

# THE RED-HAIRED CLOWN

A novel

ELENA FEDOROVA



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**The red-haired clown. A novel**

«Издательские решения»

**Fedorova E.**

The red-haired clown. A novel / E. Fedorova — «Издательские решения»,

ISBN 978-5-44-852020-4

The books by Elena Fedorova always represent an easy, confidential conversation about life, love, and friendship — about everything which is on everyone's mind, which is close and clear to every person. All works of the author are created in an integrated manner. Elena persistently follows the path of her search, her success. Simply try not to skim the novel but to think about every word, every phrase. Perhaps, you will find there something new and unknown.

ISBN 978-5-44-852020-4

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# The red-haired clown

## A novel

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ISBN 978-5-4485-2020-4

Created with Ridero smart publishing system



Elena Fedorova is a poet, writer, member of the Russian Union of Writers, a member of the International Union of Writers, Playwrights and Journalists, International Guild of Writers. She is Honored Cultural Worker of Lobnya (a town in the Moscow region), an author of more than two hundred songs for children and adults, an author of thirty five books which include nine books for children in Russian and three books in English. The genres of her works are diverse: fantasy, urban novel, detective, romance and adventure, mystery, verse novels, ballads, proverbs, tales, stories, and short stories.

Elena began to write poetry and prose in high school. The first book was published in 2000. She became the finalist of the award “Writer of the Year 2014”, was included in the list of the top 100 best writers; was nominated for the National Literary Prizes “Poet and Writer of the Year” and “Nasledie” (Heritage).

Her Golden Country Children Song Project (“Zolotaya Strana”) in collaboration with the composer Vyacheslav Gridunov became the Laureate of the Prize of the Governor of Moscow Region in the category “Care for Children” in 2013.

Elena worked as a flight attendant for Aeroflot Russian Airlines, then later as a journalist for the television and radio company “Lobnya”. Elena is the author and hostess of literary and musical evenings, film director and performer.

She was awarded a letter of Appreciation from the Deputy of the State Duma A. Baskaev “For selfless devotion to dramatic arts”.

Elena lives in Lobnya in the Moscow Region. She was awarded a medal “For contribution to the development of Lobnya”.

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## Red-haired clown

*You do not fit the mantle of a dolt,  
Why do you dress it up and why  
do you scuttle,  
And the audience at the fair why  
do you chuckle  
You need not that kind of role,  
not that role....  
It's worthwhile for you to be a peregrine,  
Who sings the songs to the sunshine  
at dawn,  
Do not get carried away by fancy tint,  
It's really no use in square stardom.*

Simone was sitting at the open window of the motley circus show-booth and with a smile on her face was looking at the field that was stretching to the horizon.

“Just think,” she was exclaiming mentally. “The whole field is full of sunflowers! This is the triumphal procession of small solar brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, close and distant relatives of the sun that have descended to earth to please us. How can one petals, fluttering in the wind? Can one imagine something more wonderful?”

The door creaked. Simone turned around, saw Charles, and whispered: “How?”

“Divinely”, he smiled, removing a red wig from his head. He sat down in front of the mirror and pulled a funny face.

“Everything is fine, dear”.

“I do not dare to ask you, why do you need all this?” Simone said, looking at the reflection of Charles in the mirror.

He straightened his back. The face became very serious, and the voice sounded like they were not in a small show-booth, stuffed to overflowing with different costumes and props, but at the huge circus arena.

“For the motley it is easier  
To hide our own stupidity.  
Tell me, please, who will dare  
In this disguise to suspect the lie?”

Charles got up, threw the royal mantle over his shoulders, and frowned. Simone crossed her legs and clasped her knees with her arms not to interfere with the procession of the lord in the throne room of the tiny show-booth. The voice of Charles changed. It became bossy, strict.

“Tell me, who in this disguise will suspect  
fabrication?  
I'm so great that it causes vibration  
My view, my moral admonitions,  
For you my scorn is the great verdict...”

He smiled and confidentially whispered in the ear of Simone:

“And I'm just someone who does a silly trick,

And I am just a silly, nasty jester  
I am covering with beautiful attire,  
(the mantle flew to the floor.)  
Amusing you, I find comfort in desire  
To make you fool, confuse and shame  
With floridity of my clumsy word frame  
With dear to all of us, beloved “kind-of”word!”

Simone began to laugh.

“That is sharper than a rapier,  
sable, snee, sword,  
Steel and blade, or even  
a double-edged spade...”

Charles came down squab on the floor, doubled up with pain, held out his hand to Simone, and groaned:

“I’m, wannabe, wounded... dying, wannabe,  
I’m, wannabe, bleeding before the eyes...”

Simone got up. Charles winked at her and sat down on the floor, clasping his knees with his arms, as she had done a moment before. His voice became softer from the bottom up to her, looking at him with regret.

“Are you startled?  
You shout sobs and sighs!  
Forgetting that here is the theatre, stage,  
All, wannabe, is fun, all is in a flash  
Now it will change all of a sudden  
And, wannabe, it will be time for fun.”

Charles jumped up, hugged Simone by the shoulders, and winked:

“And you agree with me, don’t you?”

“I kind of agree. Yes,” she said. Then shout: “Bravo! Bravo,” Simone said inertly. She did not want to fool around.

“And glorify a stupid clown!” Charles clapped his hands several times.

“I control you with my hands down.  
Puppets are far and wide, far and wide,  
far and wide...  
Did I frighten you, my child?  
I’ll do no more, I beg your pardon,  
And let the curtain on the window down...”

Charles hugged Simone, ran his hand through her soft hair, and asked: “Did I satisfy your curiosity?”

“Not quite,” she replied, moving away.

“Really?” Charles smiled, sat down on the chair, threw one leg over the other, and looked at Simone quizzically.

“And you, my soul, are not so simple  
as it could seem at first.  
Eyes are two lakes. In them the water’s clear,  
But deeply, at the bottom, of course,  
there’s a secret!  
Stranger, of course, am I accurate?  
(she nodded.)  
My soul, your temper is quite moderate.  
The lips are coral. The waist is thin...  
Oh, what a real fool you are, old harlequin!  
Before you not a simple virgin,  
in your booth came the Queen!”

Charles knocked his forehead with his palm. He got up and bowed. Looking at Simone from the bottom up, he said:

“I kindly ask you, Your Grace,  
forgive me this disorder.  
I am willing to beggar the wealth of ours,  
So you stayed in the booth for an hour,  
and if I am lucky,  
For one or two days...  
I see you are laughing at my phrase.  
I am ready to serve the Queen.  
Ready for centuries to be her harlequin...”

Charles put on a red wig on his head and began to trill with laughter. Simone shook her head and said in a sad voice: “It is not funny for me to look at your antics. It hurts, hurts, hurts... Have you, Charles, the greatest, the wisest man, the talented actor, decided to spend your life in this squeaky box with a beautiful name circus show-booth? Not small but a huge buffoonery.”

Charles grinned: “You are the first to use the superlative degree in describing my humble abode. I am filled with pride. I will just burst of self-worth and self-importance,” he puffed out his cheeks. “I will burst, and you, Simone, will mourn a great actor, an unsurpassed red-haired clown, a brilliant...”

“Jester, who is wasting his life,” Simone finished his tirade.

“Charles, you are on!” the manager of the circus cried out.

“That’s my turn,” having adjusted the wig, Charles said. “Allow me to leave you for a while. I can only ask you not to disappear. I hope you will be able to forgive me for all these stupid antics. Please, stay at the window, like a statue. And I will come back and will create a portrait: a window, sunflowers, skylight, and a lady...”

“Charles, hurry up, the program is coming to the end,” the manager tapped at the door.

“I am fly-y-ying,” Charles exclaimed, stepped out the door, and stopped. “Do not disappear, Simone. Wait. I will be right back... I will be back in a trice...” his voice reached from afar. It was not his voice, but the voice of the red-haired clown, who was amusing the audience.

Simone took a white sheet, sat down in front of the mirror, and wrote:

*Dear, dear, Charles! I am sorry. I have to leave. Yes, yes, yes... I have to leave, despite everything you have done for me. Due to everything you have done for me. For you, for me, for US, Charles. I understand that the show-booth is your life, your work, giving you the opportunity to live... not to live, but to exist. Acting, buffoonery soaked so much into your skin, got in the bloodstream, in mind that... (please, think this out yourself, you are better at this). I know, you will upbraid me, saying that your tricks used to entertain me, your clownish laughter used to amuse me. Yes, you are right. I used to have fun because I was a little girl. I grew up, Charles. Now I am a mature, intelligent, well-mannered girl, who does not want to spend her life, her youth to check entrance tickets... I am sorry that I am telling you this, and not vice versa. Charles, you are a wise man, who has been teaching me not to be afraid of difficulties, but you yourself succumb to them. Why? Then, when we meet next time, you will answer me this question. You can answer yourself right this minute... So. I am leaving for you, Charles. My, at first glance, thoughtless act is really thought out to the last detail (I had an excellent teacher!). I am leaving you, Charles, knowing that you will not let such insolence remain unpunished.*

*Simone.*

*P.S. Oh, forgive me... I do not want to hurt your feelings (in my opinion, you still have such feelings, such emotions that are not typical of clowns) ... So, not to make your heart explode out of despair, I whisper you four words that you have wanted to hear from me for a long time. I know that it is true, that it has not been the work of my imagination, that you have not been playing at that moment, otherwise... otherwise... I will die out of sorrow and despair, because, because... I LOVE YOU, CHARLES! I am leaving for us, for... (think out the finale of my letter on your own, please...)*

“Success, success, success! There has never been such a storm of applause in our circus. Simone, can you hear? It is the season of the red-haired clown!” Charles cried, opening the door of the show-booth. Flowers, which he was holding in his hands, slowly flew to the floor. A wig and a big red clownish nose followed them.

“Simone, where are you?” Charles said distractedly, realizing that something irreparable had happened. “Did you leave, Simone?”

His gaze rested on a sheet of paper, written in a steady hand.

“Black letters on a white sheet of paper this is the beginning of the finale,” Charles said, having stopped in the doorway. “Black letters instead of you – so little, so little... I have missed the tale, the dream... When will I find peace? I have to follow you again to meet the dream...”

Charles sat down on the steps, folded his arms, and, through the squinty eyes, began to observe the usual bustle of the circus actors. His thoughts were far away in the past, in that day. When he first saw Simone...

The girl with huge cherry bows was sitting in the second row. Why did he notice her and invite into the arena instead of the clumsy daughter of the Director of the circus Matilda? Probably, it was just fate.

“Do you want me to help you?” the girl from the second row exclaimed.

“Yes, yes, yes, my child,” Charles exclaimed in a clown’s voice. “Please, please. Help me become a person. Help me defeat the obnoxious white-haired clown”.

“I will try,” having reached out her little hand, she said. For some reason, Charles picked her up and carried into the arena. The white girl’s dress with cherry satin ribbons, threaded through the lacy collar and cuffs of the short sleeves, resembled a turned over liqueur-glass. Charles was admiring her.

“What should I do?” the girl asked in a businesslike tone.

“You should win,” he said, having remembered that they were at the arena, that the hundred-eyed audience was watching them, so...

“Don’t do anything silly,” he whispered to the girl.

“Of course,” she said, having done unquestioningly everything that was required.

The white-haired clown was defeated. The grateful red-haired clown Charles wanted to accompany his savior to her seat. She pushed his hand away and said: “I can take it from here.”

“Bravo!” Charles began to shout and to clap his hands loudly. The audience supported him. The girl walked to her seat under the storm of applause. She sat down, straightened her back, turned her head, and said something to a man, who was sitting next to her. He hoisted his eyeglasses on his nose and leaned forward. But new actors ran into the arena: Madame Juju with the pets dwarf dogs...

The performance came to an end. Charles ran to his show-booth to change his clothes. Somebody loudly knocked on the door.

