

THE GOVERNMENT INSPECTOR

Nikolai Gogol, translated by Stephen Mulrine

OSIP:

Dammit to hell, I'm famished! My stomach's rumbling so much it sounds like a regimental band. We'll never get home at this rate, so what d'you suggest we do, eh? That's more'n a month now, since we left Petersburg. His lordship's been chucking his money around on the road, and now he's stuck here with his tail between his legs, and he doesn't give a damn. He could've hired post-horses, he'd plenty of cash, but oh no, not him, he has to make a show of himself every place we stop. (*Mimics him*) 'Right, Osip, go and find me a room, nothing but the best, mind, and order up the finest dinner on the menu: I can't eat any old muck, I must have the best.' I mean, it'd be a different matter if he was somebody, but he's only a jumped-up clerk! Yes, and he gets matey with some fly-by-night, next thing they're at the cards, and he's gambled himself into this hole! God, I'm sick to death of it! I tell you, you're better off in the country: all right, there's no social life, but you've no worries, neither - you get hold of a nice peasant woman, you can spend the rest of your days stretched out on top of the stove, eating pies. Still, you can't argue - when you come right down to it, there's no place like Petersburg. As long as you've got money, you can live like a king - them theatre places, little dancing dogs, anything you've a fancy to. And they talk so refined the whole time, you could be up there with the nobility, near as dammit. You stroll through the Shchukin market, and the traders all shout 'Your Honour!' at you. You can take the ferry-boat, and you're sitting right next to a civil servant, no less. If you fancy a bit of company, you can pop into any shop, and some army type'll tell you all the camps he's been in, or what every single star in the sky means, so you can practically see 'em, plain as day. Then some old officer's wife'll drop in, or one of them young housemaids, and by God, she'll give you such a look - *whew!* (*Laughs and shakes his head*) And the manners of 'em, dammit, they're so well-bred. You won't hear a single cuss word, and everybody calls you 'sir'. And when you get fed up hoofing it, you just hop in a cab and sit yourself down like a lord - if you don't feel like paying, well, there's a back door to every house, you can skip out through it and the devil himself couldn't catch you. Only snag is, one day you're stuffing your face, the next you're practically starving, like now, for instance. And it's all his fault. I mean, what can you do with him? His old man sends him money, enough to last him a while - huh, fat chance! Next minute he's out on the town again, riding around in a cab, and every day it's: 'Get me a theatre ticket!' till by the end of the week he's sending me to the flea-market, to sell his new frock-coat. Another time he'll pawn the lot, right down to his last shirt, so's he's got nothing left but a shabby old jacket and overcoat. It's the truth, I swear to God! And nothing but the best English cloth - he'll lay out a hundred and fifty roubles on a tailcoat, then sell it at the market for twenty. And don't even mention his trousers - they'll go for practically nothing. And why's this, eh? It's because he won't give his mind to his work: yes, instead of sitting in his office, he's traipsing up and down Nevsky Prospect, or playing cards. My God, if the

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old master knew what was going on! I tell you, he wouldn't think twice: civil servant or no, he'd whip up your shirt tail and give you such a thrashing you wouldn't sit down for a week! You've got a decent job, so damn well do it! And the landlord's just said he won't give us nothing to eat till we pay for what we've had. And what if we can't pay, eh? (*Sighs*) Dear God, what I wouldn't give for a bowl of cabbage soup! Honestly, I could eat a horse. There's somebody at the door - that'll be him now. (*Hurriedly removes himself from the bed*) .