

## The Nose

by Nikolai Gogol

[courtesy: Gogol, *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*, translated by Ronald Wilks, Penguin Books, 1987 reprint, pp. 42-70. Phrases that appear within parentheses and in italics, and the dots are as in the original.]

### 1

An extraordinarily strange thing happened in St. Petersburg on 25 March. Ivan Yakovlevich, a barber who lived on Voznesensky Avenue (his surname has got lost and all that his shop-front signboard shows is a gentleman with a lathered cheek and the inscription 'We also let blood'), woke up rather early one morning and smelt hot bread. As he sat up in bed he saw his wife, who was a quite respectable lady and a great coffee-drinker, taking some freshly baked rolls out of the oven.

'I don't want any coffee today, Praskovya Osipovna', said Ivan Yakovlevich, 'I'll make do with some hot rolls and onion instead.' (Here I must explain that Ivan Yakovlevich would really have liked to have had some coffee as well, but knew it was quite out of the question to expect both coffee *and* rolls since Praskovya Osipovna did not take very kindly to these whims of his.) 'Let the old fool have his bread, I don't mind,' she thought. 'That means extra coffee for me!' And she threw a roll on to the table.

Ivan pulled his frock-coat over his nightshirt for decency's sake, sat down at the table, poured out some salt, peeled two onions, took a knife and with a determined expression on his face started cutting one of the rolls.

When he had sliced the roll in two, he peered into the middle and was amazed to see something white there. Ivan carefully picked at it with his knife, and felt it with his finger. 'Quite thick,' he said to himself. 'What on earth can it be?'

He poked two fingers in and pulled out – a nose!

He flopped back in his chair, and began rubbing his eyes and feeling around in the roll again. Yes, it was a nose all right, no mistake about that. And, what's more, it seemed a very

familiar nose. His face filled with horror. But this horror was nothing compared with his wife's indignation.

'You beast, whose nose is *that* you've cut off?' she cried furiously. 'You scoundrel! You drunkard! I'll report it to the police myself, I will. You thief! Come to think of it, I've heard three customers say that when they come in for a shave you start pulling their noses about so much it's a wonder they stay on at all!'

But Ivan felt more dead than alive. He knew that the nose belonged to none other than Collegiate Assessor Kovalyov, whom he shaved on Wednesdays and Sundays.

'Wait a minute, Praskovya! I'll wrap it up in a piece of cloth and dump it in the corner. Let's leave it there for a bit, then I'll try and get rid of it.'

'I don't want to know! Do you think I'm going to let a sawn-off nose lie around in *my* room...you fathead! All you can do is strop that blasted razor of yours and let everything else go to pot. Layabout! Night-bird! And you expect me to cover up for you with the police! You filthy pig! Blockhead! Get that nose out of here, out! Do what you like with it, but I don't want that thing hanging around here a minute longer!'

Ivan Yakovlevich was absolutely stunned. He thought and thought, but just didn't know what to make of it.

'I'm damned if I know what's happened!' he said at last, scratching the back of his ear. 'I can't say for certain if I came home drunk or not last night. All I know is, it's crazy. After all, bread is baked in an oven, and you don't get noses in bakeries. Can't make head or tail of it!...'

Ivan Yakovlevich lapsed into silence. The thought that the police might search the place, find the nose and afterwards bring a charge against him, very nearly sent him out of his mind. Already he could see that scarlet collar beautifully embroidered with silver, that sword...and he began shaking all over. Finally he put on his scruffy old trousers and shoes and with Praskovya Osipovna's vigorous invective ringing in his

ears, wrapped the nose up in a piece of cloth and went out into the street.

All he wanted was to stuff it away somewhere, either hiding it between two curb-stones by someone's front door or else 'accidentally' dropping it and slinking off down a side street. But as luck would have it, he kept bumping into friends, who would insist on asking: 'Where are *you* off to?' or 'It's a bit early for shaving customers, isn't it?' with the result that he didn't have a chance to get rid of it. Once he *did* manage to drop it, but a policeman pointed with his hadberd and said: 'Pick that up! Can't you see you dropped something!' And Ivan Yakovlevich had to pick it up and hide it in his pocket. Despair gripped him, especially as the streets were getting more and more crowded now as the shops and stalls began to open.

He decided to make his way to St Isaac's Bridge and see if he could throw the nose into the River Neva without anyone seeing him. But here I am rather at fault for not telling you before something about Ivan Yakovlevich, who in many ways was a man you could respect.

Ivan Yakovlevich, like any honest Russian working man, was a terrible drunkard. And although he spent all day shaving other people's beards, he never touched his own. His frock-coat (Ivan Yakovlevich never wore a dress-coat) could best be described as piebald: that is to say, it was black, but with brownish-yellow and grey spots all over it. His collar was very shiny, and three loosely hanging threads showed that some buttons had once been there. Ivan Yakovlevich was a very phlegmatic character, and whenever Kovalyov the Collegiate Assessor said 'Your hands always stink!' while he was being shaved, Ivan Yakovlevich would say: 'But why *should* they stink?' The Collegiate Assessor used to reply: 'Don't ask me, my dear chap. All I know is, they *stink*.' Ivan Yakovlevich would answer by taking a pinch of snuff and then, by way of retaliation, lather all over Kovalyov's cheeks, under his nose,

behind the ears and beneath his beard – in short, wherever he felt like covering him with soap.

By now this respectable citizen of ours had already reached St Isaac's Bridge. First of all he had a good look around. Then he leant over the rails, trying to pretend he was looking under the bridge to see if there were many fish there, and furtively threw the packet into the water. He felt as if a couple of hundredweight had been lifted from his shoulders and he even managed to produce a smile.

Instead of going off to shave civil servants' chins, he headed for a shop bearing a sign 'Hot Meals and Tea' for a glass of punch. Suddenly he saw a policeman at one end of the bridge, in a very smart uniform, with broad whiskers, a three-cornered hat and a sword. He went cold all over as the policeman beckoned to him and said: 'Come here, my friend!'