“Open,” Charles cried. Somebody knocked on the door again. Then he got up, opened the door, and whistled, having seen a gentleman in eyeglasses, behind whom the cherry bows were hiding.

“May I talk to you, Mr. Clown?” he asked.

“Sure,” Charles said, having sat on the top step. “I am listening to you. Speak, Your Honour.”

Charles thought that this man, dressed in an expensive gray suit, a starched white shirt, white gloves, a tall bowler, and a neckerchief, fastened with a diamond pin, was, most likely, a lawyer, to whom one should address “Your Honour”.

“My daughter was helping you today at the arena,” he said, drilling Charles with a savage look of gray, like the colour of his suit, eyes.

“Do you want me to share my fee with her?” Charles grinned.

“You are stupid,” the man screwed up his face. “You are so stupid that you cannot listen to the interlocutor till the end. I am not some vagabond but a decent, respected man, a successful banker, who has deigned to honour you, a pathetic comedian, with my attention...”

“I did not ask you to be so generous,” having crossed his legs when sitting down,

Charles said: “You are too arrogant, Mr. Banker. I like to talk to vagabonds, they...”

“Young man,” having tapped on the hand with a walking stick with a gold knob, the banker interrupted him. “I would never condescend to the communication with a stupid actor on the margins of the circus, if not for my daughter Simone,” he pushed the girl forward. “I am here only for her. Care to get up, Mr. Clown. Although, the word “Mr.” is too great for you. You are a jester, a poseur, an actor, who has forgotten about his true face, given from birth. I wouldn’t be surprised if you do not know your last name,” Charles slowly got up. Jaw muscles began to move on his cheeks. If not a girl with cherry bows, he would pounce on this dressed up dandy, would drag him in the dirt of the circus, in the horse manure.

“I am truly sorry.”

“Goodbye,” the banker said, having grinned. He noticed that the clown got tensed, that his eyes began to sparkle, that he clenched fists.

“Simone, you have five minutes to talk to this...” he looked at Charles with contempt and slowly said: “per-son...”

“You have a strict daddy,” Charles said, watching the receding banker.

“He is my guardian,” Simone said.

“Sometimes, once every six months, he fulfils my whims. And the rest of the time, I live in the boarding house of Madame La Rouge.”

Charles looked at Simone with interest. She smiled.

“I would like you to visit me in the boarding house if it’s not too much trouble for you, Mr. Red-Haired Clown.”

“Of course not,” Charles said, having sat down on the steps again. It was more comfortable for him to talk to the girl. Their faces were at the same level. Charles noticed that her eyes began to sparkle, that her cheeks flushed.

“Hurrah!” Simone whispered.

“I would like to ask you to do me a favour,” Charles said, having folded his arms on his chest. She looked at him with wide-open eyes.

“Don’t ever again call me Mr. Clown. Call me by name.”

She began to nod. Charles held out his hand to her and introduced himself:

“Charles Benosh is a young, promising actor, who dreams of playing the Prince of Denmark, Hamlet, but who is abandoned by a twist of fate in the circus show-booth Chapiteau. This is my temporary shelter. Do you believe me, Simone?”

“I believe, Mr. Charles Benosh,” she said, handing him a white piece of paper, on which she had written in a steady childish hand the address of the boarding house and the name Simone Stowasser.

“Meetings with a family are allowed on Mondays,” Simone said.

“And are we a family?” Charles exclaimed, having winked her. “I would never have thought that participating in the circus act makes people so close.”

“It does not make people close this way,” she shook her head, “not earthly but heavenly.”

“O-o-oh!” Charles said significantly.

“Fate brought me together with a young philosopher. You are so clever, Miss Stowasser. May I ask, how old are you?”

“I am not too old. I am just...” she leaned forward and whispered: “I will turn thirteen in two weeks. Come to congratulate me.”

“Ok,” he answered in a whisper. “I will come.”

“Thank you, you are... a wonderful man, Charles Benosh,” she said and ran away.

Charles was long sitting on the steps of his show-booth, perplexedly looking at the sheet, written in black round letters, and was whispering the name of the girl with cherry bows:

“Simone, Simone, Simone Stowasser... What am I supposed to do with you? Am I supposed to play with dolls? Perhaps...” he sighed. “Time flies so fast: yesterday I was a child, but today... No, it’s better to remember what happened yesterday...”

Charles saw the multi-coloured tent Chapiteau and froze.

“I would like to look inside. I would like to take a quick look at what is happening there, to know what kind of miracles are made,” he said.

The boys, who were standing next to him, exchanged glances. The puniest one dug Charles in the side, having exclaimed:

“Did you forget that there are no barriers for homeless children?” Charles shook his head. “Then go ahead,” he commanded and was the first to slip into the thickest part of the crowd, thronging at the entrance to the circus. And all the other boys melted into the crowd of spectators.

Charles found a spot on the stairs between the rows, located right under the dome. From up here the arena resembled a big bowl, on the bottom of which the miracle, the miraculous event, the wonder was being created. Watching trapeze artists, Charles decided to stay at this amazing place. Imagination immediately pictured him an amazing image. He is an idol of the public, a trapeze artist in a shiny leotard, who performs his best-known number the flight down from under the dome of the circus.

At this point, a drum-roll began to rattle. People froze. The slender artist in the golden suit performed somersault and flew down, having beautifully outstretched his arms. The audience gasped. But the hands of the gymnast suddenly turned into huge wings.

“Birdman!” the audience breathed out.

“The golden bird of happiness!” the voice of the compere was heard. “The trapeze artist Edward Houdini.”

Charles wiped sweat on his forehead, having thought that he would never become such a brave man like Houdini. His beautiful dream faded into oblivion. Its place was immediately taken

by another, more realistic dream. Funny clowns, white-haired and red-haired, appeared at the arena. Charles sat up to get a better look at them.

“Oh, what a brave boy!” the red-haired clown exclaimed. “Look, look, he wants to repeat the flight of Houdini.”

Charles had not time to figure out what boy was being referred to, and the red-haired clown was already rushing upstairs, jumping over the steps.

“Do not be afraid,” he was crying and throwing his arms about.

“Come here, boy, come here,” people pushed Charles.

“Me?!” having gotten wide-eyed, he whispered.

“You, you” the clown smiled and, having grabbed him by the arm, yelled at the whole circus:

“This braveheart is willing to perform the trick of the trapeze artist Edward Houdini before your eyes!”

Charles realized that he had nowhere to run, so he decided not to resist but to go down and to stand a few minutes at the arena in the spotlight. He knew that such a possibility could be given once, and decided not to miss his hour of triumph.

“Do not be afraid,” the clown whispered him when they were running down. “Trust me, and everything will be fine.”

Charles confided. They pushed him into the gun instead of the projectile. The drums began to rattle... and the gun broke into two pieces, and the audience was showered with multicoloured paper rain. Splendid!

“You can go to your place,” the clown said happily, helping Charles to get to his feet.

“Can I stay with you?” Charles asked with the voice of hope.

“Well, if we do not have problems with your relatives, then,” the red-haired clown said.

“No, no,” Charles cried. “I am an orphan. I am homeless, living under the fence.”

“Perfect,” the red-haired clown tapped him on the shoulder and, having held out his hand, introduced himself:

“I am Bebe.”

“I am Lele,” the white-haired clown said.

“Are you a woman?” Charles exclaimed enthusiastically. “Wow!”

“Yes, wow!” she mimicked him. Then she hugged him by the shoulders and asked: “Do you really live under the fence?”

“Well, it is not always under the fence,” he smiled. “Sometimes it is possible to spend the night at the station, or at the museum, or in the park, near some statue, which is not very scary.”

Lele began to laugh resonantly, disarranged his hair, and said:

“If so, then we are ready to allow you to participate in our number. We will call you Benosh. Okay?”

“Okay!” Charles exclaimed, not believing his luck. He not only stays in the circus Chapiteau but becomes a clown with a sonorous name Benosh, and Bebe and Lele will be his parents!

Charles was ten years old at that moment. Now he was twenty-three. He is not the little boy Benosh but the red-haired clown Benosh – an idol of a public, who has just been scolded by the gentleman in eyeglasses and praised by the girl Simone.

“What happened?” Bebe asked, having got into the show-booth past Charles, sitting on the steps. “Why did you freeze like a terrible statue?”

“What did the gray gentleman need from the little boy Benosh?” Lele asked, trying to look Charles in the eye. He handed her a note and said:

“The girl Simone wants me to congratulate her on her birthday.”

“Wonderful!” Bebe exclaimed. “We will seat ourselves on our the circus bicycles, arm with whistles of all sorts, and...”

“Wait, Bebe,” Lele cried. “We need a different approach here. You have seen this snow-white phenomenon. You first said that she looked like an angel, descended from heaven, and our Benosh looked like a bewildered waif, who can disrupt the performance.”

“Ye-e-es,” having leaned out of the door, Bebe said. He made a funny face, having portrayed the confused Benosh.

“Did I really look so stupid?” Charles exclaimed.

“Really,” having tapped him on the shoulder, Lele said. “But that’s in the past. Forget about it. Get up, we are going to do great things.”

Charles got up and trudged after Lele. He did not ask her any questions. He knew that Lele is a unique woman. He loved her like a mother. Thirteen years, not once she has raised her voice at him, has got mad at him. Although, there were enough occasions. How she had managed to be soft, gentle, kind, still remained a mystery for Charles.

“Do as I say,” Lele whispered him, hiding behind the door to the office of the Director of the circus.

A minute later, her big red nose, then her eyes, and her hand leaned out the door, and only then the mysterious whisper began to sound: “Come in.”

Charles looked around. No one. He whisked into the open door.

“Hey, it has been a while,” the Director of the circus Rudolf Welzer said. He was sitting at his polished desk and was condescendingly smiling. “Matilda is upset with you. She sheds tears. Good thing you had the sense to come before I called you. Well done. I value brave people. I forgive you and...” he got up.

“I allow you to take Matilda to the cinema.”

“Oh, we are so honoured!” Lele exclaimed, having pressed her arms to her bosom. “It is an honour, a great honour. But... Benosh will not be able to go to the cinema.”

“Why?” the Director frowned.

“He had nothing to wear,” she said in a tragic voice. “He will not dare to take your daughter by the arm if he wears a such a clownish attire.” Lele ordered Charles to turn around several times.

“Ye-e-es,” having sat at the table again, the Director said. “Yes, that’s not right.”

“You should not be upset because of the trifles,” Lele smiled and said in her clownish voice:

“If you, Mr. Director, give us a fee we will be able to dress up the boy.”

“Okay,” the director nodded, wrote a check, and handed it Lele, saying:

“Buy the boy something nice for Matilda would have a worthy boyfriend.”

“Certainly, Mr. Director,” Lele bowed.

“Our Benosh will look better than that gray gentleman in a bowler.”

“We-e-ell, that’s a strong comparison,” the Director grinned. “Nobody can look better than the banker Schtanzer.”

“We will try,” having winked at him, Lele said. “Besides, we have one little, tiny advantage it is youth.”

“Bravo, Lele!” the Director began to laugh. “You are the smartest woman I have ever met in my life. If it weren’t for your Bebe and my...” he began to whisper. “Gilda...”

The Director came out from behind the table, hugged Lele, kissed her on the neck, the only spot with no makeup. She stared wide-eyed, pressed a finger to her lips, and shook her head.

“Ah, I have forgotten that we match Matilda,” the Director exclaimed, releasing Lele out of his embrace. He looked at Charles and said in a stern voice:

“Today, at half past five, Matilda will be ready to go with you to the cinema.”

“But the boy has absolutely nothing to pay for the tickets in the cinema,” the ingratiating whisper of Lele sounded behind him. “Benosh wanted to outdo the banker so much that...”

“Okay, okay, I got it,” the Director grinned, having written another check. “Lele, you can turn me round your finger.”

“I use this gift extremely rare, Rudolf,” she said coquettishly.

“I appreciate this, dear,” he smiled, having handed her another check. “This is for Bebe.”

