The Horse's Surname — text 1 of 2

General Buldeev, a retired major-general, had a toothache. He rinsed his mouth with vodka and brandy, applied tobacco soot, opium, turpentine, and kerosene to the aching tooth, smeared his cheek with iodine, and put cotton soaked in alcohol in his ears, but all of this either did not help or made him nauseous. The doctor came. He poked around in the tooth and prescribed quinine, but that did not help either. When extraction of the aching tooth was proposed, the general refused. Everyone in the household—his wife, children, servants, even the cook's boy Petka—offered their own remedy. Among others, Buldeev's clerk Ivan Evseich came to him and advised him to be cured by a charm.

"Here in our district, your excellency," he said, "about ten years ago there served an excise officer Yakov Vasilich. He charmed teeth first-rate. He would turn to the window, whisper, spit, and it would be as if by magic! Such power was given to him..."

"Where is he now?"

"After he was dismissed from the excise, he lives in Saratov with his mother-in-law. Now he makes his living only by teeth. If someone's tooth aches, they go to him, and he helps... He treats the Saratov people at his own home, but if they are from other cities, then by telegraph. Send him a dispatch, your excellency, saying this and that... that the servant of God Alexey's teeth ache, I beg you to cure him. And you will send the money for the treatment by mail."

"Nonsense! Quackery!"

"But you try it, your excellency. He is very fond of vodka, lives not with his wife but with a German woman, he is a scold, but, one might say, a miraculous gentleman!"

"Send it, Alyosha!" begged the general's wife. "You don't believe in charms, but I have tried them on myself. Even though you don't believe, why not send? Your hands won't fall off from that."

"Well, all right," Buldeev agreed. "At this point you would send a dispatch not only to the excise officer but to the devil himself... Oh! I can't stand it! Well, where does your excise officer live? How do I write to him?"

The general sat down at the table and took up a pen.

"Every dog in Saratov knows him," said the clerk. "Be so good as to write, your excellency, to the city of Saratov, that is... To His Nobility Mr. Yakov Vasilich... Vasilich..."

"Well?"

"Vasilich... Yakov Vasilich... but the surname... But I have forgotten the surname!.. Vasilich... Devil... What is his surname? Just now, when I was coming here, I remembered... Allow me..."

Ivan Evseich raised his eyes to the ceiling and moved his lips. Buldeev and the general's wife waited impatiently.

"Well, what is it? Hurry up and think!"

"In a moment... Vasilich... Yakov Vasilich... Forgot! Such a simple surname... as if horse-related... Kobylin? No, not Kobylin. Wait... Zherebtsov, maybe? No, not Zherebtsov either. I remember the surname is horse-related, but which one has slipped my mind..."

"Zherebyatnikov?"

"Not at all. Wait... Kobylitsyn... Kobylyatnikov... Kobelev..."

"That is dog-related, not horse-related. Zherebchikov?"

"No, not Zherebchikov either... Loshadinin... Loshakov... Zherebkin... All wrong!"

"Well, how am I supposed to write to him? You think!"

"In a moment. Loshadkin... Kobylkin... Korenoy..."

"Korennikov?" asked the general's wife.

"Not at all. Pristyazhkin... No, not that! Forgot!"

"Then why, damn you, do you butt in with advice if you have forgotten?" the general said angrily. "Get out of here!"

Ivan Evseich slowly went out, and the general clutched his cheek and began pacing the rooms.

"Oh, my dear Lord!" he wailed. "Oh, my dear mother! Oh, I can't see the light of day!"

The clerk went out into the garden and, raising his eyes to the sky, began trying to recall the excise officer's surname: "Zherebchikov... Zherebkovsky... Zherebenko... No, not that! Loshadinsky... Loshadevich... Zherebkovich... Kobylansky..."

A little later he was called to the masters.

"Remembered?" asked the general.

"Not at all, your excellency."

"Maybe Konyavsky? Loshadnikov? No?"

And in the house, everyone vying with one another began inventing surnames. They went through all ages, sexes, and breeds of horses, remembered manes, hooves, harness... In the house, in the garden, in the servants' quarters and the kitchen, people walked from corner to corner, scratching their foreheads, searching for the surname...

The clerk was summoned to the house every now and then.

"Tabunov?" they asked him. "Kopytin? Zherebovsky?"

"Not at all," Ivan Evseich would answer and, raising his eyes upward, continued thinking aloud. "Konenko... Konchenko... Zherebeev... Kobyleev..."

"Papa!" the children shouted from the nursery. "Troikin! Uzdechkin!"

The whole estate was in an uproar. The impatient, tormented general promised five rubles to whoever remembered the real surname, and crowds began following Ivan Evseich...

"Gnedov!" they told him. "Rysisty! Loshaditsky!"

But evening came and the surname was still not found. So they went to bed without sending the telegram.

The general did not sleep all night, paced from corner to corner, and groaned... At about two in the morning he went out of the house and knocked at the clerk's window.

"Isn't it Merinov?" he asked in a tearful voice.

"No, not Merinov, your excellency," Ivan Evseich replied and sighed guiltily.

"But maybe the surname is not horse-related but some other one!"

"Truly, your excellency, it is horse-related... I remember that very well indeed."

"What a forgetful fellow you are, brother... To me now this surname is dearer, it seems, than anything in the world. I am tormented!"

In the morning the general again sent for the doctor.

"Let him pull it out!" he decided. "I can't bear it any longer..."

The doctor came and pulled the aching tooth. The pain subsided at once, and the general calmed down. Having done his work and received what was due him for his labor, the doctor got into his britzka and drove home. Beyond the gate in the field he met Ivan Evseich... The clerk was standing at the edge of the road, looking intently at his feet, thinking about something. Judging by the wrinkles furrowing his forehead and the expression of his eyes, his thoughts were tense, agonizing...

"Bulanov... Cheressedelnikov..." he muttered. "Zasuponin... Loshadsky..."

"Ivan Evseich!" the doctor addressed him. "Can't I, my dear fellow, buy about five chetverts of oats from you? Our peasants sell me oats, but it is awfully bad..."

Ivan Evseich stared dully at the doctor, smiled somehow wildly, and without saying a word in reply, clapped his hands and ran to the estate with such speed as if a mad dog were chasing him.

"I've got it, your excellency!" he shouted joyfully, not in his own voice, flying into the general's study. "Got it, God bless the doctor! Ovsov! Ovsov is the excise officer's surname! Ovsov, your excellency! Send a dispatch to Ovsov!"

"Take that!" said the general with contempt and held two figs up to his face. "I don't need your horse-related surname now! Take that!"