

The Gold by Andrejs Upītis
Translated by Christopher Moseley
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EXCERPT

The great wind in the night had broken off the signboard from its support. For a long time the little screws had been moving in the rotten board – wobbling, but not actually falling off. But tonight the wind had completely torn off the lower iron support; the upper one, the big one, could not hold out alone and was bending downwards. And the corner of the signboard was now sticking into the door, so it was hard to close it. That was why Sveilis had come out, first thing in the morning, with a chair, and climbed up to nail down the torn supporting post.

It wasn't high up, but he had to stretch. The chair wobbled on the uneven paving stones, and his worn cloth slippers slipped off. But Sveilis pressed his kneecaps against the jamb, and by stretching, hit the spot. He had already driven in the second nail, but the third was still in his mouth. Up in the attic the two children living there were looking down, one at one window, one at the other; their dirty black faces were pressed against the pane and laughing as they watched.

Now all the nails were in. They went in as if into sap-wood. They wouldn't hold out for long like that. Climbing down, Sveilis looked around. All the panels in the little house were discoloured, crumbling away in places. The blinds on both windows had toppled off. The threshold was worn out; there was quite a gap under the door. But now the sign was straight again: quietly squeaking, swinging slowly in the wind. "Portnoy" in Russian letters above, "Schneider" below, and in the middle, a worn uniform with a sword-sheath transversely across it. Sveilis went over to the other side. The same image, but with a different inscription: "August Sveile, Tailor". But then he noticed that the children upstairs were making faces; he angrily threatened them with the hammer and, gathering up the chair, went inside.

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“Well, wasn’t it broken off?” his wife inquired, squatting by the stove, on which the coffee pan was starting to steam.

But Sveilis saw no need to answer. Having got cold outside, he was shivering. He was coughing, spluttering and rubbing his foot. He clasped his frozen hands together and got to work: the buttonholes on Juškans the beer-merchant’s coat had to be stitched. The suit had to be ready by noon.

The fire in the stove was crackling pleasantly. Now and then Sveilis cast a glance at it. Behind his glasses, fogged by the warmth, and at a distance, two fires appeared to him, the flames of both completely extended. Long wisps of pale reddish flame stretched all over the room. A very pleasant warmth. Sveilis cleared his throat and scratched his thin grey beard.

The pot on the stove was starting to hiss. His wife filled the iron with coals, then cleared a corner of the table and started carrying the breakfast things. Stitching the buttonholes, Sveilis cast a harsh and critical look at each unnecessary object on the table in turn. Two coffee mugs and two glasses. The floral-patterned saucers of the two mugs, a white one for one glass, with a notch chipped out of the edge. Another glass at the edge of the table, without a cup... Mrs. Sveile, stopping at the end of the table, surveyed it all. Sveilis, sewing up the buttonholes of Juškans’ coat, was not looking, but still saw it. He saw that the sugar-bowl and the knives were still missing; he saw his wife looking at the table, but he also saw something quite different much further away. The thimble squeaked against the needle, his sizeable nose visibly reddened, but Sveilis did not utter a word. And straight away Mrs. Sveile *came to her senses* and rushed off to get the missing things. Right there behind the door, in the cupboard, everything was stored.

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The pot on the stove started to jump. A couple of times Mrs. Sveile, chattering around in circles, took it off and put it back on again. She stirred the fire in the stove, knocked the billets against each other and dug among the ashes. Hissing ever more quietly, the pot slowly stopped boiling. Mrs. Sveile **poured** the black liquid into the blue floral-patterned battered tin jug. An agreeable warmth rose in the room, a mixture of dampness, coffee and the smell of incandescent cast-iron.

Sveilis, taking a new thread of silk on his needle, blithely stretched his back against the back of his chair. He recrossed his legs one over the other. He carried on sewing. Mrs. Sveile attended to the iron.

“Neither one nor yet the other –“ she intoned. Her voice sometimes sounded surly, but her thin, prematurely aged face with its milky blue eyes and pointed nose was simply tired and apathetic.

“It will cool down,” said Sveilis, and through his long grey eyelashes flashed a glance toward the door. “Don’t’ bring it yet.”

“Not yet, no.” Mrs. Sveile was already pushing the jug onto the hottest place on the stove. She stooped again over the iron. “It just doesn’t want to light up.”

Sveilis stopped his needle halfway and suddenly straightened up.

“Well, **get busy!**” he almost screamed. Even the tips of his ears were flushed. “Is this the first time you’ve picked up a smoothing-iron?”

Mrs. Sveile **got busy**. White cinders ran in bursts along the curved front of the iron. The room seemed to be filling with a grey, drizzly mist smelling of coal. But the iron started glowing inside: the heart-shaped little hole grew redder with every stroke.

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A chattering throng of Jewish children walked past. For a moment a face with a huge cap, its peak drawn over the eyes, and white teeth, was caught in the glass of the door. It disappeared, and then from somewhere at the side an arm in a ragged sleeve reached out, and a hard little fist beat resoundingly. And for a moment later, and further away, was heard a mocking reedy voice calling “Sveile, Sveile! Eh!” Laughing and chattering away, the group of mischievous boys went on their way. Sveilis wasn’t looking, but he did see and hear. He only bent even lower over Juškans’ coat, nervously threading his needle.

But now the door opened too, and in came a young lad, his leather belt girdling his cloth shirt, with a pupil’s cap from the town school on his head. He closed the door with a rattle, went to the end by the window, pushed away the rags piled on top of his books, sat down at the table opposite Sveilis, flung his cap off, bottom downwards, and started to open the exercise-book he had just brought in.

Mrs. Sveile came with the jug of coffee.

“Darned Jew!” the boy muttered, scornfully turning over with his fingers a prize picture he had put in the book. “Every day he gets more stingy!”

Sveilis shifted in his seat.

“What are those pictures for? You ought to go to Pētersons’ – he’ll refill the pen.”

The boy stuck the picture behind the wrapper of the book’s cover.

“A lot of things from a pen/feather like that...”

Mrs. Sveile was standing at the end of the table with the coffee jug.

“Well, young Robert, why not? Doesn’t a pen cost money too?”

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“Can you write with what Pētersons has got? The boy opened a little round ink-bottle. “A cheap pen – he gets a dozen for three kopecks himself. There’s this and that, but nothing to try out calligraphy with.”

Sveilis wanted to say something more, but he couldn’t manage. He just looked at Robert and started sewing rapidly. Mother sighed, wiping the bottom of the jug with the corner of her apron and refilled his mug to the brim. Robert, his chest hunched against the table, his lips pursed, wrote a word in his new exercise-book. Sveilis stopped sewing and, without raising his head, followed every stroke of the pen attentively with his eyes.

Having waited until the boy had finished writing, tilting his head to view it from both sides, with a slight hum Mother delicately intervened: “Drink your coffee now. Made won’t wait.”

Having closed the ink-bottle, Robert got up by the window.

“Made’s been writing again. She’s always borrowing ink from me.”

Sveilis looked severely at Mother. She became quite nervous.

“She really hasn’t, Robert. She didn’t get anything written yesterday. I haven’t seen it.”

“Don’t tell me” interjected Robert. “I sketched it clearly yesterday morning – up to this little groove. And where is it now? She’s always borrowing ink from me.” He pulled out a drawer from the table and from the very back of it fetched a battered notebook. He browsed roughly through the pages, and finally he must have found what he needed. “Look here: at the gates of Plevna, at the fortress. That was where we fought. This wasn’t here yesterday morning – again she’s been writing it.” He skimmed through one more page, and another – calculating for a moment. “Thirty-seven verses. That’s how she uses up that ink of mine.”

Mother was shuffling, as if caught.

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“I don’t know – perhaps. I didn’t get to see. Now drink your coffee, Robert. You’ll have to go soon.”

Sveilis pulled his thimble onto another finger.

“Babbles nothing but rubbish...”

Robert poured sugar into the mug, but he didn’t put away the song-book. Drawing closer, stirring the mug with a spoon, he read – at first with an ironic, scornful face, but later with visible interest. He turned to another place and read again. His mother was busy around the stove. As he sewed, his father often cast a glance across the table.

“But Mum, where’s the milk?” Robert suddenly asked peevishly.

As if stung, Mother clapped her hands together and hurried to the cupboard behind the door.

“Well, you’d be better off taking a book than that nonsense,” remarked Father, but when Robert didn’t reply and didn’t even look up from Made’s song-book, he carried on working.

“Eat those bread rolls now, son,” urged his mother, adding milk to his mug. “The pretzels have completely dried up overnight. It’s not as if there wasn’t a cool place to keep them in.” She shoved the bowl of milk closer and arranged the knife more conveniently.

“Bread in a cool place ripens even sooner.” Sveilis pulled a new thread so nimbly that a knot ran through the cloth with a crackle. When he pierced, he had to look carefully, but in pulling through his eyes might overlook it. And every time he withdrew, Sveilis’ eyes flashed across the table through his glasses. He saw his son spreading butter on white bread but not taking any milk. He saw his white teeth biting into big pieces, and each time he took a mouthful of steamy brownish coffee on top of it, and the soft yellow mixture remained in a half-arc on his teeth, and tiny white crumbs from his raised hand pressed against his elbow fell onto the worn

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sleeves of his smock. And the glossy black cloth looked covered in frost. Your teeth would freeze just to touch it. Your teeth would freeze, but your mouth would feel a fragrant sweetness that would make your mouth water. Sveilis coughed and decided not to look. But he couldn't – he just had to look. He bent his head down lower, pierced even more agilely and pulled more quickly. The silken thread whizzed as it ran through the soft blackish-grey cloth. His lips were tightly pursed, his face looked strangely malevolent.

Both the pieces of bread roll had been eaten up. Mother, nibbling on something, threw aside a piece of cloth and pushed a slice of black bread to her son.

“Take a piece of this – put milk on it. This time Mrs. Baumanė has managed well: yellow, from young rye. And such a lovely crust –“ She broke off as Sveilis started coughing strangely and clenched his teeth, so that deep dimples appeared on the outside of his cheeks. And then, sounding harsher, as if arguing with someone, she added: “You won't get any until the evening. As for that dried pretzel, put some in your pocket for lunch...”

Robert broke off a bit of the slice of black bread. Now he no longer took such large bites or ate so quickly. His father was preparing the last buttonhole. Mother was behind him, at the sewing machine.

“Sveilis! Sveile-e-e-e!” called the reedy mocking voice some distance away down the street.

Only Sveilis' thin grey beard quivered slightly. Mother suddenly stepped on her sewing machine. But Robert's hand, holding a piece of bread, stopped momentarily at his mouth. For a moment he seemed to freeze, then he flushed suddenly and, bending over the coffee mug, started eating rapidly. And when he looked timidly over the table at his father, his eyes were full of tears. He no longer enjoyed it. He put the little piece of bread back on the table. Leaning back, he spent a long time drinking the last dregs in his mug.

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He looked at the old wall clock above the bed. It was time to go. To convince himself, he kept gathering the individual books together at the end of the table. He blew away the coal cinders, the fluff from the woollen clothes and wadding. And then he suddenly said: “This week the German lessons have to be paid for.”

Father left off sticking the needle in, and raised his head. Mother came back too.

“This week? But I – but you –“ He couldn’t find what to say. His eyes flashed helplessly behind his spectacles.

“Everyone’s already paid. The teacher told me again yesterday. This week is the last one.”

Mother, wiping her fingers on her apron, looked anxiously at the one and the other. Turning to her son, she bent her head.

“Well then, it must be paid. What then –“

“T-to hell with your payments!” Father went on sewing angrily, so that the needle flashed.

“How long have schools been paid? Thirty roubles! Again!”

