

THE SEVENTH FLOOR

BY
ARKADY LVOV

Translated from the Russian by Gladys Evans

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He was said to be a difficult boy. He was said to be difficult from the time he was six, when Pop and Mum had first talked with him about school. That had been in March. They had told him that spring and summer would soon be over, and in September he would start school. Pop recalled his own first days of school in a far-off September—the chestnut-trees had been just as green as in May. Mum found nothing to recall: she had merely sighed and said time did not stand still. But he, all of a sudden, had burst out laughing and declared he wasn't going to school. Mum's eyes grew big and round. But Pop was very calm.

"So, you want to go on being ignorant?"

"That's right, Pop," he answered, also very calm.

And then Pop went on to explain what nonsense he was talking, that a person could not properly judge something he knew nothing about. That he, Grisha—or Grie, as they called him at home—had no idea what school and ignorance were. They were mere words to him, without meaning.

"Mere words," Pop repeated.

Then Grie laughed again, but Pop told him: "Stop laughing! Laughing for no good reason...."

Pop never finished because Grie interrupted him, mincing very seriously: "Gives you vitamins any season."

Pop said his son was a rotten verse-maker and that he, Pop that is, used to be just as bad when he was a child but, after he took up serious things at school, it had dropped off him like autumn bark from a plane-tree.

"Did you become creamy ivory, like the plane-tree does after shedding its

bark in autumn?"

"You guessed it, son," said Pop. "But don't forget there are different ways of getting a colour...."

"For example," broke in Grie, merrily, "from a good box on the ears. I guessed it again, Pop, didn't I?"

"Right," agreed Pop, without wavering. "And now let's try it out. Come here, Grie. A bit closer, if you don't mind. I can't quite reach you."

Grie got out of his chair. Pop caught hold of his right ear and, pulling him close, gave Grie a hard hug. Mum said she had expected this variant from the beginning, and her son immediately gave her his support.

"And you were right, Mum."

"Grie," said Pop, "you've turned into as big a chatterbox as the electronic fortune-teller at a Fun Fair. But I know you'll love school and study hard. Only, please give me your word that you won't be in too much of a hurry to make up your mind. Not till you really get to know what school's like."

"Okay, Pop," said Grie. "If you're so anxious to put off the truth, we'll do it. But you told me yourself: you can't put off the truth for long."

"So-o," nodded Pop. And he wanted to add that if we always knew exactly where the truth lay, the Golden Age would come back to mankind. But he held his tongue. Later, when Grie had gone to his room, he decided it would not do, in his son's presence, to get carried away by moralizing or making social generalizations. Because premature maturity often meant premature sadness.

"You should be stricter with Grie," his wife told him.

"Yes," he answered. "I can order him to be silent, but I can't order him not to think. Even if the law permitted it."

Half an hour later, Grie knocked at his father's study door.

"Come in," said Pop. "But don't talk for about two minutes. I have to finish writing this sentence."

Curling up in an armchair, Grie studied his father, and gradually felt submerged from the soles of his feet to his tummy in a velvety warmth, as if emanating from somebody's lap. He had once felt the same velvety warmth on the beach at the sight of crabs lazing and warming themselves in the sun inside a rock pool dammed off from the sea. Except Grie himself, nobody had noticed how crab-shells change colour, how fountains of water churn turbulently through the orange claws, how the look in the crabs' black, frightened eyes seems to change. Previously, like everybody else, he had thought that crabs' eyes always look frightened because they stick out. But afterwards, many times, he had seen that crabs could have quite different eyes: they still goggled, but were lifeless and even indifferent. At first he decided that the crabs were simply ill but, suddenly, when a silvery soldierfish shot up alongside, one of these sick and seemingly indifferent crabs made a despairing, spider-like leap. Landing off-balance, for ten or fifteen seconds it had convulsively scabbled the sand with its claws, and again was stock-still.

One day he had shown the crabs to Pop and asked how they changed the colour of their shells. Pop said that the crabs could not change colour, and

that what Grie had seen was simply a sum total of physical factors—the depth of the water, the angle of incidence of the sun rays, the luminescence of the sky, air currents. All of these he had taken for a play of colour on the shells. But why just on the shells? Well ... how could he ask why? The reason was simply because a person focuses all his attention on the shells.

"Incidentally, you might have figured that out for yourself, Grie," his father remarked.

Yes, Grie thought, I might have figured it out myself, but some crabs really do change colour. They really do. How come Pop couldn't see it?

Grie was hurt when his father did not agree with him, but never for long. One day, when his parents were talking together, keeping their voices low for some reason, his father said that not only different generations, but even people of the same generation often view and interpret the world differently. And this, more than likely, was the most important requisite in understanding the world.

"And in the final analysis," added Pop, raising his voice, "that's progress."

Three days after this episode, Grie found a book in Pop's library about Giordano Bruno—a man who was burnt alive because he did not want to think as others did. But that was a long, long time ago, Grie comforted himself, half a thousand years ago. And then he found another book—and was caught by terror, because this book was only 114 years old and its author told about the cruel tortures people inflicted on others merely because some did not look at things or think the same as the rest. Yet always the executioners were in the right, and always the executed were in the wrong. Then followed new generations and new trials in court, and white was made black, and black—white. But those had been the last trials which had failed to come up for review.

Pop finished his sentence and told Grie that it would probably be better if they sat over by the window.

"Fine," said Grie. "I'd like to sit by the window, too."

Grie brought a picture-book, and his father reached over to the wall to pull up a small table, but Grie stopped him.

"Don't, Pop. We can put the book on your knee. D'you mind?"

His father moved over, and now they sat together in the same chair—father and son. Pop turned over the pages silently, and Grie was silent because he wasn't asked to explain the pictures. After going through the whole book, Grie's father turned back to the twelfth page which showed a jungle where a monster resembling an iguanodon was hiding. Pop asked what country it was supposed to be.

"Selvas, the central stream of the Amazon," explained Grie. "Yesterday, Dr. Manuel from Belo Horizonte announced on TV that he was preparing a new expedition to the valley of the Madeira. He said that it was finally time to dethrone the Amazon—the Princess of Mystery."

Listening to his son, Grie's father closed his eyes. Then, just barely opening them, so that Grie could not make out whether his father could see him or not, he said: "Dr. Manuel has the right to make any plans he pleases. But my son should realize that in the jungles a giant like the iguanodon

could not last even a day, because the trees, lianas and swamps would turn him into a helpless lump of flesh."

"Gosh, you're right, Pop. I didn't think of that."

"That's so," nodded his father. "And I'm very glad you realize it. But I'm not worried, Grie. In school you'll be given regular knowledge so as to keep such things straight, and take the place of the casual things you know. Then you won't tolerate such misconceptions. As you see, everybody needs to go to school."

The first of September, Grie went to school. The chestnut-trees were still as green as in May. On the five-fingered leaves of the plane-tree lay the silvery September dust, as delicate and light as pollen on the wings of a cabbage butterfly.

Besides Grie, there were thirteen boys and girls in his form. The school teacher, Anna Andreevna, lined them up in twos and said they

would be shown over the school, starting from the seventh floor so as not to use the lift more than necessary.

The seventh floor was filled with a silence usually found in a museum of entomology. Three walls of each classroom were taken up by electronic machines—the fourth by a huge wall-to-wall window. In the centre stood a desk, where one boy sat. A boy sat in each room except one, the last but one, where Grie saw a girl. But the last room had no occupant. Anna Andreevna gave a sudden laugh. It sounded strange in the silence that reigned in this mysterious seventh floor. Then she said that disobedient children were put here, and the last room was reserved for some new child. It would not be empty long. But Anna Andreevna was sure, naturally, that nobody from her class would end up in this room.

"Right, children?" she asked cheerfully.

"Yes," answered the children, seriously, very subdued.