“Thank you,” she sang and pushed Charles towards the door.

“We are fabulously rich,” she exclaimed when the teller gave her cash. “We can leave everything and run to the end of the world. But...” she became very serious. “We will never do this because we are people of honour, though, we wear a clownish attire. We have no right to let Rudolf Welzer down. He is a very good fellow and a very, very unhappy man,” Lele sighed. “Okay, let’s go. Today, I am not going to tell you heartbreaking stories because you have to take Matilda to the cinema.”

“And can we do without this?” Charles hopefully asked, anticipating the answer of Lele in advance.

“No,” she stated in a categorical tone.

“Lele, you know that I do not like this fat Matilda,” Charles began to whimper.

“People will point their fingers at us and will giggle.”

“Haven’t you gotten used to people laughing at you?” she asked, having frowned.

“You should consider yourself a hero of the scene, a king of the circus arena. Be above the crowd. Remember, darling, everything that happens outside of Chapiteau is the same circus. You just do not know the sequence of numbers and the number of artists, involved in the program, so you should be prepared to perform your favourite trick at any moment. Okay?” she flicked him on the nose. “Smile, my dear, we are being watched.”

“Who is watching us?” having looked around, Charles asked. Lele climbed the steps, opened the door of the show-booth, and answered:

“Eternity... Someday, we all will appear before the Almighty. We all will give Him an account of our deeds, words, and even thoughts. Therefore, do not think evil. Let your soul be pure and light, like a feather. After all, souls but not bodies will be put on the scales of eternity.”

“Lele, isn’t it too early for you to lecture the little boy?” Bebe asked.

“No, it isn’t too early,” Lele said, having sat down in front of the mirror.

Bebe turned. The makeup was completely wiped off his face. It was not easy to recognize the clown Bebe in this man with firm chin, large nose, large far-set eyes rimmed in thick lashes and hairy eyebrows.

“Most importantly, you shouldn’t be a clown in real life, my son,” Bebe said, looking Charles in the eye. “There is an arena for acting. There is a scene for characters. Everything else is ordinary, everyday life. It can be surprising if you yourself will make every moment unique. Admire, love, kiss, and enjoy what you have. Live happily, do not be sad because of the trifles.”

“That’s easy for you to say, you are not forced to go to the cinema with the beautiful Matilda,” Charles lamented.

“Son, look at this from another perspective,” Bebe said. He took Lele by the arms, began to whirl her, dropping stools, throwing right and left clothes left on the floor.

“You look so delicious, my sweetie, Matilda! I am ready to eat you right away. Wait, wait, wait, I will tie a napkin on the neck, pour a cup of tee-e-ea...” Lele stood up and ran off aside. Bebe began to approach her. “Matilda, where are you going? Matilda, I miss... your forms, curve of your hands...” Lele winded around his neck and rubbed her white cheek on his cheek. He tried to free himself from her embrace. “Matilda, why are you like this with me? Why are you like this? Like this?”

“I am doing this because you are a fool!” Lele replied. “Only jesters and clowns, like you, can talk such nonsense.”

“By the way, you are also a clown” Bebe smiled. “The little Benosh is still a hybrid, though, he is already so famous that receives invitations from honourable ladies, gray-haired ladies, and silly, funny girls... Well, okay, joking aside. What will we do next?”

“Next?” Lele sat down in front of the mirror. “Next, there will begin life without deceit, without hypocrisy and lies...”

“I will fall from happiness now. Benosh, hold me,” having rolled his eyes, Bebe exclaimed and fell to the hands of Charles.

Then they went to an expensive shop and chose Charles a strict dark suit, a shirt, a neckerchief, and an expensive pin. Looking at himself in the large full-length mirror, Charles could not decide who he was. A funny clown, a homeless child, a circus actor or...

“Are you a lord, a milord, or a baron?” having looked behind the screen, Lele asked.

“I am... Charles Benosh,” he said, having slightly raised the chin. “I am the Prince of Denmark, Hamlet.”

“Bravo!” Lele exclaimed. “That’s just what I thought. Jesters and kings people of the same rank, same class, so they are always side by side. A king without his faithful jester is nobody. And what about the jester? He is a huge mirror, in which all vices become noticeable hundredfold. Aren’t you happy about this?”

“About what?” Charles did not understand her.

“That you, my boy, are a jester. You are the mirror of the crowd, to which people keep coming to look at their vices...” Lele replied.

“I am tired of being a jester,” Charles frowned.

“Let’s talk about this before going to bed,” having pushed him to the door, Lele said.

“It is time, Matilda is waiting for you. It is not nice to make a lady languish in uncertainty.”

“I hope that our relationship with Matilda will be disconnected today for ever,” Charles said, frowning. “I hope that she will understand that I am not just a bird, who dreams to build a nest, but a lonely wanderer, Mr. In-cog-ni-to,” he looked at Lele. “Indeed, I know nothing about myself. Who am I? Who are my parents? Why was I left all alone? What made me be on the tramp? Almost everything was erased from my childhood memory. Although...” he considered for a moment.

“Sometimes, strange pictures of the past come to me while dreaming. I do not know whether it is mine or not. I dream of a rich house, candles in the candelabra, and servants dressed in white gloves and lacy cuffs, a bright wooden train, tin soldiers, a big teddy bear to sleep warmly. Fire burns in the fireplace, someone reads fairy tales. Sleep envelops me. I do not see faces, I do not see people, I hear low voices but I do not understand what they are talking about. It seems that people are talking about something mysterious. It is early for me to know this mystery. It is early because I am a child. And then... then it is getting late, too late. The train is burning in the fireplace, the pages, torn out of the books, are scattered across the floor. The big teddy bear was lost, and it felt cold, terrible without it... Sleepless nights in some abandoned house among the hundreds of homeless, shelterless, hungry, skinny boys like me. Why are we here? Why? There is no one to answer.”

“Don’t you have anything left from the past?” Lele asked, having taken Charles by the arm.

“Nothing,” he replied and smiled.

“Nothing but a birthmark in the form of a comma on the right forearm. Looking at it, I keep thinking that a comma is better than a point because there should be a continuation. So, I also should have a continuation...”

“I would say it is a good continuation,” Lele winked. “You will certainly play the role of the Prince of Denmark, my boy, but you need to learn.”

“Oh, you are saying this again,” having freed the hand, Charles said. “I do not want to. I do not want to. That’s it. A point. A point, not a comma. Please, Lele, do not to have such conversations anymore.”

“Okay,” she said. “Only bear in mind that nobody will give the role of the Prince to an impostor, “she flicked Charles on the nose.

“If you dream of a good future then you need to work a lot, to work in good faith. Remember this, son.”

“I already work a lot, “he growled out.

“I work all days long, and the bad Director does not want to raise my salary.’

“That’s because he does not consider our craft to be a great work,” Lele said.

“Everyone can run on the stage and amuse the audience. Everyone. One does not need special tricks and wisdom to grimace, to make faces, to imitate, and to laugh at all sorts of nonsense. But not everyone can make the audience cry, can find the words to make their flesh crawl, to make tears roll down. Very few people can do this. Such people are rare. Extremely rare,” she sighed. “I know, Charles, you will be able to be different. You are initially different. You do not belong here, in our show-booth.”

“Are you pushing me away, Lele?” Charles turned pale.

“No, no, dear Benosh,” having embraced him, she exclaimed. “I am not pushing you away. I will never push you away. Never. Is it possible to push away a son? No. I want you to think over my words. He looked at everything with different eyes. The eyes of the Prince of Denmark, if you want,” she smiled. “Look, Charles, it is difficult to change an ordinary way of life, sometimes it is impossible, sometimes it is not necessary, for example, as for Bebe and me. But you need to do this. You are not a clown, not a jester. You are an exquisite boy with manners of an aristocrat. You know, I am really glad that you met this girl with bows and the musical name Si-mo-ne. And the last name Stowasser sounds like a hundred gallons of happiness.”

“Why?” Charles got surprised.

“Yes, because wasser is water, which we always need,” Lele said.

“If only this wasser did not drown us all,” the voice of Bebe was heard, as he was trailing behind, tossing pebbles that got in the way with his foot, and was angry that nobody was noticing him. Lele and Charles stopped.

Bebe looked at them and continued his thought: “The rich uncle blocked the taps, and the water gushed into another place,” he began to shake the hand of Charles. “But our Benosh has a bride, Matilda Welzer...”

“Okay, do not be silly,” Lele slapped him on the forehead. “It is not so easy for the boy. He will have to walk with Matilda on the arm, and this is...”

“A great human happiness, “Bebe smiled, having taken Lele by the arm. “You, Charles, should be proud that you have been done such a great honour. Smile, stop being angry.’

“Okay,” having put on the clownish smile, Charles replied.

“Matilda will faint when she sees you,” Bebe tapped him on the shoulder. “Good luck. They left Charles near the house of the Director of the circus and left. Charles knocked and came in. Having seen him in such an attire, Matilda refused to go to the cinema with him.”

“What happened?” Charles asked distractedly. His confusion was sincere. ‘Why don’t you want to go with me to the cinema?’

“Because you want to make a fool of me,” she cried out.

“No, Matilda, no,” he said. “I learned that you had been upset because of the girl, and decided to redeem myself somehow. Thus, I decided to apologize to you.”

“Why?” she grinned. “Is it because you have never held me in your arms? Sure, you were afraid to overstrain yourself.”

“Not at all,” Charles smiled. “Well, do you want me to raise you right now? He took a step, thinking that he totally messed things up. What will happen if he cannot raise this fat girl?”

“Don’t be silly. Don’t you dare come near me,” she screamed, thinking that he will drop her on the floor and will begin to laugh with his disgusting clownish laughter. And she will burst into

tears from pain, resentment, and humiliation. And then the whole circus will be whispering behind her back, discussing this ridiculous scene. No. She will not afford such a pleasure to the red-haired clown. She herself will laugh at him.

“Get out of here before your new pants split apart at the seams,” Matilda said aloud, having pushed Charles in the chest. He staggered and sat down on the floor. She was confused.

“I have touched you with my fingertips, and you...’ she began to laugh loudly.

“Wow! What a surprise! This will be our new number... Da-ad! Dad, come quickly. Look how I have dumped the admirer”

Rudolf Welzer appeared in the doorway as fast as if all this time he was listening behind the door and was waiting for an opportune moment to reveal his radiant face.

“Prostrate Hector,” he grinned, looking at Charles, who was sitting on the floor.

“Matilda, you are a genius. We can show this to the public. You will become the most, most, most famous amazon. We will create a suitable attire for you, and we will dress Hector in the skins. What do you say?”

“I can only shout bravo! Bravissimo, Matilda!” Charles began to clap his hands.

“Enough,” the Director frowned. “You do not look like Hector. You are a soap bubble filled with arrogance. Plop, and you disappear, and you are gone. And nothing. Get up. Why are you sitting here? Go get dressed in your rags, put on your enormous red nose, whiten your face, and put makeup on your eyes and mouth to make our people laugh. Remember, I do not pay money for nothing. You have already received more than enough from me today. That’s it. Tell Lele not to come for a fee tomorrow. I will not give it.”

“Good night,” Charles said and went out.

The door behind him slammed. He smiled.

“So, the ending of our romance dots. Let’s see how this action, acting will be developing further. We will be laughing afterwards if we feel like... Well, we will forgive fools for their hasty laughter.”

Monday was the day off in the circus. Charles could do whatever he wanted on this day. He was lying in bed for a long time. He was hearing noises outside the window, tinkling of dishes, quiet conversations of Bebe and Lele, but he did not want to get up. He was basking in the soft space of dreaminess and reality, where everything was different. There was everything from birth to today’s Monday. The thought about the girl Simone made him open his eyes.

“Visit me in the boarding house of Madame La Rouge,” her voice began to sound in his mind.

