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Kolymsky Heights

Written by Lionel David

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LIONEL DAVIDSON

Kolymsky Heights

With an introduction by
Philip Pullman

FABER & FABER

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Prologue

How long, dear friend – how long? I await you with eagerness! So much has happened (so much I must not forget) that I use this time to make an account. And to offer a warning. Everything that follows you will find very strange. I urge you to remember our discussions on chance and, above all, to keep two things in mind.

Where, here, you find difficulties, be assured I have shared them. Where you doubt, I too doubted. I did not guess what is here.

I did not guess it. I did not seek it. Chance. But 'blind' chance? You will see. Soon after our last meeting I returned home and took a short holiday with my wife in Pitsunda on the Black Sea. There, there was a motor accident. My wife was killed, I myself badly injured. I spent some weeks in hospital and more in a sanatorium, a victim of severe depression. My friends, my colleagues, all urged a return to work. I returned to work but could not work. My institute was nothing to me, my former interests of no further interest.

This depression was diagnosed as 'clinical', and I was thereupon transported to a clinic! There I received various treatments, none of avail; and there presently a certain academician began paying me visits.

This academician was only vaguely familiar to me, yet it was soon apparent that he had the liveliest and most knowledgeable interest in my affairs. He had fully consulted my doctors, was aware of my domestic situation; and of course of

my publications. In a series of conversations he assured himself that I was still alert in my field. And he made me a proposition.

A research station in the north, he said, needed a new director. Its present head was in a precarious state of health and had not long to live. The work conducted by the station was of the greatest value and a committee had sat for some time considering possible candidates, aided by members of the 'state organs'; from which I deduced that there must be a security aspect to the work. This he confirmed, and went further.

That part of the work that interested the 'organs' would not, he said, meet with approval in all scientific circles – this was perfectly understandable and a valid reason for refusal. He had no knowledge of it himself but understood it to be similar to the studies at Fort Detrick in America and Porton Down in England, which is to say the research into materials for chemical and biological warfare.

The next negative aspect was no less important: the appointee to the station would never be able to leave it. For return to normal life had been deemed impermissible. This was not to say it was a life of imprisonment. Far from it. But the factor had to be taken into account with two others: the location of the station and its meteorological conditions (by which I understood that it was in an isolated place with very bad weather).

After this, all the aspects were very positive. Living conditions at the station were not merely good but luxurious. On the professional side, the budget was almost unlimited: at least he had never known the committee refuse any request by the present incumbent. (And since he is safely dead I will name him: L. V. Zhelikov was that incumbent.)

As with the budget, so with the research programme. It was virtually boundless. He talked extensively on this subject, and on his final leaving told me one thing more. All previous appointments to the station had been subject to rigorous vetting. This

was principally to determine whether the candidates were psychologically suitable for the life. Many were judged not to be, and even of those selected there had been a percentage of failures. For these unfortunates there was nothing to be done. They could not leave, of course; they had to remain, unhappily for life.

In my case such vetting would not be necessary. But he said I should bear in mind the position of the 'unfortunates'; that he would not be travelling to see me any more; that after thinking the matter over carefully I should simply send him a card saying 'yes' or 'no'. And I said I would do this.

I said I would do it and I sent him the card, saying yes; although in fact I had given it no thought at all. As soon as the words were out of his mouth I had known I would accept. My reasons were simple. My present malaise, I was certain, would not continue. Life resumes, as it always does. I was just as certain that I must now make some definite change in it. And too, there was the 'isolated place with the very bad weather'; Siberia, of course. Of which I will speak later.

For now I say that I sent the card, and six weeks later, very precipitately, with barely time to take leave of my family or say where I was going (for I did not know where I was going) I travelled under escort to the research station.

There I learned the reason for the precipitancy. Zhelikov had days to live. He was riddled with cancer. He sat in his magnificent underground apartment, the apartment I sit in now, in the mobile chair-bed he had designed (his electric chair, he called it) in a state of considerable pain, exhaustion and impatience. He had taken none of his morphine drugs that day in order to keep his brain clear. Almost at once he began giving detailed instructions on how I should deal with a problem that had arisen that very week.

The problem was the collection of a mammoth. Many of

the extinct beasts have been found in these parts, of course; the need always being to arrive on the scene before the native hunters, who eat them (and additionally conduct a tidy trade in ivory carvings). Some short time before, the government had prohibited these practices and had made it an offence for a finding not to be reported. This had no effect on the tribesmen, who do not 'tell' on each other, but a significant one on building operations. Among large construction crews there is certain to be gossip, so finds are reported at once – and at once followed by standstill orders until properly inspected.

