

received a Ford Foundation Grant, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and several awards for published work and service to his field of study. Robert A. Maguire died in 2005.

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NIKOLAY GOGOL

Diary of a Madman,
The Government Inspector
and Selected Stories

Translated with Notes by RONALD WILKS
With an Introduction by ROBERT A. MAGUIRE

PENGUIN BOOKS

NEVSKY PROSPEKT

There is nowhere finer than Nevsky Prospekt¹ – at least, not in St Petersburg. It is its very life blood. What brilliance does it lack, this crowning beauty of our capital! I know that not one of her pale-faced government clerks would exchange Nevsky Prospekt for all the blessings of this world. Not only the young fellow of twenty-five, sporting a handsome moustache and a splendidly cut frock-coat, but also the elderly gentleman with white hairs sprouting on his chin and a pate as smooth as a silver dish, is enraptured by Nevsky Prospekt. And as for the ladies! Well, the ladies are even more taken with Nevsky Prospekt. And who would not find it agreeable? The moment you step on to Nevsky Prospekt you are carried away by its gaiety. Even though you may have some urgent, vital work to do, as soon as you step on to Nevsky Prospekt you forget all about any kind of business. It is the one place where people do not appear because they are compelled to, without being driven by necessity or those mercantile interests engulfing all of St Petersburg. And the person you meet on Nevsky Prospekt seems less of an egotist than on Morskaya, Gorokhovaya, Liteynaya, Meshchanskaya and other streets,² where greed, avarice and self-interest distinguish all who walk there or fly past in carriages or droshkies.

Nevsky Prospekt is St Petersburg's principal artery. Here one who resides in the Petersburg or Vyborg³ districts, who has not visited his friend at Peski⁴ or the Moscow Gate for years, can be sure to encounter him. No directory at an information bureau provides such reliable information as Nevsky Prospekt. Mighty Nevsky Prospekt! – sole place of entertainment for the poor

man in St Petersburg. How cleanly its pavements are swept and – my God! – how many feet have left their traces there. Both the muddy, clumsy boot of the discharged soldier under whose very weight the granite appears to crack, and the miniature shoes, as light as a puff of smoke, of the young lady who, like a sunflower to the sun, turns her head towards the glittering shop windows, the rattling sabre of the ambitious ensign that leaves a sharp scratch – everyone displays his own particular strength or weakness. What a bewildering phantasmagoria within one day! How many transformations between dawn and dusk!

Let us begin with early morning, when all St Petersburg smells of hot, freshly baked loaves and is filled with old women in tattered clothes and cloaks making their forays on churches and compassionate passers-by. Then Nevsky Prospekt is well-nigh deserted: stout shopkeepers and their assistants are still slumbering in their holland nightshirts or lathering their noble cheeks or drinking coffee. Beggars gather at the door of a pastry shop where a sleepy Ganymede,⁵ who the previous day had been darting about like a fly, bearing cups of chocolate, emerges broom in hand, tieless, and throws them stale pies and leftovers. Working folk trudge down the streets, occasionally crossed by peasants hurrying to work in boots so caked with lime that even the Yekaterinsky Canal,⁶ famed for its cleanliness, could not wash it off. At this hour of the day it is normally unseemly for ladies to be out walking, since Russian folk like to express themselves in strong language that they would never hear even in the theatre.⁷ Sometimes a drowsy civil servant will plod past, briefcase under arm, if the route to his office lies along Nevsky Prospekt. One can say without hesitation that at this time of day – that is, up to twelve o'clock, Nevsky Prospekt is no one's final destination, merely the means of reaching it. Gradually it becomes filled with people weighed down with their own preoccupations, problems and vexations and who do not give it a moment's thought. Peasants speak of ten copecks or coppers, old men and women wave their arms about, or talk to themselves – occasionally with wild gesticulations – but no one listens to them or laughs at them, with the possible exception

of street urchins in their coarse cotton smocks, racing down Nevsky Prospekt like lightning with empty vodka bottles or newly repaired boots in their hands. At this time you can wear what you like – even if you put on a cap instead of a felt hat, even if your collar sticks out too far above your cravat, no one will take the slightest notice.

At twelve o'clock tutors of all nationalities with their charges in cambric collars descend upon Nevsky Prospekt. English Joneses and French Coqs walk arm-in-arm with the nurslings entrusted to their parental care and, with appropriate gravity, explain to them that shop signs are there to inform people what lies within. Governesses, pale misses and rosy-cheeked Slav maidens walk in stately fashion behind their lissom, fidgety young charges, instructing them not to drop their shoulders and to keep their backs straight. In short, at this hour Nevsky Prospekt becomes a pedagogical Nevsky Prospekt. But as two o'clock approaches, the tutors, pedagogues and children become fewer, until they are finally supplanted by doting papas walking arm-in-arm with their colourfully attired, weak-nerved spouses. Gradually they are joined by all who have completed their fairly important domestic duties – namely, discussing the weather with their doctor, for instance, and the tiny pimple that has sprung up on their nose, inquiring about the health of their horses and their children (who both, incidentally, show remarkable promise) and who have perused a theatre poster or an important announcement in the newspapers about departures and arrivals, finally drinking their cup of coffee or tea. And then they are joined by those whom fate has blessed with the enviable title of official on special commissions and by those who serve in the Foreign Collegium⁸ and are distinguished by the nobility of their occupations and habits. My God! What splendid positions and services there are! How they elevate and delight the soul! But alas! I am not in government service and therefore am denied the pleasure of seeing myself addressed in refined fashion by heads of departments. Everything you meet with on Nevsky Prospekt is remarkable for its decorum: gentlemen in long frock-coats, hands in pockets, ladies in pink, white or pale-blue satin redingotes and modish bonnets. Here you

will encounter unique sidewhiskers, allowed with consummate skill to extend below the cravat; velvety, satiny side-whiskers as black as sable or coal – but alas! – belonging only to officials at the Foreign Collegium. Providence has denied black side-whiskers to civil servants in other departments and they are compelled, to their extreme displeasure, to sport ginger ones instead. Here you will find wondrous moustaches that no pen or brush could portray, moustaches to which the best part of a life has been devoted, the objects of prolonged vigils by day and night, moustaches sprinkled with the most ravishing perfumes and fragrances, anointed with the most precious and rarest kinds of pomade, twisted at night in the finest vellum curl-papers, moustaches towards which their owners display the most touching devotion and which are the envy of every passer-by. The thousands of varieties of hats, dresses, kerchiefs – so wispy and brightly coloured – sometimes held in affection by their owners for two whole days on end, are enough to dazzle anyone walking down Nevsky Prospekt. An entire sea of butterflies seems to have suddenly risen from their flower stalks and is hovering in a shimmering cloud above the black beetles of the male sex. Here you will encounter waists beyond your wildest dreams – slender and narrow, no thicker than the neck of a bottle, at the sight of which you step respectfully to one side for fear of inadvertently nudging them with an impolite elbow. Your heart is overcome with timidity and apprehension, lest by a careless breath you might snap this exquisite creation of nature in two. And the ladies' sleeves you will see on Nevsky Prospekt! Ah – sheer delight! They are rather like two hot-air balloons and it seems the lady might suddenly soar into the air should the gentleman with her fail to hold her down; in fact, it is just as easy and pleasant lifting a lady into the air as raising a glassful of champagne to the lips. Nowhere do people bow so nobly and naturally as on Nevsky Prospekt. Here you will see a unique smile that is the very pinnacle of art, that will sometimes make you melt with pleasure, sometimes make you bow your head and feel lower than grass, or hold it high, making you feel loftier than the Admiralty spire.⁹ Here you will hear people discussing a concert or the weather with extraordinary

refinement and sense of their own importance. Here you will encounter a thousand incredible characters and events. Good heavens! What strange types you will meet on Nevsky Prospekt! Many are those who will not fail to look at your boots on meeting and when you have passed will look around to inspect your coat-tails. To this day I cannot understand why this should be. At first I thought they were bootmakers – but no, far from it. For the most part they are clerks in various departments; many of them can draft a memorandum from one department to the other with consummate skill. Or they are simple people who stroll along or read the paper in pastry shops: in other words, they are normally highly respectable citizens.

At this blessed hour, between two and three o'clock in the afternoon, when everything on Nevsky Prospekt reaches its climax, the finest products of man's genius are most grandly displayed. Someone will sport a dandyish frock-coat with the best beaver collar, another – a handsome Greek nose, a third – superb whiskers, a fourth – a pair of pretty eyes and a wonderful hat, a fifth – a signet ring with seal, ostentatiously worn on the little finger, a sixth – a dainty foot in an enchanting shoe, a seventh – a stunning tie, an eighth – simply astounding moustaches. But on the stroke of three the exhibition is over, the crowd begins to thin out. At three o'clock there is a fresh transformation: spring has suddenly come to Nevsky Prospekt! It is bustling with civil servants in green uniforms. Hungry titular, court and other counsellors¹⁰ try to quicken their pace. Young collegiate registrars, provincial and collegiate secretaries, hasten to make the most of their time and they stroll down Nevsky Prospekt with a dignified air, as if to prove that they had not spent the last six hours cooped up in an office. But the elderly collegiate secretaries, titular and court counsellors walk briskly, with heads bowed: they are disinclined to scrutinize passers-by; as yet they have not torn themselves away from their daily cares, their muddled heads are simply bursting with a whole archive of completed and uncompleted files. For a long time, instead of seeing shop signs, all they see is piles of documents or the plump face of the departmental director.

From four o'clock Nevsky Prospekt is deserted and you are

unlikely to encounter a single government clerk. The odd seamstress might dash out of a shop across Nevsky, box in hand; or the hapless booty of some philanthropic bailiff with nothing in the world but his coarse frieze overcoat; or an eccentric visitor for whom all hours are the same; or a tall, thin Englishwoman with reticule and a little book in her hands; or the occasional thick-bearded Russian workman in his high-waisted denim frock-coat, reduced to scraping a living, his back, legs and head – in fact everything about him in motion – slinking meekly along the pavement; or the occasional humble artisan – but you will meet no one else at this time on Nevsky Prospekt.

The moment dusk descends on the houses and streets, when the night-watchman with a mat on his back climbs his ladder to light the lamps, while engravings that dare not show themselves by day peep out from the lower shop windows – it is then that Nevsky Prospekt springs to life and all is astir. Now comes that mysterious time when the street lamps cast an alluring, magical light over everything. You will meet many young men, mostly bachelors, in warm frock-coats and overcoats. At this time everything suggests a purpose – better, something resembling a purpose and extremely difficult to explain. Everyone's footsteps quicken and generally become very uneven. Long shadows flit along walls and pavement, almost touching the Police Bridge with their heads. Young collegiate registrars, provincial and collegiate secretaries, stroll about for hours on end. But elderly collegiate registrars, titular and court counsellors stay at home for the most part, either because they are married or because their live-in German cooks prepare very tasty dinners for them. Here you will meet those venerable old gentlemen who at two o'clock walked along Nevsky Prospekt with such dignity and amazing elegance. You will see them tearing along just like young collegiate registrars to peep under the bonnet of some lady espied from afar, a lady whose fleshy lips and rouge-plastered cheeks appeal to so many – but above all to those shop assistants, craftsmen and merchants who always wear German coats and who promenaded in large crowds, usually arm-in-arm.

'Stop!' cried Lieutenant Pirogov on such an evening, tugging

at a young man who was walking beside him in tail-coat and cloak. 'Did you see her?'

'Oh yes – wonderful! The image of Perugino's Bianca!'¹¹

'But which one do you mean?'

'Why, the one with the dark hair. And what eyes! God, what eyes! Her whole demeanour, her figure, the cast of her face – miraculous!'

'I'm talking about the blonde who followed her! Well, why don't you go after the brunette, since she attracts you so much?'

'Oh, how can you talk like that?' the young man in tails exclaimed, turning red. 'As if she were one of those women who walk Nevsky at night! She must be a very distinguished lady,' he continued with a sigh. 'Her cloak alone must be worth eighty roubles!'

'You ass!' Pirogov shouted, pushing him in the direction of her bright, billowing cape. 'Hurry up, you silly fool or you'll lose her. I'm going after the blonde!'

The two friends parted.

'We know your type,' Pirogov thought with a smug, self-satisfied smile, convinced that no beauty could resist him.

The young man in tails and cloak, stepping nervously and timidly, went off in the direction of the colourful, billowing cape, at one moment brightly shining as it approached a street lamp, and the next momentarily veiled in darkness as it moved away. His heart pounded and he unconsciously quickened his pace. He dared not think for one moment that he had any claim on the attention of the beauty who was flying into the distance – even less that he should entertain for one moment those lewd thoughts that Lieutenant Pirogov had hinted at: his sole wish was to see the house, to discover the abode of that ravishing creature who seemed to have flown straight from heaven on to Nevsky Prospekt and would surely fly off God knows where. He dashed along so fast that he constantly kept knocking respectable looking, grey-whiskered gentlemen off the pavement.

This young man belonged to the class which constitutes a rather strange phenomenon among us and has as much connection with our regular Petersburger as someone we dream of has with reality. This exceptional class is extremely rare in a city

where everyone is either civil servant, merchant or German craftsman. Our young man was an *artist*. Is that not strange? A St Petersburg artist! An artist in the land of snow, of Finns, where all is wet, smooth, flat, pale, grey and misty! These artists are utterly different from their Italian counterparts, as proud and fiery as Italy herself and her sky. On the contrary: they are generally kind, self-effacing, carefree people quietly devoted to their art, who drink tea with a couple of friends in their tiny rooms, modestly discussing their favourite topics and totally indifferent to anything unrelated to them. They are always inviting some old beggarwoman to their rooms, making her sit six hours on end in order to transfer her pathetic, blank features on to canvas. They sketch in perspective their rooms, filled with all kinds of artist's clutter: plaster-of-Paris arms and legs that accumulated time and dust have turned coffee coloured, broken easels, overturned palettes, a friend playing the guitar, walls smeared with paint, an open window through which can be glimpsed the pale Neva and poor fishermen in their red smocks. Usually almost all of them use greyish, muddy paint – the indelible imprint of the North. But for all that they labour over their productions with genuine enjoyment. Often they are endowed with real talent and if only the fresh winds of Italy were to blow on them they would surely blossom as freely, luxuriantly and brightly as a potted plant at last taken outdoors into the fresh air. On the whole they are timid people – a star and thick epaulettes will so thoroughly confuse them that they cannot help lowering their prices. At times they like to cut a dash, but in their case this is invariably overdone and stands out rather like a badly matching patch. Occasionally you will find them wearing an excellent tail-coat with a soiled cape, or an expensive velvet waistcoat and frock-coat covered in paint: it is exactly the same with their unfinished landscapes, where you will sometimes see an inverted nymph which the artist, for want of another place, has sketched over the muddied background of an earlier composition that he once painted with great enjoyment. These artists will never look you straight in the eye and, if they do, then their expression will be vague and indefinite. They do not transfix you with the hawk-like stare

of some observer, or with the falcon-like glance of a cavalry officer. This is because they will be simultaneously taking note of your features and those of some plaster-of-Paris Hercules standing in their room. Or because they are visualizing a painting that they dream of producing one day. This often leads them to reply incoherently, sometimes quite irrelevantly, and the muddle in their heads only increases their shyness.

To such a class belonged our young man, the artist Piskarev, so shy and withdrawn, but harbouring sparks of feeling in his heart that were ready to burst into flame – given the chance. With secret tremors he hurried after the lady who had made such a powerful impression on him and he himself appeared to be amazed at his own audacity. The unknown creature who had been the cynosure of his eyes, thoughts and feelings, suddenly turned her head and glanced at him. God! What divine features! That most enchanting of brows, of dazzling whiteness, was framed by hair as lovely as agate. Those wonderful tresses fell in curls, straying from under her hat and brushing those cheeks flushed with a delicate fresh hue by the evening chill. Her lips were sealed by a whole flock of the most enchanting reveries. All that remained of childhood memories, bringing sweet daydreams and quiet inspiration by the gleaming lamp-light – all seemed to blend and intermingle, and be reflected on those harmonious lips.

She glanced at Piskarev – and at this glance his heart missed a beat: it was stern and betrayed indignation at his audacious pursuit. But even anger was enchanting on that lovely face. Overcome with shame and timidity, he stopped and lowered his eyes. But how could he lose that divine creature without even discovering that holy of holies where she dwelt? Such were the thoughts that crowded into our young dreamer's head, and he decided to pursue her. But to keep out of sight he stayed a good distance away, casually glancing around and inspecting the shop signs and at the time not missing one step taken by the young lady. Passers-by were fewer, the street grew quieter. The beauty looked back and he fancied a faint smile gleamed on her lips. He trembled all over and could not believe his eyes. No: it was the street lamp's deceptive light that had brought a

semblance of a smile to her lips; no, it was his own daydreams that were mocking him. He gasped for breath, he trembled all over, his feelings were on fire and everything became enveloped in mist. The pavement seemed to be rushing away beneath his feet, carriages with their galloping horses seemed to stand stock-still, the bridge stretched and broke its arch, houses turned upside down and a sentry's halberd, the gilt letters of a shop sign with its painted scissors, appeared to gleam on his very eyelash. This was what one turn of that pretty head had produced. Hearing nothing, seeing nothing, conscious of nothing, he swiftly followed the light traces of those beautiful feet, endeavouring to moderate his steps which moved in unison with his heartbeats. Now he was seized by doubt as to whether her glance really offered encouragement – and then he would stand still for a moment. But the beating of his heart, the irresistible power and violence of his feelings, spurred him on. He did not even notice the four-storey house that suddenly loomed in front of him or those four rows of brightly illuminated windows that looked at him all at once, or the iron railings at the entrance that rudely brought him to a sudden halt. He saw the beautiful stranger fly up the staircase, turn round, put one finger to her lips and beckon to him to follow. His knees trembled, his every feeling and thought was ablaze. A thrill of almost unbearable joy pierced his breast like a knife. No – it was no dream! Good God! So much happiness in one instant! A lifetime of bliss in two minutes! But had he not dreamt all this? Could that creature, for one divine glance from whom he would willingly have sacrificed his life, to approach whose abode he considered the very height of felicity – could she really have been so gracious, so attentive towards him a moment ago? He flew up the stairs. No earthly thoughts entered his mind, nor did any earthly passion inflame him. No: at that moment he was as pure and chaste as an innocent youth who still nurtures a vague, spiritual yearning for love. And all that would have aroused base thoughts in a depraved man only made his all the more chaste. The trust shown him by that frail, lovely creature imposed the strict code of chivalry upon him, made it his duty slavishly to carry out her every command. All he

desired was that those commands should be as difficult and demanding as possible, so that he should strive all the more to surmount every obstacle. He did not doubt that some mysterious, momentous event had compelled the unknown woman to place her trust in him and that she would ask for significant service from him – and already he felt that he possessed sufficient strength and determination for anything.

The staircase spiralled upwards and with it spiralled his fleeting fantasies. 'Mind how you go!' a voice rang out like a harp, filling his whole being with a renewed flush of excitement. On the gloomy landing, high up on the fourth floor, the beautiful stranger knocked on a door: it opened and they entered together. They were greeted by a woman of fairly attractive appearance, with a candle, but she stared at Piskarev so strangely, so brazenly, that he looked down. Three female figures in different corners met his eyes. One was laying out cards, another was sitting at a piano, giving some pathetic rendition of an old polonaise with two fingers. The third was sitting before a mirror, combing her long hair, and she evidently had no intention of abandoning her toilette at the arrival of a stranger. The sort of disagreeable untidiness, usually only to be found in a carefree bachelor's room, was everywhere in evidence. The furniture (of quite good quality) was covered in dust. A spider had stretched its web over the moulded cornice. Through the open door of another room glinted a spurred boot and the red piping of a uniform. A man's loud voice and a woman's laughter rang out, without any inhibition.

Good Lord! Where had he come to? At first he could not believe his eyes and started scrutinizing more closely the objects that filled the room. But the bare walls and curtainless windows betrayed the complete absence of a caring housewife's hand. The worn faces of those pathetic creatures, one of whom had settled right in front of his nose and was surveying him coolly, as if he were a stain on another woman's dress, convinced him that he had arrived at one of those loathsome dens which wretched depravity, spawned by tawdry education and the terrible overcrowding of the city, had made its abode. It was a den of iniquity, where man sacrilegiously tramples and mocks all

that is pure and holy, all that enhances life, where woman, the beauty of this world, the crown of creation, is transformed into some strange, equivocal being, where she loses all purity of soul, all that is womanly and where she adopts the loathsome habits of the male and has ceased to be the delicate, beautiful creature that differs from us so much. Piskarev measured her from head to foot with astonished eyes, as if trying to convince himself that this really was the same person who had so bewitched him and lured him away from Nevsky Prospekt. But she stood there before him, as lovely as before; her hair was just as beautiful, her eyes still looked heavenly. She was fresh – just seventeen. He could see that only recently had she sunk into depravity. He dared not touch her cheeks, which were as fresh and as faintly flushed as ever: she was beautiful.

