

Sergei Mikhaikov

UNCLE STEEPLER







In our street a young man lived,
Known to all the local people;
And because he was so tall,
They all called him Uncle Steeple.

Now, his last name was Stepanov,
And his first name was Stepan;
Of the giants in the district,
He was quite the tallest man.

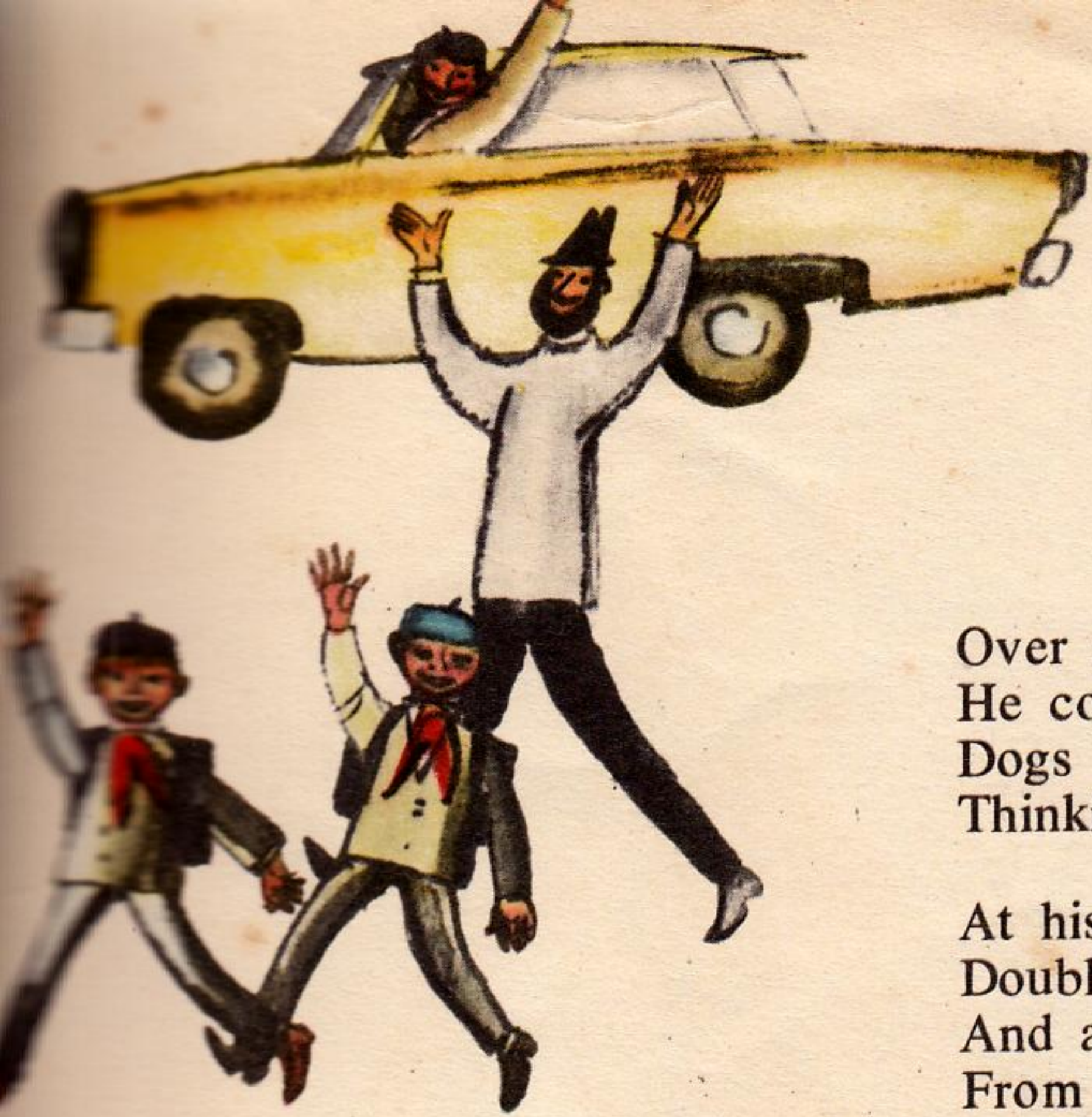
And because he was so tall,
He was loved by one and all;
Coming home at close of day,
He'd be seen a mile away.

Firm his measured footsteps beat,
As Stepan came down the street;
And his shoes were number fifty—
Few are men who have such feet.



He'd seek shoes at shops and fairs,
Asking for the biggest pairs.
He'd buy coats so long and wide,
You and I could hide inside.

When at last a suit he'd buy,
Which had struck his fancy's eye,
One quick turn before the mirror—
And apart the seams would fly.



Over any fence or wall
He could peep, he was so tall;
Dogs would loudly bark in warning,
Thinking thieves had come to call.

At his mealtimes he would eat
Double portions, as a rule;
And at night he's stretch his feet
From the bed on to a stool.



When he'd go to see the pictures,
He'd be told by quite a few,
"Sit upon the floor, young fellow,
It is all the same to you!"

When to stadiums went he,
They would let him enter free,
For they thought that Uncle Steeple
Surely must a champion be.

