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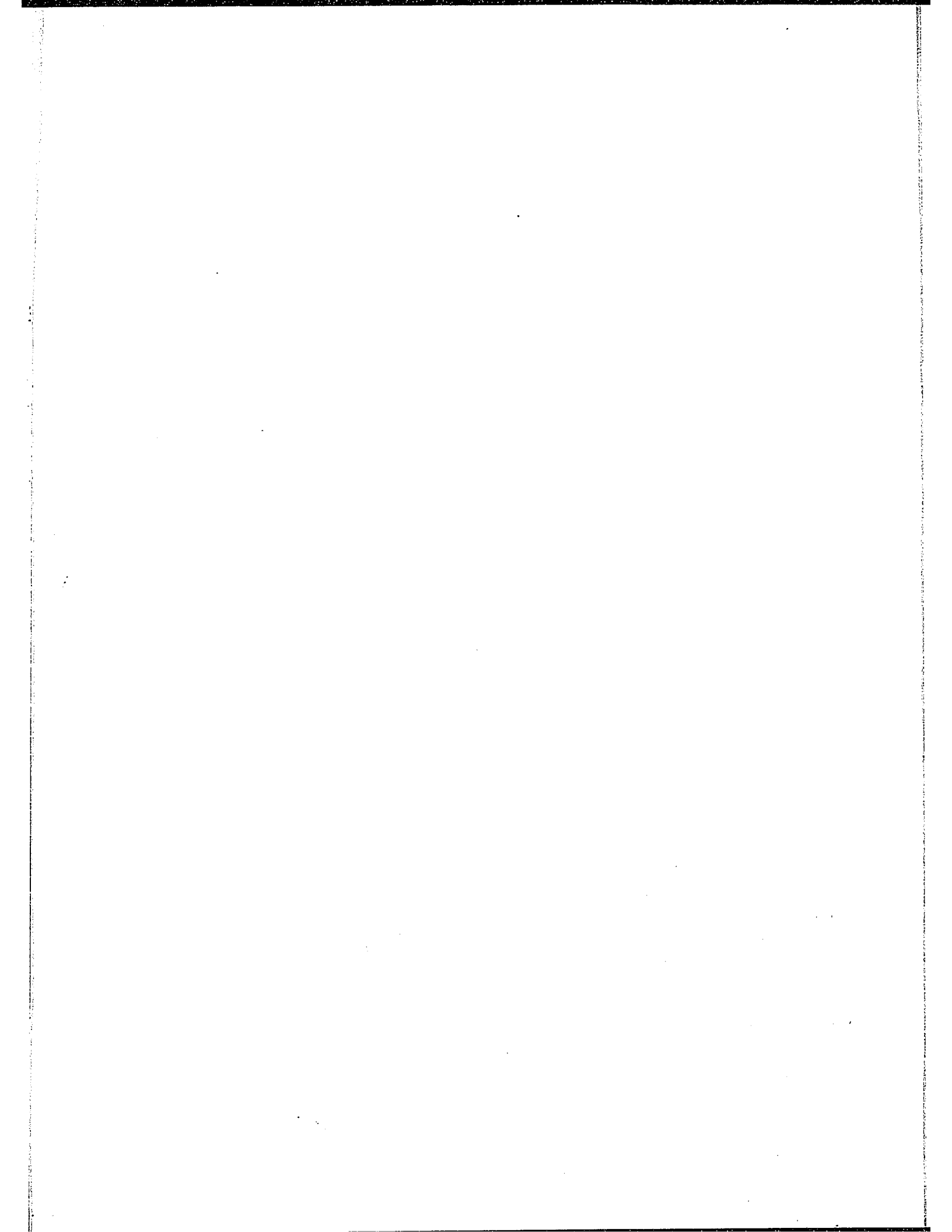
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