THE PLAIN
TRUTH

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FEUILLETON

FORTUNE VARIABLE

A tale of a watchman, a seal and two hundred and thirty-two per cent, as told by eyewitnesses and the newspapers

I. THE MANUAL

Protsentovsk considered itself a precise town: nobody there said “a lot” or “a little”, they said “plus forty” and “minus ninety”, and a suitor was valued as a percentage of the dowry.

The All-in-One shop wrote letters, signboards and portraits, all in one place.[1] All of it was done by the night watchman, Kuzma Podruchny, while the shop received the thanks.

At night Kuzma read a manual, “How to Become a Director in Ten Lessons”. Lesson one called for a confident gaze; Kuzma managed a confident gaze only in the mirror, and not in every mirror.

Kuzma loved Varya, the daughter of Treasurer Smetov. So did Yuly Pikov: thirty-seven years old, height average, fortune variable, no distinguishing marks apart from shares.[1]

With his last rouble Kuzma bought a box of chocolates and, to make it look solid, wrote on the price tag: “+232%”.

“Why two hundred and thirty-two per cent?” asked Varya.

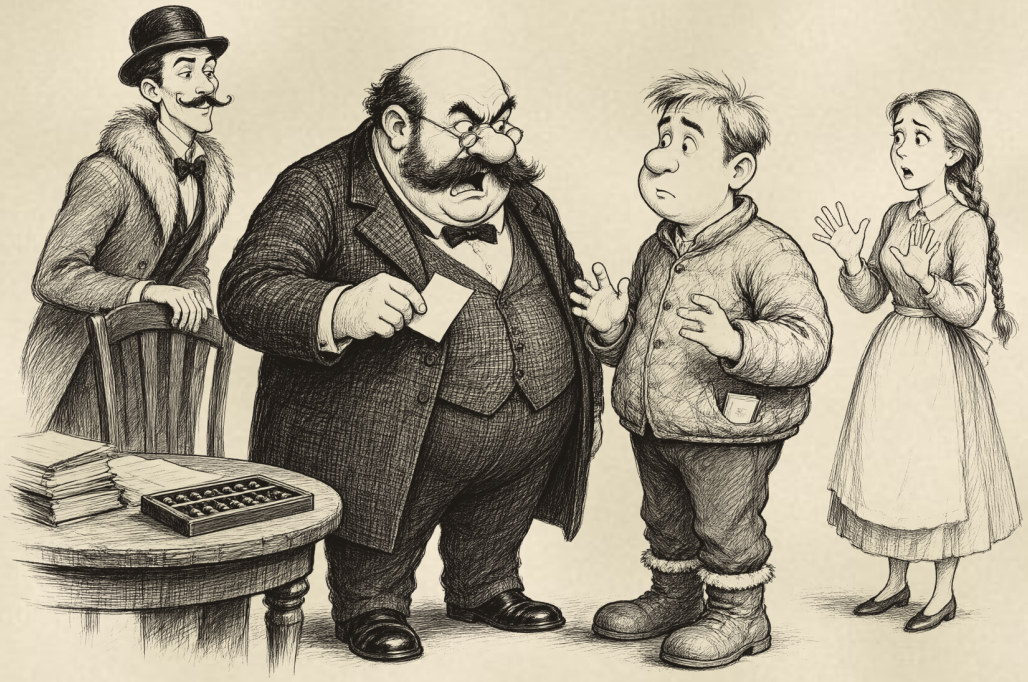
“A defence surcharge,” Kuzma explained. “Against rivals.”

“And where are the chocolates?”

“Inside. The percentages are on the outside.”

II. THE SEAL

That evening at Smetov’s they were approving the town budget for seven years. Defence spending, that is, the fence against the neighbours’ goats, was



The first to be searched, by seniority of office, was the watchman.

FACT FILE

The EU’s draft budget for 2028–2034 comes to almost €2 trillion. Six countries that provide about 40% of contributions threaten to withhold support unless spending is cut; others insist on keeping farm subsidies.[2]

THEIR WAYS

China’s youngest billionaire stopped being one in eight months: in March his fortune was put at $12.6bn, by 20 November at $959.5m.[1] In Protsentovsk this is called “fortune variable”.

LETTERS

Dear Editor, I bought a box of chocolates with a two hundred and thirty-two per cent surcharge. Inside was the ordinary number of chocolates. Whom do I complain to: the shop or the budget?
A housewife paying forty per cent

— Notice —

THE SHOP ALL-IN-ONE

Letters, signboards, portraits. The director sweeps up himself

Letter ..... **5 kop.**
Signboard ..... **10 kop.**
Portrait ..... **by agreement**
Surcharge **232%**

Sources (RBC, 21 November 2026, in Russian):
1. Chinese multibillionaire lost 90% of his fortune in eight months — rbc.ru/business/21/11/2026/6b0177cfab1f8761321769b6
2. European Council proposes raising EU defence spending by 232% — rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/6b019772fe72a4dc1cc1d4d2
3. RWB comments on Tatyana Kim stepping down as CEO of Wildberries — rbc.ru/business/21/11/2026/6b01840fd20f5e42334e64f3

to go up by two hundred and thirty-two per cent, the gate by double. Six housewives who paid forty per cent of the treasury threatened not to sign.[2]

"And the cucumbers?" asked the eldest housewife.