“It does have to be paid at some time.” Robert had already put his cap on, pulling the peak down over his eyes.

“Five roubles,” Mother quietly put in. “Today you’ll take that coat to Juškans.”

“Ten roubles!” Sveilis interjected bitterly. “To hell with it! There’s lining in it, it’s all done.

We have to buy firewood. How much does good wood cost now? There’s the rent, the week after next –“

Offended, Robert left the room with great clattering strides. Mother remained with the needles at the end of the table.

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“Well! You always do that when you have to pay. Is the child to blame then? You wanted those German lessons! Last year and the year before you could pay, now this year you just can’t. And it’s nothing at all! The other day Mrs. Skrastiņa was saying her husband and son will be needing new suits for the society bazaar.”

Sveilis cast a long incredulous look at his wife.

“They’ll be needing them... For the summer fair, when they had to play at the society ball, they needed them then too. Then for Sprīngers, then for the Jew – friends of theirs! Word of mouth, all great friends of theirs, but when they had to measure up – nothing!” All that excitement, but the hunger didn’t go away. With every moment the fragrance seemed to get stronger. The yellow-brown slice of bread was enticingly close to the dish of curds. Sveilis could stand it no longer. He stuck the needle in, put Juškans’ coat on the table and with his long bony fingers grabbed the bread in one hand, the knife in the other. With a skilful movement the knife cut the piece of bread into two equal parts in a moment. “Pour. Let’s eat. Made probably won’t be there today.”

Mrs. Sveile poured for her husband. She looked over at the door and poured for herself as well. She sat down on a chair at the end of the table. She cut off half of the remaining piece of bread and carefully strewed crumbs of dry curds on it. She took little bites, striving not to munch with her toothless mouth in eating.

Sveilis chewed robustly, and took noisy draughts from his mug. His brow was furrowed in one big frown. His thin, sparse little grey beard twitched curiously. His nose snorted loudly. For quite a while Sveilis didn’t say a word. His eyes only moved from the mug to the curd dish and back. He didn’t smear the whole implement, but took each morsel in turn from the dish. Onto the corner of the bread he moved his index finger around and with it swept the raised end of

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the knife, on which was a little butter and a decent portion of curds. As he bit, his lips also stroked the crook of his finger – it was wet and shiny. Not a crumb fell to the ground.

“Pour me another.” Sveilis shoved the mug toward his wife. “Maybe that Made won’t come home at all today.”

Mrs. Sveile slowly poured. And it was clear from her face: there was enough left for Made too. Nevertheless, having poured, she cast a timid look into the bottom of the jug.

“Naughty girl,” Sveilis resumed after a moment. “I don’t know where she gads about. She won’t bring buttons. Juškans’ suit has to be ready by noon.”

“She doesn’t gad about,” Mrs. Sveile objected.

“What do you mean, doesn’t gad about! Who was it had to run to the ball the other Sunday? Thirty kopecks gone down the drain! The boots have to be mended, a new buckle for the belt. How are we supposed to manage?”

Now Mrs. Sveile was also starting to worry.

“You just talk! Is she supposed to hang around here all week in those rags? A young person needs her pleasures too –“

“Pleasures!” Sveilis screwed up his mouth in disdain. His wife wasn’t listening.

“What girl here still goes around in patched-up boots like those! She’s had her only dress for over a year – goodness knows how many times it’s been washed.” She was quite agitated. She pushed her glass away so that it struck the jug with a clink. With her nervous fingers she kneaded a lump of bread. “Couldn’t that August help us a bit –“

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Sveilis dismissed her with his hand. With his elbows he pushed his wife's knife downwards. While she lifted it up, he quickly ate a chewed morsel. Having eaten, he said nothing, however. Only after quite a while did he speak again.

“Nothing will come of those German lessons, nothing. Just like that Skrastiņš' son: he went to that school, he just did. There, while his father doesn't have any schooling. He just plays at dances as a fiddler. That's a great skill, that. Who knows – like our own. If one is like that, will the other be much better!”

Mrs. Sveile was silent for a moment.

“It's our fault about August too! We let him out into the world too early. He would have been better off going to work, he wouldn't have learned to drink, wouldn't have behaved badly. Now, though – they say – he's in a good job.”

“In a good job!” Sveilis waved this away. “Good jobs are for good people, not wastrels. Coachman – Some sort of stable boy, maybe. And I don't believe it either – lucky if he's seen half a horse! Coachman!” For a moment he carried on sewing; the silk thread squeaked on the soft cloth. Then suddenly he stuck the needle in, and pressed both hands on his knees. “Our own fault! Our own fault! Wouldn't I have put him to work, wouldn't I have tried in every way! From a young boy he was bad inside. A blizzard, not a man! And you're his great defender! I was a fool. He ought to be flayed, anyway!”

Mrs. Sveile, bent over her machine, was winding thread on spools. Even from behind it was evident that she felt guilty. Sveilis resumed sewing.

“That's why I have those ideas about Robert too. He goes there, but what do we know? Only that we pay big money to the school, but whether we'll get it back...”

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“Robert’s not like that,” objected Mrs. Sveile.

“What can you know! They’re no longer children now, they’re beasts. Now it’s the world bringing them up, not their parents. Like Made herself. She sits there clearly up to no good – wasting paraffin, borrowing ink from the boy. The songs – phooey, t-to hell with it!” He spat angrily aside.

Mrs. Sveile was hunched even more.

“Robert’s not like that. All the teachers praise him. Always at his books, always at them. Just so long as he doesn’t damage his eyes – our lamp being what it is. He’ll be graduating next year, then it will be easier for us too.”

“Easier.” Sveilis stretched himself long and spitefully at the notion. But he turned toward his wife, waiting. His wife knew his ways, so she continued.

“He’ll graduate – then some little job – maybe right here; the notary will need a clerk. Three or so for the police station too. In the wood-cellar there are two applications.”

“A secretary for the investigating judge, a secretary for the justice of the peace,” Sveilis swiftly went on. Like that, as if it had only just entered their heads, as if they didn’t talk to each other about it every day. The two had become tenderer and more loving to each other. Hopes for the future shone like a red ray of sunshine along the crack in the wall at twilight in the room.

“Then it will be easier for us too,” Mrs. Sveile repeated her favourite idea, and Sveilis nodded in agreement. His near-sighted eyes peered through his glasses across the table, as if he wanted to discern some distant thing he had noticed wandering obscurely, something mysteriously attractive. A fan of countless fine wrinkles around the corners of his eyes stretched far over his temples, and the smile within him was clearly visible here.

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“If only he would study and not get lazy,” he added more thoughtfully. “All sorts of things happen in town. Can we go with him, every step?”

“Robert’s not like that,” Mrs. Sveile reassured him.

“No, he isn’t,” maintained Sveilis, “but what can you know. At first August wasn’t like that either. Nobody can set you right if you don’t set yourself.”

“It’s not like that at all,” Mrs. Sveile ventured, to defend him. “August – he’s never killed anyone, or stolen anything.”

With an irritated gesture Sveilis interrupted her.

“Better not to speak! He couldn’t learn to be a bricklayer, if he’d started. Couldn’t he live at Vulfsons’ store? No! Coachman! A tramp, that’s what I say – nothing more than that!”

He tried to resume sewing. But the needle, as if broken, got caught in the cloth and wouldn’t go through. He put it down and once again turned to his wife. She tried to steer the conversation to a more agreeable subject.

“The crown estates’ forest surveyors need an assistant every summer. They lodge right here with the foresters. Last time – when Made and I were taking the washing out, I mentioned it to the housekeeper at the foresters’ place. A good person – she promised to put in a word. Just now it would still be too early, one couldn’t know who and what about it.”

“Thirty roubles – well, even if it were twenty a month,” Sveilis interrupted eagerly, taking away one finger at every number. “That’s how much he’ll get. I’m counting it. Ten roubles for his board, five for expenses, and five – We don’t need any more. Just to get the rent paid. We’ll earn our own keep.”

Mrs. Sveile let out a long and hard sigh.

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“What is our income? For me, as good as nothing. And is it easy for Made? With that washing she can barely feed herself. And what good comes of it? All that fetching and carrying – Her only dress has been washed goodness knows how many times.”

Sveilis drily cleared his throat.

“Yes – but will it always be that way? Last year the notary was talking about a fur coat. I reckon that by the winter there will be more sewing to do. Even without that washing there’ll be something for us all to do.”

“You reckon,” Mrs. Sveile interjected. “You’re always reckoning like that, but you can’t work anything out. The notary will give you a fur coat to sew! Lucky if he brings some trousers. All the best stuff goes to Vulfsons. Jews always stand up for Jews, but a Latvian won’t acknowledge a Latvian!” Again she drew a long sigh. “You ought to try to buy that new tailors’ school.”

“D-damn it!” Sveilis turned aside and took up the needle. But he put it down again straight away. “Six and a half roubles!” Then he slumped down again and seemed worn out. “And nothing will come of that whole school. My eyes are getting dimmer every day. And when I can’t see anything, there will be nothing. If Made hadn’t got the skill, then I don’t know what _“

He remained sitting. Only his eyes, flashing through his glasses, gazed over the table, as if wanting to see through the wall. Mrs. Sveile was fussing, occupied at the machine, but without a purpose.

Traders were going along the street to the market. The walls and floor shook noticeably, the window-pane, set in motion, hummed. The oil can by the sewing machine, delicately tinkling, jumped. The window onto the street and the upper parts of the door were so misted up that a

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passer-by could be seen through them only as a grey fleeting shadow. But the window at the back was almost completely clear. The courtyard beyond it, with tottering, rotting wooden fences on one side, was bounded on the other side by a cracked wooden shed. At the back, by the wood-shed, something was stored up. Along the well-curb walked a grey, famished cat; round about scurried belated, half-grown hens, chirping. Sveilis cast a glance at the fence, but turned away abruptly. The weight of his own customary long days was too great for his surroundings to attract his attention for any length of time.

“If only he finishes it well and gets a certificate,” resumed Sveilis, not noticing where Mrs. Sveile was stirring.

“Again! How you lie about that boy!”

At other times his wife’s annoyance would have immediately offended Sveilis. Today the heavy thought kept him under control.

“Think it over. How much hope do we have now? August –“ He waved his hand. “There’s nothing to expect from Made either. That Skrastiņš boy was taking her out at one stage, but even he hasn’t been seen around lately.”

Reddening, Mrs. Sveile tore herself away from her machine.

“When she herself doesn’t want him! She might have wanted him – as all the other girls did. But she says, if she can’t have the one she wants, then better to have none at all.”

From his appearance one couldn’t tell whether Sveilis had heard that or not. He only sighed heavily and continued.

“So in her old age she’ll have to walk around with a bag. Say what you like, but it isn’t good with that Robert either. Remember how he used to be and how he is now. Only in his books –

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he sleeps in them. Every Sunday those black ones, with the little numbers on the back. The other day I said to him: son, take that song-book, and let's sing, all four of us – we haven't done that for ages – my eyes, you know, are too dim for it. And did he say a single word? He just took his cap and went out.”

“Well, why are you always imposing yourself with your songs? The boy has to study.”

Sveilis turned his head heavily away.

“When would that be then – the studying? He's only doing those numbers. When he starts telling Made – Haven't you heard him? Fairy-tales! Pure nonsense! Will he be asked about those in an examination? He goes through the night, using up a pint of kerosene. But what will come of all that sitting?”

He sighed and started sewing. Mrs. Sveile also sighed and looked at the clock. It would soon be ten. She glanced at the coffee-jug; only slightly warm now. But what was really astonishing was Made being out so long. She sat down and started on the machine, sewing the coat-hanger for Juškans the beer-merchant's clothes.

