

# A CHILD'S JOKE *a story by Leon Steinmetz*

The sea, warm and quiet, lay in front of me. Dusk was falling, and there was a strong smell of brine and kelp in the air.

I was sitting on a piece of a ruined ancient column on the shore of the Black Sea and couldn't quite believe that just a few hours earlier I had been in cold and wet November Moscow.

That morning I was awakened in my Moscow apartment by the sound of branches beating against my window. I opened my eyes and saw these wet, wind-tossed branches, the houses awash in torrents of rain, the passersby hunched over beneath the penetrating wind, and, suddenly, I felt so miserable that I knew I would simply die if I didn't immediately get away from there to somewhere in the sun for at least a week.

Not giving it another thought, I packed my suitcase, hailed a cab, and went to the airport.

I had decided to fly South, to Akulinsk, a small town in the Crimea, where I had never been and which, as I had

often heard, was a quiet and lovely spot.

The season was over, and I had no trouble getting a room in an inexpensive hotel. Without unpacking, I threw my suitcase down in the room, rented a bicycle at the hotel, and set out for the sea.

The sun was setting. I left the town behind and rode along the shore. The road was deserted. I had been riding for about half an hour when up ahead, to the side of the road, I saw the remains of an ancient amphitheater. The stone steps, overgrown with grass, climbed the slope of the hill. Walking my bike, I went up. I laid the bike on the steps at the top and sat down on a piece of a ruined column. Perhaps the Greeks had once celebrated their mysteries here. Over there, down below, had probably been a pier. A narrow street led from it to the temple. The broken off triangle of its pediment soared up to the sky by the columns, gleamed golden under the setting sun. . . .

I had grown so pensive that I didn't see where he had come from. That character, who looked like a bum. Thin, unshaven, incredibly tall, dressed in some kind of poncho, he stood not far from me and looked at the sea.

I moved closer to my bike.

He stood for a while, then, along the steps of the amphitheater, went down the hill. He walked across the amphitheater, across the stage, and stopped beside the columns. And then I noticed a sack and a paint-box propped against one of the columns. The bum took a small folding chair out of the sack, opened the box, and began to paint.

The weariness of a long and varied day, the regular lapping of waves running onto the shore got the better of me. I closed my eyes and dozed off.

I woke up when I began to feel chilly. A thin scarlet band over the sea indicated the spot where the sun had gone down. Shivering and regretting that I hadn't taken a sweater, I got up and began flapping my arms to warm myself. "And that weirdo is still there. I wonder what he's painting?" Skipping down the steps, I went to him.

He was sitting very close to the sea. His canvas depicted water. He painted with short, quick strokes, not paying any attention to me and muttering something under his breath.

The scarlet band at the horizon had now vanished, and, as it usually happens in the South, rapidly began to get dark. He leaned toward his sack, took out a kerosene lamp, lit it, and continued to paint by its light.