“I wonder what is she like, this Madame La Rouge?” Charles thought and got up. He had breakfast, put on his new suit, and went to the boarding house to visit Simone Stowasser. The road was winding among the green hills, on which the houses with tightly closed shutters appeared like white spots. The absence of people. Ringing silence. Even birds were not singing. Only the sound of footsteps of Charles breaks the silent peace of these places, the quietest silence of the scenery, flooded with sunlight. Charles began to think that the girl had made fun of him, that there was no the boarding house of Madame La Rouge, that it was time to go back to the usual world of polyphonic cacophony. But the road swerved sharply to the right and ran into bronze, wrought gate, behind which there was a house. It was not a house but a tower, covered with ivy. At a little distance, there was a low building with deep night eyes of windows and an open terrace. Someone came out the door to meet Charles a very beautiful, very tall lady with huge brown eyes rimmed in dark lashes on the swarthy face with terracotta blush. Her voice is the sound of the cello: “Good afternoon, Monsieur. Did you come to visit your cousin?”

“I have come to see you,” Charles almost blurted out but bethought in time.

“I would like to see Simone,” he smiled.

“Paula, call miss Stowasser,” the lady said, looking at Charles. He, accustomed to the army of eyes aimed at him, was confused by her gaze, blushed, and looked down.

“I should warn you, Monsieur...”

“Charles,” he introduced himself.

“Monsieur Charles, we do not allow our pupils to leave the boarding house on Mondays,” her voice reached his ears like gentle music.

“Keep talking, keep talking,” Charles mentally begs her, not daring to raise his eyes. He sees a long chocolate dress, from under which sparkling elegant shoes with rounded noses appear.

“On the last Sunday of each month, we allow pupils to go to town. But they must come back by six o’clock. We are responsible for our pupils. They live here until they turn twenty years, and then they marry. But it is early for Simone to think about it... She is still so young,” the lady went to the window. She paused for a moment. She turned.

“I am glad you have come. Mr. Schtanzer seldom visits Simone,” the lady took Charles by the arm and led him through the long green corridor.

“Simone is my best pupil. She is a very talented girl. She remembers all the works of Shakespeare by heart, plays music beautifully, embroiders, draws, and plays the piano. You should be proud of your cousin, Monsieur Charles. And here she is.”

Charles raised his head. A strange creature, dressed in a floor-length black skirt, black blouse with cuffs that reminded grips, the trap of the collar that was squeezing the thin neck, emerged from the depths of the green room to meet him. Black blunt toes of crude shoes could be seen from under the skirt. Her hair was smoothly combed and tied at the back of her head in a tight knot. It was hard to figure out the colour of her hair, whether it was dark gray, dark brown, or black. The face was pale. Her eyes were frightened. She looked surprised.

“You?” her mouth was half-open. She wanted to add something but changed her mind.

Charles is looking at her without blinking. He does not recognize her. She is not that girl angel with huge cherry bows, rosy face, and clear merry eyes. It is not Simone. This girl looks older. She looks much more serious than that little girl. She looks different. He sees her for the first time. He has not come to visit her. Charles does not have time to say anything, the lady pushes him forward.

“Why are you, Monsieur Charles, so confused? I thought you were a brave man,” she said ironically. “Didn’t you expect to see the girl in such a strange attire? I can’t help, as this is a frightening fashion for the pupils of the boarding house.”

“Good afternoon, Mr. Charles Benosh,” the girl slowly pronounces, holding out her hand. The hint of a smile appears on her face. The voice was dull. It sounded strange, distant.

“Simone, you can go for a walk in the garden,” the lady says and leaves, rustling her chocolate skirt.

“Simone, is that really you?” Charles asked in a whisper.

“And is that really you, Charles?” she whispers. He nods. She smiles.

“I did not think you were coming. Or rather, I was thinking about you but I was sure that you would never come. And you arrived...”

“I did not arrive but came,” he smiles. “Where does a poor actor get money for the carriage?”

“You look like a real dandy,” she said.

“I did not recognize you right away. I was waiting for the red-haired clown, and you... At first, I thought that uncle Schwartz sent one of his clerks. I got confused. I got angry. Why did he do this? Why are strangers here? What will I do with a stranger? What can we talk about? I wanted to send you away, that is, that another clerk, but I did not manage to do this when Madame La Rouge called your name. I felt relieved. Can I hug you?”

He did not manage to answer when she pressed herself against him with the whole body, froze, pushed him away, and whispered:

“Hugs are the contact of the souls.

To your chest I cherish,

And to unknown for me your world,  
Along the secret path, I vanish.  
Let's go for a walk to the garden,"

she smiled, took Charles by the hand, and led the way. The path, on which they were walking, led to the mountain. A delicate summerhouse was hiding there, in the foliage of lush willow greenery.

"Look how beautiful it is here," Simone said, smiling. "There is a tiny brook with ice water down there. It is always ice, even in the heat. Once I dived into it right in a dress. I did it on purpose. I wanted to check whether it was really ice water."

"How was it?" having curiously looked at her, Charles asked.

"It was ice. Even my teeth were aching," she said, having shivered. Simone looked different in the light of the sun. Black colour was emphasizing the pallor of her face with subtle features. And her hair seemed neither gray, nor brown, but golden. Back then, in the circus, he could not see it because of the huge bows. Now, she did not have bows but a tight knot at the back of her head, which made Simone look older.

"When I happily emerged from the water I was punished," Simone smiled. "I spent the whole week in the tower covered with ivy. I was sitting by the window and was imagining myself an enchanted princess, who must be saved by a knight on a white horse. It certainly should be a knight, he certainly should be on a white horse," she began to laugh, having slightly thrown back her head.

"I was fantasizing so much that I even got disappointed when Paula said that I was free, that I could go downstairs to my room. I just did not feel like going downstairs. I felt so good at the top next to the clouds that I decided to do something forbidden. I ran here and..." she looked at Charles. "And I realized that here, on the hill, it was not worse than in the tower. It was even better because here was freedom. And one can see things that cannot be seen from the tower. There, on the right the crucifixion. The bronze crucifixion, polished by the hands of the pupils. Everyone wants to touch the feet, the hands and the body of the Saviour. But I like the fat Angel most, who is hiding among apple and cherry trees. No one ever goes to him. He is very, very old, although, he looks quite young, younger than us. He is a plump three-year-old baby. And yet, he is completely lonely. He is the same lonely as I am. Do you want to see him?"

And without waiting for a reply she rushed down the hill. Charles rushed after her. He wanted to laugh loudly. He had never had such a good and fun time. The wind was whistling in the ears. The skirt of Simone was rustling like a mouse in the corner. The music of nature was spreading over the garden like the song of a nightingale reaching from far away. Simone froze. Charles was standing next to her. In front of them, there was a white three-year-old baby with wings. He had the white plaster oval face, the searching lifeless eyes, and the plump lips.

"Do you like it?" taking a breath, Simone asked, having firmly gripped his hand.

"For you – yes, for me – no," Charles replies.

Simone flushed from running fast. Her hair had gotten out the sleek hairstyle, having formed two beautiful curls at the temples.

"Tell me, why did you bring me here?" he asks, looking at her inspired face.

"I thought you were lonely like this Angel, like me," she turns her head and looks into his eyes. "You, the little red-haired clown, were standing on a big arena, the audience was laughing, and it was not funny to me at all. It seemed to me that you were the Angel, the three-year-old toddler with a strict look of the lifeless eyes, forgotten by everybody. I thought that when the music stopped, the audience left, the circus were empty, you would be all alone. It is easier for me. There are many of us here."

"I am not lonely," Charles said. "I have friends-clowns, Bebe and Lele."

"But, in spite of this, you are a lonely man, aren't you?" she looked searchingly and released his hand from her hand. Released. Freed.

“Depends on what you consider loneliness,” Charles smiled, marvelling at astuteness of this child. In fact, he feels unbearably lonely among the crowds.

“I am talking about the loneliness of the soul,” she whispered. “Now I do not feel it. And you?”

“Me too,” he answered in a whisper.

“So, you want to come here again,” she said, having smiled.

“I suppose,” he said, having touched the plump hand of the Angel.

“Simone, it is time to go back,” a stern voice peeled from the hill.

“It is time to go back,” Simone sighed. “Paula is calling me.”

“Who is she, this Paula” Charles asked.

“Paula is a teacher. She is watching us, makes us wear these impervious, solemn and funerary attires. Even our legs are black,” Simone lifted her skirt, having shown Charles the leg in a black crude stocking. “I do not like Paula. She is evil and cruel.”

“And what about Madame La Rouge?” Charles asked, having remembered the hazeleyed, penetrating deep into the heart, look.

“I am afraid of her,” Simone confessed. “I am afraid of her beauty, her tender voice, her searching look. Sometimes I think that she is not who she claims to be. It is like she is playing a role, hiding her true face and feelings behind an impenetrable mask of coldness. You also put on a mask of the red-haired clown to be a clown, to hide your noble face from everyone and even from yourself.”

“Simone!” the voice of Paula was heard nearby.

“Let’s go,” Simone said, squeezing the hand of Charles. She captures him again. She wins. They go up slowly. They are silent. At the gate, she looks him in the eye and says softly:

“Come here again, if you can,” she releases his hand. “Oh, I have forgotten to tell you that this attire of a young aristocrat suits you. Goodbye.”

She turns and runs away. Charles opens the gate. He lingers there for a moment, thinking that he does not want to leave this amazing place, this quietest silence for his many-voiced show-booth. But he cannot stay here. Only young pupils in black dresses-traps live here.

“Monsieur Charles, can I ask you to do me a small favour?” the voice-cello was heard from the side. Charles turns around. Madame La Rouge looks at him and smiles mysteriously.

“Please, give this envelope to Mr. Schwartz Schtanzer. This is the report, the financial letter. He has long been waiting for it. A messenger will arrive tomorrow, and you...”

“Of course, I will comply with your request. Besides, I am going to visit my uncle,” Charles said. The lights of curiosity flashed in the eyes of the lady. “Today, we are having dinner in “Tirras”.

“The restaurant “Tirras”?! ” Madame La Rouge exclaimed. Charles nodded. She shook her head.

“Mr. Schtanzer is so wasteful. But... It is not our business. Simply, the commitment to luxury has always been a mystery to me,” she smiled. “You, Monsieur Charles, may think that I am a stingy woman. But my stinginess is just the saving of time. I am sorry to waste precious minutes, seconds on trendy shops, restaurants, and night cafes. Those who lives a spiritual life, does not need anything. They can make do with a little. They need the unpainted table more than the polished one with lots of drawers, packed with unnecessary things cluttering up primarily their mind... My mind is free from clutter. Goodbye. Bow to Mr. Schtanzer.”

She turned and walked away, rustling her skirt. Charles closed the gate, passed a hand over the cold bronze, and smiled: “Madame La Rouge, you cannot be called stingy. Perhaps, Simone is right, you are an amazing actress. I noticed the shine of your eyes when I told you about a trendy restaurant. You wanted to go there instead of me. But... you found the strength to cope with the shortterm desire. You decided to play the role of an ascetic, who made a choice between a thing and an essence. You coped well with the task. I even believed that you are not the earthly, grounded creature. Bravo.”

The house of the banker Schtanzer was a castle with marble columns, wide porch, many servants, lackeys, porters in expensive liveries and white gloves.

“How can I help you?” the servant bowed.

“I have a letter to Mr. Banker. I need to deliver it personally,” Charles plays the role of a wealthy aristocrat. He looks down on the servant, who rushed with a report to the owner. A minute later, on the top of the stairs, the banker appears. He is dressed in an impeccable black suit, snow-white shirt, neckerchief, fastened with a gold pin.

“What do you want?” the voice sounds surprised. He does not recognize him.

“I have the letter from Madame La Rouge,” Charles coins the words.

“From Aspasia?!” the banker exclaims, easily runs downstairs, puts a bill in the hands of Charles, and takes the letter. “Thank you.”

Charles turns around and walks to the door. He hears as the banker is singing: “My love, my love... As-pa-si-a!”

