

WHAT GOOD ARE RELATIVES?

For two days Timofei Vasil'evich had been looking for his nephew, Serega Vlasov. On the third day, just before leaving town, he found him. He met him in a trolley car.

Timofei Vasil'evich boarded the trolley, took out a coin, and was about to give it to the conductor; only he looked—who could it be? The conductor's face seemed very familiar. Timofei Vasil'evich stared—yes! That's who it was—Serega Vlasov, his very own self, working as a trolley conductor.

"Well!" exclaimed Timofei Vasil'evich. "Serega! Is it really you, my fine friend?"

The conductor seemed embarrassed, checked his roll of tickets without any apparent need to do so, and said: "Just a moment, uncle . . . let me give out the tickets."

"O.K.! Go right ahead," his uncle said happily. "I'll wait."

Timofei Vasil'evich smiled and began to explain to the passengers: "He's a blood relative of mine, Serega Vlasov. My brother Peter's son . . . I haven't seen him for seven years . . ."

Timofei Vasil'evich looked with joy on his nephew and shouted to him: "Serega, my fine friend, I've been looking for you two days. All over town. And look where you are! A conductor . . . And I went to your address. On Raznochin Street. Not here, they answer. He went away, left this place. Where, says I, did he go, answer me, says I. I'm his blood uncle. We don't know, says they . . . And there you are—a conductor, aren't you?"

"A conductor," the nephew answered cautiously.

The passengers began to stare with curiosity at the relative. The uncle laughed happily and looked lovingly at his nephew, but the nephew was obviously embarrassed and, feeling that he was after all on duty, did not know what to say to his uncle or how to behave in his presence.

"So," the uncle said again, "you're a conductor on the trolley line?"

"A conductor . . ."

"Say, isn't that a coincidence! And I, Serega, my fine friend, I

was just looking into the trolley—and what's that? The face on that conductor looks very familiar. And it turned out to be you. Ah, there's luck for you! Well, I'm so glad. I'm so pleased, really . . ."

For a moment the conductor shifted from foot to foot, and then suddenly he said: "You've got to pay, uncle. To get a ticket . . . Are you going far?"

The uncle laughed happily and slapped him across the change purse.

"I would have paid! I swear to God! If I'd gotten on another car, or if I'd missed this one—O.K.—I would have paid. I would have paid my good money. Ah, there's luck for you! . . . I'm going to the railroad station, Serega, my fine friend."

"Two stops," said the conductor wearily, looking to the side.

"No, you don't mean it?" Timofei Vasil'evich seemed surprised. "You don't mean it? You're kidding?"

"You must pay, uncle," the conductor said softly. "Two stops. Because you can't travel for nothing and without a ticket."

Timofei Vasil'evich, offended, pressed his lips together and looked sternly at his nephew.

"Is this the way you treat your blood uncle? You rob your uncle?"

The conductor stared gloomily out of the window.

"That's piracy!" the uncle said angrily. "I haven't seen you, you son of a bitch, for seven years, and what do you do? You ask money for a trip. From your blood uncle? Don't you wave your hands at me. You may be my blood relative, but I'm not scared of your hands. Don't wave, you'll give the passengers a chill."

Timofei Vasil'evich turned the coin over in his hand and put it back in his pocket.

"What do you think of the likes of him, brothers?" Timofei Vasil'evich appealed to the public. "From his blood uncle he asks. Two stops, he says . . . Eh?"

"You must pay," said the nephew, almost in tears. "Please don't be angry, comrade uncle. Because this isn't my trolley. It's a state trolley. It belongs to the people."

"To the people," said the uncle, "that's not my business. You could show a little respect for your blood uncle. You could say, 'Uncle, put away your hard-earned ten kopecks. Travel free.' Your trolley wouldn't fall apart on account of that. I was riding in a train the other day . . . The conductor was no relation, but

still he said: 'Please, Timofei Vasil'evich,' says he, 'why bring up such a thing . . . just sit . . .' And he took me along . . . And he's no relation . . . Just an old village friend. And you do this to your blood uncle . . . You'll get no money from me."

The conductor wiped his forehead with his hands and suddenly rang the bell.

"Get off, comrade uncle," said the nephew officially.

Seeing the matter was taking a serious turn, Timofei Vasil'evich wrung his hands, took out his ten-kopeck piece again, and then again put it back.

"No," he said, "I can't! Pay you, you snot, I can't. Better let me get off."

Timofei Vasil'evich arose solemnly and indignantly and made his way to the exit. Then he turned.