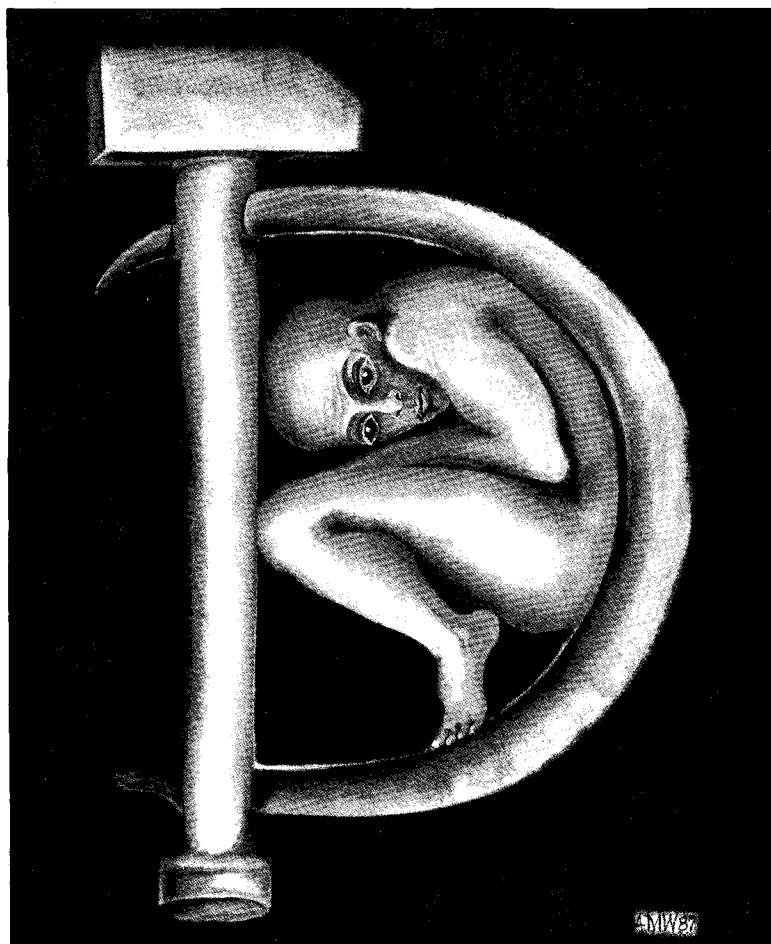
I stood beside him a little longer, then clambered up to my bicycle and headed for the hotel.

At the turn of the road I glanced back. A faint yellow flame was flickering between the columns near the water.

When I reached the hotel it was completely dark.

It is a habit of mine, whenever I travel, always to visit the local museum. So, the next day I found it on the map (it was located across the town) and decided to take a walk there.

Akulinsk was a typical Southern, provincial town: narrow streets winding over the hills; low, whitewashed houses with



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flat roofs; tiny squares with monuments to the heroes of the civil war in green-tarnished bronze trousers.

Provincial towns like these can easily depress you, if you happen to wind up in one when you are not in the right mood. But to me, after cold and wet Moscow, these white stucco houses, the small dusty squares, even the 30-year-old buses straining to crawl up the humpbacked streets seemed very nice and cheerful.

The museum was housed in an imposing squat building, the former summer residence—as the plaque at the entrance informed—of the famous philanthropist Arkhideev, whose collection furnished its basis.

I bought a ticket and went inside.

A room of ancient art—Roman portraits on pedestals stared at me, the statue of Trajan in the corner, the enormous foot of Constantine against the wall.

Right after the ancient art came the room of Socialist Realism—Lenin at the Second Congress, Lenin at the Third Congress, Karl Marx with his four daughters. I passed through it without stopping and found myself in a small, round hall of old European paintings.

And here I saw him again. That bum who had been painting yesterday among the ruins. In the same ridiculous poncho and clumsy boots, towering a head above everyone, he walked around the hall. Sometimes, setting his spindle legs apart, he would stoop very close to a painting, then, taking a few steps back and cupping his hand like a telescope, he would look at the painting through it.

To my surprise, there were several very decent “Little Dutch Masters” in the hall, a nice portrait from the Perugino School, and a beautiful landscape of Canaletto, *Morning on the Grand Canal*. I leaned closer to it, to get a better look at the tiny gondolier reflected in the light-green water, when a cleated heel crashed down on my open sandal and an elbow punched me hard in the stomach.

“I’m sorry!” The yesterday’s bum was looming over me. “I was just backing up . . . you okay?”

“I guess . . .”

It was a kind of awkward scene. We stood there staring at each other, I rubbing my solar plexus.

“You sure?”

“Yes, I’m all right.” Actually, my foot was in pain and my stomach hurt. I should probably go back to the hotel, I thought. “Which bus goes to the ‘Mermaids?’” I asked him.

“The fourth. You have to go there?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll drive you.”

“It’s not really necessary.”

“Well, it is, your foot is all red.” He was right. My foot was red and swollen. I moved my toes. None seemed to be broken, though. “I’ll feel better if I drive you there,” he said, scratching his unshaven cheek.

I don’t know whether it was the apologetic expression on his face or simply the fact that my foot hurt. “Thanks,” I said.

We walked out onto the street.