Recognizing the uniform, Ivan Yakovlevich took his cap off before he had taken half a dozen steps, tripped up to him and greeted him with: 'Good morning, Your Excellency!'

'No, no, my dear chap, none of your 'Excellencies'. Just tell me what you were up to on the bridge?'

'Honest, officer, I was on my way to shave a customer and stopped to see how fast the current was.'

'You're lying. You really can't expect me to believe that! You'd better come clean at once!'

'I'll give Your Excellency a free shave twice, even three times a week, honest I will,' answered Ivan Yakovlevich.

'No, no, my friend, that won't do. Three barbers look after me already, and it's an *honour* for them to shave me. Will you please tell me what you were up to?'

Ivan Yakovlevich turned pale...But at this point everything became so completely enveloped in mist it is really impossible to say what happened afterwards.

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## 2

Collegiate Assessor Kovalyov woke up rather early and made a ‘brring’ noise with his lips. He always did this when he woke up, though, if you asked him why, he could not give any good reason. Kovalyov stretched himself and asked for the small mirror that stood on the table to be brought over to him. He wanted to have a look at a pimple that had made its appearance on his nose the previous evening, but to his extreme astonishment found that instead of a nose there was nothing but an absolutely flat surface! In a terrible panic Kovalyov asked for some water and rubbed his eyes with a towel. No mistake about it: his nose had gone. He began pinching himself to make sure he was not sleeping, but to all intents and purposes he was wide awake. Collegiate Assessor Kovalyov sprang out of bed and shook himself: still no nose! He asked for his clothes and off he dashed straight to the Head of Police.

In the meantime, however, a few words should be said about Kovalyov, so that the reader may see what kind of collegiate assessor this man was. You really cannot compare those collegiate assessors who acquire office through testimonials with the variety appointed in the Caucasus. The two species are quite distinct. Collegiate assessors with diplomas from learned bodies...But Russia is such an amazing country, that if you pass any remark about *one* collegiate assessor, every assessor from Riga to Kamchatka will take it personally. And the same goes for all people holding titles and government ranks. Kovalyov belonged to the Caucasian variety.

He had been a collegiate assessor for only two years and therefore could not forget it for a single minute. To make himself sound more important and to give more weight to his status he never called himself collegiate assessor, but ‘Major’. If he met a woman in the street selling shirt fronts he would say: ‘Listen dear, come and see me at home. My flat’s in

Sadovaya Street. All you have to do is ask if Major Kovalyov lives there and anyone will show you the way.' And if the woman was at all pretty he would whisper some secret instructions and then say: 'Just ask for Major Kovalyov, my dear.' Therefore, throughout this story, we will call this collegiate assessor 'Major'. Major Kovalyov was in the habit of taking a daily stroll along the Nevsky Avenue. His shirt collar was always immaculately clean and well-starched. His whiskers were the kind you usually find among provincial surveyors, architects and regimental surgeons, among people who have some sort of connection with the police, on anyone in fact who has full rosy cheeks and plays a good hand at whist. These whiskers grew right from the middle of his cheeks up to his nostrils. Major Kovalyov always carried plenty of seals with him – seals bearing coats of arms or engraved with the words: 'Wednesday, Thursday, Monday,' and so on. Major Kovalyov had come to St Petersburg with the set purpose of finding a position in keeping with his rank. If he was lucky, he would get a vice-governorship, but failing that, a job as an administrative clerk in some important government department would have to do. Major Kovalyov was not averse to marriage, as long as his bride happened to be worth 200,000 rubles. And now the reader can judge for himself how this Major felt when, instead of a fairly presentable and reasonably sized nose, all he saw was an absolutely preposterous smooth flat space.

As if this were not bad enough, there was not a cab in sight, and he had to walk home, keeping himself huddled up in his cloak and with a handkerchief over his face to make people think he was bleeding. 'But perhaps I dreamt it! How could I be so stupid as to go and lose my nose?' With these thoughts he dropped into a coffee-house to take a look at himself in a mirror. Fortunately the shop was empty, except for some waiters sweeping up and tidying the chairs. A few of them, rather bleary-eyed, were carrying trays laden with hot pies. Yesterday's newspapers, covered in coffee stains, lay scattered

on the tables and chairs. 'Well, thank God thee's no one about,' he said. 'Now I can have a look.' He approached the mirror rather gingerly and peered into it. 'Damn it! What kind of trick is this?' he cried, spitting on the floor. 'If only there were *something* to take its place, but there's nothing!'

He bit his lips in annoyance, left the coffee-house and decided not to smile or look at anyone, which was not like him at all. Suddenly he stood rooted to the spot near the front door of some house and witnessed a most incredible sight. A carriage drew up at the entrance porch. The doors flew open and out jumped a uniformed, stooping gentleman who dashed up the steps. The feeling of horror and amazement that gripped Kovalyov when he recognized his own nose defies description! After this extraordinary sight everything went topsy-turvy. He could hardly keep to his feet, but decided at all costs to wait until the nose returned to the carriage, although he was shaking all over and felt quite feverish.

About two minutes later a nose really did come out. It was wearing a gold-braided uniform with a high stand-up collar and chamois trousers, and had a sword at its side. From the plumes on its hat one could tell that it held the exalted rank of state councilor<sup>1</sup>. And it was abundantly clear that the nose was going to visit someone. It looked right, then left, shouted to the coachman 'Let's go!', climbed in and drove off.

Poor Kovalyov nearly went out of his mind. He did not know what to make of it. How, in fact, could a nose, which only yesterday was in the middle of his face, and which could not possibly walk around or drive in a carriage, suddenly turn up in a uniform! He ran after the carriage which fortunately did not travel very far and came to a halt outside Kazan Cathedral<sup>2</sup>. Kovalyov rushed into the cathedral square,

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<sup>1</sup> A state councilor held the fifth of the fourteen ranks in the civil service hierarchy. A college assessor was three grades lower. (Trans.)