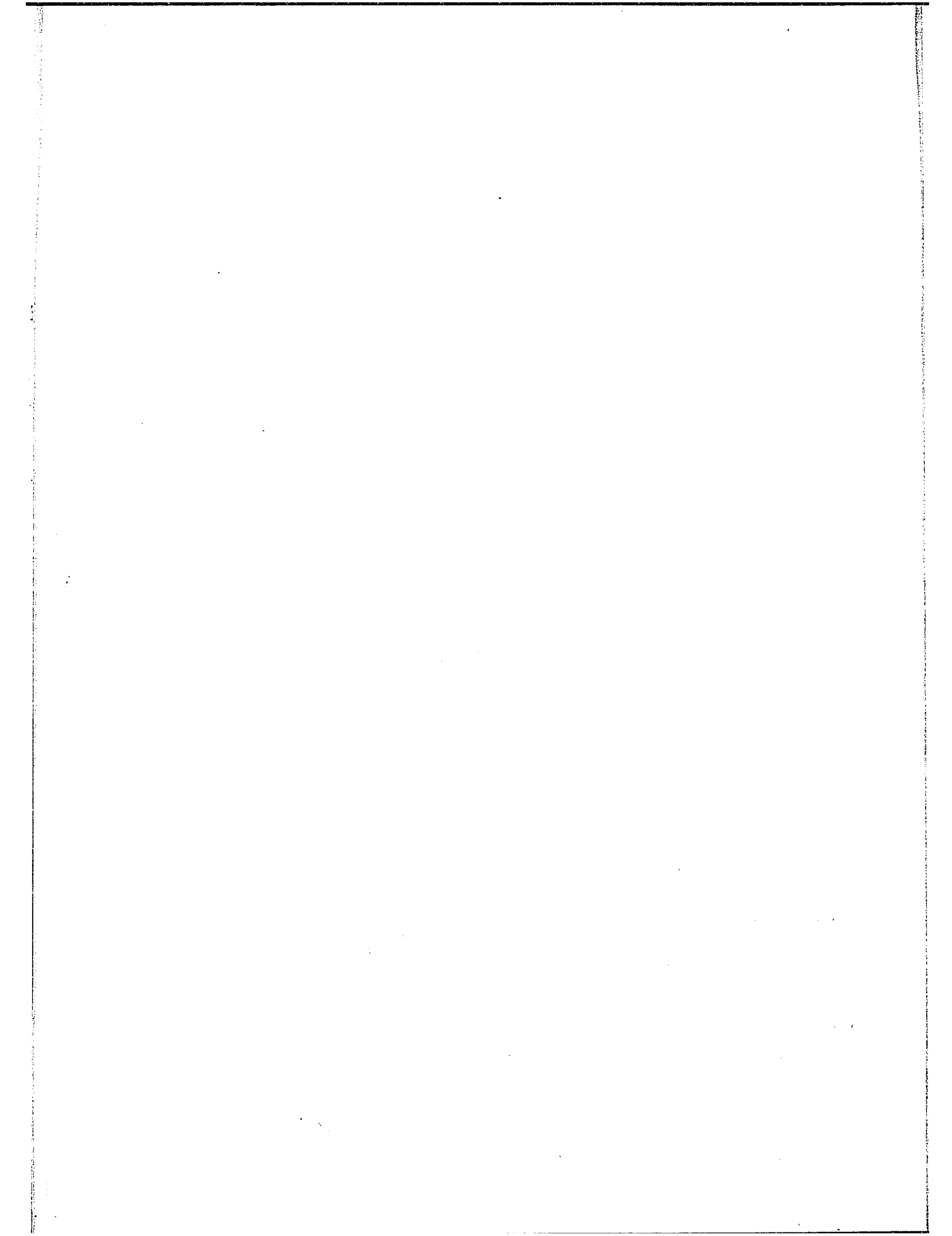
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Konstantin Vaginov's