He stood motionless before her and was ready to let himself be carried away again by that same simplicity of heart. But the beautiful girl was bored with this lengthy silence and smiled knowingly, looking him straight in the eye: that smile was filled with a kind of shameless provocativeness, as strange and as ill-suited to her face as a pious expression to a bribetaker or an accounts ledger to a poet. He shuddered. She parted her lovely lips and began to speak, but everything she said was so stupid, so vulgar. It was as if her intelligence had deserted her along with her virtue! He wanted to hear no more. Our artist was really ridiculous and as naïve as a child. Instead of taking advantage of such encouragement, instead of rejoicing at such an opportunity as anyone in his place would have done, he tore headlong from the room and out into the street like a startled gazelle.

His head bowed and his arms drooping at his side, he sat in his room like some beggar who has found a priceless pearl and immediately let it fall into the sea. 'Such beauty, such heavenly features – and *where!*? In that dreadful place!' He could say no more.

In fact, nothing arouses pity so much as the sight of beauty tainted by the putrid breath of corruption. Ugliness can go hand in hand with depravity, but never beauty, tender beauty . . . in our minds beauty is invariably linked with chastity and purity. The beautiful girl who had so bewitched our poor Piskarev was

a wondrous, rare creature and her presence in those despicable surroundings was all the more astonishing. Her every feature was so cleanly moulded, her beautiful face expressed such nobility that one would never think that debauchery now held her in its terrible clutches. She would have been a pearl beyond price, the whole universe, the paradise, the radiant quiet star of some obscure family circle and with one movement of her beautiful lips would have issued sweet commands. She would have been a goddess in a crowded ballroom, gliding over bright parquet, in the brilliant light of candles, silently adored by crowds of admirers prostrate at her feet. But alas! By the terrible will of some infernal spirit intent on destroying the whole harmony of life, she had been cast into the abyss, to the sound of mocking laughter.

Racked with heart-rending pity, he sat before the candle that had burnt low in its socket. Midnight had long passed and the belfry clock struck half past twelve, but he sat there motionless, neither asleep nor fully awake. Drowsiness, taking advantage of his stillness, began to overcome him; the room was beginning to disappear – only the light of the candle still shone through the dreams that were taking possession of him – when suddenly a knock at the door made him start and come to his senses. The door opened and in came a footman in magnificent livery. Never had a richly liveried footman peered into his lonely room, especially at that time of night! He was completely baffled and stared at the footman with impatient curiosity.

'The lady,' announced the footman with a polite bow, 'whom you were pleased to visit a few hours ago, has instructed me to invite you and sent her carriage for you.'¹²

Piskarev was speechless with astonishment. 'A carriage! A liveried footman! No, this must be some mistake . . .' he thought.

'Listen, my good man,' he said timidly, 'it seems you've come to the wrong address. Your mistress must have sent you for someone else, not me.'

'Oh no, sir, I'm not mistaken. Wasn't it you, sir, who accompanied my mistress to a house on Liteynaya, to a room on the fourth floor?'

'Yes, it was.'

'Well, if you don't mind hurrying, sir, the mistress is very eager to see you and asks you to come direct to her house.'

Piskarev flew down the stairs. Sure enough, a carriage was waiting in the courtyard. He climbed in, the doors slammed, the cobblestones in the road clattered under the wheels and hooves, and the illuminated vista of shops with their bright signs flashed past the carriage windows. Piskarev sat deep in thought the whole way, unable to make sense of this adventure. Her own house, a carriage, a footman in rich livery – he could make none of this tally with the fourth-floor room, the dusty windows and untuned piano.

The carriage stopped in front of a brightly lit entrance and Piskarev was immediately struck by the procession of carriages, the coachmen's conversation, the brilliantly illuminated windows and the sounds of music. The richly liveried footman helped him out of the carriage and respectfully escorted him into a hall with marble pillars, a porter in gold braid, cloaks and fur coats scattered here and there and a brilliant lamp. A staircase, seemingly suspended in midair, with gleaming banisters and smelling strongly of perfume, led upwards. He was already mounting it and had reached the first hall, when the swelling crowd of people made him recoil in terror at the first step he took. The extraordinary variety of people threw him into complete confusion. It seemed as if a demon had crumbled the whole world into thousands of little pieces and mixed them all together, quite at random. The gleaming shoulders of the ladies, the black tail-coats, the chandeliers, lamps, the shimmery gauze, the ethereal ribbons and the stout double bass visible through the railings of the magnificent gallery – all this dazzled him beyond measure. At one glance he could see great numbers of venerable old and middle-aged men with stars on their dress-coats, ladies gliding so lightly, proudly and gracefully over the parquet floor or sitting in rows. He could hear so many French and English words; and those young men in their black tail-coats displayed such nobility of bearing, conversed or remained silent with such dignity, incapable of uttering one word too many, related jokes so majestically, smiled so politely, sported such wonderful whiskers, moved their elegant hands so skilfully

as they adjusted their cravats, while the ladies were so ethereal, so completely immersed in their own self-satisfaction and so conscious of their charms, lowering their eyes so enchantingly that . . . but Piskarev's subdued look as he nervously leaned against a column showed that he was completely bewildered.

At that moment a crowd formed a circle around some dancers. Off they flew across the floor, draped in the diaphanous creations of Paris, in dresses fashioned from the air itself. Nonchalantly they glided over the floor with their glittering slippers and seemed more airy and weightless than if they had been treading on air. But one of them was lovelier, more sumptuously and brilliantly dressed than the others. An indescribable, most subtle refinement of taste distinguished her whole attire and yet it seemed she had taken no pains over her appearance, as if it had come into being of its own accord. She looked – and did not look – at the surrounding crowd, her long eyelashes were lowered indifferently, and the brilliant whiteness of her face was still more dazzling as she bowed her head and a faint shadow fell across her enchanting brow.

Piskarev made a great effort to force his way through the crowd, so that he could get a better look. But to his annoyance an enormous head of dark curly hair continually screened her from him. And he was so hemmed in that he dared not try to step forward or backward, afraid he might jostle some privy counsellor. But at last he managed to get to the front – and then he took a look at his clothes, wanting everything to be just right. But heavens above! What was this! The frock-coat (the one he usually wore) was covered all over with paint. In his haste he had forgotten to change into something respectable. He blushed furiously, let his head drop and wanted the ground to swallow him up. But there was absolutely nowhere to hide. Kammerjunkers¹³ in their brilliant tunics formed a solid wall behind him. By now he wanted to be as far as possible from the beauty with the lovely brow and eyelashes. In fear and trembling he raised his eyes to see if she were looking at him: heavens! There she was, facing him. . . . But what was this? 'It's her!' he cried almost at the top of his voice. In fact it really was

her, the very woman whom he had met on Nevsky Prospekt and whom he had escorted home.

Meanwhile, she raised her eyelashes and gazed at everyone with her radiant eyes. 'Oh, oh, how lovely!' was all he could say, catching his breath. She surveyed the whole circle that was eager for her attention, but soon she looked away with an air of bored indifference – and her eyes met Piskarev's. 'Oh, what heaven! What paradise! Give me strength, Lord, to bear this. Life cannot contain it – it will destroy and bear my soul away.' She beckoned, but not with her hand, or with an inclination of the head – no! This sign was expressed so subtly and imperceptibly in her ravishing eyes that it was visible to no one. But *he* could see it – and he alone understood it. The dance continued for a long time and the weary music would seem to be dying away – and then it would burst into life again, shrill and thunderous. At last it was over. She sat down, her bosom heaving beneath the shimmering gauze of her veil; her hand (heavens, what a wondrous hand!) dropped on to her knees, crushing her filmy dress, which seemed to be breathing music and its delicate lilac hue accentuated the dazzling whiteness of that beautiful hand! If only to touch it – and nothing more . . . He had no other desires – they were all too audacious. He stood beneath her chair, not daring to speak or breathe.

'Were you bored?' she asked. 'I was bored too. I can see that you hate me,' she added, lowering her long eyelashes.

'Hate you? Me?' Piskarev stammered, completely at a loss – and he would surely have poured out a stream of the most incoherent words, but at that moment a gentleman-in-waiting with a wonderfully curled tuft of hair on his head came up and made some pleasant and witty remarks. Rather appealingly he displayed a row of fine teeth and with every jest drove a sharp nail into Piskarev's heart. At last another guest – fortunately – came up to him with a question.

'It's unbearable!' she exclaimed, raising her heavenly eyes to him. 'I shall go and sit at the other end of the room. Be there!'

She glided through the crowd and disappeared. Like one possessed he forced his way through – and he was there like lightning.

So it was her, sitting like a queen, the best of all, the most beautiful, seeking him with her eyes.

'Oh, you are here!' she softly said. 'I shall be frank with you. No doubt the circumstances of our meeting struck you as very odd. Surely you cannot think that I could belong to that contemptible class of beings among whom you met me? My behaviour may seem strange to you, but I shall tell you a secret – will you promise,' she asked, fixing her eyes on him, 'never to reveal it?'

'Oh, I will, I will, I will!'

But just then a fairly elderly gentleman came up, spoke to her in some language Piskarev did not understand and offered his hand. She gave Piskarev an imploring look, motioning to him to stay where he was and await her return. But he was so impatient that he felt unable to obey orders – even from her lips. No longer could he see the lilac dress. Extremely agitated, he went from room to room and mercilessly pushed everyone he met out of his way. But everywhere sat distinguished looking personages playing whist and plunged in deathly silence. In one corner a few elderly gentlemen were debating the superiority of military over civilian service. In another, some men in superb tail-coats were indulging in light repartee about the voluminous *oeuvre* of some hard-working poet. Piskarev felt one of the elderly, venerable-looking gentlemen grab one of his coat buttons and submit a most just observation for his judgement, but he rudely thrust him aside, without even noticing that he was wearing a fairly important order around his neck. He ran into another room – she was not there. He ran into another – she was not there. He ran into a third – she was not there either. 'Where can she be? Give her to me! I cannot live without seeing her again . . . I must hear what she was meaning to tell me.' But all his searching was in vain. Anxious and exhausted he huddled in one corner and surveyed the crowd. But to his straining eyes everything appeared blurred. Finally he began to distinguish the walls of his room. He looked up: before him was a candlestick, the flame flickering at the very bottom of the socket: the whole candle had burnt down and the melted tallow had spilt on to his table.

So he had been sleeping! God, what a marvellous dream! But why had he woken up? Why could that dream not have lasted one more minute – surely she would have reappeared? Unwelcome daybreak was peering through his windows with its unpleasant, dull light. His room was in terrible, grey, murky chaos. Oh, how repulsive reality was! What was it compared to dreams? Quickly he undressed and climbed into bed, wrapping himself in his blanket, eager to recapture, if only for a moment, that fugitive vision. And in fact sleep was not slow in coming, but presented him with the exact opposite of what he wanted to see. First Lieutenant Pirogov smoking his pipe, then the Academy porter, then an actual state counsellor, then the head of a Finnish girl whose portrait he had once painted – and similar nonsense.

He lay in bed until noon, yearning to dream. But she did not appear. If only for one moment her lovely features would reappear, if only he could hear her footsteps, if only he could see her naked arm, as bright as virgin snow! Having dismissed and forgotten everything he sat with a shattered, hopeless expression, thinking only of that dream: he was not interested in anything else. His eyes gazed vacantly, lifelessly at the window, through which he could see a grubby water-carrier pouring out water that froze in the air, and the goat-like voice of a rag-and-bone man bleated: 'Any old clothes!' The sounds of pedestrian reality rang strangely in his ears. Thus he sat until evening and then he eagerly flung himself into bed. He struggled for hours with sleeplessness, but finally succumbed. Again a dream so vile and vulgar. 'God have mercy! Let me see her – if only for one minute!' Again he waited for evening, again he fell asleep, again he dreamt of some government clerk who was a clerk and a bassoon at the same time. Oh, it was unbearable! But at last she appeared! Her head, her tresses . . . she was gazing at him. But for such a fleeting moment! And again that mist, again a ridiculous dream.

In the end he lived only for dreams and from that time his whole life took a strange turn: he could be said to sleep while waking and was awake only when sleeping. If someone had seen him sitting silently at his empty table or walking down the

street he would surely have taken him for a lunatic or a man ruined by drink. His expression was completely vacant, his innate absentmindedness grew worse and drove all feeling, all movement from his face. Only at nightfall did he come to life.

Such a state undermined his strength and the most agonizing part was when sleep began to abandon him altogether. In order to save the only precious thing that remained he used every possible means of restoring it. He had heard that there was a way of ensuring sleep – one had to take opium. But where was he to get opium? Then he remembered a Persian who kept a shawl shop and who, whenever he met Piskarev, almost invariably asked him to paint a pretty girl for him. Assuming that he was bound to have opium he decided to call on him. The Persian received him sitting cross-legged on a divan.

‘What do you want opium for?’ he asked.

Piskarev told him about his insomnia.

‘All right, I’ll give you some, but you must paint me a beautiful woman. She must be very beautiful, with black eyebrows and eyes as large as olives! And paint me lying beside her, smoking my pipe! Do you hear? She must be a real beauty!’

Piskarev promised to do everything. The Persian went out and returned with a small jar filled with a dark liquid and carefully poured some of it into another jar, which he handed to Piskarev with instructions to take no more than seven drops in water. Piskarev eagerly seized that precious jar which he would not have exchanged for a pile of gold and he tore off home.

Once there he poured a few drops into a glass of water, gulped it down and fell into bed.

Good God! What joy! It was her – her again, but now in a different world. Oh, how charming she looked as she sat at the window of a bright country cottage. Her dress was simplicity itself – the simplicity that invests a poet’s thought . . . heavens, how simple and how well it suited her! A short kerchief was casually thrown around her graceful neck. Everything about her was modest, everything displayed mysterious, inexplicable taste. How charming her graceful walk! How musical the sound of her footsteps and the rustle of her simple dress! How pretty

her arm, encircled by a hair bracelet. With a tear in her eye she told him:

‘Do not despise me. I am not what you take me for. Just look at me, look closer and tell me: could I be capable of what you imagine?’

‘Oh, no, no! Let him who dares think that then let him . . .’ But then he woke up, deeply moved, distraught, with tears in his eyes. ‘Better you had not existed, that you had never lived in this world, but had been the creation of some inspired artist! I would never have left the canvas, I would have gazed upon you for eternity and kissed you, I would have lived and breathed you – as in the most wonderful dream – and then I would have been happy. I would have wanted for nothing else, I would have summoned you as my guardian angel, sleeping or in my waking hours. I would have waited for you if ever I had to portray the divine and holy. But as things are . . . how terrible life is! What use is it that she lives? Can a madman’s life be pleasing for his relatives and friends who once loved him? God, what is our life? Only perpetual discord between dream and reality!’

Almost the same thoughts occupied him incessantly. He thought of nothing, hardly ate, and with the impatience and eagerness of a lover waited for nightfall and those longed-for dreams. This constant concentration on one and the same object finally took such a hold on his whole existence and imagination that the desired image appeared almost every day, always the very opposite of reality, since his thoughts were as pure as a child’s. Through these dreams the object itself became somehow purer and was completely transformed.

The draughts of opium inflamed his mind even more and if ever there was a man who loved impetuously, ruinously, tempestuously, to the utmost degree of insanity, then he was that unfortunate.

Of all his dreams one brought him more joy than any other: he imagined himself in his studio, in such high spirits, sitting so cheerfully, palette in hand. And *she* was there. She was already his wife, sitting at his side, leaning her lovely elbow on the back of his chair and looking at his work. Her languorous, weary

eyes expressed overwhelming bliss. Everything in his room spoke of paradise. It was so bright, so neat. Heavens! She lay her enchanting head on his breast. He had never had such a wonderful dream. Afterwards he rose feeling somehow fresher and less absent-minded than before. Strange thoughts arose in his head. 'Perhaps,' he thought, 'she has been drawn into vice against her will, by some dreadful circumstances. Perhaps her heart is inclined towards remorse, perhaps she herself longs to escape from her appalling condition? And how could I be so indifferent and allow her to perish, when I only need to hold out a hand to save her from drowning?'

His thoughts wandered even further. 'No one knows me,' he told himself. 'Besides, why should anyone be concerned about me? And I have nothing to do with anyone either. If she shows genuine remorse and changes her life I will marry her. I *must* marry her. That way I would be acting far better than many who marry their housekeepers – and even the most despicable creatures. But my course of action will be disinterested and might even be noble. I shall return to the world its finest embellishment.'

After drawing up this light-headed plan, he felt his cheeks flush. He went over to the mirror and was alarmed when he saw those hollow cheeks and how pale his face was. He started to dress and groom himself with the utmost care. He washed, smoothed his hair, put on a new tail-coat and a smart waistcoat, threw his cloak over his shoulders and went out into the street. He breathed fresh air and felt totally invigorated, like a convalescent who has gone out for the first time after a long illness. His heart pounded as he drew near the street where he had not set foot since that fateful encounter. He spent a long time looking for the house and his memory seemed to have played him false. Twice he walked up and down the street, unsure in front of which house to stop. Finally one of them looked the likely one. He dashed up the stairs and knocked at the door. It opened – and who should come out to greet him? His ideal, his mysterious image, the original of those visions in his dreams – she, in whom he had lived so terribly and painfully – and so sweetly. Yes, she was standing before him! He shuddered and

could barely keep to his feet for weakness, simply overwhelmed by a surge of joy. She looked as beautiful as ever, although her eyes seemed sleepy, although a pallor had crept over her face that was no longer so fresh – but she was still lovely.

'Ah!' she cried, seeing Piskarev and rubbing her eyes (it was already two o'clock in the afternoon). 'Why did you run away from us that day?'

Weak with exhaustion he sat on a chair and looked at her. 'I've only just woken up. This morning they brought me home at seven – I was dead drunk,' she added, smiling.

Oh, better you were dumb, quite unable to say a thing, than utter such words! She had suddenly shown him her whole life, as if in a panorama. Despite all, he summoned up courage and decided to try and see if his exhortations would have any effect on her. He pulled himself together and in a trembling but passionate voice began by explaining her appalling position to her. She listened to him with an attentive look and with the same feeling of wonderment we display at the sight of something unexpected and strange. Faintly smiling, she looked at her friend who was sitting in one corner and stopped cleaning her comb to give her full attention to this new preacher.

'Yes, it's true I'm poor,' Piskarev finally said after a lengthy and instructive homily, 'but we shall work. We shall vie with one another to improve our lives. Nothing is more agreeable than to be one's own master. I shall sit at my painting while you will sit at my side, inspiring me in my work, busy with embroidering or some other handicraft. And we shall want for nothing!'

'You don't say!' she interrupted in a rather contemptuous voice. 'I'm no laundrymaid or seamstress that I should have to work!'

God! In these words her whole vile, despicable life was summed up – a life of emptiness and idleness, those loyal companions of depravity.

'Will you marry *me*?' her friend chimed in with a brazen air – until then she had been silently sitting in one corner. 'When I'm your wife I'll sit like this!'

Then her pathetic face assumed a stupid grin, which greatly amused the beauty.

Oh, this was too much! That was more than he could stand. He rushed out of the room, seeing nothing, feeling nothing, hearing nothing. His mind clouded over. The whole day was spent stupidly, aimlessly – and he did not hear or feel a thing. No one would have known that he had spent the night away somewhere. Only next day blind instinct led him back to his room, looking dreadful, pale-faced, his hair dishevelled and with signs of insanity on his face. He locked himself in his room and admitted no one; he asked for nothing. Four days passed and his door never opened. Finally, after a week had gone by and the room was still locked, people rushed to the door and called him, but there was no reply. Finally they broke down the door and found his lifeless body with the throat cut. A bloodstained razor lay on the floor. From his convulsively parted hands and his terrifyingly distorted expression one could infer that his hand had faltered and that he had suffered for a long time before his sinful soul left his body.

Thus perished a victim of insane passion – poor Piskarev, as gentle, meek and mild and as ingenuous as a child, bearing the sparks of talent that might with time have blossomed into the full flower of genius. No one shed tears over him, no one was to be seen beside his lifeless body apart from the usual district police chief and the indifferent face of the town doctor. Without even any religious rites his coffin was swiftly taken to Okhta.¹⁴ Only one old soldier followed it and wept – and only then because he had drunk a bottle of vodka too many. Even Lieutenant Pirogov did not come to see the body of the poor devil to whom – when he was alive – he had given his exalted patronage: he had no time to think about such things and, besides, he was too involved in some extraordinary adventure. But let us return to him.