“Yes, such a woman can charm anyone,” Charles thinks. He looks at money in his hand and smiles. “My daily income! Thank you, Madame La Rouge, that you asked me to serve you. I am ready to become your messenger to...” he raised his head, looked at the clouds, and breathed out: “To see Simone. This girl does not need anything from me except for conversations. And you...” He walked forward, whistling: “the heart of the beauty is inclined to cheat...”

Seven years flew, sped, raced rapidly, with lightning speed. Simone grew up. She got an excellent education. And he, Charles, continued to amuse the venerable audience, hoping that one day a miracle will happen, somebody will see the Prince of Denmark in the red-haired clown. Who will see? Charles got up, threw off the flowers by the toe of the clownish shoe, stepped into the show-booth, and took the letter of Simone. Her handwriting did not change. The letters became thinner and smaller. She was saving paper. She wanted to say a lot. She said even more than she wanted.

“Has the little boy Benosh decided to cover the floor with flowers?” the voice of Lele hit the back of Charles. “Ooh-la-la! In my opinion, you need my help.”

“Yes,” Charles said, having handed her a letter. Lele delved into reading and Charles began to wash makeup off the face frantically.

“Will you help me choose a suit?” he asked, having looked at Lele through the mirror.

“Certainly,” she replied. “What do you think to do?”

“I will go to the banker’s house,” Charles replied, dropping the attire of a clown.

“What for?” Lele asked.

“You see, Lele,” having taken her by the shoulders, Charles said, “Simone turned twenty. She can no longer live in the boarding house of Madame La Rouge. She will go to the house of her guardian, the banker Schtanzer. And he...”

“He can help her with anything,” Lele frowned. “Do you want us to go with you?”

“I can handle the banker myself,” having kissed her on the cheek, Charles said.

“But I need help with a suit.” Lele began to laugh.

“You wore out the last suit. I wonder, how long will you wear the new one?”

“For the rest of my life,” he said. “But if we talk seriously, I intend to buy not one but...”

“Five suits,” Bebe got in a word. He was standing in the doorway, hesitating to enter, and was waiting for a convenient moment to wedge himself in the conversation.

“Two will be enough for now,” Charles said in a businesslike tone.

“Then we will buy you a black and a white suit,” Lele said.

“No, better buy red and white, so all will see at once that you are a real clown, an idol of a public, Benosh!” Bebe exclaimed.

“I do not want people to see me as a clown,” Charles frowned. “I must look like a young aristocrat, who decided to get married. Today, I am playing a new role.”

“Ooh-la-la! Have our Benosh decided to marry?” “thick eyebrows of Bebe soared.

“The boy is thirty years old. It is time to think about the family,” Lele smiled.

“I said that I play a role,” Charles raised his voice. “Are you deaf or something?”

“Yes,” Bebe and Lele exclaimed in unison. Charles began to laugh to hide the lump in the throat. There is no use of all these sighs, moans, sentiments. There is no use of words that time has been lost. Who has lost it? Charles? No, he believes that it is never too late to step forward. However, he has been slightly mired in everyday life, in habitualness. He has become a sliver floating downstream. And he needs to go up. He needs to change everything. But... easy to say, hard to do.

“How will I make money if I leave the circus?” Charles said, having become serious.

“You can find any job,” Lele said. “The question is, do you want to find it?”

“Yes, Lele, as always, you are right,” Charles sighed. “If you have a goal then you should follow it.”

“If you went to drama school seven years ago, things could have been different,” she said, having remembered how upset Charles was after exams. He was not accepted. They said they needed distinctive actors-villains, and he looked more like a jester. He was recommended to try his luck in the circus.

“Though, I cannot guarantee that you will be accepted,” the chief examiner said.

“It is not easy to make people laugh. It requires talent.”

“I was looking in his pig eyes and was barely restraining myself from shouting to all of them that I was an idol of a public, Benosh! I have been making people laugh for thirteen years without any diploma. People know and love me not only in our town but far beyond it,” Charles was measuring the show-booth with wide steps, resenting the situation.

“Everything inside me was boiling. Everything was bubbling. The fiery lava was ready to erupt. But I remembered that I was playing the role of the aristocrat, who decided to find out everything about theatre. To find out this just out of boredom. I smiled with a clownish smile, looked down at the people sitting at the long table, and said:

“Thank you for the audience, ladies and gentlemen. All are free to go. Goodbye. I do not dare to delay you any longer,” he turned and left, having quietly closed the door. The gray-haired man, who was sitting apart from the other examiners, caught me up on the stairs.

“You are a very intelligent young man,” he said. “I liked you a lot. You have something elusive, something...”

“Clownish,” I suggested.

“No, no,” he shook his head. “You have charisma, attractiveness that are drawing people to you. You will always look better than your partner. Always. That is your trouble.”

“Will you order me to disfigure my face?” I got angry.

“No,” he said with a sigh. “I understand your frustration. I forgive you. You should understand, young man, I am trying to comfort you, to explain that you have not been accepted due to the fact that you are too extraordinary personality. And they, “he waved in the direction of the selection committee, “need the gray mass, the clay, from which they will sculpt some gray people like themselves. You do not fit. You are special. Who are your parents?”

“I am an orphan, who has grown up among the homeless children,” I replied. “Now I work as the red-haired clown in the circus Chapiteau.”

“You have manners of an aristocrat,” he smiled. “You made your final speech so wonderful that I wanted to get up and bow. Let me shake your hand.”

I held out my hand. He shook it with both hands and ran away, having whispered that fortune would smile upon me. It became easier for me. I wanted to make something sort of clownish. I whistled loudly, slid down the railings, and pushed the front door with my foot. A gaggle of girls flew in different directions with a deafening screech. I bowed them and walked away.

“That’s it. I am done with academies!” I decided.

“Maybe, you should try again.” Lele asked hesitantly.

“No way,” Charles cut short.

“I understand everything from the first time.”

“That’s for sure,” she smiled. “Bebe and I have never had such a smart disciple, and we will never have. Why do we need new disciples if we have Benosh?”

“Why don’t you have children?” he asked.

Lele waved away, grabbed an empty bucket and ran out of the show-booth.

“Ah, I am such a dummy. I forgot to warn you not to talk about children,” Bebe knocked his forehead. He closed the door, took a stack of yellowed photographs from the box, and handed them to Charles.

“This is Lele. She used to be a trapeze artist. The incomparable Marie Kalish was written on the posters,” the voice of Bebe became gentle, his eyes moistened. “Dancing on the wire, flying under the dome of the circus, dizzying pirouettes on the trapeze... She was shining. She was loved. She was admired. Rich gentlemen showered her with flowers and precious gifts. And she loved the stupid redhaired clown Bebe, who was coming out to the circus arena in his down-at-heel shoes and tattered clothes. She loved the clown, whom nobody called by name. No one but Marie did not know that the clown’s name was Michael.”

Bebe sat down on a stool in front of Charles and sighed.

“You have a beautiful name,” Charles smiled.

“Yes. Lele also likes it. The conversation is not about me but about her,” he began to whisper. “Once a rich gentleman appeared in the van of Lele.”

They were talking long about something, and then he opened wide the door, and shouted:

“I will not let it go. You will pay for your impudence.”

Three days later, Lele fell from the trapeze. Someone had cut the harnesses... Bebe got up and turned away to the window. His voice became dull.

“We thought she would not survive. And she...” Bebe turned and wiped away a tear. “She showed all of us up. Lele is a good woman. She is a real fighter, a hero. That’s just... she will never be a mother. We gradually got accustomed to this. Then you came along. Lele proposed to consider you our son. I agreed. Benosh, you are our son. We will not have other children. We are ready to give you everything we have. So you better not let us down, son.”

“I will not let you down, Bebe,” having hugged him, Charles said. They hid the photographs inside the box and sat down by the window.

“Tell me, Bebe, haven’t you thought that the Director of the circus cut the harnesses?” Charles asked.

“Rudolf? No. He is too cowardly,” Bebe shook his head. “Moreover, he is madly in love with Marie. He is still in love. Still madly,” Bebe began to laugh. “Did you think I do not know? I know. I know everything, everything, everything, son. Marie and I have no secrets from each other.”

“I will wash the floor,” Lele said aloud, having opened wide the door. “I am tired of your mess.”

“My dear, the mess should always be in our show-booth, otherwise, it cannot keep its sonorous circus name the Show-Booth,” Bebe said in a good-natured voice. “Leave your bucket, let’s go for a walk among sunflowers. Benosh, will you go with us?”

“No, I will stay and wash the floor. That’s why Lele dragged this heavy bucket,” Charles said. Lele kissed him on the forehead and winked: “Don’t get the drum wet.”

“And then what?” Charles asked, having looked at the bellied drum with polished chopsticks in the corner.

“And then the grenadiers will come and take you to the battle,” she said, leaving.

Then sunflowers, which were in the bucket and exuded a sweet-spicy aroma, appeared in the show-booth. Bebe was peeling seeds, praising the Director, who chose this wonderful place for the circus tent. A field of sunflowers seemed to follow them everywhere. Charles always saw sunflowers in the window of his show-booth. Always...

Lele chose two suits for Charles: light purple and light golden. She ordered to try the golden one first.

“Yes,” she nodded approvingly when Charles came out from behind the screen.

“A lovestruck young man should look like that.”

“Do you think I am madly in love with this girl?” Charles frowned.

“Not madly,” having folded her arms on her chest, she said. “But you are in love. My woman’s intuition have never let me down. Will you say I am wrong?”

“I like Simone,” Charles said. “I like her a lot but... She grew up right in front of my eyes. I was playing dolls with her. I considered her my sister. Yes, yes, yes, she is my younger sister, whom I have no right to love like a man. But...” Charles lifted his hands in dismay, “the trouble is that I cannot cope with my feelings, although I am honestly trying to get rid of them.”

“The trouble is not in this,” Lele shook her head. “Your trouble is that you are trying to destroy the best, the brightest, not thinking about that you are destroying yourself. What for?”

“That’s because I do not want to be responsible for anyone but myself,” Charles replied, having turned to the mirror.

“Well done,” Lele tapped him on the shoulder. “It is easier, free to live like you. Tell me, why do you need this suit then? Why are you going to the house of the banker? Do you want to spank the shameless girl?”

“Lele, you always ask questions that lead me up a blind alley. I am confused, I do not know what to answer,” Charles admitted.

“I prepare you for surprises,” she smiled, having flicked him on the nose. “Go, do not waste precious minutes. Remember, you are a person, worthy of respect. Even Simone said that she owed you, Charles Benosh, a lot.”

“Thank you, Marie,” having kissed her hand, Charles said. She hugged him and pushed to the door.

“I will pay for everything myself. Go.”

The porter opened the door and smiled: “Come in. You have been long awaited. Go downstairs.”

The servant, dressed in an expensive livery, bowed, passing Charles to the mirror room-hall with a gleaming parquet.

“I am glad to see you, Mr. Clown,” a demure and cold voice sounded. The banker Schwartz Schtanzer was reflected in several mirrored corridors at the same time. Charles was looking distractedly at the reflection, not knowing which one was the main.

“I am glad you came today,” the banker said, coming from behind Charles. He was confused. The banker smiled, pointed to a white armchair in gilt.

“Have a seat. I have something to tell you. I have to reveal the secret, which I had been keeping for twenty years,” he sat down in front of Charles in the same armchair-twin and clapped his hands. The servant, who emerged from the mirror, gave him a red velvet folder with a large emblem and left. The banker looked at the concentrated Charles, opened the folder, and said:

“This is the last will of George Stowasser the husband of my sister Eugenia, the mother of Simone. George was a seer. He made this will when Simone was five years old. And two years later, there was a terrible tragedy. Two trains collided. Three hundred and fifty people died.”

“The tragedy occurred on the sixth of November,” Charles said, looking at the banker. He remembered that date because the tragedy occurred on the day of his birth. Lele and Bebe decorated the show-booth with balloons, made a fire from firecrackers. Seventeen times for the seventeen years. And when the volleys died down, a tragic voice was heard from the loudspeaker: “Today...”

