

THE FATAL EGGS

MIKHAIL BULGAKOV



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Mikhail Bulgakov

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PREFACE

*Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940) was born in Kiev into the family of a teacher at a religious academy, endured the hardships of wars and revolutions, starved, became a playwright for the country's finest theatre, knew fame, persecution, public ovations and forced muteness. His best works, including the famous *The Master and Margarita*, were not published until after his death. His dramas were struck off the repertoire-*The Days of the Turbins* at the Moscow Arts Theatre and his plays about Moliere and Pushkin.*

During his lifetime, not a single major anthology of his short stories was ever published

Bulgakov's works have since been recognised as classics; his books have been published in all the languages of the civilised world, studies of him have reached the four-figure mark and the number is still rising; editions of his books in the USSR have run into millions. He has won the highest praise from Gabriel Garcia Marquez of Columbia and Kendzaburo Oe of Japan.

*Kirghiz writer Chinghiz Aitmatov looks on Bulgakov as his teacher. Mikhail Bulgakov's books have at last come into their own with their wild fantasy and their prophetic ideas about man and humanity. Our collection includes one of his most vivid stories, "*The Fatal Eggs*".*

CHAPTER I.

Professor Persikov's Curriculum Vitae

On the evening of 16 April, 1928, the Zoology Professor of the Fourth State University and Director of the Moscow Zoological Institute, Persikov, went into his laboratory at the Zoological Institute in Herzen Street. The Professor switched on the frosted ceiling light and looked around him.

This ill-fated evening must be regarded as marking the beginning of the appalling catastrophe, just as Professor Vladimir Ipatievich Persikov must be seen as the prime cause of the said catastrophe.

He was fifty-eight years old. With a splendid bald head, like a pestle, and tufts of yellowish hair sticking out at the sides. His face was clean-shaven, with a slightly protruding lower lip which gave it a slightly cantankerous expression. Tall and round-shouldered, he had small bright eyes and tiny old-fashioned spectacles in silver frames on a red nose. He spoke in a grating, high, croaking voice and one of his many idiosyncrasies was to crook the index finger of his right hand and screw up his eyes, whenever he was saying something weighty and authoritative. And since he always spoke authoritatively, because his knowledge in his field was quite phenomenal, the crooked finger was frequently pointed at those with whom the Professor was conversing. Outside his field, that is, zoology, embryology, anatomy, botany and geography, however, Professor Persikov said almost nothing at all.

Professor Persikov did not read the newspapers or go to the theatre.

His wife had run away with a tenor from the Zimin opera in 1913, leaving him a note which read as follows:

"Your frogs make me shudder with intolerable loathing. I shall be unhappy all my life because of them."

The Professor did not marry again and had no children. He was short-tempered, but did not bear grudges, liked cloudberry tea and lived in Prechistenka Street in a flat with five rooms, one of which was occupied by the old housekeeper, Maria Stepanovna, who looked after the Professor like a nanny.

In 1919 three of the Professor's five rooms were taken away. Whereupon he announced to Maria Stepanovna:

"If they don't stop this outrageous behaviour, I shall leave the country, Maria Stepanovna."

Had the Professor carried out this plan, he would have experienced no difficulty in obtaining a place in the zoology department of any university in the world, for he was a really first-class scholar, and in the particular field which deals with amphibians had no equal, with the exception of professors William Weckle in Cambridge and Giacomo Bartolomeo Beccari in Rome. The Professor could read four languages, as well as Russian, and spoke French and German like a native. Persikov did not carry out his intention of going abroad, and 1920 was even worse than 1919. All sorts of things happened, one after the other. Bolshaya Nikitskaya was renamed Herzen Street. Then the clock on the wall of the corner building in Herzen Street and Mokhovaya stopped at a quarter past eleven and, finally, unable to endure the perturbations of this remarkable year, eight magnificent specimens of tree-frogs died in the Institute's terrariums, followed by fifteen ordinary toads and an exceptional specimen of the Surinam toad.

Immediately after the demise of the toads which devastated that first order of amphibians rightly called tailless, old Vlas, the Institute's caretaker of many years' standing, who did not belong to any order of amphibians, also passed on to a better world. The cause of his death, incidentally, was the same as that of the unfortunate amphibians, and Persikov diagnosed it at once:

"Undernourishment!"

The scientist was perfectly right. Vlas should have been fed with flour and the toads with flour weevils, but the disappearance of the former determined that of the latter likewise, and Persikov tried to shift the twenty surviving specimens of tree-frogs onto a diet of cockroaches, but then the cockroaches disappeared too, thereby demonstrating their hostile attitude to

war communism. Consequently, these last remaining specimens also had to be thrown into the rubbish pits in the Institute yard.

The effect of these deaths on Persikov, particularly that of the Surinam toad, is quite indescribable. For some reason he blamed them entirely on the People's Commissar for Education.

Standing in his fur cap and galoshes in the corridor of the freezing Institute, Persikov said to his assistant Ivanov, an elegant gentleman with a fair pointed beard:

"Hanging's too good for him, Pyotr Stepanovich! What do they think they're doing! They'll ruin the whole Institute! Eh? An exceptionally rare male specimen of *Pipa americana*, thirteen centimetres long..."

Things went from bad to worse. When Vlas died the Institute windows froze so hard that there were icy scrolls on the inside of the panes. The rabbits, foxes, wolves and fish died, as well as every single grass-snake.

Persikov brooded silently for days on end, then caught pneumonia, but did not die. When he recovered, he started coming to the Institute twice a week and in the round hall, where for some reason it was always five degrees below freezing point irrespective of the temperature outside, he delivered a cycle of lectures on "The Reptiles of the Torrid Zone" in galoshes, a fur cap with ear-flaps and a scarf, breathing out white steam, to an audience of eight. The rest of the time he lay under a rug on the divan in Prechistenka, in a room with books piled up to the ceiling, coughing, gazing into the jaws of the fiery stove which Maria Stepanov-na stoked with gilt chairs, and remembering the Surinam toad.

But all things come to an end. So it was with 'twenty and 'twenty-one, and in 'twenty-two a kind of reverse process began. Firstly, in place of the dear departed Vlas there appeared Pankrat, a young, but most promising zoological caretaker, and the Institute began to be heated again a little.

Then in the summer with Pankrat's help Persikov caught fourteen common toads. The terrariums came to life again... In 'twenty-three Persikov gave eight lectures a week, three at the Institute and five at the University, in 'twenty-four thirteen a week, not including the ones at workers' schools, and in the spring of 'twenty-five distinguished himself by failing no less than seventy-six students, all on amphibians.

"What, you don't know the difference between amphibians and reptilia?"

Persikov asked. "That's quite ridiculous, young man. Amphibia have no kidneys. None at all. So there. You should be ashamed of yourself. I expect

you're a Marxist, aren't you?"

"Yes," replied the devastated student, faintly.

"Well, kindly retake the exam in the autumn," Persikov said politely and shouted cheerfully to Pankrat: "Send in the next one!"

Just as amphibians come to life after a long drought, with the first heavy shower of rain, so Professor Persikov revived in 1926 when a joint Americano-Russian company built fifteen fifteen-storey apartment blocks in the centre of Moscow, beginning at the corner of Gazetny Lane and Tverskaya, and 300 workers' cottages on the outskirts, each with eight apartments, thereby putting an end once and for all to the terrible and ridiculous accommodation shortage which made life such a misery for Muscovites from 1919 to 1925.

In fact, it was a marvellous summer in Persikov's life, and occasionally he would rub his hands with a quiet, satisfied giggle, remembering how he and Maria Stepanovna had been cooped up in two rooms. Now the Professor had received all five back, spread himself, arranged his two-and-a-half thousand books, stuffed animals, diagrams and specimens, and lit the green lamp on the desk in his study.

You would not have recognised the Institute either. They painted it cream, equipped the amphibian room with a special water supply system, replaced all the plate glass with mirrors and donated five new microscopes, glass laboratory tables, some 2,000-amp. arc lights, reflectors and museum cases.

Persikov came to life again, and the whole world suddenly learnt of this when a brochure appeared in December 1926 entitled "More About the Reproduction of Polyplacophora or Chitons", 126 pp, Proceedings of the Fourth University.

And in the autumn of 1927 he published a definitive work of 350 pages, subsequently translated into six languages, including Japanese. It was entitled "The Embryology of Pipae, Spadefoots and Frogs", price 3 roubles.

State Publishing House.

But in the summer of 1928 something quite appalling happened...

CHAPTER II.

A Coloured Tendril

So, the Professor switched on the light and looked around. Then he turned on the reflector on the long experimental table, donned his white coat, and fingered some instruments on the table...

Of the thirty thousand mechanical carriages that raced" around Moscow in 'twenty-eight many whizzed down Herzen Street, swishing over the smooth paving-stones, and every few minutes a 16,22, 48 or 53 tram would career round the corner from Herzen Street to Mokhovaya with much grinding and clanging. A pale and misty crescent moon cast reflections of coloured lights through the laboratory windows and was visible far away and high up beside the dark and heavy dome of the Church of Christ the Saviour.

But neither the moon nor the Moscow spring bustle were of the slightest concern to the Professor. He sat on his three-legged revolving stool turning with tobacco-stained fingers the knob of a splendid Zeiss microscope, in which there was an ordinary unstained specimen of fresh amoebas. At the very moment when Persikov was changing the magnification from five to ten thousand, the door opened slightly, a pointed beard and leather bib appeared, and his assistant called:

"I've set up the mesentery, Vladimir Ipatych. Would you care to take a look?"

Persikov slid quickly down from the stool, letting go of the knob midway, and went into his assistant's room, twirling a cigarette slowly in his fingers. There, on the glass table, a half-suffocated frog stiff with fright and pain lay crucified on a cork mat, its transparent micaceous intestines pulled out of the bleeding abdomen under the microscope.

"Very good," said Persikov, peering down the eye-piece of the microscope.

He could obviously detect something very interesting in the frog's mesentery, where live drops of blood were racing merrily along the vessels as clear as daylight. Persikov quite forgot about his amoebas. He and Ivanov spent the next hour-and-a-half taking turns at the microscope and exchanging animated remarks, quite incomprehensible to ordinary mortals.

At last Persikov dragged himself away, announcing: "The blood's coagulating, it can't be helped."

The frog's head twitched painfully and its dimming eyes said clearly: "Bastards, that's what you are..."

Stretching his stiff legs, Persikov got up, returned to his laboratory, yawned, rubbed his permanently inflamed eyelids, sat down on the stool and looked into the microscope, his fingers about to move the knob. But move it he did not. With his right eye Persikov saw the cloudy white plate and blurred pale amoebas on it, but in the middle of the plate sat a coloured tendril, like a female curl. Persikov himself and hundreds of his students had seen this tendril many times before but taken no interest in it, and rightly so. The coloured streak of light merely got in the way and indicated that the specimen was out of focus. For this reason it was ruthlessly eliminated with a single turn of the knob, which spread an even white light over the plate. The zoologist's long fingers had already tightened on the knob, when suddenly they trembled and let go. The reason for this was Persikov's right eye. It tensed, stared in amazement and filled with alarm.

No mediocre mind to burden the Republic sat by the microscope. No, this was Professor Persikov! All his mental powers were now concentrated in his right eye. For five minutes or so in petrified silence the higher being observed the lower one, peering hard at the out-of-focus specimen. There was complete silence all around. Pankrat had gone to sleep in his cubby-hole in the vestibule, and only once there came a far-off gentle and musical tinkling of glass in cupboards-that was Ivanov going out and locking his laboratory. The entrance door groaned behind him. Then came the Professor's voice. To whom his question was addressed no one knows.

"What on earth is that? I don't understand..."

A late lorry rumbled down Herzen Street, making the old walls of the Institute shake. The shallow glass bowl with pipettes tinkled on the table.

The Professor turned pale and put his hands over the microscope, like a mother whose child is threatened by danger. There could now be no question of Persikov turning the knob. Oh no, now he was afraid that some external force might push what he had seen out of his field of vision.

It was a full white morning with a strip of gold which cut across the Institute's cream porch when the Professor left the microscope and walked over to the window on stiff legs. With trembling fingers he pressed a button, dense black shutters blotted out the morning and a wise scholarly night descended on the room. Sallow and inspired, Persikov placed his feet apart, staring at the parquet floor with his watering eyes, and exclaimed: "But how can it be? It's monstrous! Quite monstrous, gentlemen," he repeated, addressing the toads in the terrarium, who were asleep and made no reply.

He paused, then went over to the button, raised the shutters, turned out all the lights and looked into the microscope. His face grew tense and he raised his bushy yellow eyebrows.

"Aha, aha," he muttered. "It's gone. I see. I understand," he drawled, staring with crazed and inspired eyes at the extinguished light overhead.

"It's simple."

Again he let down the hissing shutters and put on the light. Then looked into the microscope and grinned happily, almost greedily.

"I'll catch it," he said solemnly and gravely, crooking his finger.

"I'll catch it. Perhaps the sun will do it too."

The shutters shot up once more. Now you could see the sun. It was shining on the walls of the Institute and slanting down onto the pavements of Herzen Street. The Professor looked through the window, working out where the sun would be in the afternoon. He kept stepping back and forwards, doing a little dance, and eventually lay stomach down on the window-sill.

After that he got down to some important and mysterious work. He covered the microscope with a bell glass. Then he melted a piece of sealing-wax in the bluish flame of the Bun-sen burner, sealed the edge of the glass to the table and made a thumb print on the blobs of wax. Finally he turned off the gas and went out, locking the laboratory door firmly behind him.

There was semi-darkness in the Institute corridors.

The Professor reached Pankrat's door and knocked for a long time to no effect. At last something inside growled like a watchdog, coughed and snorted and Pankrat appeared in the lighted doorway wearing long striped

underpants tied at the ankles. His eyes glared wildly at the scientist and he whimpered softly with sleep.

"I must apologise for waking you up, Pankrat," said the Professor, peering at him over his spectacles. "But please don't go into my laboratory this morning, dear chap. I've left some work there that must on no account be moved. Understand?"

"Grrr, yessir," Pankrat replied, not understanding a thing.

He staggered a bit and growled.

"Now listen here, Pankrat, you just wake up," the zoologist ordered, prodding him lightly in the ribs, which produced a look of fright on Pankrat's face and a glimmer of comprehension in his eyes. "I've locked the laboratory," Persikov went on, "so you need not clean it until I come back.

Understand?"

"Yessir," Pankrat croaked.

"That's fine then, go back to bed."

Pankrat turned round, disappeared inside and collapsed onto the bed.

The Professor went into the vestibule. Putting on his grey summer coat and soft hat, he remembered what he had observed in the microscope and stared at his galoshes for a few seconds, as if seeing them for the first time. Then he put on the left galosh and tried to put the right one over it, but it wouldn't go on.

"What an incredible coincidence that he called me away," said the scientist. "Otherwise I would never have noticed it. But what does it mean?"

The devil only knows!.."

The Professor smiled, squinted at his galoshes, took off the left one and put on the right. "Good heavens! One can't even imagine all the consequences..." The Professor prodded off the left galosh, which had irritated him by not going on top of the right, and walked to the front door wearing one galosh only. He also lost his handkerchief and went out, slamming the heavy door. On the porch he searched in his pockets for some matches, patting his sides, found them eventually and set off down the street with an unlit cigarette in his mouth.

The scientist did not meet a soul all the way to the church. There he threw back his head and stared at the golden dome. The sun was licking it avidly on one side.

"Why didn't I notice it before? What a coincidence! Well, I never!

Silly ass!" The Professor looked down and stared pensively at his strangely shod feet. "Hm, what shall I do? Go back to Pankrat? No, there's no waking him. It's a pity to throw the wretched thing away. I'll have to carry it."

He removed the galosh and set off carrying it distastefully.

An old car drove out of Prechistenka with three passengers. Two men, slightly tipsy, with a garishly made-up woman in those baggy silk trousers that were all the rage in 1928 sitting on their lap.

"Hey, Dad!" she shouted in a low husky voice. "Did you sell the other galosh for booze?"

"The old boy got sozzled at the Alcazar," howled the man on the left, while the one on the right leaned out of the car and shouted: "Is the nightclub in Volkhonka still open, Dad? That's where we're making for!"

The Professor looked at them sternly over the top of his glasses, let the cigarette fall out of his mouth and then immediately forgot they existed. A beam was cutting its way through Prechistensky Boulevard, and the dome of Christ the Saviour had begun to burn. The sun had come out.

