor Fowl"— six typewritten pages with a single break. It began with the words, "Phosphorus is as necessary to man as air." There was a short piece by Roman on the work of the Unapproachable Problems Department. For the section titled "Our Veterans," there was an article by Cristobal Junta, "From Seville to Granada. 1547." There were several other small contributions in which were criticized: the absence of an adequate orderliness in the account of the credit union; the presence of some slovenliness in the organization of the volunteer fire department; the permissive attitude toward gambling in the vivarium. There were several caricatures. One showed a draggle-tailed Homa Brutus with a purple nose. Another was ridiculing the steam-baths— it showed a blue, naked man congealing under an icicle shower.

"What a bore!" I said. "What do you say we don't need verses?"

"We do need them," said Stellochka with a sigh. "I've been making layouts this way and that, and there's always some empty space."

"Let Sanya draw something. Some sort of wheat sheaf, or blooming pansies. How about it, Sanya?"

"Go on and get to work," said Drozd. "I have to draw the banner."

"Big deal," I said. "Three whole words!"

"Against a background of a starry night," Drozd said weightily. "Also a rocket. And headlines for the articles, too. And I haven't had my dinner yet. Or breakfast."

"Then go eat," I said, irritated.

"I can't afford it," Drozd said crossly. "I bought a tape recorder. At the commission shop. Here you are fooling around when you'd do better to make me a sandwich or two. With butter and jam. Or a tenner!"

I took out a ruble and showed it to him from a distance.

"When you finish the banner I'll give it to you."

"For keeps?" said Sanya, animated.

"No, for a loan."

"Well, that's the same thing," he said. "Consider the possibility that I'm going to die right now. I've already started to have spasms. Also my extremities are growing cold."

"That's a pack of lies," said Stella. "Let's sit down over at that table, Sasha, and finish those verses right now."

We sat down at the separate table and spread out the caricatures before us. For some time we sat and looked at each them in the hope that an inspiration would come forth.

"That Brutus is a brute— beware, he'll swipe your shoes to boot."

"Swipe?" I said. "Did he steal something?"

"No," said Stella. "He had a fight and was a hooligan. I just said that for the rhyme."

We waited. Nothing more came into our heads.

"Let's approach this logically. There is this Homa Brutus. He drank himself stupid. He fought. What else did he do?"

"He pestered the girls," said Stella. "Broke some glass."

"All right," I said. "What else?"

"He used foul language"

"That's strange," Sanya Drozd piped up. "I worked in the projection booth with this

Brutus. He was a regular guy. Normal"

"And?" I said.

"And, that's all."

"Can you come up with a rhyme for Brutus or maybe Brute?"

"Knout."

"Sounds like we had that with the boot."

"A knout is different. They whip you with one of those."

Stella said, with expression,

"Comrade, before you is a Brute.

Pick up your trusty knout

And whack him head to foot."

"No good," said Drozd. "Knout, whack...That would be propaganda for physical punishment."

"Kaput," I said.

"Behold, my friend, there is that Brute," said Stella,

"His words so rough and tough

That it's enough

To make the flies kaput."

"It's your poetry that'll do the flies in," said Drozd.

"Have you lettered the banner?" I asked.

"No," Drozd said coquettishly.

"Then work on it."

"They shame our proud Institute," said Stella, "such drunkards as our Brutus Brute."

"That's good," I said. "We'll use that for the finale. Write it down. It will be a moral of freshness and originality."

"What's original about that?" said the simple Drozd.

I didn't bother responding to him.

"Now we have to describe," I said, "how he engaged in hooliganism. Let's say.. Drunk like a baboon!... With language vile did ears defile!... Was born a man, became a holligan!"

"Awful," Stella said in disgust.

I propped up my head on my hands and continued to stare at the caricature. Drozd, his tail stuck up in the air, was stroking the paper with his paintbrush. His legs, encased in maximally tight jeans, were bowed out in a reverse curve. I was struck with an idea.

"Knees to the rear!" I said. "The popular song."

"A little grasshopper sat, knees to the rear," said Stella.

"Precisely," said Drozd, without turning around. "I know it, too. "the guests were scattering, knees to the rear,' " he sang.

"Wait, wail," I said. I felt inspired. " is the result:... To the prison cell, knees to the rear."

"That's not bad," said Stella.

"You follow?" I said. "Another pair of verses and all with the refrain a-teasing... "stranger's door he crashes!.. And nothing him abashes! Ignoring law and fear!.. knees to the rear. "Brilliant," I said. "Write it down! He did break in?"

"Indeed, indeed."

"Excellent!" I said. "Now another verse."

"Ambition, ammunition," I said. "Police, just-ice."

"He huddles," said Stella. "He strives. He strives not to wash and shave each day!"

"That's him," added Drozd. "It's a fact. You have achieved an artistic truth. He hasn't shaved or bathed since the day he was born."

"Maybe we can think up another line or two," offered Stella.

"Reprobate.., regenerate.. automate..

"Ingrate," I said. "Berate."

"Mate," said Drozd. "Checkmate, of course."

Again we were silent for a good long time, looking at each other numbly and moving our lips soundlessly. Drozd kept tapping on the rim of the jar with his brush.

"He plays and sways," I said at last "like pirate he swears. Chased the girl knees to the rear"

"Pirate is a little ..." said Stella.

"Then: ignoring law and fear!"

"We already had that," said Stella.

"Where..? Ah, yes, true enough."

"With a tiger striped lear", offered Drozd.

Here there was a soft scratching and we turned to see what it was. The door to Janus Poluektovich's laboratory was opening slowly.

"Look at that!" exclaimed Drozd in amazement, freezing into a pose, brush in hand.

A small green parrot with a bright red crest crawled into the crack.

"What a dear little parrot," exclaimed Drozd. "Here, parrot." He made chicken-calling noises, and worked his fingers as though he were crumbling bread. The parrot regarded him out of a single eye. Then it opened its black beak, which was as hooked as Roman's nose, and cried out hoarsely, "Reactor! Reactor! Courage!"

"Isn't he nice!" exclaimed Stella. "Sanya, catch him..."

Drozd started toward the parrot, and then stopped. "He probably bites," he said, looking reluctant. "Look at that beak."

The parrot pushed off the floor and flapped its wings and flew, somehow ineptly, about the room. I watched it in astonishment. It looked very much like that other one of yesterday. An identical twin. Chock-full of parrots, I thought.

Drozd was parrying with his brush. "He'll peck me yet, for all I know," he said.

The parrot lighted on the laboratory balance beam, twitched a bit to attain equilibrium, and cried distinctly, "Proxima Centauri! R-Rubidium! R-Rubidium!"

Having delivered itself, it puffed out its feathers, drew in its head, and covered its eyes with a membrane. It seemed to be shivering. Stella quickly created a piece of bread with jam, pinched off the crust, and brought it under its beak. The parrot did not react. It was shaking as in a fever and the scale pans were vibrating rapidly, clinking against the base.

"I think he's sick," said Drozd. He took the bread absentmindedly from Stella's hand and started to eat it.

"Friends," I said "has anybody ever seen a parrot at the Institute before?"

Stella shook her head; Drozd shrugged his shoulders.

"There've been just too many of them lately," I said. "And yesterday, too..."

"Janus is probably experimenting with them," said Stella. "Antigravitation or something along those lines."

The door to the hall opened and Roman Oira-Oira, Victor Korneev, Eddie Amperian, and Volodia Pochkin came crowding in. The room became noisy. Korneev, well rested and very active, started to leaf through the articles, loudly ridiculing their style. The powerful Volodia Pochkin, acting as deputy editor in his main police function, seized Drozd by his plump nape, bent him over, and stuck his nose into the paper.

"Where is the banner? The banner! Where is it, Drozdillo?"

Roman demanded finished verses from us. Eddie, not having any direct connection with the paper, went to the cabinet and began to noisily move its various apparatus contents.

Suddenly the parrot yelled out, "Over-rsanl Over-rsan!"— and thereupon ensued a stunned silence.

Roman stared at the parrot. His face depicted his traditional expression as though he were just struck with an astounding idea.

Volodia Pochkin let go of Drozd and said, "How about that—a parrot."

The rude Korneev instantly reached for the bird to grasp it around the body, but it broke free, and Korneev grabbed it by the tail.

"Let go, Victor!" Stella cried angrily "What kind of behavior is that— torturing animals?"

The parrot screeched louder. Everyone crowded around. Korneev was holding it as though it were a pigeon, Stella was stroking its crest, while Drozd was tenderly running his fingers through the feathers in parrots' tail. Roman looked at me.

"Curious," he said. "Isn't it?"

"How did it get here, Sasha?" Eddie asked politely.

I jerked my head in the direction of Janus's laboratory.

"What would Janus want with a parrot?" inquired Eddie.

"Are you asking me?" I said.

"No, it's a rhetorical question," Eddie said seriously.

"Why does he need two parrots?" I said.

"Or three," Roman added softly.

Korneev turned toward us.

"Where is the other?" he asked, looking around.

The parrot flopped weakly in his hand, trying to pinch his finger.

"Why don't you let it go?" I said. "You can see it's not well."

Korneev pushed Drozd away, and put the bird back on the scales. The parrot ruffled its feathers and spread its wings.

"Let him be," said Roman. "We'll figure it out later. Where's the verse?"

Stella quickly rattled off everything we had had time to compose. Roman scratched his chin, Volodia Pochkin neighed unnaturally, and Korneev delivered a command:

"To the firing squad. With heavy-caliber machine guns. Are you going to learn to write poetry sometime?"

"You can write it yourself," I said angrily.

"Poetry, I cannot write," said Korneev. "I am not a Pushkin by nature. I am a Belinsky."

"By nature you are a cadaver," said Stella.

"I beg your pardon!" insisted Victor. "I demand that the paper have a department of literary criticism. I desire to write critical articles. I shall shatter you all! I shall remind you again of your creation about the dachas."

"Which?" asked Eddie.

Korneev quoted instantly:

"I would like to build my dacha

But it's a case of bureaucratic gotcha.

The question of its proper place

The land committee will not face."