A shabby motorcycle with a paint-box in its sidecar was tied to a tree near the museum. “Have a seat.” He pushed the paint-box deeper inside.

I climbed into the sidecar, he mounted the seat, and we took off.

“Staying at the ‘Mermaids?’” he asked after we had driven for a while.

“Yes.”

“Where from?”

“Moscow.”

“Ha, the Harlot on Seven Hills!”

“What?” I didn’t understand.

But he didn’t explain.

For the rest of the trip he didn’t utter a word more. I also was silent.

“All right,” he stopped in front of the hotel. And then I said, “Listen,” I said, “would you like to have a cup of coffee with me?” I don’t know why I said that, really.

He thought for a moment. “Well, why not?”

The coffee we decided to wash down with beer. Gradually, he got talkative. I learned that his name was Matvey and that he had an eight-year-old son. I also learned that his wife and mother-in-law were mixers at the local soap plant. He had graduated from art school as a painter, but now too worked for this plant (“part-time, though,” he said), drawing soap-bar wrappers.

I told him that about a month ago I gave up writing a novel and was now writing a play. And that this play wasn’t going well.

“What’s it about?” he asked.

“Hard to describe. There are two art collectors there.”

“Well, that’s a very important theme, for only art can redeem people,” he declared solemnly. “You know, I can make a mint painting political stuff. But what for? What’s the purpose? Money is just . . .” he tore a scrap of foil off the beer bottle and crushed it with his fingers “. . . dust and ashes!”

His head was small, his hair light and fluffy. Watery blue eyes sat very close to the sides of his long beaky nose. Whom does he resemble so much? I thought. And then suddenly realized. Ostrich! Yes, of course, a sad, ruffled ostrich.

“Are we born into this world just to pile up *things* and these bits of paper named ‘money’? Or are we born to understand something while we are alive? You tell me!” he insisted, looking at me intently.

He was slightly crazy, obviously, but there was something quite appealing about him. By the time our table at the diner got crammed with empty beer bottles, he said to me: “You mentioned you had painted a bit before, would you like to drive around and paint with me?”

“I was just an amateur. Besides, I haven’t held a brush for five years.”

“Doesn’t matter. You’ll pick it up again.”

Well, maybe it’s not a bad idea. After all, I came here to relax, I thought. And I bought a paint-box, some paints, and began traveling around with him.

In the morning he would pick me up at the “Mermaids,” and we would go. He knew the Akulinsk environs like the back of his hand and, like a real cicerone, showed them to me. It was November, there were no vacationers, and the countryside was deserted.

“The Cove of Sards,” he would say pulling his motorcycle up on a cliff above the tiny round inlet. “The best place to look for chicken gods.”

"What chicken gods?"

"That's what sards with a hole in the middle are called. Water makes the holes, and you can string them and wear them around your neck. People say they're lucky. Tolik, my son, recently found two."

Most of all, though, he liked to show me the ancient ruins. As it turned out, there were many of them scattered around Akulinsk.

"Great places were once here, on the shores of the Pontus Euxinus," he would say pensively, calling the Black Sea by its ancient Greek name.

And we would sit down and paint. Squeezing the viscous, thick, bright caterpillars of paint onto my palette, I tried, the best I could to depict the sea, the sky, the rocks, the faded grass. . . .

As for Matvey, he didn't paint any of this. Usually he set up his paint-box very close to the sea and painted only water.

"Why are you painting just water?" I asked him.

"I'm trying to penetrate its essence," he replied. "It's one of the four elements that make up the universe. Earth, fire, and air are the other three, and I want to penetrate their essence. I need it for the canvas I'm working on now."

"I feel you understand what I am talking about. Ida, my wife, loves me, but she doesn't understand what I'm doing," he said to me once. We were riding through the center of Akulinsk—he in the driver's seat, I crouched in the sidecar. It was Sunday and the streets were busy with people. "You see, I can't stop thinking about the universe, I can't stop thinking that some insignificant number of years will pass like a blip and no one of these people," he nodded around, "not one of them will exist."

"There'll be others, don't worry," I said.