CHAPTER III.

Persikov Catches It

What had happened was this. When the Professor put his discerning eye to the microscope, he noticed for the first time in his life that one particular ray in the coloured tendril stood out more vividly and boldly than the others. This ray was bright red and stuck out of the tendril like the tiny point of a needle, say.

Thus, as ill luck would have it, this ray attracted the attention of the great man's experienced eye for several seconds.

In it, the ray, the Professor detected something a thousand times more significant and important than the ray itself, that precarious offspring accidentally engendered by the movement of a microscope mirror and lens. Due to the assistant calling the Professor away, some amoebas had been subject to the action of the ray for an hour-and-a-half and this is what had happened: whereas the blobs of amoebas on the plate outside the ray simply lay there limp and helpless, some very strange phenomena were taking place on the spot over which the sharp red sword was poised. This strip of red was teeming with life. The old amoebas were forming pseudopodia in a desperate effort to reach the red strip, and when they did they came to life, as if by magic. Some force seemed to breathe life into them. They flocked there, fighting one another for a place in the ray, where the most frantic (there was no other word for it) reproduction was taking place. In defiance of all the laws which Persikov knew like the back of his hand, they gemmated before his eyes with lightning speed. They split into two in the ray, and each of the parts became a new, fresh organism in a couple of

seconds. In another second or two these organisms grew to maturity and produced a new generation in their turn. There was soon no room at all in the red strip or on the plate, and inevitably a bitter struggle broke out.

The newly born amoebas tore one another to pieces and gobbled the pieces up.

Among the newly born lay the corpses of those who had perished in the fight for survival. It was the best and strongest who won. And they were terrifying. Firstly, they were about twice the size of ordinary amoebas and, secondly, they were far more active and aggressive. Their movements were rapid, their pseudopodia much longer than normal, and it would be no exaggeration to say that they used them like an octopus's tentacles.

On the second evening the Professor, pale and haggard, his only sustenance the thick cigarettes he rolled himself, studied the new generation of amoebas. And on the third day he turned to the primary source, i.e., the red ray.

The gas hissed faintly in the Bunsen burner, the traffic clattered along the street outside, and the Professor, poisoned by a hundred cigarettes, eyes half-closed, leaned back in his revolving chair.

"I see it all now. The ray brought them to life. It's a new ray, never studied or even discovered by anyone before. The first thing is to find out whether it is produced only by electricity, or by the sun as well," Persikov muttered to himself.

The next night provided the answer to this question. Persikov caught three rays in three microscopes from the arc light, but nothing from the sun, and summed this up as follows:

"We must assume that it is not found in the solar spectrum... Hm, well, in short we must assume it can only be obtained from electric light." He gazed fondly at the frosted ball overhead, thought for a moment and invited Ivanov into the laboratory, where he told him all and showed him the amoebas.

Decent Ivanov was amazed, quite flabbergasted. Why on earth hadn't a simple thing as this tiny arrow been noticed before? By anyone, or even by him, Ivanov. It was really appalling! Just look...

"Look, Vladimir Ipatych!" Ivanov said, his eye glued to the microscope.

"Look what's happening! They're growing before my eyes... You must take a look..."

"I've been observing them for three days," Persikov replied animatedly.

Then a conversation took place between the two scientists, the gist of which was as follows. Decent Ivanov undertook with the help of lenses and mirrors to make a chamber in which they could obtain the ray in magnified form without a microscope. Ivanov hoped, was even convinced, that this would be extremely simple. He would obtain the ray, Vladimir Ipatych need have no doubts on that score. There was a slight pause.

"When I publish a paper, I shall mention that the chamber was built by you, Pyotr Stepanovich," Persikov interspersed, feeling that the pause should be ended.

"Oh, that doesn't matter... However, if you insist..."

And the pause ended. After that the ray devoured Ivanov as well. While Persikov, emaciated and hungry, spent all day and half the night at his microscope, Ivanov got busy in the brightly-lit physics laboratory, working out a combination of lenses and mirrors. He was assisted by the mechanic.

Following a request made to the Commissariat of Education, Persikov received three parcels from Germany containing mirrors, convexo-convex, concavo-concave and even some convexo-concave polished lenses. The upshot of all this was that Ivanov not only built his chamber, but actually caught the red ray in it. And quite brilliantly, it must be said. The ray was a thick one, about four centimetres in diameter, sharp and strong.

On June 1st the chamber was set up in Persikov's laboratory, and he began experimenting avidly by putting frog spawn in the ray. These experiments produced amazing results. In the course of forty-eight hours thousands of tadpoles hatched out from the spawn. But that was not all.

Within another twenty-four hours the tadpoles grew fantastically into such vicious, greedy frogs that half of them were devoured by the other half. The survivors then began to spawn rapidly and two days later, without the assistance of the ray, a new generation appeared too numerous to count. Then all hell was let loose in the Professor's laboratory. The tadpoles slithered out all over the Institute. Lusty choirs croaked loudly in the terrariums and all the nooks and crannies, as in marshes. Pankrat, who was scared stiff of Persikov as it was, now went in mortal terror of him. After a week the scientist himself felt he was going mad. The Institute reeked of ether and potassium cyanide, which nearly finished off Pankrat when he removed his mask too soon. This expanding marshland generation was eventually exterminated with poison and the laboratories aired.

"You know, Pyotr Stepanovich," Persikov said to Ivanov, "the effect of the ray on deuteroplasm and on the ovule in general is quite extraordinary."

Ivanov, a cold and reserved gentleman, interrupted the Professor in an unusual voice:

"Why talk of such minor details as deuteroplasm, Vladimir Ipatych?

Let's not beat about the bush. You have discovered something unheard-of..."

With a great effort Ivanov managed to force the words out. "You have discovered the ray of life, Professor Persikov!"

A faint flush appeared on Persikov's pale, unshaven cheekbones.

"Well, well," he mumbled.

"You," Ivanov went on, "you will win such renown... It makes my head go round. Do you understand, Vladimir Ipatych," he continued excitedly, "H. G.

Wells's heroes are nothing compared to you... And I thought that was all make-believe... Remember his Food for the Gods'!"

"Ah, that's a novel," Persikov replied.

"Yes, of course, but it's famous!"

"I've forgotten it," Persikov said. "I remember reading it, but I've forgotten it."

"How can you have? Just look at that!" Ivanov picked up an incredibly large frog with a swollen belly from the glass table by its leg. Even after death its face had a vicious expression. "It's monstrous!"

CHAPTER IV.

Drozdova, the Priest's Widow

Goodness only knows why, perhaps Ivanov was to blame or perhaps the sensational news just travelled through the air on its own, but in the huge seething city of Moscow people suddenly started talking about the ray and Professor Persikov. True, only in passing and vaguely. The news about the miraculous discovery hopped like a wounded bird round the shining capital, disappearing from time to time, then popping up again, until the middle of July when a short item about the ray appeared in the Science and Technology News section on page 20 of the newspaper Izvestia. It announced briefly that a well-known professor at the Fourth University had invented a ray capable of increasing the activity of lower organisms to an incredible degree, and that the phenomenon would have to be checked. There was a mistake in the name, of course, which was given as "Pepsikov".

Ivanov brought the newspaper and showed Persikov the article.

"Pepsikov," muttered Persikov, as he busied himself with the chamber in his laboratory. "How do those newsmongers find out everything?"

Alas, the misprinted surname did not save the Professor from the events that followed, and they began the very next day, immediately turning Persikov's whole life upside down.

After a discreet knock, Pankrat appeared in the laboratory and handed Persikov a magnificent glossy visiting card.

"E's out there," Pankrat added timidly.

The elegantly printed card said:

Alfred Arkadyevich Bronsky

Correspondent for the Moscow magazines Red Light, Red Pepper, Red Journal and Red Searchlight and the newspaper Red Moscow Evening News

"Tell him to go to blazes," said Persikov flatly, tossing the card under the table.

Pankrat turned round and went out, only to return five minutes later with a pained expression on his face and a second specimen of the same visiting card.

"Is this supposed to be a joke?" squeaked Persikov, his voice shrill with rage.

"Sez 'e's from the Gee-Pee-Yoo," Pankrat replied, white as a sheet.

Persikov snatched the card with one hand, almost tearing it in half, and threw his pincers onto the table with the other. The card bore a message in ornate handwriting: "Humbly request three minutes of your precious time, esteemed Professor, on public press business, correspondent of the satirical magazine Red Maria, a GPU publication."

"Send him in," said Persikov with a sigh.

A young man with a smoothly shaven oily face immediately popped out from behind Pankrat's back. He had permanently raised eyebrows, like a Chinaman, over agate eyes which never looked at the person he was talking to. The young man was dressed impeccably in the latest fashion. He wore a long narrow jacket down to his knees, extremely baggy trousers and unnaturally wide glossy shoes with toes like hooves. In his hands he held a cane, a hat with a pointed top and a note-pad.

"What do you want?" asked Persikov in a voice which sent Pankrat scuttling out of the room. "Weren't you told that I am busy?"

In lieu of a reply the young man bowed twice to the Professor, to the left and to the right of him, then his eyes skimmed over the whole laboratory, and the young man jotted a mark in his pad.

"I am busy," repeated the Professor, looking with loathing into the visitor's eyes, but to no avail for they were too elusive.

"A thousand apologies, esteemed Professor," the young man said in a thin voice, "for intruding upon you and taking up your precious time, but the news of your incredible discovery which has astounded the whole world compels our journal to ask you for some explanations."

"What explanations, what whole world?" Persikov whined miserably, turning yellow. "I don't have to give you any explanations or anything of the sort... I'm busy... Terribly busy."

"What are you working on?" the young man asked ingratiatingly, putting a second mark in his pad.

"Well, I'm... Why? Do you want to publish something?"

"Yes," replied the young man and suddenly started scribbling furiously.

"Firstly, I do not intend to publish anything until I have finished my work ... and certainly not in your newspapers... Secondly, how did you find out about this?" Persikov suddenly felt at a loss.

"Is it true that you have invented a new life ray?"

"What new life?" exploded the Professor. "You're talking absolute piffle! The ray I am working on has not been fully studied, and nothing at all is known yet! It may be able to increase the activity of protoplasm..."

"By how much?" the young man asked quickly.

Persikov was really at a loss now. "The insolent devil! What the blazes is going on?" he thought to himself.

"What ridiculous questions! Suppose I say, well, a thousand times!"

Predatory delight flashed in the young man's eyes.'

"Does that produce gigantic organisms?" "Nothing of the sort! Well, of course, the organisms I have obtained are bigger than usual. And they do have some new properties. But the main thing is not the size, but the incredible speed of reproduction," Persikov heard himself say to his utmost dismay. Having filled up a whole page, the young man turned over and went on scribbling.

"Don't write it down!" Persikov croaked in despair, realising that he was in the young man's hands. "What are you writing?"

"Is it true that in forty-eight hours you can hatch two million tadpoles from frog-spawn?"

"From how much spawn?" exploded Persikov, losing his temper again.

"Have you ever seen the spawn of a tree-frog, say?"

"From half-a-pound?" asked the young man, unabashed. Persikov flushed with anger.

"Whoever measures it like that? Pah! What are you talking about? Of course, if you were to take half-a-pound of frog-spawn, then perhaps..."

Well, about that much, damn it, but perhaps a lot more!"

Diamonds flashed in the young man's eyes, as he filled up yet another page in one fell swoop.

"Is it true that this will cause a world revolution in animal husbandry?"

"Trust the press to ask a question like that," Persikov howled. "I forbid you to write such rubbish. I can see from your face that you're writing sheer nonsense!"

"And now, if you'd be so kind, Professor, a photograph of you," said the young man, closing his note-pad with a snap.

"What's that? A photograph of me? To put in those magazines of yours?"

Together with all that diabolical rubbish you've been scribbling down. No, certainly not... And I'm extremely busy. I really must ask you to..."

"Any old one will do. And we'll return it straightaway." "Pankrat!" the Professor yelled in a fury. "Your humble servant," said the young man and vanished. Instead of Pankrat came the strange rhythmic scraping sound of something metallic hitting the floor, and into the laboratory rolled a man of unusual girth, dressed in a blouse and trousers made from a woollen blanket. His left, artificial leg clattered and clanked, and he was holding a briefcase. The clean-shaven round face resembling yellowish meat-jelly was creased into a welcoming smile. He bowed in military fashion to the Professor and drew himself up, his leg giving a springlike snap. Persikov was speechless.

"My dear Professor," the stranger began in a pleasant, slightly throaty voice, "forgive an ordinary mortal for invading your seclusion."

"Are you a reporter?" Persikov asked. "Pankrat!"

"Certainly not, dear Professor," the fat man replied. "Allow me to introduce myself-naval captain and contributor to the Industrial Herald, newspaper of the Council of People's Commissars."

"Pankrat!" cried Persikov hysterically, and at that very moment a red light went on in the corner and the telephone rang softly. "Pankrat!" the Professor cried again. "Hello."

"Verzeihen Sie bitte, Herr Professor," croaked the telephone in German, "das ich store. Ich bin Mitarbeiter des Berliner Tageblatts..."

"Pankrat!" the Professor shouted down the receiver. "Bin momental sehr beschäftigt und kann Sie deshalb jetzt nicht empfangen. Pankrat!"

And just at this moment the bell at the main door started ringing.

"Terrible murder in Bronnaya Street!" yelled unnaturally hoarse voices, darting about between wheels and flashing headlights on the hot June

roadway. "Terrible illness of chickens belonging to the priest's widow Drozdova with a picture of her! Terrible discovery of life ray by Professor Persikov!"

Persikov dashed out so quickly that he almost got run over by a car in Mokhovaya and grabbed a newspaper angrily.

"Three copecks, citizen!" cried the newsboy, squeezing into the crowd on the pavement and yelling: "Red Moscow Evening News, discovery of X-ray!"

The flabbergasted Persikov opened the newspaper and huddled against a lamp-post. On page two in the left-hand corner a bald man with crazed, unseeing eyes and a hanging lower jaw, the fruit of Alfred Bronsky's artistic endeavours,

stared at him from a smudged frame. The caption beneath it read: "V I.

Persikov who discovered the mysterious ray." Lower down, under the heading World-Wide Enigma was an article which began as follows: "'Take a seat,' the eminent scientist Persikov invited me hospitably..."

The article was signed with a flourish "Alfred Bronsky (Alonso)".

A greenish light soared up over the University roof; the words "Talking Newspaper" lit up in the sky, and a crowd jammed Mokhovaya.

"Take a seat!" an unpleasant thin voice, just like Alfred Bronsky's magnified a thousand times, yelled from a loudspeaker on the roof, "the eminent scientist Persikov invited me hospitably. 'I've been wanting to tell the workers of Moscow the results of my discovery for some time...'"

There was a faint metallic scraping behind Persikov's back, and someone tugged at his sleeve. Turning round he saw the yellow rotund face of the owner of the artificial leg. His eyes were glistening with tears and his lips trembled.

"You wouldn't tell me the results of your remarkable discovery, Professor," he said sadly with a deep sigh. "So that's farewell to a few more copecks."

He gazed miserably at the University roof, where the invisible Alfred raved on in the loudspeaker's black jaws. For some reason Persikov felt sorry for the fat man.

"I never asked him to sit down!" he growled, catching words from the sky furiously. "He's an utter scoundrel! You must excuse me, but really when you're working like that and people come bursting in... I'm not referring to you, of course..."

"Then perhaps you'd just describe your chamber to me, Professor?" the man with the artificial leg wheedled mournfully. "It doesn't make any difference now..."

"In three days half-a-pound of frog-spawn produces more tadpoles than you could possibly count," the invisible man in the loudspeaker boomed.

"Toot-toot," cried the cars on Mokhovaya.

"Ooo! Ah! Listen to that!" the crowd murmured, staring upwards.

"What a scoundrel! Eh?" hissed Persikov, shaking with anger, to the artificial man. "How do you like that? I'll lodge an official complaint against him."

"Disgraceful!" the fat man agreed.

A blinding violet ray dazzled the Professor's eyes, lighting up everything around-a lamp-post, a section of pavement, a yellow wall and the avid faces.

"They're photographing you, Professor," the fat man whispered admiringly and hung on the Professor's arm like a ton weight. Something clicked in the air.