I have no liking for corpses and it is always disagreeable when a long funeral procession crosses my path, when some old soldier, dressed like a Capucin friar, takes snuff with his left hand because he has a torch in his right. I always feel most annoyed when I see an ornate catafalque with a coffin draped in velvet. But my annoyance is tinged with sorrow when I see a carrier hauling the uncovered pine coffin of some poor wretch,

with only some old beggarwoman (who has met the procession at a crossroads) plodding after it for want of something better to do.

If I remember correctly, we left Lieutenant Pirogov at the moment when he parted company with poor Piskarev and went in hot pursuit of the blonde. The blonde was a rather attractive but frivolous little creature. She would stop before every shop and gaze at the sashes, scarves, earrings, gloves and other trifles in the windows, constantly wriggling and gawking in all directions. 'You, my sweetie, shall be mine!' Pirogov said with confidence as he continued his pursuit, turning up his overcoat collar in case he met one of his friends. But it would not come amiss to acquaint the reader with our Lieutenant Pirogov's character.

Before we go on to describe Lieutenant Pirogov, however, it would be a good idea to say a few words about the kind of society to which Pirogov belonged. There are officers who make up a kind of middle class in St Petersburg. You will always come across one of them at a soirée or dinner given by a state counsellor who has finally risen to that rank after forty years' hard work. The pale-faced daughter, as colourless as St Petersburg, many of whom are past their prime, the customary tea table, piano, domestic balls – all this tends to be inseparable from bright epaulettes gleaming in the light of a lamp between a virtuous blonde and the black tail-coat of her brother or some family friend. It is exceedingly difficult to rouse and amuse these cold-blooded maidens: to achieve that requires much skill – better, the absence of any skill. One has to say things that are neither too clever nor too funny, intermingled with those trivialities so beloved by women. And here one must give the gentlemen in question their due. They have a special knack for making these colourless beauties laugh and listen. Often their greatest reward is to hear exclamations (smothered by laughter) such as: 'Ooh, please stop! You'll make me die laughing!' Only rarely – perhaps never – are they to be seen in the highest circles. From these they have generally been ousted by so-called aristocrats. Nonetheless, they are considered cultured, highly educated men. They love discussing literature; they praise

Bulgarin,¹⁵ Pushkin and Grech¹⁶ and speak disdainfully and sarcastically about A. A. Orlov.¹⁷ They never miss a public lecture, whether on book-keeping or even forestry. You will always find one of their number at the theatre, whatever the play – unless it's one of those *Filatkas*,¹⁸ which are deeply offensive to their fastidious taste. They are permanently in the theatre and are the greatest source of revenue for theatrical directors. They are particularly fond of fine verses in a play and like to call loudly for the actors. Many of them, who by teaching in government institutions or by preparing candidates for them, finally come to be proud owners of a carriage and pair. Then their circle widens. In the end they manage to marry a merchant's daughter who can play the piano, with a hundred thousand (or around that figure) in ready cash and a whole swarm of bearded kinsfolk. But they cannot achieve this honour until they have reached at least colonel's rank. This is because – despite giving off a slight whiff of cabbage – our bearded merchants are most reluctant to see their daughters married to anyone except a general, or at least a *colonel*.

Such are the chief characteristics of this class of young men. But Lieutenant Pirogov possessed an abundance of talents that were his own particular preserve. He could declaim verses from *Dmitry Donskoy*¹⁹ and *Woe from Wit*²⁰ superbly, and he had a special gift for blowing smoke rings from his pipe – so skilfully that he was able to string ten of them together in a chain at a time. He could tell the anecdote about a cannon being one thing and a unicorn another²¹ most agreeably. But it is rather difficult to enumerate *all* the talents and fine qualities that fate had lavished on Pirogov. He loved to discuss actresses and ballet dancers, but never as crudely as young ensigns usually discourse on the subject. He was delighted with his army rank, to which he had been recently promoted and, although he would occasionally utter as he reclined on his couch: 'Oh, oh! All is vanity! What of it if I'm a lieutenant?', deep down he was secretly flattered by this newly acquired status. He often tried to hint at it in a roundabout way in conversation and on one occasion, when he bumped into some copy clerk in the street who struck him as impolite, immediately made him stop and

gave him to understand, in few but cutting words, that a *lieutenant* was standing before him and not a common or garden officer. And then he tried to express his views even more eloquently when two exceedingly attractive young ladies happened by pass by. Generally speaking, Pirogov displayed a passion for all that was refined and consequently he encouraged the artist Piskarev. However, this was possibly because he dearly wanted him to paint a portrait of his own manly countenance. But enough about Pirogov's virtues. Man is such a wonderful creature that you can never enumerate all his finer qualities in one attempt and, the more you examine him, the more fresh features come to light.

And so Pirogov did not abandon his pursuit of the unknown pretty blonde and occasionally plied her with questions, to which she replied with rather brusque and vague sounds. They passed through the dark Kazan Gates to Meshchanskaya Street – a street of tobacconists and cheap bric-a-brac shops, German artisans and Finnish nymphs. The blonde ran even faster and flew through the gates of a rather dingy looking house. Pirogov followed her. Then she ran up a dark narrow staircase and passed through a doorway, through which Pirogov also boldly made his way. He found himself in a large room with black walls and grimy ceiling. On the table lay a pile of iron screws, sundry locksmith's tools, shining coffee pots and candlesticks. The floor was littered with brass and iron filings. Pirogov could see at once that it was a workman's lodgings. The unknown blonde flew away through a side door. For a moment Pirogov hesitated but, following the Russian rule, decided to press on. He entered a room that was quite unlike the first, very neat and tidy, showing that a German lived there. Then he was struck by an extremely weird spectacle. Before him sat Schiller – not the Schiller who wrote *William Tell* and a *History of the Thirty Years War*, but the *famous* Schiller, master tinsmith of Meshchanskaya Street. Beside Schiller stood Hoffmann – not the writer Hoffmann, but a rather competent bootmaker from Ofiterskaya Street and a great pal of Schiller's. Schiller was drunk and sitting on a chair stamping and excitedly gabbling away. None of this would have surprised Pirogov, but what did

surprise him were the extraordinarily peculiar positions of the two figures. Schiller was sitting with his rather fleshy nose sticking up, his head held high, while Hoffmann was gripping the nose between two fingers and holding the blade of his cobbler's knife close to the surface. Both individuals were speaking German and, since all the German Lieutenant Pirogov knew was 'Gut Morgen', he could not make head or tail of what was going on. However, what Schiller was saying is as follows:

'I don't want it, I don't need ein nose!' he said, waving his arms. 'Mein nose cost me three pounds of snuff a month. And I buy it from lousy Russian shop, because Germans don't stock Russian snuff. So I pay lousy Russian shop forty copecks a pound. That comes to one rouble twenty copecks. Twelve times one rouble twenty makes fourteen roubles forty. Do you hear, mein dear Hoffmann? Fourteen roubles forty just on mein nose! And on holidays I take a pinch of rappee,²² as I don't want to use filthy Russian snuff on holidays. Over the year I used two pounds of snuff at two roubles a pound. Now, six plus fourteen comes to twenty roubles – on snuff alone! That's daylight robbery! I'm asking you, mein dear friend Hoffmann – aren't I right?' Hoffmann, who was drunk as well, replied affirmatively. 'Twenty roubles forty copecks! I'm a Swabian²³ German, loyal subject of a German king. I don't want any nose! Cut mein nose off – here!!'

But for Pirogov's sudden appearance Hoffmann would without a shadow of doubt have sliced off Schiller's nose – and quite without rhyme or reason – because he had just positioned his knife as if he was about to cut out a boot sole.

Schiller was furious that a complete stranger, someone uninvited, should have so inopportunistically interrupted proceedings. Despite the fact that he was befuddled by beer and wine, Schiller felt that it was rather unbecoming to be seen in such a posture and having such things done to him, in the presence of an outsider.

Pirogov performed a slight bow and asked with his customary affability: 'Oh! Please do forgive me!'

'Clear off!' drawled Schiller in reply.

At this Pirogov was completely taken aback. This treatment was something quite new for him. The smile that had been faintly glimmering on his face vanished at once. With a feeling of wounded dignity he announced: 'I find this all very strange, my dear sir. . . obviously the fact that I'm an *officer* has escaped you.'

'So, vot's an officer! I'm a Swabian German. Me myself' (here Schiller banged his fist on the table) 'vill be officer. Eighteen months junker, two years lieutenant and tomorrow I shall be officer immediately. But I don't want to serve. This is what I'd do to officer – phooo!' And Schiller opened his hand and snorted into it.

Lieutenant Pirogov saw that all he could do now was make himself scarce. However, the kind of treatment he had received was most unbecoming for one of *his* rank and highly disagreeable. Several times he stopped on the stairs as if trying to pluck up courage and think how to make Schiller pay for his impertinence. Finally, he concluded that Schiller might be excused, since his head was so befuddled with beer. Besides, he visualized the pretty little blonde and so he decided to consign these considerations to oblivion.

Early next morning Lieutenant Pirogov appeared at the tin-smith's workshop. He was met in the hall by the pretty blonde, who asked him in a severe voice which suited her little face very well: 'What do you want?'

'Ah, good morning, my sweetie! Don't you recognize me? You little minx, you! What absolutely ravishing eyes!' And as he spoke Lieutenant Pirogov wanted to raise her chin very charmingly with one finger. But the blonde produced a frightened cry and asked with the same severity: 'What do you want?'

'To see *you* – that's all I desire!' replied Lieutenant Pirogov, smiling agreeably as he went nearer. But when he noticed that the timorous blonde was about to slip through the door he added: 'I want to order some spurs, sweetie. Can you have them made for me? But I need no spurs to love you – I need a curb, rather! What pretty little hands!'

Lieutenant Pirogov was always particularly courteous when making such declarations.

'I'll go and fetch my husband right away,' the German cried

out and left. A few moments later Pirogov saw sleepy-eyed Schiller enter – he had not recovered from yesterday's hangover. With one glance at the officer he remembered, as if in a vague dream, the events of the previous day. He could not remember *everything*, exactly as it had happened, but he felt that he had blurted out something very silly, so he greeted the officer with a very sombre look.

'I can't take less than fifteen roubles for a pair of spurs,' he said, wanting to get rid of Pirogov – as an honest German he was deeply ashamed of having to look at anyone who had seen him in such an unseemly condition. Schiller loved drinking without anyone else for company – apart from two or three of his close pals – on which occasions he kept the door locked, even to his workmen.

'Why are they so expensive?' Pirogov asked amiably.

'German workmanship!' Schiller nonchalantly replied, stroking his chin. 'A Russian would ask two roubles for them.'

'Well, to show you that I like you and want to get to know you better, I'll pay fifteen.'

Schiller reflected for a moment; being an honest German he felt rather ashamed. As he hoped to put him off ordering, he announced that the quickest he could make them was a fortnight. Pirogov made no objection and readily agreed.

The German pondered once again and then began wondering how best to do the job, to make the spurs really worth fifteen roubles. Just then the pretty blonde came into the workshop and started rummaging around on the table that was cluttered with coffee pots. The lieutenant took advantage of Schiller's musings, went over to her and squeezed her arm that was bare to the shoulder. This did not please Schiller one bit.

'Mein Frau!' he shouted.

'Was vollen Sie doch?' replied the blonde.

'Genzi into kitchen!'

The blonde retreated.

'So, in a fortnight?' asked Pirogov.

'Yes, a fortnight,' Schiller replied, still reflecting. 'I've a lot of work on at the moment.'

'Well, goodbye then, I'll look in again.'

'Goodbye,' replied Schiller, shutting the door after him.

Lieutenant Pirogov was firmly resolved not to abandon his pursuit, even though the German girl had so obviously rebuffed him. He failed to understand how anyone could resist him, especially as his personal charms and distinguished rank entitled him to full recognition. But it must be mentioned that, for all her attractiveness, Schiller's wife was extremely stupid. Stupidity, however, can be particularly appealing in a pretty wife. At least, I know of many husbands who are delighted by their wives' stupidity and see evidence in it of childlike innocence. Beauty can work perfect miracles. Instead of inspiring revulsion, all spiritual defects in a beautiful woman become unusually attractive: even vice can be attractive in them. But should beauty fade, then a woman needs to be twenty times cleverer than her husband to inspire, if not love, at least respect. For all her stupidity Schiller's wife always fulfilled her wifely duties faithfully and so it was rather hard for Pirogov to succeed in his daring enterprise. But there is always enjoyment in overcoming obstacles and with every day that passed the blonde attracted him more. He took to making fairly frequent inquiries about the spurs, so that in the end Schiller grew sick and tired of it and made every effort to finish the spurs as soon as he could. Finally they were ready.

'Ah, what excellent workmanship!' exclaimed Lieutenant Pirogov when he saw them. 'Heavens – they're so well made! Even our general doesn't have spurs like these.'

A feeling of self-satisfaction flooded through Schiller's heart. His eyes became quite cheerful and he felt completely reconciled to Pirogov. 'That Russian officer is a clever chap,' he thought to himself.

'So, I suppose you can make a sheath for a dagger, for example, or other things?'

'Well, of course I can!' Schiller replied, smiling.

'So, make me a sheath for a dagger – I'll go and fetch it – I've a very fine Turkish one, but I'd like a different sheath.'

This struck Schiller like a bombshell. He suddenly knitted his brows. 'Well, how d'ye like that!' he thought, inwardly cursing for bringing the work on himself. However, to refuse it now

he considered dishonourable. Besides, the Russian officer had praised his workmanship. With a slight shake of the head he consented. But the kiss that Pirogov audaciously planted on the lips of the pretty blonde as he left utterly bewildered him.

I do not consider it out of place to make the reader a little better acquainted with Schiller. Schiller was a typical German, in the fullest sense of the word. From the age of twenty, that happy time when a Russian is leading a devil-may-care existence, Schiller had already planned his whole life and never once deviated from it, whatever the circumstances. He made it a rule to get up at seven, to dine at two, to be ever-punctual and to get drunk every Sunday. He set himself the target of accumulating capital of 50,000 roubles within ten years and this was as fixed and immutable as fate itself, for a civil servant would sooner forget to look in at the porter's lodge of his superior than a German to alter his routine. Under no circumstances would he increase his spending and if the price of potatoes was higher than usual he would not pay a copeck more and was perfectly content with buying less. Although this sometimes left him feeling rather hungry, he grew used to it. His punctiliousness was so thorough that he resolved never to kiss his wife more than twice in twenty-four hours and to ensure he did not exceed this total never added more than one teaspoonful of pepper to his soup. However, on Sundays this rule was not so strictly observed, since Schiller would then drink two bottles of beer and one of caraway vodka which he nonetheless always cursed. He did not drink at all like an Englishman who locks his door immediately after dinner and gets drunk in solitude. On the contrary: as a true German he always drank in inspired fashion, either with Hoffmann the cobbler or with Kuntz the carpenter, also German and a great drunkard. Such was the character of our worthy Schiller, who was now in a very ticklish position: although he was phlegmatic and a German, Pirogov's behaviour aroused in him something akin to jealousy. He racked his brains and just could not think how to get rid of that Russian officer. Meanwhile Pirogov was smoking his pipe in the company of his fellow officers - Providence has decreed that wherever an officer is to be found, so is a pipe, and he alluded with great

pomp and ceremony and with a pleasant smile to his little intrigue with the pretty German with whom, so he maintained, he was already on the most intimate terms and that he still entertained hopes of winning her over.

One day as he was strolling down Meshchanskaya Street, looking at the house adorned with Schiller's sign advertising coffee pots and samovars, to his unbounded delight he spotted the blonde with her head thrust out of the window, watching passers-by. He stopped, blew a kiss and said: 'Gut Morgen!'

The blonde leaned towards him as if he were an old friend.

'Tell me, is your husband home?'

'Yes,' replied the blonde.

'And when is he out?'

'Usually on Sundays,' the stupid little blonde replied.

'That sounds promising!' thought Pirogov. 'I mustn't let the chance slip.'

The following Sunday he appeared before the blonde like a bolt from the blue. Schiller was in fact out. The pretty wife took fright, but on this occasion Pirogov proceeded rather cautiously, treating her with the utmost respect and when exchanging bows displayed the full beauty of his supple figure in its tightly fitting tunic. He made pleasant and polite jokes, but the stupid German replied to everything in monosyllables. Finally, having tried every kind of attack from all sides and realized nothing would amuse her, he invited her to dance. The German agreed in a flash, since all German women love to dance. Pirogov pinned all his hopes on this approach: firstly, because it would give her pleasure and secondly because he would be able to impress her with his graceful bearing and agility, thirdly because while dancing he could get much closer, put his arm round the pretty German and thus set the ball rolling. In brief, he envisaged complete success. He began with a variety of gavotte, knowing that one has to take things gradually with German women. The pretty German stepped out into the middle of the room and raised her shapely foot. This pose so enchanted Pirogov that he rushed to kiss her. The German girl started screaming and this only enhanced her charms in Pirogov's eyes. He was showering her with kisses when suddenly

the door opened and in came Schiller and Hoffmann, together with Kuntz the carpenter. All these worthy craftsmen were as drunk as lords.

But I leave it to the reader to judge for himself Schiller's anger and indignation.

'You oaf!' he shouted, utterly incensed. 'How dare you kiss my wife? You're a scoundrel and no Russian officer! To hell with it, mein friend Hoffmann, I'm a German and no Russian pig!'

Hoffmann replied in the affirmative.

'Oh no, I don't want any horns! Grab him by the scruff of the neck, mein dear friend, Hoffmann, I won't put up with this!' he continued, wildly gesticulating, his face turning as red as the cloth of his waistcoat. 'Eight years I've been living in St Petersburg, I have mother in Swabia and uncle in Nurnberg. I'm a German and not a cuckolded chunk of meat! Off with his clothes, Hoffmann mein friend. Hold him by the arm and leg, comrade Kuntz!'

And the Germans grabbed Pirogov by his arms and legs.

In vain he struggled to fight them off. These three craftsmen were among the sturdiest Germans in all St Petersburg and treated him so roughly and rudely that I must confess I cannot find the words to portray this melancholy event.

I am convinced that next day Pirogov was running a high fever, that he was trembling like a leaf as he waited for the police to arrive any minute, that he would have given heaven knows what for all yesterday's events to have been nothing but a dream. But what has been cannot be changed. Nothing bears comparison with Pirogov's anger and indignation. The mere thought of such a terrible insult drove him into a frenzy. He considered Siberia and a flogging the very least punishment Schiller deserved.²⁴ He flew home to dress and then proceeded straight to the general's, to describe in the most lurid colours those German craftsmen's outrageous behaviour. At the same time he wanted to lodge a written complaint with the General Staff: should the punishment designated by it be inadequate²⁵ in his opinion he would go straight to the Council of State – if not to the Tsar himself.

But all this ended rather peculiarly. On the way he dropped into a pastry shop, ate two puff pastries, read something in the *Northern Bee*²⁶ and emerged with his wrath somewhat diminished. And the fairly pleasant cool evening encouraged him to take a little stroll along Nevsky Prospekt. By nine o'clock he had completely calmed down and realized that he should not disturb the general on a Sunday. Besides, the general was sure to have been called away somewhere and so off he went to a soiree given by a director of the Control Commission,²⁷ where he found a highly congenial gathering of civil servants and officers from his regiment. There he spent a most enjoyable evening and so distinguished himself in the mazurka that not only the ladies but even the cavaliers were in raptures.

'How wonderfully this world of ours is arranged!' I thought as I walked the day before yesterday along Nevsky Prospekt and recalled those two events. 'How strangely, how inscrutably fate plays with us! Do we ever get what we really desire? Do we ever achieve what our powers have ostensibly equipped us for? No: everything works by contraries. Fate has allotted the most beautiful horses to one person and he nonchalantly drives them without even noticing their beauty, whereas another, whose heart burns with passion for horses, has to lump it on foot and his only solace is to click his tongue when a trotter is led past. Someone may have an excellent cook, but unfortunately his mouth is so small it cannot accommodate more than two little morsels of food. Another has a mouth the size of the arch of the Staff Headquarters.²⁸ But alas! – he has to be content with a German supper of potatoes. What strange tricks fate plays on us!

But strangest of all are the events that take place on Nevsky Prospekt. Oh, do not trust this Nevsky Prospekt! I always wrap myself tighter in my cloak when I walk along it and try to ignore every object I see on my way. All is deception, all is a dream, all is not what it seems. So you think that gentleman strolling along in his superbly tailored frock-coat is exceedingly wealthy? Not a bit of it. His frock-coat is his entire fortune. You imagine that those two stout gentlemen who have stopped in front of a church that is being built²⁹ are commenting on its

architecture? Far from it: they are discussing how strangely two crows are sitting opposite each other. You think that the enthusiastic character waving his arms about is telling of how his wife threw a ball out of the window at some officer who was a complete stranger to him? Not a bit of it . . . he's discussing Lafayette.³⁰ You think that these ladies . . . but ladies are least of all to be trusted. Try not to look into shop windows so often: the trifles on display are charming, but they smack of great piles of banknotes. But God forbid you peep under women's hats! However invitingly the cape of some beauty in the distance flutters, not for anything would I follow her to satisfy my curiosity . . . Keep away, for God's sake, keep away as far as you can from street lamps. Hurry past them, as fast as you can! You will be lucky if you escape without your foppish frock-coat having stinking oil spilt on it. But, apart from the lamp, everything here breathes deception. This Nevsky Prospekt lies at all hours, but most of all when the thick pall of night descends upon it and throws into relief the white and pale-yellow walls of the houses, when the whole city turns into noise and glitter, when myriad carriages pour from the bridges, when postilions shout, leap up and down on their horses and when the devil himself lights the street lamps, only to show everything in an unreal guise.

