The Story of a Commercial Enterprise

Andrei Andreyevich Sidorov inherited four thousand rubles from his mama and decided to use the money to open a bookshop. And such a shop was sorely needed. The town was steeped in ignorance and prejudice; the old folk only went to the bathhouse, the officials played cards and knocked back vodka, the ladies gossiped, the young people lived without ideals, the young ladies dreamed of marriage all day long and ate buckwheat groats, husbands beat their wives, and pigs wandered the streets.

Ideas, more ideas! thought Andrei Andreyevich. Ideas!

Having rented premises for the shop, he went to Moscow and brought back many old and the very latest authors and many textbooks, and arranged all this fine stuff on the shelves. For the first three weeks, no customers came at all. Andrei Andreyevich sat behind the counter, read Mikhailovsky and tried to think honestly. But when it happened to occur to him, for instance, that it wouldn't be a bad time now to eat some bream with porridge, he immediately caught himself at these thoughts: Oh, how vulgar! Every day in the morning a chilled girl in a headscarf and leather galoshes over her bare feet would dash headlong into the shop and say:

Give me two kopecks' worth of vinegar!

And Andrei Andreyevich would answer her with contempt:

You've got the wrong door, madam!

When one of his friends dropped in, he would put on a significant and mysterious face, take down the third volume of Pisarev from the very back shelf, blow the dust off it, and with an expression as though he had something else in the shop that he was afraid to show, he would say:

Yes, my good man... This is a little item, I tell you, that's not... Yes... Here, my good man, in a word, I must point out, there's such stuff, you understand, that you read it and can only throw up your hands... Yes.

Mind, brother, that you don't get into trouble!

After three weeks the first customer came. He was a fat, grey-haired gentleman with side-whiskers, in a peaked cap with a red band, evidently a landowner. He asked for the second part of *Native Word*.

And don't you have slate pencils? he asked.

I don't stock them.

A pity... Too bad. I don't want to go to the market over a trifle...

It really is a pity I don't stock slate pencils, thought Andrei Andreyevich after the customer left. Here in the provinces one cannot specialize narrowly, but must sell everything that relates to education and in one way or another promotes it.

He wrote to Moscow, and before a month had passed, pens, pencils, penholders, school exercise books, slate boards and other school supplies were already displayed in his shop window. Boys and girls began to drop in occasionally, and there was even one day when he took in a ruble and forty kopecks. Once the girl in leather galoshes dashed in; he had already opened his mouth to tell her with contempt that she had the wrong door, but she cried out:

Give me a kopeck's worth of paper and a seven-kopeck stamp!

After this Andrei Andreyevich began to keep postage and revenue stamps and, while he was at it, bill paper too. About eight months later (counting from the day the shop opened) a lady came in to buy pens.

And don't you have school satchels? she asked.

Alas, madam, I don't stock them!

Oh, what a pity! In that case show me what dolls you have, but only the cheaper ones.

Madam, I have no dolls either! said Andrei Andreyevich sadly.

Without thinking long, he wrote to Moscow, and soon satchels, dolls, drums, sabres, accordions, balls and all sorts of toys appeared in his shop.

This is all trifles! he told his friends. But just you wait, I'll bring in educational aids and rational games! My educational department, you understand, will be founded, as they say, on the subtlest conclusions of science, in a word...

He ordered gymnastic weights, croquet, backgammon, a children's billiard table, garden tools for children and a couple of dozen very clever, rational games. Then the townsfolk, passing his shop, to their great delight saw two bicycles: one large, the other smaller. And trade went splendidly. Trade was especially good before Christmas, when Andrei Andreyevich hung a notice in the window that he sold Christmas tree decorations.

I'll throw in some hygiene too, you understand, he told his friends, rubbing his hands. Just let me make a trip to Moscow! I'll have such filters and all kinds of scientific improvements that you'll go out of your minds, in a word. Science, my good man, cannot be ignored. No indeed!

Having made a lot of money in trade, he went to Moscow and bought some five thousand rubles' worth of assorted goods there, for cash and on credit. There were filters, and excellent desk lamps, and guitars, and hygienic drawers for children, and pacifiers, and wallets, and zoological collections. While he was at it he also bought five hundred rubles' worth of excellent crockery and was glad he had, because beautiful things develop refined taste and soften manners. Having returned home from Moscow, he set about arranging the new goods on the shelves and whatnots. And somehow it happened that when he climbed up to clear the top shelf, there was a sort of jolt and ten volumes of Mikhailovsky fell off the shelf one after another; one volume hit him on the head, and the rest fell straight down onto the lamps and smashed two lamp globes.

How they do... write thick books! muttered Andrei Andreyevich, scratching himself.

He gathered up all the books, tied them up tightly with rope and hid them under the counter. A day or two later he was told that the neighbouring grocer had been sentenced to the arrestant companies for torturing his nephew and that the shop was therefore being let. Andrei Andreyevich was very pleased and ordered that the shop be kept for himself. Soon a doorway had been knocked through the wall and both shops, joined into one, were packed to the rafters with goods; since the customers who went into the second half of the shop all asked by habit for tea, sugar and kerosene, Andrei Andreyevich, without thinking long, took on grocery goods as well.

At present he is one of the most prominent merchants in our town. He trades in crockery, tobacco, tar, soap, cracknels, textiles, haberdashery and dry goods, guns, hides and hams. He has taken a wine cellar at the market and, they say, intends to open family bathhouses with private rooms. The books that once lay on his shelves, including the third volume of Pisarev, were long ago sold at 1 ruble 5 kopecks a pood.

At name days and weddings his former friends, whom Andrei Andreyevich now mockingly calls Americans, sometimes raise with him the subject of progress, literature and other higher matters.

Have you read the latest issue of *Vestnik Evropy*, Andrei Andreyevich? they ask him.

No, I haven't read it, sir... he answers, squinting and playing with his thick watch chain. That doesn't concern us. We are engaged in more positive business.