Various laboratories were on the sixth and fifth floors, and classrooms on those below. In the school grounds, there were two separate one-storey buildings. One contained manual training workshops, the other a gymnasium. In fact, the latter had three sections: a swimming pool, a basketball court, and a hall for indoor athletics. As for the swimming pool, Anna Andreevna gave bathing privileges to whoever could swim. Five, it seemed, could not. And Grie was very surprised when the teacher gathered them near her and told them brightly that that was a mere trifle—they would learn to swim, and in six months would swim so well even a shark could not catch them.

"Right, children?" she asked again, in a happy, ringing voice.

And the children answered as seriously as they had the first time.

"Yes, that's right."

Grie shared a desk with a girl called Ilia. Grie spent half the lesson staring at her, but she never once looked his way. And during recess, she told him that staring at a person was indecent and, besides, Grie's staring bothered her.

"But," objected Grie, "a person should be able to concentrate, and then nothing would bother him. You can't concentrate."

"And you're a badly brought up boy," Ilia raised her voice just the faintest bit. "And I'll ask the teacher to move me to another seat."

During the lesson that followed, Anna Andreevna gave Grieg his first bad conduct mark. This is what she said:

"Grieg, I'm giving you your first bad conduct mark."

"Yes," Grieg admitted, "it's the first." Then he informed her that he could count to a million. Anna Andreevna looked at him long and attentively, then said with a sudden smile: "That's very good that you can count to a million. Children, is there anyone else who can count to a million?"

Thirteen hands shot up above the desks. Anna Andreevna told them they could lower their hands, and Grieg was permitted to resume his seat.

In his drawing book at home, Grieg drew thirteen hands with eyes on the palms, and wrote above the picture: THEY CAN COUNT TO A MILLION.

Then he drew a hippopotamus, a rhinoceros and an elephant in a terrarium surrounded by a moat. Beneath he wrote: CAN YOU COUNT TO A MILLION? And after a moment's thought, added: IS IT DECENT TO LOOK AT YOU?

It was a stupid question, and Grieg knew it. You see, that is what zoos are for—so people can look at the animals. But why, Grieg wondered, was it permissible to stare at animals but not at people? People looked at animals to learn more about them. And wasn't that why he had stared at Ilia? After all, wasn't that what people had eyes for—to look, see and understand! All the same, the teacher had taken Ilia's part, and probably Mum would have stuck up for her, too. But Pop?

"Say, Pop! Why isn't it decent to stare at people?"

"Convention, Grieg. People came to an unwritten agreement about it. As for whether it's necessary..." Pop shrugged his shoulders. "I think it's one of those things of the past that people simply haven't got round to reconsidering."

The first half year, from September to March, dragged out interminably. Grieg had a strange feeling—as if this half year had lasted five times longer than the whole of his preschool life. Each day, at every lesson, Anna Andreevna would say: "And now, children, we'll go on further." But, for some reason, Grieg failed to feel that they were advancing further. On the contrary, he often had the firm belief that they were moving backward, going back over roads already travelled and were, for no clear reason, getting all tangled up in them. It was as if, in the middle of an algebra lesson, they suddenly began drawing a row of strokes to learn how to count.

Yet Ilia, after almost every lesson, told her friend Lana: "Now that lesson was very interesting."

And Lana answered with importance: "Yes, it really was. Anna Andreevna knows everything, everything in the world."

Then they talked about foolish children of the past who still studied arithmetic in the fifth form, though arithmetic was nothing but a small part of algebra.

One day, Grieg could not restrain himself, and he told the girls that not one person had yet been able to establish the difference between boasting and

stupidity.

"To listen to you, it's quite clear there's no difference at all."

The girls tattled to the teacher. Anna Andreevna made Grief apologize. Standing by the teacher's desk, Grief said he was sorry. But, on returning to his seat, suddenly said: "Just the same, you see, an apology won't help them."

That night Grief had a talk with his father, because the teacher had phoned him at the institute. Pop said that Grief grieved him very much. Grief sat in the chair opposite and, looking his father straight in the eye, patiently waited until he got more to the point. Finally, Pop sighed and said that he, Grief, was not absolutely wrong, but people lived in a society and, as this was so, they had to submit to social conventions, because without them there would be no society.

"Does that mean," asked Grief, "that I hadn't the right to tell those girls the truth?"

"Not exactly, Grief. You not only may but must tell the truth. But, in addition, you are obliged to respect the opinion of the other person, no matter what you think of it."

"And they," Grief kept looking his father in the eye, "can say whatever comes into their heads because the people they speak badly of are already dead and can't talk back?"

"No," smiled Pop, "they shouldn't talk that way either. But you can't apologize to the dead. And if you do, then it's simply because there are people alive who have taken upon themselves the right to speak for the dead."

"Very well," said Grief. "I get it, Pop."

"I hope so," nodded Pop.

That night there was a thunderstorm. The first one that March. First the hail beat upon the roofs and on the windowpanes, as if thousands of monsters were spitting out millions of their teeth all at the same time. Then the rain gushed down, rather like a flood of water pouring out of the sky down a pipe of immense dimensions. The thunder clapped, then the light-

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ning flashed washing the sky green, an electric green of spark discharge.

The morning after the storm, such a sun came up as had not dawned for a long time. Grief knew perfectly well that life on earth had no effect whatsoever on the sun, that the sun could not change overnight and, in any case, could not grow any younger. And all the same, he saw a young sun which had nothing in common with yesterday's—the sluggish sun of February.

Grief left home at eight-fifteen—a quarter of an hour before lessons began. School was five minutes' walk away, and Grief always pushed the school doors open at one and the same time, twenty minutes past eight. But today Grief could only just drag his feet along, and at such a pace it would take the whole fifteen minutes to get to school. If you walk like this, Grief told himself, you'll get to school after the bell goes or, with luck, while it's still ringing. Such a thing had never been heard of in their form, and Anna

Andreevna would say it was an unusual incident, and certainly called for a general discussion. Ilia would start it off, and was sure to begin something like this:

'Personally, Grief's behaviour surprised me from the very first day.'

Then Lana would take the floor and say that she, personally, hadn't noticed anything out of the way in Grief's behaviour the first day, but soon she had adopted the same view as her friend, Ilia.

Directly across from the school stood a twelve-storey building, the Institute of Marine Life.

And facing the main entrance was the El-Monorail tram stop—the monorail connected the institute with the seashore. Grief did not intend taking the tram, but a tram happened to stop at the very moment Grief was passing by. Accidentally, he pushed the 'Ramp' button, and the robot-driver opened the door dropping the escalator-ramp which in the wink of an eye whisked Grief into a compartment in the middle of the tram.

It was only forty kilometres to the seashore— a ten-minute trip with two stops. But this was the first time in his life that Grief had travelled forty kilometres in ten minutes all by himself, and it was not at all like his previous experiences.

Grief took a seat by the port-hole. There was nobody else in the compartment, and Grief felt like the most important man on earth. Top man—the most powerful, whose wishes were carried out the moment they came to mind. Twice, because he wanted to, Grief pushed the button to stop the tram: twice, the escalator rolled down to the platform though nobody was waiting to get on. But there was one thing Grief could not do, prolong or shorten the stops, because the thirty-second stops between eight and ten in the morning and five and seven at night were part of the automatic programming and unchangeable. However, this did not make Grief feel the less powerful, no more than he would over his inability to stop the sun or cause an eclipse of the moon.

To the first stop, the track ran through the residential section of the city. But Grief saw no separate shapes of windows: instead, continually unwinding before his eyes ran a flashing, glassy ribbon, shimmering, like a road stretching ahead of a motor-car driver.

After the first stop, factories passed by and an enormous, dense blue sky which, in the residential section, had appeared only in patches. Sharp against the north-east sky rose the very smoke-stacks of the factory-museum which in fine, sunny weather could be seen from the roof-solarium on the building Grief lived in. Evenings, when it was dark, the stacks blazed with red lights—warning signals for aeroplanes. Pop had explained to Grief why the factories had needed such stacks, but all the same he had not understood. For Pop had once said that by the middle of the twentieth century people had already invented nuclear reactors and solar accumulators. And even a century before that, one chemist had said that you could burn paper money for heating purposes, but burning oil was a crime.