It is not the only significance. Hunters' finds have been in caves or other surface locations, the animals having died naturally, with a slow dispersal of body heat and inevitable degeneration of the soft tissue. There was nowhere a complete mammoth, quick frozen so to speak, with its soft tissue intact. What excited Zhelikov now was the probability that he had such an animal within his grasp.

At a sea cape to the north of the research station a site was being prepared for a large installation. During excavation the ground had given way disclosing a crevasse. In the crevasse was a ledge, and on the ledge a mammoth. It was encased in ice. Evidently it had fallen – and fallen a long way, to immediate death. A quick-frozen mammoth!

In a fury of impatience, Zhelikov insisted that I go at once to the crevasse. Too sick to travel himself, unwilling to rely on his assistants, he had been awaiting me for four days. For two of these days I had myself been travelling, and was now almost terminally weary. Yet such was his force of character that, not two hours after my arrival, he had driven me out into the cold again; and to a most fateful mission.

At that time of year (it was February) our region has almost twenty-four hours of darkness and a mean temperature of minus

fifty degrees. It is also subject to very violent, very localised, gales. We flew into one after half an hour, and although the helicopter was a large and robust machine it was so battered by flying ice that the pilot was forced into an altitude far above visual contact with the ground.

Over the site itself we switched on all our lights and were informed by radio from the ground that they had switched on theirs, but were quite unable to see each other. The pilot cautiously descended, catching a misty glimpse of the lit-up diamond pattern, but felt his rotor blades come under such an onslaught that he rapidly ascended again, asking what he should do.

Zhelikov's chief assistant and the technicians in our party gave their opinion that the attempt should be abandoned and advised an immediate return to the station with our remaining fuel. By radio I asked Zhelikov for a second opinion – in no doubt what it would be. And was not surprised. That obsessed man, hanging on to life for one reason only, told us not to waste precious time and ordered that one attempt – 'a good real attempt' – should be made to land. After the beast had been recovered we should *then* delay a return until the weather improved.

The pilot scowled, gritted his teeth and dropped again through the furious bombardment, seesawing violently over the pattern of lights before setting us precariously down. Even on the ground we were so rocked about that we had to wait, strapped in, for vehicles to take us the two hundred metres to the residential hut.

Here there was a tremendous blaze of heat and light, the sheet-metal stoves glowing cherry red, the construction workers lounging on their bunks in singlets. They came bounding at us like eager dogs, Zhelikov's standstill order having kept them hanging about for the best part of a week.

Without being relieved of my furs, or my hat even, I was at

once made to look over the technical drawings of the exposed crevasse and of the ledge where the mammoth was lodged; and within minutes was back outside again and being hurried towards it in a 'snow tank'.

A saucer-shaped depression had been excavated at the construction site, rather steeply stepped down at the centre where the crevasse had been exposed. This was surrounded by short pylons, upon which were mounted the floodlights that normally enabled work to proceed twenty-four hours a day. A crane had been rigged with a double bosun's chair, and in this I and Zhelikov's chief assistant were hastily strapped and lowered, first into the depression and then, more cautiously, into the crevasse.

Above, it had been impossible to speak in the tremendous volume of howling and shrieking, but as we descended the noise diminished, in the crevasse itself to a mere distant fluting. We were soon conversing in normal, even soft tones, for the narrowness of the glassy chasm did not incline one to loudness. I carried a torch, no floodlight reaching here, and the assistant (whom I will call V) a communications set.

We dropped slowly to the ledge, at first visible only as a long uneven hump of ice, and with V giving instructions on his set had ourselves swung to the left and the right and then below while we examined in torchlight the structure of the ice and the dim shape of the animal entombed in it. It had fallen on its left side, its limbs inwards towards the cliff, so that only one of its tusks, and no part of its trunk, could clearly be made out. Very little could be made out except its approximate size, some two and a half metres long (which marked it as a juvenile beast) and the characteristic upward slope of its receding quarters to the bulge of its abdomen. The sandwiched layers of ice, about seventy centimetres in depth, allowed only the most opaque view from above, but in a narrow window of clear ice at the side it was possible to see strands of the animal's shaggy coat.

We swung there and back, above and below, while V, an expert in the properties of ice, took careful note of the faults and stresses of the crevasse and suggested amendments to Zhelikov's recovery plan. Then we had ourselves hauled up and gave the orders for work to commence.

Two teams were lowered into the crevasse carrying steam lances and hooks, and within a couple of hours had successfully cut away and raised the immense block of ice; which was then bound up in the tarpaulins and chains we had brought with us. This work, in the constant fury of wind and ice, was completed with the greatest difficulty; and was no sooner done than the storm itself ceased, leaving complete frigid calm – as is the way in these regions.