And the neighbours, near and far,
Every grown-up, every kid,
All could tell you where he lived,
Where he worked, and what he did.





For when kites would catch and dangle,
High above, from wires or trees,
Who but he could disentangle
Them so quickly, with such ease?

And the very smallest fry
At parades he lifted high,
Because everyone must see
When our troops go marching by.



All about loved Uncle Steeple,
All were fond of Uncle Steeple,
For he was the friend of children,
Of the kids in every yard.

When towards his home he strolled,
"Greetings!" shouted young and old;
When he sneezed, they'd shout in chorus,
"Uncle Steeple, don't catch cold!"

Very early Steeple rises,
Opens all his windows wide,
Does his daily exercises,
Takes a shower in his stride.
Not to brush his teeth each morning
Is a thing he can't abide.

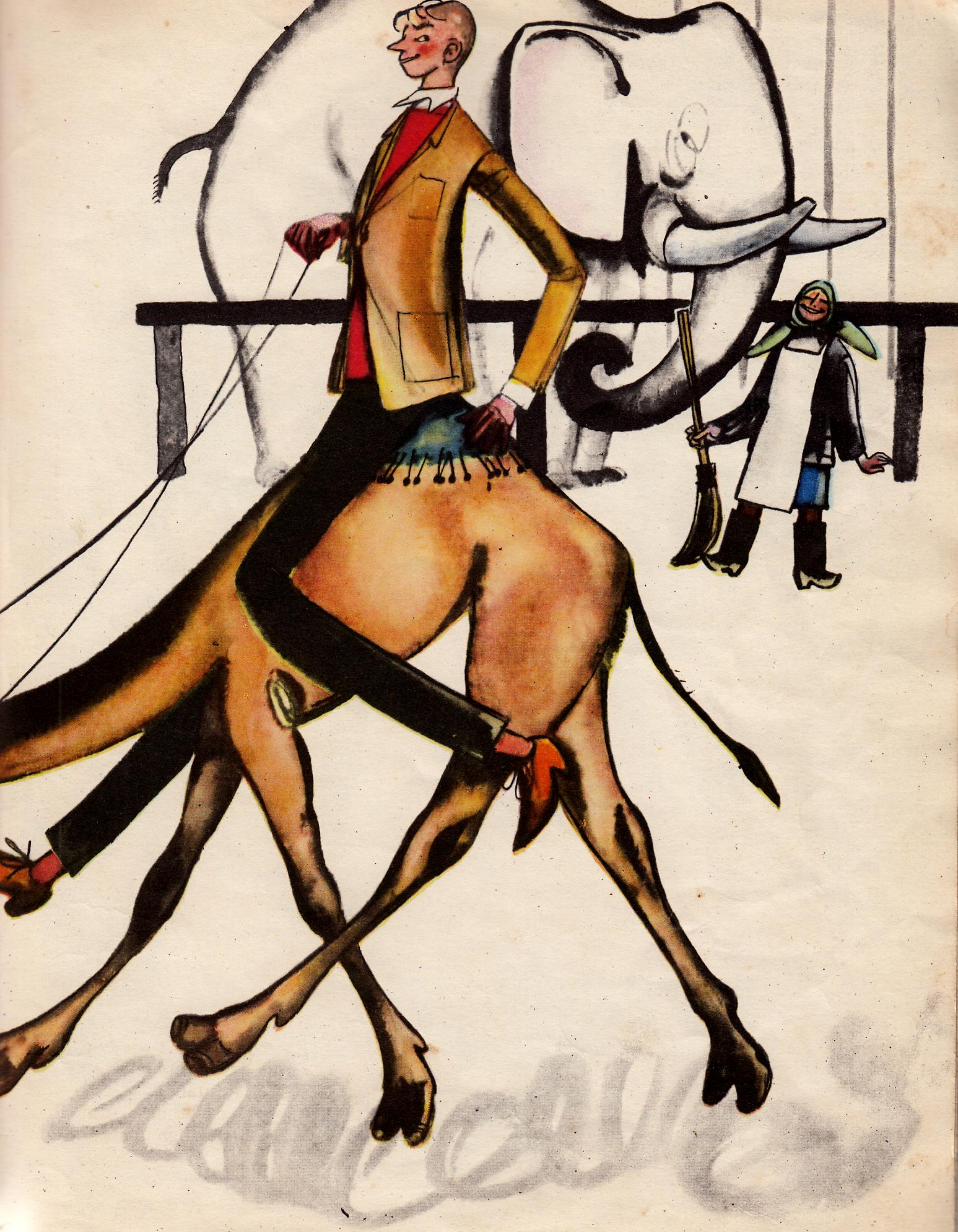
Someone's riding on an ass,
Feet a-ploughing through the grass;
Why, that someone's Uncle Steeple;
People stare, as he rides past.
And they all shout to Stepan:
"Try a camel, little man!"