*The Works and Days  
of Svistonov*

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Translated  
with an Introduction

by

DANIEL ANDRÉ ROY  
490879



A thesis submitted  
for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
Russian Language and Literature

at the  
University of Ottawa  
1995

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## Note on Transliteration

The transliteration of all Russian personal and place names in *The Works and Days of Svistonov* is based on System I as delineated by J. Thomas Shaw in his *The Transliteration of Modern Russian for English-Language Publications* (1967).

## Introduction

On 26 April 1934, following a long, hard-fought battle against tuberculosis, Konstantin Konstantinovich Vaginov, an obscure poet and novelist, died. He was thirty-five years old.

Four days later, the newspaper *Literaturny Leningrad* published three short obituaries. The first was a heartfelt eulogy signed by thirteen of Vaginov's oldest friends. The last two, by Nikolay Chukovsky and Vsevolod Rozhdestvensky, criticized and denounced the petty-bourgeois and formalistic qualities of Vaginov's prose and poetry; they nevertheless commended him for his recent attempts at 'self-reform' and viewed his short life with a mixture of scorn and pity.<sup>1</sup>

It would be thirty years before his name was again mentioned in print, and another twenty-five before the entirety of his works was finally made available to the general public.

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For a brief period in the late 1920's, Vaginov was one of the more important figures in Russian literature. The lyricism of his classically inspired, phantasmagorical and utterly personal verse elicited the admiration of such masters as Nikolay Gumilev, Mikhail Kuzmin and Osip Mandelshtam,<sup>2</sup> and his novels—wry, satirical commentaries peopled with grotesques gamely dealing with the after-shocks of the Bolshevik Revolution—had their thematic and stylistic equivalents in the works of Yuri Olesha and Andrey Platonov. And yet Soviet officials, in their perverse wisdom, did not see it fit to rehabilitate him until the last days of *perestroyka*, many years after most, if not all, of

his more controversial contemporaries had gained posthumous fame. And so the question arises: Why should we have been denied Vaginov's unique gifts until only recently?

Is it possible that Vaginov simply slipped through the cracks? Although a member of numerous literary schools and circles throughout his shortened adult life, he was also, by everyone's admission, a loner, congenitally self-effacing, forever on the periphery, rather than in the forefront, of artistic currents, observing and interpreting the foibles of humanity with a keen, doubting eye that never lost sight of his heart's unflagging quest for spiritual and artistic meaning.<sup>1</sup> This flitting about may have consequently relegated Vaginov to the back of many scholars' minds as they set about, in the 1960's and '70's, piecing together the complex tapestry of the post-revolutionary, pre-five-year-plan era of Soviet literature. Attention was undividedly directed toward any number of groups which had been banned from official memory for their experimental, usually formalistic leanings and ideologically neutral stance. The necessity of rescuing from oblivion the works of a given movement's foremost spokesmen and practitioners was of course paramount; whatever contributions demi-members, apprentices and hangers-on had made would merit a closer look only upon completion of this task.

By the mid-eighties several academics from various countries had finally wended their way to Vaginov.<sup>2</sup> His comparatively small output—roughly eight scores of poems, three short stories and four novellas<sup>3</sup> (the last incomplete)—likely misled earlier scholars to dismiss him as a mere scribbler, an interloper whose peripateticism betrayed an unformed, and perhaps uninformed, mind. But eventually others, intrigued by the aura of mystery surrounding Vaginov, delved into the matter with clearer heads and very quickly recognised the gold

mine they had stumbled upon. By the same token, they found the reason Vaginov had become such a shadowy figure by the time of his death.

Vaginov's poetics are as complex as anything in Russian literature, steeped not only in classicism and world-weary irony, but also in romanticism, symbolism and mysticism. A playful predilection for word games and in-jokes, a penchant for bitter-sweet caricatures of friends and foes, a quasi-religious belief in Spenglerism, as well as an omnipresent and incredibly diverse literary subtext, likewise informed his verse and prose, enriching both through ingeniously subtle thematic, stylistic and metaphorical allusions. The intricate, esoteric and multi-layered textures woven by Vaginov ultimately proved beyond the comprehension of ordinary readers; Vaginov was, at bottom, accessible only to the well-read, classically-educated inhabitants of the rarefied and disappearing world of Russian (as opposed to Soviet) literature. His stature among belletrists, and the admiration and esteem with which his colleagues regarded him, were insufficient to tear down the wall of public indifference. Vaginov's unorthodoxy had moreover earned him the displeasure of Stalinist hard-liners. By 1931 the Communist Party had effectively silenced him, and he spent the remaining two years of his life toiling over projects of proletarian mediocrity.<sup>1</sup> Vaginov, like so many other experimental writers of the late 1920's and early 1930's, had gradually slipped into irrelevance and, finally, obscurity.<sup>2</sup>