THE NOSE

I

An extraordinarily strange event took place in St Petersburg on 25 March. Ivan Yakovlevich, a barber who lived on Voznesensky Prospekt (his surname has been lost and all that his shop sign shows is a gentleman with a lathered cheek and the inscription 'We also let blood'), woke up rather early one morning and smelt hot bread. Raising himself slightly on his bed he saw his wife, who was a quite respectable lady and a great coffee-drinker, taking some freshly baked rolls out of the oven.

'I don't want any coffee today, Praskovya Osipovna,' said Ivan Yakovlevich, 'I'll make do with a hot roll and onion instead.' (Here I must explain that Ivan Yakovlevich would really have liked to have had some coffee as well, but knew it was quite out of the question to expect both coffee *and* rolls, since Praskovya Osipovna did not take very kindly to these whims of his.) 'Let the old fool have his bread, I don't mind,' she thought. 'That means extra coffee for me!' And she threw a roll on to the table.

Ivan pulled his frock-coat over his nightshirt for decency's sake, sat down at the table, poured out some salt, peeled two onions, took a knife and with a determined expression on his face started cutting one of the rolls.

When he had sliced the roll in two, he peered into the middle and was amazed to see something white there. Ivan carefully picked at it with his knife, and felt it with his finger. 'Quite thick,' he said to himself. 'What on earth can it be?'

He poked two fingers in and pulled out – a nose!

Ivan Yakovlevich let his arms drop to his sides and began rubbing his eyes and feeling around in the roll again. Yes, it was a nose all right, no mistake about that. And, what's more, it seemed a very familiar nose. His face filled with horror. But this horror was nothing compared with his wife's indignation.

'You beast, whose nose is *that* you've cut off?' she cried furiously. 'You scoundrel! You drunkard! I'll report it to the police myself, I will. You thief! Come to think of it, I've heard three customers say that when they come in for a shave you start tweaking their noses about so much it's a wonder they stay on at all!'

But Ivan felt more dead than alive. He knew that the nose belonged to none other than Collegiate Assessor¹ Kovalyov, whom he shaved on Wednesdays and Sundays.

'Wait a minute, Praskovya! I'll wrap it up in a piece of cloth and put it over there in the corner. Let's leave it there for a bit, then I'll try and get rid of it.'

'I don't want to know! Do you think I'm going to let a sawn-off nose lie around in *my* room . . . you fathead! All you can do is strop that blasted razor of yours and let everything else go to pot. Layabout! Night-bird! And you expect me to cover up for you with the police! You filthy pig! Blockhead! Get that nose out of here, out! Do what you like with it, but I don't want that thing hanging around here a minute longer!' Ivan Yakovlevich was absolutely stunned. He thought and thought, but just didn't know what to make of it.

'I'm damned if I know what's happened!' he said at last, scratching the back of his ear. 'I can't say for certain if I came home drunk or not last night. All I know is, it's crazy. After all, bread is something you bake, but a nose is quite different. Can't make head or tail of it! . . .'

Ivan Yakovlevich lapsed into silence. The thought that the police might search the place, find the nose and afterwards bring a charge against him, very nearly sent him out of his mind. Already he could see that scarlet collar beautifully embroidered with silver, that sword . . . and he began shaking all over. Finally he put on his undergarments and boots, pulled on all that nonsense and with Praskovya-Osipovna's vigorous invective

ringing in his ears, wrapped the nose up in a piece of cloth and went out into the street.

All he wanted was to stuff it away somewhere, either hiding it between two curb-stones by someone's front door or else 'accidentally' dropping it and slinking off down a side-street. But as luck would have it, he kept bumping into friends, who would insist on asking: 'Where are you off to?' or 'It's a bit early for shaving customers, isn't it?' with the result that he didn't have a chance to get rid of it. Once he *did* manage to drop it, but a policeman pointed with his halberd and said: 'Pick that up! Can't you see you dropped something!' And Ivan Yakovlevich had to pick it up and hide it in his pocket. Despair gripped him, especially as the streets were getting more and more crowded now as the shops and stalls began to open.

He decided to make his way to St Isaac's Bridge and see if he could throw the nose into the River Neva without anyone seeing him. But here I am rather at fault for not having told you before something about Ivan Yakovlevich, who in many ways was a man worthy of respect.

Ivan Yakovlevich, like any honest Russian working man, was a terrible drunkard. And although he spent all day shaving other people's beards, his own was perpetually unshaven. His frock-coat (Ivan Yakovlevich never wore a dress-coat) could best be described as piebald: that is to say, it was black, but with brownish-yellow and grey spots all over it. His collar was very shiny, and three loosely hanging threads showed that some buttons had once been there. Ivan Yakovlevich was a great cynic, and whenever Kovalyov the collegiate assessor said 'Your hands always stink!' while he was being shaved, Ivan Yakovlevich would say: 'But why *should* they stink?' The collegiate assessor used to reply: 'Don't ask me, my dear chap. All I know is, they *stink*.' Ivan Yakovlevich would answer by taking a pinch of snuff and then, by way of retaliation, lather all over Kovalyov's cheeks, under his nose, behind the ears and beneath his beard – in short, wherever he felt like covering him with soap.

By now this respectable citizen of ours had already reached St Isaac's Bridge. First of all he had a good look round. Then

he leant over the rails, trying to pretend he was looking under the bridge to see if there were many fish there, and furtively threw the packet into the water. He felt as if a couple of hundredweight had been lifted all at once from his shoulders and he even managed to produce a smile.

Instead of going off to shave civil servants' chins, he headed for a shop bearing the sign 'Hot Meals and Tea' for a glass of punch. Suddenly he saw a policeman at one end of the bridge, looking very impressive with broad whiskers, a three-cornered hat and a sword. He went cold all over as the policeman beckoned to him and said: 'Come here, my friend!'

Recognizing the uniform, Ivan Yakovlevich took his cap off before he had taken half a dozen steps, tripped up to him and greeted him with: 'Good morning, Your Honour!'

'No, no, my dear chap, none of your "Honour". Just tell me what you were up to on the bridge?'

'Honest, officer, I was on my way to shave a customer and stopped to see how fast the current was.'

'You're lying. You really can't expect me to believe that! You'd better come clean at once!'

'I'll give Your Honour a free shave twice, even three times a week, honest I will,' answered Ivan Yakovlevich.

'No, no, my friend, that won't do. Three barbers look after me already, and it's an *honour* for them to shave me. Will you please tell me what you were up to?'

Ivan Yakovlevich turned pale . . . But at this point everything became so completely enveloped in mist it is really impossible to say what happened afterwards.

2

Collegiate Assessor Kovalyov woke up rather early and made a 'brring' noise with his lips. He always did this when he woke up, though, if you asked him why, he could not give any good reason. Kovalyov stretched himself and asked for the small mirror that stood on the table to be brought over to him. He wanted to have a look at a pimple that had made its appearance

on his nose the previous evening, but to his extreme astonishment found that instead of a nose there was nothing but an absolutely flat surface! In a terrible panic Kovalyov asked for some water and rubbed his eyes with a towel. No mistake about it: his nose had gone. He began pinching himself to make sure he was not sleeping, but to all intents and purposes he was wide awake. Collegiate Assessor Kovalyov sprang out of bed and shook himself: still no nose! He asked for his clothes and off he dashed straight to the Head of Police.

In the meantime, however, a few words should be said about Kovalyov, so that the reader may see what kind of collegiate assessor this man was. You really cannot compare those collegiate assessors who acquire office through academic qualifications with the variety appointed in the Caucasus.² The two species are quite distinct. Collegiate assessors with diplomas from learned bodies . . . But Russia is such an amazing country, that if you pass any remark about *one* collegiate assessor, every assessor from Riga to Kamchatka will take it personally. And the same goes for all people holding titles and government ranks. Kovalyov belonged to the Caucasian variety.

He had been a collegiate assessor for only two years and therefore could not forget it for a single minute. To make himself sound more important and to give more weight and nobility to his status he never called himself collegiate assessor, but 'Major'.³ If he met a woman in the street selling shirt fronts he would say: 'Listen dear, come and see me at home. My flat's in Sadovaya Street. All you have to do is ask if Major Kovalyov lives there and anyone will show you the way.' If he happened to meet a pretty girl he would whisper some secret instructions and then say: 'Just ask for Major Kovalyov, my dear.' Therefore, throughout this story, we will call this collegiate assessor 'Major'.

Major Kovalyov was in the habit of taking a daily stroll along Nevsky Prospekt.⁴ His shirt collar was always immaculately clean and well-starched. His whiskers were the kind you usually find among provincial surveyors, architects and regimental surgeons, as well as those who have some sort of connection with the police, with anyone in fact who has full rosy cheeks and

plays a good hand at whist. These were the kind of whiskers that usually reach from the middle of the face right across to the nostrils. Major Kovalyov always carried plenty of seals with him – seals bearing coats of arms or engraved with the words: 'Wednesday, Thursday, Monday', and so on. Major Kovalyov had come to St Petersburg with the express purpose of finding a position in keeping with his rank. If he was successful, he would get a vice-governorship, but failing that, a job as an administrative clerk in some important government department would have to do. Major Kovalyov was not averse to marriage, as long as his bride happened to be worth 200,000 roubles. And now the reader can judge for himself this major's state of mind when, instead of a fairly presentable and reasonably sized nose, all he saw was an absolutely preposterous smooth flat space. As if this were not bad enough, there was not a cab in sight, and he had to walk home, keeping himself huddled up in his cloak and with a handkerchief over his face to make people think he was bleeding. 'But perhaps I dreamt it! How could I be so stupid as to go and lose my nose?' With these thoughts he dropped into a coffee-house to take a look at himself in a mirror. Fortunately the shop was empty, except for some waiters sweeping up and tidying the chairs. A few of them, rather bleary-eyed, were carrying trays laden with hot pies. Yesterday's newspapers, covered in coffee stains, lay scattered on the tables and chairs. 'Well, thank God there's no one about,' he said. 'Now I can have a look.' He approached the mirror rather gingerly and peered into it. 'Damn it! What kind of trick is this?' he cried, spitting on the floor. 'If only there were *something* to take its place, but there's nothing!'

He bit his lips in annoyance, left the coffee-house and decided not to smile or look at anyone, which was not like him at all. Suddenly he stood rooted to the spot near the front door of some house and witnessed a most incredible spectacle. A carriage drew up at the entrance porch. The doors flew open and out jumped a uniformed, stooping gentleman who dashed up the steps. The feeling of horror and amazement that gripped Kovalyov when he recognized his own nose defies description! After this extraordinary sight everything went topsy-turvy. He

could hardly keep to his feet, but decided at all costs to wait until the nose returned to the carriage, although he was shaking all over and felt quite feverish.

About two minutes later a nose really did come out. It was wearing a gold-braided uniform with a high stand-up collar and chamois trousers, and had a sword at its side. From the plumes on its hat one could tell that it held the exalted rank of state counsellor.⁵ And it was abundantly clear that the nose was going to visit someone. It looked right, then left, shouted to the coachman 'Let's go!', climbed in and drove off.

Poor Kovalyov nearly went out of his mind. He did not know what to make of it. How, in fact, could a nose, which only yesterday was in the middle of his face, and which could not possibly walk around or drive in a carriage, suddenly turn up in a uniform! He ran after the carriage which fortunately did not travel very far and came to a halt outside Kazan Cathedral.⁶ Kovalyov rushed into the cathedral square, elbowed his way through a crowd of beggarwomen who always used to make him laugh because of the way they covered their faces, leaving only slits for the eyes, and made his way in. Only a few people were at prayer, all of them standing by the entrance. Kovalyov felt so distraught that he was in no condition for praying, and his eyes searched every nook and cranny for the nose in uniform. At length he spotted it standing by one of the walls to the side. The nose's face was completely hidden by the high collar and it was praying with an expression of profound piety.

'What's the best way of approaching it?' thought Kovalyov. 'Judging by its uniform, its hat, and its whole appearance, it must be a state counsellor. But I'm damned if I know how to go about it!'

He tried to attract its attention by coughing, but the nose did not interrupt its devotions for one second and continued to perform low bows.

'My dear sir,' Kovalyov said, summoning up his courage, 'my dear sir . . .'

'What do you want?' replied the nose, turning round.

'I don't know how best to put it, sir, but it strikes me as very peculiar . . . Don't you know where you belong? And

where do I find you? In church, of all places! I'm sure you'll agree that . . .'

'Please forgive me, but would you mind telling me what you're talking about? . . . Explain yourself.'

'How can I make myself clear?' Kovalyov wondered. Nerving himself once more he said: 'Of course, I am, as it happens, a major. You will agree that it's not done for someone in my position to walk around minus a nose. It's all right for some old woman selling peeled oranges on the Voskresensky Bridge⁷ to sit there without one. But as I'm hoping to be promoted soon . . . Besides, as I'm acquainted with several highly placed ladies: Madame Chekhtaryev, for example, a state counsellor's wife and others . . . you can judge for yourself . . . I really don't know what to say, my dear sir . . . (He shrugged his shoulders as he said this.) 'If one considers this from the point of view of duty and honour . . . then you yourself will understand.'

'I don't understand a thing,' the nose replied. 'Please make yourself clear.'

'My dear sir,' continued Kovalyov in a smug voice, 'I really don't know what you mean by that. It's plain enough for anyone to see . . . Unless you want . . . Don't you realize you are *my own nose!*'

The nose looked at the major and frowned a little.

'My dear fellow, you are mistaken. I am a person in my own right. Furthermore, I don't see that we can have anything in common. Judging from your uniform buttons, I should say you're from another government department.'

With these words the nose turned away and continued its prayers.

Kovalyov was so confused he did not know what to do or think. At that moment he heard the pleasant rustle of a woman's dress, and an elderly lady, bedecked with lace, came by, accompanied by a slim girl wearing a white dress, which showed her shapely figure to very good advantage, and a pale yellow hat as light as pastry. A tall footman, with enormous whiskers and what seemed to be a dozen collars, stationed himself behind them and opened his snuff-box. Kovalyov went closer, pulled the linen collar of his shirt front up high, straightened the seals

hanging on his gold watch chain and, smiling all over his face, turned his attention to the slim girl, who bent over to pray like a spring flower and kept lifting her little white hand with its almost transparent fingers to her forehead.

The smile on Kovalyov's face grew even more expansive when he saw, beneath her hat, a little rounded chin of dazzling white, and cheeks flushed with the colour of the first rose of spring.

But suddenly he jumped backwards as though he had been burnt: he remembered that instead of a nose he had absolutely nothing, and tears streamed from his eyes. He swung round to tell the nose in uniform straight out that it was only masquerading as a state counsellor, that it was an impostor and a scoundrel, and really nothing else than his own private property, *his nose* . . . But the nose had already gone: it had managed to slip off unseen, probably to pay somebody a visit.

This reduced Kovalyov to utter despair. He went out, and stood for a minute or so under the colonnade, carefully looking around him in the hope of spotting the nose. He remembered quite distinctly that it was wearing a plumed hat and a gold-embroidered uniform. But he had not noticed what its greatcoat was like, or the colour of its carriage, or its horses, or even if there was a liveried footman at the back. What's more, there were so many carriages careering to and fro, so fast, that it was practically impossible to recognize any of them, and even if he could, there was no way of making them stop.

It was a beautiful sunny day. Nevsky Prospekt was packed. From the Police Headquarters right down to the Anichkov Bridge⁸ a whole floral cascade of ladies flowed along the pavements. Not far off he could see that court counsellor whom he referred to as lieutenant-colonel,⁹ especially if there happened to be other people around. And over there was Yarygin, a head clerk in the Senate, and a very close friend of his who always lost at whist when he played in a party of eight. Another major, a collegiate assessor, of the Caucasian variety, waved to him to come over and have a chat.

'Blast and damn!' said Kovalyov, hailing a droshky. 'Driver, take me straight to the Chief of Police.'

He climbed into the droshky and shouted: 'Drive like the devil!'

'Is the Police Commissioner in?' he said as soon as he entered the hall.

'No, he's not, sir,' said the porter. 'He left only a few minutes ago.'

'This really *is* my day.'

'Yes,' added the porter, 'you've only just missed him. A minute ago you'd have caught him.'

Kovalyov, his handkerchief still pressed to his face, climbed into the droshky again and cried out in a despairing voice: 'Let's go!'

'Where?' asked the driver.

'Straight on!'

'Straight on? But it's a dead end here – you can only go right or left.'

This last question made Kovalyov stop and think. In his position the best thing to do was to go first to the City Security Office, not because it was directly connected with the police, but because things got done there much quicker than in any other government department. There was no sense in going for satisfaction direct to the head of the department where the nose claimed to work since anyone could see from the answers he had got before that the nose considered nothing holy and was just as capable now of lying as it had done before, claiming never to have set eyes on him.

So just as Kovalyov was about to tell the driver to go straight to the Security Office, it again struck him that the scoundrel and impostor who had behaved so shamelessly at their first encounter could quite easily take advantage of the delay and slip out of the city, in which event all his efforts to find it would be futile and might even drag on for another month, God forbid. Finally inspiration came from above. He decided to go straight to the newspaper offices and publish an advertisement, giving such a detailed description of the nose that anyone who happened to meet it would at once turn it over to Kovalyov, or at least tell him where he could find it. Deciding this was the best course of action, he ordered the driver to go straight to the

newspaper offices and throughout the whole journey never once stopped pummeling the driver in the back with his fist and shouting: 'Faster, damn you, faster!'

'But sir . . .' the driver retorted as he shook his head and flicked his reins at his horse, which had a coat as long as a spaniel's. Finally the droshky came to a halt and the breathless Kovalyov tore into a small waiting-room where a grey-haired bespectacled clerk in an old frock-coat was sitting at a table with his pen between his teeth, counting out copper coins.

'Who sees to advertisements here?' Kovalyov shouted. 'Ah, good morning.'

'Good morning,' replied the grey-haired clerk, raising his eyes for one second, then looking down again at the little piles of money spread out on the table.

'I want to publish an advertisement.'

'Just one moment, if you don't mind,' the clerk answered, as he wrote down a figure with one hand and moved two beads on his abacus with the other.

A footman who, judging by his gold-braided livery and generally very smart appearance, obviously worked in some noble house, was standing by the table holding a piece of paper and, considering it the right thing to display a certain degree of bonhomie, started rattling away:

'Believe me, sir, that nasty little dog just isn't worth eighty copecks. I mean, I wouldn't even give eight for it. But the Countess adores it, just dotes on it she does, and she'll give anyone who finds it a reward of a hundred roubles! If we're going to be honest with one another, I'll tell you quite openly, there's no accounting for taste. I can understand a fancier paying anything up to five hundred, even a thousand for a deerhound or a poodle, as long as it's a good dog.'

The worthy clerk listened to him solemnly while he carried on totting up the words in the advertisement. The room was crowded with old women, salesmen and house-porters, all holding advertisements. In one of these a coachman of 'sober disposition' was seeking employment; in another a carriage, hardly used, and brought from Paris in 1814, was up for sale; in another a nineteen-year-old servant girl, with laundry experience, and

prepared to do *other* work, was looking for a job. Other advertisements offered a droshky for sale – in good condition apart from one missing spring; a ‘young’ and spirited dapple-grey colt seventeen years old; radish and turnip seeds only just arrived from London; a country house, with every modern convenience, including stabling for two horses and enough land for planting an excellent birch or fir forest. And one invited prospective buyers of old boot soles to attend certain auction rooms between the hours of eight and three daily. The room into which all these people were crammed was small and extremely stuffy. But Collegiate Assessor Kovalyov could not smell anything as he had covered his face with a handkerchief – and he could not have smelt anything anyway, as his nose had disappeared God knows where.

‘My dear sir, if I may request your . . . it’s really most urgent,’ he said, beginning to lose patience.

‘Just a minute, if you *don’t* mind! Two roubles forty-three copecks. Nearly ready. One rouble sixty-four copecks,’ the grey-haired clerk muttered as he shoved pieces of paper at the old ladies and servants standing around. Finally he turned to Kovalyov and said: ‘What do you want?’