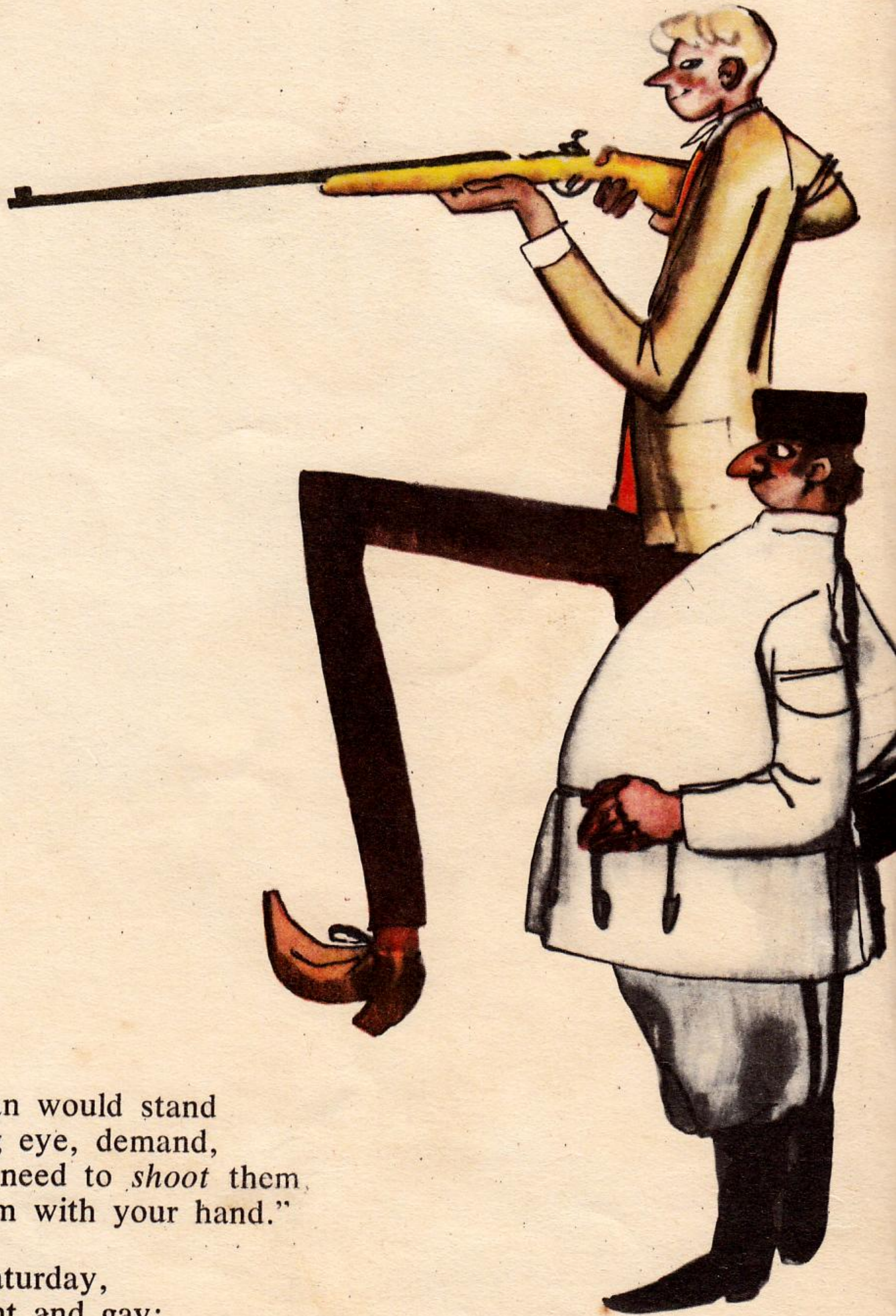
So a camel Steeple tried;
People laughed, until they cried.
Someone made a clever crack,
"You will break the camel's back!
Camels, friend, will never do,
Elephants were made for you!"



On the tower Steeple's waiting
For his turn to take a jump,
He is slightly hesitating,
And his heart goes thump, thump, thump,
While below him laugh the people,
"See the Steeple on a steeple!"



Into shooting-galleries,
Uncle Steeple'd barely squeeze;
To the keeper he would say,
"Let me shoot at targets, please."



But the puzzled man would stand
And, with twinkling eye, demand,
"Surely, you don't need to *shoot* them,
You can *reach* them with your hand."

In the park, this Saturday,
'Twill be very bright and gay;
There'll be music all night long,
Dancing, laughter, merry song.



At the entrance Steeple asks,
"Will you, please, show me some masks?
I want one that will disguise me,
So that none will recognize me."

