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SHORT STORIES COLLECTION

THE CUP OF LIFE

A cheerful Moscow story with a sad ending

Honestly, as if confessing in the face of God, I will tell you, comrades, how I am suffering because of that damned Pal Vasilyich... He seduced me with the cup of life and then betrayed me! What a rascal!..

So it was in this way... I was sitting, you know, quietly and peacefully at home and doing calculations. Well, of course, that's just how they call it – calculation – but in reality it is just living from hand to mouth on my salary, that tots up to 210. 50 are now resting in my pocket. So count then: 10 days before the first day of the next month. How much is that? 5 per day. Right. Can one get by on it? Well, it may be possible with a proper calculation. Excellent. At that very moment the door opened and Pal Vassilich came in. And what I saw: he wore something that looked like a fanciful fur coat and a hat! What a bastard, – I thought to myself! His face was florid, and I smelt the port wine odor trailing from him. Someone was crawling behind him, also well-dressed.

Pal Vasilyich immediately introduced his companion:

– He is one of us, also from the trust, – he said.

And then he slammed his hat on the table, shouting:

– I am so fed up, my friends, so tired! This work drives me mad! I want to relax and spend the evening in your good company! I beg you, my friends, let's drink the cup of life! Let's go! Let's go!

Well, how much money do I have? I say: fifty. I'm a polite and honest man, I'm not used to bumming. But what can one afford for fifty? Especially if that's your last fall money!

I answered:

– I don't have money...

He kinda looked at me fiercely and said:

– You, pig! – he shouted, – Do you want to offend me, your true friend?!

Well, I thought to myself, if so... And here we went.

As soon as we left, strange things began to happen! The yard-keeper was shoveling away the snow from the sidewalk with a scraper, when suddenly Pal Vasilyich rushed to him, snatched the scraper from his hands, and began shoveling the snow himself, screaming:

– I am an intelligent proletarian! I don't disdain any work!

And the next moment there came a crackle sound – zap! – Pal Vasilyich cut a part of a galosh¹ of a poor passer-by. The yard-keeper snatched back his scraper out of Pal Vasilyich's hands, and Pal Vasilyich yelled:

– Comrades! Help! I, a responsible worker, am being beaten!

Of course a scandal followed. The looky-loos gathered instantly. I smelt the trouble in the air, so we, together with the trust guy, grabbed Vasilyich at his elbows and dragged him into the first doorway we saw. And on the door it was written: "... and serving wines". The passer-by followed us, sure thing, with the mutilated rubber in his hand.

– Don't forget the indemnity for the spoiled galoshes.

And guess what? Pal Vasilyich unbuttoned his wallet, and when I looked into it, I was set agape! One hundred notes! A full pack of one hundreds about four fingers thick. "Oh my God", – I thought to myself. And Pal Vasilyich forked out two banknotes and said contemptuously to the applicant, whose eyes were now glittering greedily.

– H-here you go, c-comrade, – and he chuckled in

¹ Galoshes, also known as, gumshoes, rubbers, or overshoes, are a type of rubber boot that is slipped over shoes to keep them from getting muddy or wet.

some kind of an acting manner: – A. Ha. Ha.

The galosh man flinched at once, of course. The price for such galoshes today was fifty kopecks at best. Well, tomorrow, I think, he will buy a luxury pair for sixty maybe.

Nice, what can I say. We sat down and things went off and rolling. So, Moscow port wine... do you know how it works on a person? You don't get drunk from it, but you lose your perception of what is happening. I remember that we were eating crayfish and then suddenly we found ourselves on Strastnaya Square. And there on Strastnaya Square, Pal Vasilyich embraced a lady who was passing by and kissed her three times: on the right cheek, on the left, and again on the right. I remember that we were laughing, and that the lady was pretty startled and kept on standing stone-still for some time. Pushkin statue was gazing at the lady, and the lady was gazing back at Pushkin.

The next moment shoppy folks hammered on us with flower bouquets. Pal Vasilyich bought a bunch of flowers and trampled them jauntily underfoot.

And then I heard a tense, choking voice saying:

– Shall we? Shall we have a little r-r-ride?

We stepped into the car. The driver turned to us and asked:

– Your Excellency, where are we heading for?

“Your Excellency”? Who? Pal Vasilyich?! What a bastard, I thought to myself!

And Pal Vasilyich unbuttoned his queer fur coat and answered:

– Wherever the road takes you.

The driver spun the wheel at once, and we rushed forth like a whirlwind. In five minutes we made a stop at Neglinny². The driver beeped the horn three times that resembled pig's grunt:

“Oink... oink... oink...”

And again guess what! On this very "oinks" lackeys rushed out of the door and took us by the arms. And the head waiter spoke to us in a courtesy manner like some kind of a count:

– Table to the dear gentlemen.

Violins were playing cheerfully:

Under the sultry skies of Argentina...

A man in a hat and coat, all covered in snow, was dancing merily between the tables. At that point, Pal Vasilyich went not even red in the face, but I'd rather say he turned a deep crimson hue and spotty, and burst out:

– I am fed up with these port wines! I want to drink champagne!