‘I want . . .’ Kovalyov began. ‘Something very fishy’s been going on, whether it’s some nasty practical joke or a plain case of fraud I can’t say as yet. All I want you to do is to offer a substantial reward for the first person to find the black-guard . . .’

‘May I inquire as to your name, sir?’

‘Why do you need that? I can’t tell you. Too many people know me – Mrs Chekharyev, for example, who’s married to a state counsellor, Mrs Palageya Podtochin, a staff officer’s wife . . . they’d find out who it was at once, God forbid! Just put “Collegiate Assessor”, or even better, “Gentleman holding the rank of major”.’

‘And the missing person was a household serf of yours?’

‘Household serf? The crime wouldn’t be half as serious! It’s my *nose* that’s disappeared God knows where.’

‘Hm, strange name. And did this Mr Nose steal much?’

‘My nose, I’m trying to say. You *don’t* understand! It’s my

own nose that’s disappeared. It’s a diabolical practical joke someone’s played on me.’

‘How did it disappear? I don’t follow.’

‘I can’t tell you how. But please understand, my nose is driving at this very moment all over town, calling itself a state counsellor. That’s why I’m asking you to print this advertisement announcing the first person who catches it should return the nose to its rightful owner as soon as possible. Imagine what it’s like being without such a conspicuous part of your anatomy! If it were just a small toe, then I could put my shoe on and no one would be any the wiser. On Thursdays I go to Mrs Chekharyev’s (she’s married to a state counsellor) and Mrs Podtochin, who has a staff officer for a husband – and a very pretty little daughter as well. Also, they’re all very close friends of mine, so just imagine what it would be like . . . In *my* state I can’t possibly visit any of them.’

The clerk’s tightly pressed lips showed he was deep in thought. ‘I can’t print an advertisement like that in our paper,’ he said after a long silence.

‘What? Why not?’

‘I’ll tell you. A paper can get a bad name. If everyone started announcing his nose had run away, I don’t know how it would all end. And enough false reports and rumours get past editorial already . . .’

‘But why does it strike you as so absurd? I certainly don’t think so.’

‘That’s what *you* think. But only last week there was a similar case. A clerk came here with an advertisement, just like you. It cost him two roubles seventy-three copecks, and all he wanted to advertise was a runaway black poodle. And what do you think he was up to really? In the end we had a libel case on our hands: the poodle was meant as a satire on a government cashier – I can’t remember what ministry he came from.’

‘But I want to publish an advertisement about my nose, not a poodle, and that’s as near myself as dammit!’

‘No, I can’t accept that kind of advertisement.’

‘But I’ve lost my *nose!*’

‘Then you’d better see a doctor about it. I’ve heard there’s a

certain kind of specialist who can fix you up with any kind of nose you like. Anyway, you seem the cheery sort, and I can see you like to have your little joke.'

'By all that's holy, I swear I'm telling you the truth. If you really want me to, I'll *show* you what I mean.'

'I shouldn't bother if I were you,' the clerk continued, taking a pinch of snuff. 'However, if it's *really* no trouble,' he added, leaning forward out of curiosity, 'then I shouldn't mind having a quick look.'

The collegiate assessor removed his handkerchief.

'Well, how very peculiar! It's quite flat, just like a freshly cooked pancake. Incredibly flat.'

'So much for your objections! Now you've seen it with your own eyes and you can't possibly refuse. I will be particularly grateful for this little favour, and I'm delighted that this incident has afforded me the pleasure of making your acquaintance.'

The major, evidently, had decided that a little toadying might do the trick.

'Of course, it's no problem *printing* the advertisement,' the clerk said. 'But I can't see what you can stand to gain by it. If you like, why not give it to someone with a flair for journalism, then he can write it up as a very rare freak of nature and have it published as an article in the *Northern Bee*¹⁰ (here he took another pinch of snuff) so that young people might benefit from it (here he wiped his nose). Or else, as something of interest to the general public.'

The collegiate assessor's hopes were completely dashed. He looked down at the bottom of the page at the theatre guide. The name of a rather pretty actress almost brought a smile to his face, and he reached down to his pocket to see if he had a five-rouble note, since in his opinion staff officers should sit only in the stalls. But then he remembered his nose, and knew he could not possibly think of going to the theatre.

Apparently even the clerk was touched by Kovalyov's terrible predicament and thought it would not hurt to cheer him up with a few words of sympathy.

'I deeply regret that such a strange thing has happened to you. Would you care for a pinch of snuff? It's very good for

headaches – and puts fresh heart into you. It's even good for piles.'

With these words he offered Kovalyov his snuff-box, deftly flipping back the lid which bore a portrait of some lady in a hat.

This unintentionally thoughtless action made Kovalyov lose patience altogether.

'I don't understand how you can joke at a time like this,' he said angrily. 'Are you so blind you can't see that I've nothing to smell with? To hell with your snuff! I can't bear to look at it, and anyway you might at least offer me some real French rappee,¹¹ not that filthy Berezinsky¹² brand.'

After this declaration he strode furiously out of the newspaper office and went off to the local Inspector of Police (a fanatical lover of sugar whose hall and dining room were crammed full of sugar cubes presented by merchants who wanted to keep well in with him). At that moment the cook was removing the Inspector's regulation jackboots. His sword and all his military trappings were hanging peacefully in the corner and his three-year-old son was already fingering his awesome tricorne. And he himself, after a warrior's life of martial exploits, was now preparing to savour the pleasures of peace. Kovalyov arrived just when he was having a good stretch, grunting, and saying, 'Now for a nice two hours' nap.' Our collegiate assessor had clearly chosen a very bad time for his visit.

The Inspector was a great patron of the arts and industry, but most of all he loved government banknotes. 'There's nothing finer than banknotes,' he used to say. 'They don't need feeding, take up very little room and slip nicely into the pocket. And they don't break if you drop them.'

The Inspector gave Kovalyov a rather cold welcome and said that after dinner wasn't at all the time to start investigations, that Nature herself had decreed a rest after meals (from this our collegiate assessor concluded the Inspector was well versed in the wisdom of antiquity), that *respectable* men do not get their noses ripped off, and that there were no end of majors knocking around who were not too fussy about their underwear and who were in the habit of visiting the most disreputable places.

These few home truths stung Kovalyov to the quick. Here I must point out that Kovalyov was an extremely sensitive man. He did not so much mind people making personal remarks about him, but it was a different matter when aspersions were cast on his rank or social standing.

As far as he was concerned they could say what they liked about subalterns on the stage, but staff officers should be exempt from attack.

The reception given him by the Inspector startled him so much that he shook his head, threw out his arms and said in a dignified voice, 'To be frank, after these remarks of yours, which I find very offensive, I have nothing more to say . . .' and walked out. He arrived home hardly able to feel his feet beneath him. It was already getting dark. After his fruitless inquiries his flat seemed extremely dismal and depressing. As he entered the hall he saw his footman Ivan lying on a soiled leather couch spitting at the ceiling, managing to hit the same spot with a fair degree of success. The nonchalance of the man infuriated him and Kovalyov hit him across the forehead with his hat and said: 'You fat pig! Haven't you anything better to do!'

Ivan promptly jumped up and rushed to take off Kovalyov's coat. Tired and depressed, the major went to his room, threw himself into an armchair and after a few sighs said:

'My God, my God! What have I done to deserve this? If I'd lost an arm or a leg it wouldn't be so bad. Even without any ears things wouldn't be very pleasant, but it wouldn't be the end of the world. A man without a nose, though, is God knows what, neither fish nor fowl. Just something to be thrown out of the window. If my nose had been lopped off during the war, or in a duel, at least I might have had some say in the matter. But to lose it for no reason at all and with nothing to show for it, not even a copeck! No, it's absolutely impossible . . . It can't have gone just like that! Never! Must have been a dream, or perhaps I drank some of that vodka I use for rubbing down my beard after shaving instead of water: that idiot Ivan couldn't have put it away and I must have picked it up by mistake.'

To convince himself that he was not in fact drunk the major pinched himself so hard that he cried out in pain, which really

did convince him he was awake and in full possession of his senses. He stealthily crept over to the mirror and screwed up his eyes in the hope that his nose would reappear in its proper place, but at once he jumped back, exclaiming:

'That ridiculous blank space again!'

It was absolutely incomprehensible. If a button, or a silver spoon, or his watch, or something of that sort had been missing, that would have been understandable. But for his nose to disappear from his own flat . . . Major Kovalyov weighed up all the evidence and decided that the most likely explanation of all was that Mrs Podtochin, the staff officer's wife, who wanted to marry off her daughter to him, was to blame, and no one else. In fact he liked chasing after her, but never came to proposing. And when the staff officer's wife told him straight out that she was offering him her daughter's hand, he politely withdrew, excusing himself on the grounds that he was still a young man, and that he wanted to devote another five years to the service, by which time he would be just forty-two. So, to get her revenge, the staff officer's wife must have decided to ruin him and for that purpose had hired some old witches – it was quite inconceivable that his nose had been cut off – no one had visited him in his flat, his barber Ivan Yakovlevich had shaved him only last Wednesday, and the rest of that day and the whole of Thursday his nose had been intact. All this he remembered quite clearly. Moreover, he would have been in pain and the wound could not have healed as flat as a pancake in such a short time. He began planning what to do: either he would sue the staff officer's wife for damages, or he would go and see her personally and accuse her point blank.

But he was distracted from these thoughts by the sight of some chinks of light in the door, which meant Ivan had lit a candle in the hall. Soon afterwards Ivan appeared in person, holding the candle in front of him, so that it brightened up the whole room. Kovalyov's first reaction was to seize his handkerchief and cover up the bare place where only yesterday his nose had been, to stop that stupid man gaping at his master's weird appearance. No sooner had Ivan gone back to his cubby-hole than a strange voice was heard in the hall:

'Does Collegiate Assessor Kovalyov live here?'

'Please come in. The major's home,' said Kovalyov, springing to his feet and opening the door.

A smart-looking police officer, with plump cheeks and whiskers that were neither too light nor too dark – the same police officer who had stood on St Isaac's Bridge at the beginning of our story – made his entrance.

'Are you the gentleman who has lost his nose?'

'Yes, that's me.'

'It's been found.'

'What did you say?' cried Major Kovalyov. He could hardly speak for joy. He looked wide-eyed at the police officer, the candle-light flickering on his fat cheeks and thick lips.

'How did you find it?'

'Very strange. We intercepted it just as it was boarding the stagecoach bound for Riga. Its passport was made out in the name of some civil servant. Strangely enough, I mistook it for a gentleman at first. Fortunately I had my spectacles with me so I could see it was really a nose. I'm very short-sighted, and if you happen to stand just in front of me, I can only make out your face, but not your nose, or beard, or anything else in fact. My mother-in-law (that's to say, on my *wife's* side) suffers from the same complaint.'

Kovalyov was beside himself.

'Where is it? I'll go right away to claim it.'

'Don't excite yourself, sir. I knew how much you wanted it back, so I've brought it with me. Very strange, but the main culprit in this little affair seems to be that swindler of a barber from Voznesensky Street: he's down at the station now. I've had my eyes on him a long time now on suspicion of drunkenness and larceny, and only the day before yesterday he was found stealing a dozen buttons from a shop. You'll find your nose just as it was when you lost it.'

And the police officer dipped into his pocket and pulled out the nose wrapped up in a piece of paper.

'That's it!' cried Kovalyov, 'no mistake! You *must* stay and have a cup of tea with me.'

'That would give me great pleasure, but I just couldn't. From

here I have to go direct to the House of Correction . . . The price of food has rocketed . . . My mother-in-law (on my *wife's* side) is living with me, and all the children as well; the eldest boy seems very promising, very bright, but we haven't the money to send him to school . . .'

Kovalyov guessed what he was after and took a note from the table and pressed it into the officer's hands. The police officer bowed very low and went out into the street, and almost simultaneously Kovalyov could hear him telling some stupid peasant who had driven his cart up on the pavement what he thought of him.

When the police officer had gone, our collegiate assessor felt rather bemused and only after a few minutes did he come to his senses at all, so intense and unexpected was the joy he felt. He carefully took the nose in his cupped hands and once more subjected it to close scrutiny.

'Yes, that's it, that's it!' Major Kovalyov said, 'and there's the pimple that came up yesterday on the left-hand side.' The major almost laughed with joy.

But nothing is lasting in this world. Even joy begins to fade after only one minute. Two minutes later, and it is weaker still, until finally it is swallowed up in our everyday, prosaic state of mind, just as a ripple made by a pebble gradually merges with the smooth surface of the water. After some thought Kovalyov concluded that all was not right: yes – the nose had been found but there still remained the problem of putting it back in place.

'What if it doesn't stick?'

And this question which he now asked himself made the major turn pale.

With a feeling of inexpressible horror he rushed to the table, and pulled the mirror nearer, as he was afraid that he might stick the nose on crooked. His hands trembled. With great care and caution he pushed it into place. But oh! the nose just would not stick. He warmed it a little by pressing it to his mouth and breathing on it, and then pressed it again to the smooth space between his cheeks. But try as he might the nose would not stay on.

'Come on now – stay on, you fool!' he said. But the nose

seemed to be made of wood and fell on to the table with a strange cork-like sound. The major's face quivered convulsively. 'Perhaps I can graft it,' he said apprehensively. But no matter how many times he tried to put it back, all his efforts were futile.

He called Ivan and told him to fetch the doctor, who happened to live in the same block, in the best flat, on the first floor.

This doctor was a handsome man with fine whiskers as black as pitch, and a fresh-looking, healthy wife. Every morning he used to eat apples and was terribly meticulous about keeping his mouth clean, spending at least three quarters of an hour rinsing it out every day and using five different varieties of toothbrush to polish his teeth. He came right away. When he had asked the major if he had had this trouble for very long the doctor lifted Major Kovalyov's head by the chin and prodded him with his thumb in the spot once occupied by his nose – so sharply that the major hit the wall very hard with the back of his head. The doctor told him not to worry and made him stand a little way from the wall and lean his head first to the right. Pinching the place where his nose had been the doctor said 'Hm!' Then he ordered him to move his head to the left and produced another 'Hm!' Finally he prodded him again, making Kovalyov's head twitch like a horse having its teeth inspected.

After this examination the doctor shook his head and said: 'It's no good. It's best to stay as you are, otherwise you'll only make it worse. Of course, it's possible to have it stuck on, and I could do this for you quite easily. But I assure you it would look terrible.'

'That's *marvellous*, that is! How can I carry on without a nose?' said Kovalyov. 'Things can't get any worse! The devil knows what's going on! How can I go around looking like a freak? I mix with nice people. I'm expected at two soirées today. I know nearly all the best people – Mrs Chekharyev, a state counsellor's wife, Mrs Podtochin, a staff officer's wife . . . after the way *she's* behaved I won't have any more to do with *her*, except when I get the police on her trail.' Kovalyov went on pleading: 'Please do me this one favour – isn't there *any way*?

Even if you only get it to hold on, it wouldn't be so bad, and if there were any risk of it falling off, I could keep it there with my hand. I don't dance, which is a help, because any violent movement might make it drop off. And you may rest assured I wouldn't be slow in showing my appreciation – as far as my pocket will allow of course . . .'

The doctor then said in a voice which could not be called loud, or even soft, but persuasive and arresting: 'I never practise my art from purely mercenary motives. That is contrary to my code of conduct and all professional ethics. True, I make a charge for private visits, but only so as not to offend patients by refusing to take their money. Of course, I could put your nose back if I wanted to. But I give you my word of honour, if you know what's good for you, it would be far worse if I tried. Let nature take its course. Wash the area as much as you can with cold water and believe me you'll feel just as good as when you had a nose. Now, as far as the nose is concerned, put it in a jar of alcohol; better still, soak it in two tablespoonsful of sour vodka and warmed-up vinegar, and you'll get good money for it. I'll take it myself if you don't want it.'

'No! I wouldn't sell it for anything,' Kovalyov cried desperately. 'I'd rather lose it again.'

'Then I'm sorry,' replied the doctor, bowing himself out. 'I wanted to help you . . . at least I've tried hard enough.'

With these words the doctor made a very dignified exit. Kovalyov did not even look at his face, and felt so dazed that all he could make out were the doctor's snowy-white cuffs sticking out from the sleeves of his black dress-coat.

The very next day he decided – before going to the police – to write to the staff officer's wife to ask her to put back in its proper place what belonged to him, without further ado. The letter read as follows:

Dear Mrs Alexandra Grigoryevna,

I cannot understand this strange behaviour on your part. You can be sure, though, that it won't get you anywhere and you certainly won't force me to marry your daughter. Moreover, you can rest assured that, regarding my nose, I am familiar with the

whole history of this affair from the very beginning, and I also know that you, and no one else, are the prime instigator. Its sudden detachment from its rightful place, its subsequent flight, its masquerading as a civil servant and then its re-appearance in its natural state, are nothing else than the result of black magic carried out by yourself or by those practising the same very honourable art. I consider it my duty to warn you that if the above-mentioned nose is not back in its proper place by today, then I shall be compelled to ask for the law's protection.

I remain, dear Madam,

Your very faithful servant,
Platon Kovalyov.

Dear Mr Kovalyov!

I was simply staggered by your letter. To be honest, I never expected anything of this kind from you, particularly those remarks which are quite uncalled-for. I would have you know I have never received that civil servant mentioned by you in my house, whether disguised or not. True, Philip Ivanovich Potanchikov used to call. Although he wanted to ask for my daughter's hand, and despite the fact that he was a very sober, respectable and learned gentleman, I never gave him any cause for hope. And then you go on to mention your nose. If by this you mean to say I wanted to make you look foolish,¹³ that is, to put you off with a formal refusal, then all I can say is that I am very surprised that you can talk like this, as you know well enough my feelings on the matter are quite different. And if you care to make an official proposal to my daughter, I will gladly give my consent, for this has always been my dearest wish, and in this hope I am always at your disposal.

Yours sincerely,
Alexandra Podtochin.

'No,' said Kovalyov when he had read the letter. 'She's not to blame. Impossible! A guilty person could never write a letter like that.' The collegiate assessor knew what he was talking about in this case as he had been sent to the Caucasus several times to carry out legal inquiries. ~~How on earth did this happen~~

then? It's impossible to make head or tail of it!' he said, letting his arms drop to his side.

Meanwhile rumours about the strange occurrence had spread throughout the capital, not, need we say, without a few embellishments. At the time everyone seemed very preoccupied with the supernatural: only a short time before, some experiments in magnetism had been all the rage. Besides, the story of the dancing chairs in Konyushenny Street¹⁴ was still fresh in people's minds, so no one was particularly surprised to hear about Collegiate Assessor Kovalyov's nose taking a regular stroll along Nevsky Prospekt at exactly three o'clock every afternoon. Every day crowds of inquisitive people flocked there. Someone said they had seen the nose in Junker's Store and this produced such a crush outside that the police had to be called.

One fairly respectable-looking, bewhiskered entrepreneur, who sold stale cakes outside the theatre, knocked together some handsome, solid-looking wooden benches, and hired them out at eighty copecks a time for the curious to stand on.

One retired colonel left home especially early one morning and after a great struggle managed to barge his way through to the front. But to his great annoyance, instead of a nose in the shop window, all he could see was an ordinary woollen jersey and a lithograph showing a girl adjusting her stocking while a dandy with a small beard and cutaway waistcoat peered out at her from behind a tree – a picture which had hung there in that identical spot for more than ten years. He left feeling very cross and was heard to say: 'Misleading the public with such ridiculous and far-fetched stories shouldn't be allowed.'

Afterwards it was rumoured that Major Kovalyov's nose was no longer to be seen strolling along Nevsky Prospekt but was in the habit of walking in Tavrichesky Park¹⁵ and that it had been doing this for some time. When Khozrev-Mirza¹⁶ lived there, he was astonished at this freak of nature. Some of the students from the College of Surgeons went to have a look. One well-known, very respectable lady wrote specially to the head park-keeper, asking him to show her children this very rare phenomenon and, if possible, give them an instructive and edifying commentary at the same time.

These events came as a blessing to those socialites (indispensable for any successful party) who loved amusing the ladies and whose stock of stories was completely exhausted at the time.

A few respectable and high-minded citizens were very upset. One indignant gentleman said that he was at a loss to understand how such absurd cock-and-bull stories could gain currency in the present enlightened century, and that the complete indifference shown by the authorities was past comprehension. Clearly this gentleman was the type who likes to make the government responsible for everything, even their daily quarrels with their wives. And afterwards . . . but here again the whole incident becomes enveloped in mist and what happened later remains a complete mystery.

3

This world is full of the most outrageous nonsense. Sometimes things happen which you would hardly think possible: that very same nose, which had paraded itself as a state counsellor and created such an uproar in the city, suddenly turned up, as if nothing had happened, in its rightful place, that is, between Major Kovalyov's two cheeks. This was on 7 April. He woke up and happened to glance at the mirror – there was his nose! He grabbed it with his hand to make sure – but there was no doubt this time. 'Aha!' cried Kovalyov, and if Ivan hadn't come in at that very moment, he would have joyfully danced a trepak round the room in his bare feet.