The second stop was also within the city limits. Beyond, right to the shore itself, stretched the parks and meadows that formed a complete ring round

the metropolis. Grie had seen the ring twice from a helicopter and, somehow or other, both times it had looked like the huge green ring into which the giant Gilgamesh had locked the toy houses of the toy people. But here, down on earth, there was no ring at all. There were hundred-metre tall eucalyptus-trees, giant sequoias and baobabs with enormous trunks. Yet against the pallid March sky where the horizon-ends vanished into the sea and beyond the hills, they merely looked like big trees; even the neighbouring maple-like plane-trees failed to give you a true picture of their natural size. This seemed strange to Grie, for he was long used to the fact that the size of things could be apprehended through comparison. Then why did hundred-metre giants look like ordinary trees, though the plane-trees—as tall as six-storey buildings—were no bigger than a small boy hiding his head on his father's knees? If he, Grie, stood beside such a tree...! Of a sudden Grie's eyes widened, as if in fright. But he was far from frightened. He laughed aloud because he had made an immense discovery all by himself, without Pop's help: man compared all things with himself, and only then did he really comprehend their size.

After a moment or two the same inertia, which at start-off had pressed Grie against the back of the seat, began to throw him forward. There were the poles of the El-track—at first flashing swiftly by in a haze, like fingers momentarily chopped across one's line of vision, they then began changing into vertically set pipes that curved downward and later straightened one after another till they were strictly parallel, and abruptly stopped. The loudspeaker announced: "Aquatoria. Last stop."

Three gigantic reservoirs—for whales, walruses and dolphins—stretched along the shore. In reality, they were part of the sea, strips partitioned off by a searchlight-lined concrete breakwater which stood a good hundred metres offshore.

In the nearest reservoir on the right, the one for dolphins, one section was fenced off as a play-aquatorium for children. It was stocked exclusively with riding-dolphins who had a word-stock of not less than one hundred words. In all the twelve years of its existence, there had never been one accident. Even so, children taking dolphin-rides had to wear life jackets or vests. This was a precaution in case of the slight likelihood of child or dolphin momentarily losing his head.

Having donned his life-belt, Grie went to the station hydrophone and ordered dolphin No. 113 to come into Sector Four.

Half a minute later, dolphin-113, nicknamed Deo, swam into the fourth sector. Grie was standing near by, about ten metres away, patiently waiting till the animal swam closer. But Deo did not stir a fin, and Grie waved to him. Deo had a perfect view of Grie waving his hand, but he made no move. Angry, Grie called Deo a donkey, and ran to the ramp-dock where the stubborn dolphin was lazily circling. Running up, Grie saw a raised blue-lettered Number Three underfoot, and almost tripped over it.

Finally settled on Deo's back, Grie spoke to him long and lovingly, asking his forgiveness in human language. Now Deo did not understand the words—they were not in his vocabulary. But he could not mistake the

intonation. He liked this boy who chattered on and on, holding a portable hydrophone at his mouth. And without question, Deo carried out his every command, even though it was far from easy.

Dozens of dolphins carrying children swam swiftly alongside, and every manoeuvre had to be calculated to the nearest centimetre. When they entered the south-western quadrant, Deo tore ahead at a speed of thirty kilometres an hour, almost colliding with a dolphin called Kell. Grie was in raptures, and Deo was too, such a wise and courteous Deo. 'Zz-zz-z! Tts! Zz-zz!' Deo whistled, wheezing like an inter-communications buzzer, in his delight.

"I d-don't understand," laughed Grie, in answer. And the dolphin, loving the game, whistled even more shrilly to amuse the boy.

The water in the aquatorium was heated to 89°F but after three hours Grie began to feel chilled from being so long in the water, despite its warmth. Deo turned north-west to enter the first sector. At first Grie did not catch on to the dolphin's manoeuvre, but when they began heading straight for the ramp-dock, he started beating his heels against the dolphin's sides and screaming into the hydrophone, insisting he make a wide-angled turn. The dolphin stopped, waiting patiently for the boy to become reasonable. After stormily protesting for about a minute, Grie calmed down and spoke to the dolphin, asking to be put ashore. Again the dolphin slipped through the water, as softly and noiselessly as if he were made of polished glass. The water did not even reach the boy's knees, though it had risen before like a bow-wave. Now it swept back in smooth slipstream.

Climbing up on the ramp, Grie pulled Deo close and pressed his cheek against the rough head. Then he stood up and made his way along the shore. At a turn in the path, he looked back, waved, and called out something. Soon he disappeared and, as before, Deo circled aimlessly in his place in the first sector, from which all the road could be seen right up to the turning.

It was twelve o'clock—the time school was out. Another five minutes and Anna Andreevna would march her class into the school cafeteria. The children ordered their lunch in the short recess following the first lesson. Later, all they had to do was press a button to get their order. Like all the others, Grie did this five times a week, every day but Saturday and Sunday. Except for today. For the first time since he had started school. Momentarily, Grie had the unpleasant feeling of being cut off and abandoned, but only for a moment. Before him the glass doors of the Aquatorium Cafe swung open as silently as the cafeteria doors at school, and the aromas here were just as appetizing as those he was used to.

Grie finished his lunch in fifteen minutes, and left. As he turned onto a gravel road he stopped, though there was no reason to, strictly speaking. For him, all roads led homeward now that it was approaching one o'clock. But what had seemed so unquestionably and obviously right before lunch, was no longer so obvious. Grie shuffled from foot to foot, and the gravel dryly crunched underfoot. A blackbird whistled long and shrill, while the wind swept through a clump of trees with a hurried whisper, now remonstrating, now calling to him to follow it, but very softly so that it was only discernible if he listened hard.

The electric bell rang from the station: the next El-tram was leaving for town. The whistling of the blackbirds spilled desolately over the grove of trees. Whistling in answer, Grie walked along the road toward the shade.

The grove was dark and shady, like a room in summer with the light piercing through a crack in closed shutters. The sounds here were different too—they clung to their sources, a bird, a tree, or a beetle burrowing its way beneath dry leaves. Even to the brook incessantly ruminating over something all along its way, and whose babbling never rose more than an inch above the surface.

Never before had Grie heard such silence as was here. It was an amazing silence, not at all like the silence he experienced at home when he was left alone. Grie raked some dry fallen leaves into a pile near a thuja pine-tree, and sat down with his back against the soft, resilient trunk. That way it was more comfortable to listen to the silence.

A blindingly bright disc of sunlight lay at the boy's feet, so bright it seemed like a visitor from another world. Above the disc rose a transparent haze, and for a moment the air became frosted over, like a mirror when you breathe on it. Then, with a kind of amazing quick-change that Grie missed, the disc suddenly grew as large as an ocean, and over this ocean swirled coils of steam that were as huge as threatening clouds. The most amazing thing, though, was that right in the middle of the ocean stood a thuja pine, which a moment before had stood in the grove, and there he was, Grie, sitting beneath and leaning against the trunk.

Once Grie imagined he saw a giant wave rising in the distance, on the horizon, and rushing straight at him. He bent over, ready to dive under it: but suddenly it was not a wave at all, but a bluish strip of fog running the whole length of the horizon. The strip hung motionless, while the ocean heaved monotonously between him and the horizon, sending up countless geysers that pulsed like the jets of non-synchronized fountains.

Several times Grie clearly saw the head of a gigantic grey snake with two flat sabre-like teeth. Grie told himself it was utter nonsense, because there never had been sabre-tooth snakes, but the head appeared again and again, and every time Grie noticed new details: little, hairy ears, pallid white eyes as unwinking and elastic as the pupils of a cat, an emerald hood and monstrous fins like pterodactyl wings.