"Driving out your uncle . . . Your blood uncle," Timofei Vasil'evich said in a fury, "Why, you snot . . . I can have you shot for this."

Timofei Vasilevich threw a withering glance at his nephew and got off the trolley.

THE ARISTOCRAT

Grigorii Ivanovich inhaled noisily, wiped his chin with his sleeve, and began to tell the story: Brothers, I don't like women who wear hats. If a woman's wearing a hat, or if she's got silk stockings on her, or a little pug-dog in her arms, or if she's got a gold tooth, then to me she's an aristocrat, and not a woman at all but an empty space.

In my time, of course, I once courted an aristocrat like that. I went strolling with her and took her to the theater. It was in the theater, in fact, that it all came out. It was in the theater that she exposed her ideology in its full measure.

I met her in the courtyard at home. At a house meeting. I look, and there stands just such a big deal. Stockings on her, gold tooth.

"Where are you from, citizen?" I say. "What number?"

"I am," she says, "from number seven."

"Please," says I, "good luck to you."

And all at once I found I liked her terribly. I began to go see her often. To Apartment Number Seven. As it happened, I'd go in a kind of official capacity. Like this: "Anything wrong here, citizen, in the way of a broken pipe or toilet? Everything working?"

"Yes," she replies. "Everything's working."

And she wraps herself up in a woolen shawl and there's not a whisper more. Only with her eyes she's devouring away. And the tooth flashes in her mouth. I came to her for a month—she got used to it. She began to answer in more detail. Like, for example, "the pipe's working, thank you, Grigorii Ivanovich."

To get on, we began to take strolls along the streets. We'd go out on the street, and she'd ask me to take her by the arm. I was embarrassed, but I'd take her arm and tag along like a fish out of water. And what to say, I don't know, and in front of people I'm ashamed.

Well, and once she says to me: "Why," she says, "do you always take me out on the streets? My head's gotten all twisted. You could," she says, "if you're a man and a gentleman, take me to the theater, for example."

"Can do," says I.

And all at once on the following day the party cell distributed tickets for the opera. One ticket I received myself, and the other one I got from Vas'ka the locksmith, who gave his up to me.

I never looked at the tickets, but they were different. Mine was in the orchestra, but Vas'ka's was in the balcony.

Anyway, we got there. We took our seats in the theater. She took a seat on my ticket, and I on Vas'ka's. I was sitting in the last balcony and couldn't see a horse-radish. But if I leaned way out over the balcony rail I could see her. But not too well.

I was getting more and more bored, and went downstairs. I look—it's intermission. And she's coming out for intermission.

"Hello," says I.

"Hello."

"It's interesting," says I. "Is the pipe working here?"

"I don't know," she says.

And she goes to the buffet. I follow her. She walks along the buffet and looks at the counter. And on the counter there's a plate. On the plate some pastries.

And I'm such a goose, such an uncut bourgeois, I creep around her and offer: "If you would like," says I, "to eat one of those pastries, don't hesitate. I'll pay."

"*Merci*," she says.

And suddenly she maneuvers herself around to the plate with a vicious movement, grabs the one with whipped cream, and laps it up.

The money I had on me was damn little. At most enough for three pastries. She eats, and I go whisking nervously through my pockets. I look in my hand. How much do I have? About a pigeon's droppings' worth.

She ate the one with whipped cream and grabbed another. I let out with a quack. And then I keep quiet. Such a bourgeois kind of embarrassment took hold of me. Like this, a gentleman, and no money on him.

I walk around her like a rooster, and she giggles waiting for compliments.

I say: "Isn't it time to go back to our seats? Maybe they rang."

But she says: "No."

And takes a third.

"On an empty stomach—isn't that a lot? You might throw up."

And she: "No," she says, "I'm used to it."

And takes a fourth.

Then the blood runs to my head.

"Put it," says I, "back!"

And she got scared. She opened her mouth, and in her mouth the tooth flashed.

It seemed to me as though someone had touched a whip to my rear. It's all one, think I, there'll be no strolling with her now.

"Put it back," says I, "you damn bitch!"

She stepped back. And I say to the attendant: "How much for the three pastries we ate?"

The attendant takes it all indifferently—he takes his time.

"You owe me," says he, "for eating four pieces, so-and-so much."

"How," says I, "for four? When the fourth is still on the plate."

"No," says he, "though it's still on the plate, it was nibbled and it's been smutched by a finger."

"How," says I, "nibbled, if you please. It's your cockeyed fantasies."

But he still takes it indifferently—he wrings his hands in front of his mug.