We at once boarded the helicopter, hovered while the load was attached and the rotors cautiously took the strain, and then took off. Thus, flying close to the ground and very slowly – in ceremonial slow motion almost as if at some great state funeral – we carried the animal back to the station.

We carried it back and manoeuvred it to the prepared position in the tunnel. And had not long removed the tarpaulins when Zhelikov appeared, driving erratically down the ramp in his chair.

In our absence the old man, wasted by pain, had forcibly been given drugs. Left alone in his room, in a state of semiconsciousness, he had none the less caught wind of our arrival and 'escaped'. He now began driving round and round the block of ice, vainly trying to raise himself to view the animal. V and I assured him that nothing apart from a tusk was to be seen. But in his befuddled anxiety he suspected that we were concealing something – that the block had been fractured in the course of removal and the mammoth damaged. We insisted that this was by no means the case, but still could not satisfy him.

The indomitable small figure, muffled in furs in the frozen

tunnel, seemed to have shrunk further while we were away. His head was no bigger than a grapefruit. But still he tried to impose his will. He insisted angrily that no attempt whatever should be made to repair the damage until his planned programme of X-rays and photography of the animal in position had been carried out. And this had to be carried out immediately!

V and I were so exhausted we almost told him the secret there and then. And were mightily relieved when his doctor and an attendant hurriedly appeared and spirited him away. For some moments afterwards we gazed at each other, knowing that the shock of it might have killed him on the spot.

In the fine and even lighting of the tunnel a far better view was obtainable through the window of clear ice. Some bits of frosting had been knocked off, and the shaggy coat of the animal was clearly visible inside. It was not the coat of a mammoth. It was that of a bear. Bears were not extinct – were indeed very plentiful. The whole body of science held that they had not changed their form in millions of years. Yet what we appeared to have here was a bear with a tusk.

But still we left it for the night.

I slept the sleep of exhaustion, and early next day supervised the X-rays and photography. Zhelikov slept on, heavily sedated. The first plates were developed in minutes and I imposed immediate secrecy on the small team involved until Zhelikov himself, after suitable preparation, could be informed. But this was not to be. That doughty fighter, in the front rank of scientists, did not return from wherever he had gone, and shortly before noon his mantle passed to my shoulders; and with it the problem of the animal in the tunnel.

In subsequent days I had it photographed again and again, from all angles and by the most advanced means. But from the very first plate the facts had been clear. We had not been wrong

about the coat of the bear, or about the tusk. Yet it was not a bear with a tusk; and animals other than bears wear the skins of bears.

This animal was human; it was female; it was 1.89 metres tall (six feet two and one-half inches); it was in the thirty-fifth week of pregnancy, and it had given birth before.

These latter facts and some others I of course established later, yet I will state the leading ones now.

Sibir (as we call her; the sleeper) is a handsome, indeed a beautiful, female, of fair complexion and finely set features. Her eyes are grey, very slightly slanted – the only 'mongoloid' feature, for there is no mongoloid fold to the lids – and her cheekbones are high, somewhat flattened. One would say, in short, that she is of Slav type, if such terms had meaning, which of course they do not. She pre-dated the Slavs and all existing peoples by tens of thousands of years; for her moment of death was near to 40,000 years ago.

By our best reckoning she was in her eighteenth year when she fell into the crevasse and broke her neck. She had eaten a recent meal of fish, and had more with her in a large deerhide bag. The bag had been on a sled, which she was drawing, and the tusk (one-quarter of a tusk, the terminal curved portion) was attached to the sled as one of its runners; its twin had evidently broken off and fallen farther into the crevasse on impact. The force of the impact had dislodged the load on the sled and distributed it around and above her upper body, giving the impression of bulk and length we had noticed.

She had fallen on her left side, with the left arm (she was a left-hander) outstretched, perhaps in an attempt to protect her unborn child. This child, responsible for the pronounced 'bulge', would have given her a difficult delivery in any case for its head was very large: its father plainly of Neanderthaloid stock (not the specialised *Neanderthal* of Europe but the earlier more generalised form with higher vaulting to the skull – its European

successor being in this respect a throwback; evolution does not proceed along straight lines).

Apart from the broken arm and neck she was otherwise uninjured. She had frozen rapidly, brain damage being minimal. And she was perfect. And also perfectly whole: lips, tongue, flesh, organs (her digestive ones indeed arrested while at work on the fish) all healthily fresh: quick frozen. There was even saliva in her mouth. Apart from her height she seemed in all respects of absolutely modern type. And yet, in all respects, she was not. Of which, more later.