"Yes, exactly, the others. But these, I mean *these* people who're now bustling about with all the thoughts whirling in their heads, and all their fears, and feelings—these people will be no more . . ."

The traffic light went red in front of us and we stopped.

" . . . And I just can't understand," he continued, "why people think and worry so much about trifles—a promotion, a stupid quarrel, to buy or not to buy something, and yet think so little about what'll happen to them when they cross that boundary, although it can happen to any one of us at any moment!" He was very agitated now. "Who, tell me, who can be sure, when awakening in the morning, that he'll live till evening? No one! The boundary between 'here' and 'there,' it's like a film of a soap bubble! . . ."

"Green light, let's go," I said.

" . . . Now one is alive, and 'here,'" he continued, not listening to me, his Adam's apple going up and down his scrawny neck, " . . . a split second, and he's dead and 'there,' and joins those who were before him . . ."

"We're holding up traffic," I said. Horns started honking behind us.

"And maybe the grocer who sells me milk in the morning dies in the evening and sees Alexander the Great or Michelangelo!"

"But maybe he doesn't. Maybe there's no Alexander the Great over there," I said. "Maybe people just disappear, vanish, as if they had never existed, fall through into

darkness and that's it."

"Oh, no, no! There can't be darkness there! No way!" he exclaimed, revving the engine.

One day he invited me to his place. "I want you to see my canvas and to have dinner with us," he said.

He lived outside of town, not far from those ancient ruins where I had first seen him. We drove along an unpaved, dusty street, turned around a stretch of desolated land, and stopped beside a long, wooden house which looked like a barrack.

In front of the house some scraggy chickens were kicking up the dust. Sheets were flapping on a line. Between the sheets several children were running, brandishing their wooden swords.

"Tolik!" Matvey called out.

A skinny, light-haired boy with a bandaged knee broke away from the other kids and ran up to us.

"What?"

"Nothing. Just wanted to say 'hi,'" Matvey stroked his neck. "Is mother back?"

"No, not yet. And grandma's gone to get some cabbage," the boy said, looking seriously now at me, now at his father. He was small and puny and looked younger than his eight years.

"Hey, mouse," one of the kids shouted, "you playing?"

"Yes!" Tolik shouted back, "can I?" he looked at his father.

Matvey nodded, "We'll call you when dinner's ready."

A long, dirty corridor with many doors was dimly lit by two naked bulbs. A smell of stale things, food, cats, mildew, hung in the air. Some of the doors were ajar. A march was heard blaring over the radio somewhere.

"Our apartment's over there, at the end," Matvey said walking before me.

Several darkened gas stoves stood along the corridor. On one, a bully character, naked to the waist, with tattoos on both shoulders, was frying onions. On another, an obese old woman was stirring laundry boiling in a washtub. At her feet a small boy sat on the floor, holding a live turtle and trying to break off its leg.

We walked to the end of the corridor, Matvey opened the door, and I saw a room. A plywood cupboard, a chair, a simple iron bedstead and an unpainted table near it made up its furnishings. At an angle to the bed stood a child's cot, above which a homemade rug hung on the wall. A shaggy wolf, with his tongue hanging out, and a little girl in a red hood talking to him among the silk trees were appliquéd on the gray burlap.

"This is my mother-in-law's and Tolik's room."

Squeezing between the table and the cupboard we went into the next room, which was even smaller than the first.

"And this is Ida's and mine," Matvey said.

A bed with a cheap blanket took up almost the entire space of the room. Two shelves, piled up with canvases, books, rolls of paper, folders, brushes, bottles of varnish, jars of paint ran along the wall over the bed.

A huge canvas, covered by a piece of cloth, was propped against the opposite wall.

"It's too big to see it so close," Matvey said, "you should stand on the bed and lean back against the wall, then you'll



scope it out."

I removed my shoes and climbed onto the bed.

Matvey pulled the cloth off.

Vigorous black lines, here and there touched by color, ran over the entire canvas. The lines twisted into spirals, fell down, soared up; naked bodies, some winged figures, gusty tongues of flame, heaved up mountains could be discerned in them. Light and dark were wrestling there like two living beings.