He ordered some soap and water to be brought right away, and as he washed himself looked into the mirror again: the nose was there. He had another look as he dried himself – yes, the nose was still there!

'Look, Ivan, I think I've got a pimple on my nose.'

Kovalyov thought: 'God, supposing he replies: "Not only is there no pimple, but no nose either!"' But Ivan answered: 'Your nose is quite all right, sir, I can't see any pimple.'

'Thank God for that,' the major said to himself and clicked his fingers.

At this moment Ivan Yakovlevich the barber poked his head round the corner, but timidly this time, like a cat which had just been beaten for stealing fat.

'Before you start, are your hands clean?' Kovalyov shouted from the other side of the room.

'Perfectly clean.'

'You're lying.'

'On my life, sir, they're clean!'

'Well, they'd better be!'

Kovalyov sat down. Ivan Yakovlevich covered him with a towel and in a twinkling, with the help of his shaving brush, had transformed his whole beard and part of his cheeks into the kind of cream served up at merchants' birthday parties.

'Well, I'll be damned,' Ivan Yakovlevich muttered to himself, staring at the nose. He bent Kovalyov's head to one side and looked at him from a different angle. 'That's *it* all right! You'd never credit it . . .' he continued and contemplated the nose for a long time. Finally, ever so gently, with a delicacy that the reader can best imagine, he lifted two fingers to hold the nose by its tip. This was how Ivan Yakovlevich normally shaved his customers.

'Come on now, and mind what you're doing!' shouted Kovalyov. Ivan Yakovlevich let his arms fall to his side and stood there more frightened and embarrassed than he had ever been in his life. At last he started tickling Kovalyov carefully under the chin with his razor. And although with only his olfactory organ to hold on to without any other means of support made shaving very awkward, by planting his rough, wrinkled thumb on his cheek and lower gum (in this way gaining some sort of leverage) he finally succeeded in overcoming all obstacles.

When everything was ready, Kovalyov rushed to get dressed and took a cab straight to the café. He had hardly got inside before he shouted, 'Waiter, a cup of chocolate,' and went straight up to the mirror. Yes, his nose was there! Gaily he turned round, screwed up his eyes and looked superciliously at two soldiers, one of whom had a nose no bigger than a *waist-coat* button. Then he went off to the ministerial department where he was petitioning for a vice-governorship. (Failing this

he was going to try for an administrative post.) As he crossed the entrance hall he had another look in the mirror: his nose was still there!

Then he went to see another collegiate assessor (or major), a great wag whose sly digs Kovalyov used to counter by saying: 'I'm used to your quips by now, you old niggler!'

On the way he thought: 'If the major doesn't split his sides when he sees me, that's a sure sign everything is in its proper place.' But the collegiate assessor did not pass any remarks. 'That's all right then, dammit!' thought Kovalyov. In the street he met Mrs Podtochin, the staff officer's wife, who was with her daughter, and they replied to his bow with delighted exclamations: clearly, he had suffered no lasting injury. He had a long chat with them, made a point of taking out his snuff-box, and stood there for ages ostentatiously stuffing both nostrils as he murmured to himself: 'That'll teach you, you old hens! And I'm not going to marry your daughter, simply *par amour*, as they say! If you *don't* mind!'

And from that time onwards Major Kovalyov was able to stroll along Nevsky Prospekt, visit the theatre, in fact go everywhere as though absolutely nothing had happened. And, as though absolutely nothing *had* happened, his nose stayed in the middle of his face and showed no signs of absenting itself. After that he was in perpetual high spirits, always smiling, chasing all the pretty girls, and on one occasion even stopping at a small shop in the Gostiny Dvor¹⁷ to buy ribbon for some medal, no one knows why, as he did not belong to any order of knighthood.

And all this took place in the northern capital of our vast empire! Only now, after much reflection, can we see that there is a great deal that is very far-fetched in this story. Apart from the fact that it's *highly* unlikely for a nose to disappear in such a fantastic way and then reappear in various parts of the town dressed as a state counsellor, it is hard to believe that Kovalyov was so ignorant as to think newspapers would accept advertisements about noses. I'm not saying I consider such an advertisement too expensive and a waste of money: that's nonsense, and what's more, I don't think I'm a mercenary person. But it's all

very nasty, not quite the thing at all, and it makes me feel very awkward! And, come to think of it, how *did* the nose manage to turn up in a loaf of bread, and how *did* Ivan Yakovlevich . . . ? No, I don't understand it, not one bit! But the strangest, most incredible thing of all is that authors should write about such things. That, I confess, is beyond my comprehension. It's just . . . no, no, I don't understand it at all! Firstly, it's no use to the country whatsoever; secondly – but even then it's no use either . . . I simply don't know *what* one can make of it . . . However, when all is said and done, one can concede this point or the other and perhaps you can even find . . . well then you won't find much that *isn't* on the absurd side *somewhere*, will you?

And yet, if you stop to think for a moment, there's a grain of truth in it. Whatever you may say, these things do happen in this world – rarely, I admit, but they do happen.

THE OVERCOAT

In one of our government departments . . . but perhaps I had better not say exactly *which* one. For no one's more touchy than people in government departments, regiments, chancelleries or, in short, *any* kind of official body. Nowadays every private citizen thinks the whole of society is insulted when he himself is. They say that not so long ago a complaint was lodged by a district police inspector (I cannot remember which town he came from) and in this he made it quite plain that the state and all its laws were going to rack and ruin, and that his own holy name had been taken in vain without any shadow of doubt. To substantiate his claim he appended as supplementary evidence an absolutely enormous tome, containing a highly romantic composition, in which nearly every ten pages a police commissioner made an appearance, sometimes even in an inebriated state. And so, to avoid any *further* unpleasantness, we had better call the department in question *a certain department*.

In a certain department, then, there worked *a certain civil servant*. On no account could he be said to have a memorable appearance; he was shortish, rather pockmarked, with reddish hair, and also had weak eyesight, or so it seemed. He had a small bald patch in front and both cheeks were wrinkled. His complexion was the sort you might call haemorrhoidal . . . but there's nothing anyone can do about that: the Petersburg climate is to blame.

As for his rank in the civil service¹ (this must be determined before we go any further) he belonged to the species known as *eternal titular counsellor*, for far too long now, as we all know, *mocked and jeered* by certain writers with the very commendable

habit of attacking those who are in no position to retaliate. His surname was Bashmachkin, which all too plainly was at some time derived from *bashmak*.²

But exactly when and what time of day and how the name originated is a complete mystery. Both his father and his grandfather, and even his brother-in-law and all the other Bashmachkins, went around in boots and had them soled only three times a year. His name was Akaky Akakievich. This may appear an odd name to our reader and somewhat far-fetched, but we can assure him that no one went out of his way to find it, and that the way things turned out he just could not have been called anything else. This is how it all happened: Akaky Akakievich was born on the night of 22 March, if my memory serves me right. His late mother, the wife of a civil servant and a very fine woman, made all the necessary arrangements for the christening. At the time she was still lying in her bed, facing the door, and on her right stood the godfather, Ivan Ivanovich Yeroshkin, a most excellent gentleman who was a chief clerk in the Senate, and the godmother, Arina Semyonovna Belobrushkova, the wife of a district police inspector and a woman of the rarest virtue. The mother was offered a choice of three names: Mokkia, Sossia or Khozdazat, after the martyr. 'Oh no,' his mother thought, 'such awful names they're going in for these days!' To try and please her they turned over a few pages in the calendar³ and again three peculiar names popped up: Triphily, Dula and Varakhasy. 'It's sheer punishment sent from above!' the woman muttered. 'What names! For the life of me, I've never seen anything like them. Varadat or Varukh wouldn't be so bad but as for Triphily and Varakhasy!' They turned over yet another page and found Pavsikakhy and Vakhtisy. 'Well, it's plain enough that this is fate. So we'd better call him after his father. He was an Akaky, so let's call his son Akaky as well.' And that was how he became Akaky Akakievich. The child was christened and during the ceremony he burst into tears and made such a face it was plain that he knew there and then that he was fated to be a titular counsellor. So, that's how it all came about. The reason for all this narrative is to enable our reader to judge for himself that the whole train of events was absolutely

predetermined and that for Akaky to have any other name was quite impossible.

Exactly *when* he entered the department, and who was responsible for the appointment, no one can say for sure. No matter how many directors and principals came and went, he was always to be seen in precisely the same place, sitting in exactly the same position, doing exactly the same work – just routine copying, pure and simple. Subsequently everyone came to believe that he had come into this world already equipped for his job, complete with uniform and bald patch. No one showed him the least respect in the office. The porters not only remained seated when he went by, but they did not so much as give him a look – as though a common housefly had just flown across the waiting-room. His superiors treated him icily and despotically. Some assistant to the head clerk would shove some papers right under his nose, without even so much as a ‘Please copy this out’, or ‘Here’s an interesting little job’, or some pleasant remark you might expect to hear in refined establishments. He would take whatever was put in front of him without looking up to see who had put it there or questioning whether he had any right to do so, his eyes fixed only on his work. He would simply take the documents and immediately start copying them out. The junior clerks laughed and told jokes at his expense – as far as office wit would stretch – telling stories they had made up themselves, even while they were standing right next to him, about his seventy-year-old landlady, for example, who used to beat him, or so they said. They would ask when the wedding was going to be and shower his head with little bits of paper, calling them snow.

But Akaky Akakievich did not make the slightest protest, just as though there were nobody there at all. His work was not even affected and he never copied out one wrong letter in the face of all this annoyance. Only if the jokes became too unbearable – when somebody jugged his elbow, for example, and stopped him from working – would he say: ‘Leave me alone, why do you have to torment me?’ There was something strange in these words and the way he said them. His voice had a peculiar sound which made you ^{feel} sorry for him, so much

so that one clerk who was new to the department, and who was about to follow the example of the others and have a good laugh at him, suddenly stopped dead in his tracks, as though transfixed, and from that time onwards everything seemed to have changed for him and now appeared in a different light. Some kind of supernatural power alienated him from his colleagues whom, on first acquaintance, he had taken to be respectable, civilized men. And for a long time afterwards, even during his gayest moments, he would see that stooping figure with a bald patch in front, muttering pathetically: ‘Leave me alone, why do you have to torment me?’ And in these piercing words he could hear the sound of others: ‘I am your brother.’ The poor young man would bury his face in his hands and many times later in life shuddered at the thought of how brutal men could be and how the most refined manners and breeding often concealed the most savage coarseness, even, dear God, in someone universally recognized for his honesty and uprightness . . .

One would be hard put to find a man anywhere who so lived for his work. To say he worked with zeal would be an understatement: no, he worked *with love*. In that copying of his he glimpsed a whole varied and pleasant world of his own. One could see the enjoyment on his face. Some letters were his favourites, and whenever he came to write them out he would be beside himself with excitement, softly laughing to himself and winking, willing his pen on with his lips, so you could tell what letter his pen was carefully tracing, so it seemed, just by looking at him. Had his rewards been at all commensurate with his enthusiasm, he might perhaps have been promoted to state counsellor,⁴ much to his own surprise. But as the wags in the office put it, all he got for his labour was a badge in his button-hole and piles in his posterior. However, you could not say he was *completely* ignored. One of the directors, a kindly gentleman, who wished to reward him for his long service, once ordered him to be given something rather more important than ordinary copying – the preparation of a report for another department from a completed file. All this entailed was altering the title page and changing a few verbs from the first to the third person. This caused him so much trouble that he broke

out in a sweat, kept mopping his brow, and finally said: 'No, you'd better let me stick to plain copying.' After that they left him to go on copying for ever and ever. Apart from this copying nothing else existed as far as he was concerned. He gave no thought at all to his clothes: his uniform was not what you might call green, but a mealy white tinged with red.

His collar was very short and narrow, so that his neck, which could not exactly be called long, appeared to stick out for miles, like those plaster kittens with wagging heads foreign street-peddlars carry around by the dozen. Something was always sure to be sticking to his uniform – a wisp of hay or piece of thread. What is more, he had the strange knack of passing underneath windows when walking down the street just as some rubbish was being emptied and this explained why he was perpetually carrying around scraps of melon rind and similar refuse on his hat. Not once in his life did he notice what was going on in the street he passed down every day, unlike his young colleagues in the Service, who are famous for their hawk-like eyes – eyes so sharp that they can even see whose trouser-strap has come undone on the other side of the pavement, something which never fails to bring a sly grin to their faces. But even if Akaky Akakievich did happen to notice something, all he ever saw were rows of letters in his own neat, regular handwriting.

Only if a horse's muzzle appeared from out of nowhere, propped itself on his shoulder and fanned his cheek with a gust from its nostrils – only then did he realize he was not in the middle of a sentence but in the middle of the street.⁵ As soon as he got home he would sit down at the table, quickly swallow his cabbage soup, and eat some beef and onions, tasting absolutely nothing and gulping everything down, together with whatever the Good Lord happened to provide at the time, flies included. When he saw that his stomach was beginning to swell he would get up from the table, fetch his inkwell and start copying out documents he had brought home with him. If he had no work from the office, he would copy out something else, just for his own personal pleasure – especially if the document in question happened to be remarkable not for its stylistic beauty,

but because it was addressed to some newly appointed or important person.

Even at that time of day when the light has completely faded from the grey St Petersburg sky and the whole clerical brotherhood has eaten its fill, according to salary and palate; when everyone has rested from departmental pen-pushing and running around; when his own and everyone else's absolutely indispensable labours have been forgotten – as well as all those other things that restless man sets himself to do of his own free will – sometimes even more than is really necessary; when the civil servant dashes off to enjoy his remaining hours of freedom as much as he can (one showing a more daring spirit by careering off to the theatre; another sauntering down the street to spend his time looking at cheap little hats in the shop windows; another going off to a party to waste his time flattering a pretty girl, the shining light of some small circle of civil servants; while another – and this happens more often than not – goes off to visit a friend from the office living on the third or second floor, in two small rooms with hall and kitchen, and with some pretensions to fashion in the form of a lamp or some little trifle which has cost a great many sacrifices, refusals to invitations to dinner or country outings); in short, at that time of day when all the civil servants have dispersed to their friends' little flats for a game of whist, sipping tea from glasses and nibbling little biscuits, drawing on their long pipes, and giving an account while dealing out the cards of the latest scandal which had wafted down from high society – a Russian can *never* resist stories; or when there is nothing new to talk about, retelling the age-old anecdote about the Commandant who was told that the tail of the horse in Falconet's statue⁶ of Peter the Great had been cut off; briefly, even when everyone was doing his best to amuse himself, Akaky Akakievich did not abandon himself to any such pleasures.

No one could remember ever having seen him at a party. After he had copied to his heart's content he would go to bed, smiling in anticipation of the next day and what God would send him to copy. So passed the uneventful life of a man who, on a salary of four hundred roubles, was perfectly happy with

his lot; and this life might have continued to pass peacefully until ripe old age had it not been for the various calamities that lie in wait not only for titular counsellors, but even privy, state, court and all types of counsellor, even those who give advice to no one, nor take it from anyone.

St Petersburg harbours one terrible enemy of all those earning four hundred roubles a year – or thereabouts. This enemy is nothing else than our northern frost, although some people say it is very good for the health. Between eight and nine in the morning, just when the streets are crowded with civil servants on their way to the office, it starts dealing out indiscriminately such sharp nips to noses of every description that the poor clerks just do not know where to put them.

At this time of day, when the foreheads of even important officials ache from the frost and tears well up in their eyes, the humbler titular counsellors are sometimes quite defenceless. Their only salvation lies in running the length of five or six streets in their thin, wretched little overcoats and then having a really good stamp in the lobby until their faculties and capacity for office work have thawed out. For some time now Akaky Akakievich had been feeling that his back and shoulders had become subject to really vicious onslaughts no matter how fast he tried to sprint the official distance between home and office. At length he began to wonder if his overcoat might not be at fault here.

After giving it a thorough examination at home he found that in two or three places – to be exact, on the back and round the shoulders – it now resembled coarse cheesecloth: the material had worn so thin that it was almost transparent and the lining had fallen to pieces.

At this point it should be mentioned that Akaky Akakievich's coat was a standing joke in the office. It had been deprived of the status of overcoat and was called a dressing-gown instead. And there was really something very strange in the way it was made. As the years went by the collar had shrunk more and more, as the cloth from it had been used to patch up other parts. This repair work showed no sign of a tailor's hand, and made the coat look baggy and most unrightly. When he realized

what was wrong, Akaky Akakievich decided he would have to take the overcoat to Petrovich, a tailor living somewhere on the third floor up some backstairs and who, in spite of being blind in one eye and having pockmarks all over his face, carried on quite a nice little business repairing civil servants' and other gentlemen's trousers and frock-coats, whenever – it goes without saying – he was sober and was not hatching some plot in that head of his.

Of course, there is not much point in wasting our time describing this tailor, but since it has become the accepted thing to give full details about every single character in a story, there is nothing for it but to take a look at this man Petrovich.

At first he was simply called Grigory and had been a serf belonging to some gentleman or other. People started calling him Petrovich after he had gained his freedom, from which time he began to drink rather heavily on every church holiday – at first only on the most important feast-days, but later on every single holiday marked by a cross in the calendar.⁷ In this respect he was faithful to ancestral tradition, and when he had rows about this with his wife he called her a worldly woman and a German.

As we have now brought his wife up we might as well say a couple of words about her. Unfortunately, little is known of her except that she was Petrovich's wife and she wore a bonnet instead of a shawl. Apparently she had nothing to boast about as far as looks were concerned. At least only *guardsmen* were ever known to peep even under her bonnet as they tweaked their moustaches and made a curious noise in their throats.

As he made his way up the stairs to Petrovich's (these stairs, to describe them accurately, were running with water and slops, and were anointed with that strong smell of spirit which makes the eyes smart and is a perpetual feature of all backstairs in Petersburg), Akaky Akakievich was already beginning to wonder how much Petrovich would charge and had made up his mind not to pay more than two roubles. The door had been left open as his wife had been frying some kind of fish and had made so much smoke in the kitchen that not even the cockroaches were visible.

Mrs Petrovich herself failed to notice Akaky Akakievich as he walked through the kitchen and finally entered a room where Petrovich was squatting on a broad, bare wooden table, his feet crossed under him like a Turkish Pasha. As is customary with tailors, he was working in bare feet. The first thing that struck Akaky was his familiar big toe with its deformed nail, thick and hard as tortoiseshell. A skein of silk and some thread hung round his neck and some old rags lay across his lap. For the past two or three minutes he had been trying to thread a needle without any success, which made him curse the poor light and even the thread itself. He grumbled under his breath: 'Why don't you go through, you swine! You'll be the death of me, you devil!'

Akaky Akakievich was not very pleased at finding Petrovich in such a temper: his real intention had been to place an order with Petrovich after he had been on the bottle, or, as his wife put it, 'after he'd bin swigging that corn brandy again, the old one-eyed devil!'

In this state Petrovich would normally be very amenable, invariably agreeing to any price quite willingly and even concluding the deal by bowing and saying thank you. It is true that afterwards his tearful wife would come in with the same sad story that that husband of hers was drunk again and had not charged enough. But even so, for another copeck or two the deal was usually settled. But at this moment Petrovich was (or so it seemed) quite sober, and as a result was gruff, intractable and in the right mood for charging the devil's own price. Realizing this, Akaky Akakievich was all for making himself scarce, as the saying goes, but by then it was too late. Petrovich had already screwed up his one eye and was squinting steadily at him. Akaky Akakievich found himself saying:

'Good morning, Petrovich!'

'Good morning to you, sir,' said Petrovich, staring at Akaky's hand to see what kind of booty he'd brought.

'I . . . er . . . came about that . . . Petrovich.'

The reader should know that Akaky Akakievich spoke mainly in prepositions, adverbs and resorted to parts of speech which had no meaning whatsoever. If the subject was particu-

larly complicated he would even leave whole sentences unfinished, so that very often he would begin with: 'That is really exactly what . . .' and then forget to say anything more, convinced that he had said what he wanted to.

'What on earth's that?' Petrovich said, inspecting with his solitary eye every part of Akaky's uniform, beginning with the collar and sleeves, then the back, tails and buttonholes. All of this was very familiar territory, as it was his own work, but every tailor usually carries out this sort of inspection when he has a customer.

'I've er . . . come . . . Petrovich, that overcoat you know, the cloth . . . you see, it's quite strong in other places, only a little dusty. This makes it look old, but in fact it's quite new. Just a bit . . . you know . . . on the back and a little worn on one shoulder, and a bit . . . you know, on the other, that's all. Only a small job . . .'

Petrovich took the 'dressing-gown', spread it out on the table, took a long look at it, shook his head, reached out to the window sill for his round snuff-box bearing the portrait of some general - exactly which one is hard to say, as someone had poked his finger through the place where his face should have been and it was pasted over with a square piece of paper.