"Did you have that? Admit it!"

"So what!" I said. "Pushkin had his unfortunate verse, too. They don't even publish them in full in school books."

"I know that," said Drozd.

Roman turned toward him. "Are we going to have a banner today or not?"

"We shall!" said Drozd. "I have drawn the letter "F."

"Which "F"? What does "F" has to do with it?"

"Shouldn't I have done it?" asked Drozd.

"What? I will expire on the spot," said Roman. "The paper is called, Towards Progressive Thaumaturgy. "Show me just one "F"!"

Drozd goggled at the wall, moving his lips now and then. "How can that be?" he said finally. "Where did I get the letter letter "F"? There was letter "F"."

Roman exploded and ordered Pochkin to chase us all back to our places. Stella and I were placed under Korneev's command. Drozd was feverishly changing his letter "F" into a stylized letter "T." Eddie Amperian attempted to fade out with the psychoelectrometer, but was seized, rounded up, and assigned to repair the airbrush needed for the creation of the starry sky. Then came Pochkin's turn. Roman ordered him to type all the articles with concurrent editorial and style correction. Roman himself undertook to stroll about the laboratory, looking over everyone's shoulder in turn.

The work boiled along for a while. We had time to compose and reject a series of variants on the steambath theme: "Instead of steamy bowers, we have ice cold showers"; "If you truly hunger to ablute, cold for hot is not a substitute"; "Our two hundred mages, each and all, desire hot water in their shower stall"; and so forth and so on.

Korneev continued his vile and scurrilous attacks like a true literary critic. "Learn from Pushkin!" he pounded into us. "Or at least from Pochkin. A genius is sitting next to you, and you can't even imitate him... "o'er the road a ZiL is rolling,, o'er me it will be bowling". What physical force is bound up in these lines! What sincerity of feeling!"

We fought back with anemic repartee. Sanya Drozd reached the letter "f" in the word "progressive." Eddie fixed the airbrush and tried it out on Roman's compendias. Volodia Pochkin was searching for the letter "T" on his typewriter, belching curses. Everything was proceeding normally. Then Roman said suddenly, "Sasha, will you glance over here?"

I looked. The parrot was lying under the scales, its legs drawn up, its eyes covered with a white film, and its crest drooping.

"Expired," Drozd said pityingly.

Again we crowded around the parrot. I didn't have any particular notions, and if I did, they were all in the subconscious, but I stretched out my hand, picked up the parrot, and examined its legs.

Roman asked at once, "Is it there?"

"It's there," I said.

On the black scrunched-up leg was the ring of white metal engraved "Photon" and bearing the numbers "19-05-73." I looked distraughtly at Roman.

We both must have looked peculiar, as Korneev said, "All right, let's hear whatever interesting tale you have to tell."

"Shall we tell?" asked Roman.

"It's some kind of bad dream," I said, "probably some sort of trick. They're probably doubles."

"But no," he said. "That's the whole point. It's not a double. It's a very genuine

original."

Roman again examined the little corpse attentively.

"Let me see," said Korneev.

The four of them, including Volodia Pochkin and Eddie, investigated the parrot in the most thorough manner and declared unanimously that it was not a double and that they did not understand why this gave us such trouble.

"Let's take myself, for instance," said Komeev. "I, too, am not a double. Why doesn't that amaze you?"

Roman surveyed, in turn, Stella, who was consumed with curiosity, Volodia Pochkin, with his mouth open, and Victor, who was smiling tauntingly, and told all how the day before yesterday he had found the charred feather, which he threw into the wastepaper basket; and about how there had been no feather in the basket yesterday, but instead a dead parrot had manifested itself on this (same) table, which parrot was not a double, but an exact copy of this one; and also about how Janus had recognized the parrot and mourned over it, incinerated it in the above-mentioned furnace, and scattered its ashes to the wind, for some reason.

No one spoke for a while. Drozd was only dimly interested in Roman's story and shrugged his shoulders. His face clearly expressed that he didn't understand what all this excitement was about, and that in his opinion much thicker broths were brewed in this institution. Stella also seemed disappointed. But the magister trio understood everything only too well, and their physiognomies registered protest.

Korneev said decisively, "You are making it up. And not too well at that."

"This just isn't that same parrot," said the polite Eddie. "You must be mistaken."

"It's the one," I said. "Green and with a ring."

"Photon?" asked Korneev in a prosecutor's tone.

"Photon. Janus called him his little Photon."

"And the numbers?" asked Volodia.

"And the numbers!"

"The numbers are the same?" Korneev asked threateningly.

"I think they are the same," I said, looking at Roman uncertainly.

"Let's have that a bit more precisely," demanded Korneev, covering the parrot with his red paw. "Would you repeat those numbers again?"

"Nineteen.." I said. "Eh.. zero-two, is it? Sixty-three."

Korneev looked under his palm. "You lie," he said. "And how about you?"

He turned to Roman.

"I don't remember," Roman said calmly. "It seems it was zero-five, not zero-three."

"No," I said. "I still think it was zero-six. I remember there was that hook on it."

"A hook," Pochkin said contemptuously. "See our S. Holmeses and N. Pinkertons! They grow weary of the law of cause and effect."

Korneev stuffed his hands in his pockets. "That's a different matter," he said. "I don't believe you are lying. You are simply mixed up. The parrots are all green, many are tagged. This pair was from the series. And your memory is full of holes. As with all versifiers and editors of hack bulletin gazettes."

"Full of holes?" inquired Roman.

"Like a sieve."

"Like a sieve?" repeated Roman, smiling strangely.

"Like an old sieve," elaborated Victor. "A rusty one. Like a net. With large mesh."

Then Roman, continuing to smile strangely, pulled a notebook out of his shirt pocket and riffled its pages.

"And so," he said. "Large, meshed, and rusty. Let's see nineteen, zero-five, seventy-three," he read.

The magisters lunged toward the parrot and collided their foreheads with a dry crack.

"Nineteen, zero-five, seventy-three," Korneev read the numbers on the ring in a fallen voice. It was most spectacular. Stella immediately squealed with pleasure.

"Big deal," said Drozd without tearing himself away from his drawing. "I once had a number coinciding with the winner in a lottery. I ran to the savings outlet to pick up my car. And then it turned out—"

"Why did you write down the number?" said Korneev, squinting at Roman.

"Is it a habit with you? Do you write down all numbers? Maybe you have the number of your watch in there?"

"Brilliant" said Pochkin. "Victor, you are great! You have hit the bull's eye. Roman, what a disgrace! Why did you poison the parrot? How cruel!"

"Idiots!" said Roman. "What am I to you? A Vibegallo?"

Korneev ran up to him and ogled his ears.

"Go to the devil!" said Roman. "Sasha, just look at them."

"Come on, fellow," I said. "Who jokes that way? What do you take us for?"

"And what is left for us to do?" said Korneev "Someone is lying. Either it's you or the laws of nature. I believe in the law of nature. Everything else changes."

Anyway, he quickly wilted, sat down out of the way, and settled down to think. Sanya Drozd drew his banner calmly. Stella was looking at each of us — in turn with frightened eyes. Volodia Pochkin rapidly wrote and crossed out some formulas. Eddie was the first to speak.

"Even if laws are not subverted," he said with a show of reasonableness, "the unexpected appearance of a large number of parrots in the same room and their suspiciously high mortality rate still remain most unlikely. But I am not too surprised, since I have not forgotten we are dealing here with Janus Poluektovich. Don't you feel that Janus Poluektovich is in himself a most curious personage?"

"It would seem so," I said.

"I think so, too," said Eddie. "What field is he actually working in, Roman?"

"It depends on which Janus you mean. Janus-U is involved in communication with parallel spaces."

"Hmm," said Eddie. "That'll hardly help us."

"Unfortunately," said Roman "I, too, have been constantly thinking about how we can tie in the parrots with Janus, and I can't come up with anything."

"But is he not a strange person?" asked Eddie.

"Yes, undoubtedly," said Roman. "Beginning with the fact that there are two of them and he is one. We have become so used to that, that we no longer think about it"

"That's what I wanted to talk about. We seldom discuss Janus, as we respect him tremendously. But hasn't every one of us noticed at least one idiosyncrasy about him?"

"Idiosyncrasy number one," I said. "A fondness for dying parrots."

"We'll consider that as one," said Eddie. "What else?"

"Gossips," Drozd said with dignity. "I had occasion to ask him for a loan once."

"Yes?" said Eddie.

"And he gave it to me," said Drozd. "But then I forgot how much he gave me. Now I don't know what to do."

He was silent. Eddie waited a while for a continuation and then said, "Do you know, for example, that each time I had to work nights with him, at exactly twelve midnight he went away somewhere and came back five minutes later, and each time, I had the

impression that, one way or another, he was trying to find out from me what we were doing there prior to his departure."

"That is indeed so," said Roman. "I know it very well. I have noted for a long time that right at midnight his memory is wiped clean. And he is thoroughly aware of this defect. He excused himself several times and said that it was a reflexive syndrome connected with the sequelae of a serious contusion."

"His memory is worthless," said Volodia Pochkin. He crumpled a sheet with computations and threw it under the table. "He keeps bothering you about whether he's seen you yesterday or not."

"And what you talked about, if he has seen you," I added.

"Memory, memory," Korneev muttered impatiently. "What has memory to do with it? Lots of people have faulty memories... That's not the point. What has he been doing with parallel spaces?"

"First we have to collect the facts," said Eddie.

"Parrots, parrots, parrots," continued Victor. "Can it be that they are doubles, after all?"

"No," said Volodia Pochkin. "I calculated. According to all criteria, it is not a double."

"Every midnight," said Roman, "he goes to that laboratory of his and literally locks himself up in it for several minutes. One time he ran in there so hurriedly that he did not have time to shut the door.

"And what happened?" asked Stella in a faint voice.

"Nothing. He sat down in his chair, stayed there a few minutes, and came back. Immediately he asked whether we had been talking about something important."

"I'm going," said Korneev, getting up.

"I, too," said Eddie. "We're having a seminar."

"Me, too," said Volodia Pochkin.