“You have an excellent memory,” Schwartz Schtanzer said. “Yes, it happened on the sixth of November. The parents of Simone, George and Eugenia Stowasser, were among the dead people. We had been keeping secret the reason of the absence of parents from Simone for a long time. On

the eve of the tragedy, the girl was very ill. Her body was so weakened that the doctor recommended delaying the sad news. But the maid forgot to hide the portraits of George and Eugenia, placed in the mourning frame. Simone distractedly looked at me, pressed both palms to her lips, closed her eyes, and fell backwards. She came to her senses in two hours. All this time, I was in a vacuum of hopelessness...” he closed his eyes with his hand and sighed.

“But, thank God, it is over. It is in the distant past. And now we are more interested in the future. So. The will of George Stowasser, which he left fifteen years ago, shocked me. But now, it does not seem to me folly. This will is quite reasonable, as well as everything that George was doing. I bow before him, before his ability to come out any situation with honour. I am proud of this man. I try to be like him, as much as possible. George was a man of his word. His ‘yes’ was always ‘yes’. His ‘no’ meant an uncompromising refusal. He never teetered on the brink of ‘yes’ and ‘no’, never acted meanly, never lied, never bustled.”

“What is the use of titles? What is the use of ranks? Simple sound. If you take them away there will be only emptiness,” George grinned. “I will never go to the court tailor. I will not overpay him because of the word ‘court’. I would rather go outside and look for a self-taught tailor, a master by vocation, and not by pleasing the court!”

“This statement sounds like the one by Madame La Rouge,” Charles thought with a smile. The banker also smiled and said:

“George Stowasser wanted to give Simone good education. He spent a lot of time in order to find a good school. He found the boarding house of Madame La Rouge accidentally. You know, it happens in life: you get lost and end up in the destination place,” Schwartz grinned. “George found the boarding house, called me, said that he could entrust the education of his daughter only to Madame La Rouge, and then took me to an amazing place the boarding house La Rouge,” Schwartz closed his eyes, paused for a moment, and said:

“Madame Aspasia charmed me from the first minute. I was totally blown away. I was ready to throw the whole world at her feet.”

“Oh, dear Schwartz, my dear banker,” she sang with her soft voice. “I do not need your wealth. Give them to your wife...”

“Yes, Mr. Clown, I was married. I was married, much to my regret,” he sighed. “I asked Aspasia permission to be her friend, a friend of the boarding house, a philanthropist, a helper, to be anyone she would deem necessary for me to be.”

“I will assume you are a good man,” she smiled and after a pause added: “Maybe, we can be friends. When I brought Simone to the boarding house, Aspasia took her as her own daughter, surrounded her with care. George left enough money so that Simone could get a decent education... For thirteen years, which Simone spent in the boarding house, Aspasia did not accept a single gift from me. The boxes and parcels, addressed to her, came back not even unpacked. The only thing that we had with Madame La Rouge – letters,” he smiled.

“Aspasia a master of words. Two or three sentences sometimes have so much sense, which a wordy statement does not have. I know that sometimes I am too chatty. But you, Mr. Clown, should forgive me this sin. I have been waiting so long, I have been keeping the secret so long that words just flow from my mouth like water from a spring. So... George wanted Simone to be brought up in the boarding house until she turns twenty. He made a list of required sciences, which she must learn. We fulfilled all his wishes, everything he asked for. Yes, yes, he asked. You heard it right. George Stowasser never demanded. He never yelled, never ordered. He slightly changed his tone and said: “I am asking you to do this.”

He even talked like this to the servants. He scolded the guilty ones in a low voice:

“You should be ashamed. I asked you, hoping for your honesty, and you... After such lessons, people did not dare not to comply with his requests commands. I promised George to do whatever he asked me for. I am keeping it... He bowed his head and delved into reading of the will. He was

reading slowly, placing emphasis on the right words. Charles imagined that George Stowasser himself was reading the will.”

“In the case of our death, our daughter Simone Stowasser becomes the direct heiress of the whole fortune. Prior to the twentieth birthday of Simone, the right to dispose of property is given to the brother of my wife Eugenia Stowasser, Schtanzer Schwartz. On the twentieth birthday, Simone must bring home the red-haired clown from the circus Chapiteau. But it is not a simple clown for entertainment but a person, who fell in love with her as a little pupil of the boarding house in a simple black dress-trap. A clown should not know that Simone is a rich heiress. He should not be older than forty years. If such a person is not found, then you, Schwartz, have been searching badly. Simone gets the right of inheritance of the fifth part of the fortune when the red-haired clown will enter the house. Three parts of the fortune I leave to Schwartz Schtanzer.

One part goes to Aspasia La Rouge. One part goes to the red-haired clown named...” the banker raised his head, looked at Charles over the top of the glass, and asked:

“What is your name, Mr. Clown?”

“Charles,” he whispered. The banker nodded, lowered his head, and read aloud:

“Named Charles Benosh! It does not matter whether this gentleman marries Simone or not. By forty years he might be a father of a big family. If so, I congratulate him. I ask, I beg him about one thing: to treat my girl as a sister, not to leave her in difficult times.

I hope that Charles Benosh is a decent person, that he will understand that I do not buy his love, his devotion, his friendship. If Charles Benosh is a man of a different sort he may take the money and disappear from the life of Simone Stowasser forever. This is his right,” the banker raised his head, looked at Charles.

“But I believe that the red-haired clown is a man of honour. Otherwise, he would not sit in my house, where evil thoughts of dishonest people are reflected in the hundreds of mirrors like black ghosts. Only a sensitive, sympathetic person with a gentle, sensitive heart can listen to the three-hour chatter of Schwartz Schtanzer, not fearing the shadows of the past that are dancing in the mirrored corridors.

Love my Simone. God bless you. I wish I could shake your hand. Let Schwartz do it for me. Sincerely, George Stowasser. The banker closed the folder, smiled, got up, stepped towards Charles, and held out his hand. Charles hastily got up, shook the banker’s hand, and smiled distractedly.”

“I congratulate you, Mr. Charles Benosh. You have just become a millionaire. By the way, this colour of warm gold suits you.”

“May I ask, Mr. Schtanzer, how Simone’s father found out my name?” Charles asked, feeling that his knees were shaking, and on the back, rolling beads of sweat.

“George was a seer,” the banker smiled. “Sit down, Mr. Benosh, I have to tell you something.”

He put the will aside and sat down in the armchair, having thrown one leg over the other.

“I would like to tell you the story of how Simone and I were looking for the red-haired clown,” he grinned. “It took us six years to find you. Six! The word “circus” was causing me a migraine. I was shaking when I saw painted faces and heard stupid laughs. All red-haired clowns were actually stool pigeons. Some were too old, some were too stupid, too conceited, too great, and so on to infinity. None of them wanted to visit the little girl in the boarding house. Aspasia and I began to panic but Simone, childish frankness, said:

“I will recognize my red-haired clown immediately. Let’s stop unnecessary the conversation with all these respected people.”

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s go to the circus on the outskirts of the town today, and then let’s have an annual respite. Simone agreed. She picked a white dress, hid the hair under big cherry bows, and wrote a note.”

“Today I will see him,” she whispered. “I am telling you beforehand, lest you think I am cheating. I even know that he will choose me for his clown’s trick. And then...” she closed her eyes

as if looking at her only visible picture in advance. “He will pick me up and will carry into the arena. Everything happened this way. Do you remember?” Charles nodded. “When Simone gave you a note and sat in the carriage I told her that you were a swaggering fool, like all the previous clowns. I did not like you at all. Your makeup was terrible. Your cherry nose was too big. You had the exaggerated eyes on the white face, the huge mouth from ear to ear,” Schwartz screwed up his face.

“And then, when we were talking near the trailer I was ready to slap you in the face but decided not to upset Simone. She, by the way, immediately said that you were a very nice person. I can see that now. You are smart, well educated, have learned to listen to the interlocutor. Now it is not shameful to invite you in a decent society. And then, sitting in the carriage, I was indignant. I said that you would never come to the boarding house. Simone smiled and said that you would come because you had promised her. Then I promised to pay a hundred ducats to a man, who would bring me such happy news.”

Simone gave me a cool look and said: “You can say goodbye to your ducats right now. The red-haired clown will come to me on Monday.”

“In a hundred years, I smiled. Next Monday, which is tomorrow,” she replied, looking ahead.

“And if he does not come will you have a hundred ducats to pay me?” I asked.

“I will not have to waste your money because the red-haired clown will come. He will definitely come!” she closed her eyes and did not open them to the boarding house.

Simone was sure about you but Aspasia and I did not expect that things would develop with this rapid speed. Besides, we were not waiting for an elegant dandy but a clown in a clownish attire,’ he smiled. ‘Haven’t our secrets yet exhausted you? You are too pale. Would you like some water?’

“No, thank you, it is all right,” Charles said, relaxing neckerchief. “I am just not used to sitting so long in one place, in one position.”

“You can stand up if you want. Only I would recommend you not to stand up not to fall from the next mystery, which...”

“Uncle Schwartz, let me invite you for tea,” the voice of Simone sounded from the depths of the mirrored corridor. Charles saw her reflection and smiled. She was again dressed in the black dress-trap.

“Perhaps, mysteries can wait,” Schwartz said, having gotten up. “Let’s go to the terrace. A breath of fresh air will not hurt. Besides, it is time for the afternoon tea and leisurely conversations about the weather. I hope you are not in a hurry.”

“I am not in a hurry,” Charles said, knowing that he was in a hurry to see Simone, to hear her voice, to look into her in the eyes. He was looking forward to asking about the plum three-year-old Angel with a plaster face, about a tiny brook in a dual willow frame, about their secret summerhouse, where she was teaching him different sciences, and he was telling her about his homeless childhood. Is it possible to lose it? Is it possible to forget this, to exchange this for ducats? He does not need the wealth of Simone Stowasser. It does not matter how much this house, this huge garden, this furniture with gilt are estimated. He is ready to wander around the world in an old, painted bright colours, show-booth, look out the window at the changing scenery, and listen to the song of the squeaky wheels...

“Good afternoon!” the voice of Madame La Rouge sounded like a cello. “You are so elegant tonight, Monsieur Charles as if you came to woo.”

“Yes, you are right. I came to woo,” he replied, looking at Simone. She nearly dropped the teacup.

“Simone,” Madame Aspasia shook her head.

Simone put the cup on the table, sat down on the edge of her chair, dropped her head so low that her chin rested against her chest.

“It is commendable,” Madame Aspasia smiled, picked up the cup, and asked: “Tell me, Monsieur Charles, did you think how the Holy Church would treat a marriage between relatives?”

“No,” he replied, having noticed how Simone startled.

“It is a pity,” Madame Aspasia said, having taken a sip.

The banker began to drum his fingertips on the table, and, grunting “I see”, turned his head away. Aspasia and Charles sat at the table opposite each other. She was freely leaning back in her high chair, behind which the surface of a small pond was glittering. A flock of wild ducks was swimming slowly along the shore, making short stops to dry their wings. The flaps of wings were like the sighs, the cries of despair, the confused misunderstanding that arose in the chest of Charles. He sat on the edge of the chair, ready to dart off and run, run without looking back to the horizon at any moment. What for? To find himself in another place, where no one knows him, where he will be able to start everything all over again. Everything, everything, everything. What for? To prove Simone that she was wrong. He does not succumb to the difficulties. He is not a coward but...

Charles stood up. Madame La Rouge smiled, put the cup down, and nicely laid her thin hands with long musical fingers on her knees.

“I must confess to you, Madame La Rouge, Simone is not my sister,” he said, looking down at the smiling Aspasia. “I claimed to be her cousin in order for you not to kick me out of the house.”

“Bravo, Monsieur Charles,” she said.