Traders were passing by on the street. When the gust of wind died down the pedestrians' footsteps could be heard. As they walked they chatted – one was laughing, another was expectorating and spitting. But the next moment a new burst of wind resounded, throttling any other noise. The wind squeezed in under the door into the room and at moments, rustling, swept away the peeling yellow-brown shreds of the wallpaper. Sveilis pulled his legs under the chair. He fixed the topmost button on the coat and raised the collar. It occurred to him that it would be better that way, because then it wouldn't show in front of a dirty ragged shirt.

The clock struck ten.

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Suddenly behind the door came steps and the upper part of the window darkened. Neither Sveilis nor Mrs. Sveile looked up, but they both knew that it was Made. They knew it from the footsteps alone. And they both knew that soon she would shake off her shoes and come inside.

But this time she didn't shake her feet. She only stopped for a moment – she was probably releasing her hand to close the door – and came straight in. With vigour she turned and closed the door, damp, a ball of snowy cold wind rolled to the end of the room, in the warmth of the room it unwrapped itself and rose to the ceiling.

From the forceful striking of the door the whole house rocked. Fine little flakes of lime poured from the ceiling onto the table and onto Juškans the beer-merchant's coat.

Sveilis and Mrs. Sveile at once looked over at Made and each of them at once returned to their work. Made's arrival was too unusual, her entrance was too strange, to ask anything. If there was anything to tell, and had to be told, then let her tell it herself.

Made flung a knot of dirty washing wrapped in a striped flannel blanket down by the stove, and then came to the table. She shoved a little rattling container in front of her father.

“Buttons.” She said no more.

She pulled off her faded padded jacket and threw it on her bed. She untied her black fringed headscarf and threw it in passing on her father's and mother's bed, the end of which projected right to the stove. She bent over the stove and rubbed her hands to warm them.

When she straightened up, her father and mother both quickly turned their eyes to their work. And both had the same thought: now she'll come to the table and eat. She'll eat and tell us... But no. She went over to the door, wiped the misted glass with the corner of her apron, stopped and looked out onto the street.

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Father was sewing nimbly. The thimble scraped from time to time against the end of the needle.

Mother was conscientiously clipping the ends of the threads for the coat-hanger.

And suddenly Made went outside. Father and mother stirred, yet neither one of them said anything. Made was too odd today. She didn't want to talk about anything. So it seemed anyway, she would say something unseemly, smarting like a hard finger on a sensitive spot. Yet they needed to talk; the curiosity and the strange vacant feeling was growing. As if an alien heaviness were lying over them. Neither one of them could sit calmly.

Both of them noticed at once that Made was carrying the little wash-tub across the yard. She was going to soak the washing, but her coffee was sitting on the table untouched. No... Sveilis' long bony fingers nervously stroked the crumpled garment.

She brought the tub in and laid it in its customary place. First the water needed to be heated, however. She probably hadn't thought of that today. She turned back to the door to look. But then her mother's patience finally ran out. She got up brusquely from the machine and turned around.

"Well, come now and drink your coffee!" Her voice sounded offended and upset. It was evident that Father agreed with his whole being to this injunction.

Made turned around and slowly approached. And when she was at the end of the table, with her face to the window onto the yard, her similarity to her mother was downright surprising. She was a little bigger – well, younger too – but with the same broad-shouldered, somewhat forward-bending frame, the same wide, meagre face, aged by overwork, constant worry and poverty, sullen and tired. Only the grey, luxuriant, dense hair could raise the height of a person worn down by work – but unkempt, hurriedly plaited together in somewhat loose braids,

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carelessly assembled – these made even more evident the characteristic impression of a spinster, old and shrivelled before her time.

She poured the coffee mechanically, broke off a little piece of bread and smeared butter on it with the end of the knife. Still standing on her feet, she chewed and drank. Three or four morsels she ate, no more. The rest she put down on the table, then picked it all up and took it to put in the cupboard. With the corner of her apron she wiped crumbs from the table. All the while her mother stood looking at her.

“What’s wrong with you? Why aren’t you eating? Are you sick?”

Made busied herself with the iron just as mechanically. “No, nothing. I just – don’t want to.”

“What’s all this about not wanting to? A person who hasn’t eaten can’t work.” She went over and ostentatiously took the iron away from her daughter. She waved it, exhaled and put the wire basket on the stove, breaking off her talk at intervals. “You run, you run all morning, and you still haven’t eaten... Father already starting to say there won’t be any buttons... Did you get the washing from the foresters?”

“Yes. Less of it. Only eight sheets. They say the Kēkis washgirls are doing it themselves at home now.” She sat down heavily on her bed and folded her arms in her lap.

“I noticed it was a smaller load there,” added her mother, starting to lift the pots up to heat the water.

The cast-iron circles clinked, and then the room became quite again. Father yanked a button from a shiny hard rustling piece of paper, coughed drily and looked toward his daughter.

Made folded her arms again and hunched herself up more tightly. And suddenly she spoke, in a strange, hollow voice: “August seems to have arrived.”

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The news in itself should not have upset her mother and father. After all, it was not far to the manor-house where they had heard he lived, sixty or seventy *verst*s. But Made's voice, and her whole mien, were utterly odd.

"So he'd be coming through with the gentlefolk?" inquired her father ironically, but a strong curiosity was audible behind the irony.

"No, he's just coming," Made replied.

"Well, then he's been driven out again." One might have thought Sveilis was pleased with his son's misfortune. Made wasn't listening to him anyway. She got to her feet and nervously, restlessly rummaged along the bed.

"He arrived yesterday evening. This morning when I went out, the Jewish woman called out to me through the doorway of the chemist's shop: Is it true that your brother, the one from the manor, has arrived? I said I didn't know. I came from the foresters – again there was Mrs. Riepenis from the Silieši family – on her way to market with some piglets. Was it true? They were all talking about it at the market."

Her father's sarcastic laugh suddenly interrupted her.

"That's something to talk about! A gentleman! They're joking!"

But Made wasn't listening to her father's laughter, or his remarks.

"I don't know. Yes, they were all talking about it at the market. They'd been drinking the whole night at the hotel. The beer ran out – this morning a boy with a basket ran twice back to Vītiņi."

"There you go," her father broke in again. "Driven out – and then what he did get there he's now spending on drink. If he ever gets hold of a rouble or two – next thing he's got no trousers left to wear."

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“No, it’s something else,” Made replied. “If you just come out, there are Jews in all the doorways. They’re talking and pointing, they’re all looking at me. Three boys, who knows what they were gabbling about, ran behind me a long way along the street. When I got to the corner here, I ran into Mrs. Juškana.”

“Ah, Mrs. Juškana!” exclaimed her mother, who had not taken her eyes off Made the whole time, and hurriedly went over to the door.

“Has he already been here too? Drinking all night at the hotel and fooling around. The beer ran out. They also sent for her husband this morning. Wherever he’s dragged himself away to, that’s where he’s stayed. She’s supposed to go to the market – there’s scarcely anybody who stays at home. They ought to close the beer shop. Such a shame, you can’t put up with it: market day, so more people will come in. And right now – to hell with it! Filling up with beer in the afternoon!”

For a moment an unpleasant silence hung over the room. Then Made resumed: “They say he’s flinging hundred-rouble notes around like rags.”

“Who? August?” cried father and mother together. Father even jumped up slightly on his chair, burst into laughter again, but checked himself, and calculatedly spat to one side. “D-damn! What tales you tell!”

“They’re not tales at all. At first I didn’t believe it myself, but when everybody was talking about it... I thought, I’ll pass by the hotel, maybe I’ll hear some more. And as I went, so – the street was full of Jews. Mostly boys, but grown-up ones as well. The whole length of the hotel, that’s how big the crowd was, out on the street – talking to each other about something and looking in the windows. Nothing could be seen through the lower windows, only the buffet serving girls standing to one side, showing their teeth. But upstairs one of them was open, and

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there was a hell of a noise coming out of it. Such shouting, such singing – you couldn't understand it. But there were plenty of people there, you could hear that. Glasses clinking. Billiard balls knocking. Now and then a music-box started to play. The window was open, but down below, in the middle of the street, a whole pile of glass – smashed bottles, glasses and carafes. Shards of plates with meat on them, a couple of trampled pastries. A hell of a noise coming from the window. They were singing, shouting, the music-box playing. The policeman was there too – with his misty eyes, must have been up all night. Standing there, just smiling and not saying anything...”

In obvious perplexity she grabbed her scarf, put it on her head, but immediately took it off again. She went over and turned the tub around. For a moment she shifted on her feet, then suddenly went over to the door and looked out over her mother's shoulder.

But there was nothing special to see there. The merchants had already gone past. The occasional Jew or Jewess, rugged up against the wind, went past. Sniffling past the door and the lamp-post, with a mongrel dog straining and whining. Sparse, big raindrops struck against the window of the hat-shop, on the other side of the street.

The children of the women in the flat upstairs were walking across the ceiling with something heavy and rattling. Flakes of lime again poured onto the table.

“D-dammit!” Sveilis grumbled quietly. “If they haven't assaulted and robbed someone.”

Made and her mother withdrew from the door. Someone was coming in: Rozentals, the master carpenter.

At this, Sveilis put down his sewing on the table. Under the coat he felt for the ends of the tape-measure put around its neck and took it. He opened the drawer of the sewing-machine, where he kept a little pocket-book of measurements.

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But Rozentals had not come to be measured for a suit. Having greeted the three of them, and talked in his usual inconsequential way about the weather and such things, he remained standing, evidently looking for words. It was awkward and unpleasant for them all.

“Sit down, Rozentals,” Mrs. Sveile invited him. But Rozentals didn’t want to sit down.

“No, thanks. I’m just here for a little moment, passing by. I have to take some nails to Kacs. I just came in to... But maybe you know?”

But nobody responded to his inquiring look. All three of them had cast their eyes to the floor. Rozentals continued.

“Your August... They’re saying he’s won the big prize. And others are saying he found the money and got a third of it – they’re talking about terrific sums.”

But they had nothing to say, even to this.

“The whole town’s talking,” Rozentals resumed ardently, moving towards the door, closer to the women. “Mad things. Sort of things like: What about a bit for me? – but I’m just telling you as a neighbour: nothing good about that. Where would one man get hold of money like that? Lighting up cigars with five-rouble notes!” The neighbour chuckled. “They know it’s nothing to do with us. Anyone can do as they please with their own money. But this is mad! Don’t let any banker get to know about it; nobody’s got that kind of money to bury in a ditch!”

He could no longer just stand there. He twisted and shuffled. From this movement and his voice Made understood that it did have something to do with him. The good neighbour was being tortured by envy. She turned around and straightened up.

“Oh, why are you listening to people’s gossip, Rozentals? If someone has money, then he can... And again, if he doesn’t, that’s a pity too. That’s how it is.”

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“A pity? For me?” Rozentals stretched his arms and tried to smile disdainfully. “Made, this very day I want you to –“

“Oh, what would we be wanting or not wanting for each other!” Made rebutted quite caustically. With every moment she was recalling something new to be done. There was a suit to be sewn, then there was Vulfsons... And who was it that had done most to put off the Skrastiņš boy? Wanting! She cleared her dry throat, just as her father did. “Let everyone look out for himself, and not get mixed up in other people’s doings. That’s how it is.”

Mother still wanted to intervene and soften Made’s thoughtless hardness. But Rozentals already understood that there was nothing else for him here, and headed for the door. He almost crashed into Mrs. Skrastiņa.

