

AN OBSTACLE by Daniil Harms, 1940

Pronin said:

“Your stockings are very beautiful”.

Irina Maser asked:

“You like my stockings?”

Pronin said:

“Oh, yes. Very much”, and he grabbed the stockings with his hand.

Irina asked:

“And why do you like my stockings?”

Pronin answered:

“They are very smooth”.

Irina raised her skirt and asked:

“And do you see how high they are?”

Pronin said:

“Oh, yes, yes.”

Irina said:

“But that’s where they end. That’s where the naked leg starts.”

“I say, what a leg!” Said Pronin.

“My legs are very fat”, said Irina, “But my hips are very wide”.

“Show me”, said Pronin.

“I can’t”, said Irina, “I don’t have my pants on”.

Pronin kneeled in front of her.

Irina asked:

“Why are you kneeling?”

Pronin kissed her leg just above the stoking, and answered:

“That’s why.”

Irina asked:

“Why are you raising my skirt even higher? Haven’t I told you that I’m not wearing any panties?”

But Pronin raised her skirt all the same and said:

“It’s all right. It’s all right.”

“What exactly do you mean, by ‘it’s all right?’”, asked Irina.

Then that moment, somebody knocked on the door.

Irina quickly pulled down her skirt and Pronin got up from the floor and moved to the window.

“Who is that?”, Irina asked through the closed door.

“Open up!”, answered a sharp voice.

Irina opened the door and a man in a black overcoat and high boots entered the room. He was followed by the two military men of lower rank, who were carrying shotguns, and then a caretaker entered after them. The military men of lower rank stood by the door, and the man in the black overcoat came up to Irina Mazer and asked:

“Your surname?”

“Mazer”, answered Irina.

“Your surname?”, the man in the black overcoat asked, addressing Pronin.

Pronin answered:

“My surname is Pronin”.

“Do you carry weapons?”, asked the man in a black overcoat.

“No”, said Pronin.

“Sit down over there”, said the man in the black over coat, pointing to a chair.

Pronin sat down.

“As for you”, the man in the black overcoat said to Irina, “You put your coat on. You’ll have to come for a ride with us.”

“What for?”, asked Irina.

The man in the black overcoat did not answer.

“I need to change”, protested Irina.

“No”, said the man in the black overcoat.

“But I need to put on something extra”, said Irina.

“No”, said the man in the black overcoat.

“And what about me? Shall I go with you?”, asked Pronin.

“Yes”, said the man in the black overcoat, “Get dressed”.

Pronin got up, took his coat and hat from the hanger, put them on and said:

“Well, I am ready”.

“Let’s go”, said the man in the black overcoat.

The two men of lower military rank and the caretaker stamped their feet.

Everyone moved to the corridor.

The man in a black overcoat locked the door of Irina’s room and sealed it with two muddy coloured seals.

“Out into the street”, he said.

Everyone left the flat, slamming the front door loudly.



*Illustration by Bronislav Malakhovskii (1902 – 1937) – a Russian architect, artist and cartoonist, arrested in 1937 and executed in 1937 as a Polish spy.*

*Daniil Kharmis (1902 – 1942) was an early Soviet era Avant-gardist and absurdist poet, writer and dramatist. Arrested in 1941 for spreading “libellous and defeatist mood”, died of starvation in prison in 1942, during the siege of Leningrad.*