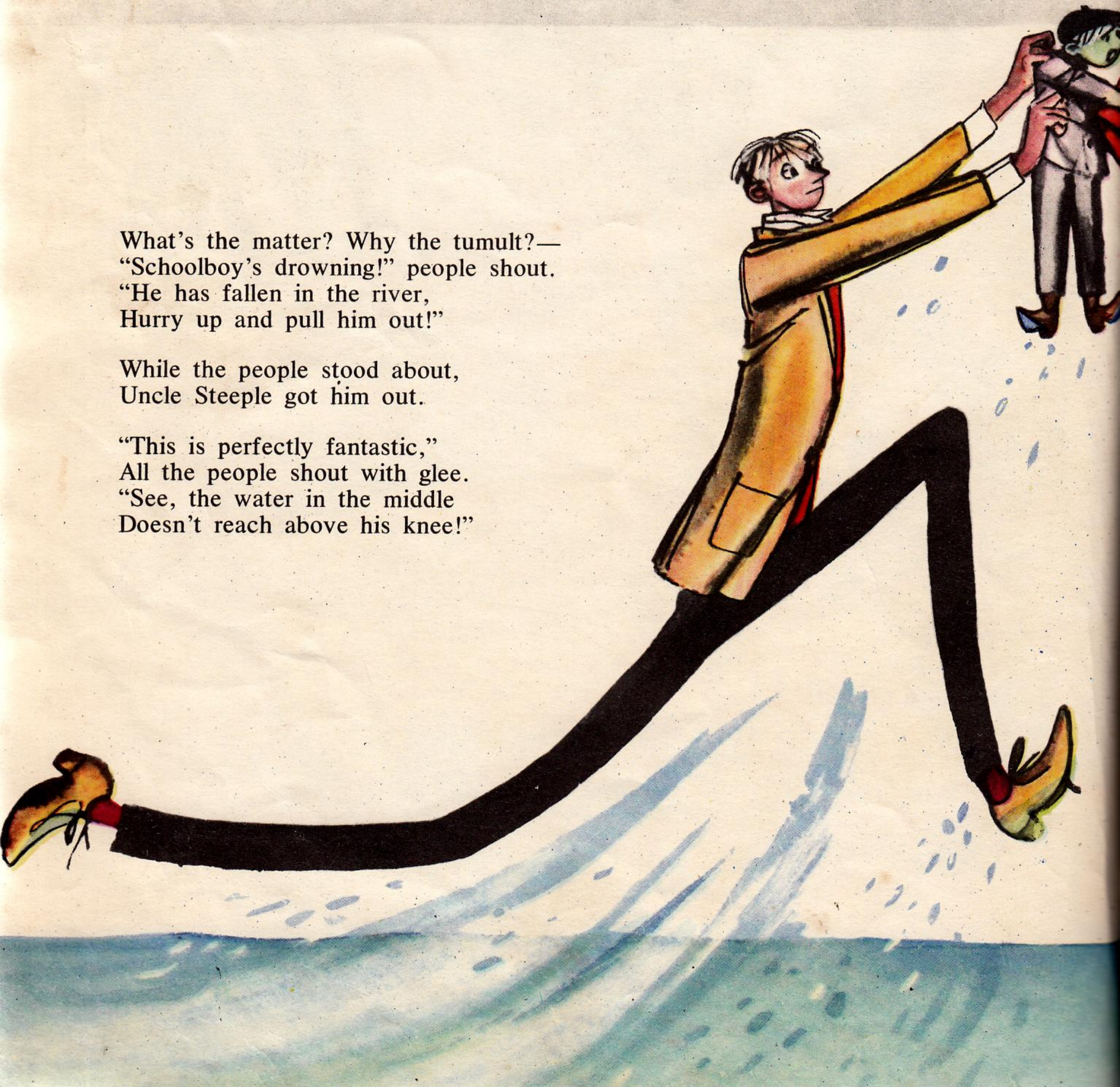
"What's the use?" they say in jest,
"Even though you do your best,
Anyone will recognize you:
You're much taller than the rest."



What's the matter? Why the tumult?—
"Schoolboy's drowning!" people shout.
"He has fallen in the river,
Hurry up and pull him out!"

While the people stood about,
Uncle Steeple got him out.

"This is perfectly fantastic,"
All the people shout with glee.
"See, the water in the middle
Doesn't reach above his knee!"

