

A GOOD-FOR-NOTHING

1

When people talk to Pyotr Petrovich they always call him by his full name and patronymic. As for Senya – well, if he's ever been called Semyon Ivanych you can bet it was only some layabout of a student pulling his leg. No, to all and sundry he's just plain Senya. Sometimes he gets quite worked up about it. 'What's with the familiarity?' he'll say. 'How come it's Pyotr Petrovich for him, but Senya for me?'

'Well,' people say, 'that's your name, isn't it: Senya.' And they laugh, because it's so out of character for him to get angry.

Senya and Pyotr Petrovich always stick together – best mates, they are, as thick as thieves. People can't figure this out. Pyotr Petrovich seems such a sober, reliable sort of fellow, so how did he come to be friends with Senya?

Well, I'll tell you how it happened. One night Pyotr Petrovich was strolling along peacefully by the Kremlin walls on his way home to Balchug Street. Jagged shadows fell from the battlements, while up above the Kremlin towers drowsed like so many staid boyars, each with its own given name: Water Pump, Secret Passage, Old Crone, Alarm, Saviour. He really loved those towers, did Pyotr Petrovich. And as night gave way to the pink glow of a fresh May dawn, he fell into a kind of reverie.

And then – so suddenly it made him jump – he heard a voice calling from somewhere above: 'I say! I say, old chap!' Pyotr Petrovich looked all around, but Red Square was empty apart from a policeman on duty, and he'd nodded off. 'Blow me!' he thought. 'Must be imagining things: in broad daylight, too.' But then the voice called out again: 'I say, I'm up here. Hang on a minute!'

Pyotr Petrovich looked up, and his jaw dropped... Good Lord! Somehow or other this fellow had managed to climb up the Kremlin wall! 'So sorry to detain you, old chap,' he was saying, 'but I'm a bit cheesed off up here all on my own. What's more, I'm feeling a bit high, as you might say. Bad case of alcohol poisoning. It's such a beautiful night, and I want to talk, you see – to talk...'

'Hold on though, how did you manage to get up there?'

'Oh, there was a whole gang of us, all pretty far gone. And then we had this stupid bet. More to the point, I can't get down – they took the rope away, the rotten lot!'

There he was, sitting between two battlements and chatting away, his legs dangling down. Pyotr Petrovich just couldn't contain himself and burst out laughing. The fellow on the wall joined in too.

It must have been their laughter that woke the policeman up. Spotting the infringement of order was easy enough, but getting it down off the wall was something else altogether. What a laugh! All sorts turned up: bakers, early-morning newspaper vendors, street urchins, yard sweepers... Eventually someone brought ladders and they managed to get the poor beggar down on terra firma again. From there, of course, it was straight off to the police station.

Down at the station he gave his name as Senya Babushkin, first-year university student.

'Which department?' enquired the sergeant.

'Just put me down as a first-year student. You see, I originally started off studying mathematics, then I switched to medicine, then to natural sciences, and now I'm going to study law – as a first-year student again.'

The sergeant laughed, and Senya laughed too. They took a statement from Pyotr Petrovich as well, so that he wouldn't feel left out. It was midday when the two of them finally got away from the station, and by then they were the best of friends.

'This definitely calls for a celebration,' Senya decided.

They called in at the Ant, a hostelry on Solyanka Street. Pyotr Petrovich, of course, followed his watchword of moderation in all things, whereas Senya celebrated their new friendship so enthusiastically that he nearly ended up back at the police station again. He was stopped by a policeman. 'You'd best come along o' me, sir,' he said. 'Come along now, if you please!' But having just forged indis-soluble bonds of friendship with Pyotr Petrovich, Senya was full of the milk of human kindness. He flung his arms around the officer of the law, clasping him to his bosom. 'Consht'ble, dear ol' pal!' he bawled. 'Don' cher unnerstan', ol' pal...' The policeman didn't know where to look. After all, how can you administer a caution to someone who's squeezing you in his embraces? He quietly extricated himself and returned to his post, pretending he hadn't seen Senya in the first place. Then Pyotr Petrovich took Senya home, undressed him, put him to bed, and trotted off to get some smelling salts. That's how they became friends.