Grie was not scared. On the contrary, a certain angry strength grew tumultuously inside him, demanding that he attack the monster at once. Against this rose a different feeling that cautioned and restrained Grie, so that reckless anger would not blind him to common sense. The monster retracted his fins, ready to lunge. Grie's jaw tightened, his breathing became slow and heavy, his scalp drew taut to the bone.

Fins back, the monster shot up over the waves, and millions of hail-stones all together showered down on Grie's head. Grie closed his eyes and covered his head with his arms, but the hail beat hard against his hands, trying to pierce a way through. The main thing, Grie told himself over and over, was to open his eyes, he had only to open his eyes and all this would vanish.

When he opened them, neither the ocean nor the grey finned snake was in

sight. There was no hail either: all the glade was studded with pine cones as lustreless as dusty cactus leaves. Grie gathered a few—they were amazingly like dwarf sea-urchins. Then he let them trickle from his hands over his head, but now they were only resilient cones, not like hail-stones at all.

The disc of sunlight still lay at his feet, but to the right of them now instead of to the left as before. Across the disc scurried some ants, tracing on it jagged lines resembling those of an international airlines map. At first the ants seemed absolutely alike, but on selecting two of them at random Grie could no longer tear his eyes away. For it seemed even these two differed from each other: one, with a scarcely noticeable brownish sheen, was slower; the other, as shiny as a black mirror, was bustling with energy. One would continually stop dead to meticulously inspect his load; the other dragged his burden point-blank ahead without stopping, not even turning aside if another ant happened to cross his path, but go right over his kinsman, load and all. The strangest thing was that his kinsman did not in the least rebel against this treatment, but would stop arid patiently wait till the black and shiny ant had got over with his load.

Suddenly Grie heard a shrill buzzing that sounded like a Lilliputian electric motor. It came from an oak-tree on his left, but however hard Grie looked he could not discover the source, either near the oak or beside the thuja; there was nothing but the cyanic-blue air pierced with sunbeams. Then the buzzing shifted its position—so swiftly one would think no dart had been made—and hung somewhere over Grie's head. Grie jerked back his head and caught a glimpse of a golden-grey gleam in the air just as he was flicked on the nose. At his feet fell an emerald jewel beetle, while the huge yellow-jacket wasp which had dropped it during an abrupt turn before landing suddenly rocketed up and away so fast that Grie failed to follow its flight.

The jewel beetle was dead. At least, however much Grie poked at it, the beetle remained as still as a dead thing insensible to pain. Yet its fuzzy legs were as flexible as if alive, and the transparent wings under the tough, horny, armour-like shell were as elastic and moist as a freshly caught grasshopper's. That, Grie decided, means it's alive and only pretending to be dead hoping to be discarded. But it was clear as day that the beetle could not keep up -the pretence for more than a minute, two at the most. However, when the two minutes were up, even after five and then ten minutes, the beetle was as indifferent as before, and made no attempt

to escape. Then Grie chose a place where the ants had gathered in such a tight pack that a needle could not be inserted between them, and dropped the beetle there. At first the ants shied away from the strange lump that had fallen like a bolt from the blue, but half a second was enough for them to get over their fright and they dashed at the beetle—now you could see only a hill of ants, each fighting to get to the bottom.

Grie waited a minute, but when the beetle must and should have run away, it remained motionless. Grie chased the ants away with a twig, picked the beetle up, again flexed and unflexed its hairy legs and partly opened the horny outer wings to feel the inner ones. Then he put it in his pocket.

The rays of sunshine were as bright as ever, but they all strove to flatten out on the ground: the angle between them and the ground was now scarcely 30 degrees. Grie knew they would slant earthward with increasing swiftness, and in two hours would lay completely flat like fallen trees—the March sun sets quickly after five in the afternoon.

Filling his spare pockets with pine cones, Grie came out on the gravel road. In twenty minutes he was turning left at a road sign pointing to the Aquatoria Station.

Grie got back home at six. The doors were wide open, and he went through all four rooms: there was nobody home. Turning on the telephone-secretary, Grie heard Anna Andreevna's voice: "Your son did not come to school today.

Please let me know the reason." Strange, thought Grie, it seems nobody knows all that I know, not even the smallest detail. Not, Pop, nor Mum, not even Anna Andreevna, who knows everything in the world according to Lana.

Putting his cones on the table, Grie pulled out the beetle. In the gloom it gleamed with gold-green spots fading at the edges. Grie turned on the table lamp, and violet tones appeared that were not there before. He turned the beetle over on its back and pressed its abdomen with a pencil: the abdomen was soft. Two or three hours after the time of death, it becomes glassy and brittle, raspy. But perhaps too little time had passed for rigor mortis to set in.

The everyday glasses and dishes were in the dining-room; the crystal glasses were in Mum's room in the elliptical cabinet. Mum's room was closer. Grie did not stop to choose, he took the first that came to hand: a rosy crystal goblet with three diamond-shaped feet. Dropping the beetle in the glass, Grie looked for a sheet of thick paper, made holes in it, and pressed it over the vessel. Then he sat at the table and glued his eyes to the beetle. Once he imagined it stirred its feet. But he was not quite sure: sometimes things, even those deliberately motionless, begin to come alive when you look at them hard—first the edges and the various delicate lines. Grie closed his eyes and rubbed them—no, the beetle was absolutely motionless. Suddenly Pop's voice spoke from the wall: "Grie, can you hear me? Answer, can you hear me?"

Only now Grie noticed that his pocket walkie-talkie, which he had hidden in a drawer three weeks ago, was hanging on the wall. The strangest thing was that when he had come in he had not noticed it, nor that the red indicator was lit up—the signal that it was turned on.

"Yes, Pop," cried Grie. "I hear you! I'm home."

"So!" said Pop. "And does Mum know you're home?"

"Mum never called up. But she probably will in a moment."

Pop did not answer. He did not even say his usual 'Good!' which gave Grie the feeling of security and well-being.

Three minutes later, Mum called. As soon as Grie lifted the receiver and said 'Hello, this is Grie', Mum abruptly told him he was a good-for-nothing boy, that he had no heart, that he didn't love his mother and had no pity.

Pop and Mum arrived together. Mum took a tablet, standing up, when Pop

brought her a quarter of a glass of water, her usual portion. And Grie patiently waited for the world to return to normal, to the way it had probably been for a thousand years. Pop and Mum sat down, but their son stood by the table. Even if he—an ill-bred boy—should lean on the table, for all he knew they would say: 'Keep your hands at your sides, down the seams of your trousers!' Grie had long wanted to ask why they said 'down the seams': you see, his trousers were seamless. But this question always occurred to him at an awkward moment, when it was impossible to ask any questions. First, Grie stood close up to the table, but immediately had to take a pace back, because he couldn't control his right hand—all by itself, it seemed to land on the table. It seemed to Grie that Pop was smiling. But this, of course, was only imagination because Pop's face was harsh, his lips tightly shut, his eyes ... well, Grie wasn't very anxious to look into them right now. Yet the first words Pop used were about eyes:

"Grie, look me in the eye."

"I'm looking, Pop," said Grie, turning his gaze on the window.

"Grie," repeated Pop, "look me in the eye!"

Grie tried as hard as he could to look Pop right in the eye, and he probably would have made it if Mum had not suddenly mixed in.

"As if ho could look his father in the eye! If there was only a little shame in his own eyes, some sign of having a conscience."

Grie could never understand Mum's tendency to contrast his eyes, tongue or nose to his own self, using such names as shameless eyes, loose tongue, long face and so on. Apparently, Pop did not understand Mum at such times either, because when she started that he would tell her very gently, almost in a whisper: "Grie and I will come to your room in five minutes."

And this time, it all happened exactly in the same way, with the exception of one quite new and not too clear sentence of Mum's: "Have it your way, but you're too liberal with him. It won't lead to any good."

