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Our journey got off to a fairly smooth start.

We were in a second-class carriage, each with a seat of our own. We were sitting the way passengers are generally meant to sit—no one was curled up underneath the seats or lying up above in the luggage rack.

My impresario, the pseudonymous Gooskin, became very agitated: Why was the train taking so long to leave? And then, when it finally did leave, he said it was ahead of schedule.

“And that’s a bad omen. Goodness knows what will happen now!”

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Along with our own group, there were three other ladies in the compartment. They were talking very quietly, sometimes even in a whisper, about matters all too close to our immediate concerns: who had managed to smuggle their money and diamonds abroad, and how.

“Have you heard? The Prokins managed to get away with their entire fortune. They used their old grandmother as a mule.”

“But how come the grandmother didn’t get searched?”

“How can you ask? She’s so unpleasant. Who would dare?”

“As for the Korkins, they were really smart. And all on the spur of the moment! Madame Korkina, who’d already been searched, was standing to one side. And then, all of a sudden—‘Ow! Ow!’—she twists her ankle. She can’t walk, she

can't even take a single step. Her husband, who hasn't been searched yet, says to a Red Army soldier, 'Please pass her my stick. She needs it.' The soldier gives her the stick. And it's the stick they've hollowed out and stuffed with diamonds. How do you like that?"

"The Bulkins have a teapot with a false bottom."

"Fanichka took a huge diamond out of the country—you'll never believe this—by stuffing it up her own nose."

"All very well for her—she's got a fifty-carat nose. But we aren't all as lucky as her."

Then they told the tragic tale of how a certain Madame Fook cleverly hid a diamond in an egg. She made a small hole in the shell of a raw egg, put the diamond inside, and then hard-boiled the egg: Who could find her diamond now? So she puts the egg into her food basket and sits there calm as can be, smiling away. Along come some Red Army soldiers. They search the luggage. And then one of them grabs that very egg, peels it and wolfs it down before Madame Fook's very eyes. The poor woman travelled no further. She got off at that station and trailed around after that wretched Red Army soldier for three days on end, not once letting him out of her sight, as if he were a little child.

"And then?"

"What do you think? Nothing! She went back home empty-handed."



Peaceful discussion of these alarming topics made our journey both entertaining and informative, but we hadn't even been going three hours when the train stopped and everyone was ordered to disembark.

We get off the train, drag our luggage out, stand on the platform for about two hours, and then get onto a different train. This train is third class only and packed full. Some malicious-looking peasant women with pale eyes are sitting opposite us. They clearly don't like the look of us.

"Here they be on our train," says a woman with a pockmarked face and a wart. "Here they be on our train, but where and why they're going, they haven't a clue."

"Like dogs off a chain," agrees the other one. She has a grimy headscarf and is using the corners of it, rather gracefully, to wipe her duck-like nose.

What irritates them most of all is a Pekinese dog—a tiny, silken ball lying on the lap of the older of our two actresses.

"A dog on a train! Look at her—a hat on her head and here she be on a train with a dog!"

"Should've left it at home. Nowhere for folks to sit and here she be with this hound of hers!"

"But she's not in your way," says the actress, her voice quivering as she defends her hound. "Anyway, it's not as though *you'd* be sitting here on my lap!"

"No, we'd not be travellin' around with dogs," the women continue relentlessly.

"I can't leave her at home on her own. She's delicate. She needs more care than a little child."

"Huh?"

"What d'ye mean by that then?" shouts the pockmarked one, leaping to her feet in fury. "Here, listen to this! This one here with the hat says our children's worse than dogs! We're not standing for this, are we?"

"Huh? Us? We be dogs and she ain't?"

Then this discussion—and there's no knowing where it might

have led—is interrupted by a wild shriek. The shriek comes from the space at the end of the carriage. Everyone jumps up and rushes to investigate. The pockmarked woman goes as well, and, when she returns, she tells us in the most amiable of tones that a thief had been caught and that they'd been about to “drop 'im under the car”—only the thief had beaten them to it. He'd jumped off the moving train.

“Charming characters!” says Averchenko. “Try to ignore them. Think about something cheerful.”

I do as he says.