Fat and Thin

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At a stop along the Nikolayev railway, two friends ran into one another: one fat, the other thin. The fat one had just eaten in the stationhouse. . . The thin one had just exited the railcar and was loaded down with suitcases, parcels, and boxes. From behind his back gazed a thin woman with a long chin—his wife—and a tall, squinting schoolboy—his son.

"Profiry!" yelled the fat man, seeing the thin man. "Is that you? My dear friend! Long time, no see!"

"My word!" said the thin man, astonished. "Misha! My best friend from childhood! Where did you come from?"

The friends kissed each other's cheeks three times and fixed their tear-filled eyes on one another. Both were pleasantly surprised.

"My dear man!" began the thin one after the kisses. "Well, I didn't expect this! What a surprise! Well, now take a good look at me! The same good looking fellow I always was!.. And you, Lord! What about you? Rich? Married? I myself am married, as you can see. . . This is my wife, Luisa, of the Vanzenbachs. . . A Lutheran. . . And this is my son, Nathaniel, he's in the third grade. Nate, this is my best friend from childhood! We went to school together!"

Nathaniel thought for a moment and removed his hat.

"We went to school together!" continued the thin man. "You remember how they teased you? They called you Herostratus[1] because you burned the class ledger, and they called me Ethialtes[2] because I loved to gossip. Ha-ha. . . We were just kids then! Don't be afraid, Nate! Come over closer to him. . . And this is my wife, of the Vanzenbachs. . . A Lutheran."

Nathaniel thought for a moment and hid behind his father's back.

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[1] The madman who burned the temple of Artemis at Ephesus, one of the Seven Wonders of the World, in 356 BCE.

[2] Athenian politician who furthered the democracy movement and was assassinated in 461 BCE.

"Well, how is life, my friend?" asked the fat man, looking ecstatically at the thin man. "Still in the service? Or are you out?"

"Still in, my dear friend! This is my second year as a collegiate assessor[3] and I have the Stanislaw.[4] The pay isn't so good... But what does that matter? My wife gives music lessons, and I carve wooden cigar cases in my spare time. Excellent cigar cases! I sell them for a ruble apiece. We get by somehow... Well, and you? Probably a state counselor[5] already? Hmm?"

"No, my friend, try going a little higher," said the fat man. "I already earned my promotion to privy counselor...[6] I have two stars."

The thin man suddenly paled and tightened up, but soon his face was contorted by a broad grin. It seemed as if light shone from his face and eyes. He hunched over, cringed, shrank... His suitcases, parcels, and boxes hunched over and winced. His wife's long chin became even longer. Nathaniel straightened up and fastened all the buttons on his uniform.

"Your Excellency, I... Most pleasant! My best friend, one might say, from childhood, and all of a sudden such a big name! Hee hee."

"Now that's enough!" said the fat man, his brow furrowed. "Why use that tone? We're childhood friends—no need to think about rank!"

"Beg your pardon... Well... " chuckled the thin man, hunching over even further. "Your Excellency's favor... like manna from heaven... This, Your Excellency, is my son Nathaniel... my wife Luisa, a Lutheran, in a sense... "

The fat man wanted to express something, but there was such awe, delight, and respectful anguish on the thin man's face that the privy counselor became ill. He turned from the thin man and gave him his hand in parting.

The thin man pressed three fingers, bowed deeply and giggled, like a Chinaman: "Hee-hee-hee." His wife smiled. Nathaniel shuffled his feet and dropped his hat. All three were pleasantly surprised.

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[3]Eighth rank in the table of ranks in the Russian Empire, corresponding to the rank of major.

[4]I.e., the Order of St. Stanislaw.

[5]Fifth rank in the imperial service, corresponding to the rank of brigadier general.

[6]Third rank in the imperial service, corresponding to the rank of lieutenant general.