<sup>2</sup> Such was the severity and idiocy of the censorship in Gogol's day that in the original version Kazan Cathedral had to be replaced by a shopping arcade, on the grounds of 'blasphemy'. (Trans.)

elbowed his way through a crowd of beggar women who always used to make him laugh because of the way they covered their faces, leaving only slits for the eyes, and made his way in. Only a few people were at prayer, all of them standing by the entrance. Kovalyov felt so distraught that he was in no condition for praying, and his eyes searched every nook and cranny for the nose in uniform. At length he spotted it standing by one of the walls to the side. The nose's face was completely hidden by the high collar and it was praying with an expression of profound piety.

'What's the best way of approaching it?' thought Kovalyov. 'Judging by its uniform, its hat, and its whole appearance, it must be a state councillor. But I'm damned if I know!'

He tried to attract its attention by coughing, but the nose did not interrupt its devotions for one second and continued bowing towards the altar.

'My dear sir,' Kovalyov said, summoning up his courage, 'my dear sir...'

'What do you want?' replied the nose, turning around.

'I don't know how best to put it, sir, but it strikes me as very peculiar... Don't you know where you belong? And where do I find you? In church, of all places! I'm sure you'll agree that...'

'Please forgive me, but would you mind telling me what you're talking about?... Explain yourself.'

'How can I make myself clear?' Kovalyov wondered. Nervous once more he said: 'Of course, I am, as it happens, a Major. You will agree that it's not done for someone in my position to walk around minus a nose. It's all right for some old woman selling peeled oranges on the Voskresensky Bridge to go around without one. But as I'm hoping to be promoted soon... Besides, as I'm acquainted with several highly-placed ladies: Madame Chekhtaryev, for example, a state councillor's wife... you can judge for yourself... I really don't know what to say, my dear sir... (He shrugged his

shoulders as he said this.) Forgive me, but you must look upon this as a matter of honour and principle. You can see for yourself...'

'I can't see anything,' the nose replied. 'Please come to the point.'

'My dear sir,' continued Kovalyov in a smug voice, 'I really don't know what you mean by that. It's plain enough for anyone to see...Unless you want...Don't you realize you are *my own nose!*'

The nose looked at the Major and frowned a little.

'My dear fellow, you are mistaken. I am a person in my own right. Furthermore, I don't see that we can have anything in common. Judging from your uniform buttons, I should say you're from another government department.'

With these words the nose turned away and continued its prayers.

Kovalyov was so confused he did not know what to do or think. At that moment he heard a pleasant rustling of a woman's dress, and an elderly lady, bedecked with lace, came by, accompanied by a slim girl wearing a white dress, which showed her shapely figure to very good advantage, and a pale yellow hat as light as pastry. A tall footman, with enormous whiskers and what seemed to be a dozen collars, stationed himself behind them and opened his snuff-box. Kovalyov went closer, pulled the linen collar of his shirt front up high, straightened the seals hanging on his gold watch chain and, smiling all over his face, turned his attention to the slim girl, who bent over to pray like a spring flower and kept lifting her little white hand with its almost transparent fingers to her forehead.

The smile on Kovalyov's face grew even more expansive when he saw, beneath her hat, a little rounded chin of dazzling white, and cheeks flushed with the colour of the first rose of spring.

But suddenly he jumped backwards as though he had been

burnt: he remembered that instead of a nose he had nothing, and tears streamed from his eyes. He turned round to tell the nose in uniform straight out that it was only masquerading as a state councilor, that it was an impostor and a scoundrel, and really nothing else than his own private property, *his* nose... But the nose had already gone: it managed to slip off unseen, probably to pay somebody a visit.

This reduced Kovalyov to absolute despair. He went out, and stood for a minute or so under the colonnade, carefully looking around him in the hope of spotting the nose. He remembered quite distinctly that it was wearing a plumed hat and a gold-embroidered uniform. But he had not noticed what its greatcoat was like, or the colour of its carriage, or its horses, or even if there was a liveried footman at the back. What's more, there were so many carriages careering to and fro, so fast, that it was practically impossible to recognize any of them, and even if he could, there was no way of making them stop.

It was a beautiful sunny day. Nevsky Avenue was packed. From the Police Headquarters right down to the Anichkov Bridge people flowed along the pavements in a cascade of colour. Not far off he could see that court councilor whom he referred to as Lieutenant-Colonel,<sup>3</sup> especially if there happened to be other people around. And over there was Yaygin, a head clerk in the Senate, and a very close friend of his who always lost at whist when he played in a party of eight. Another Major, a collegiate assessor, of the Caucasian variety, waved to him to come over and have a chat.

'Blast and damn!' said Kovalyov, hailing a droshky. 'Driver, take me straight to the Chief of Police.'

He climbed into the droshky and shouted: 'Drive like the devil!'

'Is the Police Commissioner in?' he said as soon as he entered the hall.

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<sup>3</sup> The civil service ranks had their corresponding ranks in the army. (Trans.)

‘No, he’s not, sir,’ said the porter. ‘He left only a few minutes ago.’

‘This really *is* my day.’

‘Yes,’ added the porter, ‘you’ve only just missed him. A minute ago you’d have caught him.’

Kovalyov, his handkerchief still pressed to his face, climbed into the droshky again and cried out in a despairing voice: ‘Let’s go!’

‘Where?’ asked the driver.

‘Straight on!’

‘Straight on? But it’s a dead-end here – you can only go right or left.’

This last question made Kovalyov stop and think. In his position the best thing to do was to go first to the City Security Office, not because it was directly connected with the police, but because things got done there much quicker than in any other government department. There was no sense in going direct to the head of the department where the nose claimed to work since anyone could see from the answers he had got before that the nose considered nothing holy and would have no difficulty in convincing its superiors by its brazen lying that it had never set eyes on Kovalyov before.