Now two things must be said. Of all inhabited lands on earth this region, of prehistoric ice, is the only one where such a find could be made. Next, it was made at precisely the moment when use could be made of it – although our operations have been very careful and she is barely blemished. I cannot bring myself to disfigure her.

I look at her often. She is still in my tunnel, serene and detached in time, for ever in her eighteenth year. You will see her. So, the end of one long chain of chance and the beginning of another – this most momentous other, the reason you are here.

I do not doubt, in connection with this, that you will have many things to tell me. Well, I await them.

And now to begin.

One

The Postman and the Professor

1

At ten to nine on a June morning, a shining and brilliant morning that promised a day of great heat, a lady of sixty-three cycled through the streets of Oxford.

She cycled slowly, corpulent and majestic as some former Queen of the Netherlands, sun hat bobbing, flowered dress billowing. Up and around churned the floral thighs until, turning into the High, they were arrested by a slowly changing traffic light. She swooped at once off her saddle and applied the brake – applied it a moment too late so that her broad-sandalled feet went pit-a-pat in small skittering hops as she wrestled with the machine.

Bad co-ordination. Oh, *schrecklich*, *schrecklich*. Everything today was frightful, not least her head. She took the opportunity to remove her hat and fan the head, also to pull at a clinging portion of skirt and shake that about too.

Her sister had advised her to stay in bed today. Out of the question. With retirement age three dangerous years behind her, she could not allow a cold in the head to keep her in bed. Her employer would not be staying in bed. And other people were after her job. Miss Sonntag's colds did not, like other people's, come in winter; hers came in summer, during heatwaves, with stupefying intensity. When the whole world was full of flowers and delight, she turned into an imbecile. She felt hot and cold by turn now, dazed, unnatural, a lump.

The lights changed and she ascended once more and pedalled regally on. In the city of bicycles there were not today many

bicycles. The university was in its long vacation, but her professor was not yet on vacation. Until he went – which would not be before the River Spey showed more salmon – there would be no time off for her. *Ach!*

Brasenose passed, and Oriel and All Souls. She turned in at the close as the clocks all began chiming nine. The little forecourt was airless and deserted, no bicycles in the bicycle stand. She chained her own and went wearily inside. The caretaker had sorted the post and separated the professor's with an elastic band. She took her hat off, and sneezed.

The air in her room was stale but chill. She tried to turn the air conditioner off but couldn't, and opened the window instead. Then she switched the electric kettle on and looked for the post. She could not see any post. But she had *somewhere* seen some post. Her head was so thick she couldn't remember where. In the hall, perhaps, where it had arrived? She went out and searched the hall. No post.

The kettle was whistling, so she went back in and made herself a cup of coffee and hung up her hat. Underneath the hat, on the chair, was the post. She gazed dully at it, and blew her nose. Then she drank some coffee and started work, and almost at once was interrupted by the telephone. She answered it, continuing to straighten out letters and toss the envelopes into the bin; and had completed them all before hanging up. This was when she realised that something else was wrong with the post. There were six foreign envelopes. There were only five foreign letters.

She shuffled the letters blankly about, and then looked on the floor and in the bin. In the bin were the six foreign envelopes, and ten British ones, all empty. She saw this was going to be a totally bad day. She also saw that her boss had arrived. His long stooping form had tramped past the glass panel of her door. She sat back on her heels and considered her sister's advice. Then she pulled herself together and in an addled way began matching let-

ters and envelopes to find out which was missing.

There were ten British envelopes and ten British letters; three American envelopes and three American letters; two German envelopes, two German letters; one Swedish envelope, no Swedish letter. She looked at this envelope again. It was a tatty one. The address was written on a slip of tissue paper and stuck on with Sellotape. Nothing was in it. After a while, unable to understand anything any more, she merely took everything in to the professor and told him they were a letter short.

The professor looked up at her, mystified.

'A letter short, Miss Sonntag?'

'This envelope has no letter.'

He had a look at the envelope.

'Goteborg, Sverige,' he said. 'What is there at Goteborg, Sverige?'

'The university, perhaps?'

'With absent-minded professors, perhaps?'

This thought occurred to her just as he said it, and she cursed the cold in her head. At another time she would have had the thought first and left the envelope where it was (as, it was later thought, she had probably done at least once before). Thick-headedness had sent her hunting through the accursed bin.

Her head was no less thick but she said stolidly, 'This does not seem to me a professor's letter. I mean, naturally there is no letter, but—'

'That's all right, Miss Sonntag.'