"No," said Roman "You sit here and type. I appoint you head of this enterprise. And you, Stellotchkha, take Sasha and make verses. And I'm leaving. I'll be back in the evening and the paper had better be ready."

They left, and we stayed to do the paper. At first we tried to come up with something, but grew tired quickly and had to accept that we just couldn't do any more. So we wrote a small poem about a dying parrot.

When Roman returned the paper was finished. Drozd lay on the table and consumed sandwiches, while Pochkin was expounding to Stella and me why the incident with the parrot could absolutely not be included.

"Stout fellow," said Roman "An excellent paper. What a banner! What boundless starry skies! And how few typos! And where is the parrot?"

The parrot lay in the Petri dish, the very same dish and in the very same place where Roman and I saw it yesterday. It was enough to make me catch my breath.

"Who put it there?" inquired Roman.

"I did," said Drozd. "Why?"

"No, that's all right," said Roman. "Let it lay there. Right, Sasha?"

I nodded.

"Let's see what'll happen with it tomorrow," said Roman.

Chapter 4

This poor old innocent bird o' mine swearing blue fire, and none the wiser

R.Stevenson

Next morning, however, right from the start, I had to assume my normal duties. Aldan had been repaired and was ready to do battle, and when I arrived in Electronics after breakfast there was already a small queue of doubles, with lists of assigned problems, at the door. I began by vengefully expelling Cristobal Junta's double, and writing on his list that I couldn't decipher the script. (Junta's handwriting was truly not susceptible to being read; he wrote Russian in gothic letters.) Feodor Simeonovich's double brought a program that had been personally composed by him. It was the first program Feodor Simeonovich had written by himself without any advice, prompting, or directions on my part. I looked the program over attentively and was pleasantly reassured that it was put together competently, economically, and not without ingenuity. I corrected some inconsequential errors and turned it over to my girls. Then I noticed that a pale and distraught-looking accountant from the fish factory was visibly languishing in the line. He was so discomfited and even frightened that I received him at once.

"It's a bit uncomfortable," he muttered, looking fearfully at the doubles out of the corner of his eye. "After all, these comrades are waiting there and they were here before me..."

"It's all right, these are not comrades," I calmed him.

"Well, citizens.

"Not citizens, either."

The accountant turned altogether pale, and bending toward me, pronounced in a halting whisper, "No wonder, then! I am looking at them, and they are not blinking... And that one there, in blue — I think he's not even breathing..."

I had already processed half of the queue when Roman called.

"Yes."

"The parrot's gone!"

"What do you mean— gone?"

"Just like that."

"Did the charwoman throw it out?"

"I asked. Not only did she not throw it out, she hasn't seen it."

"Maybe the brownies are fooling around."

"In the director's laboratory? I doubt it."

"Mmm, yes," I said. "Maybe Janus himself?"

"Janus hasn't come in yet. And, anyway, I don't think he's back from Moscow."

"So, what are we supposed to make of it?" I asked.

"I don't know. We'll see."

We were silent.

"You'll call me?" I asked. "If something interesting develops?"

"Of course. Without fail. So long, old chap."

I forced myself not to think about the parrot, which was, after all, none of my business. I finished with all the doubles, checked all the programs, and took up the nasty little

problem that had been hanging over me for a long time. It was given me by the absolutists. At first I had told them that it had neither sense nor solution, as was the case with most of their conundrums. But then I consulted with Junta, who had a sharp insight into such matters, and he gave me a few encouraging pieces of advice. I had reverted to the problem several times and put it off as many, but now I was able to finish it off. It worked out most elegantly. Just as I finished and leaned back in my chair to contemplate with delight the solution from a distance, Junta arrived, ominous and irate. Looking down at my feet, he inquired in a dry, menacing tone as to when I had ceased to understand his writing. It reminded him quite strongly of sabotage, he informed me. In 1936 in Madrid he ordered people to be put up against the wall for this.

I looked at him with tender emotion.

"Cristobal Joseevich," I said. "I finally did find the solution. You were absolutely right. Conjunction space can indeed be folded along any four variables."

Finally he raised his eyes to me and looked me in the face. I must have had an especially happy expression because he softened and growled, "May I see it?"

I handed him the sheets and he sat down next to me and, together, we went over the problem from beginning to end, savoring the two most elegant transformations, one of which he prompted to me, and one which I found myself.

"You and I don't have such bad heads, Alessandro," Junta said finally.

"We have a certain artistry of thought. What do you think?"

"I think we're pretty good," I said sincerely.

"And I concur," he said. "We'll publish it. No one should be ashamed to publish that. It's not anything like self-powered galoshes or invisibility pants."

We had reached a fine state of satisfaction and began to analyze his new problem. In no time at all he told me that he had previously judged himself a pobrecito and had come to the conclusion that I was a mathematical ignoramus at our very first meeting. I hotly agreed with him and expressed the opinion that he was conceivably quite ready to retire on pension, and as for me, I should be ejected bodily from the Institute to load lumber because I wouldn't qualify for any other job. He contradicted me. He said there could be no talk of any pension and that he should be processed for fertilizer, while I should not be allowed within a kilometer of a sawmill, where a certain intellectual level was still required, but should be assigned as assistant to a junior trainee on the cesspool pump at the cholera barracks.

So we sat, propping up our heads and abandoning ourselves to self-devaluation, when Feodor Simeonovich looked in. As near as I could make out, he was impatient to hear my opinion of his program.

"Program!" exclaimed Junta, smiling biliously "I haven't seen your program, Feodor, but I am sure that it is a work of genius in comparison to this — " He handed Feodor Simeonovich the sheet with the problem, holding it in ginger disgust between two fingers "Regard this exemplar of mental poverty and vapidity."

"B-but, my dear f-fellows," said Feodor Simeonovich, having diligently deciphered the handwriting. "This is B-Ben B-Beczalel's problem! Didn't C-Cagliostro prove th-that it had no s-solution?"

"We know that it has no solution, too," said Junta, bristling immediately. "But we wish to learn how to solve it"

"H-how strangely you r-reason, C-Cristo... H-how can you look for a solution, where it d-does not exist? It's s-some sort of n-nonsense."

"Excuse me, Feodor, but it's you who are reasoning strangely. It's nonsense to look

for a solution if it already exists. We are talking about how to deal with a problem that has no solution. This is a question of profound principle, which, I can see, is not within your scope, since you are an applications type. Apparently I started this conversation with you for nothing."

Cristobal Joseevich's tone was exceedingly insulting and Feodor Simeonovich became angry.

"I'll t-tell you what, my g-good fellow," he said. "I can't d-debate with you in such a v-vein, in the presence of the young man. Y-you astonish m-me. It's not unpedagogical. If you wish to continue, let's go out in the hall."

"As you wish," replied Junta, drawing himself up like a steel spring and reaching convulsively for a nonexistent haft at his hip.

They walked out ceremoniously, holding their heads high and not looking at each other. The girls tittered. I wasn't particularly concerned, either. Sitting down, I put my hands around my head, studying the sheet that had been left behind and listening to the mighty rumble of Feodor Simeonovich's bass and the dry, angry expletives of Cristobal Joseevich cutting through, out in the hall.

In the end, Feodor Simeonovich bellowed, "Would you please follow me to my office!"

"A pleasure!" grated Junta. They had now assumed the formal "you."

Their voices faded in the distance.

"Duel! A duel!" chittered the girls.

Junta had an arrant fame as a duelist and for picking quarrels. They said that he would bring his adversary to his laboratory, offer him a choice of rapiers, swords, or halberds, and then start jumping on tables and overturning cabinets a-la Jean Marais. But there was no need to worry about Feodor Simeonovich. It was quite clear that, having arrived in his office, they would gloom in silence at each other across the table for half an hour, then Feodor Simeonovich would sigh heavily, open his liquor cabinet, and fill two glasses with the Elixir of Bliss. Junta would flare his nostrils, twist his moustache, and drink up. Feodor Simeonovich would fill the glasses again without delay and shout into the lab, "Fresh pickles!"

Roman called at this time and asked in an odd voice that I go to his place at once. I ran upstairs.

In the lab were Roman, Victor, and Eddie. Besides them, there was also a green parrot. Alive. He sat, just as yesterday, on the balance beam, ogled each one of us in turn out of one eye or the other, poked around under his feathers with his beak, and obviously exhibited excellent health. The scientists, in contradistinction, looked far from well. Roman hunched over the bird and periodically sighed convulsively. A pale Eddie gently massaged his temples, wearing the agonized expression of a migraine sufferer. Victor, too, astride a chair, rocked it like a bug-eyed schoolboy and grumbled indistinctly, sotto voce.

"The same one?" I asked weakly.

"The same one," said Roman.

"Photon?" I began to feel poorly, too. "And the number coincides?"

Roman did not reply.

Eddie said in a lugubrious tone, "If we knew how many feathers the parrot has in his tail, we could count them over again and account for the one lost yesterday."

"Would you like me to go and fetch Brehm?" I offered.

"Where is the corpse?" asked Roman. "That's where we should start from! Listen, detectives— where is the corpse?"

"Corpse," barked the parrot. "Ceremony! Corpse overboard! Rubidium!"

"The devil knows what he's talking about," said Roman with feeling.

"Corpse overboard is a typical pirate saying" explained Eddie.

"And rubidium?"

"R-rubidiuml Res-erve! Tr-tremendous!" said the parrot.

"The rubidium reserves are huge," translated Eddie "It would be interesting to know where."

I bent over to examine the ring.

"Could it be that it's still not the same one?"

"And where is the one?" asked Roman.

"Well, that's a different question," I said. "That would be easier to explain."

"Explain," Roman demanded.

"Wait," I said. "Let's first decide the question: Is it the same one or not?"

"I think it's the same one," said Eddie.

"And I think it's not the same one," I said. "Here there's a scratch on the ring, where the three..."

"Three!" pronounced the parrot "Water-r sprout!"

Victor suddenly perked up. "I have an idea," he said.

"What?"

"Word-association test."

"How?"

"Wait! Everybody sit down and be quiet and don't interfere. Roman, do you have a tape recorder?"