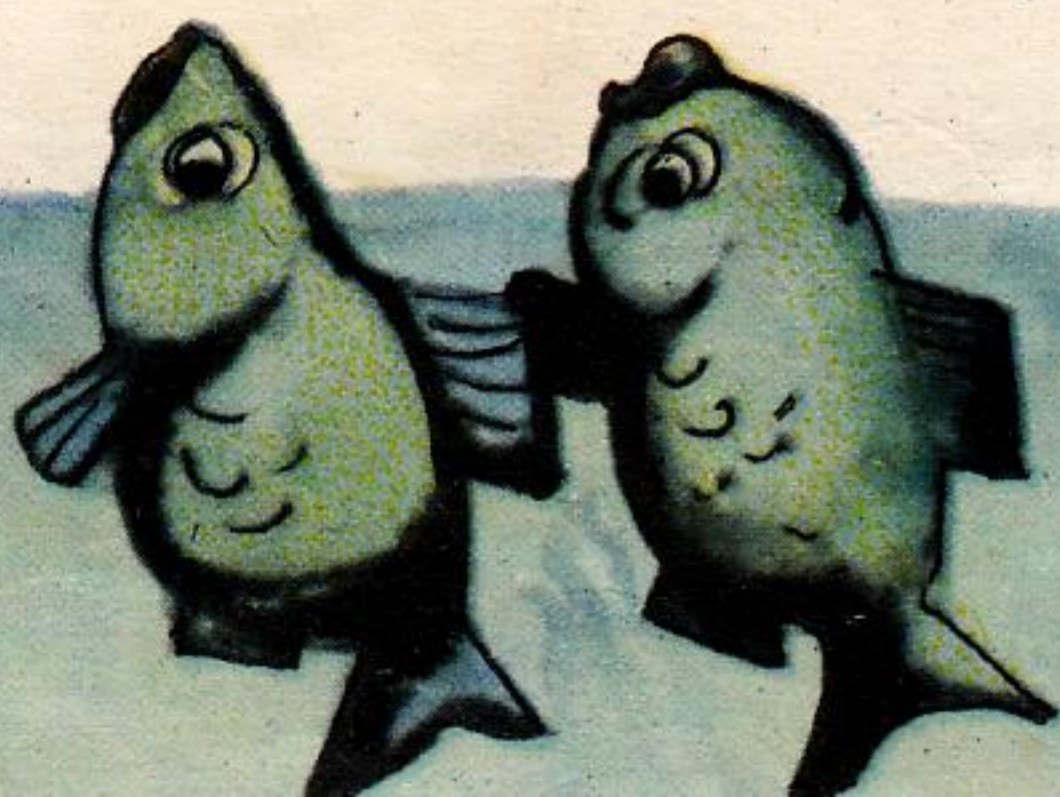




Frightened, wet, but safe and sound,
Stands the schoolboy on the ground;
Uncle Steeple saved the schoolboy,
Saved a boy who might have drowned.

All the people, for his deed,
Wish to shake him by the hand;
"Ask for anything you need,"
He is made to understand.

"I don't need a single thing,"
Answers Steeple, colouring.

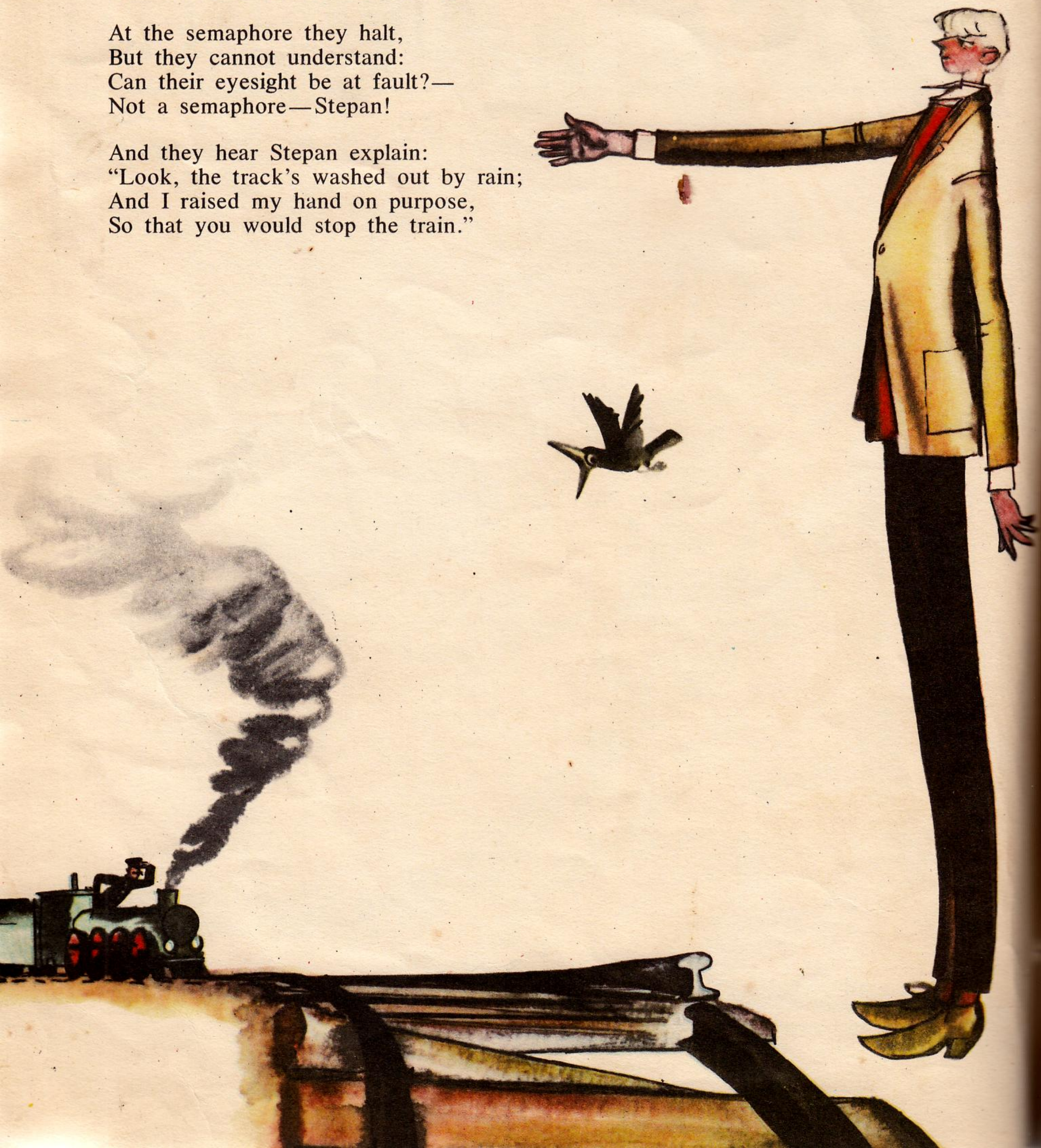


Whistling loud, the engine sped,
While the driver stared ahead;
As they thundered past a station,
To the fireman he said:

“On this line, from end to end,
You’ve seen every semaphore,
But I’ll gladly bet, my friend,
That one you’ve not seen before.”