"To blazes with them!" cried Persikov wretchedly, pushing his way with the ton weight out of the crowd. "Hey, taxi! Prechistenka Street!"

A battered old jalopy, a 'twenty-four model, chugged to a stop, and the Professor climbed in, trying to shake off the fat man.

"Let go!" he hissed, shielding his face with his hands to ward off the violet light.

"Have you read it? What they're shouting? Professor Persikov and his children've had their throats cut in Malaya Bronnaya!" people were shouting in the crowd.

"I don't have any children, blast you!" yelled Persikov, suddenly coming into the focus of a black camera which snapped him in profile with his mouth wide open and eyes glaring.

"Chu... ug, chu... ug," revved the taxi and barged into the crowd.

The fat man was already sitting in the cab, warming the Professor's side.

CHAPTER V.

The Tale of the Chickens

In the small provincial town formerly called Trinity, but now Glassworks, in Kostroma Province (Glassworks District), a woman in a grey dress with a kerchief tied round her head walked onto the porch of a little house in what was formerly Church, but now Personal Street and burst into tears. This woman, the widow of Drozdov, the former priest of the former church, sobbed so loudly that soon another woman's head in a fluffy scarf popped out of a window in the house across the road and exclaimed: "What's the matter, Stepanovna? Another one?"

"The seventeenth!" replied the former Drozdova, sobbing even louder.

"Dearie me," tutted the woman in the scarf, shaking her head, "did you ever hear of such a thing? 'Tis the anger of the Lord, and no mistake! Dead, is she?"

"Come and see, Matryona," said the priest's widow, amid loud and bitter sobs. "Take a look at her!"

Banging the rickety grey gate, the woman padded barefoot over the dusty hummocks in the road to be taken by the priest's widow into the chicken run.

It must be said that instead of losing heart, the widow of Father Sawaty Drozdov, who had died in twenty-six of anti-religious mortification, set up a nice little poultry business. As soon as things began to go well, the widow received such an exorbitant tax demand that the poultry business would have closed down had it not been for certain good folk. They advised the widow to inform the local authorities that she, the widow, was setting up a poultry cooperative. The cooperative consisted of Drozdova herself, her

faithful servant Matryoshka and the widow's dear niece. The tax was reduced, and the poultry-farm prospered so much that in twenty-eight the widow had as many as 250 chickens, even including some Cochins. Each Sunday the widow's eggs appeared at Glassworks market. They were sold in Tambov and were even occasionally displayed in the windows of the former Chichkin's Cheese and Butter Shop in Moscow.

And now, the seventeenth brahmaputra that morning, their dear little crested hen, was walking round the yard vomiting. The poor thing gurgled and retched, rolling her eyes sadly at the sun as if she would never see it again. In front of her squatted co-operative-member Matryoshka with a cup of water.

"Come on, Cresty dear... chuck-chuck-chuck... drink some water,"

Matryoshka begged, thrusting the cup under the hen's beak, but the hen would not drink. She opened her beak wide, threw back her head and began to vomit blood.

"Lord Jesus!" cried the guest, slapping her thighs. "Just look at that!

Clots of blood. I've never seen a hen bring up like that before, so help me God!"

These words accompanied the poor hen on her last journey. She suddenly keeled over, digging her beak helplessly into the dust, and swivelled her eyes. Then she rolled onto her back with her legs sticking up and lay motionless. Matryoshka wept in her deep bass voice, spilling the water, and the Chairman of the cooperative, the priest's widow, wept too while her guest lent over and whispered in her ear: "Stepanovna, I'll eat my hat if someone hasn't put the evil eye on your hens. Whoever heard of it! Chickens don't have diseases like this! Someone's put a spell on them."

"Tis devils' work!" the priest's widow cried to heaven. "They want to see me good and done for!"

Her words called forth a loud cock-a-doodle-doo, and lurching sideways out of the chicken-coop, like a restless drunk out of a tavern, came a tatty scrawny rooster. Rolling his eyes at them ferociously, he staggered about on the spot and spread his wings like an eagle, but instead of flying up, he began to run round the yard in circles, like a horse on a rope. On his third time round he stopped, vomited, then began to cough and choke, spitting blood all over the place and finally fell down with his legs pointing up at the sun like masts. The yard was filled with women's wails, which were

answered by an anxious clucking, clattering and fidgeting from the chicken-coop.

"What did I tell you? The evil eye," said the guest triumphantly. "You must get Father Sergius to sprinkle holy water."

At six o'clock in the evening, when the sun's fiery visage was sitting low among the faces of young sunflowers, Father Sergius, the senior priest at the church, finished the rite and took off his stole. Inquisitive heads peeped over the wooden fence and through the cracks. The mournful priest's widow kissed the crucifix and handed a torn yellow rouble note damp from her tears to Father Sergius, in response to which the latter sighed and muttered something about the good Lord visiting his wrath upon us. Father Sergius's expression suggested that he knew perfectly well why the good Lord was doing so, only he would not say.

Whereupon the crowd in the street dispersed, and since chickens go to sleep early no one knew that in the chicken-coop of Drozdova's neighbour three hens and a rooster had kicked the bucket all at once. They vomited like Drozdova's hens, only their end came inconspicuously in the locked chicken-coop. The rooster toppled off the perch head-first and died in that pose. As for the widow's hens, they gave up the ghost immediately after the service, and by evening there was a deathly hush in her chicken-coop and piles of dead poultry.

The next morning the town got up and was thunderstruck to hear that the story had assumed strange, monstrous proportions. By midday there were only three chickens still alive in Personal Street, in the last house where the provincial tax inspector rented lodgings, but they, too, popped off by one p. m. And come evening, the small town of Glassworks was buzzing like a bee-hive with the terrible word "plague" passing from mouth to mouth.

Drozdova's name got into The Red Warrior, the local newspaper, in an article entitled "Does This Mean a Chicken Plague?" and from there raced on to Moscow.

Professor Persikov's life took on a strange, uneasy and worrisome complexion. In short, it was quite impossible for him to work in this situation. The day after he got rid of Alfred Bronsky, he was forced to disconnect the telephone in his laboratory at the Institute by taking the receiver off, and in the evening as he was riding along Okhotny Row in a tram, the Professor saw himself on the roof of an enormous building with Workers' Paper in black letters. He, the Professor, was climbing into a taxi,

fuming, green around the gills, and blinking, followed by a rotund figure in a blanket, who was clutching his sleeve. The Professor on the roof, on the white screen, put his hands over his face to ward off the violet ray. Then followed in letters of fire: "Professor Persikov in a car explaining everything to our well-known reporter Captain Stepanov." And there was the rickety old jalopy dashing along Volkhonka, past the Church of Christ the Saviour, with the Professor bumping up and down inside it, looking like a wolf at bay.

"They're devils, not human beings," the zoologist hissed through clenched teeth as he rode past.

That evening, returning to his apartment in Prechistenka, the zoologist received from the housekeeper, Maria Stepanovna, seventeen slips of paper with the telephone numbers of people who had rung during his absence, plus Maria Stepanovna's oral statement that she was worn out. The Professor was about to tear the pieces of paper up, but stopped when he saw "People's Commissariat of Health" scribbled next to one of the numbers.

"What's up?" the eccentric scientist was genuinely puzzled. "What's the matter with them?"

At ten fifteen on the same evening the bell rang, and the Professor was obliged to converse with a certain exquisitely attired citizen. The Professor received him thanks to a visiting card which said (without mentioning any names) "Authorised Head of Trading Sections for Foreign Firms Represented in the Republic of Soviets."

"The devil take him," Persikov growled, putting his magnifying glass and some diagrams down on the baize cloth.

"Send him in here, that authorised whatever he is," he said to Maria Stepanovna.

"What can I do for you?" Persikov asked in a tone that made the authorised whatever he was shudder perceptibly. Persikov shifted his spectacles from his nose to his forehead and back again, and looked his visitor up and down. The latter glistened with hair cream and precious stones, and a monocle sat in his right eye. "What a foul-looking face,"

Persikov thought to himself for some reason.

The guest began in circuitous fashion by asking permission to smoke a cigar, as a result of which Persikov reluctantly invited him to take a seat.

Then the guest began apologising at length for having come so late. "But it's impossible to catch ... oh, tee-hee, pardon me ... to find the Professor at

home in the daytime." (The guest gave a sobbing laugh like a hyena.)

"Yes, I'm very busy!" Persikov answered so curtly that the visitor shuddered visibly again.

Nevertheless he had taken the liberty of disturbing the famous scientist. Time is money, as they say ... the Professor didn't object to his cigar, did he?

"Hrmph, hrmph, hrmph," Persikov replied. He'd given him permission."

"You have discovered the ray of life, haven't you, Professor?"

"Balderdash! What life? The newspapers invented that!"

"Oh, no, tee-hee-hee..." He perfectly understood the modesty that is an invariable attribute of all true scholars... of course... There had been telegrams today... In the cities of Warsaw and Riga they had already heard about the ray. Professor Persikov's name was on everyone's lips... The whole world was following his work with bated breath... But everyone knew how hard it was for scholars in Soviet Russia. Entre nous, soi-dis... There wasn't anyone else listening, was there? Alas, they didn't appreciate academic work here, so he would like to have a little talk with the Professor... A certain foreign state was offering Professor Persikov entirely disinterested assistance with his laboratory research. Why cast your pearls here, as the Scriptures say? This state knew how hard it had been for the Professor in 'nineteen and 'twenty during that tee-hee ... revolution. Of course, it would all be kept absolutely secret. The Professor would inform the state of the results of his work, and it would finance him in return. Take that chamber he had built, for instance. It would be interesting to have a peep at the designs for it...

At this point the guest took a pristine wad of banknotes out of his inside jacket pocket...

A mere trifle, a deposit of 5,000 roubles, say, could be given to the Professor this very moment... no receipt was required. The authorised whatever he was would be most offended if the Professor even mentioned a receipt.

"Get out!" Persikov suddenly roared so terrifyingly that the high keys on the piano in the drawing-room vibrated.

The guest vanished so quickly that after a moment Persikov, who was shaking with rage, was not sure whether he had been a hallucination or not.

"His galoshes?" Persikov yelled a moment later in the hall.

"The gentleman forgot them, sir," replied a quaking Maria Stepanovna.

"Throw them out!"

"How can I? The gentleman's bound to come back for them."

"Hand them over to the house committee. And get a receipt. Don't let me ever set eyes on them again! Take them to the committee! Let them have that spy's galoshes!"

Maria Stepanovna crossed herself, picked up the splendid leather galoshes and took them out of the back door. She stood outside for a while, then hid the galoshes in the pantry.

"Handed them over?" growled Persikov.

"Yes, sir."

"Give me the receipt."

"But the Chairman can't write, Vladimir Ipatych!"

"Get. Me. A. Receipt. At. Once. Let some literate rascal sign it for him."

Maria Stepanovna just shook her head, went off and returned a quarter of an hour later with a note which said: "Rcvd for storage from Prof. Persikov I (one) pr. ga's. Kolesov."

"And what might that be?"

"It's a baggage check, sir."

Persikov trampled on the check, but put the receipt under the blotter.

Then a sudden thought made his high forehead darken. He rushed to the telephone, rang Pankrat at the Institute and asked him if everything was alright there. Pankrat snarled something into the receiver, which could be interpreted as meaning that, as far as he could see, everything there was fine. But Persikov did not calm down for long. A moment later he grabbed the phone and boomed into the receiver:

"Give me the, what's it called, Lubyanka. Merci... Which of you should I report this to ... there are some suspicious-looking characters in galoshes round here, and... Professor Persikov of the Fourth University..."

The receiver suddenly cut the conversation short, and Persikov walked away, cursing under his breath.

"Would you like some tea, Vladimir Ipatych?" Maria Stepanovna enquired timidly, peeping into the study.

"No, I would not ... and the devil take the lot of them... What's got into them!"

Exactly ten minutes later the Professor received some new visitors in his study. One of them was pleasant, rotund and very polite, in an ordinary khaki service jacket and breeches. A pince-nez perched on his nose, like a crystal butterfly. In fact he looked like a cherub in patent leather boots.

The second, short and extremely grim, wore civilian clothes, but they seemed to constrict him. The third visitor behaved in a most peculiar fashion. He did not enter the Professor's study, but stayed outside in the dark corridor. The brightly lit study wreathed in clouds of tobacco smoke was entirely visible to him. The face of this third man, also in civilian clothes, was adorned by a tinted pince-nez.

The two inside the study wore Persikov out completely, examining the visiting card, asking him about the five thousand and making him describe what the man looked like.

"The devil only knows," Persikov muttered. "Well, he had a loathsome face. A degenerate."

"Did he have a glass eye?" the small man croaked.

"The devil only knows. But no, he didn't. His eyes darted about all the time."

"Rubinstein?" the cherub asked the small man quietly. But the small man shook his head gloomily.

"Rubinstein would never give cash without a receipt, that's for sure," he muttered. "This isn't Rubinstein's work. It's someone bigger."

The story about the galoshes evoked the liveliest interest from the visitors. The cherub rapped a few words down the receiver: "The State Political Board orders house committee secretary Kolesov to come to Professor Persikov's apartment I at once with the galoshes." In a flash Kolesov turned up in the study, pale-faced and clutching the pair of galoshes.

"Vasenka!" the cherub called quietly to the man sitting in the hall, who got up lethargically and slouched into the study. The tinted lenses had swallowed up his eyes completely.

"Yeh?" he asked briefly and sleepily.

"The galoshes."

The tinted lenses slid over the galoshes, and Persikov thought he saw a pair of very sharp eyes, not at all sleepy, flash out from under the lenses for a second. But they disappeared almost at once.

"Well, Vasenka?"

The man called Vasenka replied in a flat voice: "Well what? They're Polenzhkovsky's galoshes."

The house committee was immediately deprived of Professor Persikov's present. The galoshes disappeared in a newspaper. Highly delighted, the

cherub in the service jacket rose to his feet and began to pump the Professor's hand, even delivering a small speech, the gist of which was as follows: it did the Professor honour ... the Professor could rest assured ... he would not be disturbed any more, either at the Institute or at home ... steps would be taken, his chambers were perfectly safe...

"But couldn't you shoot the reporters?" asked Persikov, looking over his spectacles.

His question cheered the visitors up no end. Not only the small gloomy one, but even the tinted one in the hall gave a big smile. Beaming and sparkling, the cherub explained that that was impossible.

"But who was that scoundrel who came here?"

The smiles disappeared at once, and the cherub replied evasively that it was just some petty speculator not worth worrying about. All the same he trusted that the Professor would treat the events of this evening in complete confidence, and the visitors left.

Persikov returned to his study and the diagrams, but he was not destined to study them. The telephone's red light went on, and a female voice suggested that the Professor might like to marry an attractive and amorous widow with a seven-roomed apartment. Persikov howled down the receiver:

"I advise you to get treatment from Professor Rossolimo..." and then the phone rang again.

This time Persikov softened somewhat, because the person, quite a famous one, who was ringing from the Kremlin enquired at length with great concern about Persikov's work and expressed the desire to visit his laboratory. Stepping back from the telephone, Persikov wiped his forehead and took off the receiver. Then trumpets began blaring and the shrieks of the Valkyrie rang in the apartment upstairs. The cloth mill director's radio had tuned in to the Wagner concert at the Bolshoi. To the accompaniment of howls and rumbles descending from the ceiling, Persikov declared to Maria Stepanovna that he would take the director to court, smash his radio to bits, and get the blazes out of Moscow, because somebody was clearly trying to drive him out. He broke his magnifying glass, spent the night on the divan in the study and was lulled to sleep by the sweet trills of a famous pianist wafted from the Bolshoi Theatre.

The following day was also full of surprises. After taking the tram to the Institute, Persikov found a stranger in a fashionable green bowler hat standing on the porch. He scrutinised Persikov carefully, but did not address

any questions to him, so Persikov put up with him. But in the Institute hall, apart from the dismayed Pankrat, a second bowler hat stood up as Persikov came in and greeted him courteously: "Good morning, Citizen Professor."

"What do you want?" asked Persikov furiously, tearing off his coat with Pankrat's help. But the bowler hat quickly pacified Persikov by whispering in the gentlest of voices that there was no need at all for the Professor to be upset. He, the bowler hat, was there precisely in order to protect the Professor from all sorts of importunate visitors. The Professor could rest assured not only about the laboratory doors, but also about the windows. So saying the stranger turned back the lapel of his jacket for a moment and showed the Professor a badge.