"This is great!" I said.

"You like it?"

"I do indeed. What is it?"

"I haven't finished it yet. It's the Battle of the Angels with the Devil. As Saint John said, 'Michael and his angels were battling the Devil, and the Devil and his hordes were battling them!' And this battle," he exclaimed, "you see, this battle is still going on, now more than ever! They're wrestling for our souls. I see them clinching in the air. Like this!" he clinched his hands and attempted to move in the room, but since there was nowhere to move, sank down on the bed.

Women's voices and the clatter of dishes were heard from the other room. They had, apparently, begun setting the table.

"... There's another thing I'm pondering over," he continued, "how to make sure my painting's not going to deteriorate. Almost all pictures painted after the 18th century are darkening and getting cracks, but the old masters are shining. Why's that? What's the secret? For three years I've been pondering over it, and, you know, I think I'm close now. I'm sure they used eucalyptus balsam for their primers. I spent a year making the primer for this canvas. The secret is, they ground the stuff not into linseed oil, as everybody thinks, but into cedar oil, you see! If you put cedar oil in the sun for a couple of months, it settles, and then you add eucalyptus balsam and you get an astonishingly firm surface. That's for the primer, and for the paints, I recently ran across a description in an old manuscript of how the medieval monks made their colors. You know what they did? They added honey and egg white to their pigments and, also, bees. Really, can you believe it, crushed, dried bees!"

"What for?"

"For the wax," he said excitedly. "I tried it, and that's absolutely amazing! Want to take a look?" He took from the shelf a jar with paint and opened it. "Just smell that honey! And look, what a smoothness. Put a drop on your finger! Isn't it beautiful?"

For dinner, we had cabbage soup and boiled potatoes. We could all barely fit at the small table. I, as a guest, sat on the only chair; Ida, beside her mother, on the bed; Matvey and Tolik on the cot, with Tolik on top of three pillows.

"Ran into Sergey's wife today," the old woman said, ladling the soup from the pot into the dishes. "She said they've bought a new apartment. Will be moving soon. Everybody's fine. Only we're in the pits."

The old woman was tall and skinny, with a small bony face and big red hands. From her appearance you would think she was Matvey's mother rather than Ida's.

"Mama, please..." Ida said quietly.

Ida was a small, thin woman who faded early.

"What 'please'? I'm not saying anything. That Sergey went to the same art school as him," the old woman said to me, nodding at Matvey. "The man is a moron, but he makes money hand over fist—all from his pictures!"

"Sergey serves the lie. He's a lost man," Matvey said.

"Lost!" the old woman exclaimed smacking the pot with a ladle. "The guy has two apartments, a wife dressed up like a doll, and he calls him 'lost.' And look who's talking! We don't have enough to buy an extra chair..."

"Mama, I beg you, we have a guest now," Ida said.

"That's right! Maybe at least because of the guest he'll get ashamed of how we live."

"But for God's sake, mother, I've told you. Matvey'll finish the canvas and then start doing something about money. Are you having a good time in Akulinsk?" Ida turned to me, evidently trying to switch the subject.

But the old woman wouldn't stop.

"I know how he'll start doing," she muttered. "For years he's been doing this garbage. Painting devils! If, instead of devils, for all these years he'd been making pictures like Sergey's, we'd have our own apartment too, and wouldn't be living in this hell!"

"Not just for an apartment, for my life, I wouldn't do what Sergey does. Painting all those Lenins and Marxes... selling his soul for money!"

"You just listen to him!" the old woman exclaimed disgustedly. "He finds words real good, drumming about all these souls and demons and devils. I'm old, and I don't believe in that s--t. And you, a young guy, should be ashamed to hammer away these words like some old illiterate jerk. It's sickening to listen to it!"

"Don't listen then."

"And I wouldn't, and I wouldn't look, but it turns my stomach, when I know that for five pictures like Sergey does we could buy a nice apartment. Take a look around. Aren't you ashamed to keep a family like this?" She was getting real heated now.

Matvey sat silently, bending his head over his plate and eating his soup, as if he didn't hear her.