Well, of course, people gathered around. Experts. Some say a nibble was taken, others—no.

And I emptied out my pockets—something, of course, spilled out on the floor and rolled away—the crowd laughs. But to me it's not funny. I am counting my change.

I counted the money—enough for four pieces and a little over. Dear mother, I'd picked a quarrel for nothing.

I paid. I turn to the lady: "Eat," says I. "It's paid for."

The lady doesn't move. She's embarrassed to eat it. And here some old joker butted in.

"Give it here," says he. "I'll eat it."

And he ate it, the scum. With my money.

We took our seats in the theater. We watched the opera. Then home.

And at home she says to me in that bourgeois tone of hers: "Enough swinery on your part. Those who don't have money shouldn't go out with ladies."

And I say: "Money isn't happiness. Pardon the information."

So I left her.

I don't like aristocrats.

THE BATHHOUSE

Our bathhouses are not so bad. You can wash yourself. Only we have trouble in our bathhouses with the tickets. Last Saturday I went to a bathhouse, and they gave me two tickets. One for my linen, the other for my hat and coat.

But where is a naked man going to put tickets? To say it straight—no place. No pockets. Look around—all stomach and legs. The only trouble's with the tickets. Can't tie them to your beard.

Well, I tied a ticket to each leg so as not to lose them both at once. I went into the bath.

The tickets are flapping about on my legs now. Annoying to walk like that. But you've got to walk. Because you've got to have a bucket. Without a bucket, how can you wash? That's the only trouble.

I look for a bucket. I see one citizen washing himself with three buckets. He is standing in one, washing his head in another, and holding the third with his left hand so no one would take it away.

I pulled at the third bucket; among other things, I wanted to take it for myself. But the citizen won't let go.

"What are you up to," says he, "stealing other people's buckets?" As I pull, he says, "I'll give you a bucket between the eyes, then you won't be so damn happy."

I say: "This isn't the tsarist regime," I say, "to go around hitting people with buckets. Egotism," I say, "sheer egotism. Other people," I say, "have to wash themselves too. You're not in a theater," I say.

But he turned his back and starts washing himself again.

"I can't just stand around," think I, "waiting his pleasure. He's likely to go on washing himself," think I, "for another three days."

I moved along.

After an hour I see some old joker gaping around, no hands on his bucket. Looking for soap or just dreaming, I don't know. I just lifted his bucket and made off with it.

So now there's a bucket, but no place to sit down. And to wash standing—what kind of washing is that? That's the only trouble.

All right. So I'm standing. I'm holding the bucket in my hand and I'm washing myself.

But all around me everyone's scrubbing clothes like mad. One is washing his trousers, another's rubbing his drawers, a third's wringing something out. You no sooner get yourself all washed up than you're dirty again. They're splattering me, the bastards. And such a noise from all the scrubbing—it takes all the joy out of washing. You can't even hear where the soap squeaks. That's the only trouble.

"To hell with them," I think. "I'll finish washing at home."

I go back to the locker room. I give them one ticket, they give me my linen. I look. Everything's mine, but the trousers aren't mine.

"Citizens," I say, "mine didn't have a hole here. Mine had a hole over there."

But the attendant says: "We aren't here," he says, "just to watch for your holes. You're not in a theater," he says.

All right. I put these pants on, and I'm about to go get my coat. They won't give me my coat. They want the ticket. I'd forgotten the ticket on my leg. I had to undress. I took off my pants. I look for the ticket. No ticket. There's the string tied around my leg, but no ticket. The ticket had been washed away.

I give the attendant the string. He doesn't want it.

"You don't get anything for a string," he says. "Anybody can cut off a bit of string," he says. "Wouldn't be enough coats to go around. Wait," he says, "till everyone leaves. We'll give you what's left over."

I say: "Look here, brother, suppose there's nothing left but crud? This isn't a theater," I say. "I'll identify it for you. One pocket," I say, "is torn, and there's no other. As for the buttons," I say, "the top one's there, the rest are not to be seen."

Anyhow, he gave it to me. But he wouldn't take the string.

I dressed, and went out on the street. Suddenly I remembered: I forgot my soap.

I went back again. They won't let me in, in my coat.

"Undress," they say.

I say, "Look, citizens. I can't undress for the third time. This isn't a theater," I say. "At least give me what the soap costs."

Nothing doing.

Nothing doing—all right. I went without the soap.

Of course, the reader who is accustomed to formalities might be curious to know: what kind of a bathhouse was this? Where was it located? What was the address?

What kind of a bathhouse? The usual kind. Where it costs ten kopecks to get in.