The Death of a Clerk — text 1 of 2

One fine evening the no less fine executor, Ivan Dmitrich Chervyakov, was sitting in the second row of seats and looking through opera glasses at The Bells of Corneville. He looked and felt himself at the height of bliss. But suddenly... In stories this but suddenly is often encountered. The authors are right: life is so full of surprises! But suddenly his face wrinkled, his eyes rolled back, his breathing stopped... he took the glasses from his eyes, bent over and... ah-choo!!! He sneezed, as you see. Sneezing is not forbidden to anyone anywhere. Peasants sneeze, and police chiefs, and sometimes even privy councillors. Everyone sneezes. Chervyakov was not in the least embarrassed, wiped himself with his handkerchief and, like a polite man, looked around him: had he disturbed anyone with his sneezing? But then he had to become embarrassed. He saw that the little old man sitting in front of him, in the first row of seats, was diligently wiping his bald head and neck with his glove and muttering something. In the little old man Chervyakov recognized the state general Brizhzhalov, serving in the Ministry of Ways of Communication.

I sprayed him! thought Chervyakov. Not my superior, a stranger, but still awkward. I must apologize.

Chervyakov cleared his throat, leaned forward and whispered in the general's ear:

Excuse me, your excellency, I sprayed you... I accidentally...

Nothing, nothing...

For God's sake, excuse me. I... I didn't mean to!

Oh, sit down, please! Let me listen!

Chervyakov became embarrassed, smiled stupidly and began to look at the stage. He looked, but no longer felt bliss. Anxiety began to torment him. During the intermission he approached Brizhzhalov, walked around near him and, overcoming his timidity, muttered:

I sprayed you, your excellency... Forgive me... I... it's not that...

Oh, nonsense... I've already forgotten, and you're still on about the same thing! said the general and impatiently moved his lower lip.

Forgotten, but there's malice in his eyes, thought Chervyakov, looking suspiciously at the general. And he doesn't want to talk. I should explain to him that I didn't

mean to at all... that it's a law of nature, or he'll think I wanted to spit. If he doesn't think so now, he'll think so later!..

Having come home, Chervyakov told his wife about his rudeness. His wife, it seemed to him, took the incident too lightly; she was only frightened, and then, when she learned that Brizhzhalov was a stranger, she calmed down.

But still, you go and apologize, she said. He'll think you don't know how to behave in public!

That's just it! I apologized, but he was somehow strange... Didn't say a single sensible word. And there was no time to talk.

The next day Chervyakov put on a new dress uniform, had his hair cut and went to Brizhzhalov to explain... Entering the general's reception room, he saw many petitioners there, and among the petitioners the general himself, who had already begun receiving petitions. Having questioned several petitioners, the general raised his eyes to Chervyakov.

Yesterday at the Arcadia, if you remember, your excellency, began to report the executor, I sneezed and... accidentally sprayed... Exc...

What trifles... God knows what! What do you want? the general turned to the next petitioner.

He doesn't want to talk! thought Chervyakov, turning pale. He's angry, then... No, this can't be left like this... I'll explain to him...

When the general finished his conversation with the last petitioner and made his way to the inner apartments, Chervyakov stepped after him and muttered:

Your excellency! If I dare to trouble your excellency, it is precisely from a feeling, I can say, of repentance!.. Not on purpose, as you yourself know!

The general made a tearful face and waved his hand.

But you're simply laughing, my good sir! he said, disappearing behind the door.

What mockery is there here? thought Chervyakov. There's no mockery here at all! A general, and can't understand! If that's so, I won't apologize to this braggart anymore! Devil take him! I'll write him a letter, but I won't go! By God, I won't!

So thought Chervyakov, walking home. He did not write the letter to the general. He thought and thought, and could not think of this letter. He had to go himself to explain the next day.

I came yesterday to trouble your excellency, he muttered, when the general raised questioning eyes to him, not in order to laugh, as you were pleased to say. I apologized for having sprayed while sneezing..., but I didn't think of laughing. Do I dare to laugh? If we are going to laugh, then there will be no respect for persons... at all...

Get out!! suddenly roared the general, turning blue and trembling.

What-s? asked Chervyakov in a whisper, swooning with horror.

Get out!! repeated the general, stamping his feet.

Something tore in Chervyakov's stomach. Seeing nothing, hearing nothing, he backed toward the door, went out into the street and trudged... Coming home mechanically, without taking off his dress uniform, he lay down on the sofa and... died.