Pop did not reply. He only smiled and slightly raised his brows, and this made his face look very kindly, so kindly that Grie smiled in response, as if all the unpleasantness were over.

When Mum left the room, Pop made Grie sit in a chair and tell everything in detail—first, why he played hooky from school, and second, where he had been the whole day.

Grie told Pop what a morning it had been that day, such a sun and such a sky. No, 'honour bright', he hadn't thought it up beforehand. His legs had automatically brought him to the Institute of Marine Life, and there—well, Pop must know—right beside it was the elevated monorail station. And the railway took him to the seashore, and at the seashore was the aquatorium, and in the aquatorium were dolphins. And afterwards, when you leave the seashore, if you turn left there's a grove of trees. Oh yes, Grie had completely forgotten: on the way to the grove was the Aquatorium Cafe, and he had had his lunch there.

Pop listened to Grie silently. Pop was a good listener, he did not ask leading questions, or catch you up on a word, wave his arms or shake his

head sadly. Sometimes Grie had a strange feeling: as if Pop were right in front of him, and then suddenly vanished. That is, not altogether vanished, but as if he had lost his usual form and become everything that surrounded Grie. The strangest thing was that at the same time Grie could clearly see Pop sitting in his chair.

"Pop," said Grie, "that gold beetle we found, is it alive?"

Pop smiled. Now Grie knew that Pop was truly smiling. But he did not notice the slip he had made, though his father noticed and yet did not correct his son because, from the moment Grie had talked about the grove, he had not been there alone but with his father; and they had also found the jewel beetle together. And his father that day had clearly heard the shrill buzzing like that of a Lilliputian electric motor. And both of them, father and son, had thrown back their heads to find where it came from.

Then, without asking permission, Grie ran to the window-sill, grabbed the goblet with the beetle inside and put it in front of his father.

"Look, Pop. See how flexible the legs are. And the wings are soft. And the belly's soft. And remember, when we threw it to the ants, it did not try to escape. Why? Does that mean it is really dead?"

Pop suddenly broke out laughing and Grie too—he always joined in when Pop laughed.

"No," said Pop. "The beetle is neither dead nor alive: it's in a half-way state. The hornet or yellow-jacket wasp paralysed the nervous system with its venom, and at the same time it preserved the beetle's body from decomposing. Conserved it, so to say, as a meal for its larvae. However, the beetle retains the minimum of the functions of life. As a matter of fact, it is simply a 'preserving' process, no more. By the way, people preserve their food now by a recipe using hornet venom. Even the terminology is retained—hornetization.

Pop laughed once more, and Grie joined in. But this time Grie stopped laughing long before Pop did, and began begging his father to calm down. Grie pulled Pop's sleeve a dozen times before he got results. Finally Pop stopped, clapped Grie on the shoulder and spoke the words Mum so detested.

"Shoot, sonny, what's next?"

But Pop could not answer Grie's next question. He even told him straight out: "I can't answer that one." Then he added: "Nobody else can, either. Amazing, but it's a fact. We aren't any further ahead than people were two hundred years ago; we don't even know exactly why the hornet picks on the jewel beetle, or how it distinguishes its victim from other beetles, especially as jewel beetles themselves are extremely different in appearance. The oak-beetle is not a bit like the poplar-beetle, and the gold-pitted emerald beetle is very much of a white crow in the beetle family."

Grie listened very attentively, and when Pop fell unexpectedly silent, thinking about something far away—you could see by his eyes that it was about something quite remote—Grie suddenly asked whether Anna Andreevna could explain the behaviour of the beetle-murdering hornet.

"I doubt it," answered Pop.

"I doubt it," Pop repeated, and Grie could clearly hear the voice of his teacher who would insist to him, Grie, that hornets were guided by instinct, and that that was quite enough for today, that an exhaustive answer would be given him when he reached the seventh form at lessons in biocybernetics and parapsychology.

Pop was still thinking his own, far-away thoughts, which was why he did not pay attention to Grie's words.

"I don't want to go to school."

Then Grie said it again.

"Pop, I won't go to school."

This time Pop heard him and once more, as he had last summer which was almost a year ago, he told Grie not to talk nonsense. But Grie repeated it a third time, and Pop no longer talked about nonsense or acting silly, but said very strictly that tomorrow they would go to school together.

Then Pop knocked over the goblet: it fell to the floor and the diamond-shaped feet were chipped off. Mum was extremely irritated, because these crystal goblets were her favourites. Besides, it was one more piece of evidence proving how great were the forces of chaos and entropy, and how swiftly they spread.

"Yes," said Pop, "you're absolutely right. Our forefathers, with their primitive way of thinking, put it this way: 'When trouble comes in at the window, open the doors!'"

"Oh, you're always the cheerful one!"

"Not always," Pop objected, smiling, and kissed Mum on both cheeks, both eyes, both ears and then her forehead—because seven is a sacred number.

Grie could always tell exactly what mood

Anna Andreevna was in. But today, for the first time, he was taken aback. She was as polite as ever, very courteous, and once even called him 'my boy', but all of it was oddly different from the usual atmosphere set by habit and continuing day after day. Anna Andreevna already knew that Grie had played hooky—Pop had called her yesterday so she wouldn't worry—and she also knew that Grie did not want to come to school. Though Grie never guessed that Pop had had a talk with the teacher, would it have changed things if he had known? After all, he held no grudge against Anna Andreevna and did not blame her for his not liking school. In her place, there might have been another teacher— and just the same Grie would not have wanted to go to school. Didn't he like Anna Andreevna? That wasn't it: she was ordinary, like the majority, and lo Grie she was the same as all other people. Naturally, Ilia and Lana admired her because she was 'so utterly, utterly special, the best teacher in the world' — but Grie found their calf love merely disgusting. Though Anna Andreevna, as a person, had nothing to do with it. No, this was quite a different thing—quite simply, Grie was bored during the lessons. Just why he was bored, Grie couldn't have said. According to Ilia, school was very interesting: today you don't know, tomorrow you do; today you don't understand, tomorrow you'll understand everything. But with Grie, for some reason, it was right the other way round:

today, things are clear; tomorrow, they're not. And the most surprising of all was how really good Grie felt when what was clear as day suddenly turned out not to be; or when something simple became so complicated, so confusing, that even Pop could not explain it to him, to Grie, nor to himself either. And besides, they almost never talked at lessons about the most important things—those important things Grie's head was always busy with. When Grie asked questions, without fail Anna Andreevna referred him to the future.

"That is learned in the fifth form, this in the seventh, something else in the tenth. Science, Grie, above all is a system, and it is based on moving from the simple to the complex."

Pop also said that science was a system. But either Pop's voice was different, or his eyes were—because the same words had a different ring when Pop said them, and the world around did not lose its shine.

"Children," said Anna Andreevna, when the bell rang, "yesterday Grie played hooky. We won't talk about it now, as to whether it was good or bad. We shall first hear what Grie has to say."

"Well," began Grie, "I got up, did morning drill, washed, had breakfast and left home at a quarter past eight. It takes me five minutes to walk to school, but suddenly I saw an El-tram which goes to the sea...."

"But didn't you ever see it before? If you came across an aeroplane, would you go off to Africa or Patagonia?"

"Be silent, Ilia," Anna Andreevna checked her.

"To Africa or Patagonia?" Grie repeated.

"I could not come across an aeroplane. A helicopter, yes, but not an aeroplane."

"Grie," said the teacher, "you're digressing. Tell everything, just as it happened."

Nobody interrupted Grie again, and he repeated his story of yesterday, word for word: about the dolphin Deo, about the grove, the ants, and the beetle-killing hornet. But now it was not simply a repetition, because Grie remembered Pop's explanations. None of them knew that Grie was weaving in Pop's words, and it came out as if Grie had known all this from the very start.

