The Little Red Christmas Tree

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Translated from Russian by Malcolm W. Davis

The thirties of the twentieth century had rolled around; and the great perpetual revolution was still going on. The Russian middle class was nearing complete extinction, assisted on toward this goal by hunger and executions, and also as a result of mass stampedes of the bourgeois to the Soviet pastures. A real living non-counterfeit bourgeois had become a rarity and the disappearance of this precious species was causing serious disturbance in the minds of farseeing Soviet statesmen. So appropriate decrees were issued for decisive action.

At first it was determined that the death of any bourgeois, even from the most natural causes, should be regarded as base sabotage and overt counterrevolution, for which his closest relatives must answer as hostages, subject to immediate execution for aiding and abetting a felony. But the Central Executive Committee took a hand in time and stopped this order. Then any transfer from the bourgeois to the proletarian status was strictly prohibited. The bourgeois, it was proposed, should be regarded as the property of the nation, entrusted to the general care and guardianship, like public parks.

But the bourgeois obstinately continued their black sabotage, because in those days to expire was far easier than to smoke a cigarette.

Soon they were reckoned at ten, then five—three—two; and finally in all Soviet Russia there remained just one bourgeois. He was a childless widower, Stepan Nilitch Rybkin, a resident of Malaya Zagvozdka, near Gatchino, formerly proprietor of a grocery and poultry store.

Up to his little toppling, wooden, three-window, one-story-and-attic, but still privately owned dwelling there rolled on the 24th of December, 1935, an elegant Renault, from which stepped two Soviet Commissars with serious expressions on their clever red faces. Deliberately but politely they mounted the steps, took off their coats in the hall, and entered the tiny parlor. The master of the house met them, a man still youthful although in the middle period of life, with a bald spot of respectable dimensions and with traces of gray in his hair.

“Please sit down. What can I do for you?”

The commissars took seats and glanced around—an icon, illuminated by the greenish flame of a small lamp, hung in the corner; white curtains draped the windows; a geranium stood on the windowsill; a cage for a canary, a crocheted tablecloth, a gramophone …

“Living in luxury, eh?” remarked the first commissar genially, stammering a little, with a pleasant smile.

“Well, after a fashion—more or less—only, I must confess, all this bores me. It’s such an isolated life. I’d like to make application for transfer to Soviet status—some sort of communal store house or shop—but if they won’t accept me, it won’t be long before I die off. That’s always cheap.”

The second commissar, a former actor, waved his hands in alarm.

“What’s that, dovie, what’s that? That’s not a nice way to joke, daddy. I’m a nervous woman. No, sweetie, no; you won’t cause any unpleasantness like that, I hope.”

“All the same, I may up and do it! What kind of life is mine? The most insignificant! I’m like a decoy rabbit, I might say. There was lots of hunting near us here, around Gatchino, in the old days. Gentlemen from Petersburg used to come down, and in the course of time killed off all the game. Finally there was just one rabbit left. Old and experienced. Probably about five pounds of No. 3 rabbit shot had lodged in him, and he was still hopping around. He was a kind of lucky rabbit. So the hunters at last made an agreement: They would not kill this rabbit, but shoot past him. To keep their aim good, you see, and for excitement.

“They used to come down on Sundays, wander around in the bushes and pepper away all day long at this rabbit. And he, you know, would hop around among them, all over the field. He got so bold, the rascal, and was so clever, that sometimes he would sit up on his hind legs, in front of a marksman, and rub his mug with his forepaws. And the hunter at ten paces, blazing away at him, shell after shell.”

“What’s the idea—telling us this yarn?”

“The point is that my life, in a way, is like that rabbit’s. I can’t complain. I live well enough; nobody picks on me. All the same it’s hard. Every time there’s some revolutionary holiday—in July or in October, for instance, or the birthday of Karl Radek or Steklov’s saint’s day—down here to Zagvozdka is sure to come a swarm of people. Not only from Petersburg—they come all the way from Moscow. They overrun all the streets. You can’t get through in a cart or on foot. All day and all night they mill around under my windows and howl: ‘Death to the bourgeoisie! Long live the dictatorship of the proletariat!’ They make speeches from my front steps. Always the same thing. … It gets dull! Or they start shooting revolvers. Fire away all night. So that your head swells with the racket. Of course I know they’re firing in the air. But all the same, the day the writer Yasinsky was married, they drilled a hole in a pane in the attic.”

“Show us the son-of-a-gun! We’ll drill holes in him!”