"I do."

"Let's have it. But everyone must be quiet. I'll open him up, the rascal. He'll tell me everything."

Victor pulled up a chair, sat down with the recorder in his hand opposite the parrot, puffed himself up, fixed the parrot with one eye, and yelled, "R-rubidium!"

The parrot started and almost fell off the scales. Flapping his wings to regain equilibrium, he responded, "Rreserve! Cr-rater Rithey!"

We looked at each other, "R-reserve!" yelled Victor.

"Tr-remendous! Riches! R-riches! Rithey is r-right! Rithey is r-right! R-robots! R-robots!"

"Robots!"

"Cr-rashes Bur-rning! Atmospher-re bur-rning! Scrram! R-retreat! Scram!
Dr-ramba Retr-reat!"

"Dramba!"

"R-rubidium! R-reserve!"

"Rubidium!"

"R-reserve! Cr-rater! Rithey!"

"Short circuit," said Roman "Full circle." "Wait, wait," Victor rattled on "In a minute— " "Try something different," counseled Eddie.

"Janus!" said Victor.

The parrot opened its beak and sneezed. "Ja-nus!" Victor repeated sternly. The parrot gazed pensively out of the window. "There's no letter "R".

"Possible," said Victor. "Let's try.. Nevstr-r-uev!"

"Pr-ressing maneuver!" said the parrot "Wizar-rd! Wizar-rd! Kr-rib transmitting!"

"That is not a pirate's parrot," said Eddie.

"Ask him about the corpse," I said.

"Corpse," Victor said reluctantly.

"Bur-rial cer-remony! Temporal restriction! Or-ration! Or-ration!Cr-rap! Work! Work!"

"He must have had some curious owners," said Roman "What do we do now?"

"Victor," said Eddie, "I think he's using space terminology. Try something simple, routine."

"Hydrogen bomb," said Victor.

The parrot lowered its head and cleaned its beak with a claw.

"Tractor," said Victor.

The parrot remained silent.

"It doesn't work," said Roman.

"Devil take it!" said Victor. "I can't think of a single everyday item with an "R". The parrot looked at Victor out of one eye. "Kor-rneev, r-request!"

"What?" asked Victor. For the first time in my life I saw Victor at a loss for words.

"Kor-rneev r-rude! R-rude! Great worker! R-rare rrude! Dr-roll!"

We giggled. Victor looked at us and said vengefully, "Oira-Oira!"

"Elder-ny! Elder-rly!" the parrot responded readily "Cheer-rful! R-reached."

"Something isn't right," said Roman.

"Why not right?" said Victor. "It's very much to the point. Privalov!"

"Ar-rtles Pr-roject! Pr-imitive! Hard wor-rker!"

"Fellows, he knows us all," said Eddie.

"Wor-rkers!" responded the parrot. "Or-rain pepper-r! Zer-ro! Zer-ro! Gr-avitation!"

"Amperian!" Victor said hurriedly.

"Cr-rematorium! Pr-remature r-rupture!" said the parrot, thought some, and added, "Amper-re— meter!"

"Dissociated nonsense," said Eddie.

"There is no such thing as dissociated nonsense," Roman said pensively. Victor snapped the catch and opened the dictaphone. "The tape has run out," he said. "Too bad."

"You know what," I said. "I think it would be simpler to ask Janus. What sort of parrot this one is, where it is from, and in general— "

"And who is the one to ask?" inquired Roman.

No one responded. Victor suggested listening to the tape again. At the very first words from the dictaphone, the parrot flew to Victor's shoulder and sat there listening with evident interest, making comments such as, "Dr-ramba ignor-res ur-ranium," "Cor-rect," and "Kor-rneev r-rude!"

When the recording was finished, Eddie said, "In principle, you could compose a lexicon and analyze it on the machine. But this and that is clear even now. In the first place, he knows us all. That's astonishing in itself.

It means that he's heard our names many times. In the second place, he knows about robots. And about rubidium. By the way, where is rubidium used?"

"In our Institute," said Roman, "it certainly is'nt used at all."

"It's something like sodium," said Korneev.

"All right for rubidium," I said. "But how does he know about lunar craters?"

"Why lunar in particular?"

"Do we call mountains "Well, right off the bat there's the Arizona crater, and also, a crater is not a mountain, but a hole."

"Tempor-ral r-rip!" the parrot said.

"He has the strangest terminology," said Eddie. "In no way can I classify it as general

usage."

"Yes," agreed Victor. "If the parrot is always with Janus, then Janus busies himself with strange matters."

"Str-range or-rbital tr-ransfer!"

"Janus is not involved in space," said Roman. "I would know."

"Maybe he was previously."

"Not previously either."

"Robots of some kind," Victor said sorrowfully "Craters why craters?"

"Perhaps Janus reads science-fiction," I offered.

"Aloud? To a parrot?"

"Mmm, yes....

"Venera!" said Victor, addressing the parrot "R-ruinous cr-raze!" said the parrot. It grew thoughtful, then elucidated, "Cr-rashed. Fr-ruitlessly!"

Roman got up and paced up and down the laboratory. Eddie put his cheek down on the table and closed his eyes.

"How did he appear here?" I asked.

"Same as yesterday," said Roman. "From Janus's laboratory."

"You saw it yourself?"

"Uhuh."

"I don't understand one thing," I said. "Did he or didn't he die?"

"And how would we know?" said Roman. "I'm not a veterinarian. And Victor is not an ornithologist. And, in general, this may not even be a parrot."

"What then could it be?"

"How would I know?"

"This could be an complex involved hallucinatory induction," said Eddie without opening his eyes.

"Induced how?"

I pressed my eyeball with a finger and looked at the parrot. The parrot image split.

"It splits," I said. "It's not an hallucination."

"I said— 'an complex hallucination,'" reminded Eddie.

I pressed on both eyes and was temporarily blinded.

"Here's what," said Korneev. "I declare that we are dealing with a suspension of the law of cause and effect. Therefore, there is but one conclusion— it's all an hallucination and we should all get up, get in line, and depart, singing, to a psychiatrist. Form a line!"

"I won't go," said Eddie. "I have one more idea."

"What?"

"I won't say."

"Why?"

"You'll beat me."

"We'll beat you if you don't."

"So beat me."

"You don't have any idea," said Victor. "You are just imagining it. Off to the psychiatrist."

The door creaked and Janus Poluektovich came in from the hall.

"So," he said. "How do you do!"

We stood up. He went around and shook each of us by the hand in turn.

"Dear Photon," he said, seeing the parrot. "He is not bothering you, Roman Petrovich?"

"Bothering?" said Roman "Me? Why would he bother me? He is not bothering me, just the opposite..

"Still, it's every day — " Janus started to say something and suddenly stopped. "What did we discuss yesterday?" he asked, wiping his forehead.

"Yesterday you were in Moscow," said Roman, in a humble tone of voice.

"Ah-h.. yes, yes. Well, all right. Photon— come here."

The parrot flew up, perched on Janus's shoulder, and said in his ear, "Gr-rain, gr-rain! Sugar-r!"

Janus Poluektovich smiled tenderly and went into his laboratory.

We looked stupidly at each other.

"Let's get out of here," said Roman.

"To the psychiatrist! To the psychiatrist," mumbled Korneev ominously, while we walked along the corridor toward his sofa "Into crater Ritchey! Dr-ramba! Sugar-r!"

Chapter 5

Facts are always in plenty— it's fantasy we lack.

D. Blokhintzev

Victor put the containers with the living water down on the floor and we all flopped down on the sofa-translator and lighted up. After some time Roman asked, "Victor, did you turn off the sofa?"

"Yes."

"I keep having this or that nonsense popping into my head."

"I switched it off and blocked it," said Victor. "No, fellows," said Eddie. "And why not hallucination, after all?"

"Who said that it's not an hallucination?" asked Victor. "Didn't I suggest a psychiatrist?"

"When I was courting Maika," said Eddie, "I induced such hallucinations that I was frightened myself."

"What for?" asked Victor.

Eddie thought. "I don't really know," he said. "Probably out of sheer extiement."

"I ask: Why would anyone induce hallucinations in us?" said Victor.

"And then, we are not Maika, either. We are, thank God, magisters. Who can best us? Maybe Janus, maybe Kivrin or Junta. Perhaps Giacomo, too."

"But our Alexander is in the weak side," said Eddie in a diffident tone.

"So what?" I asked. "Am I the only one who is seeing things?"

"As a general proposition, we could run a test," said Victor, in deep thought. "If we had Sasha.. you know — "

"No, no," said I "You will forget that for me. Aren't there other methods? Press on the eyeball. Or give the tape recorder to an uninvolved person. Let him listen, and discover whether there is a recording or not."

The magisters smiled pityingly.

"You make a good programmer, Sasha" said Eddie.

"Sprat!" said Korneev. "An embryo!"

"Yes, my dear Sashenka," sighed Roman, "I can see you can't even imagine what a really detailed, thoroughly induced hallucination is like."

Dreamy expressions suffused the faces of the magisters— evidently sweet memories were evoked in them. I looked at them with envy. They were smiling, shutting their eyes in concentration. They were winking at an imaginary someone.

Then Eddie said suddenly, "Orchids bloomed for her all winter. They smelled of the sweetest scent I could think of."

Victor came out of his trancelike state. "Berkeleyans!" he said.

"Unwashed solipsists! «I dislike what I don't think I feel!»

"Yes," said Roman. "An hallucination is not a fit object of discussion. It's too simple. We are not children or old wives. I don't wish to be an agnostic. What was that idea you had, Eddie?"

"I had? Ah, yes, there was one. Also a primitive one, basically. Matrixats."

"Hmm," Roman said dubiously.

"And how's that?" I asked.

Eddie explained reluctantly that besides the doubles with which I was familiar, there also were matrixats— absolutely accurate copies of people and objects. In contradistinction to the doubles, the matrixat was identical with the original in structural detail. It was impossible to distinguish one by the usual methods. Special equipment was required and, in general, that was a highly complicated and demanding undertaking. In his own time Balsamo received his magister-academician degree for the proof of the matrixat nature of Philippe Bourbon, known popularly as the "Iron Mask." This matrixat of Louis XIV was created in the secret laboratories of the Jesuits with the aim of seizing the French throne. In our time, matrixats were made by the biostereographic method a-la Richard Segure.

