Examination for a Rank

Geography teacher Galkin bears a grudge against me and, believe me, I won't pass his exam today, said, nervously rubbing his hands and sweating, the clerk of the Xth postal office, Yefim Zakharych Fendrikov, a gray-haired, bearded man with a venerable bald spot and a solid belly. I won't pass... It's as sure as God is holy... And he's angry at me over mere trifles. Once he came to me with a registered letter and pushed through the whole crowd so that I, you see, would take his letter first and then the others. That won't do... Though he is of the educated class, still observe order and wait. I made him a proper remark. Wait your turn, I said, my dear sir. He flared up, and since then he has risen against me like Saul. He gives my little son Yegorushka failing marks, and spreads all sorts of names about me around the town. Once I was walking past Kukhtin's tavern, and he stuck his head out of the window with a billiard cue and shouted in a drunken voice to the whole square: Gentlemen, look: a used stamp is coming!

The Russian language teacher Pivomedov, who was standing in the hallway of the Xth district school together with Fendrikov and condescendingly smoking his cigarette, shrugged his shoulders and reassured: Don't worry. We have no precedent of your sort being failed at exams. It's a formality!

Fendrikov calmed down, but not for long. Galkin walked through the hallway, a young man with a thin, ragged beard, in canvas trousers and a new blue frock coat. He looked sternly at Fendrikov and walked on.

Then a rumor spread that the inspector was coming. Fendrikov turned cold and began to wait with that fear which is so well known to all defendants and first-time examinees. Through the hallway ran out to the street the regular supervisor of the district school, Khamov. After him hurried to meet the inspector the religious instructor Zmiezhalov in a kamilavka and with a pectoral cross. The other teachers also rushed there. Inspector of public schools Akhamov greeted loudly, expressed his displeasure at the dust, and entered the school. Five minutes later they began the exams.

They examined two priests' sons for rural teacher. One passed, the other did not. The one who failed blew his nose into a red handkerchief, stood a bit, thought, and left. They examined two volunteers of the third category. After that Fendrikov's turn came...

Where do you serve? the inspector addressed him.

As a clerk at the local post office, Your Nobility, he said, straightening up and trying to hide from the public the trembling of his hands. I have served twenty-one years, Your Nobility, and now information is required to present me for the rank of collegiate registrar, for which I dare to undergo the examination for the first class rank.

So... Write a dictation.

Pivomedov rose, coughed, and began to dictate in a deep, piercing bass, trying to catch the examinee on words that are written differently from how they are pronounced: good cold water, when you want to drink, and so on.

But however much the cunning Pivomedov tried, the dictation succeeded. The future collegiate registrar made a few mistakes, though he emphasized more the beauty of the letters than grammar. In the word "extraordinarily" he wrote two n's, wrote "better" as "lutshe", and with the words "new undertaking" he brought a smile to the inspector's face, since he wrote "new pod-undertaking"; but after all these are not gross errors.

The dictation is satisfactory, said the inspector.

I dare to inform Your Nobility, said the encouraged Fendrikov, glancing sideways at his enemy Galkin, I dare to report that I studied geometry from Davydov's book, and partly learned it from my nephew Varsonofy, who came for the holidays from the Trinity-Sergius, also called Vifania, seminary. And I studied planimetry and stereometry... everything as it is...

Stereometry is not in the program.

Not required? But I sat over it for a month... What a pity! sighed Fendrikov.

But let's leave geometry for now. Let's turn to the science which you, as an official of the postal department, probably love. Geography is the science of postmen.

All the teachers smiled respectfully. Fendrikov did not agree that geography is the science of postmen (this was nowhere written in the postal regulations or in the district orders), but out of respect said: Exactly so. He coughed nervously and with horror began to wait for questions. His enemy Galkin leaned back in his chair and, without looking at him, asked drawlingly: Eh... tell me, what government is there in Turkey?

It's known what... Turkish...

Hm!.. Turkish... That's a stretchable concept. There the government is constitutional. And what tributaries of the Ganges do you know?

I studied geography from Smirnov and, excuse me, did not learn it clearly... The Ganges is the river that flows in India... this river flows into the ocean.

I'm not asking you about that. What tributaries does the Ganges have? Don't you know? And where does the Araks flow? And you don't know that either? Strange... Of which province is Zhitomir?

Route 18, place 121.

Cold sweat appeared on Fendrikov's forehead. He blinked his eyes and made such a swallowing movement that it seemed he had swallowed his tongue.

As before the true God, Your Nobility, he muttered. Even Father Archpriest can confirm... I have served twenty-one years and now this very thing, which... I will pray to God all my life...

All right, let's leave geography. What have you prepared in arithmetic?

And arithmetic not clearly... Even Father Archpriest can confirm... I will pray to God all my life... Since Pokrov I study, study and... no use... I've grown too old for scholarship... Be so kind, Your Nobility, make me pray to God forever.

Tears hung on Fendrikov's eyelashes.

I have served honestly and irreproachably... I fast annually... Even Father Archpriest can confirm... Be magnanimous, Your Nobility.

Haven't you prepared anything?

I prepared everything, but remember nothing... Soon sixty will strike, Your Nobility, how can one keep up with sciences here? Do me a favor!

I've even ordered a cap with a cockade for myself... said Archpriest Zmiezhalov and smirked.

All right, go!.. said the inspector.

Half an hour later Fendrikov was walking with the teachers to Kukhtin's tavern to drink tea and was triumphant. His face shone, happiness shone in his eyes, but the every-minute scratching of the back of his head showed that some thought was tormenting him.

What a pity! he muttered. Why, what a stupidity on my part, you might say!

But what is it? asked Pivomedov.

Why did I study stereometry if it's not in the program? For a whole month I sat over it, the wretched thing. What a pity!