"Cucumbers are the defence of the stomach," said Smetov. "We shall not cut them."

At that moment the treasury seal vanished, and Pikov, passing by, gave Kuzma a friendly pat on the pocket. Without the seal the budget became an essay on a free topic.

Kuzma opened the manual at lesson four: "A director does not look for the culprit; he searches everyone present." The search was his idea, and the first to be searched, by seniority of office, was the watchman.

"And where did this come from?" Smetov drew a pawnshop receipt out of Kuzma's pocket: "Seal, treasury, one."

"I don't know."

"The receipt is made out to the bearer. You are the bearer."

"But the search was my idea!"

"So you were checked first."

The seal was not found, but in Protsentovsk paper weighed more than the thing: a thing gets lost, a paper gets filed. Kuzma was put out through the gate whose cost the town had just doubled.

III. ON HIS HEELS

Lesson five read: "Follow the suspect relentlessly." Kuzma followed Pikov so relentlessly that he stepped into his footprints and breathed down his collar.

Pikov was carrying his entire fortune to the exchange: a chest of shares in the shop. In March the chest had been worth twelve and a half million, by Friday less than one,[1] and it weighed the same: shares fall in price, planks do not.

"Nine kopecks apiece," said the broker.

"It was ninety yesterday!"

"Yesterday you were a rich man too."

"Why so cheap?"

"Signboards are written cheaper these days. And when the shop will turn a profit, not even the shop knows."[1]

Meanwhile two messages came into the town chat: "Seal lost. Finder gets five per cent of the budget. Smetov." And below it: "Fortune lost. Finder gets ten per cent of the remainder. Pikov."

"Ten per cent of what?" asked a passer-by.

"Of the remainder," replied Pikov. "The remainder is being clarified."

Pikov turned the corner, Kuzma turned after him and ran into the fence. The defence spending had paid off.

IV. IN A DREAM

Kuzma fell asleep over the manual. In his dream he was a director: the signboards wrote themselves, Varya looked at him with a hundred and forty per cent respect, and over the square rose the moon, round and important, like a seal. The moon was promptly filed with the budget.

Varya, meanwhile, was not asleep: she had memorised the receipt number, for in Protsentovsk people remember figures better than faces. In the morning she went to the pawnshop.

"Who pawned the seal?" she asked.

"A young man. Thirty-seven years old, height average, fortune variable."

"And what is it today?"

"Today minus ninety. He pawned the seal to last till evening."

Smetov redeemed the seal. Pikov paid the money back out of the remainder; the remainder covered exactly that.

"I trusted you one hundred per cent!" said Smetov.

"And I trusted you two hundred and thirty-two," replied Pikov. "With the defence surcharge."

That same morning the shop's founder, Director Matryona Osnovatelnitseva, stepped down. The announcement promised that the shop's work would not be affected.[3] So it proved: the shop's work was done by Kuzma, and Kuzma was asleep.

V. THE SHARE

Varya came to the shop and woke the watchman.

"The seal has been found," she said. "Papa begs your pardon. About seven per cent of it, but he begs."

Kuzma did not know what to say and opened the manual at lesson ten, "The Merger". "Take your partner by the hand." Kuzma took it. "Offer a share."

"I offer forty-five per cent," said Kuzma.

"Of what?"

"Of everything. It was sixty-five, but twenty went into funds."[3]

"And the rest?"

"The rest is chocolates."

"Not bad for a watchman," Smetov said condescendingly from the doorway. "Even too much for a director."

It was Smetov who proposed Kuzma as director: whoever does the work may as well receive the thanks. The former director had lost the right to act without a power of attorney,[3] and her first power of attorney was written out by the new director, in a fine hand and with the seal.

In the evening Kuzma finished the manual. The last lesson read: "Now step down to strategic development." Kuzma closed the book: he had only just begun developing.

Tomorrow the shop opens at eight. At five past eight the director will sweep the porch: the post is new, the broom is old.

From press reports



Kuzma stepped into his footprints and breathed down his collar.

Sources (RBC, 21 November 2026, in Russian):

1. Chinese multibillionaire lost 90% of his fortune in eight months — rbc.ru/business/21/11/2026/6b0177cfab1f8761321769b6
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