So just as Kovalyov was about to tell the driver to go straight to the Security Office, it struck him that the scoundrel and impostor who had behaved so shamelessly could quite easily take advantage of the delay and slip out of the city, in which event all his efforts to find it would be futile and might even drag on for another month, God forbid. Finally inspiration came from above. He decided to go straight to the newspaper offices and publish an advertisement, giving such a detailed description of the nose that anyone who happened to meet it would at once turn it over to Kovalyov, or at least tell him where he could find it. Deciding this was the best course of action, he ordered the driver to go straight to the newspaper offices and throughout the whole journey never once stopped

pummelling the driver in the back with his fist and shouting: 'Faster, damn you, faster!'

'But sir...' the driver retorted as he shook his head and flicked his reins at his horse, which had a coat as long as a spaniel's. Finally the droshky came to a halt and the breathless Kovalyov tore into a small waiting-room where a grey-haired bespectacled clerk in an old frock-coat was sitting at a table with his pen between his teeth, counting out copper coins.

'Who sees to advertisements here?' Kovalyov shouted. 'Ah, good morning.'

'Good morning,' replied the grey-haired clerk, raising his eyes for one second, then looking down again at the little piles of money spread out on the table.

'I want to publish an advertisement.'

'Just one moment, if you don't mind,' the clerk answered, as he wrote down a figure with one hand and moved two beads on his abacus with the other.

A footman who, judging by his gold-braided livery and generally very smart appearance, obviously worked in some noble house, was standing by the table holding a piece of paper and, just to show he could hob-nob with high and low, startled rattling away:

'Believe me, that nasty little dog just isn't worth eighty kopecks. I wouldn't give more than sixteen for it. But the Countess dotes on it, and that's why she makes no bones about offering a hundred roubles to the person who finds it. If we're going to be honest with one another, I'll tell you quite openly, there's no accounting for taste. I can understand a fancier paying anything up to five hundred, even a thousand for a deerhound or a poodle, as long as it's a good dog.'

The elderly clerk listened to him solemnly while he carried on totting up the words in the advertisement. The room was crowded with old women, shopkeepers, and house-porters, all holding advertisements. In one of these a coachman of 'sober disposition' was seeking employment; in another a carriage,

hardly used, and brought from Paris in 1814, was up for sale; in another a nineteen year-old servant girl, with laundry experience, and prepared to do *other* work, was looking for a job. Other advertisements offered a droshky for sale – in good condition apart from one missing spring; a ‘young’ and spirited dapple-grey colt seventeen years old; radish and turnip seeds only just arrived from London; a country house, with every modern convenience, including stabling for two horses and enough land for planting an excellent birch or fir forest. And one invited prospective buyers of old boot soles to attend certain auction rooms between the hours of eight and three daily. The room into which all these people were crammed was small and extremely stuffy. But Collegiate Assessor Kovalyov could not smell anything as he had covered his face with a handkerchief – and he could not have smelt anything anyway, as his nose had disappeared God knows where.

‘My dear sir, will you take the details down now, *please*. I really can’t wait any longer,’ he said, beginning to lose patience.

‘Just a minute, if you *don’t* mind! Two roubles forty-three kopecks. Nearly ready. One rouble sixty-four kopecks,’ the grey-haired clerk muttered as he shoved pieces of paper at the old ladies and servants standing around. Finally he turned to Kovalyov and said: ‘What do you want?’

‘I want...’ Kovalyov began. ‘Something very fishy’s been going on, whether it’s some nasty practical joke or a plain case of fraud I can’t say as yet. All I want you to do is to offer a substantial reward for the first person to find the blackguard...’

‘Name, please.’

‘Why do you need that? I can’t tell you. Too many people know me – Mrs Chekhtaryev, for example, who’s married to a state councilor, Mrs Palageya Podtochin, a staff officer’s wife...they’d find out who it was at once, God forbid! Just put ‘Collegiate Assessor’, or even better, ‘Major’.

‘And the missing person was a household serf of yours?’

‘Household serf? The crime wouldn’t be half as serious! It’s my *nose* that’s disappeared.’

‘Hm, strange name. And did this Mr Nose steal much?’

‘*My* nose, I’m trying to say. You don’t understand! It’s my own nose that’s disappeared. It’s a diabolical practical joke someone’s played on me.’

‘How did it disappear? I don’t follow.’

‘I can’t tell you how. But please understand, my nose is traveling at this very moment all over the town, calling itself a state councilor. That’s why I’m asking you to print this advertisement announcing the first person who catches it should return the nose to its rightful owner as soon as possible. Imagine what it’s like being without such a conspicuous part of your body! If it were just a small toe, then I could put my shoe on and no one would be any the wiser. On Thursdays I go to Mrs Chekhtaryev’s (she’s married to a state councilor) and Mrs Podtochin, who has a staff officer for a husband – and a very pretty little daughter as well. They’re all very close friends of mine, so just imagine what it would be like...In *my* state how can I visit any of them?’

The clerk’s tightly pressed lips showed he was deep in thought. ‘I can’t print an advertisement like that in our paper,’ he said after a long silence.

‘What? Why not?’

‘I’ll tell you. A paper can get a bad name. If everyone started announcing his nose had run away, I don’t know how it would all end. And enough false reports and rumours get past editorial already...’

‘By why does it strike you as so absurd? *I* certainly don’t think so.’

‘That’s what *you* think. But only last week there was a similar case. A clerk came here with an advertisement, just like you. It cost him two roubles seventy-three kopecks, and all he wanted to advertise was a runaway black poodle. And what do you think he was up to really? In the end we had a libel case on

our hands: the poodle was meant as a satire on a government cashier – I can't remember what ministry he came from.'

'But I want to publish an advertisement about my nose, not a poodle, and that's as near myself as dammit!'

'No, I can't accept that kind of advertisement.'

'But I've lost my *nose*!'

'Then you'd better see a doctor about it. I've heard there's a certain kind of specialist who can fix you up with any kind of nose you like. 'Anyway, you seem a cheery sort, and I can see you like to have your little joke.'

'By all that's holy, I swear I'm telling you the truth. If you really want me to, I'll *show* you what I mean.'

'I shouldn't bother if I were you,' the clerk continued, taking a pinch of snuff. 'However, if it's *really* no trouble,' he added, leaning forward out of curiosity, 'then I shouldn't mind having a quick look.'