Without having closed the door, Mrs. Skrastiņa shot a glance at each of the Sveilis family in turn. She looked most closely at Mrs. Sveile, but from her she perceived the least. Sveilis was sitting, his head bowed, his brow wreathed in countless furrows. With evident bitter annoyance he dug the needle in and briskly tore the creaking silk thread through the button. Little by little the eye of the needle with its thick, soft thread took up nearly the entire hole, and the accustomed fingers still slid over the round iron impeller. Then the tailor clenched his teeth so that sizeable troughs appeared in both cheeks, his thumb folded over like a falcon’s claw and furiously strangled the needle against the sides of the index finger. Made, still upset by Rozentals, straightened up somewhat haughtily. Around her thin, bluish, tightly clenched lips there played something like a self-conscious grin, but those eyes flashed a sense of a great, beautiful future. Only from Mother was there still nothing to be observed. Shaken and confused, she stared at the floor, shuffled on the spot, not knowing whether to go or to stay, smile or sigh.

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Mrs. Skrastiņa greeted them cheerfully. She was more diplomatic right from the start.

“Shitty weather,” she cursed, but carried on smiling, shaking her rain-soaked scarf. And her eyes, like a mouse’s, shot from one to the other. “Wind and rain. And now the snow is starting to fling itself down.”

Nobody answered. Sveilis tore a new button from the paper. Made sat down on the bed. Mrs. Sveile fussed around the iron. They all looked at the visitor expectantly. But she was a diplomat. Smiling, she shook herself.

“There’s so much mud in our street that you can’t wade through it. If it carries on a couple more days, we’ll have to take to a boat. In the potholes where the pavement’s broken up, it’s just a mass of water.”

Now Made had recovered her composure and was aware of her relationship to the visitor.

“Oh my dears!” she cried loudly, and a slight disparagement was unmistakable in her voice.

“So you have to wade then! Go around the edge of it.”

“Why, my dears, those edges are just the same. You can’t wade along those lower streets. Where we live, there are street lamps burning – the little ones have to get through the mud by swimming. Just now: getting a pound or so of starch from Volkov. For lunch we wanted to make a cranberry jelly. But we couldn’t quite do it. We had to go around by Vidus street.”

On Vidus street was the hotel. The Sveilis family paid attention. It was obvious that none of them wanted to show it. Mrs. Skrastiņa waited a moment, but when there was no hope of anyone reacting, she skilfully manoeuvred to the point.

“Rain or no rain, it’s always warm in there. Cobbled as flat as a table. Street-lamps. Well now, my dears! It’s like being in your own home, nothing missing there. The hotel.” Here she

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stopped again for a moment – and the silence fell even more heavily over the Sveilis room. And then she suddenly said, as if it had just occurred to her, what was preying on her mind. “Yes, well, what I wanted to – You see, my dears - When I went in there, I looked: a whole crowd outside the hotel on the street. Big and small, Jews and Latvians, seamen too... The windows open, playing, shouting, singing... Bottles coming down like crows and smashing on the street... Whole plates of meat... Who knows what somebody got into their head there.”

Now the listeners really did have to respond. But when they could think of nothing to say, Mrs. Skrastiņa, embarrassed, broke off. It was evident just from her face and nervous movements how upset she was, and how tortured by curiosity.

But Made sometimes couldn't contain herself, if she had something on her mind. She got up off the bed and rearranged the blanket.

“Ah, well now! We already know that ourselves. That's what people are talking about now. No sooner has one gone than another runs in to tell us. They're not minding their own business, only other people's.”

“My dears, no, no!” Mrs. Skrastiņa waved her hand grandly. “What business would I have to mind? But other people are saying he's found half a million. A Russian gentleman was robbed, and this man found it...”

“D-dammit!” Sveilis muttered into his beard.

Made smirked drily. And in this laughter, from contempt and a notion of pleasure, if you listened carefully you could also hear annoyance that she knew no more than these curious onlookers.

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“Oh, well now! What haven’t we heard... Whoever has eyes will find something to see. But somebody might trip over and fall and then they wouldn’t see anything.”

Mrs. Skrastiņa spoke about this and that, but soon she realized that the Sveilis family knew nothing. And from that point her flood of talk abruptly slackened off. Driven by curiosity, and barely taking her leave, she hurried away.

But there was no peace for the Sveilis family. Now they started coming one after another – even in twos and threes. They reported and they enquired. A little group of unemployed people was also starting to gather by the door on the other side of the street. They had no time to cook dinner, or warm the water for the washing.

And the stories these people could tell! He’d found half a million. A big win had fallen to him. He’d won a bet. He’d been playing cards. He’d killed a trader and robbed him. A three-rouble tip to a boy for bringing him beer. He’d stuck hundred-rouble notes into the young ladies’ stockings. He’d thrown handfuls of silver coins in cash out the window. Sveilis grew ever greyer and gloomier, and his nose grew ever redder. Made grew ever more nervous and fidgety; she could no longer work, nor sit in peace. She got up from the bed, went to the door and with eager eyes looked at the crowd that was timidly thronging and wandering on the other side of the street. And ever higher rose her heaving, formerly barely noticeable breast. Mother, seizing on whatever she could, swathed in her apron, and suppressing her sighs, glanced sidelong at her husband, then at her daughter.

As he ironed, listening to the visitors’ talk and battling with his own bad thoughts, Sveilis so forgot himself that he singed the back of Juškans’ jacket. But then he pulled himself together and got away from his unacceptable absent-mindedness. He brushed it all as he should, folded

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it and sewed it into a black carrying cloth. He changed into his galoshes, put on a shirt-front without a cravat, put on a coat and carried the suit off to Juškans. It was now half past two.

The crowd of people on the other side of the street fell silent and parted ways as Sveilis came out. There wasn't much for him to hear anyway; the wind was rustling wildly and rattling everything he might catch. And there was plenty of catching and rattling: the wooden house-shutters, the open and convulsing doors, the dislodged pieces of tin on the roofs, the signs by the letter-boxes hanging on the door-posts of the little shops, the lasts, the buckets of chains, the piles of wool, the strings of pretzels. It was no longer raining so much at all, but the stones on the street were floating in a sea of mud.

In the crowd Sveilis also noticed a few of the familiar mischievous boys that he sometimes could not avoid. Pulling at their chins and with quavering voice, they were always there to meet him and accompany him, calling out in reedy tones. Instinctively protecting himself as if from unavoidable blows, he tucked his head deep into his coat collar and nimbly crossed over the street. But to his amazement, this time he didn't hear any rude mimicking calls. One of them coughed in embarrassment, one of them even raised his hat to him. Sveilis had such a strange feeling that he wanted to go back to his room. But he couldn't. Juškans was waiting for his suit.

Staggering from the beer shop at that moment were three farmers – two oldish ones, bearded, and one still a mere boy. At the inner door Mrs. Juškana was visible. The farmers were laughing as they reeled along, but Mrs. Juškana, red as a beetroot, was gesticulating with her arms and berating them.

“Just you – Oh, the shame of it!” she complained, behind Sveilis as he entered the tavern. “The crooks! I would have had a drink with them. Doubles all round! A quarter of it for myself... Did I go and sit down? When you invited me! The cheats! Three hours hanging around, and

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the total bill was only two roubles sixty. Just boozing and sucking on a herring. The only thing is, the abuse the crockery.” From the little table by the wall she picked up a plate loaded with herring heads and three knives, took them behind the counter and threw them onto the shelf with a clatter. She was still looking out the window with annoyance at the departing men. “You asked me to come yourselves! They’ve all got mouths like nose-bags. The milk-boy himself. Pinching and pawing – oh yes. But when it comes to paying...” She shook her fist at the vanishing men and let out a heavy sigh of anger.

“Mr. Juškans not at home?” inquired Sveilis in a strange voice.

Mrs. Juškana fell back with a puff onto a bench. The floor was sagging.

“Home! Where would that be! Wherever he took off to this morning, there he stayed.” She was hunting for her handkerchief, but, not finding it, wiped away the sweat with her apron. “He’s drinking with that son of yours. Now he’ll squander away all the money again. He goes mad once he starts. He’ll start on those young ladies... What can you know about those old blokes. He’ll fritter away his last kopeck.” She didn’t want to fume any longer, because she was running out of breath, but she couldn’t restrain herself. She got to her feet, supporting herself on the edge of the counter. “All day, since he went in the morning. Left me here to slave over those Žuļiks. If I’d known, I’d never have let him.” And suddenly she turned on Sveilis, as if he were to blame. “With that son of yours – that vagabond! A big banker now! I tell you, once they get together to drink, they’ll fall down together. Millionaire! You’ve got to laugh. I tell you, the police ought to be told, let them take him and search him. Where would a starveling like him start squandering money all at once? Nobody gets pennies from heaven just like that. I tell you, if he hasn’t been killing and robbing, he’s had his fingers in someone’s coffers. That’s as clear as day!”

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Sveilis shrugged his shoulders hard.

“I don’t know. I only listen to what others... I’ve brought the suit for Mr. Juškans here.” He put the parcel on the counter and untied his black scarf.

Mrs. Juškana took the parts of the suit and inspected each of them carefully in turn. She hung it up on a nail driven into a shelf above the packet of keys and looked over it once again, against the light. She studied it, puffing.

“There’s a stain here, again.” She pointed with her finger and looked angrily at Sveilis. “It’s the same with you every time.”

“That’s nothing,” Sveilis defended himself. “A little more water got splashed on it.”

“It may be nothing to you,” exclaimed Mrs. Juškana, “but we have to pay for it. Right at the front! Can anyone wear a garment like that! And the chalk-white here still hasn’t been wiped off!” She pulled the coat down from the nail and threw it on a chair. She inspected the vest and trousers. She dug her finger into the trouser-buttons. “What buttons are these! How always using the roughest and cheapest materials! If you don’t want to do it, or can’t, then say. There’s no shortage of tailors – oh, spare me! On every corner...”

Sveilis bit his lip so that his quivering grey beard wouldn’t be noticed. It was the same every time. But he just couldn’t get used to it. If she’d also talked about what there was... That there was too little horsehair material, that there were patches of flax on the collars... But she didn’t know that. Yet she sensed that not everything was right. So she would search for what wasn’t even there. Sveilis was deeply offended, insulted and upset. He always got angry as soon as he looked at the fat tavern-keeper. But he couldn’t say anything: Juškans was the only one that still stayed loyal to him. No matter how the payment went.

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“It’s nothing, it’s nothing,” he muttered quietly.

But now the door opened and Juškans himself came in. A stocky middle-aged man, on whose white, pock-marked, smiling face not a bristle could be found.

Heavily drunk, he swayed in, grinning with his white teeth and small kindly eyes. He was pleasantly surprised and didn’t even sense his wife’s flashes of anger.

“Hello, master!” He grasped Sveilis’ hand heartily, and having shaken it, didn’t let it go. He put his other heavy hand on his shoulder and looked hard into his shy, blinking eyes. “Going out for once, eh?” He shook Sveilis so powerfully that his twisted black scarf was stuffed down past his pocket and he was little short of losing his footing. Sveilis smiled unwillingly but conciliatorily and looked at the tavern-keeper’s wife. She in turn threw all the parts of the suit in a heap on the bench.

“Going out!” she grumbled. “You! If only you would go right away. You don’t care about your home. Better take a look at what this tailor here has done. He might at least have wiped away the chalk marks! What kind of trouser buttons are these!”

Quietly, but unceasingly chuckling, Juškans lowered himself onto the nearest bench. You could see that today he had spent a long time chuckling like that, wearing him out, but his mouth was convulsed into a permanent rictus of a smile.