“Oh, never mind him—the blockhead! He’s not worth bothering about. But, take it all in all, I’m fed up, comrades, with this business of being a bourgeois. I don’t want any more of it. I can’t stand it and don’t want to. Take me into some Soviet post. I beg you respectfully—most respectfully I beseech you. Even in a Terrorist Tribunal—anything …”

“Why, what do you mean, buddy—Terrorist Tribunal? There’s no work in them, old pal, at all. They play marbles all day and read Nat Pinkerton, and only practice on wooden mannikins just to keep their hand in the game, so to speak. No, you stick it out, angel-face; you stay, as you always have, in the bourgeoisie. Don’t we take good care of you? Don’t we cherish you? Would you like to have us look you up a house that would be more cozy? In Petersburg, in Strielna—you can even live in red Piter! If you like, old cherub, you can even have a maidservant …”

“No, no; what’s the use?” muttered Rybkin morosely.

“An auto-mo-mo-bi-i-ile?”

“Don’t want one.”

“Perhaps, handsome, you’re not satisfied with your food ration?”

“I’ve got no kick. The grub’s all right. A couple of days ago they sent a turkey, a pound of caviar, a ham, three bottles of red wine … That’s not the point. I’m not happy inside … I’ve got the blues.”

“Well now, comrade, how about marrying? Offspring, you know? Eh?”

“Right you are, boy! That’s the idea! Would you like to have us fix you up a wedding? Don’t worry—no Soviet stuff. Old style—a church wedding! We’ll write for a priest from abroad—a regular one. We’ll give him safe conduct here and back. How about it, life of my heart? Hey? One wink and we’ll put it through. You won’t have time to look around. Well, of course, not without a little hostile demonstration. We’ll have to kick up a little roughhouse, hold a couple of rallies. But aren’t you used to that sort of thing, sweetie?”

Rybkin turned away to the window and wearily waved his hand.

“Drop it! Chuck it! It bores me to tears. I’m fed up, I tell you. Let me alone. What do you want me for, anyway?”

The commissars, probably for the hundredth time, began to explain to him the importance of his services in the perpetual revolution. First, it was essential to the proletarian masses to

have a living object against which to vent periodically the holy wrath of the people. Second, there was the class war, in which the people win their rights … Where were they to find a hostile class if the last bourgeois ran away or surrendered, and there was no one to fight? Finally, what would the comrades in other countries say of Russia? What would the foreign correspondents think? No, Comrade Rybkin must stay at his glorious post—not destroy the work of the revolution … The actor talked so persuasively that a tear even ran down his fat shaven cheek.

Stepan Nilitch apathetically rubbed his forehead with his palm, nodded his head and said:

"All right. Don't cry! You make me feel sorry. I'll serve a year more, and then see. It was just that … well, I was a little off color today. I was sitting here alone and thinking … here, I thought, people used to have Christmas trees … there were the children … lots of candles … gold tinsel glittering … strings of glistening Christmas balls swinging … the smell of evergreen … and I got to feeling so down in the mouth. Well, never mind; I'll get over it."

The Commissars hastily glanced around at each other and rose to take their leave. It was as if the same idea had struck the minds of both at once. In the hall they warmly pressed the hand of their host. Outside, in the street, in the light blue snowy twilight, stood the dark purple spruce trees.

Having escorted his guests to the door, Stepan Nilitch went out, as was his custom, to the spot where the church used to be. He stood there some twenty minutes. He tried to recall the Christmas hymns, but could not. Memory was rusted. Then he went to see his friend, the communal shoemaker, and spent an hour and a half with him. He glanced at several pamphlets scattered on the windowsill, but found the familiar, repulsive phrases about the destruction of the bourgeois order, and threw them aside. Both men wanted to talk of old times; but on the other side of the wall lived a member of the Terrorist Tribunal who, unfortunately, was at home.

As Rybkin approached his own house, he was surprised by an unwonted bright light pouring out of the windows onto the snow in the garden and the bare black trees. Full of amazement, he entered the parlor. In the middle of the room stood a little Christmas tree, all sparkling with bright lights. Gold and silver ornaments glistened merrily on it. Swaying gently from the branches hung miniature guillotines, exquisite tiny models of gallows, axes and blocks, scythes and hammers, and other toys and emblems of the revolution. One candle had slightly singed a spruce twig, and a sweet aroma of balsam smoke filled the room.

"In the class war shall you win your rights!" lisped Rybkin and burst into tears.