"Hm ... you work pretty efficiently, I must say," Persikov growled, adding naively: "What will you have to eat?"

Whereupon the bowler hat smiled and explained that someone would come to relieve him.

The next three days were splendid. The Professor had two visits from the Kremlin and one from the students whom he was to examine. The students all failed to a man, and you could see from their faces that Persikov now filled them with a superstitious dread.

"Go and be bus conductors! You're not fit to study zoology," came the shouts from his laboratory.

"Strict, is he?" the bowler hat asked Pankrat.

"I should say so," Pankrat replied. "If any of 'em stick it to the end, they come staggerin' out, sweatin' like pigs, and make straight for the boozier."

With all this going on the Professor did not notice the time pass, but on the fourth day he was again brought back to reality, thanks to a thin, shrill voice from the street.

"Vladimir Ipatych!" the voice shouted through the open window from Herzen Street. The voice was in luck. Persikov had driven himself too hard in the last few days. And at that moment he was sitting in an armchair having a rest and a smoke, with a vacant stare in his red-rimmed eyes. He was exhausted. So it was even with a certain curiosity that he looked out of the window and saw Alfred Bronsky on the pavement. The Professor recognised the titled owner of the visiting card from his pointed hat and note-pad.

Bronsky gave a tender and courteous bow to the window.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" asked the Professor. He did not have the strength to be angry and was even curious to know what would happen next.

Protected by the window he felt safe from Alfred. The ever-vigilant bowler hat outside immediately turned an ear to Bronsky. The latter's face blossomed into the smarmiest of smiles.

"Just a sec or two, dear Professor," said Bronsky, raising his voice to make himself heard. "I have one question only and it concerns zoology. May I put it to you?"

"You may," Persikov replied in a laconic, ironical tone, thinking to himself: "There's something American about that rascal, you know."

"What have you to say re the fowls, Professor?" shouted Bronsky, cupping his hands round his mouth.

Persikov was taken aback. He sat on the window-sill, then got down, pressed a knob and shouted, pointing at the window: "Let that fellow on the pavement in, Pankrat!"

When Bronsky walked into the room, Persikov extended his bonhomie to the point of barking "Sit down!" to him.

Smiling ecstatically, Bronsky sat down on the revolving stool "Kindly explain something to me," Persikov began. "You write for those newspapers of yours, don't you?"

"That is so," Alfred replied respectfully.

"Well, what I can't understand is how you can write if you can't even speak Russian properly. What do you mean by 'a sec or two' and 're the fowls'?"

Bronsky gave a thin, respectful laugh.

"Valentin Petrovich corrects it."

"And who might Valentin Petrovich be?"

"The head of the literary section."

"Oh, well. I'm not a philologist anyway. Now, leaving aside that Petrovich of yours, what exactly do you wish to know about fowls?"

"Everything you can tell me, Professor."

At this point Bronsky armed himself with a pencil. Sparks of triumph flashed in Persikov's eyes.

"You shouldn't have come to me, I don't specialise in our feathered friends. You should have gone to Yemelian Ivano-vich Portugalov, at the First University. I personally know very little..."

Bronsky smiled ecstatically to indicate that he had got the Professor's joke. "Joke-very little!" he scribbled in his pad.

"But if it interests you, of course. Hens, or cristates are a variety of bird from the fowl species. From the pheasant family," Persikov began in a loud voice, looking not at Bronsky, but into the far distance where he could see an audience of thousands. "From the pheasant family ...phasianus.

They are birds with a fleshy skin crown and two gills under the lower jaw...

Hm, although some have only one in the middle under the beak. Now, what else. Their wings are short and rounded. The tail is of medium length, somewhat stepped and even, I would say, roof-shaped. The middle feathers are bent in the form of a sickle... Pankrat... bring me model No. 705 from the model room, the cross-section of the domestic cock. You don't need it? Don't bring the model, Pankrat. I repeat, I am not a specialist. Go to Portugalov.

Now let me see, I personally know of six types of wild fowl... Hm, Portugalov knows more... In India and on the Malaysian archipelago. For example, the Bankiva fowl, or *Callus bankiva*. It is found in the foothills of the Himalayas, throughout India, in Assam and Burma... The Java fowl, or *Gallus varius* on Lombok, Sumbawa and Flores. And on the island of Java there is the splendid *Gallus eneus* fowl. In south-east India I can recommend the very beautiful *Sonneratii*. I'll show you a drawing of it later. As for Ceylon, here we have the Stanley fowl, which is not found anywhere else."

Bronsky sat there, eyes popping, and scribbled madly.

"Anything else I can tell you?"

"I'd like to hear something about fowl diseases," Alfred whispered quietly.

"Hm, it's not my subject. You should ask Portugalov. But anyway...

Well, there are tape-worms, leeches, the itchmite, bird-mite, chicken louse, *Eomenacanthus stramineus*, fleas, chicken cholera, inflammation of the mucous membrane, *Pneumonocosis*, tuberculosis, chicken mange... all sorts of things (Persikov's eyes flashed.) ... poisoning, tumours, rickets, jaundice, rheumatism, *Ahorion Schonlein's fungus* - that's a most interesting disease.

Small spots like mould appear on the crown..."

Bronsky wiped the sweat off his brow with a coloured handkerchief.

"And what in your opinion, Professor, is the cause of the present catastrophe?"

"What catastrophe?"

"Haven't you read about it, Professor?" exclaimed Bronsky in surprise, pulling a crumpled page of Izvestia out of his briefcase.

"I don't read newspapers," Persikov pouted.

"But why not, Professor?" Alfred asked gently.

"Because they write such rubbish," Persikov replied, without thinking.

"But surely not, Professor?" Bronsky whispered softly, unfolding the page.

"What's the matter?" asked Persikov, even rising to his feet. Bronsky's eyes were flashing now. He pointed a sharp painted finger at an incredibly large headline which ran right across the whole page: "Chicken plague in the Republic".

"What?" asked Persikov, pushing his spectacles onto his forehead...

CHAPTER VI.

Moscow. June 1928

The city shone, the lights danced, going out and blazing on. In Theatre Square the white lamps of buses mingled with the green lights of trams; above the former Muir and Merilees, its tenth floor added later, skipped a multi-coloured electrical woman, tossing out letter by letter the multicoloured words:

"Workers' Credit". A crowd thronged and murmured in the small garden opposite the Bolshoi Theatre, where a multicoloured fountain played at night. And over the Bolshoi itself a huge loudspeaker kept making announcements.

"Anti-fowl vaccinations at Lefortovo Veterinary Institute have produced brilliant results. The number of... fowl deaths for today has dropped by half..."

Then the loudspeaker changed its tone, something growled inside it, a spray of green blazed up over the theatre, then went out and the loudspeaker complained in a deep bass:

"An extraordinary commission has been set up to fight the fowl plague consisting of the People's Commissar of Health, the People's Commissar of Agriculture, the head of animal husbandry, Comrade Ptakha-Porosyuk, Professors Persikov and Portugalov... and Comrade Rabinovich! New attempts at intervention," the loudspeaker giggled and cried, like a jackal, "in connection with the fowl plague!"

Theatre Passage, Neglinnaya and Lubyanka blazed with white and violet neon strips and flickering lights amid wailing sirens and clouds of dust.

People crowded round the large notices on the walls, lit by glaring red reflectors.

"All consumption of chickens and chicken eggs is strictly forbidden on pain of severe punishment. Any attempt by private traders to sell them in markets is punishable by law with confiscation of all property. All citizens in possession of eggs are urgently requested to take them to local police stations."

A screen on the roof of the Workers' Paper showed chickens piled up to the sky as greenish firemen, fragmenting and sparkling, hosed them with kerosene. Red waves washed over the screen, deathly smoke belched forth, swirling in clouds, and drifted up in a column, then out hopped the fiery letters:

"Dead chickens being burnt in Khodynka."

Amid the madly blazing windows of shops open until three in the morning, with breaks for lunch and supper, boarded-up windows with signs saying "Eggs for sale. Quality guaranteed" stared out blindly. Hissing ambulances with "Moscow Health Dept." on them raced past policemen and overtook heavy buses, their sirens wailing.

"Someone else poisoned himself with rotten eggs," the crowd murmured.

The world-famous Empire Restaurant in Petrovsky Lines glowed with green and orange lamps, and inside it by the portable telephones on the tables lay liqueur-stained cardboard notices saying "No omelettes until further notice.

Try our fresh oysters."

In the Hermitage Gardens, where Chinese lanterns shone like sad beads in dead choked foliage, on a blindingly lit stage the singers Shrams and Karmanchikov sang satirical songs composed by the poets Ardo and Arguyev,

Oh, Mama, what shall I do

Without my little eggies two?

accompanied by a tap-dance.

The theatre named after the deceased Vsevolod Meyerhold who, it will be remembered, met his end in 1927 during a production of Pushkin's Boris Godunov, when the trapezes with naked boyars collapsed, sported a running coloured neon strip announcing a new play by the writer Erendors, entitled "Fowl Farewell" directed by Kuchterman, a pupil of Meyerhold. Next door, at the Aquarium Gardens, ablaze with neon advertisements and shining

half-naked women, the revue "Son-of-a-Hen" by the writer Lenivtsev was playing to loud applause among the foliage of the open-air variety stage. And along Tverskaya trotted a line of circus donkeys, with lanterns under each ear and gaudy posters. The Korsh Theatre was reviving Rostand's Chantecler.

Newspaper boys bellowed and yelled among the motor wheels: "Horrific find in underground cave! Poland preparing for horrific war!

Horrific experiments by Professor Persikov!"

In the circus of the former Nikitin, in a rich brown arena smelling sweetly of dung, the deathly white clown Born was talking to Bim, all swollen up with dropsy.

"I know why you're so fed up!"

"Why ith it?" squealed Bim.

"You buried your eggs under a gooseberry bush, and the 15th District police squad has found them."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha," laughed the circus, so hard that the blood curdled happily and longingly in their veins and the trapezes and cobwebs stirred under the old dome.

"Allez-ooop!" the clowns shouted loudly, and a well-fed white horse trotted out bearing a stunningly beautiful woman with shapely legs in a crimson costume.

Not looking at or taking heed of anyone and ignoring the prostitutes' nudges and soft, enticing invitations, the inspired and solitary Professor Persikov crowned with unexpected fame made his way along Mokhovaya to the neon clock by the Manege. Here, engrossed in his thoughts and not looking where he was going, he collided with a strange, old-fashioned man and banged his fingers painfully against the wooden holster hanging from the man's belt.

"What the devil!" squealed Persikov. "My apologies!" "Pardon me!"

replied an unpleasant voice in return, and they managed to disentangle themselves in the mass of people. The Professor continued on his way to Prechistenka, putting the incident out of his head straightaway.

CHAPTER VII.

Feight

Whether or not the Lefortovo veterinary vaccinations were effective, the Samara quarantine teams efficient, the strict measures taken with regard to buyers-up of eggs in Kaluga and Voronezh adequate and the work of the Special Moscow Commission successful, is not known, but what is known is that a fortnight after Persikov's last meeting with Alfred there was not a single chicken left in the Republic. Here and there in provincial back-yards lay plaintive tufts of feathers, bringing tears to the eyes of the owners, and in hospital the last gluttons recovered from diarrhea and vomiting blood. The loss in human life for the whole country was not more than a thousand, fortunately. There were also no large-scale disturbances. True, in Volokolamsk someone calling himself a prophet announced that the commissars, no less, were to blame for the chicken plague, but no one took much notice of him. A few policemen who were confiscating chickens from peasant women at Volokolamsk market got beaten up, and some windows in the local post and telegraph office were smashed. Fortunately, the efficient Volokolamsk authorities took measures as a result of which, firstly, the prophet ceased his activities and, secondly, the telegraph windows were replaced.

After travelling north as far as Archangel and Syumkin Vyselok, the plague stopped of its own accord for the simple reason that it could go no further-there are no chickens in the White Sea, as we all know. It also stopped in Vladivostok, because after that came the ocean. In the far south it died down and disappeared somewhere in the scorched expanses of Ordubat, Djilfa and Karabulak, and in the west it stopped miraculously right

at the Polish and Rumanian frontiers. Perhaps the climate there was different or the quarantine cordon measures taken by these neighbouring states helped.

But the fact remains that the plague went no further. The foreign press discussed the unprecedented plague loudly and avidly, and the Soviet government, without kicking up a racket, worked tirelessly round the clock.

The Extraordinary Commission to combat the chicken plague was renamed the Extraordinary Commission to encourage and revive poultry-keeping in the Republic and supplemented by a new extraordinary troika consisting of sixteen comrades. "Volunteer-Fowl" was founded, of which Persikov and Portugalov became honorary deputy chairmen. The newspapers carried pictures of them with the captions "Mass purchase of eggs from abroad" and "Mr Hughes tries to sabotage egg campaign". A venomous article by the journalist Kolechkin, ending with the words: "Keep your hands off our eggs, Mr Hughes-you've got eggs of your own!", resounded all over Moscow.

Professor Persikov had worked himself to a state of complete exhaustion over the last three weeks. The fowl events had disturbed his usual routine and placed an extra burden on him. He had to spend whole evenings attending fowl committee meetings and from time to time endure long talks either with Alfred Bronsky or the fat man with the artificial leg. And together with Professor Portugalov and docents Ivanov and Borngart he anatomised and microscopised fowls in search of the plague bacillus and even wrote a brochure in the space of only three evenings, entitled "On Changes in the Liver of Fowls Attacked by Plague".

Persikov worked without great enthusiasm in the fowl field, and understandably so since his head was full of something quite different, the main and most important thing, from which the fowl catastrophe had diverted him, i.e., the red ray. Undermining his already overtaxed health by stealing time from sleeping and eating, sometimes not returning to Prechistenka but dozing on the oilskin divan in his room at the Institute, Persikov spent night after night working with the chamber and the microscope.

By the end of July the commotion had abated somewhat. The renamed commission began to work along normal lines, and Persikov resumed his interrupted studies. The microscopes were loaded with new specimens, and fish- and frog-spawn matured in the chamber at incredible speed. Specially

ordered lenses were delivered from Konigsberg by aeroplane, and in the last few days of July, under Ivanov's supervision, mechanics installed two big new chambers, in which the beam was as broad as a cigarette packet at its base and a whole metre wide at the other end. Persikov rubbed his hands happily and began to prepare some mysterious and complex experiments. First of all, he came to some agreement with the People's Commissar of Education by phone, and the receiver promised him the most willing assistance of all kinds, then Persikov had a word with Comrade Ptakha-Porosyuk, head of the Supreme Commission's Animal Husbandry Department. Persikov met with the most cordial attention from Ptakha-Porosyuk with respect to a large order from abroad for Professor Persikov. Ptakha-Porosyuk said on the phone that he would cable Berlin and New York rightaway. After that there was a call from the Kremlin to enquire how Persikov was getting on, and an important-sounding voice asked affectionately if he would like a motor-car.

"No, thank you. I prefer to travel by tram," Persikov replied.

"But why?" the mysterious voice asked, with an indulgent laugh.

Actually everyone spoke to Persikov either with respect and awe, or with an affectionate laugh, as if addressing a silly, although very important child.

"It goes faster," Persikov said, after which the resonant bass on the telephone said:

"Well, as you like."

Another week passed, during which Persikov withdrew increasingly from the subsiding fowl problems to immerse himself entirely in the study of the ray. His head became light, somehow transparent and weightless, from the sleepless nights and exhaustion. The red rims never left his eyes now, and almost every night was spent at the Institute. Once he abandoned his zoological refuge to read a paper on his ray and its action on the ovule in the huge hall of the Central Commission for Improving the Living Conditions of Scientists in Prechistenka. This was a great triumph for the eccentric zoologist. The applause in the hall made the plaster flake off the ceiling, while the hissing arc lamps lit up the black dinner jackets of club-members and the white dresses of their ladies. On the stage, next to the rostrum, a clammy grey frog the size of a cat sat breathing heavily in a dish on a glass table. Notes were thrown onto the stage. They included seven love letters, which Persikov tore up. The club president had great difficulty persuading him onto the platform. Persikov bowed angrily. His hands were

wet with sweat and his black tie was somewhere behind his left ear, instead of under his chin. Before him in a breathing haze were hundreds of yellow faces and white male chests, when suddenly the yellow holster of a pistol flashed past and vanished behind a white column. Persikov noticed it vaguely and then forgot about it. But after the lecture, as he was walking down the red carpet of the staircase, he suddenly felt unwell. For a second the bright chandelier in the vestibule clouded and Persikov came over dizzy and slightly queasy. He seemed to smell burning and feel hot, sticky blood running down his neck... With a trembling hand the Professor clutched the banisters.