At the time Senya was living with his brother Arkhip Ivanych in Sadovniki.

Years before, Arkhip Ivanych had actually done time in exile: five years or so if I'm not mistaken, in Shenkursk. Anyway, by this time he'd trimmed his radical views somewhat. He'd landed himself a nice little job in the Justice Department and cultivated the side whiskers and bags under the eyes to go with it. Well, if you have to be a jumped-up little bureaucrat, you need to act the part. He didn't see it like that, though. He fancied himself as something of a liberal, and was quite prepared to cock a snook at authority as long as no one was looking.

As for his dear little brother Senya, Arkhip never stopped going on at him. 'What's the younger generation coming to?' he'd say. 'None of you show the slightest bit of interest in political and social issues. You could have borrowed some of my books, but no: you have to go and pick on Maupassant. I ask you! After that I'm not surprised you spend all your time hanging around in pubs...'

This continual nagging really turned Senya against him. No matter that Arkhip Ivanych provided him with free board and lodging, letting him live there without a care in the world. All these material advantages meant nothing to a light-hearted, harum-scarum type like Senya. And far from showing Arkhip Ivanych due respect as his benefactor, it has to be said that Senya always gave as good as he got, so that they were at each other's throats the whole time.

In the New Year's honours that winter Arkhip Ivanych was awarded the Order of St Stanislav, I forget which class. Deep down the so-and-so must have been tickled pink, but he put on a suitably sour expression for the world at large. Senya was given strict instructions. 'I'll thank you not to go blabbing about this wretched business,' Arkhip Ivanych told him, pointing at the medal. 'People will think I went after it by sucking up to the bosses, whereas in fact I have a reputation for quite the opposite. It wasn't for nothing I spent five years in Shenkursk...'

Anyway, round about the same time Senya palled up with an engine driver from the Ryazan line, and this chap took him along in his cab for three days, all the way to Saratov. As usual it didn't take Senya long to make up his mind. He just met this engine driver in the street, and it was a case of: 'Fancy a ride?' – 'You bet' – and that was that. Anyway, during the trip he wrote his brother a letter saying not to worry, he'd be home on Saturday, and so on and so forth. And on the envelope he wrote: Arkhip Ivanych Babushkin, Order of St Stanislav, such-and-such class.

Next morning Arkhip Ivanych was sorting through his mail when he recognised Senya's sloppy handwriting on one of the envelopes. He opened the letter and casually tossed the envelope aside unread.

'Aha – mm, mm,' he mumbled, chewing his bread and butter. 'Taken it into his head to go on a trip, has he? Charming!'

Arkhip Ivanych was about to leave the building, in a hurry to get to work and looking at his watch, when he saw the hall porter standing in his way and bowing to him.

'Well, what is it?'

'If you please, sir... I understand you've received an honour...'

Poor old Arkhip Ivanych turned as red as a beetroot and muttered something. But there was nothing for it, he had to cough up a rouble coin. 'How did he find out, the bastard?' he thought. 'They're all the same, these porters...'

When he got back from the office, Arkhip Ivanych sat down to his dinner. He was ravenous and had just knocked back a glass preparatory to tucking in when there was a knock at the door.

'Who is it?'

The door flew open, and in burst the yard sweeper and the same postman who'd delivered Senya's letter that morning.

'Permit us to offer our felicitations on the honour you've received, Arkhip Ivanych...'

Well, you should have seen him jump up and stamp his feet!

'Insolent louts! Out of my sight! Whatever I've received is my business and none of yours!'

He carried on swearing at them like a trooper, and was so worked up he couldn't even face his dinner any more. Such was the grief Senya had given him with this whole business that his patience finally snapped. He had it out with Senya, and ended up by giving him his marching orders.

'There's the door,' he said. 'Now bugger off and see that you fend for yourself.'

He carried on swearing at them like a trooper, and was so worked up he couldn't even face his dinner any more. Such was the grief Senya had given him with this whole business that his patience finally snapped. He had it out with Senya, and ended up by giving him his marching orders.

'There's the door,' he said. 'Now bugger off and see that you fend for yourself.'