At the semaphore they halt,
But they cannot understand:
Can their eyesight be at fault?—
Not a semaphore—Stepan!

And they hear Stepan explain:
“Look, the track’s washed out by rain;
And I raised my hand on purpose,
So that you would stop the train.”





Why the smoke and all the clatter?
What has happened? What's the matter?

There's a corner house ablaze,
Crowds of idlers stand and gaze;
Firemen ply the flames with water,
As the fire-escapes they raise.

Soon the attic's all in flames,
Birds dash at the window-panes.

In the yard the youngsters crowd,
To Stepanov they all turn
And in anguish cry aloud,
"Please, don't let our pigeons burn!"

Steeple reaches to the attic,
Though he's standing on the ground;
And his hand goes to the window,
Through the flames that lap around.



When he opened up the shutter,
From the window, small and narrow,
Flew the pigeons, all a-flutter—
Eighteen pigeons and—a sparrow.

Grateful children highly praise him,
For he set the pigeons free,

And the grown-ups all advise him
That a fireman he should be.

“I don’t want to be a fireman,”
Was his answer to them all.
“I would rather join the Navy—
If I do not prove too tall.”



In the corridor there's laughter,
Jokes, and merry conversation.
In the doctor's office Steeple
Strips for his examination,

Say the doctors, all in chorus,
"Reaching you is hard to do.
You are quite a problem for us:
We aren't half as tall as you."

"We'll examine," said the doctors,
"Both your hearing and your sight.
Is your liver quite in order?
Are your heart and lungs all right?"

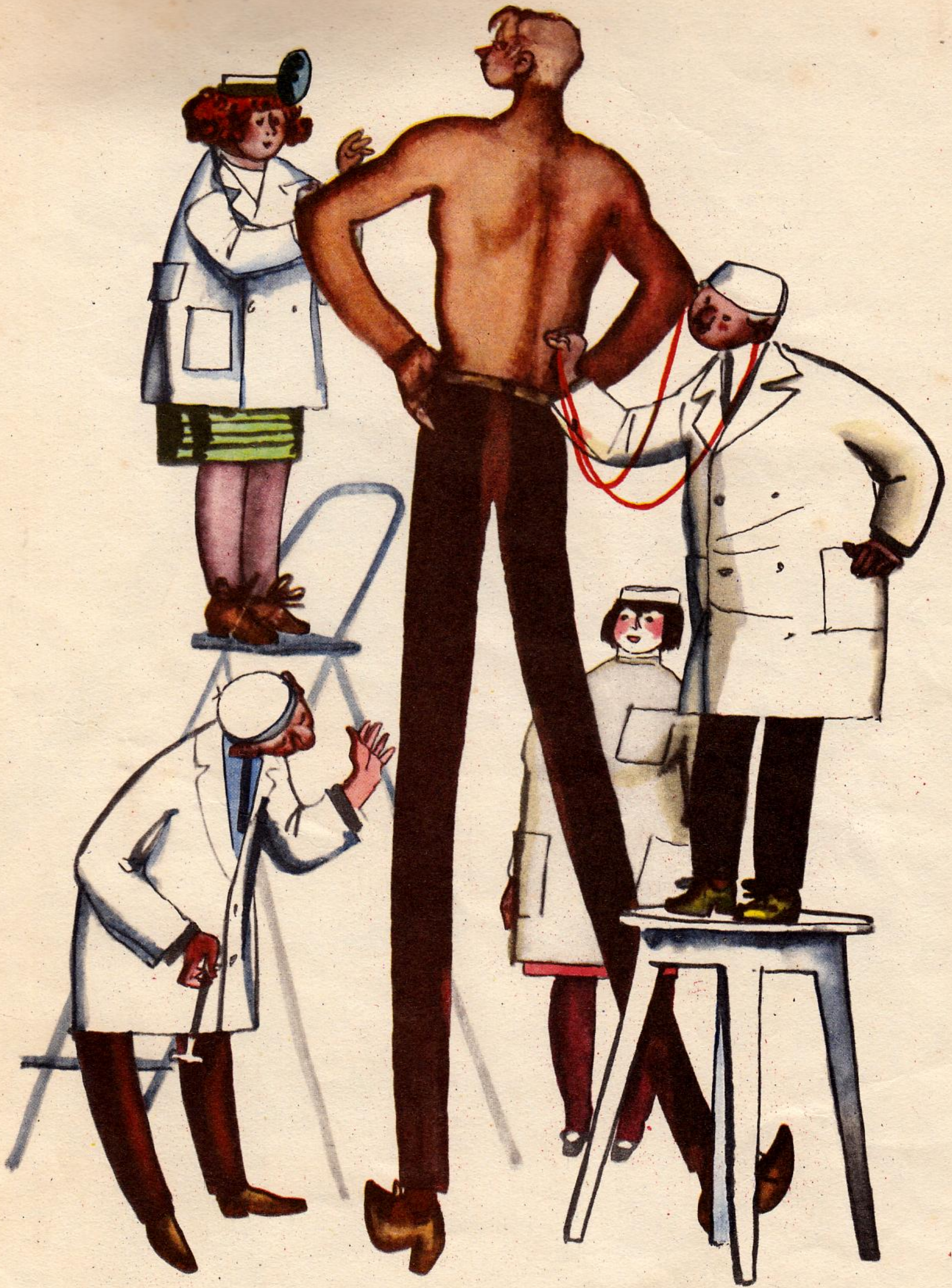
They examined him and weighed him,
And he passed in every test;
And they said: "Your heart beats soundly
And your lungs are of the best.
Pretty tall, we must confess,
But we'll pass you none the less.