"Is anything the matter, Vladimir Ipatych?" he was besieged by anxious voices on all sides.

"No, no," Persikov replied, pulling himself together. "I'm just rather tired. Yes. Kindly bring me a glass of water."

It was a very sunny August day. This disturbed the Professor, so the blinds were pulled down. One flexible standing reflector cast a pencil of sharp light onto the glass table piled with instruments and lenses. The exhausted Persikov was leaning against the back of his revolving chair, smoking and staring through clouds of smoke with dead-tired but contented eyes at the slightly open door of the chamber inside which a red sheaf of light lay quietly, warming the already stuffy and fetid air in the room.

There was a knock at the door.

"What is it?" Persikov asked.

The door creaked lightly, and in came Pankrat. He stood to attention, pallid with fear before the divinity, and announced: "Feight's come for you, Professor."

The ghost of a smile flickered on the scientist's face. He narrowed his eyes and said:

"That's interesting. Only I'm busy."

"'E says 'e's got an official warrant from the Kremlin."

"Fate with a warrant? That's a rare combination," Persikov remarked.

"Oh, well, send him in then!"

"Yessir," Pankrat replied, slithering through the door like a grass-snake.

A minute later it opened again, and a man appeared on the threshold.

Persikov creaked his chair and stared at the newcomer over the top of his spectacles and over his shoulder. Persikov was very isolated from real life.

He was not interested in it. But even Persikov could not fail to notice the main thing about the man who had just come in. He was dreadfully old-fashioned. In 1919 this man would have looked perfectly at home in the streets of the capital. He would have looked tolerable in 1924, at the beginning. But in 1928 he looked positively strange. At a time when even the most backward part of the proletariat, bakers, were wearing jackets and when military tunics were a rarity, having been finally discarded at the end of 1924, the newcomer was dressed in a double-breasted leather jacket, green trousers, foot bindings and army boots, with a big old-fashioned Mauser in the cracked yellow holster at his side. The newcomer's face made the same impression on Persikov as on everyone else, a highly unpleasant one. The small eyes looked out on the world with a surprised, yet confident expression, and there was something unduly familiar about the short legs with their flat feet. The face was bluish-shaven. Persikov frowned at once.

Creak' ing the screw mercilessly, he peered at the newcomer over his spectacles, then through them, and barked: "So you've got a warrant, have you? Where is it then?"

The newcomer was clearly taken aback by what he saw. In general he was not prone to confusion, but now he was confused. Judging by his eyes, the thing that impressed him most was the bookcase with twelve shelves stretching right up to the ceiling and packed full of books. Then, of course, the chambers which, hell-like, were flooded with the crimson ray swelling up in the lenses. And Persikov himself in the semi-darkness by sharp point of the ray falling from the reflector looked strange and majestic in his revolving chair. The newcomer stared at him with an expression in which sparks of respect flashed clearly through the self-assurance, did not hand over any warrant, but said: "I am Alexander Semyonovich Feight!"

"Well then? So what?"

"I have been put in charge of the Red Ray Model State Farm," the newcomer explained.

"So what?"

"And so I have come to see you on secret business, comrade."

"Well, I wonder what that can be. Put it briefly, if you don't mind."

The newcomer unbuttoned his jacket and pulled out some instructions typed on splendid thick paper. He handed the paper to Persikov, then sat down uninvited on a revolving stool.

"Don't push the table," said Persikov with hatred.

The newcomer looked round in alarm at the table, on the far edge of which a pair of eyes glittered lifelessly like diamonds in a damp dark opening. They sent shivers down your spine.

No sooner had Persikov read the warrant, than he jumped up and rushed to the telephone. A few seconds later he was already saying hastily in a state of extreme irritation:

"Forgive me... I just don't understand... How can it be? Without my consent or advice... The devil only knows what he'll do!"

At that point the stranger, highly offended, spun round on the stool.

"Pardon me, but I'm in charge..." he began.

But Persikov shook a crooked finger at him and went on: "Excuse me, but I just don't understand. In fact, I object categorically. I refuse to sanction any experiments with the eggs... Until I have tried them myself..."

Something croaked and rattled in the receiver, and even at a distance it was clear that the indulgent voice on the phone was talking to a small child. In the end a purple-faced Persikov slammed down the receiver, shouting over it at the wall:

"I wash my hands of the whole business!"

Going back to the table, he picked up the warrant, read it once from top to bottom over his spectacles, then from bottom to top through them, and suddenly howled:

"Pankrat!"

Pankrat appeared in the doorway as if he had shot up through the trap-door in an opera. Persikov glared at him and barked: "Go away, Pankrat!" And Pankrat disappeared, his face not expressing the slightest surprise.

Then Persikov turned to the newcomer and said: "I beg your pardon. I will obey. It's none of my business.

And of no interest to me."

The newcomer was not so much offended as taken aback.

"Excuse me," he began, "but comrade..."

"Why do you keep saying comrade all the time," Persikov muttered, then fell silent.

"Well, I never," was written all over Feight's face.

"Pard..." "Alright then, here you are," Persikov interrupted him.

"See this arc lamp. From this you obtain by moving the eyepiece,"

Persikov clicked the lid of the chamber, like a camera, "a beam which you can collect by moving the lenses, number 1 here... and the mirror,

number 2." Persikov put the ray out, then lit it again on the floor of the asbestos chamber. "And on the floor you can put anything you like and experiment with it. Extremely simple, is it not?"

Persikov intended to express irony and contempt, but the newcomer was peering hard at the chamber with shining eyes and did not notice them.

"Only I warn you," Persikov went on. "You must not put your hands in the ray, because from my observations it causes growths of the epithelium.

And whether they are malignant or not, I unfortunately have not yet had time to establish."

Hereupon the newcomer quickly put his hands behind his back, dropping his leather cap, and looked at the Professor's hands. They were stained with iodine, and the right hand was bandaged at the wrist.

"But what about you, Professor?"

"You can buy rubber gloves at Schwabe's on Kuznetsky," the Professor replied irritably. "I'm not obliged to worry about that"

At this point Persikov stared hard at the newcomer as if through a microscope.

"Where are you from? And why have you..."

Feight took offence at last.

"Pard..."

"But a person should know what he's doing! Why have you latched on to this ray?"

"Because it's a matter of the greatest importance..."

"Hm. The greatest importance? In that case... Pankrat!"

And when Pankrat appeared:

"Wait a minute, I must think." "Pankrat dutifully disappeared again.

"There's one thing I can't understand," said Persikov. "Why the need for all this speed and secrecy?"

"You've got me all muddled up. Professor," Feight replied. "You know there's not a single chicken left in the whole country."

"Well, what of it?" Persikov howled. "Surely you're not going to try and resurrect them all at the drop of a hat, are you? And why do you need this ray which hasn't been properly studied yet?"

"Comrade Professor," Feight replied, "you've got me all muddled, honest you have. I'm telling you that we must put poultry-keeping back on its feet again, because they're writing all sorts of rotten things about us abroad.

Yes."

"Well, let them..."

"Tut-tut," Feight replied enigmatically, shaking his head.

"Who on earth, I should like to know, would ever think of using the ray to hatch chickens..."

"Me," said Feight.

"Oh, I see. And why, if you don't mind my asking? How did you find out about the properties of the ray?"

"I was at your lecture, Professor."

"But I haven't done anything with the eggs yet! I'm only planning to!"

"It'll work alright, honest it will," said Feight suddenly with great conviction. "Your ray's so famous it could hatch elephants, not only chickens."

"Now listen here," Persikov said. "You're not a zoologist, are you?"

That's a pity. You would make a very bold experimenter. Yes, only you risk ... failure ... and you're taking up my time."

"We'll give the chambers back to you. Don't you worry!"

"When?"

"After I've hatched out the first batch."

"How confidently you said that! Very well! Pankrat!"

"I've brought some people with me," said Feight. "And a guard..."

By evening Persikov's study was desolate. The tables were empty.

Feight's people took away the three big chambers, only leaving the Professor the first, the small one which he had used to begin the experiments.

The July dusk was falling. A greyness invaded the Institute, creeping along the corridors. Monotonous steps could be heard in the study. Persikov was pacing the large room from window to door, in the dark... And strange though it may seem all the inmates of the Institute, and the animals too, were prey to a curious melancholy that evening. For some reason the toads gave a very mournful concert, croaking in a most sinister, ominous fashion.

Pankrat had to chase a grass-snake that slipped out of its chamber, and when he caught it in the corridor the snake looked as if it would do anything just to get away from there.

Late that evening the bell from Persikov's study rang. Pankrat appeared on the threshold to be greeted by a strange sight. The scientist was standing alone in the middle of the study, staring at the tables. Pankrat coughed and froze to attention.

"There, Pankrat," said Persikov, pointing at the empty table. Pankrat took fright. It looked in the dark as if the Professor had been crying. That was unusual, terrifying.

"Yessir," Pankrat replied plaintively, thinking, "If only you'd bawl at me!"

"There," Persikov repeated, and his lips trembled like a little boy's whose favourite toy has suddenly been taken away from him.

"You know, my dear Pankrat," Persikov went on, turning away to face the window. "My wife who left me fifteen years ago and joined an operetta company has now apparently died... So there, Pankrat, dear chap... I got a letter..."

The toads croaked mournfully, and darkness slowly engulfed the Professor. Night was falling. Here and there white lamps went on in the windows. Pankrat stood to attention with fright, confused and miserable.

"You can go, Pankrat," the Professor said heavily, with a wave of the hand. "Go to bed, Pankrat, my dear fellow."

And so night fell. Pankrat left the study quickly on tiptoe for some reason, ran to his cubby-hole, rummaged among a pile of rags in the corner, pulled out an already opened bottle of vodka and gulped down a large glassful. Then he ate some bread and salt, and his eyes cheered up a bit.

Late that evening, just before midnight, Pankrat was sitting barefoot on a bench in the poorly lit vestibule, talking to the indefatigable bowler hat on duty and scratching his chest under a calico shirt.

"Honest, it would've been better if he'd done me in..."

"Was he really crying?" asked the bowler hat, inquisitively.

"Honest he was," Pankrat insisted.

"A great scientist," the bowler hat agreed. "A frog's no substitute for a wife, anyone knows that."

"It sure isn't," Pankrat agreed.

Then he paused and added:

"I'm thinking of bringing the wife up here... No sense her staying in the country. Only she couldn't stand them there reptiles..."

"I'm not surprised, the filthy things," agreed the bowler hat.

Not a sound could be heard from the Professor's study. The light was not on either. There was no strip under the door.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Incident at the State Farm

There is no better time of the year than mid-August in Smolensk Province, say. The summer of 1928 was a splendid one, as we all know, with rains just at the right time in spring, a full hot sun, and a splendid harvest... The apples on the former Sheremetev family estate were ripening, the forests were a lush green and the fields were squares of rich yellow...

Man becomes nobler in the lap of nature. Alexander Se-myonovich too did not seem quite as unpleasant as in the town. And he wasn't wearing that revolting jacket. His face had a bronze tan, the unbuttoned calico shirt revealed a chest thickly covered with black hair. He had canvas trousers on.

And his eyes were calmer and kinder.

Alexander Semyonovich trotted excitedly down the colon-naded porch, which sported a notice with the words "Red Ray State Farm" under a star, and went straight to the truck that had just brought the three black chambers under escort.

All day Alexander Semyonovich worked hard with his assistants setting up the chambers in the former winter garden, the Sheremetevs' conservatory.

By evening all was ready. A white frosted arc lamp shone under the glass roof, the chambers were set up on bricks and, after much tapping and turning of shining knobs, the mechanic who had come with the chambers produced the mysterious red ray on the asbestos floor in the black crates.

Alexander Semyonovich bustled about, climbing up the ladder himself and checking the wiring.

The next day the same truck came back from the station and spat out three boxes of magnificent smooth plywood stuck all over with labels and white notices on a black background that read: "Vorsicht: Eier!"

"Eggs. Handle with care!"

"Why have they sent so few?" Alexander Semyonovich exclaimed in surprise and set about unpacking the eggs at once. The unpacking also took place in the conservatory with the participation of the following: Alexander Semyonovich himself, his unusually plump wife Manya, the one-eyed former gardener of the former Sheremetevs, who now worked for the state farm in the universal post of watchman, the guard doomed to live on the state farm, and the cleaning girl Dunya. It was not Moscow, and everything here was simpler, more friendly and more homely. Alexander Semyonovich gave the instructions, glancing avidly from time to time at the boxes which lay like some rich present under the gentle sunset glow from the upper panes in the conservatory. The guard, his rifle dozing peacefully by the door, was ripping open the braces and metal bands with a pair of pliers. There was a sound of cracking wood. Clouds of dust rose up. Alexander Semyonovich padded around in his sandals, fussing by the boxes.

"Gently does it," he said to the guard. "Be careful. Can't you see it's eggs?"

"Don't worry," croaked the provincial warrior, bashing away happily.

"Won't be a minute..."

Wrr-ench. Down came another shower of dust.

The eggs were beautifully packed: first came sheets of waxed paper under the wooden top, next some blotting paper, then a thick layer of wood shavings and finally the sawdust in which the white egg-tops nestled.

"Foreign packing," said Alexander Semyonovich lovingly, rummaging around in the sawdust. "Not the way we do it. Careful, Manya, or you'll break them."

"Have you gone daft, Alexander Semyonovich," replied his wife. "What's so special about this lot? Think I've never seen eggs before? Oh, what big ones!"

"Foreign," said Alexander Semyonovich, laying the eggs out on the wooden table. "Not like our poor old peasant eggs. Bet they're all brahmaputras, the devil take them! German..."

"I should say so," the guard agreed, admitting the eggs.

"Only why are they so dirty?" Alexander Semyonovich mused thoughtfully.

"Keep an eye on things, Manya. Tell them to go on unloading. I'm going off to make a phone call."

And Alexander Semyonovich went to use the telephone in the farm office across the yard.

That evening the phone rang in the laboratory at the Zoological Institute. Professor Persikov tousled his hair and went to answer it.

"Yes?" he asked.

"There's a call for you from the provinces," a female voice hissed quietly down the receiver.

"Well, put it through then," said Persikov disdainfully into the black mouthpiece. After a bit of crackling a far-off male voice asked anxiously in his ear:

"Should the eggs be washed. Professor?"

"What's that? What? What did you say?" snapped Persikov irritably.

"Where are you speaking from?"

"Nikolskoye, Smolensk Province," the receiver replied.

"Don't understand. Never heard of it. Who's that speaking?"

"Feight," the receiver said sternly.

"What Feight? Ah, yes. It's you. What did you want to know?"

"Whether to wash them. They've sent a batch of chicken eggs from abroad..."

"Well?"

"But they're all mucky..."

"You must be wrong. How can they be 'mucky', as you put it? Well, of course, maybe a few, er, droppings got stuck to them, or something of the sort."

"So what about washing them?"

"No need at all, of course. Why, are you putting the eggs into the chambers already?"

"Yes, I am," the receiver replied.

"Hm," Persikov grunted.

"So long," the receiver clattered and fell silent.

"So long," Persikov repeated distastefully to Decent Ivanov. "How do you like that character, Pyotr Stepanovich?"

Ivanov laughed.

"So it was him, was it? I can imagine what he'll concoct out of those eggs."

"Ye-e-es," Persikov began maliciously. "Just think, Pyotr Stepanovich."

Well, of course, it's highly possible that the ray will have the same effect on the deutero-plasma of a chicken egg as on the plasma of amphibians. It is also highly possible that he will hatch out chickens. But neither you nor I can say precisely what sort of chickens they will be. They may be of no earthly use to anyone. They may die after a day or two. Or they may be inedible. And can I even guarantee that they'll be able to stand up. Perhaps they'll have brittle bones." Persikov got excited, waved his hand and crooked his fingers.

"Quite so," Ivanov agreed.

"Can you guarantee, Pyotr Stepanovich, that they will be able to reproduce? Perhaps that character will hatch out sterile chickens. He'll make them as big as a dog, and they won't have any chicks until kingdom come."

"Precisely," Ivanov agreed.