“Trouser-buttons, oh mama!” He waved his hand a long time and couldn’t hold back a little automatic chuckle. His voice was affected by that and by drink more than usual. It was as if a metallic undertone were buzzing along with his every word. “Things are different now! Now begins another life!” Throwing his head back, for a while he took a special pleasure in staring at his wife; then he turned to Sveilis. “Do you know what, old chap? No, don’t blink at me, come here!” He motioned him closer with his hand. “A millionaire, believe it or not! Ah, you

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think he isn't? But I tell you... You're thinking: August. Au-gusts. Well, go on, have a look. His pockets are full – he dips his hand in, it comes out full. Handfuls of coins out the window for the Jews... a three-rouble tip to a boy for a crate of beer. Buffets for the young ladies." He burst out laughing and wouldn't stop. "I can light a cigar with a hundred-rouble note, he says."

"Beast!" Mrs. Juškana angrily shrugged her shoulders. "You're dead drunk."

"Not at all!" replied Juškans. "I've had a drink – well, sure. But not like that... But how can he... Pockets full!"

"Well, there'll be a job for the police to sort out," declared Mrs. Juškana, but it was obvious that even she was starting to take an interest in this inexplicable wealth. She looked out the window, and at the clock.

Sveilis let out a cough.

"We don't know anything, we only listen to... But so, then, the bosses are letting him fool around there?"

Juškans dismissed this with a wave.

"Bosses are there too. What does he care about them? He's a boss himself now! He can bathe in beer and wine. I just slipped away on the quiet. 'Mate' – he calls me 'mate' – 'Juškans, you're not going anywhere. You're coming with me to Riga. Why would you hang around in a dingy beer-cellar? I've got a house and a Grade Two hotel – you'll be standing behind the buffet! There you won't have to scuffle with those peasant nobodies! You'll have a finer clientele!"

"What are you raving about?" objected Mrs. Juškana, but still she moved in a little closer.

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“Well, like I tell you! The deal’s as good as done! When I’ve got fifty roubles a month - plus percentages – why would I hang around here?”

Sveilis couldn’t hold back much longer.

“Perhaps I could... er, that money, those ten roubles for the suit?”

“What a pittance! Ten roubles!” Juškans suddenly appeared terribly drunk. “Ten roubles is nothing – where a million is stretching out. I spit on ten roubles. If I have fifty roubles – plus percentages – why would I hang around here?” And suddenly he started to drone, beating time with his foot. “Dress your legs, nightingale, we’re driving the cows to pasture...”

Sveilis was standing in deep perplexity. He needed the money. And yet it seemed strange, inappropriate and impolite to impose for the sake of ten roubles on a man who had just stared millions in the face. As if a strange lustre – the lustre of gold – was still lighting up his pale, pock-marked face. It made this man, so familiar, seem more strange, more distant... unreachable and imperturbable. He felt an unwelcome reverence for him – perhaps a fear. Perhaps also a secret annoyance, a little envy, a little unhealthy desire. No – for the sake of ten roubles he couldn’t approach one who had just looked on a million.

Sveilis went out.

Outside the autumn wind again seized him with clammy, cold hands. It tore his coat open and groped his skin with its hard fingers. A blanket of clouds, broken in pieces, swathed itself over the roofs; here and there a little patch of clear sky shone through. Behind the houses the invisible evening sun cast a red glow through every chink. After the dark day it struck the eyes brightly and dazzlingly. And it seemed strange to Sveilis that there, indoors, he had been stupefied by that insignificant, deceptive lustre. He grew angry at his own cowardice. He

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wanted to turn back, demand stoutly that he be paid what was owing. But his legs themselves just kept on heading away for home.

There was no longer a crowd of people opposite his door. As Sveilis arrived, his wife came away from the window and, on opening the door, he noticed she was confused, fussing around an empty wash-tub without purpose. She too was always watching and waiting! Sveilis bit his lip and let his gaze roam around the room. Made wasn't there. He didn't have time to say anything before his wife broke in.

“You brought it?” But she could probably already see that he hadn't brought anything. “But I told you: two pounds of porridge oats, salt, and a pound of herrings. I told you, when you get it from Juškans – but you always forget!”

His wife was speaking unusually angrily. And there was no reason: she could have gone there again – far from here! Yet Sveilis did understand. And on no account did he want to say that he had not been paid by Juškans, that he'd been afraid and didn't dare go back. He turned around and went back out again.

He had to walk straight, but some way off he thought he noticed Made and turned off into a side alley. He didn't have to escape, but still he didn't want to meet her. Something had come between the members of the family, something he had to keep to himself. Sveilis walked with big strides.

He had no particular goal. It was a wonder even to himself when he turned into Vidus street. But it was no surprise at all that the lamps were burning so early, when it was still quite light, the street-lamp had already been lit opposite the hotel, and, by turning a handle, it was being put back on its post. The lamp shone with an oddly feeble light against the bright red evening

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sky. It was a joke to turn on this frail niggardly little light, as if to show the weakness of men's handiwork against the might of nature. But to Sveilis this was no joke, nothing strange.

Some people were still standing on the street opposite the hotel door. Sveilis noticed them, but he didn't observe them. Whether anyone was still on the roadway, he didn't look. But he saw immediately that the shutters were closed all around the lower floor, while the upper windows had their curtains drawn. And the lamplight glowed feebly through them. And again it seemed strange to him that he wasn't going where he was supposed to – back to Juškans – but where he shouldn't go, where he didn't want to go.

For the first time Sveilis went into the hotel. It must have been from what he had been told that he recalled the layout. Right behind the door he started climbing up the stairs. Below, somewhere off to one side, a woman's voice was humming a light, skipping melody. That must have been the buffet. He didn't need to go there. He climbed up the creaking wooden steps, on which burned a small kerosene lamp. The firelight stretched out; along the end of a cylinder smoke was rising outside. Sveilis turned the wick down and kept on climbing.

Upstairs, along a corridor, all the doors were open. As far as he could see, there was light in every room. The loud noise of a tavern, but he couldn't work out which room it was actually coming from. The whole corridor was full of a strange swirling and rustling. For a moment it died down, and then again, louder than before, began a wave of talking, laughter, stamping feet and clattering crockery.

A young man in a long, worn, round-cornered coat darted out of one room, wanting to get to another. Having noticed Sveilis, he stopped, made to go into the room, but in the end came forward. He came up and looked insolently at the strange newcomer.

“What do you want?” he demanded curtly.

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But Sveilis himself didn't really know that. He was only looking past him at the lighted open doors.

“Nothing. I just came anyway.”

“There's nothing for you here. Gentlemen here...” He nodded his head toward the bright door and waved his hand downwards. “Buffet's downstairs.”

But Sveilis shook his head. He hadn't come here to drink. He was only looking at the doors and listening. The young man moved menacingly closer.

“If you don't want anything, then... Gentlemen here.”

But just at that moment Skrastiņš came out of the first door. Submissively, but smiling inexpressibly happily, bent over, dividing his distinguished beard into two, on spotting Sveilis he rushed straight up to him.

“Ah, hello, Pop!” With both hands he pressed Sveilis' hand. “This is nice! But why so late? We've been here since the morning.” And he turned his face, beaming with huge pleasure, back towards the open doors. “I say to your August: ‘Mate’” – he looked at the frock-coated lad to see if he was listening to what he had said to the rich man – “‘Mate’, I say to August: ‘send for your old Pop. Pop should be here anyway, otherwise there won't be any music.’ Could you, old chap, ever have imagined this? No-one could! If you'd ever dreamt it, you'd have spat and said: rubbish, no more than that! But now let anyone come and look and say it's rubbish... Come on, old chap!”

As if escorting a fine lady, he led Sveilis by the hand to the first open door. Though he had come here himself, now he stiffened up and was unwilling. Suddenly he was overcome by

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shyness. He was actually afraid of his son, of this rich man, to whom all these strangers were now being so friendly and cheerful.

“Come on, old chap!” Skrastiņš, with a laugh, slapped him on the shoulder with his free hand. “I say, Pop has to be here, otherwise the music can’t get going!”

In the doorway, a white light from the prisms surrounding the ceiling lamps struck Sveilis in the eyes, dazzling him. And his ears were assaulted by the suddenly released twanging and drumbeats of the music. He stayed on the spot, with slightly folded arms, raised chin, open mouth and smarting eyes, misted with sweat on his glasses.

But even in that single moment he noticed a lot. The semi-circular table, covered with blankets reaching down to the floor, loaded with bottles, glasses, plates, eating utensils, littered with cigarette-packets and corks, strewn with ash, spattered with yellow and brown stains. The floor, right up to the door, was strewn, spattered, along the walls and in the corners, baskets and crates of empty bottles, upright and upended – simple beer-bottles and ones with labels and red and white pasted tops. Hanging on the stove door was a hat with a cockade. On the huddle of chairs and the ripped leather sofa were people in all sorts of get-up and all sorts of poses. Ruddy, laughing, strange and familiar faces. Smouldering cigars and cigarettes. Glasses raised, standing and leaning over.

Sveilis’ gaze ran superficially over everything – it appeared and merged together. But he dwelled longer on August. He was sitting at the far end of the table with his face right opposite the door. And from his arms extended on the table, from his smiling face, his head thrown back, from the servile attitudes of other people – it was instantly obvious from everything that he was the chief and primary person here. But Sveilis didn’t linger to look longer. Right next to him the golden epaulettes flashed in his eyes, a yellow strap diagonally across a chest glittered

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ominously – and suddenly with his misted glasses, as he saw only a pallid confused mass and heard a nasty discord of noise, he started to go back downstairs.

He couldn't quite grasp whether anyone was still holding or calling him. With all his might he was rushing away. He only recovered himself when, downstairs, he opened the oaken outer door and a sharp gust of wind burst onto his face through a crack. Only then did he notice that his back was damp with sweat, that his heart was thumping wildly with fear. What had he been seeking here? What had he got himself into? He raced outside at a run and was still looking back timidly when the door slammed heavily behind him.

The gang of familiar boys was standing on the corner. Sveilis instinctively drew his neck into his coat collar: straight away there would resound the well-known mocking reedy screams. For fifteen years these imps had been pursuing him. One generation grew into men, but another took their place and continued. Straight away they would be calling: Svei-lee! But no: the boys drew aside. And none of them scoffed in mockery.

In deep confusion Sveilis walked along the road. He went on, turned around – turned and walked and turned again, and came to his senses only when he had gone up to two pine-trees by the roadside, by the last house in the town. He shook himself, turned around and came back. But he was soon lost again in long, hard, confused thought.

The sun had already gone down, and in the large clear pale bluish patches of sky along the declining edges of the clouds a few stars were already twinkling when Sveilis arrived home.

Roberts was already home from school. He was sitting in his place by the window, rapidly thumbing through a book. Sveilis immediately realized that he also knew. Made was sitting on the other side of the table, looking through the window into the yard, with arms folded in her lap and clenched lips. Mother was occupied with something at the end of the bed. The

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unthinkable thought was pressing ever more heavily on Sveilis. He was angry with everyone, but didn't say anything to any of them. He took off his coat and threw it aside. He lay heavily on the bed – placing his hands behind his head as usual, and sniffing. His anger was growing.

An unpleasant, unbearable silence. The old clock was slowly, slowly ticking, whirring for eternally long intervals and then striking quickly with a groan. Mother gradually let out a sigh, and she, masking it, coughed and sniffled. Sveilis' anger was growing.

“D-dammit! What are you sniffing about there?” he finally exclaimed.

Mother didn't reply. But Roberts slammed the book shut and got up.

“Fairy-tales!” He gestured nervously with his hands. The features of his gaunt face were constantly changing. Red blotches were burning on his cheeks. “A thousand! Someone pulled a ten-rouble note out of his pockets and is now spending it on booze.”