I didn't know then who this Richard Segure was, but I said at once that the matrixat concept could only explain the extraordinary similarity of the parrots. And that's all. For example, it continued to be incomprehensible where yesterday's dead parrot had gone.

"That's true enough," said Eddie. "And I don't insist. Especially since Janus has no connection whatsoever with biostereography."

"There you are," I said more boldly. "In that event it would be better to suggest a trip into the described future. You know? The way Louis Sedlovoi does it."

"And then?" said Komeev, without any special interest

"Janus simply flies into a science-fiction novel, takes a parrot there, and brings him back here. When the parrot dies, he flies to the same page and again... it then becomes understandable why the parrots are similar.

It is one and the same parrot and you can see why it has this science-fiction vocabulary. And furthermore," I continued, feeling that I wasn't doing so badly, "This could also explain why Janus asks the same questions all the time: each time he fears that he has returned on the wrong day... I think I have explained it all quite nicely, no?"

"And is there such a science-fiction novel?" asked Eddie with a show of curiosity.
"With a parrot in it?"

"I don't know," I said honestly, "but there are all kinds of animals in those starships. Cats and dogs and children and, anyway, there is a vast science-fiction literature in the West. You can't read it all..."

"Well, to begin with, a parrot out of Western science-fiction would hardly speak Russian," said Roman "But the main point is that it's altogether incomprehensible how these cosmic parrots— even granted they come from Soviet science fiction — could be acquainted with Korneev, Privalov, and Oira-Oira..."

"I'm not even mentioning the fact," said Victor lazily, "that it's one thing to transport a real material body into a world of ideas, but quite another to transport an idea-world body into the real world. I doubt that there is an author who created a parrot image suitable for transference into the material world."

I was reminded of the semitransparent inventors and couldn't find a rejoinder.

"However," Victor continued charitably, "our Sasha here is exhibiting definite signs of promise. One feels a certain noble madness in his ideas."

"Janus wouldn't incinerate an ideal parrot," said Eddie with conviction. "An ideal parrot cannot even rot."

"And why, anyway," Roman said suddenly, "why are we so inconsistent? Why Sedlovoi? Why should Janus repeat Sedlovoi's activities? Janus has a line of investigation. Janus has his own area of problems. Janus involves himself in the investigation of parallel dimensions. Let's take that as a point of departure."

"Let's," I said.

"Do you think that Janus was successful in establishing communications with some parallel dimension?" asked Eddie.

"Communications he established them some time ago. Why not suppose that he has gone further? Why not suppose that he is now working on the transfer of material bodies? Eddie is right. There must be matrixats, because the guarantee of complete identity is absolutely necessary. The transfer conditions are selected on the basis of the experimental situation. The first two transfers were unsuccessful: the parrots died. Today the experiment was apparently successful..."

"Why do they speak Russian?" asked Eddie. "And why, again, does the parrot have such a vocabulary?"

"It means that a Russia exists there, too," said Roman. "But there they are already mining rubidium in Ritchey crater."

"It's all too far-fetched," said Victor. "Why parrots in particular? Why not dogs or guinea pigs? Why not just tape recorders, in the final analysis? Also, how do these parrots know that Oira-Oira is old, and that Korneev is an excellent worker?"

"Rude," I prompted.

"Rude, but excellent. And where, after all, did the dead parrot disappear?"

"You know what?" said Eddie. "This won't do. We are working like dilettantes. Like the authors of amateur letters: now two years that there are underground thumps in my basement. Please explain how they originate! We need a systematic approach. Where is your paper, Vitya? We'll write it down at once."

So we wrote it all down in Eddie's beautiful handwriting.

In the first place we took it as a postulate that what was happening was not an hallucination; otherwise the whole thing would be dull. Next we formulated questions which the sought-for-hypotheses would have to answer.

The questions were divided into two groups: the "parrot" group and the "Janus" group. The latter was introduced at the insistence of Roman and Eddie, who declared that they sensed, with their innermost innards, a connection between the idiosyncrasies of the parrot and of Janus. They could not answer Korneev's question as to the physical meaning of the concepts "innards" and "sensed," but underlined that Janus himself presented a most curious subject for investigation, and, also, that an apple doesn't fall far from the apple tree. Inasmuch as I had no opinion of my own, they were in the majority and the final list of questions looked like this.

Why did parrots number one, two, and three, observed on the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth respectively, look so much alike that we assumed them, in the beginning, to be one and the same?

Why did Janus burn the first parrot, and also probably the one before number one (number zero) and of which only a feather remained?

Where did the feather go?

Where did the second (expired) parrot go?

How to account for the strange vocabularies of the second and third parrots?

How to explain that the third parrot knew us all, although we had seen it for the first time?

("Why and of what did the parrots die?" I would have added, but Korneev growled, "Why and for what reason is a bluish color the first sign of poisoning?" — and my question was not included.)

What did Janus and the parrots have in common?

Why did Janus not remember with whom and about what he conversed on the previous day.

What happened to Janus every midnight?

Why did Janus-U have the strange habit of talking in the future tense, while nothing of the sort had been observed with Janus-A?

Why, finally, were there two of them, and whence, actually, came the belief that Janus Poluektovich was one person in two manifestations?

After that we thought laboriously for some time, constantly consulting the list. I kept hoping that a noble madness would again descend upon me, but my thoughts scattered, and the more I thought, the more I tended to the viewpoint of Sanya Drozd: that in this Institute, anything at all, and worse than that, happened regularly. I understood that this cheap skepticism was simply the result of my ignorance of and unfamiliarity with the categories of thought associated with a changed world, but I couldn't help it. All that had happened, I reasoned, was truly remarkable only if one considered the three or four parrots as being one and the same. They were actually so close in their resemblance that at first I had been led astray. That was only natural. I was a mathematician, I respected numbers, and their coincidence, especially of six digits, was automatically associated by me with the coincidence of the numbered object. However, it was clear that it could not have been one and the same parrot. In that case the law of cause and effect would have had to be abrogated, and I was not about to renounce that law for the sake of some scruffy parrots, some of which had already expired. But if it was not the same parrot, then the whole problem became more shallow. All right, then, the numbers coincided. Then again, someone had thrown out the corpse unbeknown to us. What else was there? The vocabulary? So what about the vocabulary... ? For sure there was a very simple explanation. I was about ready to give a speech on this theme when Victor suddenly said, "Fellows, I think I am beginning to see!"

We didn't say a word, we only turned toward him in a simultaneous rush.

Victor got up.

"It's as simple as a pancake," he said. "It is trivial. It is flat and banal. It's not even of sufficient interest to converse about."

We were getting up slowly. I had the same feeling as in reading the last pages of a gripping mystery novel. All my skepticism somehow evaporated instantly.

"Countermotion!" stated Victor. Eddie sat down.

"Countermotion?" said Roman "Let's see - aha..." He twisted his fingers "So - uh-uh and -if so? Yes, it's understandable why he knows us all —"

Roman made a wide welcoming gesture. "It means they come from there."

"And that's why he asks what he talked about yesterday," Victor picked up, "and the science-fiction vocabulary, too!"

"Will you wait!" I howled. The last page of the mystery was written in Arabic. "Hold it! What countermotion?"

"No," said Roman with regret, and at once you could tell by Victor's expression that countermotion wouldn't work out. "It doesn't fit," said Roman. "It's like a motion picture... Imagine a motion picture..."

"What motion picture?!" I yelled. "Help!"

"Movies in reverse," explained Roman. "Do you understand? Countermotion."

"Dog crap," said Victor, all upset, and lay down on the sofa with his nose in his crossed arms.

"True enough, it doesn't fit," said Eddie, also crushed. "Don't get excited, Sasha: it

doesn't work out anyway. Countermotion is simple movement in time in the opposite direction. Like a neutrino. But the problem is that if the parrot was a countermover, he'd be flying backward and instead of dying he'd be coming alive. -- But, generally, it's a good idea. A parrot-countermover would indeed know something about space. He would be living from the future and into the past. And a countermoving Janus could not, in fact, know what happened in our "yesterday", because it would be his "tomorrow".

"That's the point," said Victor. "That's what I thought: why did the parrot say that Oira-Oira was so cleverly and in detail foretell, on occasion, what would happen on the next day. Do you remember the incident on the polygon, Roman? It all suggested strongly that they were from the future "Listen. Is it really possible— this countermotion?" I said.

"Theoretically it is possible," said Eddie. "After all, half the matter in the universe is moving in the opposite direction in time. Practically no one has worked in that field."

"Who needs it, and who could stand it?" Victor said gloomily.

"Granted, it would be a wonderful experiment," noted Roman.

"Not an experiment, but a self-sacrifice," growled Victor "Whatever you may think, I feel there is something involving countermotion in all this. — I feel it in my innards."

"Ah, yes, the innards!" said Roman and we all were quiet.

While they were silent, I was feverishly adding up all the practical evidence. If countermotion was theoretically possible then theoretically the suspension of the law of cause and effect was also possible. Actually, the abrogation of the law was not involved as it remained in effect separately both for the normal world and for the world of the countermover. — And this meant that one could still postulate that there were not three or four parrots, but only one and the same. What results? On the morning of the tenth it was lying dead in the petri dish. Afterward it was burned to ashes and scattered on the wind. Nonetheless, on the morning of the eleventh it was again alive. Not only not burned to ashes, but whole and unhurt. True, it expired in the middle of the day and again wound up in the dish. This was devilishly important! I felt it was devilishly important — the petri dish — the consistency of place — on the twelfth the parrot was again alive and begged for sugar. — This was not countermotion, it was not a film running backward, but there was something of countermotion in it... Victor was right. — For the countermover the sequence of events was: the parrot lives, the parrot dies, the parrot is burned. From our point of view, if details were discarded, it came out exactly in reverse: the parrot is burned, the parrot dies, the parrot lives. — It's as though the film had been cut in three places and was shown with the third piece first, then the second, and finally the first piece. — There were some kinds of breaks of discontinuity — discontinuity interruption — points of discontinuity.