"And such nonchalance," Persikov was working himself into a fury. "Such perkiness! And kindly note that I was asked to instruct that scoundrel."

Persikov pointed to the warrant delivered by Feight (which was lying on the experimental table). "But how am I to instruct that ignoramus when I myself can say nothing about the question?"

"Couldn't you have refused?" asked Ivanov.

Persikov turned purple, snatched up the warrant and showed it to Ivanov who read it and gave an ironic smile.

"Yes, I see," he said significantly.

"And kindly note also that I've been expecting my shipment for two months, and there's still no sign of it. But that rascal got his eggs straightaway and all sorts of assistance."

"It won't do him any good, Vladimir Ipatych. In the end they'll just give you back your chambers."

"Well, let's hope it's soon, because they're holding up my experiments."

"Yes, that's dreadful. I've got everything ready."

"Has the protective clothing arrived?"

"Yes, today."

Persikov was somewhat reassured by this and brightened up.

"Then I think we'll proceed like this. We can close the doors of the operating-room tight and open up the windows."

"Of course," Ivanov agreed.

"Three helmets?"

"Yes, three."

"Well then, that's you and me, and we'll ask one of the students. He can have the third helmet."

"Grinmut would do."

"That's the one you've got working on salamanders, isn't it? Hm, he's not bad, but, if you don't mind my saying so, last spring he didn't know the difference between a Pseudotyphlops and a Platyplecturus," Persikov added with rancour.

"But he's not bad. He's a good student," Ivanov defended him.

"We'll have to go without sleep completely for one night," Persikov went on. "Only you must check the gas, Pyotr Stepanovich. The devil only knows what it's like. That Volunteer-Chem lot might send us some rubbish."

"No, no," Ivanov waved his hands. "I tested it yesterday. You must give them some credit, Vladimir Ipatych, the gas is excellent."

"What did you try it on?"

"Some common toads. You just spray them with it and they die instantly.

And another thing, Vladimir Ipatych. Write and ask the GPU to send you an electric revolver."

"But I don't know how to use it."

"I'll see to that," Ivanov replied. "We tried one out on the Klyazma, just for fun. There was a GPU chap living next to me. It's a wonderful thing. And incredibly efficient. Kills outright at a hundred paces without making a sound. We were shooting ravens. I don't even think we'll need the gas."

"Hm, that's a bright idea. Very bright." Persikov went into the corner, lifted the receiver and barked:

"Give me that, what's it called, Lubyanka."

The weather was unusually hot. You could see the rich transparent heat shimmering over the fields. But the nights were wonderful, green and deceptive. The moon made the former estate of the Sheremetevs look too beautiful for words. The palace-cum-state farm glistened as if it were made of sugar, shadows quivered in the park, and the ponds had two different halves, one a slanting column of light, the other fathomless darkness. In the patches of moonlight you could easily read Izvestia, except for the chess

section which was in small nonpareil. But on nights like these no one read Izvestia, of course. Dunya the cleaner was in the woods behind the state farm and as coincidence would have it, the ginger-moustached driver of the farm's battered truck happened to be there too. What they were doing there no one knows. They were sheltering in the unreliable shade of an elm tree, on the driver leather coat which was spread out on the ground. A lamp shone in the kitchen, where the two market-gardeners were having supper, and Madame Feight was sitting in a white negligé on the columned veranda, gazing at the beautiful moon and dreaming.

At ten o'clock in the evening when the sounds had died down in the village of Kontsovka behind the state farm, the idyllic landscape was filled with the charming gentle playing of a flute. This fitted in with the groves and former columns of the Sheremetev palace more than words can say. In the duet the voice of the delicate Liza from *The Queen of Spades* blended with that of the passionate Polina and soared up into the moonlit heights like a vision of the old and yet infinitely dear, heartbreakingly entrancing regime.

Do fade away... Fade away...

pipled the flute, trilling and sighing.

The copses were hushed, and Dunya, fatal as a wood nymph, listened, her cheek pressed against the rough, ginger and manly cheek of the driver.

"He don't play bad, the bastard," said the driver, putting a manly arm round Dunya's waist.

The flute was being played by none other than the manager of the state farm himself, Alexander Semyonovich Feight, who, to do him justice, was playing it beautifully. The fact of the matter was that Alexander Semyonovich had once specialised in the flute. Right up to 1917 he had played in the well-known concert ensemble of the maestro Petukhov, filling the foyer of the cosy little Magic Dreams cinema in the town of Yekaterinoslav with its sweet notes every evening. But the great year of 1917, which broke the careers of so many, had swept Alexander Semyonovich onto a new path too. He left the Magic Dreams and the dusty star-spangled satin of its foyer to plunge into the open sea of war and revolution, exchanging his flute for a death-dealing Mauser. For a long time he was tossed about on waves which washed him ashore, now in the Crimea, now in Moscow, now in Turkestan, and even in Vladivostok. It needed the revolution for Alexander Semyonovich to realise his full

potential. It turned out that here was a truly great man, who should not be allowed to waste his talents in the foyer of Magic Dreams, of course. Without going into unnecessary detail, we shall merely say that the year before, 1927, and the beginning of 1928 had found Alexander Semyonovich in Turkestan where he first edited a big newspaper and then, as a local member of the Supreme Economic Commission, became renowned for his remarkable contribution to the irrigation of Turkestan. In 1928 Feight came to Moscow and received some well-deserved leave. The Supreme Commission of the organisation, whose membership card this provincially old-fashioned man carried with honour in his pocket, appreciated his qualities and appointed him to a quiet and honorary post. Alas and alack! To the great misfortune of the Republic, Alexander Semyonovich's seething brain did not quieten down. In Moscow Feight learned of Persikov's discovery, and in the rooms of Red Paris in Tverskaya Street Alexander Semyonovich had the brainwave of using the ray to restore the Republic's poultry in a month. The Animal Husbandry Commission listened to what he had to say, agreed with him, and Feight took his warrant to the eccentric scientist.

The concert over the glassy waters, the grove and the park was drawing to a close, when something happened to cut it short. The dogs in Kontsovka, who Should have been fast asleep by then, suddenly set up a frenzied barking, which gradually turned into an excruciating general howl. The howl swelled up, drifting over the fields, and was answered by a high-pitched concert from the million frogs on the ponds. All this was so ghastly, that for a moment the mysterious enchanted night seemed to fade away.

Alexander Semyonovich put down his flute and went onto the veranda.

"Hear that, Manya? It's those blasted dogs... What do you think set them off like that?"

"How should I know?" she replied, gazing at the moon.

"Hey, Manya, let's go and take a look at the eggs," Alexander Semyonovich suggested.

"For goodness sake, Alexander Semyonovich. You're darned crazy about those eggs and chickens. Have a rest for a bit."

"No, Manya, let's go."

A bright light was burning in the conservatory. Dunya came in too with a burning face and shining eyes. Alexander Semyonovich opened the

observation windows carefully, and they all began peeping into the chambers.

On the white asbestos floor lay neat rows of bright-red eggs with spots on them. There was total silence in the chambers, except for the hissing of the 15,000 candle-power light overhead.

"I'll hatch those chicks out alright!" exclaimed Alexander Semyonovich excitedly, looking now through the observation windows at the side, now through the wide ventilation hatches overhead. "You'll see. Eh? Don't you think so?"

"You know what, Alexander Semyonovich," said Dunya, smiling. "The men in Kontsovka think you're the Antichrist. They say your eggs are from the devil. It's a sin to hatch eggs with machines. They want to kill you."

Alexander Semyonovich shuddered and turned to his wife. His face had gone yellow.

"Well, how about that? Ignorant lot! What can you do with people like that? Eh? We'll have to fix up a meeting for them, Manya. I'll phone the district centre tomorrow for some Party workers. And I'll give 'em a speech myself. This place needs a bit of working over alright. Stuck away at the back of beyond..."

"Thick as posts," muttered the guard, who had settled down on his greatcoat in the conservatory doorway.

The next day was heralded by some strange and inexplicable events. In the early morning, at the first glint of sunlight, the groves, which usually greeted the heavenly body with a strong and unceasing twitter of birds, met it with total silence. This was noticed by absolutely everybody. It was like the calm before a storm. But no storm followed. Conversations at the state farm took on a strange and sinister note for Alexander Semyonovich, especially because according to the well-known Kontsovka trouble-maker and sage nicknamed Goat Gob, all the birds had gathered in flocks and flown away northwards from Sheremetevov at dawn, which was quite ridiculous. Alexander Semyonovich was most upset and spent the whole day putting a phone call through to the town of Grachevka. Eventually they promised to send him in a few days' time two speakers on two subjects, the international situation and the question of Volunteer-Fowl.

The evening brought some more surprises. Whereas in the morning the woods had fallen silent, showing clearly how suspiciously unpleasant it was when the trees were quiet, and whereas by midday the sparrows from the

state farmyard had also flown off somewhere, that evening there was not a sound from the Sheremetevka pond either. This was quite extraordinary, because everyone for twenty miles around was familiar with the croaking of the Sheremetev frogs. But now they seemed to be extinct. There was not a single voice from the pond, and the sedge was silent. It must be confessed that this really upset Alexander Semyonovich. People had begun to talk about these happenings in a most unpleasant fashion, i.e., behind his back.

"It really is strange," said Alexander Semyonovich to his wife at lunch. "I can't understand why those birds had to go and fly away."

"How should I know?" Manya replied. "Perhaps it's because of your ray."

"Don't be so silly, Manya!" exclaimed Alexander Semyonovich, flinging down his spoon. "You're as bad as the peasants. What's the ray got to do with it?" "I don't know. Stop pestering me." That evening brought the third surprise. The dogs began howling again in Kontsovka and how! Their endless whines and angry, mournful yelping wafted over the moonlit fields.

Alexander Semyonovich rewarded himself somewhat with yet another surprise, a pleasant one this time, in the conservatory. A constant tapping had begun inside the red eggs in the chambers. "Tappity-tappity-tappity," came from one, then another, then a third.

The tapping in the eggs was a triumph for Alexander Semyonovich. The strange events in the woods and on the pond were immediately forgotten.

Everyone gathered in the conservatory, Manya, Dunya, the watchman and the guard, who left his rifle by the door.

"Well, then? What about that?" asked Alexander Semyonovich triumphantly. Everyone put their ears eagerly to the doors of the first chamber. "That's them tapping with their little beaks, the chickens,"

Alexander Semyonovich went on, beaming. "So you thought I wouldn't hatch out any chicks, did you? Well, you were wrong, my hearties." From an excess of emotion he slapped the guard on the shoulder. "I'll hatch chickens that'll take your breath away. Only now I must keep alert," he added strictly. "Let me know as soon as they start hatching."

"Right you are," replied the watchman, Dunya and the guard in a chorus.

"Tappity-tappity-tappity," went one egg, then another, in the first chamber. In fact this on-the-spot spectacle of new life being born in a thin shining shell was so intriguing that they all sat for a long time on the upturned empty crates, watching the crimson eggs mature in the mysterious glimmering light. By the time they went to bed it was quite late and a

greenish night had spread over the farm and the surrounding countryside. The night was mysterious, one might even say frightening, probably because its total silence was broken now and then by the abject, excruciating howls of the dogs in Kontsovka. What on earth had got into those blasted dogs no one could say.

An unpleasant surprise awaited Alexander Semyonovich the next morning.

The guard was extremely upset and kept putting his hands on his heart, swearing that he had not fallen asleep but had noticed nothing.

"I can't understand it," the guard insisted. "It's through no fault of mine, Comrade Feight."

"Very grateful to you, I'm sure," retorted Alexander Semyonovich heatedly. "What do you think, comrade? Why were you put on guard? To keep an eye on things. So tell me where they are. They've hatched out, haven't they?"

So they must have run away. That means you must have left the door open and gone off somewhere. Get me those chickens!"

"Where could I have gone? I know my job." The guard took offence.

"Don't you go accusing me unfairly, Comrade Feight!"

"Then where are they?"

"How the blazes should I know!" the guard finally exploded. "I'm not supposed to guard them, am I? Why was I put on duty? To see that nobody pinched the chambers, and that's what I've done. Your chambers are safe and sound. But there's no law that says I must chase after your chickens.

Goodness only knows what they'll be like. Maybe you won't be able to catch them on a bicycle."

This somewhat deflated Alexander Semyonovich. He muttered something else, then relapsed into a state of perplexity. It was a strange business indeed. In the first chamber, which had been switched on before the others, the two eggs at the very base of the ray had broken open. One of them had even rolled to one side. The empty shell was lying on the asbestos floor in the ray.

"The devil only knows," muttered Alexander Semyonovich. "The windows are closed and they couldn't have flown away over the roof, could they?"

He threw back his head and looked at some big holes in the glass roof.

"Of course, they couldn't, Alexander Semyonovich!" exclaimed Dunya in surprise. "Chickens can't fly. They must be here somewhere. Chuck, chuck, chuck," she called, peering into the corners of the conservatory, which were cluttered with dusty flower pots, bits of boards and other rubbish. But no chicks answered her call.

The whole staff spent about two hours running round the farmyard, looking for the runaway chickens and found nothing. The day passed in great excitement. The duty guard on the chambers was reinforced by the watchman, who had strict orders to look through the chamber windows every quarter of an hour and call Alexander Semyonovich if anything happened. The guard sat huffily by the door, holding his rifle between his knees. What with all the worry Alexander Semyonovich did not have lunch until nearly two. After lunch he slept for an hour or so in the cool shade on the former She-remetev ottoman, had a refreshing drink of the farm's kvass and slipped into the conservatory to make sure everything was alright. The old watchman was lying on his stomach on some bast matting and staring through the observation window of the first chamber. The guard was keeping watch by the door.

But there was a piece of news: the eggs in the third chamber, which had been switched on last, were making a kind of gulping, hissing sound, as if something inside them were whimpering.

"They're hatching out alright," said Alexander Semyonovich. "That's for sure. See?" he said to the watchman.

"Aye, it's most extraordinary," the latter replied in a most ambiguous tone, shaking his head.

Alexander Semyonovich squatted by the chambers for a while, but nothing hatched out. So he got up, stretched and announced that he would not leave the grounds, but was going for a swim in the pond and must be called if there were any developments. He went into the palace to his bedroom with its two narrow iron bedsteads, rumped bedclothes and piles of green apples and millet on the floor for the newly-hatched chickens, took a towel and, on reflection, his flute as well to play at leisure over the still waters. Then he ran quickly out of the palace, across the farmyard and down the willow-lined path to the pond. He walked briskly, swinging the towel, with the flute under his arm. The sky shimmered with heat through the willows, and his aching body begged to dive into the water. On the right of Feight began a dense patch of burdock, into which he spat en passant. All

at once there was a rustling in the tangle of big leaves, as if someone was dragging a log. With a sudden sinking feeling in his stomach, Alexander Semyonovich turned his head towards the burdock in surprise. There had not been a sound from the pond for two days. The rustling stopped, and above the burdock the smooth surface of the pond flashed invitingly with the grey roof of the changing hut. Some dragon-flies darted to and fro in front of Alexander Semyonovich. He was about to turn off to the wooden platform, when there was another rustle in the burdock accompanied this time by a short hissing like steam coming out of an engine. Alexander Semyonovich tensed and stared at the dense thicket of weeds.

At that moment the voice of Feight's wife rang out, and her white blouse flashed in and out through the raspberry bushes. "Wait for me, Alexander Semyonovich. I'm coming for a swim too."

His wife was hurrying to the pond, but Alexander Semyonovich's eyes were riveted on the burdock and he did not reply. A greyish olive-coloured log had begun to rise out of the thicket, growing ever bigger before his horrified gaze. The log seemed to be covered with wet yellowish spots. It began to straighten up, bending and swaying, and was so long that it reached above a short gnarled willow. Then the top of the log cracked, bent down slightly, and something about the height of a Moscow electric lamp-post loomed over Alexander Semyonovich. Only this something was about three times thicker than a lamp-post and far more beautiful because of its scaly tattooing. Completely mystified, but with shivers running down his spine, Alexander Semyonovich looked at the top of this terrifying lamp-post, and his heart almost stopped beating. He turned to ice on the warm August day, and everything went dark before his eyes as if he were looking at the sun through his summer trousers.