“Robert, how can you –“ Mother broke in timorously. But Made tightened her lips spitefully.

“Speak! What do you know about such things, you idiot boy?”

“Well, you're going to see some things –“

“It isn't good –“ Father finally spoke up. “I was there, I saw... Like beasts, not like people. All the walls piled high with bottles. Handfuls of money scattered there.”

“Well, what about himself?” Curiosity was burning in Made's voice.

“Himself – he sits and drinks, with the others. Half the town was there – the fine ones and the rough ones. Juškans and Skrastiņš too.”

“Them too? Oh, and musicians there too!” Made sneered grimly.

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“I thought –“ Sveilis was looking for a word. “We should let the police know. But everyone there – everyone at the same table –“

Robert could not calm down.

“I won’t stay here! I can’t go to school any more. Everyone pesters and questions me. On the street they run behind me. What do I know! In recess a big gang from school ran off to have a look. Everyone was kept back after school. The inspector asked me – what I know! I can’t stand it any more!”

“Don’t care about them!” Made interjected bitterly. “Envy – that’s why they’re asking. I don’t care. I spit on them.”

The door was pushed and burst open with a noise, slamming against the wall. Out on the pavement a man was bent over, lifting something. He immediately straightened up and came inside.

It was the boy from the hotel. In one hand he carried a big basket loaded with bottles, in the other a heavyish parcel of grey paper. He put the basket down on the end of the table, the parcel on the floor. He had nothing to say, but Sveilis recognized straight away that this was the man with the long round-cornered coat.

The door stayed open. Through a gust of wind coming in, one could clearly hear a characteristic noise. But immediately footsteps were also heard, and, buttoning himself up and taking uncertain steps, August came in.

The carrier went toward him. And as he approached, August dug two fingers into his vest pocket, withdrew them and reached out to the carrier.

“Take it and get going!” And he let out a long hiccup.

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The servant, bowing low, thanked him and closed the door as he left. August came to the table.

When his foot hit the basket, he bent down, seeming to want to lift something out of it. But he recovered himself and straightened up again. He remembered that he was supposed to give greetings. Made was closest; she was the first to receive his hand. Robert stood by the doorpost, near the window, half-way out. He took a step toward it.

“How’s it going, student?” August laughed, with a firm grip on his delicate, gaunt hand, which he forcefully withdrew. But then he saw Father sitting on the bed and went up to him. “Well hello, old chap!” And he shook the tailor’s hard hand with special force. Mother was behind him; he didn’t notice her, and later forgot to greet her. She carried a chair, wiping it with her apron.

“Sit down, son!” And she withdrew again, bending over the stove.

August sat down. With his hands on the crook of his stick, he threw his head back and, smiling for a moment, looked through his misty eyes at the little lamp with its white shade, and a notch cut out of its lower edge. He turned and passed his superficial drinker’s gaze around the room. Three beds with striped homespun blankets and straw-filled pillow-cases. By the stove, the tub, and alongside on the floor, a pile of washing, from which a dirty shirt-sleeve poked out. He turned and shook his head.

Made hadn’t taken her eyes off her brother the whole time.

A slender, fine figure. A round head, a hard hat, wearing a new, modern checked cloth coat with a slim outer collar. Collars like this were still seen only on the fashion pages. And where the coat opened out, one could see a black and white spotted animal-skin stitched-in lining – a fine black jacket and a shiny white stippled vest, across the chest of which stretched a broad golden watch-chain. The overshirt was crumpled, coming out in places, while the red-striped

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pinheads on his cravat glittered like a broken piece of a rainbow. The black cane was emblazoned with three monograms; his soft white hands rested flabbily on its engraved silver handle. From his face you could barely make this man out as a Sveilis. If you took a good look, you could discern the inborn characteristic features, but the long bright blond whiskers, the particular fattened-up stoutness and roundness, and the whiteness, and ruddiness of the head brought on by an over-filled belly and alcohol, made him oddly alien, and weirdly respectable. The strong stench of alcohol was strangely mixed with the fine scent of liberally applied perfume. And gradually Made's eyes were lit up like the pinheads on his cravat, like the stone in her brother's white signet ring.

August placed his cane on his knee. He threw back his head and hat.

“Well, what are we sitting here for! This meeting calls for a celebration.” From long drinking his voice a little croaky, his tongue a little slurred. With his full lips he spoke roundly and only just got the words out. He tried to untie the parcel, but couldn't find the knot, only turning it from one side to the other.

“Here are some scissors!” Made rushed to his aid and obligingly cut through the string.

“Thank you!” August bowed gallantly with a smile. With his elbow he freed up a little of the table-end. Made again rushed to his aid and cleared everything away to the other end: Robert's books, the rags of street clothes and buckram, the set-square and the scissors, the tape-measure and the pot of oil, the spindle of yarn, the wax, the pieces of soap and chalk, the paper containing the buttons, Father's hat. And then she looked at what her brother placed on the table.

Boxes of chocolates and sweets – angular and round, thin and really thick, tins of sardines, mackerel and lampreys, a red wooden box of caviar, cuts of smoked salmon and eel, various

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packets of cheese, a loaf of sourdough bread, a basket of apple-cakes, a box of cigars with a glass lid. He undid and unwrapped them and carelessly tossed one after the other. His clumsy drunken fingers ripped and tore. The whole end of the table was loaded up with papers and various fragrant edible substances.

Surprised and confused, the wide-eyed Sveilis family surveyed the unseen and unexpected marvels. Mother didn't dare come closer; from right there in the middle of the room, from her chair she gazed at them and strove to hold back her tears. She didn't understand herself why they were pressing so irresistibly on her eyes. Father, smacking his lips, swallowed hard. Robert's hands were visibly shaking. Only Made was recovering her wits and already assisting her brother.

August smiled at the confusion he had caused. He understood their feelings, and on his face a ruddiness of great and undisguised pleasure overcame his paleness. Every new pack was a further testimony for him. Usually he displayed annoyance and artificial indignation.

“Wretched little town – you can't get anything!” A wheel of cheese rolled around and would have fallen if Made hadn't caught it. “So this is cheese? Devil knows what's mixed into it. Eat it. You can't get anything better.” He handed the basket of apple-cakes to Made and then to Mother. Made took one and bit into it greedily; Mother bit into a little corner of hers and then, holding it delicately in her fingertips, sat down on the bed.

Bending down, August unpacked the basket of bottles. He lifted them out in twos and threes, inspected them against the lamp and disdainfully threw them back.

“Been piling up,” he grumbled. Finally, however, he selected one: a low, fat-bellied bottle with a long neck. “Well, let's try this one.” He started hunting in his pockets for a corkscrew. He

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spat. “Don’t know where I’ve put it... did someone steal it at the hotel?” He put the bottle on the table, to search with both hands, but couldn’t find it. “Don’t you have one?”

“A corkscrew? We don’t.” Made shrugged her shoulders and looked at her mother.

“You don’t! What kind of a life is that? Well, give me those scissors. Let’s have a go with those.”

He took the scissors Made offered him and started to clean the crosswise attached labels and the varnish from the top of the bottle-neck. But when he somehow noticed the cigar-box, he took it, ripped it open and handed one cigar to his father.

“Here, light up!”

Made burst out laughing.

“Don’t you know he doesn’t smoke?”

August dismissed this with a contemptuous wave.

“These are for non-smokers too. They’re quite light. Take it!”

Sveilis mechanically took the light brown cigar with its red paper ring in the middle. August himself took out a silver cigarette case and put it on the table. Again he had a long search for a cigarette-holder and the others looked on with wonder at the massive engraved silver box with its gilded centre. And after that again the yellow amber cigarette-holder with its shiny little metal hoop at the fat end and blue enamelled rose in the middle. And finally also the matchbox in a grey metal indentation, on one side of which was an engraved monogram, and on the other an inlaid picture of Bastejkalns, in Riga. August lit up for himself, but he forgot his father. Fragrant curlicues of smoke rose to the ceiling and gradually filled the room.

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On the table, among the packets and opened waxy papers, stood the bottle with the scissors stuck into its cork. As he smoked, August had momentarily forgotten it. Apparently something deeply pleasing had come into his mind: a secretive smile was visibly spreading across his whole ruddy-pale face. His full lips were moving, as if wanting to say something. But his eyes involuntarily caught Robert's unbelieving, almost hostile gaze. August's face somehow seemed to cloud over.

"Why aren't you eating, student? Take it!" He shifted a little. "Now, a basket of cakes for my brother."

Made licked her fingers and reached over and took another cake. But Robert didn't take any. He had turned to the window, but his eyes were obsessively boring into his brother.

"Thank you. I don't want sweets like that."

August laughed a little forcedly.

"Toothache? You know, student, it's still too early. You've been looking out for a girl?"

Robert blushed and turned back to face him. His hands were nervously wedged behind his leather belt.

"I don't need sweets like that; you'd better throw them out to the Jews on the street – they'll fight to scoop them up. Let Made eat them up. Take them, take them." He pushed the basket on the table over to her side.

"Children!" cried Mother and moved as if wanting to intervene.

"Yes, I like it, and I'll eat!" Made hit back defiantly and ostentatiously picked up one more, though she hadn't eaten even half of the first. "Thanks, brother!" And again she cast a glance at August with deliberate kindness and appreciation. With her white teeth she bit her bottom

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lip and looked steadily at her brother. And her misty, benevolently smiling eyes gradually narrowed and grew more incisive. But she said no more.

Sveilis had got up, to his full height. With his dully shining spectacles, and tightly pursed lips, he slowly but forcefully came over to the table. He carefully put the unlit cigar back in its box and shut the lid. For a moment he looked down on August.

“Tell me – where do you get this from?” His voice was a little musty, but definite and hard. This voice and his father’s whole bearing evidently moved August. He burst out laughing.

“Funny question! Well – from the shop, from the shop right here. Light up – you’ll see it’s not too bad at all.”

But his father didn’t seem to hear him.

“We need to know. Whoever we meet is asking us. Throwing handfuls of money around... fooling around... turning the whole town upside down.” He stretched out his hands, but then shrugged again and bent down close over his son. “Are you mad, or what’s wrong with you?”

“But Dad!” Made intervened angrily. “What are you raving about?”

August dismissed this with a lofty wave.

“Let him ramble on...”

Father simply carried on.

“One person says you’ve killed and robbed, another you’ve won the lottery. They’re all asking us. We don’t know anything.”

“And why do you have to know?” August retorted irritably. “Let everyone find out for himself. I have money, and I can do this. Who can deny me that? Who – can – deny – me- that?” He

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slammed his fist hard on his knee, so that his cane with its monograms and silver top fell clattering to the floor. And then he waved his slender hand over the table. “Don’t you have something to eat? Don’t you have something to drink? Don’t worry: if it runs out, we’ll get more!” Again he moved to take hold of a bottle.

“Not a crumb, not a drop, will I touch,” continued his father, agitated. “I – I don’t know where and for what money – Maybe it’s stolen. Maybe somebody’s blood is stuck to it. Don’t eat!” He tore the cake from Made’s hand and threw it on the table.

August burst into hoarse laughter. But the laughter soon stopped. Along with all the drinking he was noticeably deeply upset. He pulled himself together and angrily turned his back on his father.

“It’s not worth it with fools. He thinks that everyone who has his pockets full of money has worked for it with his own hands! With a needle and an iron! You can darn and sew for seven hundred years and still end up with not a shred to wear, like you started.” He let his intoxicated gaze rove around the room. “Is this a life? Is this it, in this room? A pigsty, not a human home. In Riga I’ll have six rooms, and a hotel opposite, on the corner. I’m not a dog, I don’t want to leave my kith and kin here.”