"The soup is excellent. It was mama's idea to put the dill in," Ida tried again.

"What the hell are you talking about?" the old woman shouted at her. "Don't you hide your eyes," she turned to Matvey. "Look at your son," she poked her finger at Tolik. "The boy runs around like a ragamuffin, and his father paints devils. People like you should be forbidden to have children!"

"You have no right to say this to me!" Matvey slammed down his spoon.

"Matti, don't! Mama, that's enough, stop it!" Ida exclaimed.

Tolik, apparently used to such scenes, sat there calmly, and taking from his plate the circles of boiled carrot, laid them out on the table.

"What do you mean stop it? I won't let you shut me up!" the old woman shouted. "Am I talking about myself? Am I thinking about myself? I wish I were dead and not seeing all this!"

Her small face puckered up suddenly and tears spurted

from her eyes. She jumped up from the table, grabbed her coat, which hung on a nail on the door, and rushed out of the room.

"Mama . . ." Ida ran after her.

"She'll calm down," she said returning shortly. "She'll be all right. She had a fight with the neighbors today, that's why she's like that. I'm sorry," she said to me.

"Listen, daddy," Tolik said, "they told us in school today that there're five parts of the world. Is it true, or is it also a pack of lies?"

"This time they told the truth, strangely enough," Matvey said.

"Tolik, not everything they say in school is a lie," said Ida.

"Almost everything," Matvey said.

"Matti, stop it, what're you teaching him! Tolik, don't listen to him. You better tell me why you fished all the carrots out of your soup again?"

"'Cause I hate them. Say, daddy," he turned to Matvey, "can you color maps?"

"What maps?"

"For geography. I'll show you," he bent down, pulled a map from under his cot, and spread it on the table. It was a blue contour map of the world. "See, we've got to color each part different."

They both bent over the map. Their heads touched.

"When is it due?" Matvey rubbed his chin against Tolik's fluffy crown.

"By tomorrow. Stop tickling."

"Well, then we better do it tonight. Listen," he turned to me, "how much longer are you planning to stay in Akulinsk?"

"I don't know. A few days at least."

"So you can stay till the weekend?"

"I guess so. Why?"

"In the mountains, about a three-hour drive from here, there's a small Apollo temple of the first century. I want to show it to you, but I'll be busy till the end of the week, got to draw a couple of wrappers. Saturday we could go though. What do you think?"

"Fine."

"Can I go with you?" Tolik said.

"Well, it's a bit of a long trip for you on the cycle, although . . ." Matvey looked at Ida.

"Where would you put him?" she said.

"In the sidecar, I suppose. Listen, maybe you can go too? You could sit behind me and they two in the sidecar, eh?"

She thought for a moment, "I think it would be nice."

"Hurray!" Tolik shouted.

"Now, we got to leave early Saturday," Matvey said to me, "so, at seven in the morning we'll pick you up at your hotel."

For the next few days I didn't see him. I wandered about Akulinsk, painted its narrow, sun-flooded streets, dusty little squares . . . liked Matvey's family, and I thought about our trip with pleasure. And so, on Saturday, at 10 before seven, I was standing in front of my hotel, waiting for them. At seven o'clock, however, no one came. Since Matvey didn't have a phone, I couldn't call him. At eight I decided to take a cab and go to his place.

Raising the dust, the cab stopped near the low wooden house, which looked like a barrack. A breeze rocked the empty clothesline.

I went inside.

The long corridor with many doors was dead quiet. A weedy gray cat darted past me and disappeared somewhere.

The plywood cupboard, emptied and flung open, the child's cot, the table with its legs up, stood outside Matvey's door. What's going on? Are they moving?

I knocked.

The door opened, and someone's hand pulled me in.

A harsh light struck me in the eyes. The naked bulb must have had at least 200 watts. Because of that light and because of the presence of three cops, the small room seemed even smaller.

"Where to put him?" one of them asked.

"On the bed, next to the others!"

The mattress on the old woman's bed was propped up. On the bare springs in a row sat Tolik, Ida, the old woman, and Matvey.