"Fellows," I said, my voice feeble. "Must countermotion be necessarily continuous?" For a while they did not react. Eddie smoked, blowing clouds at the ceiling, Victor lay motionless on his stomach, and Roman stared at me vacuously. Then his eyes widened.

"Midnight!" he said in a fearsome voice.

They all jumped up.

It was as though I had just driven in a decisive goal in a championship soccer game. They were all over me, smacking me on my cheeks, they pounded me on my neck and shoulders, they threw me on the sofa and fell down themselves.

"Genius," howled Eddie.

"What a head," roared Roman.

"And here I thought we had an imbecile in you!" added the rude Korneev.

Then we quieted down and everything proceeded as smooth as butter. First Roman announced, out of a clear blue sky, that now he understood the mystery of the Tunguska meteorite. He desired to impart it to us at once and we concurred gladly, paradoxical as this might sound. We were not in any hurry to approach that which intrigued us the most. No, we were in no hurry whatsoever! We were gourmets.

We did not attack the delicacies. We inhaled the aroma, we rolled up our eyes and smacked our lips, we rubbed our hands, we stalked around, we anticipated....

"Let us finally shed a true light," began Roman in an ingratiating tone, "on the snarled problem of the Tungus marvel. Prior to us, this problem has been tackled by persons absolutely devoid of imagination. All these comets, antimatter meteorites, auto-exploding nuclear ships, various cosmic clouds, and quantum generators— it's all too banal, and consequently far from the truth. As for me, the Tungus meteorite was always the ship of cosmic wanderers and I always supposed that it could never be found on the site of the explosion simply because it was long gone. Until today, I thought that the fall of the Tungus meteorite was not the landing of a ship, but its departure. And even this roughed-out theory explained a great deal. The concept of discrete countermotion allows us to finish this problem once and for all.

"What did happen on the thirtieth of June, 1908, in the region of Podkamennaya Tunguska? About the middle of July of the same year, the ship of the aliens entered circumsolar space. But they were not the simple, artless aliens of science-fiction novels. They were countermovers, my friends. People who had arrived in our world from another universe where time flows in the opposite direction of ours. As a result of the mutual interaction of the opposite time flows, they had become converted from ordinary countermovers, who perceived our universe as a film running backward, into countermovers of the discrete type. The nature of such discreteness does not concern us at this time. What is of significance is another aspect of the matter. The important thing is that in our universe life for them became subject to a definite rhythmic cycle.

"If you assume for the sake of simplicity that their unit cycle was equal to an Earth day, then their existence would look like this from our point of view. On the first of July, let's say, they live, work, and eat just as we do. But exactly at, say, midnight, they and all their equipment pass not into the second of July, as we ordinary mortals do, but into the very start of June the thirtieth; that is, one moment forward and two days backward, if you consider it from our viewpoint. Exactly the same way, at the end of June thirtieth, they pass not into the first of July but into the very beginning of June the twenty-ninth. And so forth.

"Finding themselves in close proximity to Earth, our countermovers discovered to their amazement, assuming they had not discovered it previously, that the Earth was performing strange leaps in its orbit, which leaps made astrogation extremely difficult. Further, finding themselves above the Earth on the first of July, according to our calendar, they observed a huge fire in the very center of the gigantic Eurasian continent, whose smoke they had previously seen— on the second, third, and so on of July in our time. The cataclysm in itself interested them, but their scientific curiosity was thoroughly aroused, when on the morning of the thirtieth of June— in our time-frame— they noticed that there was not even a vestige of any fire at all and a serene sea of green taiga was stretching below them. The intrigued captain ordered a landing in the very same place where he had observed the day before— in his time-frame, and with his own eyes— the epicenter of the fiery catastrophe. From that

time on everything proceeded as expected. Relays clicked, screens flickered, planetary engines (in which k-gamma-plasmoin was exploding) roared."

"How's that again?" asked Victor.

"K-gamma-plasmoin. Or, say, mu-delta-ionoplast. The ship wrapped in flames fell into the taiga, and, naturally, ignited it. It was precisely this scene which was observed by Karelinsk peasants and other people, who subsequently entered history as eyewitnesses. The fire was awful. The countermovers looked tentatively outside, were intimidated and decided to wait it out behind their fire-resistant screens and alloys. Until midnight they listened with trepidation to the fierce roaring and crackling of the flames, and exactly at midnight everything became still. And no wonder. The countermovers entered their new day—the twenty-ninth of June on our calendar. The courageous captain, with infinite precautions, decided about two hours later to exit the ship and saw magnificent conifers calmly swaying in the brilliant light of his searchlights. He was immediately subjected to attack by clouds of bloodsucking insects, known as mosquitoes and midges in our terminology."

Roman stopped to catch his breath and looked around at us. We liked it very much. We anticipated, how, in the same way, we would crack open the mystery of the parrot.

"The subsequent fate of the countermover wanderers," continued Roman, "should be of no interest to us. It may be that, on about the fifteenth of June, they quietly and noiselessly, using non-inflammatory alpha-beta-gamma-anti-gravitation this time, took off from the peculiar planet and went home. Maybe they all perished, poisoned by mosquito saliva, and their cosmic ship remained stuck on our planet, sinking into the abyss of time, and the Silurian Sea, where trilobites crawled over its wreck. Neither is it impossible that sometime in 1906 or possibly 1901 a taiga hunter may have stumbled upon it and told his friends about it for a long time afterward. They in turn, even as they should, didn't believe him worth a damn."

"In concluding my modest presentation, I will permit myself to express my sympathy for the courageous explorers who attempted in vain to discover something worthwhile in the region of Podkamennaya Tunguska. Mesmerized by the obvious, they were interested only in what happened in the taiga after the explosion and none of them were interested in what had happened before. Dixi."

Roman coughed to clear his throat and drank a mug of the living water.

"Does anybody have any questions for the lecturer?" inquired Eddie. "No questions? Fine! Let us revert to the parrots. Who is asking for the floor?"

Everybody asked for the floor. And everyone started speaking. Even Roman, who was slightly hoarse. We tore the list with questions out of each other's hands and crossed out one question after another, so that, in less than half an hour, there was constructed a thoroughly clear and scrupulously detailed picture of the observed events.

In 1841, in the family of a landlord of moderate means, who was also a reserve lieutenant in the army, by the name of Poluekt Chrisanovitch Nevstruev, there was born a son. He was named Janus, in honor of a distant relative by the name of Janus Poluektovich Nevstruev, who had accurately predicted the sex and also the day and even the hour of the infant's birth. This relative, a quiet, retiring old man, moved to the reserve lieutenant's estate soon after the Napoleonic invasion and lived in the guest house, devoting himself to scientific endeavors. He was somewhat peculiar, as is appropriate for a scientist, with many idiosyncrasies, but became attached to his godson and didn't leave him for a minute, constantly feeding him knowledge of

mathematics, chemistry, and other sciences. It could be said that there was not a single day in the life of the younger Janus without Janus the elder, and it was probably due to this that he didn't notice what was a subject of wonder to others: that the old man not only grew no older, but to the contrary, became apparently stronger and more vigorous. Toward the end of the century the old Janus introduced the younger into the final mysteries of analytical, relativistic, and general magic. They continued to live and work side by side, taking part in all the wars and revolutions, suffering with stoic courage all the reverses of history, until they came finally to the Scientific Research Institute of Thaumaturgy and Spellcraft.

To be honest, this whole introductory part was entirely a fictional invention. About the past of the Januses we knew but one fact: that J.P. Nevstruev was born on the seventh of March, 1841. How and when J.P. Nevstruev became the director of the Institute was completely unknown to us. We didn't even know who was the first to guess, and gave away, the fact that Janus-U and Janus-A were one and the same man in two persons. I learned of this from Oira-Oira and believed it because I couldn't understand it. Oira-Oira learned it from Giacomo and also believed because he was young and exalted. A charwoman told it to Korneev and Korneev then decided that the fact itself was so trivial as not to merit any examination. Eddie, on the other hand, heard Savaof Baalovich and Feodor Simeonovich talking about it. Eddie was then a junior laboratory assistant and generally believed in everything except God.

And so, the past of the Januses appeared extremely hazy to us. But the future we knew quite accurately Janus-A, who was now busier with the affairs of the Institute than with science, would, in the near future, become entranced with the idea of practical countermotion. He would devote his life to it. He would acquire a friend— a small green parrot named Photon, which would be a gift to him from famous Russian cosmonauts. It would occur on the nineteenth of May of either 1973 or 2073— that's how the ingenious Eddie deciphered the mysterious number 190573 on the ring. Most likely, soon after that date, Janus would attain his goal and convert into countermovers both himself and the parrot, who would, of course, be sitting on his shoulder begging for sugar. Precisely at that moment, if we understood anything at all about counter-motion, future mankind would be

deprived of Janus Poluektovich; but in return, the past would acquire two Januses, since Janus-A would turn into Janus-U and would begin to glide backward on the axis of time. They would meet every day, but it would never enter the mind of Janus-A to suspect anything out of the ordinary because he had become accustomed, from his cradle, to the kindly wrinkled face of his relative and teacher. And every night, exactly at midnight, exactly at zero hours, zero-zero minutes, zero-zero seconds, and zero-zero tertia*, local time, Janus-A would transit, as we all do from today's night into tomorrow morning, while Janus-U and his parrot, in that same moment equal to a micro quantum of time, would transit from our present right into our yesterday's morning.

That was why the parrots one, two, and three were so similar: they were simply one and the same parrot. Poor old Photon. Perhaps he had been overcome by old age or maybe he had caught a cold in the draft and had flown to his favorite balance in Roman's laboratory to die. He died and his aggrieved owner made him a fiery funeral and scattered his ashes to the wind, doing so because he didn't realize how dead countermovers behave. Or perhaps precisely because he did know. Naturally, we viewed this as a movie with reversed sections.