On the tip of the log was a head. A flattened, pointed head adorned with a round yellow spot on an olive background. In the roof of the head sat a pair of lidless icy narrow eyes, and these eyes glittered with indescribable malice. The head moved as if spitting air and the whole post slid back into the burdock, leaving only the eyes which glared at Alexander Semyonovich without blinking. Drenched with sweat, the latter uttered five incredible fear-crazed words. So piercing were the eyes between the leaves.

"What the devil's going on..."

Then he remembered about fakirs... Yes, yes, in India, a wicker basket and a picture. Snake-charming.

The head reared up again, and the body began to uncoil. Alexander Semyonovich raised his flute to his lips, gave a hoarse squeak and, gasping for breath, began to play the waltz from Eugene Onegin. The eyes in the burdock lit up at once with implacable hatred for the opera.

"Are you crazy, playing in this heat?" came Manya's cheerful voice, and out of the corner of his eye Alexander Semyonovich glimpsed a patch of white.

Then a terrible scream shattered the farm, swelling, rising, and the waltz began to limp painfully. The head shot out of the burdock, its eyes leaving Alexander Semyonovich's soul to repent of his sins. A snake about thirty feet long and as thick as a man uncoiled like a spring and shot out of the weeds. Clouds of dust sprayed up from the path, and the waltz ceased.

The snake raced past the state farm manager straight to the white blouse.

Feight saw everything clearly: Manya went a yellowish-white, and her long hair rose about a foot above her head like wire. Before Feight's eyes the snake opened its mouth, something fork-like darting out, then sank its teeth into the shoulder of Manya, who was sinking into the dust, and jerked her up about two feet above the ground. Manya gave another piercing death cry. The snake coiled itself into a twelve-yard screw, its tail sweeping up a tornado, and began to crush Manya. She did not make another sound. Feight could hear her bones crunching. High above the ground rose Manya's head pressed lovingly against the snake's cheek. Blood gushed out of her mouth, a broken arm dangled in the air and more blood spurted out from under the fingernails. Then the snake opened its mouth, put its gaping jaws over Manya's head and slid onto the rest of her like a glove slipping onto a finger. The snake's breath was so hot that Feight could feel it on his face, and the tail all but swept him off the path into the acrid dust. It was then that Feight went grey. First the left, then the right half of his jet-black head turned to silver. Nauseated to death, he eventually managed to drag himself away from the path, then turned and ran, seeing nothing and nobody, with a wild shriek that echoed for miles around.

CHAPTER IX.

A Writhing Mass

Shukin, the GPU agent at Dugino Station, was a very brave man. He said thoughtfully to his companion, the ginger-headed Polaitis: "Well, let's go. Eh? Get the motorbike." Then he paused for a moment and added, turning to the man who was sitting on the bench: "Put the flute down."

But instead of putting down the flute, the trembling grey-haired man on the bench in the Dugino GPU office, began weeping and moaning. Shukin and Polaitis realised they would have to pull the flute away. His fingers seemed to be stuck to it. Shukin, who possessed enormous, almost circus-like strength, prised the fingers away one by one. Then they put the flute on the table.

It was early on the sunny morning of the day after Manya's death.

"You come too," Shukin said to Alexander Semyonovich, "and show us where everything is." But Feight shrank back from him in horror, putting up his hands as if to ward off some terrible vision.

"You must show us," Polaitis added sternly. "Leave him alone. You can see the state he's in."

"Send me to Moscow," begged Alexander Semyonovich, weeping.

"You really don't want to go back to the farm again?"

Instead of replying Feight shielded himself with his hands again, his eyes radiating horror.

"Alright then," decided Shukin. "You're really not in a fit state... I can see that. There's an express train leaving shortly, you can go on it."

While the station watchman helped Alexander Semyonovich, whose teeth were chattering on the battered blue mug, to have a drink of water, Shukin

and Polaitis conferred together. Polaitis took the view that nothing had happened. But that Feight was mentally ill and it had all been a terrible, hallucination. Shukin, however, was inclined to believe that a boa constrictor had escaped from the circus on tour in the town of Grachevka.

The sound of their doubting whispers made Feight rise to his feet. He had recovered somewhat and said, raising his hands like an Old Testament prophet:

"Listen to me. Listen. Why don't you believe me? I saw it. Where is my wife?"

Shukin went silent and serious and immediately sent off a telegram to Grachevka. On Shukin's instructions, a third agent began to stick closely to Alexander Semyonovich and was to accompany him to Moscow. Shukin and Polaitis got ready for the journey. They only had one electric revolver, but it was good protection. A 1927 model, the pride of French technology for shooting at close range, could kill at a mere hundred paces, but had a range of two metres in diameter and within this range any living thing was exterminated outright. It was very hard to miss. Shukin put on this shiny electric toy, while Polaitis armed himself with an ordinary light machine-gun, then they took some ammunition and raced off on the motorbike along the main road through the early morning dew and chill to the state farm. The motorbike covered the twelve miles between the station and the farm in a quarter of an hour (Feight had walked all night, occasionally hiding in the grass by the wayside in spasms of mortal terror), and when the sun began to get hot, the sugar palace with columns appeared amid the trees on the hill overlooking the winding River Top. There was a deathly silence all around. At the beginning of the turning up to the state farm the agents overtook a peasant on a cart. He was riding along at a leisurely pace with a load of sacks, and was soon left far behind. The motorbike drove over the bridge, and Polaitis sounded the horn to announce their arrival. But this elicited no response whatsoever, except from some distant frenzied dogs in Kontsovka. The motorbike slowed down as it approached the gates with verdigris lions. Covered with dust, the agents in yellow gaiters dismounted, padlocked their motorbike to the iron railings and went into the yard. The silence was eery.

"Hey, anybody around?" shouted Shukin loudly.

But no one answered his deep voice. The agents walked round the yard, growing more and more mystified. Polaitis was scowling. Shukin began to search seriously, his fair eyebrows knit in a frown. They looked through an

open window into the kitchen and saw that it was empty, but the floor was covered with broken bits of white china.

"Something really has happened to them, you know. I can see it now. Some catastrophe," Polaitis said.

"Anybody there? Hey!" shouted Shukin, but the only reply was an echo from the kitchen vaults. "The devil only knows! It couldn't have gobbled them all up, could it? Perhaps they've run off somewhere. Let's go into the house."

The front door with the colonnaded veranda was wide open. The palace was completely empty inside. The agents even climbed up to the attic, knocking and opening all the doors, but they found nothing and went out again into the yard through the deserted porch.

"We'll walk round the outside to the conservatory," Shukin said. "We'll give that a good going over and we can phone from there too."

The agents set off along the brick path, past the flowerbeds and across the backyard, at which point the conservatory came into sight.

"Wait a minute," whispered Shukin, unbuckling his revolver. Polaitis tensed and took his machine-gun in both hands. A strange, very loud noise was coming from the conservatory and somewhere behind it. It was like the sound of a steam engine. "Zzzz-zzzz," the conservatory hissed.

"Careful now," whispered Shukin, and trying not to make a sound the agents stole up to the glass walls and peered into the conservatory.

Polaitis immediately recoiled, his face white as a sheet. Shukin froze, mouth open and revolver in hand.

The conservatory was a terrible writhing mass. Huge snakes slithered across the floor, twisting and intertwining, hissing and uncoiling, swinging and shaking their heads. The broken shells on the floor crunched under their bodies. Overhead a powerful electric lamp shone palely, casting an eery cinematographic light over the inside of the conservatory. On the floor lay three huge photographic-like chambers, two of which were dark and had been pushed aside, but a small deep-red patch of light glowed in the third.

Snakes of all sizes were crawling over the cables, coiling round the frames and climbing through the holes in the roof. From the electric lamp itself hung a jet-black spotted snake several yards long, its head swinging like a pendulum. There was an occasional rattle amid the hissing, and a strange putrid pond-like smell wafted out of the conservatory. The agents could just make out piles of white eggs in the dusty corners, an enormous

long-legged bird lying motionless by the chambers and the body of a man in grey by the door, with a rifle next to him.

"Get back!" shouted Shukin and began to retreat, pushing Polaitis with his left hand and raising his revolver with his right. He managed to fire nine hissing shots which cast flashes of green lightning all round. The noise swelled terribly as in response to Shukin's shots the whole conservatory was galvanised into frantic motion, and flat heads appeared in all the holes. Peals of thunder began to roll over the farm and echo on the walls. "Rat-tat-tat-tat," Polaitis fired, retreating backwards. There was a strange four-footed shuffling behind him. Polaitis suddenly gave an awful cry and fell to the ground. A brownish-green creature on bandy legs, with a huge pointed head and a cristate tail, like an enormous lizard, had slithered out from behind the barn, given Polaitis a vicious bite in the leg, and knocked him over.

"Help!" shouted Polaitis. His left arm was immediately snapped up and crunched by a pair of jaws, while his right, which he tried in vain to lift, trailed the machine-gun over the ground. Shukin turned round in confusion.

He managed to fire once, but the shot went wide, because he was afraid of hitting his companion. The second time he fired in the direction of the conservatory, because amid the smaller snake-heads a huge olive one on an enormous body had reared up and was slithering straight towards him. The shot killed the giant snake, and Shukin hopped and skipped round Polaitis, already half-dead in the crocodile's jaws, trying to find the right spot to shoot the terrible monster without hitting the agent. In the end he succeeded. The electric revolver fired twice, lighting up everything around with a greenish flash, and the crocodile shuddered and stretched out rigid, letting go of Polaitis. Blood gushed out of his sleeve and mouth. He collapsed onto his sound right arm, dragging his broken left leg. He was sinking fast.

"Get out... Shukin," he sobbed.

Shukin fired a few more shots in the direction of the conservatory, smashing several panes of glass. But behind him a huge olive-coloured coil sprang out of a cellar window, slithered over the yard, covering it entirely with its ten-yard-long body and wound itself round Shukin's legs in a flash.

It dashed him to the ground, and the shiny revolver bounced away. Shukin screamed with all his might, then choked, as the coils enfolded all of him except his head. Another coil swung round his head, ripping off the scalp, and the skull cracked. No more shots were heard in the farm.

Everything was drowned by the all-pervading hissing. In reply to the hissing the wind wafted distant howls from Kontsovka, only now it was hard to say who was howling, dogs or people.

CHAPTER X.

Catastrophe

In the editorial office of Izvestia the lights were shining brightly, and the fat duty editor was laying out the second "column with telegrams "Around the Union Republics". One galley caught his eye. He looked at it through his pince-nez;

and laughed, then called the proof-readers and the maker-up and showed them it. On the narrow strip of damp paper they read: "Grachevka, Smolensk Province. A hen that is as big as a horse and kicks like a horse has appeared in the district. It has bourgeois lady's feathers instead of a tail."

The compositors laughed themselves silly.

"In my day," said the duty editor, chuckling richly, "when I was working for Vanya Sytin on The Russian Word they used to see elephants when they got sozzled. That's right. Now it's ostriches."

The compositors laughed.

"Yes, of course, it's an ostrich," said the maker-up. "Shall we put it in, Ivan Vonifatievich?"

"Are you crazy?" the editor replied. "I'm surprised the secretary let it through. It was written under the influence alright."

"Yes, they must have had a drop or two," agreed the compositors, and the maker-up removed the ostrich report from the desk.

So it was that Izvestia came out next day containing, as usual, a mass of interesting material but no mention whatsoever of the Grachevka ostrich.

Decent Ivanov, who was conscientiously reading Izvestia in his office, rolled it up and yawned, muttering: "Nothing of interest," then put on his

white coat. A little later the Bunsen burners went on in his room and the frogs started croaking. In Professor Persikov's room, however, there was hell let loose. The petrified Pankrat stood stiffly to attention.

"Yessir, I will," he was saying.

Persikov handed him a sealed packet and told him: "Go at once to the head of the Husbandry Department, and tell him straight that he's a swine. Tell him that I said so. And give him this packet."

"That's a nice little errand and no mistake," thought the pale-faced Pankrat and disappeared with the packet.

Persikov fumed angrily.

"The devil only knows what's going on," he raged, pacing up and down the office and rubbing his gloved hands. "It's making a mockery of me and zoology. They're bringing him pile upon pile of those blasted chicken eggs, when I've been waiting two months for what I really need. America's not that far away! It's sheer inefficiency! A real disgrace!" He began counting on his fingers. "Catching them takes, say, ten days at the most, alright then, fifteen, well, certainly not more than twenty, plus two days to get them to London, and another one from London to Berlin. And from Berlin it's only six hours to get here. It's an utter disgrace!"

He snatched up the phone in a rage and began ringing someone.

Everything in his laboratory was ready for some mysterious and highly dangerous experiments. There were strips of paper to seal up the doors, divers' helmets with snorkels and several cylinders shining like mercury with labels saying "Volunteer-Chem" and "Do not touch" plus the drawing of a skull and cross-bones on the label.

It took at least three hours for the Professor to calm down and get on with some minor jobs. Which is what he did. He worked at the Institute until eleven in the evening and therefore had no idea what was happening outside its cream-painted walls. Neither the absurd rumours circulating around Moscow about terrible dragons, nor the newsboys' shouts about a strange telegram in the evening paper reached his ears. Docent Ivanov had gone to see TsarFyodor Ivanovich at the Arts Theatre, so there was no one to tell the Professor the news.

Around midnight Persikov arrived at Prechistenka and went to bed, where he read an English article in the Zoological Proceedings received from London. Then he fell asleep, like the rest of late-night Moscow. The only thing that did not sleep was the big grey building set back in

Tverskaya Street where the Izvestia rotary presses clattered noisily, shaking the whole block. There was an incredible din and confusion in the office of the duty editor. He was rampaging around with bloodshot eyes like a madman, not knowing what to do, and sending everyone to the devil. The maker-up followed close on his heels, breathing out wine fumes and saying: "It can't be helped, Ivan Vonifatievich. Let them bring out a special supplement tomorrow. We can't take the paper off the presses now."

Instead of going home, the composers clustered together reading the telegrams that were now arriving in a steady stream, every fifteen minutes or so, each more eerie and disturbing than the one before. Alfred Bronsky's pointed hat flashed by in the blinding pink light of the printing office, and the fat man with the artificial leg scraped and hobbled around. Doors slammed in the entrance and reporters kept dashing up all night. The printing office's twelve telephones were busy non-stop, and the exchange almost automatically replied to the mysterious calls by giving the engaged signal, while the signal horns beeped constantly before the sleepless eyes of the lady telephonists.

The composers had gathered round the metal-legged ocean-going captain, who was saying to them:

"They'll have to send aeroplanes with gas."

"They will and all," replied the composers. "It's a downright disgrace, it is!" Then the air rang with foul curses and a shrill voice cried:

"That Persikov should be shot!"

"What's Persikov got to do with it?" said someone in the crowd. "It's that son-of-a-bitch at the farm who should be shot."

"There should have been a guard!" someone shouted.

"Perhaps it's not the eggs at all."

The whole building thundered and shook from the rotary machines, and it felt as if the ugly grey block was blazing in an electrical conflagration.

Far from ceasing with the break of a new day, the pandemonium grew more intense than ever, although the electric lights went out. One after another motorbikes and automobiles raced into the asphalted courtyard. All Moscow rose to don white sheets of newspapers like birds. They fluttered down and rustled in everyone's hands. By eleven a.m. the newspaper-boys had sold out, although that month they were printing a million and a half copies of each issue of Izvestia. Professor Persikov took the bus from Prechistenka to the Institute. There he was greeted by some news. In the

vestibule stood three wooden crates neatly bound with metal strips and covered with foreign labels in German, over which someone had chalked in Russian: "Eggs. Handle with care!"

The Professor was overjoyed.

"At last!" he cried. "Open the crates at once, Pankrat, only be careful not to damage the eggs. And bring them into my office."

Pankrat carried out these instructions straightaway, and a quarter of an hour later in the Professor's office, strewn with sawdust and scraps of paper, a voice began shouting angrily.

"Are they trying to make fun of me?" the Professor howled, shaking his fists and waving a couple of eggs. "That Poro-syuk's a real beast. I won't be treated like this. What do you think they are, Pankrat?"

"Eggs, sir," Pankrat replied mournfully.

"Chicken eggs, see, the devil take them! What good are they to me? They should be sent to that rascal on his state farm!"

Persikov rushed to the phone, but did not have time to make a call.

"Vladimir Ipatych! Vladimir Ipatych!" Ivanov's voice called urgently down the Institute's corridor.