“Tell me, have you thought about the fact that Simone, left without parents, can be your sister? You also grew up without parents. Am I right?”

“Yes,” Charles replied. “I am an orphan. My parents passed on long before the birth of Simone, so to search for some connection in our orphanage would be foolish.”

“It would be foolish,” she repeated, having gotten up. “But, nevertheless, there is some connection between them.”

“Are you kidding?” Charles distractedly smiled.

Simone raised her head. Her look was full of despair. Another moment and tears would pour from her eyes.

“Aspasia was not joking,” ceasing to drum on the table, Schwartz said.

“Simone, did you know about this?” Charles whispered, having turned pale. She bit her lip and shook her head.

“She did not know,” Schwartz said, having gotten up.

Simone remained seated. Her body, dressed in the mourning and ceremonial dress, reminded of the monument to the mourner. Charles thought she was petrified. Tear, running down her cheek, was proving that Simone was alive, that it was the same a surprise for her. Charles fell on his knees before her, took her hands, and said: “Simone, do not cry, please. Perhaps, Mr. Schwartz is wrong. The will of your father says nothing about our kinship. It just calls my name. But Benosh is not the last name. It is my stage name. I am the red-haired clown Benosh. Except for the name Charles and the vague childhood memories, I have nothing left from my parents.”

“And how should we do with a birthmark in the form of a comma on his right forearm?” Aspasia asked.

Charles turned his head, looked at her from the bottom up, whispered: “How do you know?”

“George Stowasser told me,” she replied and looked at Schwartz. “It is time to show them a letter from George. Take them to the private office. I can no longer watch what is going on here.”

She turned and, rustling her chocolate satin skirt, left.

“Let’s go to the private office,” the banker said, having taken Simone by the hand. Charles followed them.

“When I was telling Lele that I treated Simone like a younger sister, “he thought, “I was trying more to convince myself, not her, that it was this way. But now, when we are ascribed a kinship, I am terrified. I am crushed by the realization that I am madly in love with my own sister. I just realized that all my feelings are real. Real! Will I ever be able to experience something like that, or will I have a fear of new disappointment? Why do I love her? Why? The Prince has only one Ophelia – Simone Stowasser. But...”

“Come in. Sit down,” Schwartz said, opening the door to the private office.

Charles came in and looked around. There were bookcases with glass doors along the walls from floor to ceiling. There was a large leather sofa. On the opposite side, there was an unpolished desk with one big drawer, from which Schwartz got the folder with the emblem. He hoisted his eyeglasses on his nose, cleared his throat, read: “Dear children!” he looked at Simone and Charles, sitting on the edge of a deep sofa, and grinned. “You are like the frightened birds that fell down from the nests.”

“We are like the prisoners awaiting the death sentence,” Charles said, having firmly gripped his hand of Simone.

“I love,” she whispered and closed her eyes.

“Dear children, I am glad that you have found each other!” Schwartz cheerfully exclaimed. And Charles felt the lump in the throat and wanted to burst into tears. For the first time in many years, he wanted to scream from pain and despair. But he was sitting on the sofa, was looking unwinkingly at the books behind the back of the banker, and was listening. He was waiting for the verdict to be announced, for the guillotine to fall down.

“Simone, the boy next to you is the one, whom you, the five-year-old girl, wanted to save,” Schwartz smiled, looked at Simone.

She opened her eyes, considered for a moment, remembering something, and nodded.

“Do you remember that we went to the circus Chapiteau on the outskirts of the town?” the voice of Schwartz sounded more cheerful. “First, the trapeze artists were flying under the dome, and then, there were the clowns, the red-haired and the white-haired. They brought a boy to the arena and began to push him into the gun instead of the projectile.

You grabbed me by the arm and demanded:

“Dad, save him! Save him immediately.”

“Wait,” having hugged you by the shoulders, I said. “It is the circus, my dear, and nothing bad will happen with the boy, you will see.”

“Something bad has already happened,” you frowned. “Why is he here and not in the gymnasium, as cousin Leo? Where are his parents? Why do they allow the boy to skip classes?”

“Probably, his parents also work in the circus,” I assumed. At this time, the shot rang out, the gun broke into two pieces, the audience was showered with multi-coloured paper stars. The boy bowed and ran backstage together with clowns.

“Dad, please, save him,” you whispered, looking at me with eyes full of tears.

“Simone, this boy is happy. You saw how he smiled happily,” I said.

“Please, dad, you said barely audible. I know, I know that he needs help.”

“Okay,” having shaken your hand, I said.

“We will save your boy. I put you in the landau, while I went to the Director of the circus.”

“What is the name of the boy assistant of the clowns?” I asked, having introduced myself.

“Benosh,” he said. “This boy is not as small as you thought. He is already fifteen. He has a promising future. He will have his own number in the new program. He will become the youngest red-haired clown.”

“Tell me, is Benosh the name of the boy?”

“No, no, his name is Charles,” the Director smiled. “Benosh is a stage name given by the clowns.”

“And who are the parents of this boy?” I asked.

“He is an orphan,” the Director said.

“An orphan boy named Charles,” I said thoughtfully and got up. “Mr. Director, can I ask you for a favour?” he stretched in a string. I put a few large bills on the table and said:

“I will support your circus, and you will support this little clown. Let him keep his stage name. Let him introduce himself as Charles Benosh.”

I promise that we will declare in the new program: the red-haired clown Charles Benosh! the Director promised. I bowed and went out.

On the street, I was almost knocked down by one shock-headed little boy. He was running away from a thick girl, who was shouting something rude at his back.

“Excuse me, Your Honour,” the boy smiled, intending to sneak. I stopped him, wanting to ask him about the boy-assistant of the clowns, but after seeing is a birthmark in the form of a comma on the right forearm, I got speechless. It was that little boy, whom we had been searching for ten years.

“Is your name Charles?” I whispered.

“No, my name is Benosh,” he replied proudly, released, and ran away.

“My dear boy, my dear Charles, I am sorry that I did not tell you everything, that I did not take you with us. I got confused. Yes, yes, confused. For the first time, I did not know what to do, how to be. I went to look for you among the colourful circus trailers. I was stopped by a good-natured fat man, who asked me what I was looking there and grinned.”

“It is easier to catch the wind than our Benosh.”

I turned and walked to the carriage, waiting for me at the exit.

“Simone, you were right,” I said, sitting down opposite her. “This is the boy, whom we must save.”

Schwartz looked at Charles and smiled.

“Do you remember this gentleman?”

Charles nodded. The picture of the past emerged so clearly in his memory as if it all happened a few moments ago. A tall gentleman is looking at him with kind eyes and is smiling. But he, Charles, almost knocked him off his feet, running away from Matilda, the daughter of the Director. The gentleman, for some reason, is talking to him in a whisper. It amuses Charles. He shows his tongue and rushes away. He is passionate about the game, he does not care about the gentleman, walking in the backyard of the circus. Let the adults worry and be concerned. And he, Charles, has nothing to be afraid of. He has not been on the tramp for a long time. He has found protection in the face of Lele and Bebe. Now, he is a clown, the redhaired clown Benosh.

Charles smiled: “I remember this gentleman.”

“Wonderful,” Schwartz said and continued reading letters.

“Mom, mom, we have found the boy, who should be saved!” Simone shouted rushing into the house. Eugenia looked at me frightenedly.

“Yes, my dear, Charles is found,” I smiled.

“Where, where is he” she exclaimed.

“He works in the circus as the red-haired clown,” I replied. Eugenia pressed her hands to her lips, whispered:

“Thank God, the son of Natalie and Edward is alive!”

“Yes, Charles, you are not our son...” Schwartz paused.

“What?” Simone asked.

“What?” Charles straightened his back.

“You are not our son, Charles,” the banker repeated once more. “You are a son of a woman, whom I hopelessly loved. As hopelessly as Schwartz Schtanzer loves Aspasia La Rouge... I saw Natalie for the first time at the ball and lost my mind. I went to her across the room, having forgotten etiquette, having forgotten everything else. I thought she was an ephemeral creature. I was afraid that she would disappear, that I would not be able to talk to her. I do not know why but I wanted to say a few words to her. I did not even think that I could discredit her, that my gesture could be misinterpreted.”

“What do you want?” having blocked Natalie, a man in an expensive uniform, decorated with orders, asked.

“Allow me to pay my respects,” I said, realizing that I made a mistake.

“Edward Benosh,” having held out his hand, he introduced himself. Schwartz looked at Charles over the top of the glass, said: “Yes, yes, young man, Benosh is the last name of your parents.”

“It is surprising,” Charles said. “This name was invented by Lele. Why did she call me like that? I never asked her this. I just accepted my new name as a gift. I was proudly using it all these years, not knowing that it was my last name,” he smiled. “It is nice to regain the lost kinship. I still do not understand what happened to all my numerous relatives? Don’t they want to use the part of the inheritance destined for me? Aren’t they aware of this? Schwartz Schtanzer shrugged, lowered his head, and continued reading.”

“Edward Benosh was an amazing person. We became friends with him. I began to visit their house, large and beautiful house, where a lot of amazing people were gathering. There I met Eugenia Schtanzer the mother of Simone...”

If I knew that Edward Benosh was a leader of a secret society of comrades-in-arms, I would try to do something, to help Natalie and Charles. But... I found out about this too late when the house of the Benosh family was turned into the heap of ruins, into the dump of broken dreams.”

“Please, find my Charles,” dying Natalie whispered. “Servants took him somewhere when this mayhem began. I know, I know, he is alive. He must not die. He is not guilty of anything. Find him, George. Save him...”

“Ten years passed before we found you, Charles Benosh. But...” Schwartz cleared his throat. “When we arrived at the circus to take you with us, we only saw the bits of posters, fluttering in the wind. The circus left. Eugenia burst into tears. I was doing my best to console her. And she was crying louder and stronger. Then I ran to the field, gathered sunflowers for her, fell on one knee, and said: “We will certainly find him.”

Eugenia pressed sunflowers to her face, became silent. We came back home, invited Schwartz, and made a will. I wrote this letter a few days later on my own. I needed to get my thoughts together, to calm my heart that was going to burst. This letter is my confession. If Schwartz Schtanzer reads the letter, it means that the bad dream of Eugenia has come true. We are dead... And you are alive! Be happy. Love each other as brother and sister. Be best friends. Be whoever you want, just be, be...

*Your George Stowasser.*

P.S. Oh, I forgot to mention that Natalie Benosh was born at the end of the world, in the town of Charlottenberg. Maybe, you, Charles, would like to find this place. Good luck.”

Schwartz took off his eyeglasses, closed the folder, and smiled: “Now you know everything.”

“Thank you, Mr. Schwartz,” Simone said with a sigh of relief. “I am so happy that Charles is nobody to me. As nobody means everything, the whole world, the whole globe, which I can embrace, press to my chest.” She got up, clasped her shoulders with her arms, and screwed up her eyes. She expected that Charles would get up and kiss her. And he was sitting like a stone idol and was looking at the books behind Schwartz.

“What is it, Charles?” Simone asked, having opened her eyes. “Aren’t you happy? You were afraid that I would want to become your wife, right?”

“No, no,” he said, having rubbed his temples. “Just... Can I take a book?”

“A book?” Schwartz looked at him with annoyance. “Why do you need it?”

Charles got up, came up to the bookcase, took a book in an old binding, opened it, and smiled.

“Yes, this was the book read to me before bedtime by a kind storyteller. For me not to forget his tales, he put a flower, forget-me-not, between the pages.”

Charles turned and showed Simone a flower.

“What a miracle!” she exclaimed. “How old is that flower?”

“Eternity,” Charles said after smelling the pages of the book.

“Now, I understand that back then, before bedtime, your father was telling me the story of his love,” having closed the book, Charles said. On the cover, it was written “The Handbook on Astronomy”. Simone began to laugh.

“Yes, dad loved to read fairy tales from dictionaries and scientific treatises on banking. He wanted his daughter to be the most educated girl on the planet. And here I am...”