“We’re not going anywhere!” shouted his father defiantly. “We’ve managed before, we’re going to manage, and we don’t need anything from you. Nothing! Look out for yourself: this isn’t your property. Don’t kid yourself – there’s no way this can belong to you.”

August sighed regretfully. But in this hypocritical sigh, in his loud forced laughter – behind all his bravado lay something timid and sullenly shameful. When he proudly puffed his chest, his face turned aside. And when he cocked his head challengingly, the corners of his eyes, slightly quivering, seemed to want to sink to the floor. Every movement, every feature, seemed to be

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held by someone from within, and turned away. In every gesture one could perceive something like a deliberate forcing, an unwilling and disguised effort. And that just because what was disguised could be sensed by anyone and, in moments, seen as well. Made, without taking her eyes away, looked at her wealthy brother. Well, let her speak then, let her say it – let her shut everyone’s mouth with one word.

But this single direct word seemed to be difficult for him to get past his lips. He started off far away, in a roundabout way.

“Where is my property and where is someone else’s? Not everyone can ever have it, only those who know how. He who is smarter will live well. In the end there’s only one handful of gold, and it goes from hand to hand. If anyone doesn’t want to let go of it, he gets knocked down and it gets scattered on the ground. So it’s better for him to scatter it himself, and not wait for it to be taken by force.”

“Mad!” Father interrupted and, probably out of real fear, moved backwards. What have you got to snatch and scatter?”

August laughed again.

“I have! You only have to know how. You don’t have to rob, or steal, or find it in the ground. Grab it from those who don’t need it, and live. Live it up, so the whole world spins around you! Eat!” He shoved the boxes of sweets and chocolates over to Made. “If you fancy it, eat. If it runs out, we’ll buy some more. It’s not stolen, robbed, or found in the ground.” He was silent for a moment, as if thinking it over. He resumed more slowly and quietly, in a different voice. “She was never really healthy, our landlady.” With a sudden drunken laugh he interrupted himself. “Sometimes, yes, but more often she was only in bed being lifted and fed. This summer she went abroad. For the whole summer, she said, but after Midsummer she was back already.

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I can't manage without you, August. You're like a son to me." He was about to laugh again, but controlled himself in time. "She hardly ever got up again. And I always had to be there for her. Her daughters, it wouldn't occur to them to do anything. One of them had a bobby-pin stuck into her cheek – that's how crazy she was at the end. I had to lift her, I had to warm her pillow, I had to sit with her. Torture! We thought she was having one of her whims again. But then all at once, by telegram, three doctors from Vilnius. Day and night, they wouldn't go away. Now we saw it was no joke any more. And on the second day they called us all in. She lay there, not recognizing anyone any more, just mumbling a little with her mouth. This is for you, this is for you, and for you, August, this little packet, in the left-hand drawer of the desk... and a ring. You take me off to the graveyard, don't let the others near. And that same evening, that was the end." His mouth was again forming a laugh, but he realized that laughter wouldn't be appropriate, and only shook his head rapidly, so that his round hat slid over one ear. He threw one leg over the other and leaned back in the chair. "For a month and a half I lived in Riga. A quick hand doesn't catch anything. But that hotel is a good place, you only have to know how to act. The apartment is not far away there. Six rooms – enough for everyone. So! Come on now, old chap!" He caught his father by the coat-tail and pulled him closer to the table.

Made's face was beaming with pleasure and pride.

"Well, come on!" she in turn encouraged her father. She then moved closer to her brother. "So that's fine. So you don't think... If you need people there – we can all help. It's not exactly a living here."

August had thrown his head right back. The hat sank right over his eyes. He laughed heartily, and a pungent smell of alcohol and tobacco flowed from his mouth.

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“Oh, might I need your help? Well, how can you help me? You, tailor, what can you do, for example?” He shook his father by the coat-tail. “Well now, I might open a first-class tailor’s shop – then you can supervise it. Ready-to-wear men’s and women’s fashions... and toilet requisites” – with his other hand he took Made by the sleeve of her jacket. “Then you can sit at the till.” Gradually he had become more serious and was no longer mocking. He let go of his father and sister, and straightened his hat. “A café and pastry-shop too... modern equipment, waitresses in uniform, a women’s orchestra... lunchtime and evening concerts. Café Tirol, Café Mexico. Or a men’s and women’s hairdresser with all the latest stylings.”

Made gently put her hand on his shoulder.

“No, brother, the pastry-shop’s better – or the fashion shop.”

“Or a sprat-stall at the Daugava market,” Robert interjected. Made and August look at him together. On his face ridicule struggled with disbelief, curiosity with temptation.

August got up.

“You, boy, don’t fool around. If I want, I can carry you off to Riga and put you in a high school or somewhere. You understand. Wherever you want. But keep control of that big mouth. So, why don’t you eat the cakes when I give them? Eat! Do you think I’m running short, that I don’t have money?”

Ceremoniously and grandly he dipped his hand under his coat, felt around for something there and buttoned up, pulled a new yellow shiny wallet out and tossed it on the table. It thumped heavily and stickily.

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“Is this money or not?” He looked derisively at Robert, but he looked confusedly at the wallet and was unable to say anything in reply. The effect had completely succeeded. This enthused August even more. He dug his hand into his trouser pocket and pulled out a handful.

“Is this money or not?” With the practised manner of a handler of money he slapped a full handful on a free patch of the table. It clattered and clinked, and from this strange yet quite familiar sound a shudder of pleasure and fear ran through the flesh of everyone present in the room.

When his chubby, soft white hand emerged, a considerable little pile of money remained on the worn deal table. One paper three-rouble note and a couple of silver coins. The rest were golden tens and fives.

The little lamp with its torn shade seemed to be ashamed and went out. The whole room seemed to become crepuscular, all the worn-out faded objects shrank in their places and huddled to the wall in the dusk. Practically nothing was visible, palpable and perceptible as it had been. There remained only the yellow metal, radiating its mysterious glow, on the dilapidated board. Not a breath was heard, not an eye flashed. Only the gold radiated its yellow light in the silent, dim room.

August grinned quietly. But even his grin was not habitually flippant or boastful. Even in this you could sense a certain solemnity, a certain reverence for gold, which you could wrap in rags, and knead with dirty fingers, and throw on the ground, but which was and remained the ruler of the world.

The piece of paper money and the silver coins were not worthy beside it. They lessened the brilliance of the real metal and even seemed to lose some of their value. With careless fingers August took it and stuffed it in his vest pocket. In stuffing it, a silver coin slid out and, whirling

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and bouncing, clinking and humming, rolled away across the floor. Like a wondrous straying bee, it fluttered across the dirty room and came to rest somewhere by the door.

Mother involuntarily let out a loud gasp – and the room came back to life. They all stirred, looking at each other. Robert didn't want to look, but he couldn't take his eyes off the gold. Father rubbed at his glasses and couldn't get them clear. August stuffed his wallet back in his pocket.

At that moment at the outer door someone started kicking their feet and timidly coughing. The door was opened carefully, and in it was framed a policeman's uniform.

Made stirred suddenly. The abrupt ominous sight struck her like a heavy blow. With both hands she grabbed hold of the edge of the table and stared wide-eyed at the newcomer. Her face became paler; her lips were quite white.

But there was no reason at all to worry. The policeman stayed by the door and raised his hand to his cap. His yellow teeth shone through his drooping whiskers.

“Begging your pardon – but the master said for you to come.”

“Who?” The rich man leaned back proudly in his chair. “Am I supposed to go?”

“Yes – he asked for you to come. Says he has some business.”

“Ah, he has some business, does he?” August laughed loudly. “I know his business. Well, tell him I'll be there right away.”

“Yes – but he said to come right away.”

“Go when you're told!” yelled August, striking his leg. With all the subservience in the policeman's voice and in all his behaviour one could observe a certain familiarity, at times

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even a slight mockery, and this offended August somewhat. But then – his relatives had to witness that a policeman like that was a mere nothing to him.

When the outer door was shut again, Made let out a deep breath.

“Oh, I got such a fright!”

August rose to his feet. He couldn't quite stand up properly, but he let his chest out proudly and laughed jeeringly.

“What – a little man like that? What is there to be afraid of? For ten kopecks he'll dance.” He went over and slapped Robert on the shoulder, half-amiably, half-mockingly. “Well, how are you getting on at Gymnasium – or Realschule, or whatever you want to call it? Oh, what thick books you have!” He picked up one and disdainfully threw it back on the table. “The boy has to study, there's nothing for him there.”

And without saying goodbye, without looking at any of them, he went out the door. Slowly, with a heavy creak the door opened, and the chilly air steamed into the room from outside. Mother quietly sneaked over to close it.

For quite a while nobody said a word. Their experiences just now had been too strange. Their impressions had been too various and difficult to ease or disperse them with lightly cast words.

But the wind was now roaring round the corners and rattling the shutters. The children upstairs were brawling, and flakes of lime were pouring down. It seemed all to have been seen in a dream or heard in a fairy-tale. Yet it had to be believed: the basketful of bottles, the table groaning with never-seen fragrant sweetmeats, square and round, green and gilded and bright floral boxes. In the middle, the bottle with the scissors stuck into its cork. And there, on the

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edge – No, it wasn't a dream! These could not be phantoms! Yet this truth seemed more incomprehensible and incredible than any dream or fairy-tale.

With her hands supporting her head, Made stood looking. Looking and thinking. She was thinking and could not work out. How many times had she looked at the merchants' shelves, where all these goods were piled up. And every time, her mouth watered. Involuntarily she looked across the table. Robert: he too was not looking at what was, with smells and colours, unsampled promised tastes, enticing and tempting him. And at other times he would be prepared to fight over a single sweet! Yet today virtually nothing had been eaten! She turned her gaze on her father. Yes, he too was looking elsewhere. She ostentatiously took a bite from the cake she had started on. No, she didn't like it!

Somehow she was overcome with something like annoyance. She put aside the sweet morsel she had bitten and started to clear the table. She wrapped them back in their papers and took them to the cupboard. When everything else was put away, she took the scissors out of the cork and grasped the bottle by its neck.

“Shall I put this away too?” Her voice sounded sharp, almost angry.

Her father waved this away and got up from the table.

“All of it. Let nothing be seen here. Goodness knows what he brought here. Let him take it himself – we don't need anything.”

“Let the Jews on the street have it, with their vodka,” declared Robert quickly and, turning to the bed, started to undress.

Made placed the bottle back in the basket with the others. She delicately lifted the basket alongside the wall. She was angry with everyone.

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“Big men! Any other time you’d lick your lips – now you don’t need anything! Goodness knows what you’ve got to be so high and mighty about.”

The loops were popping as Robert tore his jacket off.

“You just eat up then. Eat up, drink up, till you’re crawling on all fours. Now you can be happy, like you’ve never been before.”

With clenched fists Made stopped as she passed, a step away from him. It seemed she was about to scratch his eyes out with her nails. For a moment she couldn’t collect her thoughts to say something bad.

“Arrogant beggar!” she finally blurted out.

One of Robert’s arms was caught in his sleeve.

“You – that’s what you are! If you don’t take, you’re not one. But if you cringe and crawl, and catch what’s thrown to you, then you’re a real beggar!” He tore off the last of his clothes, threw himself into bed and, turning to the wall, covered himself up to the neck.

“Children! What kind of language is this?” Mother intervened to calm them down.

Sveilis didn’t like these sharp words either. But his own heart was so full, his head so confused, that he didn’t know what to say. Made, too, came to her senses and saw that this clash wasn’t appropriate, that it was spoiling what had been a beautiful moment and suddenly upsetting the prospect of a brilliant future. Collecting herself, she wiped the corner of the table with the corner of her apron. She carefully spread the pile of gold around. She even strove not to look at it. She took a couple of steps back, but still turned back. With its mysterious power the yellow metal was drawing her in.