Petrovich took a pinch of snuff, held the coat up to the light, gave it another thorough scrutiny and shook his head again. Then he placed it with the lining upwards, shook his head once more, removed the snuff-box lid with the pasted-over general, filled his nose with snuff, replaced the lid, put the box away somewhere, and finally said: 'No, I can't mend that. It's in a *terrible* state!'

With these words Akaky Akakievich's heart sank.

'And why not, Petrovich?' he asked almost in the imploring voice of a child. 'It's only a bit worn on the shoulders. After all, you could patch it up with a few scraps of cloth.'

'I've got plenty of patches, plenty,' said Petrovich, 'But there's nothing to sew them on to. The coat's absolutely rotten. It'll fall to pieces if you so much as touch it with a needle.'

'Well, if it falls to bits you can patch it up again.'

'But it's too far gone. There's nothing for the patches to hold

on to – it's all worn terribly thin. You can hardly call it cloth any more. One gust of wind and the whole lot will blow away.'

'But patch it up just a *little*. It can't, hm, be, well . . .'

'I'm afraid it can't be done, sir,' replied Petrovich firmly. 'It's too far gone. You'd be better off if you cut it up for the winter and made some leggings with it, because socks aren't any good in the really cold weather. The Germans invented them as they thought they could make money out of them.' (Petrovich liked to have a dig at Germans.) 'As for the coat, you'll have to have a *new* one, sir.'

The word 'new' made Akaky's eyes cloud over and everything in the room began to swim round. All he could see clearly was the pasted-over face of the general on Petrovich's snuff-box.

'What do you mean, a *new* one?' he said as though in a dream. 'I've got no money for that.'

'Yes, you'll have to have a new one,' Petrovich said in a cruelly detached voice.

'Well, um, if I had a *new* one, how would, I mean to say, er . . . ?'

'You mean, how much?'

'Yes.'

'You can reckon on three fifty-rouble notes or more,' said Petrovich pressing his lips together dramatically. He had a great liking for strong dramatic effects, and loved producing some remark intended to shock and then watching the expression on the other person's face out of the corner of his eye.

'A hundred and fifty roubles for an overcoat!' poor Akaky shrieked for what was perhaps the first time in his life – he was well known for his low voice.

'Yes, sir,' said Petrovich. 'And even then it wouldn't be much to write home about. If you want a collar made from marten fur and a silk-lined hood then it could set you back as much as two hundred.'

'Petrovich, please,' said Akaky imploringly, not hearing, or at least trying not to hear, Petrovich's 'dramatic' pronouncement, 'just do what you can with it, so I can wear it a little longer.'

'I'm afraid it's no good. It would be sheer waste of time and

money,' Petrovich added, and with these words Akaky left, feeling absolutely crushed.

After he had gone Petrovich stayed squatting where he was for some time without continuing his work, his lips pressed together significantly. He felt pleased he had not cheapened himself or the rest of the sartorial profession.

Out in the street Akaky felt as if he were in a dream. 'What a to-do now,' he said to himself. 'I never thought it would turn out like this, for the life of me . . .' And then, after a brief silence, he added: 'Well now then! So this is how it's turned out and I would never have guessed it would end . . .' Whereupon followed a long silence, after which he murmured: 'So that's it! Really, to tell the truth, it's so unexpected that I never would have . . . such a to-do!' When he had said this, instead of going home, he walked straight off in the opposite direction, quite oblivious of what he was doing. On the way a chimney-sweep brushed up against him and made his shoulder black all over. And then a whole hatful of lime fell on him from the top of a house that was being built. To this he was blind as well; and only when he happened to bump into a policeman who had propped his halberd up and was sprinkling some snuff he had taken from a small horn on to his wart-covered fist did he come to his senses at all, and only then because the policeman said:

'Isn't the pavement wide enough without you having to crawl right up my nose?'

This brought Akaky to his senses and he went off in the direction of home.

Not until he was there did he begin to collect his thoughts and properly assess the situation. He started talking to himself, not in incoherent phrases, but quite rationally and openly, as though he were discussing what had happened with a sensible friend in whom one could confide when it came to matters of the greatest intimacy.

'No, I can see it's impossible to talk to Petrovich now. He's a bit . . . and it looks as if his wife's been knocking him around. I'd better wait until Sunday morning: after he's slept off Saturday night he'll start his squinting again and will be dying for a drink to see him through his hangover. But his wife won't give

him any money, so I'll turn up with a copeck or two. That will soften him up, you know, and my overcoat . . .'

Akaky Akakievich felt greatly comforted by this fine piece of reasoning, and waiting for the next Sunday and after seeing from a distance that Petrovich's wife had left the house, he went straight off to see him. Just as he had expected, after Saturday night, Petrovich's eye really was squinting for all it was worth, and there he was, his head drooping towards the floor, and looking very sleepy. All the same, as soon as he realized why Akaky had come, he became wide awake, just as though the devil had given him a sharp kick.

'It's impossible, you'll have to have a new one.' At this point Akaky Akakievich shoved a ten-copeck piece into his hand.

'Much obliged, sir. I'll have a quick pick-me-up on you,' said Petrovich. 'And I shouldn't worry about that overcoat of yours if I were you. It's no good at all. I'll make you a *marvellous* new one, so let's leave it at that.'

Akaky Akakievich tried to say something about having it repaired, but Petrovich pretended not to hear and said:

'Don't worry, I'll make you a brand-new one, you can depend on me to make a good job of it. And I might even get some silver clasps for the collar, like they're all wearing now.'

Now Akaky Akakievich realized he would *have* to buy a new overcoat and his heart sank. Where in fact was the money coming from? Of course he could just about count on that holiday bonus. But this had been put aside for something else a long time ago. He needed new trousers, and then there was that long-standing debt to be settled with the shoemaker for putting some new tops on his old boots. And there were three shirts he had to order from the seamstress, as well as two items of underwear which cannot decently be mentioned in print. To cut a long story short, all his money was bespoken and he would not have enough even if the Director were so generous as to raise his bonus to forty-five or even fifty roubles. What was left was pure chicken-feed; in terms of *overcoat* finance, the merest drop in the ocean. Also, he knew very well that at times Petrovich would suddenly take it into his head to charge the devil's own price, so that even his wife could not help shouting at him:

'Have you gone out of your mind, you old fool! One day he'll work for next to nothing, and now the devil's making him charge more than he's worth himself!'

He knew very well, however, that Petrovich would do the job for eighty roubles; but the question still remained, where was he to get these eighty roubles from? He could just about scrape half of it together, perhaps a little more. But what about the balance? Before we go into this, the reader should know where the *first* half was coming from.

For every rouble he spent, Akaky Akakievich would put half a copeck away in a small box, which had a little slot in the lid for dropping money through, and which was kept locked. Every six months he would tot up his savings and change them into silver. He had been doing this for a long time, and over several years had amassed more than forty roubles. So, he had half the money, but what about the rest?

Akaky Akakievich thought and thought, and at last decided he would have to cut down on his day-to-day spending, for a year at least: he would have to stop drinking tea in the evenings; go without candles; and, if he had copying to do, go to his landlady's room and work by the light of her candle. He would have to step as carefully and lightly as possible over the cobbles in the street – almost on tiptoe – so as not to wear his shoe soles out before their time; avoid taking his personal linen to the laundress as much as possible; and, to make his underclothes last longer, take them off when he got home and only wear his thick cotton dressing-gown – itself an ancient garment and one which time had treated kindly. Frankly, Akaky Akakievich found these privations quite a burden to begin with, but after a while he got used to them. He even trained himself to go without any food at all in the evenings, for his nourishment was *spiritual*, his thoughts always full of that overcoat which one day was to be his. From that time onwards his whole life seemed to have become richer, as though he had married and another human being was by his side. It was as if he was not alone at all but had some pleasant companion who had agreed to tread life's path together with him; and this companion was none other than the overcoat with its thick cotton-wool padding and strong

lining, made to last a lifetime. He livened up and, like a man who has set himself a goal, became more determined.

His indecision and uncertainty – in short, the vague and hesitant side of his personality – just disappeared of its own accord. At times a fire shone in his eyes, and even such daring and audacious thoughts as: ‘Now, what about having a *marten collar?*’ flashed through his mind.

All these reflections very nearly turned his mind. Once he was not far from actually making a *copying mistake*, so that he almost cried out ‘Ugh!’ and crossed himself. At least once a month he went to Petrovich’s to see how the overcoat was getting on and to inquire where was the best place to buy cloth, what colour they should choose, and what price they should pay. Although slightly worried, he always returned home contented, thinking of the day when all the material would be bought and the overcoat finished. Things progressed quicker than he had ever hoped. The Director allowed Akaky Akakievich not forty or forty-five, but a whole *sixty* roubles bonus, which was beyond his wildest expectations. Whether that was because the Director had some premonition that he needed a new overcoat, or whether it was just pure chance, Akaky Akakievich found himself with an extra twenty roubles. And as a result everything was speeded up. After another two or three months of mild starvation Akaky Akakievich had saved up the eighty roubles. His heart, which usually had a very steady beat, started pounding away. The very next day off he went shopping with Petrovich. They bought some *very* fine material, and no wonder, since they had done nothing but discuss it for the past six months and scarcely a month had gone by without their calling in at all the shops to compare prices. What was more, even Petrovich said you could not buy better cloth anywhere. For the lining they simply chose calico, but calico so strong and of such high quality that, according to Petrovich, it was finer than silk and even had a smarter and glossier look.

They did not buy marten for the collar, because it was really too expensive, but instead they settled on cat fur, the finest cat they could find in the shops and which could easily be mistaken for marten from a distance. In all, Petrovich took two weeks to

finish the overcoat as there was so much quilting to be done. Otherwise it would have been ready much sooner. Petrovich charged twelve roubles – anything less was out of the question. He had used silk thread everywhere, with fine double seams, and had gone over them with his teeth afterwards to make different patterns.

It was . . . precisely *which* day it is difficult to say, but without any doubt it was the most triumphant day in Akaky Akakievich’s whole life when Petrovich at last delivered the overcoat. He brought it early in the morning, even before Akaky Akakievich had left for the office. The overcoat could not have arrived at a better time, since fairly severe frosts had already set in and were likely to get even worse. Petrovich delivered the overcoat in person – just as a good tailor should. Akaky Akakievich had never seen him looking so solemn before. He seemed to know full well that his was no mean achievement, and that he had suddenly shown by his own work the gulf separating tailors who only relined or patched up overcoats from those who make new ones, right from the beginning. He took the overcoat out of the large kerchief he had wrapped it in⁸ and which he had only just got back from the laundry. Then he folded the kerchief and put it in his pocket ready for use. Then he took the overcoat very proudly in both hands and threw it very deftly round Akaky Akakievich’s shoulders. He gave it a sharp tug, smoothed it downwards on the back, and draped it round Akaky Akakievich, leaving some buttons in the front undone. Akaky Akakievich, who was no longer a young man, wanted to try it with his arms in the sleeves. Petrovich helped him, and even this way it was the right size. In short, the overcoat was a perfect fit, without any shadow of doubt. Petrovich did not forget to mention it was only *because* he happened to live in a small backstreet and *because* his workshop had no sign outside, and *because* he had known Akaky Akakievich such a long time, that he had charged him such a low price. If he had gone anywhere along Nevsky Prospekt they would have rushed him seventy-five roubles for the labour alone. Akaky Akakievich did not feel like taking Petrovich up on this and in fact was rather intimidated by the large sums Petrovich was so fond of

mentioning just to try and impress his clients. He settled up with him, thanked him and went straight off to the office in his new overcoat. Petrovich followed him out into the street, stood there for a long time taking a look at the overcoat from some way off, and then deliberately made a small detour up a side-street so that he could have a good view of the overcoat from the other side, i.e. coming straight towards him.

Meanwhile Akaky Akakievich continued on his way to the office in the most festive mood. Not one second passed without his being conscious of the new overcoat on his shoulders, and several times he even smiled from inward pleasure. And really the overcoat's advantages were two-fold: firstly, it was warm; secondly, it made him feel good. He did not notice where he was going at all and suddenly found himself at the office. In the lobby he took the overcoat off, carefully examined it all over, and then handed it to the porter for special safe-keeping.

No one knew how the news suddenly got round that Akaky Akakievich had a new overcoat and that his 'dressing-gown' was now no more. The moment he arrived everyone rushed out into the lobby to look at his new acquisition. They so overwhelmed him with congratulations and good wishes that he smiled at first and then he even began to feel quite embarrassed. When they all crowded round him saying they should have a drink on the new overcoat, and insisting that the *very least* he could do was to hold a party for all of them, Akaky Akakievich lost his head completely, not knowing what to do or what to answer or how to escape. Blushing all over, he tried for some considerable time, rather naïvely, to convince them it was not a new overcoat at all but really his old one. In the end one of the civil servants, who was nothing less than an assistant head clerk, and who was clearly anxious to show he was not at all snooty and could hobnob even with his inferiors, said: 'All right then, I'll throw a party instead. You're all invited over to my place this evening. It so happens it's my name-day.'

Naturally the others immediately offered the assistant head clerk their congratulations and eagerly accepted the invitation. When Akaky Akakievich tried to talk himself out of it, everyone said it was impolite, in fact quite shameful, and a refusal was

out of the question. Later, however, he felt pleased when he remembered that the party would give him the opportunity of going out in his new overcoat that very same evening.

The whole day was like a triumphant holiday for Akaky Akakievich. He went home in the most jubilant mood, took off his coat, hung it up very carefully and stood there for some time admiring the cloth and lining. Then, to compare the two, he brought out his old 'dressing-gown', which by now had completely disintegrated. As he examined it he could not help laughing: what a *fantastic* difference! All through dinner the thought of his old overcoat and its shocking state made him smile. He ate his meal with great relish and afterwards did not do any copying but indulged in the luxury of lying on his bed until it grew dark. Then, without any further delay, he put his clothes on, threw his overcoat over his shoulders and went out into the street. Unfortunately the author cannot say exactly where the civil servant who was giving the party lived: his memory is beginning to let him down badly and everything in Petersburg, every house, every street, has become so blurred and mixed up in his mind that he finds it extremely difficult to say where *anything* is at all. All the same, we do at least know for certain that the civil servant lived in the *best part* of the city, which amounts to saying that he lived miles and miles away from Akaky Akakievich. At first Akaky Akakievich had to pass through some badly lit, deserted streets, but the nearer he got to the civil servant's flat the more lively and crowded they became, and the brighter the lamps shone. More and more people dashed by and he began to meet beautifully dressed ladies, and men with beaver collars. Here there were not so many cheap cabmen⁹ with their wooden basketwork sleighs studded with gilt nails. Instead, there were dashing coachmen with elegant cabs, wearing crimson velvet caps, their sleighs lacquered and covered with bearskins. Carriages with draped boxes simply flew down the streets with their wheels screeching over the snow.

Akaky Akakievich surveyed this scene as though he had never witnessed anything like it in his life. For some years now he had not ventured out at all in the evenings.

Filled with curiosity, he stopped by a brightly lit shop window to look at a painting of a pretty girl who was taking off her shoe and showing her entire foot, which was really quite pretty, while behind her a gentleman with side-whiskers and a fine goatee was poking his head round the door of an adjoining room. Akaky Akakievich shook his head and smiled, then went on his way. Why did he smile? Perhaps because this was something he had never set eyes on before, but for which, nonetheless, each one of us has some instinctive feeling. Or perhaps, like many other civil servants he thought: 'Oh, those Frenchmen! Of course, if they happen to fancy something, then really, I mean to say, to be exact, something . . .' Perhaps he was not thinking this at all, for it is impossible to probe deep into a man's soul and discover all his thoughts. Finally he arrived at the assistant head clerk's flat. This assistant head clerk lived in the grand style: a lamp shone on the staircase, and the flat was on the first floor.

As he entered the hall Akaky Akakievich saw row upon row of galoshes. Among them, in the middle of the room, stood a samovar, hissing as it sent out clouds of steam. The walls were covered with overcoats and cloaks; some of them even had beaver collars or velvet lapels. From the other side of the wall he could hear the buzzing of voices, which suddenly became loud and clear when the door opened and there emerged a footman carrying a tray laden with empty glasses, a jug of cream and a basketful of biscuits. There was no doubt at all that the clerks had been there a long time and had already drunk their first cup of tea.

When Akaky Akakievich had hung up his overcoat himself he went in and was struck all at once by the sight of candles, civil servants, pipes and card tables. His ears were filled with the blurred sound of little snatches of conversation coming from all over the room and the noise of chairs being shifted backwards and forwards. He stood very awkwardly in the middle of the room, looking around and trying to think what to do. But they had already spotted him and greeted him with loud shouts, everyone immediately crowding into the hall to have another look at the overcoat. Although he was somewhat

overwhelmed by this reception, since he was a rather simple-minded and ingenuous person, he could not help feeling glad at the praises showered on his overcoat. And then, it goes without saying, they abandoned him, overcoat included, and turned their attention to the customary whist tables. All the noise and conversation and crowds of people – this was a completely new world for Akaky Akakievich. He simply did not know what to do, where to put his hands or feet or any other part of himself. Finally he took a seat near the card-players, looking at the cards, and examining first one player's face, then another's. In no time at all he started yawning and began to feel bored, especially as it was long after his usual bedtime.

He tried to take leave of his host, but everyone insisted on his staying to toast the new overcoat with a glassful of champagne. About an hour later supper was served. This consisted of mixed salad, cold veal, meat pasties, pastries and champagne. They made Akaky Akakievich drink two glasses, after which everything seemed a lot merrier, although he still could not forget that it was already midnight and that he should have left ages ago.

So that his host should not stop him as he left, he crept silently from the room, found his overcoat in the hall (much to his regret it was lying on the floor), shook it to remove every trace of fluff, put it over his shoulders and went down the stairs into the street.

Outside it was still lit up. A few small shops, which house-serfs and different kinds of people use as clubs at all hours of the day, were open. Those which were closed had broad beams of light coming from chinks right the way down their doors, showing that there were still people talking inside, most probably maids and menservants who had not finished exchanging the latest gossip, leaving their masters completely in the dark as to where they had got to. Akaky Akakievich walked along in high spirits, and once, heavens know why, very nearly gave chase to some lady who flashed by like lightning, every part of her body showing an extraordinary mobility. However, he stopped in his tracks and continued at his previous leisurely

pace, amazed at himself for breaking into that inexplicable trot. Soon there stretched before him those same empty streets which looked forbidding enough even in the daytime, let alone at night. Now they looked even more lonely and deserted. The street lamps thinned out more and more – the local council was stingy with its oil in this part of the city. Next he began to pass by wooden houses and fences. Not a soul anywhere, nothing but the snow gleaming in the streets and the cheerless dark shapes of low-built huts which, with their shutters closed, seemed to be asleep. He was now quite near the spot where the street was interrupted by an endless square with the houses barely visible on the other side: a terrifying desert. In the distance, God knows where, a light glimmered in a watchman's hut which seemed to be standing on the very edge of the world. At this point Akaky Akakievich's high spirits drooped considerably. As he walked out on to the square, he could not suppress the feeling of dread that welled up inside him, as though he sensed that something evil was going to happen. He looked back, then to both sides: it was as though he was surrounded by a whole ocean. 'No, it's best not to look,' he thought, and continued on his way with his eyes shut. When at last he opened them to see how much further he had to go he suddenly saw two men with moustaches right in front of him, although it was too dark to make them out exactly. His eyes misted over and his heart started pounding.