The collegiate assessor removed his handkerchief.

'Well, how very peculiar! It's quite flat, just like a freshly cooked pancake. Incredibly flat.'

'So much for your objections! Now you've seen it with your own eyes and you can't possibly refuse. I will be particularly grateful for this little favour, and it's been a real pleasure meeting you.'

The Major, evidently, had decided that flattery might do the trick.

'Of course, it's no problem *printing* the advertisement,' the clerk said. 'But I can't see what you can stand to gain by it. If you like, why not give it to someone with a flair for journalism, then he can write it up as a very rare freak of nature and have it published in *The Northern Bee*<sup>4</sup> (here he took another pinch of snuff) so that young people might benefit from it (here he wiped his nose). Or else, as something of interest to the general public.'

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<sup>4</sup> A reactionary St. Petersburg periodical notorious for its vicious attacks on writers of talent, including Gogol. (Trans.)

The collegiate assessor's hopes vanished completely. He looked down at the bottom of the page at the theatre guide. The name of a rather pretty actress almost brought a smile to his face, and he reached down to his pocket to see if he had a five-rouble note, since in his opinion staff officers should sit only in the stalls. But then he remembered his nose, and knew he could not possibly think of going to the theatre.

Apparently even the clerk was touched by Kovalyov's terrible predicament and thought it would not hurt to cheer him up with a few words of sympathy.

'Really, I can't say how sorry I am at what's happened. How about a pinch of snuff? It's very good for headaches – and puts fresh heart into you. It even cures piles.'

With these words he offered Kovalyov his snuff-box, deftly flipping back the lid which bore a portrait of some lady in a hat.

This unintentionally thoughtless action made Kovalyov lose patience altogether.

'I don't understand how you can joke at a time like this,' he said angrily. 'Are you so blind you can't see that I've nothing to smell with? You know what you can do with your snuff! I can't bear to look at it, and anyway you might at least offer me some real French rapee, not that filthy Berezinsky brand.'

After this declaration he strode furiously out of the newspaper office and went off to the local Inspector of Police (a fanatical lover of sugar, whose hall and dining room were crammed full of sugar-cubes presented by merchants who wanted to keep well in with him). Kovalyov arrived just when he was having a good stretch, grunting, and saying, 'Now for a nice two hours nap.' Our collegiate assessor had clearly chosen a very bad time for his visit.

The Inspector was a great patron of the arts and industry, but most of all he loved government banknotes. 'There's nothing finer than banknotes,' he used to say. 'They don't need feeding, take up very little room and slip nicely into the pocket. And they don't break if you drop them.'

The Inspector gave Kovalyov a rather cold welcome and said that after dinner wasn't at all the time to start investigations, that nature herself had decreed a rest after meals (from this our collegiate assessor concluded that Inspector was well versed in the wisdom of antiquity), that *respectable* men do not get their noses ripped off, and that there were no end of majors knocking around who were not too fussy about their underwear and who were in the habit of visiting the most disreputable places.

These few home truths stung Kovalyov to the quick. Here I must point out that Kovalyov was an extremely sensitive man. He did not so much mind people making personal remarks about him, but it was a different matter when aspersions were cast on his rank or social standing.

As far as he was concerned they could say what they liked about subalterns on the stage, but staff officers should be exempt from attack.

The reception given him by the Inspector startled him so much that he shook his head, threw out his arms and said in a dignified voice, 'To be frank, after these remarks of yours, which I find very offensive, I have nothing more to say...' and walked out. He arrived home hardly able to feel his feet beneath him. It was already getting dark. After his fruitless inquiries his flat seemed extremely dismal and depressing. As he entered the hall he saw his footman Ivan lying on a soiled leather couch spitting at the ceiling, managing to hit the same spot with a fair degree of success. The nonchalance of the man infuriated him and Kovalyov hit him across the forehead with his hat and said: 'You fat pig! Haven't you anything better to do!'

Ivan promptly jumped up and rushed to take off Kovalyov's coat. Tired and depressed, the Major went to his room, threw himself into an armchair and after a few sighs said:

'My God, my God! What have I done to deserve this? If I'd lost an arm or a leg it wouldn't be so bad. Even without any

*ears* things wouldn't be very pleasant, but it wouldn't be the end of the world. A man without a nose, though, is God knows what, neither fish nor fowl. Just something to be thrown out of the window. If my nose had been lopped off during the war, or in a duel, at least I might have had some say in the matter. But to lose it for no reason at all and with nothing to show for it, not even a kopeck! No, it's absolutely impossible...It can't have gone just like that! Never! Must have been a dream, or perhaps I drank some of that vodka I use for rubbing down my beard after shaving instead of water: that idiot Ivan couldn't have put it back in the cupboard.'

To prove to himself he was not drunk the Major pinched himself so hard that he cried out in pain, which really did convince him he was awake and in full possession of his senses. He stealthily crept over to the mirror and screwed up his eyes in the hope that his nose would reappear in its proper place, but at once he jumped back, exclaiming:

'That ridiculous blank space again!'

It was absolutely incomprehensible. If a button, or a silver spoon, or his watch, or something of that sort had been missing, that would have been understandable. But for his *nose* to disappear from his own flat...Major Kovalyov weighed up all the evidence and decided that the most likely explanation of all was that Mrs Podtochin, the staff officer's wife, who wanted to marry off her daughter to him, was to blame, and no one else. In fact he liked chasing after her, but never came to proposing. And when the staff officer's wife used to tell him straight out that she was offering him her daughter's hand, he would politely withdraw, excusing himself on the grounds that he was still a young man, and that he wanted to devote another five years to the service, by which time he would be just forty two. So, to get her revenge, the staff officer's wife must have hired some witches to spirit it away, and this was the only way his nose could possibly have been cut off – no one had visited him in his flat, his barber

Ivan Yakovlevich had shaved him only last Wednesday, and the rest of that day and the whole of Thursday his nose had been intact. All this he remembered quite clearly. Moreover, he would have been in pain and the wound could not have healed as smooth as a pancake in such a short time. He began planning what to do: either he would sue the staff officer's wife for damages, or he would go and see her personally and accuse her point blank.