Charles hugged her and kissed her on the lips. For the first time. Simone did not expect. She looked at him confused.

“I love you,” Charles whispered, and repeated a little louder:

“I love you, Simone.”

She screwed up her eyes and raised her head. Charles kissed her forehead, eyes, cheeks, pressed his lips to her lips, as to a sream. They did not see how Schwartz Schtanzer quietly left the room, having closed the door behind him. He went to the terrace, where his Aspasia La Rouge was waiting for him. She got up towards him and asked: “Well, how?”

Instead of answering, Schwartz hugged her and began to whirl her.

“What are you doing? Stop this immediately. I am going to faint. Have mercy on me, Schwartz,” Aspasia said. “At my age, it is forbidden to make such sudden movements.”

“At your age, my dear, it is exactly the time to make those movements and to be reckless,” having kissed her upon both cheeks, Schwartz said.

“What are you doing?” she exclaimed, having released out of his embrace.

“I express joy,” he smiled. “You were right, Aspasia. Charles loves Simone. He loves her truly. You won!”

“If I won, then you lost. Are you so happy to lose?” she asked.

“No,” he shook his head, continuing to smile happily. “I am pleased with your insightfulness, your feminine intuition, your strength, your... Madame La Rouge, allow me to kiss you.”

“No,” having proudly thrown back her head, she said.

“I knew this,” Schwartz sighed, impulsively hugged Aspasia and kissed her on the lips.

“You... you...” she looked at him distractedly and turned away.

Schwartz hugged her by the shoulders, whispered:

“Forgive me. Forgive me, dear Aspasia. Consider my act to be foolish childishness. Give me a scolding. Just do not be silent, please.”

She turned and kissed him on the lips. She pushed him away, blushed, looked down, and said:

“If you knew how long I was waiting for this foolish childishness from you, Schwartz.”

“But why didn’t you..?” he exclaimed. She raised her head, looked into his eyes widened in surprise, and confessed:

“I was playing the role of an impregnable arrogant woman to hide my helplessness. I do not know how to cope with my feelings. I do not know how to do this. What have I done? What have we done? How will we look each other in the eye after everything that has happened”

“With love and tenderness,” Schwartz said, having taken her hands in his.

“How will we look your wife in the eye?” Aspasia asked, freeing her hands.

“I do not have a wife for a long time, my dear Madame La Rouge,” Schwartz smiled. “I am a widower.”

“What are you talking about?” she frowned. “This morning, I was talking to Madame Schtanzer in the garden.”

“Aspasia,” he began to laugh. “The woman, whom you believe to be my wife, is my housekeeper. I became a widower seven years ago.”

“Schwarz...” Aspasia pressed his hand to her chest. “But why, why didn’t you tell me? Why?”

“I was afraid to be rejected,” he said.

“That is so foolish,” she sighed. “Why did you decide that I will reject you? I cannot reject someone I care about, someone I...” she pressed her palm to her lips and anxiously looked at Schwartz.

“Well, well, well, Aspasia, why are you silent?” Schwartz asked, removing the hand of Aspasia from her mouth. “Please, finish what you wanted to say.”

“I... lo-ve,” she whispered. He hugged her, snuggled against the flaming cheek, and said:

“Aspasia, you have made me the happiest man on the planet. Just think, it took fifteen years to hear the only right words, which contain the meaning of my life, the meaning of our future life, Aspasia...”

Simone and Charles drove up to the circus in the leather landau, pulled by four chocolate shiny horses. Matilda dropped the bucket of water, froze, watching how Charles, dressed in a light golden suit, was upholding the girl, dressed in black dress-trap. They slowly were going to the show-booth of the clowns, Lele and Bebe were dancing, they flapping on the backs of horses, were seating themselves in the carriage, and were leaving.

“Dad, dad, did you see?” Matilda cried belatedly, throwing off the bucket angrily.

“What happened?” having run out to her shouting, the Director of the circus asked. Matilda waved toward the receding landau and began to stamp her feet.

“What does it all mean? How can this licence be in your circus? Do they want to derail the performance?”

“Do not worry, dear,” Rudolf Welzer tried to smile. “They will come back. We have four more hours before the performance.”

“Only four hours!” Matilda cried.

“What will you do if they do not come back? What will you do if they do not return to your circus at all?”

“I will think of something else,” the Director said hesitantly, having gone to the show-booth of the clowns. He knew that Matilda was right something irreparable happened: he lost his best clowns. He knew it would happen sooner or later. He was prepared for that from the very moment when a tall gentleman came to him and left the annual revenue only for the little boy Benosh to not change his stage name. If they took off on that very day, he could have stayed without the clowns fifteen years ago. It is a considerable period of time. They visited many places during this time... He made a decent fortune, married off Matilda. What else does one need?

Rudolf Welzer sat in front of a mirror, put a red wig on the head, and smiled:

“I need the circus because it is my whole life. I will die without it. Only here, at the circus, I feel needed. Only here.”

He put on a big red nose, whitened his face, and winked at his counterpart in the mirror.

“The problem is solved, friend! Today, the unsurpassed clown Rudy the red nose will come into the arena of the circus! Finally, my lifelong dream of becoming a clown will come true. Finally, no one will dare to condemn me for the choices I have made. Everyone will consider me a hero because I will save the program.”

The horses were running together along the road. Lele was enthusiastically shouting and was clapping hands. Bebe was smiling condescendingly and was nodding to passersby. Simone and Charles were laughing lightheartedly. Everyone was having fun.

“Lele, tell me, why did you call me Benosh?” having caught her hand, Charles asked.

“O-o-oh,” having rolled her eyes, she sang. “Once I heard... No, it was not so. One day, I was walking down the street, and the carriage was slowly driving past, similar to ours, this carriage. There were few horses, so he was not driving very fast. Maybe, that’s because a sugary beauty was sitting in the carriage. No, she was not sugary, she was very, very beautiful and somewhat unreal. She was

sitting like that,” Lele made a pose, in which the sugary beauty was sitting, closed her eyes, paused for a few moments, and then began to jabber:

“The young lady was wearing something airy. The white lacy foam was wrapping her neck, arms, and was raising above the hair. And her hair was copper, gleaming copper of the polished pipes. She had curls at the temples. Her eyes were hidden behind black velvet lashes. And there was a boy beside her. O-oo-oh...” Lele closed her eyes. “The image of this boy still excites my imagination. He was not a child but a three-year-old angel with plump rosy cheeks and large, as cherries, eyes. He was also dressed in something lacy. Having seen this sugary family, I froze,” she paused, showing in what position she stopped on the sidewalk. Charles and Simone exchanged glances, thinking about their angel from the boarding house.

“I was standing and looking at the sugary family, and people around me were shouting: “Benosh, Benosh, Benosh!” Lele continued enthusiastically in a mysterious voice.

“Benosh, I repeated, having decided to call my baby this name. You, Charles, got the name.”

Lele smiled, thinking that for the first time she was calmly talking about the child she never had. Though, she has the grown-up Benosh and not very grown-up Simone, who are taking Bebe and her to visit a rich uncle.

“You know, Lele, I am that same sugary three-year-old boy, whom you saw,” Charles said.

“You?” she waved away. “It cannot be true.”

“Lele, Charles Benosh is my real name,” Charles smiled. “Benosh is the last name of my parents.”

Lele turned pale, pressed into the seat, and retreated into herself.

“We appreciate jokes, son,” Bebe said.

“But we never made a fool of anyone.”

“He is not fooling you,” Simone exclaimed.

“There is a portrait of little Charles and Natalie Benosh, dressed in white lacy clothes, in our house. Lele described them very accurately. On that day, about which Lele was telling, the Benosh family was driving from the artist Baudelaire, who was painting a portrait of Natalie at the request of my father.”

“Really?” having hopefully looked at Simone, Lele asked.

“Yes, yes, Lele, having given Charles the name Benosh, you gave him back his last name,” Simone said. “If you named him differently, we would have never found him. Thank you, dear Lele.”

Lele began to wave at her and dropped her head on her knees. Bebe ran his hand over her back.

“Well, now we have a new number the clown bursts into tears. It will not work this way. We still have to entertain the respectable public in the evening. Brace up, pull yourself together.”

“Tonight, we will not let you go,” Simone said. “We have kidnapped you to invite for dinner with the best people.”

“No, no,” Lele roused herself. “I will not stay for any dinner.”

“You will stay,” Simone said forcefully, “because the best people are you, Bebe, my uncle Schwartz, Madame La Rouge, and Charles. Today is our day. It is the day of happiness, the day of dreams and hopes. You have long wanted to escape from the circus and to go traveling around the world,” Lele nodded.

“So, Marie, consider that your journey has already begun.”

“Oh, my soul, you know my name,” Lele said, having pressed her palm to her chest.

“Yes,” Simone smiled. “Now I will always call you Marie. And you Michael.”

Bebe grunted, rubbed his nose, smiled, and said:

“You are able to move even the most insensitive ones, Mademoiselle Simone.”

“You are not insensitive,” having gently looked at him, Simone said. “You are the best people, who can give away their warmth, kindness, and tenderness, sent down to us from heaven.”

“Freely you received, freely give”, Lele said. “Give, grant, gift others.”

“The person who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the person who sows generously will also reap generously”,<sup>1</sup>

Bebe smiled, continuing to rub his nose to hide confusion and tears.

“We never chased wealth, we were content with what we had.”

“The one who loves money will never be satisfied with money, he who loves wealth will never be satisfied with his income. This also is futile!”<sup>2</sup>

“Lele said, having winked Charles.”

“Thank you, my dear Marie and Michael,” he said. “Your wise lessons helped me become a good person.”

“Goodbye, the red-haired clown. Hello, Charles Benosh,” Simone said. The carriage stopped near the house with white columns. Charles helped the ladies to go down. The porter opened the door to a new life, full of unexpected events and new experiences...

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<sup>1</sup> Corinthians 9:6.

<sup>2</sup> Ecclesiastes 5:10

## Charlottenberg

The town of Charlottenberg is a little miracle at the end of the world. A few dozen houses are nestling on a huge cliff, which is being hit by the roaring waves of the cold ocean. From time to time, white chunks of iceberg are drifting along the horizon. The northern strict beauty of the pale nature is fascinating. Its dullness, unsightliness, inconspicuous, discreetness, and homeliness contain the unprecedented power of charm. It is impossible to look away.

“Oh, my heart is filled with trembling joy!” Simone whispers, having sat next to a strange flower that looked like coral pyramids, connected by arrow-shaped green stems. Like a red light, it sticks out of the ground, having moved apart from the snow melted in the sun. It was a smooth gray-brown circle, within which there was a flower, reminiscent of the arena of the circus. Charles smiles skeptically:

“The circus... the arena...” it seemed it was long ago, in the past life. And it has been only one year. Only one year. One year. The whole year. The year of Simone and him, which began in the house-castle with columns and many servants dressed in golden liveries...

Lele and Bebe sat at the table with confused and wondering faces. Seeing them like that was a big surprise for Charles, although, he also did not behave like always. Along with clownish clothes, he took off his clownish mask, became thoughtful and serious. Having sat down at a large dining table, served with expensive dishes, Charles projected to his childhood. Pictures of the past rose so vividly in his mind that Charles was surprised:

“Why hasn’t this happened before?” and he answered himself: “Probably, that’s because the situation was not like this, was not appropriate. The dozing consciousness inside her could not awake. There were people, who could not lift the veil of the past, light the floodlights, illuminate the stage, where the action was taking place. The past came to life. Charles saw Natalie Benosh, dressed in a simple dress, like all the servants usually wore. Why does she need this attire? So no one could recognize her as the wife of the head of the secret society. Natalie floats through the rooms, like a shadow. Edward Benosh, dressed equally modestly, stops her, kisses her hand, whispers something, and apologizes. Natalie smiles sadly and disappears. A heavy curtain covering the door, behind which Natalie has disappeared, is rocking slightly.”

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