"Your ID!" demanded the cop with a broad face and a short, hooked, owlsh nose. He was, apparently, in charge.

The other two cops were much younger. One was holding a lined sheet of paper with a seal. His big, protruding ears stuck out from under his uniform cap.

"Should we proceed, sir?" he asked.

"Go on!"

On the small appliquéd rug, now thrown on the floor, canvases, sketches, drawings of various sizes and shapes were piled up. Winged angels, flung up hands, tongues of flame, clouds, stones filled them.

The third cop, who had a mustache, went into Matvey and Ida's room.

"What was your purpose in coming to Akulinsk?" the older cop asked me, turning my ID in his hands.

"Just to relax."

"Write," the mustachioed cop said to the one with the sheet, bringing several canvases from Matvey's room and throwing them onto the rug. "The old clenched hands. Child's fist. Two fingers."

"Your address in Akulinsk?" the old cop continued questioning me.

"The 'Mermaids,' number 14."

"How long have you known these people?"

"Not very long. Listen, why are you asking me all this? What's the meaning? . . ."

"Keep answering. I'm doing the questioning here."

"A devil with a green face. A devil with a violet face," the mustachioed cop brought out a few more canvases. "Three cobble stones."

Matvey sat motionless, clutching his fingers. At one moment he would look at the floor, then lift his head and look at the cops, then again look down and mumble something under his breath.

"Fire and an eye," the mustachioed cop said.

"What?"

"An eye. Just one eye."

"I pity you," Matvey said suddenly, raising his head and looking at the old cop. "You don't realize what you're doing, and whom you're serving."

"Matti . . ." Ida said.

The old woman, who was sitting next to Matvey, stretched out her hand and, without a word, grabbed his sleeve.

But Matvey went on.

"... You were given a chance—you were born a human—and you blew it. For that, in the next life, you'll be born a spider."

"Did you hear that?" the old cop turned to the one with the sheet. "Write it down. For calling a representative of the law a spider, you'll get a year in jail," he said to Matvey.

"A year in jail! You threaten me with a year in jail, when you'll be sentenced for eternity. Do you realize it? *For eternity!* And you'll never, ever, be a human again. You'll come back to earth as a spider, or even worse, as a microbe!"

"I've warned you. For that microbe you'll get another year!"

"Matti, I beg you," said Ida.

Matvey waved his hand and fell silent.

"Small ones're done, sir," the mustachioed cop said. "Only the big one's left, and some papers."

"Get the big one out, and put the papers into a separate bag!"

"Yessir!"

"Hold it! Lift it up! Turn the corner!" The young cops dragged the big canvas out of Matvey's room.

Tolik, in his nightshirt, sat beside Ida, staring at them, his naked knees trembling.

The search went for another hour. They shook out the laundry, then, with a crowbar, lifted some floorboards, poked the dry earth underneath.

"Well, that's about it," the old one said.

"Right, sir."

"You'll be hearing from us," he said to me, handing me back my ID.

And they left, taking along the canvases, sketches wrapped up in the rug, and the papers, which they had stuffed into a pillow case.

Matvey they took away with them.

"It's because of me," Tolik whispered barely audibly, when their steps had faded away in the corridor. "Because of me," he repeated. "I gave it to the teacher, Mama..."

"What did you give to the teacher?" Ida said bending toward him, her face wet with tears.

"I forgot to rip daddy's drawing out of my notebook, when I gave it to her," he said. "She asked me, 'Who drew that?' I said I didn't know. But she, probably, guessed. And now... they will... kill... him..."

He wanted to say something else, but he couldn't. He just kept opening and closing his mouth, like a fish which has been pulled onto the shore, and he was trembling more and more violently.

"Toliki!" Ida gripped his shoulders. "Tolik," she touched his forehead. "He's burning up! The doctor. We've got to get him to the doctor!" Frantically, she started pulling a shirt over his head. "Tolik! My God, he's almost unconscious! Mother!" She cried to the old woman.

But the old woman didn't hear her.

Her hands clinging to the springs of the bed, her head bent down, she repeated, rocking as in a trance: "I knew it... I knew it... I knew it..."