'Aha, that's *my* overcoat all right,' one of them said in a thunderous voice, grabbing him by the collar. Akaky Akakievich was about to shout for help, but the other man stuck a fist the size of a clerk's head right in his face and said: 'Just one squeak out of you!' All Akaky Akakievich knew was that they pulled his coat off and shoved a knee into him, making him fall backwards in the snow, after which he knew nothing more. A few minutes later he came to and managed to stand up, but by then there was no one to be seen. All he knew was that he was freezing and that his overcoat had gone, and he started shouting. But his voice would not carry across the vast square. Not once did he stop shouting as he ran desperately across the square towards a sentry box where a policeman stood propped up on his halberd looking rather intrigued as to who the devil

was shouting and running towards him. When he had reached the policeman Akaky Akakievich (in between breathless gasps) shouted accusingly that he had been asleep, that he was neglecting his duty and could not even see when a man was being robbed under his very nose. The policeman replied that he had seen nothing, except for two men who had stopped him in the middle of the square and whom he had taken for his friends; and that instead of letting off steam he would be better advised to go the very next day to see the police inspector, who would get his overcoat back for him. Akaky Akakievich ran off home in the most shocking state: his hair – there was still some growing around the temples and the back of his head – was terribly dishevelled. His chest, his trousers, and his sides were covered with snow. When his old landlady heard a terrifying knocking at the door she leaped out of bed and rushed downstairs with only one shoe on, clutching her nightdress to her bosom out of modesty. But when she opened the door and saw the state Akaky Akakievich was in, she shrank backwards. After he had told her what had happened she clasped her hands in despair and told him to go straight to the District Police Superintendent, as the local officer was sure to try and put one over on him, make all kinds of promises and lead him right up the garden path. The best thing was to go direct to the Superintendent himself, whom she actually happened to know, as Anna, the Finnish girl who used to cook for her, was now a nanny at the Superintendent's house. She often saw him go past the houses and every Sunday he went to church, smiled at everyone as he prayed and to all intents and purposes was a thoroughly nice man. Akaky Akakievich listened to this advice and crept sadly up to his room. What sort of night he spent can best be judged by those who are able to put themselves in someone else's place. Early next morning he went to the Superintendent's house but was told that he was asleep. He returned at ten o'clock, but was informed that he was still asleep. He came back at eleven, and was told that he had gone out. When he turned up once again round about lunchtime, the clerks in the entrance hall would not let him through on any account, unless he told them first what his business was, why he had

come, and what had happened. So in the end Akaky Akakievich, for the first time in his life, stood up for himself and told them in no uncertain terms that he wanted to see the Superintendent *in person*, that they dare not turn him away since he had come from a government department on official business, and that they would know all about it if he made a complaint. The clerks did not have the nerve to argue and one of them went to fetch the Superintendent who reacted extremely strangely to the robbery. Instead of sticking to the main point of the story, he started cross-examining Akaky Akakievich with such questions as: 'What was he doing out so late?' or 'Had he been visiting a house of ill-repute?', which left Akaky feeling very embarrassed, and he went away completely in the dark as to whether they were going to take any action or not. The whole of that day he stayed away from the office – for the first time in his life.

The next morning he arrived looking very pale and wearing his old 'dressing-gown', which was in an even more pathetic state.

The story of the stolen overcoat touched many of the clerks, although a few of them could not refrain from laughing at Akaky Akakievich even then. There and then they decided to make a collection, but all they raised was a miserable little sum since, apart from any *extra* expense, they had nearly exhausted all their funds subscribing to a new portrait of the Director as well as to some book or other recommended by one of the heads of department – who happened to be a friend of the author. So they collected next to nothing.

One of them, who was deeply moved, decided he could at least help Akaky Akakievich with some good advice. He told him not to go to the local police officer, since although that gentleman might well recover his overcoat somehow or other in the hope of receiving a commendation from his superiors, Akaky did not stand a chance of getting it out of the police station without the necessary legal proof that the overcoat was really his. The best plan was to apply to a certain *Important Person*, and this same Important Person, by writing to and contacting the proper people, would get things moving much

faster. There was nothing else for it, so Akaky Akakievich decided to go and see this Important Person.

What exactly this Important Person did and what position he held remains a mystery to this day. All we need say is that this Important Person had become important only a short while before, and that until then he had been an *unimportant* person. However, even now his position was not considered very important if compared with others which were still more important. But you will always come across a certain class of people who consider something unimportant which for other people is in fact important. However, he tried all manners and means of buttressing his importance. For example, he was responsible for introducing the rule that all low-ranking civil servants should be waiting to meet him on the stairs when he arrived at the office; that no one, on any account, could walk straight into his office; and that everything must be dealt with in the *strictest* order of priority: the collegiate registrar was to report to the provincial secretary who in turn was to report to the titular counsellor (or whoever it was he *had* to report to) so that in this way the matter reached him according to the prescribed procedure. In this Holy Russia of ours everything is infected by a mania for imitation, and everyone apes and mimics his superior. I have even heard say that when a certain titular counsellor was appointed head of some minor government department he immediately partitioned off a section of his office into a special room for himself, an 'audience chamber' as he called it, and stationed two ushers in uniforms with red collars and gold braid outside to open the doors for visitors – even though you would have a job getting an ordinary writing desk into this so-called chamber.

This Important Person's methods and routine were very imposing and impressive, but nonetheless simple. The whole basis of his system was strict discipline. 'Strictness, strictness . . . and strictness' he used to say, usually looking very solemnly into the face of the person he was addressing when he had repeated this word for the third time. However, there was really no good reason for this strict discipline, since the ten civil servants or so who made up the whole administrative machinery of his

department were all duly terrified of him anyway. If they saw him coming from some way off they would stop what they were doing and stand to attention while the Director went through the office. His normal everyday conversation with his subordinates simply *reeked* of discipline and consisted almost entirely of three phrases: 'How dare you? Do you know who you're talking to? Do you realize who's standing before you?'

However, he was quite a good man at heart, pleasant to his colleagues and helpful. But his promotion to general's rank had completely turned his head; he became all mixed up, somehow went off the rails, and just could not cope any more. If he happened to be with someone of equal rank, then he was quite a normal person, very decent in fact and even far from stupid in many respects.

But put him with people only one rank lower, and he was really at sea. He would not say a single word, and one felt sorry to see him in such a predicament, all the more so as even *he* felt that he could have been spending the time far more enjoyably.

Sometimes one could read this craving for interesting company and conversation in his eyes, but he was always inhibited by the thought: would this be going too far for someone in his position, would this be showing too much familiarity and therefore rather damaging to his status? For these reasons he would remain perpetually silent, producing a few monosyllables from time to time, and as a result acquired the reputation of being a crashing bore. This was the Important Person our Akaky Akakievich went to consult, and he appeared at the worst possible moment – most inopportune as far as *he* was concerned – but most opportune for the Important Person. The Important Person was in his office having a very animated talk with an old childhood friend who had just arrived in Petersburg and whom he had not seen for a few years.

At this moment the arrival of a certain Bashmachkin was announced. 'Who's he?' he asked abruptly and was told, 'Some clerk or other.' 'Ah, let him wait, I can't see him just now,' the Important Person replied. Here we should say that the Important Person told a complete lie: he had plenty of time, he had long since said all he wanted to his friend, and for some

considerable time their conversation had been punctuated by very long silences broken only by their slapping each other on the thigh and saying:

'Quite so, Ivan Abramovich!' and 'Well yes, Stepan Varlamovich!'

Even so, he still ordered the clerk to wait, just to show his old friend (who had left the Service a fair time before and was now nicely settled in his country house) how long he could keep clerks standing about in his waiting-room. When they really had said all that was to be said, or rather, had sat there in the very comfortable easy chairs to their heart's content without saying a single word to each other, puffing away at their cigars, the Important Person suddenly remembered and told his secretary, who was standing by the door with a pile of papers in his hands: 'Ah yes now, I think there's some clerk or other waiting out there. Tell him to come in.' One look at the timid Akaky Akakievich in his ancient uniform and he suddenly turned towards him and said: 'What do you want?' in that brusque and commanding voice he had been practising especially, when he was alone in his room, in front of a mirror, a whole week before his present appointment and promotion to general's rank.

Long before this Akaky Akakievich had been experiencing that feeling of awe which it was proper and necessary for him to experience, and now, somewhat taken aback, he tried to explain, as far as his tongue would allow him and with an even greater admixture than ever before of 'wells' and 'that is to say', that his overcoat was a new one, that he had been robbed in the most barbarous manner, that he had come to ask the Important Person's help, so that through his influence, or by doing this or that, by writing to the Chief of Police or someone else (whoever it might be), the Important Person might get his overcoat back for him.

Heaven knows why, but the general found this approach rather too familiar.

'What do you mean by this, my dear sir?' he snapped again. 'Are you unaware of the correct procedure? Where do you think you are? Don't you know how things are conducted here?'

It's high time you knew that first of all your application must be handed in at the main office, then taken to the chief clerk, then to the departmental director, then to my secretary, who *then* submits it to me for consideration . . .'

'But Your Excellency,' said Akaky Akakievich, trying to summon up the small handful of courage he possessed, and feeling at the same time that the sweat was pouring off him, 'I took the liberty of disturbing Your Excellency because, well, secretaries, you know, are a rather unreliable lot . . .'

'What, what, what?' cried the Important Person. 'Where did you learn such impudence? Where did you get those ideas from? What rebellious attitude towards their heads of department and superiors has infected young men these days?'

Evidently the Important Person did not notice that Akaky Akakievich was well past fifty. Of course, one might call him a young man, relatively speaking; that is, if you compared him with someone of seventy.

'Do you realize who you're talking to? Do you know who is standing before you? Do you understand, I ask you, do you understand? I'm asking you a question!'

At this point he stamped his foot and raised his voice to such a pitch that Akaky Akakievich was not the only one to be scared out of his wits. Akaky Akakievich almost fainted. He reeled forward, his body shook all over and he could hardly stand on his feet. If the porters had not rushed to his assistance he would have fallen flat on the floor. He was carried out almost lifeless. The Important Person, very satisfied that the effect he had produced exceeded even *his* wildest expectations, and absolutely delighted that a few words from him could deprive a man of his senses, peeped at his friend out of the corner of one eye to see what impression he had made. He was not exactly displeased to see that his friend was quite bewildered and was even beginning to show unmistakable signs of fear himself.

Akaky Akakievich remembered nothing about going down the stairs and out into the street. His hands and feet had gone dead. Never in his life had he received such a savage dressing-down from a general – and what is more, a general from another department.

He continually stumbled off the pavement as he struggled on with his mouth wide open in the face of a raging blizzard that whistled down the street. As it normally does in St Petersburg the wind was blowing from all four corners of the earth and from every single side-street. In a twinkling his throat was inflamed and when he finally dragged himself home he was unable to say one word. He put himself to bed and broke out all over in swellings. That is what a 'proper and necessary' dressing-down can sometimes do for you!

The next day he had a high fever. Thanks to the generous assistance of the Petersburg climate the illness made much speedier progress than one might have expected, and when the doctor arrived and felt his pulse, all he could prescribe was a poultice – and only then for the simple reason that he did not wish his patient to be deprived of the salutary benefits of medical aid. However, he *did* advance the diagnosis that Akaky Akakievich would not last another day and a half, no doubt about that, and then: *kaput*. After which he turned to the landlady and said:

'Now, don't waste any time and order a pine coffin right away, as he won't be able to afford oak.'

Whether Akaky Akakievich heard these fateful words – and if he did hear them, whether they shocked him into some feeling of regret for his wretched life – no one has the slightest idea, since he was feverish and delirious the whole time. Strange visions, each weirder than the last, paraded endlessly before him: in one he could see Petrovich the tailor and he was begging him to make an overcoat with special traps to catch the thieves that seemed to be swarming under his bed. Every other minute he called out to his landlady to drag one out which had actually crawled under the blankets.

In another he was asking why his old 'dressing-gown' was hanging up there when he had a *new* overcoat. Then he imagined himself standing next to the general and, after being duly and properly reprimanded, saying: 'I'm sorry, Your Excellency.' In the end he started cursing and swearing and let forth such a torrent of terrible obscenities that his good landlady crossed herself, as she had never heard the like from him in all her born

days, especially as the curses always seemed to follow right after those 'Your Excellencies'. Later on he began to talk complete gibberish, until it was impossible to understand anything, except that this jumble of words and thoughts always centred on one and the same overcoat. Finally poor Akaky Akakievich gave up the ghost. Neither his room nor what he had in the way of belongings was sealed off,¹⁰ in the first place, because he had no family, and in the second place, because his worldly possessions did not amount to very much at all: a bundle of goose quills, one quire of white government paper, three pairs of socks, two or three buttons that had come off his trousers, and the 'dressing-gown' with which the reader is already familiar. Whom all this went to, God only knows, and the author of this story confesses that he is not even interested. Akaky Akakievich was carted away and buried. And St Petersburg carried on without its Akaky Akakievich just as though he had never even existed.

So vanished and disappeared for ever a human being whom no one ever thought of protecting, who was dear to no one, in whom no one was the least interested, not even the naturalist who cannot resist sticking a pin in a common fly and examining it under the microscope; a being who endured the mockery of his colleagues without protesting, who went to his grave without achieving anything in his life, but to whom, nonetheless (just before the end of his life) a shining visitor in the form of an overcoat suddenly appeared, brightening his wretched life for one fleeting moment; a being upon whose head disaster had cruelly fallen, just as it falls upon the kings and great ones of this earth . . .

A few days after his death a messenger was sent from the Department with instructions for him to report to the office *immediately*: it was the Director's own orders. But the messenger was obliged to return on his own and announced that Akaky would not be coming any more. When asked why not he replied: 'Cos 'e's dead, bin buried three days ago.' This was how the office got to know about Akaky Akakievich's death, and on the very next day his place was taken by a new clerk, a

much taller man whose handwriting was not nearly so upright and indeed had a pronounced slope.

But who would have imagined that this was not the last of Akaky Akakievich, and that he was destined to create quite a stir several days after his death, as though he were trying to make up for a life spent being ignored by everybody? But this is what happened and it provides our miserable story with a totally unexpected, fantastic ending. Rumours suddenly started going round St Petersburg that a ghost in the form of a government clerk had been seen near the Kalinkin Bridge,¹¹ and even further afield, and that this ghost appeared to be searching for a stolen overcoat. To this end it was to be seen ripping all kinds of overcoats from everyone's shoulders, with no regard for rank or title: overcoats made from cat fur, beaver, quilted overcoats, raccoon, fox, bear – in short, overcoats made from every conceivable fur or skin that man has ever used to protect his own hide. One of the clerks from the department saw the ghost with his own eyes and immediately recognized it as Akaky Akakievich. He was so terrified that he ran off as fast as his legs would carry him, with the result he did not manage to have a very good look: all he could make out was someone pointing a menacing finger at him from the distance. Complaints continually poured in from all quarters, not only from titular counsellors, but even such high-ranking officials as privy counsellors, whose backs and shoulders were being subjected to quite nasty colds through this nocturnal ripping off of their overcoats. The police were instructed to run the ghost in, come what may, dead or alive, and to punish it most severely, as an example to others – and in this they very nearly succeeded. To be precise, a policeman, part of whose beat lay along Kirushkin Alley, was on the point of grabbing the ghost by the collar at the very scene of the crime, just as he was about to tear a woollen overcoat from the shoulders of a retired musician who, in his day, used to tootle on the flute. As he seized the ghost by the collar the policeman shouted to two of his friends to come and keep hold of it, just for a minute, while he felt in his boot for his birch-bark snuff-box to revive his nose (which had been slightly frost-bitten six times in his life). But the snuff must have

been one of those blends even a ghost could not stand, for the policeman had barely managed to cover his right nostril with a finger and sniff half a handful up the other when the ghost sneezed so violently that they were completely blinded by the spray, all three of them. While they were wiping their eyes the ghost disappeared into thin air, so suddenly that the policemen could not even say for certain if they had ever laid hands on it in the first place. From then on the local police were so scared of ghosts that they were frightened of arresting even the living and would shout instead: 'Hey you, clear off!' from a safe distance. The clerk's ghost began to appear even far beyond the Kalinkin Bridge, causing no little alarm and apprehension among fainter-hearted citizens. However, we seem to have completely neglected the Important Person, who, in fact, could almost be said to be the *real* reason for the fantastic turn this otherwise authentic story has taken. First of all, to give him his due, we should mention that soon after the departure of our poor shattered Akaky Akakievich the Important Person felt some twinges of regret. Compassion was not something new to him, and, although consciousness of his rank very often stifled them, his heart was not untouched by many generous impulses. As soon as his friend had left the office his thoughts turned to poor Akaky Akakievich.

Almost every day after that he had visions of the pale Akaky Akakievich, for whom an official wiggling had been altogether too much. These thoughts began to worry him to such an extent that a week later he decided to send someone round from the office to the flat to ask how he was and if he could be of any help. When the messenger reported that Akaky Akakievich had died suddenly of a fever he was quite stunned. His conscience began troubling him, and all that day he felt off-colour.

Thinking that some light entertainment might help him forget that unpleasant experience he went off to a party given by one of his friends which was attended by quite a respectable crowd. He was particularly pleased to see that everyone there held roughly the same rank as himself, so there was no chance of any embarrassing situations. All this had an amazingly uplifting effect on his state of mind. He unwound completely, chatted

very pleasantly, made himself agreeable to everyone, and in short, spent a very pleasant evening. Over dinner he drank one or two glasses of champagne, a wine which, as everyone knows, is not exactly calculated to dampen high spirits. The champagne put him in a reckless, adventurous mood: he decided not to go straight home, but to call on a lady of his acquaintance, Karolina Ivanovna, who was of German origin and with whom he was on the friendliest terms. Here I should mention that the Important Person was no longer a young man but a good husband and the respected head of a family. His two sons, one of whom already had a job in the Civil Service, and a sweet sixteen-year-old daughter with a snub nose that was nonetheless pretty, came every day to kiss his hand and say '*Bonjour, Papa*'. His wife, who still retained some of her freshness and had not even lost any of her good looks, allowed him to kiss her hand first, and then kissed his, turning it the other side up. But although the Important Person was thoroughly contented with the affection lavished on him by his family, he still did not think it wrong to have a lady friend in another part of the town. This lady friend was not in the least prettier or younger than his wife, but that is one of the mysteries of this world, and it is not for us to criticize. As I was saying, the Important Person went downstairs, climbed into his sledge and said to the driver: 'To Karolina Ivanovna's', while he wrapped himself snugly in his warm, very luxurious overcoat, revelling in that happy state of mind, so very dear to Russians, when one is thinking about absolutely nothing, but when, nonetheless, thoughts come crowding into one's head of their own accord, each more delightful than the last, and not even requiring one to make the mental effort of conjuring them up or chasing after them. He felt very contented as he recalled, without any undue exertion, all the gayest moments of the party, all the *bons mots* that had aroused loud guffaws in that little circle: many of them he even repeated quietly to himself and found just as funny as before, so that it was not at all surprising that he laughed very heartily. The boisterous wind, however, interfered with his enjoyment at times: blowing up from God knows where or why, it cut right into his face, hurling lumps of snow at it, making his collar

billow out like a sail, or blowing it back over his head with such supernatural force that he had the devil's own job extricating himself. Suddenly the Important Person felt a violent tug at his collar. Turning round, he saw a smallish man in an old, worn-out uniform, and not without a feeling of horror recognized him as Akaky Akakievich. The clerk's face was as pale as the snow and was just like a corpse's.

But the Important Person's terror passed all bounds when the ghost's mouth became twisted, smelling horribly of the grave as it breathed on him and pronounced the following words: 'Ah, at last I've found you! Now I've, er, hm, collared you! It's *your* overcoat I'm after! You didn't care about mine, *and* you couldn't resist giving me a good ticking-off into the bargain! Now hand over *your* overcoat!' The poor Important Person nearly died. However much strength of character he displayed in the office (usually in the presence of his subordinates) – one only had to look at his virile face and bearing to say: 'There's a man for you!' – in this situation, like many of his kind who seem heroic at first sight, he was so frightened that he even began to fear (and not without reason) that he was in for a heart attack. He tore off his overcoat as fast as he could, without any help, and then shouted to his driver in a terrified voice: 'Home as fast as you can!'

The driver, recognizing the tone of voice his master used only in moments of crisis – a tone of voice usually accompanied by some much stronger encouragement – just to be on the safe side hunched himself up, flourished his whip and shot off like an arrow.

Not much more than six minutes later the Important Person was already at his front door. Coatless, terribly pale and frightened out of his wits, he had driven straight home instead of going to Karolina Ivanovna's. Somehow he managed to struggle up to his room and spent a very troubled night, so much so that next morning his daughter said to him over breakfast: 'You look very pale today, Papa.' But Papa did not reply, did not say a single word to anyone about what had happened, where he had been and where he had originally intended going. The encounter had made a deep impression on him. From that time

onwards he would seldom say: 'How dare you! Do you realize who is standing before you?' to his subordinates. And if he did have occasion to say this, it was never without first hearing what the accused had to say. But what was more surprising than anything else the ghostly clerk disappeared completely. Obviously the general's overcoat was a perfect fit. At least, there were no more stories about overcoats being torn off people's backs. However, many officious and overcautious citizens would not be satisfied, insisting the ghost could still be seen in the remoter parts of the city, and in fact a certain police constable from the Kolomna¹² district saw with his own eyes a ghost leaving a house. However, being rather weakly built – once a quite normal-sized, fully mature piglet which came tearing out of a private house knocked him off his feet, to the huge amusement of some cab-drivers who were standing near by, each of whom was made to cough up half a copeck in snuff-money for his cheek – he simply did not have the nerve to make an arrest, but followed the ghost in the dark until it suddenly stopped, turned round, asked: 'What do *you* want?' and shook its fist at him – a fist the like of which you will never see in the land of the living. The constable replied: 'Nothing', and beat a hasty retreat. This ghost, however, was much taller than the first, had an absolutely enormous moustache and, apparently heading towards the Obukhov Bridge,¹³ was swallowed up in the darkness of the night.