The professor took his jacket off. His unusual head, large and knobbly and extending in various unexpected directions, was bald as an egg. It was glistening now. 'It's awfully hot in here,' he said. 'Is the air conditioning going?'

'Oh, yes.' Miss Sonntag sneezed defensively into a Kleenex. 'It is keeping my cold going.' She watched him wind his glasses round his ears and examine the envelope more closely.

The address was written in ballpoint in shaky block letters:

PROF G F LAZENBY
OXFORD
ENGLAND

Professor Lazenby looked at the back of the envelope and then at the front again. Then he held it up to the light. It was a flimsy airmail envelope and he looked through it. Then he looked inside and after a moment withdrew a tiny strip of tissue paper partially stuck to the bottom.

'Well! I did not see this,' Miss Sonntag said.

'Quite all right, Miss Sonntag.'

There was nothing on the paper. He upended the envelope and carefully tapped it.

'You don't think there was some powder in there and I have thrown it in the bin?' Miss Sonntag said, alarmed.

'We can go and look in the bin.'

'Well, I will do it! Naturally. I am just so sorry. It has not occurred to me—'

They both went and looked in the bin. They removed the envelopes, carefully tapping each inside the bin. They removed all the envelopes, but there was no powder in the bin. There was just, at the bottom, another strip of tissue paper.

At that moment Miss Sonntag remembered that the phone had gone as she opened the first envelope, and that the first envelope had been the Swedish one, which naturally had been the first to go into the bin. She began explaining this to Lazenby but he only said, 'Quite all right, Miss Sonntag,' and they both went back to his glassed-in room off the main lab. A few graduate students were by this time at work in the lab; it was the department of microbiology.

Lazenby inserted himself into his chair and loosened his tie.

Then he looked at the two bits of paper and smelt them. 'These are cigarette papers,' he said. He held one up to Miss Sonntag and looked at the envelope. 'The address is also on a cigarette paper,' he said.

'Well! I don't know about this. I don't know what I am to do,' Miss Sonntag said faintly. She couldn't smell anything on the paper.

'How about getting me a cup of coffee?' Lazenby said. 'Also . . . maybe . . . that fellow from Scientific Services. You've got his number.' He was looking sideways along one of the papers. There was nothing on it but he had an idea something was in it. There was a suggestion of indentations on the surface.

'Of course. At once, Professor. But I wish to say,' Miss Sonntag said formally, 'that without this cold in my head I could not have made this mistake. It is not something—'

'What mistake? *No* mistake, Dora,' the professor said kindly, and also accurately. 'It was acute of you to spot this. Most thorough. I admire it.'

'So? Ah. Thank you. Yes. Coffee,' Miss Sonntag said, and fairly hurtled through to her own room, her cheeks pink. She couldn't remember when he had last called her Dora. Her sense of smell had miraculously returned. She smelt flowers everywhere, also her own lavender water, and through the open window glorious Oxford, and beyond it the rest of this kindliest and most gentle of lands.

Miss Sonntag and her sister Sonya, some years older, had found a haven in England from Germany just before the war, 'sponsored' by a friend of their father's, a fellow-doctor. The doctor had kept them with him in Oxford throughout the war and later taken an interest in their welfare. In Germany Sonya had had medical ambitions, and Dora academic ones – neither attainable for them in that land; and not easy in England either, since their education had been dislocated for years. In the end

Sonya had gone into nursing, and Dora into the university's administration, neither of them marrying, until Professor Lazenby had whisked Dora off to his own institute. That had been fifteen years ago and she had been with him ever since. *Three* sugars in his coffee. She spooned them in, still glowing at recollection of the tribute to her thoroughness. Then she recollected the other thing he wanted. The man from Scientific Services.

2

The man from Scientific Services was a former student of Lazenby's who remembered him chiefly as rather a sketchy performer at his work but a useful bluffer when experiments went wrong. He had gone down with a disappointing Third and got a job with the old Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. From Ag & Fish he had gone somewhere else, and after that Lazenby had lost touch with him. He had surfaced again, urgently soliciting help and inviting the professor to lunch, a few days before Lazenby was due at a conference in Vienna. Although having much to attend to, Lazenby could not well resist a plea from an old student; but he had been greatly surprised at the opulence of the meal laid before him. During the meal the old student invited him, as Lazenby understood it, to become a spy.

'Oh, nothing like that, Prof! Much too strong a word.'

'You want me to report on what people say to me in private in Vienna?'

'Not personal things, of course not. *Programmes*, costly *budgeting* things. There's an *immense* amount of duplication going on. Cannot be good for science, Prof.'