"As a tankman you won't do,
Tanks are far too small for you.
As an infantryman? No,
From the trenches you would show.

"Now if you become a flyer,
We're afraid your legs would tire:
Planes don't have much room to spare,
You'd be very cramped in there.

"For a man who is so tall
Any horse would be too small.
But the Navy wouldn't care—
You can serve your country there!"





"I'm prepared to serve my people.
Fire and flood for them I'll dare,"
Proudly answered Uncle Steeple,
"You can send me anywhere."

Winter, spring, and summer pass...
Once again it's snowing hard.
Uncle Steeple, where is he?
There's no answer from the sea,
Not a letter, not a card.

Then the little kids, one day,
Had a wonderful surprise,
For a sailor came their way,
Who was Uncle Steeple's size.

As he walked along the street,
Snow-flakes crunched beneath his feet.
Maybe you can tell me who
Was that man in navy blue?

He wore neatly ironed trousers,
Sailor hat without a brim,
Woolen gloves, a big brass buckle—
Anchors shone all over him.

When he reached his home ashore,
No one knew him any more.
Children asked him, by the door,
"Who may you be looking for?"



Uncle Steeple turned their way,
And saluted, bright and gay,
As he told the happy children,
"I've come home on leave today.

"Haven't slept the night, what's more,
Walking seems so hard on shore.



"Let me change, and rest my feet,
Have some tea, a cup or two,
Then come in, and you I'll treat
To some tales about the blue.

"About war, the cannonade,
And the Leningrad blockade,
How, when serving on the cruiser,
I was wounded in a raid."

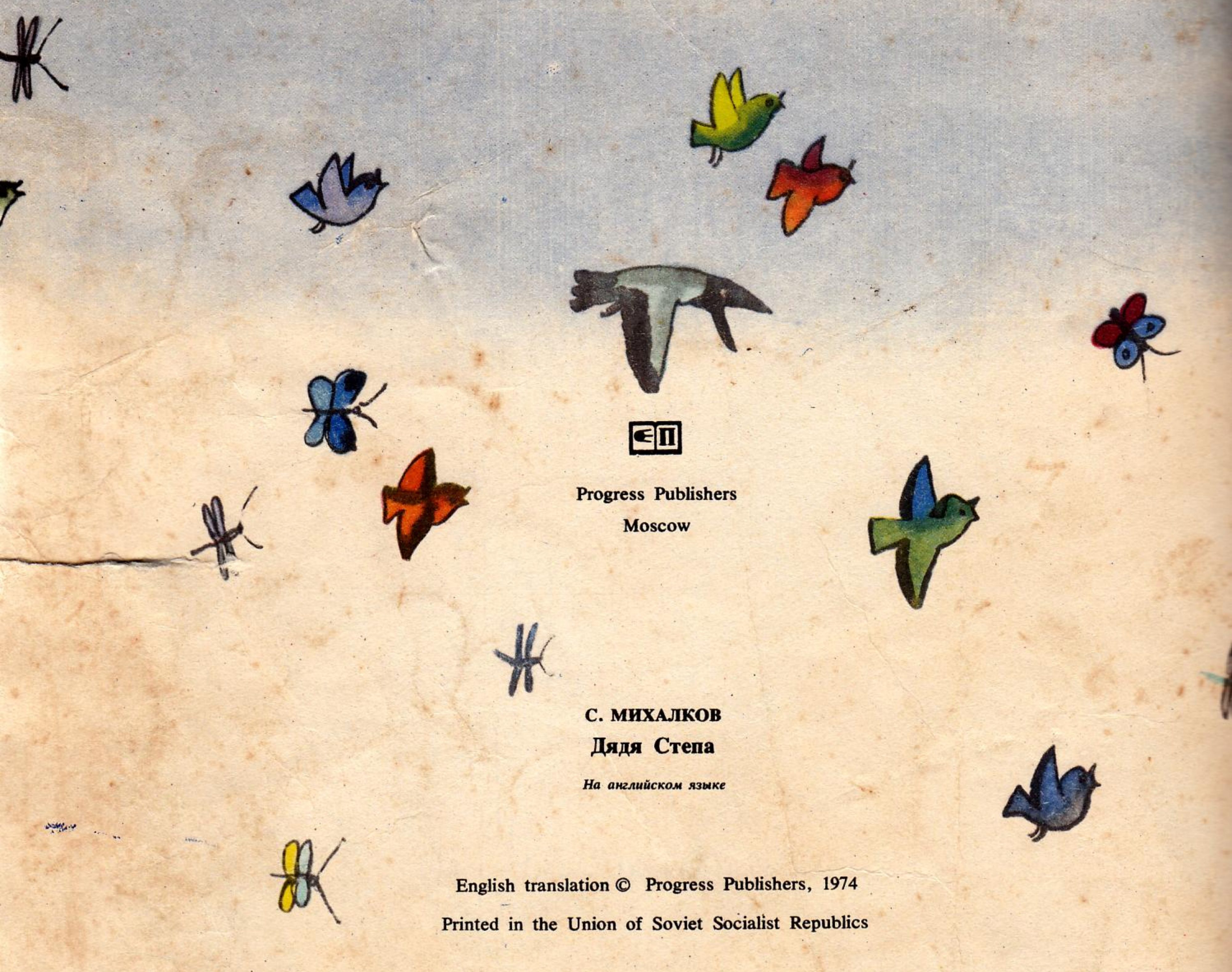
Prouder children you won't meet
Than the children of our street—
For their friend's a Soviet sailor,
Serving in the Baltic Fleet.