Ilia was the first to raise her hand. Naturally, she said, what Grie had told them was not without interest. But just think what would happen, she said, if every schoolchild acted at his own sweet will. Discipline was obligatory for all, and Grie needn't think we were going to make an exception in his case. That was all very well long, long ago, when people were still not very wise, when there were all kinds of princes and princesses—bluebloods they called them. But now everybody knew quite well that all people's blood was the same colour—red.

Then Lana took the floor. First of all, she explained, she fully agreed with Ilia. But in addition, she wished to voice her indignation at Grie's egoism. He had cared only about his personal pleasure, and had not in the least thought about the worry he was causing his mother, father and Anna Andreevna. Of course, she didn't think Grie did it on purpose, out of spite,

but certainly from egoism, because egoism blinds a person to everyone but himself.

After Lana came Lim, then Ada and Saul. Yes, they said, Grie deserved severe blame for his act. However, we must not judge Grie, but help him, because anybody can make a mistake—a car runs on four wheels, yet still overturns.

"I think Lim, Ada and Saul are right," said Anna Andreevna, smiling. And now it was clear to everybody that she was in a good mood. "Now we will give the floor to Grie again."

Did he realize what he had done? Yes, he did. Did he understand that he had worried his parents and Anna Andreevna? He did, and he asked the teacher's pardon. And at home he would ask his mother and father to forgive him, but if his classmates insisted he could do it here, in the classroom.

Grie waited a minute. Nobody insisted, and he spoke again: "But I don't like school, and I will not come to the lessons."

He had scarcely uttered the words about school and the lessons, when Ilia threw up her hand. But this time the teacher would not let her speak. This time, she spoke herself.

"If Grie is so stubborn," she said, "we will meet his wishes, children. From today, Grie is excused from the lessons in the classroom. From today, he will study on the seventh floor, in a separate room."

And the children remembered the mysterious seventh floor, and the boys sitting there in loneliness among the electronic machines; and the last, empty room they had seen when the school year began, about which Anna Andreevna had said: "But I'm sure nobody will end up here from our form."

"However," Anna Andreevna made a pause, "when Grie honestly improves and wants to return to us, we'll always find room for him."

A quarter of an hour later, the lift took Grie and his father up to the seventh floor. They were met by an elderly man with white hair, like the hair of an albino deer, and with blue eyes— so blue they seemed like a piece of the sky cut out in the form of human eyes.

"Oh, Dean Grigoryevich," he cried happily. "I'm terribly pleased to see you. And who's this? Your son? Glad to meet you, young man. I'm Gore Maxovich, and you? Grie? Grigory, that must be. Grigory Deanovich. Glad, terribly glad, to welcome you here to our empyrean heights. Well, now, come along into your study."

The old man smiled all the time. And the strangest thing was that Grie also wanted to smile for some reason; and not just smile, but laugh—laugh till it hurt, like when you romp and roll with a dog on the grass when he licks you all over, now on the ear, now the nose, now on the mouth. Pop smiled too. But only at first. Later, when Gore Maxovich began speaking of a mutual acquaintance by the strange name of Elu-the-Big, Pop stopped smiling. He merely nodded, and narrowed his eyes now and then. Grie knew this squint of Pop's well—it always appeared when Pop was dissatisfied with himself.

"Oh, don't be so modest, Dean Grigoryevich," the older man put in hurriedly. "Elu-the-Big is magnificent and you, as the designer, should be

proud of him. Though the emotional analysis of tests, frankly speaking, does not come easy to him."

Pop sighed.

"You're much too lenient, Gore Maxovich. At the outside, he is a barely average teaching-computer."

Gore Maxovich began a despairing protest and, in search of support, alluded to that far-off time when the respected Dean Grigoryevich, then Grie's age, sat in this very same room and furiously argued that the Electronic Teacher-2, or Elu-Two as everybody called it, was over-marking.

"Ah," and Gore raised his finger in reproof, "self-criticism is all very well, but one mustn't overdo it. No, indeed!"

Grie had stopped by the table in the middle of the room. Pop stood by the window.

"Sit down," Gore commanded, patting Grie on the head. "And now relate how you spent the day, yesterday. First, orally, and then write it out—here, use this paper."

"Whom will I tell it to?" asked Grie.

"To nobody," and the older man shrugged. "If, of course, you don't count yourself a listener. Your father has probably told you the story of the old eccentric who talked to himself on the street. 'Say, Mister,' asked one solicitous youngster, 'why do you talk to yourself?' 'Eh, young fellow,' the old man answered, 'it's so nice, d'you know, to talk with a clever man.' And now to work, young Grie," Gore finished, with unexpected severity.

Pop and Gore Maxovich went out: Grie was left alone. At first he was busy thinking about the jovial Gore, then about Pop—who apparently had invented the machine Elu-the-Big; afterwards about the meeting in his form, and back to the broken crystal goblet and, finally, about yesterday morning when there had been just as much sunshine as today. Grie clicked his tongue, trying to reproduce Deo's voice, but he did not come very close because the squeaking sound was missing—the somewhat grating creak of a hard-to-open door.

Now Grie was ready to start his task: but there was something ridiculous about talking to himself. Come to think of it, what could he tell himself that he didn't already know? After all, it was he who had seen it all, heard it all, thought it all out. And he had already told it twice: first to Pop, then to his classmates.

It was very quiet in the room: the quietness here could be heard like the silence there in the grove. Grie listened hard: something crackled monotonously away in Elu-the-Big, who every fifteen seconds gave a click like a knife blade severing an over dry, brittle recording-tape. Then came a splutter, and Elu-the-Big gave a clucking sound that was an exact copy of Deo's delighted chortle. Grie burst out laughing, and told Elu that he could cluck too, but he could no more talk with him than he could with Deo. Yet if he could tell Deo about yesterday, the dolphin's eyes would brighten merrily and he would whistle away in delight like an intercom buzzer somebody had forgotten to switch off.

"Tss! Tss! ZZ-zz-z!" buzzed Elu.

"All right, then," said Grie, reconciled. "I have to tell it to somebody, anyhow, and there's nobody else here but you to hear me."

And Grie related once more the story of his amazing day without faltering even once, not till he got to the very place where the wasp stung his victim—suddenly it became terribly important to figure out where the sting was made.

"If it were done on the outer wings, then probably nothing would have come of it," Grie reasoned aloud. "Because those wings are chiti-nous. So it has to be done in a soft place. But how does the hornet know it has to sting the beetle in a soft part of the body?"

With frightening suddenness, a sick anxiety settled on Grie: first he leaned against the window—down below in the school yard, children were playing—then he started to pace the room, then began tormenting Elu-the-Big to tell him the answer, and finally called it a stupid dolt and slapped his hand on Elu's green eye, to boot.

Elu was silent but, almost coincident with the slap, the door opened and Pop and Gore Maxovich came in.

"What's the matter, Grigory?" cried the old man. "Acting like an ignorant blockhead! You won't get anywhere taking out your anger on anything that comes to hand. You must admit, young Grigory, that's no way to behave. Elu doesn't deserve it. D'you hear how the poor thing gasps?"

Elu-the-Big gasped twice: first long and heavily, especially on the intake, and then exhaled a short, sharp sigh.

Looking at Grie with blue, amused eyes, Gore Maxovich said it was time to do the written work. Then he turned round at the door on his way out, raised a threatening finger and reminded him that anger did not become a proper man.

Grie finished it toward noon: it took him two hours and a quarter. When it struck twelve, Grie was surprised—time seemed to be a variable thing, as if similar periods of time were of different duration.

"As if time had slopped," he told Pop and Gore Maxovich.

"Maybe it really had?" suggested the older man, seriously, and Grie felt that he was far from joking when he said it.

Gore Maxovich neatly folded the sheets Grie had written and solemnly opened the door for him.

"You are free, Grigory, until one o'clock. If I had that much time, I should spend the first half of it in the swimming pool, and the second having lunch topped off with a ten-minute walk."

"May I, Pop?" asked the boy, uncertainly.