“So are we leaving that here?” She moved to scoop the money across the table into her hand.

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“Don’t you touch that!” screamed Sveilis. “It’s not ours! And what isn’t ours we don’t need. Let other people’s property not touch our fingers.”

“You’re just plain mad!” Made ostentatiously turned to her bed. “You’ve been waiting all this time – no help, *no help* – And then when you get it – other people’s property!” She spat in disgust.

For a moment Sveilis couldn’t gather his wits to say anything. His head was full and heavy, and not a single clear thought could be found. He couldn’t take that money – no way! That much he did know. He didn’t want to look, but his eyes kept turning toward the patch of yellow.

“That isn’t honestly gotten money,” he said, as if to himself, more in sadness than in anger.

Made laughed derisively.

“So only as honestly as with a needle and scissors? Only as with a wash-tub?” She recounted what was said. “Well, didn’t you hear: he hasn’t stolen, murdered or robbed anyone. If his landlady has, for good service...”

No-one had an answer to that. Silence reigned in the room for a good while. They were all rapidly undressing and lying down. Robert shifted in his bed.

“We’re not beggars.”

In his dirty, patched linen shirt, flannelette underpants, and bare feet, Sveilis went to extinguish the lamp. On tiptoe, as if no-one should hear, as if someone were hiding and watching attentively in a shadowy corner of the room. Turning a strangely sidelong glance, his eyes fixed on the blackness of the window, so no-one would think he was looking at the money...

He bent over and with a powerful puff blew out the lamp. And at once his heart felt better and lighter. The darkness stifled the repulsive yellow glow at the end of the table, covered the faces

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with their oddly transformed expressions, covered over the whole unbearable, incomprehensible things he had just witnessed and experienced. Now a man was left to himself, with his existence shaped by the long hard years, left to his own thoughts and feelings. Like a wheel that had run in a well-worn groove, he was slipping back into his old rut and could carry on with his usual rhythm.

Going back to bed, Sveilis now put his whole feet on the floor. Softly creaking, his calloused sole adhered to the dirty, musty, chilly floor. But it was no more unpleasant than on other evenings.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, Sveilis put his hands together and said his prayers. He said them more loudly than on other evenings, as if attesting that nothing had changed, that everything was just the same and couldn't be otherwise. Pulled up against the wall, Mother, her lips silently chattering and sighing with satisfaction, prayed along with him. Made and Robert were lying silently in their beds. As they did every evening...

Lying down, Sveilis covered himself up to the neck. At first the blanket seemed unpleasantly cool. But immediately an agreeable warmth, starting from the chest began to flow toward his feet. When he pressed the toes of one foot against the other, he could feel how cold they were. But gradually they too warmed up. As they did every evening...

Sveilis buried his hands deep under the warm blanket, stretched out a little more, adjusted his position and sighed long and comfortably. There is nothing pleasanter in the evening than to stretch out a back that has been bent all day, restore feeling to bones numb from sitting and warm one's frozen feet. It was as if the day had not existed at all – there had never been the tedious work, the difficulties, the worries, the poverty; only the mild, soporific warmth and the cosy pleasure.

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Through the dim glass of the door one could just make out the rosy distant glow of the fluttering street-light. The crosses on the door-frame were only occasionally discernible as grey fleeting shadows. But otherwise the room was full of a thick soft darkness. Dark and silent. Only the clock ticked sleepily. And then a knocking started. A stiff, rough finger fumbled for a long time with the rusted steel latch, raised it with an obstinate squeak and let it fall back. How many knocks there were one wouldn't want to count; ignorance of the time and unfamiliarity with the surroundings were a part of this darkness, unreachable and immovable – now the darkness reigned supreme. The infrequent rattling knocks died away, as they sought in vain a way in. For a long time something like the gradually receding wing-beats of big brown bees could be heard. It sank somewhere near the furthest corner, and again it was silent.

It was silent for a long time, and then the clock struck again. And again the brown bees were swarming and unable to settle together, and died away into the darkness. Outside the wind was whipping, but that made the darkness and silence within the room even greater and more perceptible.

On one side, as the sleepers shifted, came the rustling of bags of straw. And a moment later someone gave out a long and languid sigh. From deeper in the corner came a sleepy yawn.

In the Sveilis' room everyone was asleep.

But gradually the darkness dispersed. It was nothing yet, everything was as before, and yet it was as if something were rippling somewhere. It was as if an inaudible and intangible breath was shifting away the thick soft swathe of darkness. It rippled and remained as before. But then again – As if the window at the end became visible. Maybe it was only a visual trick, maybe the accustomed eye something there that was visible in daylight, maybe these were only remembered visual impressions stored up, nothing actually visible and tangible. But no –

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already one could make out the shadowy crosses of the frame and the pale patches of the panes. And slowly the pallor of the panes stood out ever clearer, and the crosses on the frame were black against them. Now the droplets of dawn were twinkling. Now the oil-can, placed on the window-sill, was glistening dimly.

His face to the window, Robert was lying with open eyes, staring for a long time. And finally he understood: the moon was travelling upwards, over the roofs of the houses.

At first a long pale feeler of pale light passed along the lintel of the window. It nudged the drops of sweat; they took fright and slid down the pane. A ray of mischievous little pieces was driven after them, pricking at them, then withdrew and, meandering around the oil-can, stretched itself out further, but, frightened of the dark, retreated. Yet now there was nothing to be afraid of: now others too, shorter and longer, rushed in the wake of the first. First of all the upper pane became distinct, then the one next to it, then gradually the lower ones also became paler and lighter. First the end of Mother's and Father's bed rose up out of the dark, then Made's pillow also glowed white. Robert looked on in wonder.

The extinguished lamp stood, as if surprised, confused, ashamed, in the middle of the table. At first the stream of moonlight flowed past its further side, diagonally across the table. But now one tributary of it was directed past the near side. Surprised and amazed, the lamp stood palely in the midst of a white, cold, ever-flowing, relentlessly growing light, and could not grasp whether it was its friend or enemy. But Robert gazed for only a short while, as the bright brass fittings were dimly illuminated. He didn't want to, he resisted, but one powerful, irresistible hand was turning his gaze further, to the end of the table.

The moon had not reached that far yet. But gradually the pale white stream moved, and it was obvious that soon it would pass over it. Over it... Did he have to know that! Did he have to

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look! He gritted his teeth and tightly closed his eyes. If he could have a share! He wasn't a beggar at all!

The pale white stream of light gradually moved on. Nothing was yet clearly visible, but slowly the brighter patch at the end of the table revealed itself. The closer the moonlight moved in, the more the darkness rolled away. Now both of them met and merged; one couldn't say which would prevail. But then the patch seemed to give off a rosy glow, appeared to ripple together, and then, one by one, the yellow piles started to stand out. They stood out, then receded again, and slowly became incandescent.

After the first light slumber Made opened her eyes. When she peered closely, she could see the stove and the saucepans, and the iron in the corner. And there on the floor lay the bundle of dirty washing, and one sleeve, like a ghostly broken-off arm, hung out of it. With sudden revulsion, Made threw her head back and froze.

The pile of gold was shining on the table. No, that wasn't money! A heap of burning coals blown in by the wind! Wasn't this like the heap of coals mentioned in fairy-tales, which the expert can grasp as gold by the handful, while the non-expert burns his own old hat and a hole in his coat pocket? Waves of fear and uncontrollable yearning passed through Made's frame. She flinched, clutching her knees in her arms. It became cold under the threadbare blanket; she shivered and clenched her teeth to stop them from chattering.

How could it be freezing – this burning heap of coals! The more it glowed, the colder it became. Below it burned a calm, dark pinkish flame. A little higher arose a reddish-yellow radiance. As it glistened, the white radiance streamed in ripples, overflowing the whole table, took in the pile of tailor's appurtenances, and the whole room was filled with an odd pale brilliance. As if hypnotized, Made stared with wide, unreasoning eyes, and all her previous unbelievable and

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impossible thoughts turned in her brain like a confused whirling flock of birds. She could not keep up with her imagination, she felt the horror of this audacious race, she was giddy... and yet she could not hold back. Forgetting everything, she gave in to this giddiness, she tumbled head over heels, into the unknown, unseen distance, into the whirlwind of reddish-yellow freezing light.

Sveilis coughed cosily, turned his head and remained there.

No, no! Not for a moment had he thought about it. He didn't need that alien money, earned who knows how! He didn't even want to think about it. He didn't have anything, true – but how much did he actually need? Was there a day when he had gone to bed without eating? When a man works and is content with what he earns, then he isn't a beggar, he has enough. He had never lusted after August' money. Perhaps he had to put by a few roubles for festive days, or buy firewood for the winter, or when he couldn't chase customers – then he might. But suddenly to have a big fat shiny moneybag on the table – a whole handful of gold – no!

Sveilis could barely contain himself, keep himself from crying out. He controlled himself. D-dammit! He'd been looking at the table all that time! He pulled himself together and turned away. But the pale white and the reddish yellow brilliance bored through his eyes anyway. Sveilis didn't want to think, but he was powerless. No matter how much he squeezed his eyes shut, he couldn't avoid seeing the rippling reddish-yellow piles at the end of the table. No matter how much he pressed his ear to the pillow, he couldn't avoid hearing the stinging hum of the softly clinking metal coins. Through his eyelids, though the pillow-case, the sound and the shining of the gold penetrated. Like a blunt needle it probed all his senses. It became unbearable to remain in his warm, accustomed bed; he wanted to move, engage all his limbs, cover himself as he otherwise would. But he mustn't move; let the others wake up, so that they wouldn't noticed that he was awake and thinking about that damned... He held his breath and

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listened. No, he heard nothing at all. But just because he heard nothing, it seemed suspicious. Robert always breathed heavily in the night, and Mother puckered her lips. Now he heard nothing. Sveilis started breathing long and regularly. If anyone was awake, let them think that he was asleep. And he did want to fall asleep.

But he couldn't get to sleep. The clinking of the gold would not be silenced, the pale glow would not be dimmed. And yet, with this unpleasant feeling began to mix in an odd, unprecedented, unknown pleasure. His thoughts dispersed in every direction like a disturbed flock of birds. He snatched at them, but couldn't catch a single one. A whole handful of gold was now at his disposal! How real could it be? For a year, maybe two, he might not have to work so much. He had billed Juškans for ten roubles – now he had a whole handful. A whole handful!

A red flame fluttered before him through his tightly shut eyes. A glowing shiver ran through him. He felt his forehead turning damp. He couldn't stand this. He didn't need – anything! He had to sleep, so that in the morning he could get up and set to work.

Quietly, silently he moved his legs from under the blanket and let them down beside the bed. Then he pulled the blanket aside and sat up. For a moment he sat listening, then he went to the table on tiptoe.

It was light; everything could be seen clearly. Sveilis took a piece of woollen cloth from the far end and put it over the pile of money. And it seemed to him that it immediately got darker and darker in the room. Walking back, he collided with a chair. He got quietly into bed and listened.

Mother turned a little. But Sveilis didn't notice that she carefully shoved a hand upwards and looked for a half-eaten piece of cake hidden behind the pillow-case. She sighed and went quiet.

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Then Made could be heard swinging around against the wall and, her clothes rustling, covering herself for a long time. Now Robert also started breathing aloud as usual.

Sveilis lay stretched out, his eyes tightly closed. But his thoughts, like a disturbed flock of birds, dispersed in every direction.

In the early morning light he was the first to get up, get dressed, go to the table, scoop a handful of money into his hand and pour it into his trouser pocket.

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