"Please, stay here, while I go and call the doctor," Ida said to me, rushing to the door, "or no, I'll stay here, you call. Please."

I dashed outside and ran to the phone booth.

Despite the cop's threats, however, Matvey was not jailed for a year, not even for a week. He was released in two days.

Nobody summoned me, and I bought a ticket to return to Moscow.

On the eve of my departure, we were sitting on the shore, not far from his house, among the ancient ruins where I had first seen him.

"Why did they come? What did it all mean?" I asked.

"Because of that drawing," he waved his hand.

"What drawing? Tolik mentioned something..."

"Yes, it was that. I drew a funny little picture to amuse him. It's a child's joke, really."

He picked up a pebble and with a few quick strokes drew five heads in the sand. The first—a huge, shaggy head with a tangled mass of hair and beard, was obviously, Karl Marx. The second—with less hair and shorter beard was, of course, Engels. Next came Lenin—balding, with a little goatee and a mustache. After him—Stalin, with just a mustache. And the last one, clean shaven and bald, was, undoubtedly, our current ruler.

"Well, that's what he accidentally gave to his teacher. And it had a caption, besides. 'Marxism goes bald'... poor kid..." Matvey lowered his head.

"How's he today?" I asked.

"Better. The doctor said it was a shock... It's strange, really, that they released me so quickly. Just a warning. It's a different time, now, I suppose... well, all my canvases and notes they destroyed, though..."

"What?"

"Yeah, they said it's religious propaganda."

I couldn't speak. The words stuck in my throat. Matvey was also silent, looking down.

"But you know," he raised his head and looked at me, "this joke was just a pretext for him to destroy what I'm doing. But too soon he exults."

"Who exults?"

"The Devil, as Saint John said, the Devil with his hordes... You see, he thinks I'm defeated, but he's dead wrong. All my ideas are here," he slapped his forehead, "and my recipes for the primer and the colors they didn't find. I had something like a presentiment that it would happen, and a couple of weeks ago I recopied them all into a separate notebook and hid it in a flour-can. Here they are, all of them!" He pulled a small, thick notebook from inside his shirt. "Puff!" he blew the flour off the cover. "Want me to read you some?"

And he opened the notebook and started reading.

"... Gently heat eucalyptus balsam over a delicate flame. Add into it the white of one egg. Then, pour in three spoons of light linden honey that has stood in the sun. And then, stirring slowly, add the finely powdered pigment..."

He read, and a long blue shadow stretched from him over the ground.





## Empire Strikes Back *by William Hawkins*

"... To sit in darkness here hatching vain empires."

—Milton

Kitchener: *The Man Behind the Legend* by Philip Warner, New York: Atheneum; \$15.95.

During his discussion of the overthrow of feudalism by the bourgeoisie in his classic *Capitalism, So-*

*cialism and Democracy*, Joseph Schumpeter asked whether "in the end such complete emancipation was good for the bourgeois and his world." He concluded that it had not been. Capitalist society needs the "steel frame" of the precapitalist aristocracy and its values in order to survive. It was the

"human material of feudal society" which "continued to rule the roost right to the end of the period of intact and vital capitalism."

It filled the offices of state, officered the army, devised policies . . . and, though taking into account bourgeois interests, it took care to distance itself from the bourgeoisie.

The passing of this class was the principle reason Schumpeter believed that capitalism was doomed. Not that it would fail economically; Schumpeter was a firm believer in the *economic* superiority of capitalism. It would fail politically because "the bourgeois class is ill equipped to face the problems, both domestic and international, that have normally to be faced by a country of any importance."

We have seen that the industrialist and the merchant, as far as they are entrepreneurs, also fill a function of leadership. But economic leadership of this type does not readily expand, like the medieval lord's military leadership, into the leadership of nations. On the contrary, the ledger and the cost calculation absorb and confine.

Schumpeter, by birth an Austrian, was attempting to warn his adopted United States of its weakness as a capitalist nation without a feudal past. A nation about to assume global responsibilities. The weakness Schumpeter perceived has been manifest on many occasions. The revolt of middle-class students during the Vietnam War

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