On the ninth, Roman finds the remaining feather in the furnace. Photon's corpse is

already gone; it was burned tomorrow. On the morrow, the tenth, Roman finds it in the petri dish. Janus-U finds the corpse and burns it then and there in the furnace. The feather, which escaped cremation, remains in the furnace to the end of the day; and at midnight jumps into the ninth. On the morning of the eleventh, Photon is alive, although already sickly. The parrot expires before our eyes under the scales (on which it will be so happy to sit now) and the simple-souled Sanya Drozd puts it in the dish, where the deceased will lie till midnight, will jump into the morning of the tenth, will be found there by Janus-U, burned and scattered to the winds, but its feather will remain to be found by Roman. On the morning of the twelfth, Photon is alive and well and has an interview with Korneev, asking for sugar; but at midnight the bird will jump into the morning of the One-sixtieth of a second eleventh when it will sicken and die, and will be placed in the petri dish; but at midnight it will jump into the morning of the tenth, will be burned and scattered, but a feather will remain behind, which at midnight will jump into the morning of the ninth, will be found by Roman and thrown in the wastebasket. On the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth, and so on, much to our joy, Photon will be happy, talkative, and we'll be spoiling it, feeding it sugar and pepper seeds, while Janus-U will be coming around to inquire whether he is interfering with our work. Employing the word-association technique, we should be able to learn a great many curious facts from him concerning the cosmic expansion of mankind and, doubtlessly, our own personal futures.

When we arrived at this point in our discussion, Eddie suddenly became gloomy and announced that he didn't appreciate Photon's insinuations about his, Amperian's, untimely demise. Korneev, to whom any empathetic tact was foreign, remarked that any magus death was inevitably untimely and that nonetheless we'd all get to it sooner or later. Anyway, Roman said, it was possible the parrot loved him more than anyone else and remembered only his death. Eddie understood that he had a chance to die later than all of us and his mood improved.

However, the talk about death channeled our thoughts into a dismal direction. All of us — except, of course, Korneev — began to feel sorry for Janus-U. Truly, if one thought about it, his situation was horrible. First, he represented an example of tremendous scientific selflessness, because he was practically deprived of the possibility to exploit the fruits of his labor. Further, he had no bright future whatsoever. We were moving toward a world of reason and brotherhood, and he, with each passing day, went toward Bloody Nicholas, serfdom, the shooting on Sennaya Square, and— who knew?— maybe toward Arakcheevshchina, Bironovshchina, oprichnina . And somewhere in the depths of time, on the waxed parquet floor of the Saint Petersburg Academic de Science, he would be met on a fine day by a colleague in a powdered wig— a colleague who for a whole week had been scrutinizing him peculiarly — and who now would exclaim in surprise, throw up his hands, and mutter with horror in his eyes, "Herr Neffstroueff! How can it be? Fwhen yesterday they definitely printed in "Fedomosti" that you had died from strok..." And he would have to tell of a twin brother and false reporting, knowing full well and understanding only too correctly what that conversation meant.

"Cut it out," said Korneev "You are too maudlin. In return for all that he knows the future. He's been there, where we still have a long way to go. And he may know exactly when we will all die."

"That's a completely different matter," Eddie said sadly.

"It's hard on the old man," said Roman. "See to it that you treat him more gently and warmly in the future. Especially you, Victor. You are always rude to him."

"So why does he always pester me?" Victor hit back.

"So now you know why he pesters you, and you can conduct yourself decently."

Victor scowled and started to examine the list of questions with a great show of concentration.

"We have to explain everything in more detail to him," I said.

"Everything we know. We have to predict his near future to him constantly."

"Yes, devil take it!" said Roman. "He broke his leg this winter, on the ice."

"It has to be prevented," I said decisively.

"What?" asked Roman. "Do you understand what you are saying? It has been healed for a long time..."

"But it has not been broken yet— for him," contradicted Eddie.

For several minutes he tried to comprehend the whole thing.

Victor said suddenly, "Wait a minute! And how about this? One question, my dear chums, has not been crossed out."

"Which?"

"Where did the feather go?"

"What do you mean, where?" said Roman. "It transited into the eighth. And on the eighth, I had coincidentally used the furnace to melt an alloy.

"And so what does that mean?"

"But I did throw it into the wastebasket. – I did not see it on the eighth, seventh, sixth hmm... Where did it go?"

"The charwoman threw it out," I offered.

"As a matter of fact it would be interesting to cogitate on that," said Eddie. "Assume that no one incinerated it. How should it appear through the centuries?"

"There are items of more interest," said Victor. "For instance, what happens to Janus's shoes when he wears them to the day they were manufactured at the shoe factory? And what happens to the food he eats for supper? And in general..."

But we were too tired to continue. We argued a little more, and then Sanya Drozd came along, evicted us from the sofa, switched on his radio, and got around to scrounging for two rubles.

"I need some," he droned.

"We don't have any," we replied.

"So maybe it's next to last you have; can't you let me have some."

Further discussion became impossible and we decided to go and have dinner.

"After all is said and done," said Eddie, "our hypothesis is not so fantastic. Perhaps the fate of Janus is even more astounding."

That would be quite possible, we thought, and departed for the dining room.

I ran in to Electronics to let them know that I'd gone to have dinner. In the hall I bumped into Janus-U, who looked at me attentively, smiled for some reason, and asked if we had met yesterday.

"No, Janus Poluektovich," I said. "We did not see each other yesterday. Yesterday you were not at the Institute. Yesterday, Janus Poluektovich, you flew to Moscow first thing in the morning."

"Ah yes," he said. "It had slipped my mind."

He was smiling at me in such an affectionate way, that I made up my mind. It was a little presumptuous of me, of course, but I knew for sure that Janus Poluektovich was kindly disposed toward me lately, and this meant that no unpleasantness could occur between us now. And I asked softly, looking around cautiously, "Janus Poluektovich, may I be permitted to ask you one question?"

Raising his eyebrows, he regarded me thoughtfully for some time, and then, apparently remembering something, said, "Please do. One question only?"

I understood that he was right. It all wouldn't fit into just one question. Would there be a war? Would I amount to something? Would the recipe for universal happiness be found? Would the last fool die someday? I said, "Could I come to see you tomorrow morning?"

He shook his head, and replied, with what seemed to be a touch of malevolence, "No. It is quite impossible, Tomorrow morning, Alexander Ivanovich, you will be called by the Kitezhgrad plant, and I will have to approve your trip."

I felt stupid. There was something degrading about this determinism, delivering me, an independent person with free will, to totally defined steps and actions outside of my control. And it was not a question of whether I wanted to go to Kitezhgrad or not. It was a question of inevitability. Now I could not die or get sick, or act up ("up to getting fired"). I was fated, and for the first time, I grasped the terrible meaning of this word. I had always known that it was bad to be fated to execution or blindness, for example. But to be fated to the love of the most wonderful girl in the world, to a round-the-world voyage, and to the Kitezhgrad trip (where, incidentally, I was spoiling to go for the past three months) also proved to be most unsettling. The knowledge of the future now presented itself to me in an entirely new light.

"It's bad to read a good book from its end, isn't it?" said Janus Poluektovich, watching me frankly "As to your questions, Alexander Ivanovich... try to understand, Alexander Ivanovich, that a single future does not exist for everyone. They are many, and each one of your actions creates one of them. You will come to understand that," he said convincingly. "Very definitely, you will understand it."

Later I did indeed understand it.

But that's really an altogether different story.

Epilogue and Commentary

A short epilogue and commentary
by the head of the SRIWaT computing laboratory,
junior scientist A.I. Privalov.

The subject sketches about life in the Scientific Research Institute of Thaumaturgy and Spellcraft are not, in my view, realistic in the strict sense of the word. Nevertheless they possess certain virtues that favorably distinguish them from the analogous works of G. Perspicaciov and B. Pupilov and consequently permit their recommendation to a wide circle of readers.

First of all it should be noted that the authors were able to perceive the situation and to distinguish that which is progressive in the work of the Institute from the conservative. The sketches do not evoke the kind of irritation that one experiences when reading admiring articles about the hack tricks of Vibegallo or the enraptured transliterations of the irresponsible prognostications from the Department of Absolute Knowledge.

Further, it is a pleasure to note the correct attitude of the authors to the magus as a human being. For them, the magus is not an object of fearful admiration and adulation, but neither is he the irritating film fool, a person out of this world who is constantly losing his glasses, is incapable of punching a hooligan in the face, and reads excerpts from Differential and Integral Equations to the enamoured girl. All this means that the authors had assumed the proper attitude toward their subject. The authors should also be given credit for presenting the Institute environment from the viewpoint of a novice and for not missing the profound correlation between the laws of magic and the laws of administration. As to the shortcomings of the sketches, the preponderant majority of them are the result of the fundamental humanitarian orientation of the authors. Being professional writers, they time and again show a predilection for the so-called artistic verity to the so-called verity of facts. Also, being professional writers, and just as the majority of writers, they are insistently emotional and pitifully ignorant in matters of modern magic. While in no way protesting the publication of these sketches, I feel nevertheless impelled to point out certain concrete errors and inaccuracies.

I. The title of the sketches, it seems to me, does not correspond with their content. Using the title Monday Begins on Saturday, which is indeed a widespread saying among us, the authors apparently wished to state that the magi work without respite even when they are resting. In reality such is almost the case. But it is not evident in the sketches. The authors became excessively entranced by the exotic aspects of our activities and succumbed to the temptation to proffer the more adventurous and exciting episodes. The adventures of the spirit, which constitute the essence of life in any magus, were given almost no expression in the sketches. Of course, I don't include here the last chapter of Part Three, where the authors did attempt to depict the labor of the mind, but based themselves on the ungrateful medium of a rather dilettantish and elementary problem in logic. (Incidentally, I had expounded my viewpoint on this

question to the authors, but they shrugged their shoulders and said, in something of a pique, that I took the sketches too seriously.)