"Grie," his father shrugged, "Gore Maxovich is in charge here. And if he advised me to go swimming, I shouldn't waste any time."

A minute later, travelling in 'third gear', Grie was already crossing the school yard.

"Well, and now we'll hear what Elu-the-Big has to tell us. Not hear, but look, rather," Gore corrected himself.

After turning on the video-screen, Gore muttered at first to himself, then let out a cascade of 'Hm, Hm's' modulating them from something indistinct

to irreproachable articulation, and finally made a pronouncement in the trumpet voice of an electronic news-despatcher.

"And so, my dear Dean Grigoryevich, for yesterday your son gave out 280 units of information by the Rozov-Anjou scale, instead of the 60 units on the school programme. That is for oral work. Now, let's see what the written variant gives us. Aha, aha—240. That's without any graphological analysis. Wait a minute, so— another 60. All together, that makes 300."

"Right," replied Dean Grigoryevich, his fingers drumming on the control board, "but it's absolutely clear that the oral work in textual values is no worse than the written text, so it contains even more information."

"Exactly," joined in Gore, "though not in the pure, so to say, skeletal form; but rather in the underlying emotional tones found only in voice modulation and gestures. The voice, eyes and hands of a person reveal what he cannot put into words. And Elu-the-Big doesn't take this information into account. For Elu, the signal lies in the word alone. It knows no difference between a gifted mime and one of the ancient stone-woman statues of the steppes."

Cleaving the room diagonally as he strode, Dean Grigoryevich involuntarily stopped every time he reached the centre, where the diagonals crossed. Then he marched to the window and looked below for fifteen minutes, unable to tear himself away. Children were playing in the school yard—laughing, playing Indians as the custom has been for a century or two, racing one another and squealing with delight if they won or frowning if they lost. What would Elu-the-Big say about these children? Nothing: for Elu they were not information-bearers.

Then Gric suddenly appeared in their midst down in the yard. He was tearing along at a rocking gallop, imitating a horse. Dean Grigoryevich smiled. He mused on the fact that the information this boy had given out yesterday and today had shot an avalanche of ideas into his father's head. Who knows, he thought, maybe the design of a new Elu will crystallize out of these very ideas. The mathematician Turing had first spoken of idea-avalanches a century ago. He believed them to be an exclusive trait of gifted personalities. But perhaps Turing was mistaken? Most likely he was: in any case, the time characteristic of this function was absolutely necessary: children nearly always thought creatively. The thousands of childish 'Why's?'— so tiring to an adult—represented a chain reaction, Turing's idea-avalanche.

Why don't we give credence to children? What happens to these idea-avalanches when children grow up? Do they vanish spontaneously or are they crushed from without? Albert Einstein admitted that he had been a child much too long.

But you had to stop somewhere. Impossible to believe implicitly in the quirks of a child. Laziness, idleness, light-mindedness, futile daydreaming— children had these too. But what was laziness in reality? If you discarded all the moral verdicts, then laziness was nothing but a reluctance on the part of a system to function in a given direction. Yet top functioning was a natural state with any normal self-run system. Then why did it set up resistance?

Could it be that it was instinctively protecting its personal 'id' from awaited exposure? Maybe....

"Strange," said Dean aloud, breaking the silence suddenly.

"Nothing strange about it," his companion put in. "In Yasnaya Polyana there once lived a remarkable old man. But this great man wasn't old, by the way, when he wrote his small article entitled 'Who Is Teaching Whom?' which went on to prove that we—experienced know-it-alls— learn from children."

"Right," Dean laughed. "At any rate, the wiser of the barbarian tribe of adults do. But who can determine the correct borderlines of the truth? The most difficult thing of all is to stop in time. Formerly, people didn't manage this so well. And now? I know, you are already picturing Grie here with you, but...."

"In short," Gore suddenly interrupted, "my old-fashioned grandfather denned a situation like this more clearly: there's many a slip between the cup and the lip! Grie must stay here, on the seventh, in a specially programmed class—getting

ten years of education in seven, plus the green light to follow his inclinations. But his father's afraid of making ... mm ... mm ... a mistake. He can't decide whether he should indulge his son's bent or, on the contrary, act against it." "Yes," nodded Dean. "Your old-fashioned grandfather was right. I'm not so sure whether this exceptional talent for observing, this sensitivity, actually is the real Grie. After three years—why three?—after a year, all this may vanish into thin air. But the memory of once being extraordinary is not an easy thing to live with."

"That beats all!" cried Gore. "Then would you kindly tell me whose future may be foretold by your Elu? Whose destiny has he the right to deal with? Anyone's, only not your son's! Right? Answer me that, am I right? Then what the devil is your Elu good for? Nothing?"

"The whole trouble is," sighed Dean, "that Elu is no wiser than you or I. The school system down through the years—reservations don't alter the fact—has been based on an absurd axiom: man is standardized, apart from his merits. So differentiations, with rare exceptions, show up only in the future, when our schooldays are already a rosy, elegaic and useless memory, like that of first love. Why, even Elu sees only the past and present, and those only out of the corner of his eye." Dean burst out laughing. "And as before, the Greek moiras or the Roman parcae lock us up, and throw the keys into the future."

"And is that all you can say?" the old man asked dryly. "So first we look for the keys, and only then decide what to do with our own son?"

"Don't be angry, my dear Gore...."

"Don't you play the fool, Dean. And don't forget what lies between the lock and the key— sometimes a person's whole life."

"And so," Dean added cheerfully, "hail to the masterkey! But don't forget Gan Brunov, the child wonder, who amused himself with integrals at seven years of age, but at twenty found himself an ordinary programmer with such extraordinary conceit that it almost brought him to suicide."

"Fine," said Gore pacifically. "You keep on protecting Grief from a possible mental drama which is envisaged by the theory of chance and your life experience. But what will become of the grown man when he suddenly discovers that he has accomplished ten times less than he could have, and his father and the school are to blame? You notice, I say nothing of the interests of society which needs everyday workable units rather than wonder store-houses of energy."

Turning sharply, Dean Grigoryevich raised his fist as if intending to hit something invisible standing between him and Gore, but there came a quick buzzing sound, impatient, insistent—and Grief flew in through the opening door. His face was crimson, and dark runnels of sweat that started at the temples streaked down to his chin.

"Pop," he cried, "guess who came in first? I did—me! And everybody at the pool was surprised, and asked where I learned to swim like that."

"Everybody who was there?"

"Everybody!"

"Perhaps not everyone? After all, you couldn't see and hear all of them at once."

"Everybody, Pop, really."

"Well, what do you say to that, Gore Maxovich? Did you ever see such a dreadful show-off? And just imagine, three months ago this fellow was accusing his classmates of boasting, which he said was merely a synonym for stupidity. Grief, tell Gore Maxovich about that little episode."

"Pop, I'm not bragging. It really was that way: everybody was surprised and asked me questions."

"You don't say," said his father. "In that case boasters are all-seeing and all-hearing: they have four eyes and four ears like the four cardinal points of the compass."

Grief dropped his head unhappily and stood quite still until Gore Maxovich told him to take his seat. Then, before Grief started his lessons, Gore began thinking aloud, recalling what an incessant boaster Dean had been, Grief's father. Dean's eyes threatened, a warning finger went to his lips, his head shook—but Gore was implacable and concluded by saying that children should know only the truth about their fathers.

"Right, Grief? That's true, isn't it?"

"Yes," Grief answered quietly, not raising his head.

"And then," added Gore, "they will be better than their fathers. For that's the purpose of progress."

The following day, at a schoolteachers' council meeting, the prior results of the inquiry were reviewed, and Grief was excluded from the pupils taking the general curriculum. The same day, he was moved to the seventh floor to be under the guidance of Gore Maxovich.

That evening Mum laid the table for company. Pop was displeased: there was no need, he said. It was out of place. But Mum laughed very, very much, and said it wasn't the Middle Ages, that puritanism and asceticism had long ceased being virtues. Then the guests arrived. As if in collusion,

the women repeated with one accord: "Is this Grie? I wouldn't have known him. How he's grown!"