When they see Stepanov coming,
All the little kids run out,
But instead of "Uncle Steeple",
"Lighthouse" is the name they shout.



Translated from the Russian by Eugene Felgenhauer

Drawings by F. Lemkul



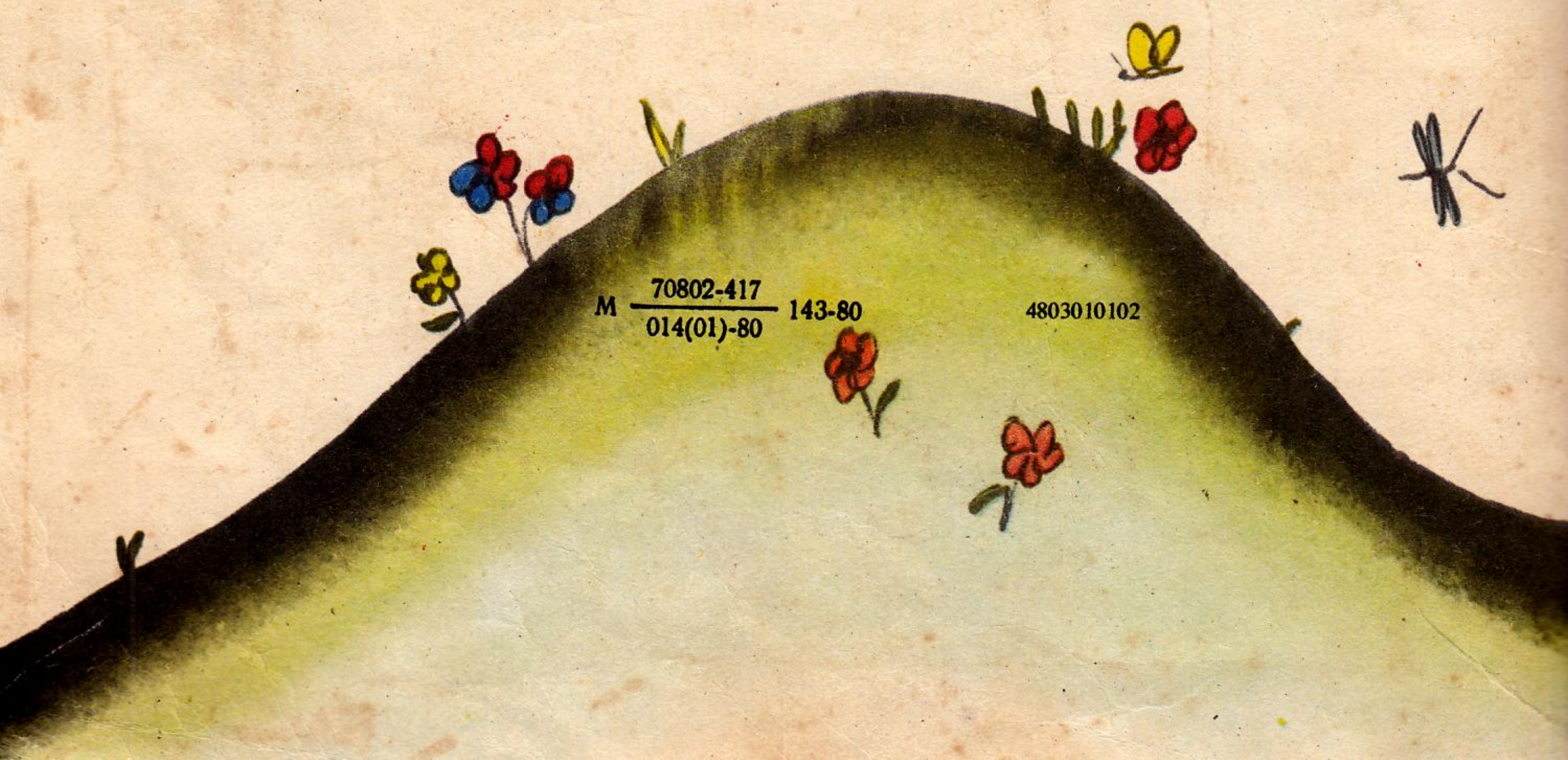
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