2. The aforementioned ignorance of the problems of magic as a science plays nasty jokes on the authors throughout the entire length of the book. As, for example, in formulating the M.F. Redkin dissertation theme, they admitted fourteen (!) errors. The weighty term "hyperfield," which they obviously liked very much, is inserted improperly into the text over and over again. Apparently it's beyond their ken that the sofa-translator radiates not an M-field, but a Mu-field; that the term "living water" had gone out of usage two centuries ago; that the mysterious apparatus under the name of "aquavitometer" and a computer by the name of "Aldan" do not exist in nature; that the head of a computation laboratory very seldom checks programs — for which purpose there are programmer-mathematicians (of which we have two, whom the authors stubbornly persist in calling girls). The description of materialization exercises in the first chapter of Part Two is done in a repugnant manner: examples of wild terminology that must remain on the conscience of the authors include, "vector magistatum" and "Auers' incantation." The Stokes equation has no bearing whatsoever on materialization and Saturn could in no way be in the constellation of Libra at that time. (This last lapse, particularly, is all the more unforgivable since I was given to understand that one of the authors is a professional astronomer.)¹ The list of these kinds of inaccuracies and incongruities could be extended with no great exertion, but I refrain from doing so, since the authors categorically refused to change a single item. They also refused to expunge the terminology that they did not understand: one said that it was necessary for the ambience, and the other — that it adds color. I was, by the way, forced to agree that the preponderant majority of the readers could not distinguish the correct from the erroneous terminology, and also that no matter what terminology was employed, no reasonable reader would believe it anyway.

3. The pursuit of the above-mentioned artistic verity (as expressed by one of the authors) and character development (as expressed by the other) has led to a considerable distortion of the images of the real people taking part in the story. As a matter of general fact, the authors are inclined toward a certain belittlement of heroes and, consequently, some sort of believability has been achieved by them, possibly only in the case of Vibegallo, and to some extent with Cristobal Junta (I am not counting the episodic projection of the vampire Alfred, who indeed has emerged more successfully than anyone else). For example, the authors assert that Korneev is rude and imagine that the reader can construct an adequate perception of this rudeness for himself. Yes, Korneev is indeed rude. But it is precisely for this reason that Korneev, as described, appears as a "semitransparent inventor" (in the terminology of the authors themselves) as compared with the real Korneev. The same applies to the legendary politeness of E.Amperian. R.P. Oira-Oira is completely incorporeal in the sketches, although in the very period described, he was divorcing his second wife and expected to marry for the third time. The adduced examples are probably adequate to keep the reader from lending too much credence to my own portrayal in the stories.

The authors had requested that I explain certain incomprehensible terms and little-known names encountered in the book. In responding to this request I have encountered definite difficulties. Naturally I do not intend to explain the terminology thought up by the authors ("aquavitometer," "temporal transmission," and the like).

1. True, Boris Strugackij was indeed an astronomer (Translator)

But I don't think it would be of much use to explain the real terminology when it demands extensive specialized knowledge. It is, for instance, impossible to explain the term "hyperfield" to a person who is poorly oriented in the theory of physical vacuum. The term "transvection" is even more pregnant and, furthermore, different schools employ it in different senses. In brief, I have restricted myself to commentaries on those names, terms, and concepts that are, on the one hand, fairly widely known, and on the other, have wide application and specific meaning in our work. Further, I have commented on some words that don't have a direct relationship to magic, but which, in my view, could confound the reader.

GLOSSARY

Afreet: A variation of the jinn. As a rule the afreets are well-preserved doubles of the most famous Arabian generals. At the Institute, they are used by M.M. Kamnoedov in the role of armed security guards, as they are distinguished from other jinns by being highly disciplined. The fire-throwing mechanism of the afreets has not been well investigated and it is hardly likely that anyone will ever study it thoroughly, because nobody needs it.

Acephalus: A congenitally deformed individual without brain or cranium. Typically, acephalus die at birth or a few hours later.

Augurs: Priests in ancient Rome who foretold the future by the flight of birds and their behavior. The great majority of them were conscious swindlers. This applies in considerable measure to the augers in the Institute, although they have now developed new methods.

Basilisk: Mythological monster with the body of a rooster and the tail of a snake, which kills with its gaze. In actuality, an almost extinct lizard covered with feathers and the precursor of the archaeopteryx. Capable of hypnosis. Two exemplars are maintained in the Institute's vivarium.

Beczalel, Leo Ben: A well-known medieval magician, royal alchemist of Emperor Rudolph II.

Brownie: A certain kind of supernatural creature inhabiting each occupied house, according to the imagination of the superstitious. There is nothing supernatural about brownies. They are either magi who have sunk to the lowest depths and are not amenable to reeducation, or mixed breeds resulting from the unions of gnomes with domestic animals. At the Institute they are under the administration of Kamnoedov and are used as unskilled labor.

Cadaver: q.v. zombie

Danaides: In Greek mythology the criminal daughters of King Danaus, who killed their husbands at his behest. At first, the Danaides were sentenced to fill a bottomless vessel with water. Subsequently, following an appeal, the court took into account that they were married under duress. This mitigating circumstance permitted their transfer to a somewhat less nonsensical occupation. At the Institute they now break up asphalt wherever they themselves had recently laid it.

Demon, Maxwell's: An important element in the mental experiment of the great English physicist Maxwell. Intended for an assault on the second law of thermodynamics. In Maxwell's mental experiment, the demon is placed next to an aperture in a dividing partition between the two compartments of a vessel filled with moving molecules. The work of the demon consists of allowing fast molecules to move from one compartment into the other, and to slam the door shut in the face of slow molecules. The ideal demon is thus able to create a very high temperature on one side and a very low temperature on the other side of the partition, without doing any work,

realizing a perpetual engine of the second order. But only very recently, and only in our Institute, has it been possible to find and put such demons to work.

Dracula, Count: The celebrated Hungarian vampire of the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. Never was a count. Committed a great many crimes against humanity. Was caught by the hussars and ceremoniously pierced with an aspen stake in the presence of a large assemblage of people. Distinguished for a tremendous power of survival: the autopsy disclosed one and one half kilograms of silver bullets in his body.

Ghast: q.v. ghoul

Ghoul: q.v. vampire

Gian Ben Gian: Either an ancient inventor or an ancient warrior. His name is always associated with the concept of a shield and is not encountered separately. (For example, it is mentioned in *The Temptation of St. Anthony* by Flaubert.)

Gnome: Found in West European tales — an ugly dwarf guarding underground treasures. I have spoken with some of the gnomes. They are in fact ugly and are in fact dwarfs, but as to treasures, they have never heard of them. The majority of gnomes are forgotten and considerably desiccated doubles.

Golem: One of the first cybernetic robots, made of clay by Leo Ben Beczalel. (See, for example, the Czech comedy *The Emperor's Baker*; its golem bears a good resemblance to a real one.)

Malleus Maleficarum: An ancient manual of instructions on interrogation of the third degree. Was developed and applied by the clerics especially for exposing witches. Has been rescinded in modern times as obsolete.

Incubus: A variation of resuscitated corpses, which have a tendency to enter into wedlock with the living. Do not exist. In theoretical magic the term "incubus" is used in an entirely different sense; as a measure of the negative energy of a living organism. Incunable: name for the first printed books. Some of them are distinguished by their truly enormous size.

Jinn: Evil spirit of Arabian and Persian myths. Almost all the jinns are doubles of King Solomon and the magi of his times. Used in military and political hooliganism applications. Distinguished by a repulsive character, gall, and total absence of a sense of gratitude. Their ignorance and aggressive behavior is so unbearable that all are now imprisoned. Widely used in modern magic as test specimens. In particular, E. Amperian determined, as exemplified in thirteen jinns, the quantity of evil that a nasty ignorant fool can inflict on a society.

Levitation: The ability to fly without any mechanical contrivances. The levitation of birds, bats, and insects is well known.

Oracle: In the belief of the ancients, a means of communication by the gods with men:

the flight of birds (used by augurs), the rustling of trees, the dreams of a prophet, and so forth. Also the place where prophecies were made. "The Solovetz Oracle" is a small dark room. It has been planned for several years to install a large computer there for minor prophecies.

Phantom: A ghost, a spook. In modern view it is a condensation of necrobiotic information. Phantoms excite a superstitious horror, though they are entirely harmless. In the Institute they are used for the verification of historic truth, although they cannot be legal witnesses.

Pythia: A priestess, a prophetess in ancient Greece. Prophesied after breathing poisonous fumes. Pythias do not practice at the Institute. They smoke a great deal and restrict themselves to the study of the general theory of prediction.

Ramapithecus: In contemporary view, the immediate precursor of pithecanthropus on the evolutionary ladder.

Segure, Richard: The hero of the phantasmic story "The Mystery of Richard Segure," who discovered three dimensional photography.

The Star of Solomon: In world literature, a magical sign in the shape of a six-pointed star, possessing powerful thaumaturgical properties. In the present time, as with most other geometrically based incantations, it has lost its potency and is useful only for frightening the illiterate.

Taxidermist: A stuffer of figures. I recommended this term to the authors because C.J. Junta becomes infuriated when called naturalist.

Tertium: One-sixtieth of a second.

Upanishads: Ancient Hindu commentaries on the four sacred books.

Vampire: Blood-sucking corpse of folklore. In reality, vampires are magi who, for one reason or another, have taken the path of abstract evil. The tried-and-true remedy for them is the wooden stake and bullets cast from native silver. In the text the word is used loosely.

Turnskins: People capable of turning into certain animals: such as wolf (werewolf), fox (kitzune), and the like. For some reason they excite horror in the superstitious. V.P. Korneev, for instance, turned into a rooster when he had a toothache and immediately felt relieved.

Zombi (also Cadaver): Generally speaking, an unliving object: a portrait, statue, idol, scarecrow. (See, for example, Count Cagliostro by A.N. Tolstoi.) One of the first zombies in history was the well-known Galatea, the work of the sculptor Pygmalion. Not used in modern magic. As a rule they are phenomenally stupid, capricious, hysterical, and almost unresponsive to training. In the Institute, unsuccessful doubles and double-like colleagues are sometimes ironically called cadavers.

A. Privalov