Persikov put down the phone and Pankrat hopped aside to make way for the decent. The latter hurried into the office and, contrary to his usual gentlemanly practice, did not even remove the grey hat sitting on his head.

In his hand he held a newspaper.

"Do you know what's happened, Vladimir Ipatych?" he cried, waving before Persikov's face a sheet with the headline "Special Supplement" and a bright coloured picture in the middle.

"Just listen to what they've done!" Persikov shouted back at him, not listening. "They've sent me some chicken eggs as a nice surprise. That Porosyuk's a positive cretin, just look!"

Ivanov stopped short. He stared in horror at the open crates, then at the newspaper, and his eyes nearly popped out of his head.

"So that's it," he gasped. "Now I understand. Take a look at this, Vladimir Ipatych." He quickly unfolded the paper and pointed with trembling fingers at the coloured picture. It showed an olive-coloured snake with yellow spots swaying like a terrible fire hose in strange smudgy foliage. It had been taken from a light aeroplane flying cautiously over the snake.

"What is that in your opinion, Vladimir Ipatych?"

Persikov pushed the spectacles onto his forehead, then pulled them back onto his nose, stared at the photograph and said in great surprise: "Well, I'll be damned. It's ... it's an anaconda. A boa constrictor..."

Ivanov pulled off his hat, sat down on a chair and said, banging the table with his fist to emphasise each word: "It's an anaconda from Smolensk Province, Vladimir Ipatych. What a monstrosity! That scoundrel has hatched out snakes instead of chickens, understand, and they are reproducing at the same fantastic rate as frogs!"

"What's that?" Persikov exclaimed, his face turning ashen. "You're joking, Pyotr Stepanovich. How could he have?"

Ivanov could say nothing for a moment, then regained the power of speech and said, poking a finger into the open crate where tiny white heads lay shining in the yellow sawdust:

"That's how."

"Wha-a-at?" Persikov howled, as the truth gradually dawned on him.

"You can be sure of it. They sent your order for snake and ostrich eggs to the state farm by mistake, and the chicken eggs to you."

"Good grief ... good grief," Persikov repeated, his face turning a greenish white as he sank down onto a stool.

Pankrat stood petrified by the door, pale and speechless. Ivanov jumped up, grabbed the newspaper and, pointing at the headline with a sharp nail, yelled into the Professor's ear:

"Now the fun's going to start alright! What will happen now, I simply can't imagine. Look here, Vladimir Ipatych." He yelled out the first passage to catch his eye on the crumpled newspaper: "The snakes are swarming in the direction of Mozhaisk ... laying vast numbers of eggs. Eggs have been discovered in Dukhovskiy District... Crocodiles and ostriches have appeared.

Special armed units... and GPU detachments put an end to the panic in Vyazma by burning down stretches of forest outside the town and checking the reptiles' advance..."

With an ashen blotched face and demented eyes, Persikov rose from the stool and began to gasp:

"An anaconda! A boa constrictor! Good grief!" Neither Ivanov nor Pankrat had ever seen him in such a state before.

The Professor tore off his tie, ripped the buttons off his shirt, turned a strange paralysed purple and staggered out with vacant glassy eyes.

His howls echoed beneath the Institute's stone vaulting.

"Anaconda! Anaconda!" they rang.

"Go and catch the Professor!" Ivanov cried to Pankrat who was hopping up and down with terror on the spot. "Get him some water. He's had a fit."

CHAPTER XI.

Bloodshed and Death

A frenzied electrical night blazed in Moscow. All the lights were burning, and the flats were full of lamps with the shades taken off. No one was asleep in the whole of Moscow with its population of four million, except for small children. In their apartments people ate and drank whatever came to hand, and the slightest cry brought fear-distorted faces to the windows on all floors to stare up at the night sky criss-crossed by searchlights. Now and then white lights flared up, casting pale melting cones over Moscow before they faded away. There was the constant low drone of aeroplanes. It was particularly frightening in Tverskaya-Yamskaya Street.

Every ten minutes trains made up of goods vans, passenger carriages of different classes and even tank-trucks kept arriving at Alexandrovsky Station with fear-crazed folk clinging to them, and Tverskaya-Yamskaya was packed with people riding in buses and on the roofs of trams, crushing one another and getting run over. Now and then came the anxious crack of shots being fired above the crowd at the station. That was the military detachments stopping panic-stricken demented people who were running along the railway track from Smolensk Province to Moscow. Now and then the glass in the station windows would fly out with a light frenzied sob and the steam engines start wailing. The streets were strewn with posters, which had been dropped and trampled on, while the same posters stared out from the walls under the hot red reflectors. Everyone knew what they said, and no one read them any more. They announced that Moscow was now under martial law.

Panicking was forbidden on threat of severe punishment, and Red Army detachments armed with poison gas were already on their way to Smolensk Province. But the posters could not stop the howling night. In their apartments people dropped and broke dishes and vases, ran about banging into things, tied and untied bundles and cases in the vain hope of somehow getting to Kalanchevskaya Square and Yaroslavl or Nikolayevsky Station. But, alas, all the stations to the north and east were surrounded by a dense cordon of infantry, and huge lorries, swaying and rattling their chains, piled high with boxes on top of which sat Red Army men in pointed helmets, bayonets at the ready, were evacuating gold bullion from the vaults of the People's Commissariat of Finances and large crates marked "Tretyakov Gallery. Handle with care!" Cars were roaring and racing all over Moscow.

Far away in the sky was the reflected glow of a fire, and the constant boom of cannons rocked the dense blackness of August.

Towards morning, a huge snake of cavalry, thousands strong, hooves clattering on the cobble-stones, wended its way up Tverskaya through sleepless Moscow, which had still not extinguished a single light. Everyone in its path huddled against entrances and shop-windows, knocking in panes of glass. The ends of crimson helmets dangled down grey backs, and pike tips pierced the sky. At the sight of these advancing columns cutting their way through the sea of madness, the frantic, wailing crowds of people seemed to come to their senses. There were hopeful shouts from the thronged pavements.

"Hooray! Long live the cavalry!" shouted some frenzied women's voices.

"Hooray!" echoed some men.

"We'll be crushed to death!" someone wailed.

"Help!" came shouts from the pavement.

Packets of cigarettes, silver coins and watches flew into the columns from the pavements. Some women jumped out into the roadway, at great risk, and ran alongside the cavalry, clutching the stirrups and kissing them.

Above the constant clatter of hooves rose occasional shouts from the platoon commanders:

"Rein in."

There was some rowdy, lewd singing and the faces in cocked crimson helmets stared from their horses in the flickering neon lights of advertisements. Now and then, behind the columns of open-faced cavalry, came weird figures, also on horseback, wearing strange masks with pipes

that ran over their shoulders and cylinders strapped to their backs. Behind them crawled huge tank-trucks with long hoses like those on fire-engines. Heavy tanks on caterpillar tracks, shut tight, with narrow shining loopholes, rumbled along the roadway. The cavalry columns gave way to grey armoured cars with the same pipes sticking out and white skulls painted on the sides over the words "Volunteer-Chem. Poison gas".

"Let 'em have it, lads!" the crowds on the pavements shouted. "Kill the reptiles! Save Moscow!"

Cheerful curses rippled along the ranks. Packets of cigarettes whizzed through the lamp-lit night air, and white teeth grinned from the horses at the crazed people. A hoarse heartrending song spread through the ranks: ...No ace, nor queen, nor jack have we, But we'll kill the reptiles sure as can be. And blast them into eternity...

Loud bursts of cheering surged over the motley throng as the rumour spread that out in front on horseback, wearing the same crimson helmet as all the other horsemen, was the now grey-haired and elderly cavalry commander who had become a legend ten years ago. The crowd howled, and their hoorays floated up into the sky, bringing a little comfort to their desperate hearts.

The Institute was dimly lit. The events reached it only as isolated, confused and vague echoes. At one point some shots rang out under the neon clock by the Manege. Some marauders who had tried to loot a flat in Volkhonka were being shot on the spot. There was little traffic in the street here. It was all concentrated round the railway stations. In the Professor's room, where a single lamp burned dimly casting a circle of light on the desk, Persikov sat silently, head in hands. Streak of smoke hung around him.

The ray in the chamber had been switched off. The frogs in the terrariums were silent, for they were already asleep. The Professor was not working or reading. At his side, under his left elbow, lay the evening edition of telegrams in the narrow column, which announced that Smolensk was in flames and artillery were bombarding the Mozhaisk forest section by section, destroying deposits of crocodile eggs in all the damp ravines. It also reported that a squadron of aeroplanes had carried out a highly successful operation near Vyazma, spraying almost the whole district with poison gas, but there were countless human losses in the area because instead of leaving it in an orderly fashion, the population had panicked and

made off in small groups to wherever the fancy took them. It also said that a certain Caucasian cavalry division on the way to Mozhaisk had won a brilliant victory against hordes of ostriches, killing the lot of them and destroying huge deposits of ostrich eggs. The division itself had suffered very few losses. There was a government announcement that if it should prove impossible to keep the reptiles outside the 120-mile zone around Moscow, the capital would be completely evacuated. Office- and factory-workers should remain calm. The government would take the strictest measures to avoid a repetition of the Smolensk situation, as a result of which, due to the pandemonium caused by a sudden attack from rattlesnakes numbering several thousands, the town had been set on fire in several places when people had abandoned burning stoves and begun a hopeless mass exodus. It also announced that Moscow's food supplies would last for at least six months and that a committee under the Commander-in-Chief was taking urgent measures to armour apartments against attacks by reptiles in the streets of the capital, if the Red Army and aeroplanes did not succeed in halting their advance.

The Professor read none of this, but stared vacantly in front of him and smoked. Apart from him there were only two other people in the Institute, Pankrat and the house-keeper, Maria Stepanovna, who kept bursting into tears. This was her third sleepless night, which she was spending in the Professor's laboratory, because he flatly refused to leave his only remaining chamber, even though it had been switched off. Maria Stepanovna had taken refuge on the oilcloth-covered divan, in the shade in the corner, and maintained a grief-stricken silence, watching the kettle with the Professor's tea boil on the tripod of a Bunsen Burner. The Institute was quiet. It all happened very suddenly.

Some loud angry cries rang out in the street, making Maria Stepanovna jump up and scream. Lamps flashed outside, and Pankrat's voice was heard in the vestibule. The Professor misinterpreted this noise. He raised his head for a moment and muttered: "Listen to them raving... what can I do now?"

Then he went into a trance again. But he was soon brought out of it. There was a terrible pounding on the iron doors of the Institute in Herzen Street, and the walls trembled. Then a whole section of mirror cracked in the neighbouring room. A window pane in the Professor's laboratory was smashed as a grey cobble-stone flew through it, knocking over a glass table. The frogs woke up in the terrariums and began to croak. Maria Stepanovna

rushed up to the Professor, clutched his arm and cried: "Run away, Vladimir Ipatych, run away!" The Professor got off the revolving chair, straightened up and crooked his finger, his eyes flashing for a moment with a sharpness which recalled the earlier inspired Persikov.

"I'm not going anywhere," he said. "It's quite ridiculous. They're rushing around like madmen. And if the whole of Moscow has gone crazy, where could I go? And please stop shouting. What's it got to do with me? Pankrat!"

he cried, pressing the button.

He probably wanted Pankrat to stop all the fuss, which he had never liked. But Pankrat was no longer in a state to do anything. The pounding had ended with the Institute doors flying open and the sound of distant gunfire.

But then the whole stone building shook with a sudden stampede, shouts and breaking glass. Maria Stepanovna seized hold of Persi-kov's arms and tried to drag him away, but he shook her off, straightened himself up to his full height and went into the corridor, still wearing his white coat.

"Well?" he asked. The door burst open, and the first thing to appear on the threshold was the back of a soldier with a red long-service stripe and a star on his left sleeve. He was firing his revolver and retreating from the door, through which a furious crowd was surging. Then he turned and shouted at Persikov:

"Run for your life, Professor! I can't help you anymore."

His words were greeted by a scream from Maria Stepanovna. The soldier rushed past Persikov, who stood rooted to the spot like a white statue, and disappeared down the dark winding corridors at the other end. People rushed through the door, howling:

"Beat him! Kill him..."

"The villain!"

"You let the reptiles loose!"

The corridor was a swarming mass of contorted faces and torn clothes. A shot rang out. Sticks were brandished. Persikov stepped back and half-closed the door of his room, where Maria Stepanovna was kneeling on the floor in terror, then stretched out his arms like one crucified. He did not want to let the crowd in and shouted angrily:

"It's positive madness. You're like wild animals. What do you want?"

Then he yelled: "Get out of here!" and finished with the curt, familiar command: "Get rid of them, Pankrat."

But Pankrat could not get rid of anyone now. He was lying motionless in the vestibule, torn and trampled, with a smashed skull. More and more people swarmed past him, paying no attention to the police firing in the street.

A short man on crooked ape-like legs, in a tattered jacket and torn shirt-front all askew, leapt out of the crowd at Persikov and split the Professor's skull open with a terrible blow from his stick. Persikov staggered and collapsed slowly onto one side. His last words were: "Pankrat. Pankrat."

The totally innocent Maria Stepanovna was killed and torn to pieces in the Professor's room. They also smashed the chamber with the extinguished ray and the terrariums, after killing and trampling on the crazed frogs, then the glass tables and the reflectors. An hour later the Institute was in flames. Around lay corpses cordoned off by a column of soldiers armed with electric revolvers, while fire-engines sucked up water and sprayed it on all the windows through which long roaring tongues of flame were leaping.

CHAPTER XII.

A Frosty Deus Ex Machina

On the night of 19th August, 1928, there was an unheard-of frost the likes of which no elderly folk could recall within living memory. It lasted forty-eight hours and reached eighteen degrees below. Panic-stricken Moscow closed all its doors and windows. Only towards the end of the third day did the public realise that the frost had saved the capital and the endless expanses under its sway afflicted by the terrible disaster of 1928. The cavalry army by Mozhaisk, which had lost three-quarters of its men, was on its last legs, and the poison gas squads had been unable to halt the loathsome reptiles, who were advancing on Moscow in a semi-circle from the west, south-west and south.

They were killed off by the frost. The foul hordes could not survive two days of minus eighteen degrees centigrade, and come the last week of August, when the frost disappeared leaving only damp and wet behind it, moisture in the air and trees with leaves dead from the unexpected cold, there was nothing to fight. The catastrophe was over. The forests, fields and boundless marshes were still covered with coloured eggs, some bearing the strange pattern unfamiliar in these parts, which Feight, who had disappeared no one knew where, had taken to be muck, but these eggs were now completely harmless. They were dead, the embryos inside them had been killed.

For a long time afterwards these vast expanses were heavy with the rotting corpses of crocodiles and snakes brought to life by the ray engendered in Herzen Street under a genius's eye, but they were no longer dangerous. These precarious creations of putrid tropical swamps perished in

two days, leaving a terrible stench, putrefaction and decay over three provinces. There were epidemics and widespread diseases from the corpses of reptiles and people, and the army was kept busy for a long time, now supplied not with poison gas, but with engineering equipment, kerosene tanks and hoses to clean the ground. It completed this work by the spring of 1929.

And in the spring of 'twenty-nine Moscow began to dance, whirl and shimmer with lights again. Once more you could hear the old shuffling sound of the mechanical carriages, a crescent moon hung, as if by a thread, over the dome of Christ the Saviour, and on the site of the two-storey Institute which burnt down in August 'twenty-eight they built a new zoological palace, with Docent Ivanov in charge. But Persikov was no more. No more did people see the persuasive crooked finger thrust at them or hear the rasping croaking voice. The world went on talking and writing about the ray and the catastrophe of '28 for a long time afterwards, but then the name of Professor Vladimir Ipatievich Persikov was enveloped in mist and extinguished, like the red ray discovered by him on that fateful April night. No one succeeded in producing this ray again, although that refined gentleman, Pyotr Stepanovich Ivanov, now a professor, occasionally tried.

The first chamber was destroyed by the frenzied crowd on the night of Persikov's murder. The other three chambers were burnt on the Red Ray State Farm in Nikolskoye during the first battle of the aeroplanes with the reptiles, and it did not prove possible to reconstruct them. Simple though the combination of the lenses with the mirror-reflected light may have been, it could not be reproduced a second time, in spite of Ivanov's efforts.

Evidently, in addition to mere knowledge it required something special, something possessed by one man alone in the whole world, the late Professor Vladimir Ipatievich Persikov.

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