But he was distracted from these thoughts by the sight of some chinks of light in the door, which meant Ivan had lit a candle in the hall. Soon afterwards Ivan appeared in person, holding the candle in front of him, so that it brightened up the whole room. Kovalyov's first reaction was to seize his handkerchief and cover up the bare place where only yesterday his nose had been, to prevent that stupid idiot from standing there gaping at him. No sooner had Ivan left than a strange voice was heard in the hall:

'Does Collegiate Assessor Kovalyov live here?'

'Please come in. The Major's home, said Kovalyov, springing to his feet and opening the door.

A smart-looking police officer, with plump cheeks and whiskers that were neither too light nor too dark – the same police officer who had stood on St Isaac's Bridge at the beginning of our story – made his entrance.

'Are you the gentleman who has lost his nose?'

'Yes, that's me.'

'It's been found.'

'What did you say?' cried Major Kovalyov. He could hardly speak for joy. He looked wide-eyed at the police officer, the candle-light flickering on his fat cheeks and thick lips.

'How did you find it?'

'Very strange. We caught it just as it was about to drive off in the Riga stagecoach. Its passport was made out in the name of some civil servant. Stangely enough, I mistook it for a gentleman at first. Fortunately I had my spectacles with me so

I could see it was really a nose. I'm very short-sighted, and if you happen to stand just in front of me, I can only make out your face, but not your nose, or beard, or anything else in fact. My mother-in-law (that's to say, on my *wife's* side) suffers from the same complaint.

Kovalyov was beside himself.

'Where is it? I'll go right away to claim it.'

'Don't excite yourself, sir. I knew how much you wanted it back, so I've brought it with me. Very strange, but the main culprit in this little affair seems to be that swindler of a barber from Voznesensky Street: he's down at the station now. I've had my eyes on him a long time on suspicion of drunkenness and larceny, and only three days ago he was found stealing a dozen buttons from a shop. You'll find your nose just as it was when you lost it.'

And the police officer dipped into his pocket and pulled out the nose wrapped up in a piece of paper.

'That's it!' cried Kovalyov, 'no mistake! You *must* stay and have a cup of tea.'

'I'd like to, but I'm expected back at the prison... The price of food has rocketed... My mother-in-law (on my *wife's* side) is living with me, and all the children as well; the eldest boy seems very promising, very bright, but we haven't the money to send him to school...'

Kovalyov guessed what he was after and took a note from the table and pressed it into the officer's hands. The police officer bowed very low and went out into the street, where Kovalyov could hear him telling some stupid peasant who had driven his cart up on the pavement what he thought of him.

When the police officer had gone, our collegiate assessor felt rather bemused and only after a few minutes did he come to his senses at all, so intense was his joy. He carefully took the nose in his cupped hands and once more subjected it to close scrutiny.

'Yes, that's it, that's it!' Major Kovalyov said, 'and there's

the pimple that came up yesterday on the left-hand side.' The Major almost laughed with joy.

But nothing is lasting in this world. Even joy begins to fade after only one minute. Two minutes later, and it is weaker still, until finally it is swallowed up in our everyday, prosaic state of mind, just as a ripple made by a pebble gradually merges with the smooth surface of the water. After some thought Kovalyov concluded that all was not right again yet and there still remained the problem of putting the nose back in place.

'What if it doesn't stick?'

With a feeling of inexpressible horror he rushed to the table, and pulled the mirror nearer, as he was afraid that he might stick the nose on crooked. His hands trembled. With great care and caution he pushed it into place. But oh! the nose just would not stick. He warmed it a little by pressing it to his mouth and breathing on it, and then pressed it again to the smooth space between his cheeks. But try as he might the nose would not stay on.

'Stay on, you fool!' he said. But the nose seemed to be made of wood and fell on to the table with a strange cork-like sound. The Major's face quivered convulsively. 'Perhaps I can graft it,' he said apprehensively. But no matter how many times he tried to put it back, all his efforts were futile.

He called Ivan and told him to fetch the doctor, who happened to live in the same block, in one of the best flats on the first floor.

This doctor was a handsome man with fine whiskers as black as pitch, and a fresh-looking, healthy wife. Every morning he used to eat apples and was terribly meticulous about keeping his mouth clean, spending at least three quarters of an hour rinsing it out every day and using five different varieties of toothbrush. He came right away. When he had asked the Major if he had had this trouble for very long the doctor pushed back Kovalyov's chin and prodded him with his

thumb in the spot once occupied by his nose – so sharply that the Major hit the wall very hard with the back of his head. The doctor told him not to worry and made him stand a little way from the wall and lean his head first to the right. Pinching the place where his nose had been the doctor said ‘Hm!’ Then he ordered him to move his head to the left and produced another ‘Hm!’ Finally he prodded him again, making Kovalyov’s head twitch like a horse having its teeth inspected.

After this examination the doctor shook his head and said: ‘It’s no good. It’s best to stay as you are, otherwise you’ll only make it worse. Of course, it’s possible to have it stuck on, and I could do this for you quite easily. But I assure you it would look terrible.’

‘That’s *marvellous*, that is! How can I carry on without a nose?’ said Kovalyov. ‘*Whatever* you do it couldn’t look any worse; and God knows, that’s bad enough! How can I go around looking like a freak? I mix with nice people. I’m expected at two soirees today. I know nearly all the best people – Mrs Chekharyev, a state councillor’s wife, Mrs Podtochin, a staff officer’s wife... after the way *she*’s behaved I won’t have any more to do with *her*, except when I get the police on her trail.’ Kovalyov went on pleading: ‘Please do me this one favour – isn’t there any way? Even if you only get it to hold on, it wouldn’t be so bad, and if there were any risk of it falling off, I could keep it there with my hand. I don’t dance, which is a help, because any violent movement might make it drop off. And you may rest assured I wouldn’t be slow in showing my appreciation – as far as my pocket will allow of course...’