Mum told them about his remarkable results, turning each time to Grie and adding: "Now, don't go getting a swelled head, Grie!"

When the guests had gone, Pop said that laurel leaves were heavy, and wreaths made of them had broken the neck of more than one.

"Dean," Mum's voice was tender, but a bit reproachful just as it had been when she raised her glass of champagne to drink to Grie's success yet scolded him at the same time, demanding modesty. "Dean," she said, "no sociology and no philosophy. I want to be happy. Simply happy, don't you see?"

"No," laughed Pop. "I don't see. I'm like the giraffe: on Monday I get wet feet, and on Friday I see I've caught cold."

Three weeks later, on Tuesday, April 15, Grie played hooky again from school. He returned home at three in the afternoon—his usual time.

On Thursday night, Gore Maxovich telephoned and asked Dean Grigoryevich to drop in and see him at school, if possible.

As father and son went to school, each was busy with his thoughts—Grie wondering if Gore Maxovich would tell Pop about his skipping school, and Dean Grigoryevich suppressing the temptation to ask his son if he knew why the teacher had asked him to come.

Gore met them at the doors and, without waste of time, led Dean over to a table where a huge sheet of paper was spread out, spotted with diagrams.

"Look, my dear fellow, and you'll be simply amazed. Again I see Aphrodite rising from the foam," he cried noisily, tapping his finger on the paper. "None but the blind would see here only a broken succession."

Dean Grigoryevich was not blind, but all the same he failed to see an Aphrodite born of the foam: he saw the curve on Grie's study-graph for the past three weeks. After the tenth day, the line dropped ever sharper so that by the sixteenth day it had turned into a plumb line stopping somewhere between forty and fifty information units—fifteen units lower than the average for a first former. But on the eighteenth day, it shot up to a mark of 340 and kept rocketing until the nineteenth day, yesterday, where it rose another thirty units. The seventeenth day was omitted from the chart.

"Gore Maxovich," Dean exclaimed, "the seventeenth day is missing."

"No," said Gore, pointing a finger at Grie.

"It is only missing on the report chart. Where were you on Tuesday, Grie?... Did you hear that, Dean? In the entomological gardens. Why did you want to go there? Amazing! A comprehensive answer, and a very original one: 'I don't know, I simply wanted to.' Why didn't you tell your father about it? Aha, clear enough—he didn't wish to hurt him. Now, Grie, you go and take a walk for a quarter of an hour."

Hardly had Grie's footsteps died away at the end of the corridor, when the itch to declaim left Gore Maxovich. For a minute, they were both silent. Then the elder man went to Elu-the-Big, and laid his hand over the green eye.

"These words are not for him," he said. "Though, honestly, I wouldn't

hesitate to admit his genius as a pedagogue if only he could speed up the information-current of my scholars beforehand, if only by one or two weeks. Why did Grie want to go there, to the entomological gardens? Why only on the seventeenth day, though his study curve plainly dropped from the tenth? Why?"

"I don't know, I don't understand at all," whispered Dean. "The symptoms or signs are there, but no prognosis. Elu is simply an untalented accumulator of constants. And it was my son who helped me to understand this, my own son. Intuition guides Grie. But how long will it serve him? Elu shows the measure of his giftedness. But I must know whether his giftedness is stable, otherwise it is all a mirage, a mirage which may melt away under the first rays of a rising sun."

"No, Dean, that's not right," cried Gore. "A researcher has no right to put the question in an 'all-or-nothing' way. And however much you want to see a thousand per cent guarantee of the future this moment, today, you'll get nowhere. Maybe your son will manage this, or perhaps only his grandson. But if your new Elu could see a week, or a month ahead, we would move forward twice as fast, and more surely."

"Twice as fast, and more surely," repeated Dean mechanically, viewing the picture which rose before him even before the older man had attacked him with reproaches and disclosures. This picture had followed him persistently for a month: a motor car travelling at great speed on salt flats, the headlights throwing their beams 200 metres ahead; beyond, right to the horizon, lay only thick darkness. His desire to increase the speed was almost unbearable, but to do that one had to see the whole road, right to the horizon.

But how? How could he see all of it? Was it actually in man's power to do it? What if the moiras and parcae did not represent the brilliant insight of human intuition at all, but both were only alluring and convenient poetical images?

Good, let's assume that. Let's assume it's impossible to see the road in all its details. But it might be possible to determine the direction! You see, the working of a system in time—that is certainly a direction. But what did he, personally, know of the system that was called Grie, or about the systems which, under millions of names, were jumping for joy or were way down in the dumps, or were playing the fool that very moment on all six continents!

When he designed his first Elu, the President of the Pedagogical Academy announced at the annual convocation that school had at last put on seven-league boots. And everybody had applauded his words. As if those same seven-league boots hadn't been gathering dust for a good fifty years in museums of astronautics and nuclear physics, even in medical museums! And nobody had remembered that teaching, as previously, called itself a science; nobody had remembered, either, that Rabelaisian allegory which was made by the President of the Academy of Science: when children play at being mermen or spacemen, it is foolish and inhuman to disenchant them—one should wait till they grow up.

"Odd, you know," said Dean of a sudden, "that teaching, the most ancient

of the humanities, is only beginning. And perhaps.... Nostalgia, I guess, remembering ... Gore Maxovich."

"Dean," said the older man, speaking very sternly, strictly, "stop complaining, or I'll put you outside the door. After a quarter of a century you should have, must have, become a man. When you went to school, there was only Elu-Two, and now we have Elu-the-Big. After him will come Elu-Maximus, Elu-Magnus, Elu-Ultramagnus and...."

"And that's the purpose of progress," smiled Dean, but his eyes remained sad. "Just the same, for me, for us ... this is a difficult time; more difficult, perhaps, than it was four and a half centuries ago for Komensky; three hundred years ago for the good Pestalozzi."

"No," cried Gore, "it's not...."

The very moment he stepped forward to grip his opponent by his jacket lapels, Grie opened the door and called out that he was tired of loafing around in the school gardens, where they stopped you a thousand times to give a lecture. It was better sitting here with Elu-the-Big. Why was that, why Elu? Because Elu only says what's right and what's wrong, without jawing you about it.

"D'you hear that, you doubting Thomas, you!" cried Gore, shaking a finger at Dean Grigoryevich. "Elu teaches, but doesn't lecture. You fix it so that hateful old Gore doesn't have to be here at all on the seventh floor, so that Elu-Magnus and Elu-the-Great will push all this present company out of here ... Elu-the-Big and old Gore!"

"And time? And..." Dean indicated his son with his eyes. "And him?"

"Don't make a tragedy of it, old fellow!" Again the itch to make a speech caught old Gore. "What is a tragedy? Only want of faith, only empty want of faith, and fear!"

Transferring Elu's keys to the orange light, Grie tapped out a story on a free topic: "The Life and Habits of the Venomous Beetle-Murderer." The old teacher turned on the signal: 'Quiet! Lesson time.' And busied himself quietly with the graphic report tables.

At first, Dean Grigoryevich leaned over his son, but after five minutes he walked over to the window: the school yard and gardens, the playing fields, were empty. Only the sun below, on Earth, was not empty or meaningless, but held much. So fantastically much. And as before, when the old teacher was reproaching him, once more he saw before him the car and the salt flats lighted for two hundred metres, not more, by the car headlights. But there was a light far away on the horizon—a delicate arch, that belted the Earth, though between the arch of light and the lighted road on the salt-flats lay a thick and absolute darkness.

Teaching, the most ancient of the humanities, was only beginning.

Apparently, he spoke aloud. Yes, aloud: for the yellow light flared up: 'Routine Broken' — and old Gore threatened him with a finger, nodding at the red signal light: 'QUIET! LESSON TIME.'