The lackeys dashed in all directions, and the head

² Neglinny (or Neglinny drive, after 1922 was renamed into Neglinnaya Street) – a street inside the Garden Ring of Moscow, Russia. It runs from the Bolshoi Theater to Trubnaya Square.

waiter bowed his head deeply, so I saw a white line of his greasy hair part:

– I can recommend some wonderful types...

And bottle tops started flying around us like butterflies.

Pal Vasilyich embraced me and shouted:

– I love you, my dear comrade! No more wasting of you precious time in this sour Centrosoyuz ³. I'll fix you up for some job in our trust. We are now having, you know how they say, staff rationalization, well, manpower redeployment, so there should be some vacancies. And for your information, I am high muckity-muck in the trust! I am God-almighty there!

And his trust mate barked "That's right!" – and shivered a glass on the floor with pure delight.

What then happened to Pal Vasilyich!

– So you want to show your broad soul? – he shouted. – So you broke this cheap glass and you are happy now? A. Ha. Ha. Watch this!

And upon that, he shivered a comport on the floor – poof! And the trust fellow shivered another glass! And Pal Vasilyich crashed a sauce boat! And a trust man – another glass!

I recovered my senses only when the waiter

³ ... in your Centrosoyuz. – abridged russian version for The Central Union of Consumer Societies that was created in 1917.

brought us the bill. And then I looked at it with my bleary eyes – o-n-e b-i-l-l-i-o-n nine hundred and twelve million. Yes, sir.

I remember that Pal Vasilyich was shelling out the money and suddenly he took out five hundred and told me:

– My dear friend! Here, I lend you! You lead a dull and miserable life in your Centrosoyuz! Take these five hundred! Join us in the trust and enjoy yourself!

What can I say, I couldn't resist, I confess. And I took five hundred from this scoundrel. Judge for yourself: after all, he will blow this money on booze anyway, a rascal of a man! Their money in trusts is easy. And so as I took these damned five hundred, something suddenly squeezed my heart. I turned around mechanically and saw – as if through the veil – a man who was sitting in the corner of the room with a bottle of seltzer water standing in front of him. He looked at the ceiling, but, you know, it seemed to me that he was looking directly at me. As if, you know, he had another – invisible – pair of eyes on his cheek.

I can't express how sick I felt!

– Gop, tsa, dritsa, gop, tsa, tsa!!

I trotted sideways to the door. And the lackeys rushed to me and waved their napkins in front of my face!

And then I smelled the breath of fresh air that blew into my face. I still remember that the driver

“oinked” again and it seemed to me that I was driving upright. Whereto I have no idea. My memory has failed completely...

I woke up at home! Half past two on the clock.

And my head – Oh my God! I couldn't even lift it! Somehow I managed to remember that it all had happened the previous day, and first of all I dived into my pocket. Here they were – the five hundred! Well, I thought to myself – that's great! And even though my head was splitting from an awful headache, I was lying and dreaming about my future service in the trust.

Eventually I had some rest, drank tea and felt a little bit better. I fell asleep early in the evening.

I was woken up by a doorbell in the middle of the night...

I thought to myself – this is probably my aunt from Saratov.

I went barefoot to the hallway and asked through the closed door:

– Aunty, is that you?

And from behind the door an unfamiliar voice answered:

– Yes. Open the door.

I opened it and froze...

– Let me..., – I tried to say, but my voice faded, – to find out for what..?

Ah, what a scoundrel!! So that's what it is! It turned out that during the interrogation, Pal Vasilyich

(he was arrested in the morning) testified to the investigator:

– And five hundred I gave to a citizen such and such.

Well, that “citizen” was me, obviously!

I wanted to shout at the top of my throat: “That’s a gross lie!!”

And then, you know, I looked into the eyes of the man with a briefcase... And I remembered instantly! Dear me, seltzer! That’s him! The eyes that were on his cheek were now on his forehead!

I froze... I don’t remember how, but I took out those five hundred...

And the seltzer man told his chase tail, his fellow staffer, calmly:

– Attach to the file.

And to me he said:

– Get dressed.

My God! My God! And just as we were approaching, I saw – through tears – the illuminated inscription "Commandant's Office". That's when I dared to ask:

– What has he done, that scoundrel of a man, that I should be deprived of my freedom because of him?

And seltzer man said mockingly through gritted teeth:

– Oh, never mind. It has nothing to do with you.

Fancy that! It has nothing to do with me! What’s

that “it”? Then I found out that there were about seven articles of that “it”... giving and taking bribes, negligent storage, and most importantly – embezzlement! Here is what I should have “never mind”! So that scoundrel, that Pal Vasilyich, was living his last evening then, he was drinking – as he said that night – the cup of life! Well, to make a long story short, they let me out after two weeks in custody. I rushed to my work. But I felt with my heart that some new fellow with a white line of his greasy hair part in a long jacket had already been sitting at my desk.

– Staff rationalization, manpower redeployment. And besides that... Strange, but still...

And he turned back to the phone.

I grew cold... I received my liquidation payment... dismissal money for two weeks in advance, which amounted to 105, and then left.

And since then, without a stop, I have been walking... and walking. And if another week is going to be just like this, I think, I won't take it anymore and end it all by killing myself.

KOMAROV CASE

At the beginning of 1922, people began to disappear in Moscow. For some reason, it was happening mostly to local horse dealers or peasants who came from the suburbs of Moscow to buy horses.