The doctor then said in a voice which could not be called loud, or even soft, but persuasive and arresting: ‘I never practice my art from purely mercenary motives. That is contrary to my code of conduct and all professional ethics. True, I make a charge for private visits, but only so as not to offend patients by refusing to take their money. Of course, I could put your nose back if I wanted to. But I give you my

word of honour, if you know what's good for you, it would be far worse if I tried. Let nature take its course. Wash the area as much as you can with cold water and believe me you'll feel just as good as when you had a nose. Now, as far as the nose is concerned, put it in a jar of alcohol; better still, soak it in two tablespoonsful of sour vodka and warmed-up vinegar, and you'll get good money for it. I'll take it myself if you don't want it.'

'No! I wouldn't sell it for anything,' Kovalyov cried desperately. 'I'd rather lose it again.'

'Then I'm sorry,' replied the doctor, bowing himself out. 'I wanted to help you...at least I've tried hard enough.'

With these words the doctor made a very dignified exit. Kovalyov did not even look at his face, and felt so dazed that all he could make out were the doctor's snowy-white cuffs sticking out from the sleeves of his black dress-coat.

The very next day he decided – before going to the police – to write to the staff officer's wife to ask her to put back in its proper place what belonged to him without further ado. The letter read as follows:

Dear Mrs Alexandra Grigoryevna,

I cannot understand this strange behaviour on your part. You can be sure, though, that it won't get you anywhere and you certainly won't force me to marry your daughter. Moreover, you can rest assured that, regarding my nose, I am familiar with the whole history of this affair from the very beginning, and I also know that you, and no one else, are the prime instigator. Its sudden detachment from its rightful place, its subsequent flight, its masquerading as a civil servant and then its re-appearance in its natural state, are nothing else than the result of black magic carried out by yourself or by those practicing the same very honourable art. I consider it my duty to warn you that if the above-mentioned nose is not back in its proper place by today, then I shall be compelled to ask for the law's protection.

I remain, dear Madam,

Your very faithful servant,

Platon Kovalyov

Dear Mr Kovalyov!

I was simply staggered by your letter. To be honest, I never expected anything of this kind from you, particularly those remarks which are quite uncalled-for. I would have you know I have never received that civil servant mentioned by you in my house, whether disguised or not. True, Philip Ivanovich Potahchikov used to call. Although he wanted to ask for my daughter's hand, and despite the fact that he was a very sober, respectable and learned gentleman, I never gave him any cause for hope. And then you go on to mention your nose. If by this you mean to say I wanted to make you look foolish,<sup>5</sup> that is, to put you off with a formal refusal, then all I can say is that I am very surprised that you can talk like this, as you know well enough my feelings on the matter are quite different. And if you care to make an official proposal to my daughter, I will gladly give my consent, for this has always been my dearest wish, and in this hope I remain at your disposal.

Yours sincerely,

Alexandra Podtochin

'No' said Kovalyov when he had read the letter. 'She's not to blame. Impossible! A guilty person could never write a letter like that.' The collegiate assessor knew what he was talking about in this case as he had been sent to the Caucasus several times to carry out legal inquiries. 'How on earth did this happen then? It's impossible to make head or tail of it!' he said, letting his arms drop to his side.

Meanwhile rumours about the strange occurrence had spread throughout the capital, not, need we say, without a few embellishments. As the time everyone seemed very preoccupied with the supernatural: only a short time before, some experiments in magnetism had been all the rage. Besides, the story of the dancing chairs in Konushenny Street<sup>6</sup> was still

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<sup>5</sup> Russian is rich in idioms referring to the nose, most of which have a derogatory meaning, e.g. to make a fool of, etc. (Trans.)

<sup>6</sup> An entry in Pushkin's diary for 17 December 1833 mentions furniture jumping about in one of the houses attached to the Royal Stables. In 1832 a certain lady called Tatarinova was exiled from St. Petersburg for deceiving people into thinking she could will objects to move. (Trans.)

fresh in people's minds, so no one was particularly surprised to hear about Collegiate Assessor Kovalyov's nose taking a regular stroll along the Nevsky Avenue at exactly three o'clock every afternoon. Every day crowds of inquisitive people flocked there. Someone said they had seen the nose in Junker's Store and this produced such a crush outside that the police had to be called.

One fairly respectable-looking, bewhiskered character, who sold stale cakes outside the theatre, knocked together some solid-looking wooden benches, and hired them out at eighty kopecks a time for people to stand on.

One retired colonel left home especially early one morning and after a great struggle managed to barge his way through to the front. But to his great annoyance, instead of a nose in the shop window, all he could see was an ordinary woolen jersey and a lithograph showing a girl adjusting her stocking while a dandy with a small beard and cutaway waistcoat peered out at her from behind a tree – a picture which had hung there in that identical spot for more than ten years. He left feeling very cross and was heard to say: 'Misleading the public with such ridiculous and far-fetched stories shouldn't be allowed.'

Afterwards it was rumoured that Major Kovalyov's nose was no longer to be seen strolling along the Nevsky Avenue but was in the habit of walking in Tavrishesky Park, and that it had been doing this for a long time. When Khozrov-Mirza<sup>7</sup> lived there, he was astonished at this freak of nature. Some of the students from the College of Surgeons went to have a look. One well-known very respectable lady wrote specially to the head park-keeper, asking him to show her children this very rare phenomenon and, if possible, give them an instructive and edifying commentary at the same time.

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<sup>7</sup> A Persian prince who had come with official apologies for the murder of the famous playwright A. S. Griboyedov, in Tehran, in 1929. (Griboyedov had gone to Tehran to negotiate with the Shah regarding the Peace of Turkmenchai.) (Trans.)

These events came as a blessing to those socialites (indispensable for any successful party) who loved amusing the ladies and whose stock of stories was completely exhausted at the time.

A few respectable and high-minded citizens were very upset. One indignant gentleman said that he was at a loss to understand how such absurd cock-and-bull stories could gain currency in the present enlightened century, and that the complete indifference shown by the authorities was past comprehension. Clearly this gentleman was the type who likes to make the government responsible for everything, even their daily quarrels with their wives. And afterwards...but here again the whole incident becomes enveloped in mist and what happened later remains a complete mystery.

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### 3

This world is full of the most outrageous nonsense. Sometimes things happen which you would hardly think possible: that very same nose, which had paraded itself as a state councilor and created such an uproar in the city, suddenly turned up, as if nothing had happened, plonk where it had been before, i.e. right between Major Kovalyov's two cheeks. This was on 7 April. He woke up and happened to glance at the mirror – there was his nose! He grabbed it with his hand to make sure – but there was no doubt this time. 'Aha!' cried Kovalyov, and if Ivan hadn't come in at that very moment, he would have joyfully danced a trepak round the room in his bare feet.

He ordered some soap and water, and as he washed himself looked into the mirror again; the nose was there. He had another look as he dried himself – yes, the nose was still there!

'Look, Ivan, I think I've got a pimple on my nose'.

Kovalyov thought: 'God, supposing he replies: 'Not only is there no pimple, but no nose either!' But Ivan answered: 'Your nose is quite all right, sir, I can't see any pimple.'

‘Thank God for that,’ the Major said to himself and clicked his fingers.

At this moment Ivan Yakovlevich the barber poked his head round the corner, but timidly this time, like a cat which had just been beaten for stealing fat.

‘Before you start, are your hands clean?’ Kovalyov shouted from the other side of the room.

‘Perfectly clean.’

‘You’re lying.’

‘On my life, sir, they’re clean!’

‘Hm, let’s have a look then!’

Kovalyov sat down. Ivan Yakovlevich covered him with a towel and in a twinkling had transformed his whole beard and part of his cheeks into the kind of cream served up at merchants’ birthday parties.

‘Well, I’ll be damned,’ Ivan Yakovlevich muttered to himself, staring at the nose. He bent Kovalyov’s head to one side and looked at him from a different angle. ‘That’s *it* all right! You’d never credit it...’ he continued and contemplated the nose for a long time. Finally, ever so gently, with a delicacy that the reader can best imagine, he lifted two fingers to hold the nose by its tip. This was how Ivan Yakovlevich normally shaved his customers.

‘Come on now, and mind my nose!’ shouted Kovalyov. Ivan Yakovlevich let his arms fall to his side and stood there more frightened and embarrassed than he had ever been in his life. At last he started tickling Kovalyov carefully under the chin with his razor. And although with only his olfactory organ to hold on to without any other means of support made shaving very awkward, by planting his rough, wrinkled thumb on his cheek and lower gum (in this way gaining some sort of leverage) he managed to shave him.

When everything was ready, Kovalyov rushed to get dressed and took a cab straight to the café. He had hardly got inside before he shouted, ‘Waiter, a cup of chocolate,’ and

went straight up to the mirror. Yes, his nose was there! Gaily he turned round, screwed up his eyes and looked superciliously at two soldiers, one of whom had a nose no bigger than a *waistcoat* button. Then he went off to the ministerial department where he was petitioning for a vice-governorship. (Failing this he was going to try for an administrative post.) As he crossed the entrance hall he had another look in the mirror: his nose was still there!

Then he went to see another collegiate assessor (or Major), a great wag whose sly digs Kovalyov used to counter by saying: 'I'm used to your quips by now, you old niggler!'

On the way he thought: 'If the Major doesn't split his sides when he sees me, that's a sure sign everything is in its proper place.' But the collegiate assessor did not pass any remarks. 'That's all right then, dammit!' thought Kovalyov. In the street he met Mrs Podtochin, the staff officer's wife, who was with her daughter, and they replied to his bow with delighted exclamations: clearly, he had suffered no lasting injury. He had a long chat with them, made a point of taking out of his snuff-box, and stood there for ages ostentatiously stuffing both nostrils as he murmured to himself: 'That'll teach you, you old hens! And I'm not going to marry your daughter, simply *par amour*, as they say! If you *don't* mind!'

And from that time onwards Major Kovalyov was able to stroll along the Nevsky Avenue, visit the theatre, in fact go everywhere as though absolutely nothing had happened. And, as though absolutely nothing *had* happened, his nose stayed in the middle of his face and showed no signs of wandering off. After that he was in perpetual high spirits, always smiling, chasing all the pretty girls, and on one occasion even stopping at a small shop in the Gostiny Dvor<sup>8</sup> to buy ribbon for some medal, no one knows why, as he did not belong to any order of knighthood.

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<sup>8</sup> The same shopping arcade substituted by the censorship for Kazan Cathedral in the original version. It was built in the eighteenth-century and opened off the Nevsky Avenue. (Trans.)

And all this took place in the northern capital of our vast empire! Only now, after much reflection can we see that there is a great deal that is very far-fetched in this story. Apart from the fact that it's *highly* unlikely for a nose to disappear in such a fantastic way and then reappear in various parts of the town dressed as a state councilor, it is hard to believe that Kovalyov was so ignorant as to think newspapers would accept advertisements about noses. I'm not saying I consider such an advertisement too expensive and a waste of money: that's nonsense, and what's more, I don't think I'm a mercenary person. But it's all very nasty, not quite the thing at all, and it makes me feel very awkward! And, come to think of it, how *did* the nose manage to turn up in a loaf of bread, and how *did* Ivan Yakovlevich...? No, I don't understand it, not one bit! But the strangest, most incredible thing of all is that authors should write about such things. That, I confess, is beyond my comprehension. It's just...no, no, I don't understand it at all! Firstly, it's no use to the country whatsoever; secondly, it's no use...I simply don't know *what* one can make of it...However, when all is said and done, one can concede this point or the other and perhaps you can even find...well then you won't find much that *isn't* on the absurd side, will you?

And yet, if you stop to think for a moment, there's a grain of truth in it. Whatever you may say, these things do happen—rarely, I admit, but they do happen.