---

Konstantin Konstantinovich Wagenheim was born April 4, 1899 (Old Style) in St. Petersburg, the second of three sons. His father, a colonel in the Russian army, russified the German family name to

Vaginov during the First World War;<sup>1</sup> his mother, the daughter of a rich Siberian industrialist, owned several apartment buildings in downtown St. Petersburg and was thus able to raise her two sons (the youngest died in infancy, also of tuberculosis) in relative luxury.<sup>2</sup>

Konstantin's solitary nature was a direct result of his persistent ill health as a child. His frailty prevented him from playing outside with other children, and he consequently spent most of his free time alone, reading history and literature, and studying foreign languages, chiefly French and Italian.<sup>3</sup> He was also an ardent numismatist, and his passion for ancient Greek and Roman coins in particular eventually led him to the great writers and poets of Classical literature.<sup>4</sup>

In 1910 Vaginov entered the Gurevich Lyceum, a private school renowned for its robustly independent and democratic traditions.<sup>5</sup> He began studying literature in earnest during his seven years there. His favourite authors included Poe, De Quincey, Pater, Shakespeare and above all Baudelaire, whose *Flowers of Evil* apparently inspired him to first try his hand at poetry.<sup>6</sup> Of greater importance, though, was his exposure to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Ovid's earthy, passionate, serio-comic retelling of mostly Greek myths dealing with transformations undergone by various gods and mortals, and Gibbon's vivid account of the pagan world's death at the hands of the younger, more dynamic Christian faith were to provide Vaginov with the philosophical framework and historical parallels which would guide his approach to both art and life in the Soviet Union.

In fact, comparisons between the Barbarian invasions of the Roman Empire in the fifth century A. D. and the toppling of Tsarist Russia by Lenin's Bolsheviks were all but inevitable. The Russian intelligentsia had for many years anticipated, even eagerly awaited,

some cataclysmic event which would engulf their Empire, and all of Europe, as well. They envisioned this catastrophe as a catharsis, a material as well as spiritual cleansing that would purge Western civilization of, they believed, the cancerous moral rot which had spread to its every limb and organ. The Great War became that catharsis the moment it degenerated into a conflagration of continental proportions. Numerous movements and ideologies, from republicanism to socialism to humanism, waited in the wings, ready to fill the void, each laying claim to the key that would open the door to a new era... but it was communism, contrary to all expectations, that finally won the day.

Over the following years, as the reborn Russia fought, unsuccessfully, to export its brand of utopia beyond the borders of its empiricist predecessor, another war was waged within the country's artistic community between those who wished to preserve and build on tradition and those who demanded a clean break from the past. Symbolist was pitted against Futurist, Acmeist against Proletarianist. The significance of this struggle was not lost on the writers and poets of the period, but the well-rounded bourgeois traditionalists, with their intimate knowledge of history and the philosophy of history, were much more aware of the gravity, even hopelessness of their plight and understandably distressed about standing before the precipice of a dark age which might conceivably wipe out all memory of them or their achievements. A few, such as Blok, Olesha and Vaginov, actually felt honoured and privileged to be able to witness the death of one era and the birth of another, to stand on the cusp of such rare, momentous change. Though they realised their old ways would ultimately prove their undoing, they accepted—for a time—their fate and the new world with all the faith and equanimity evinced by Christian martyrs almost

two millenia earlier.

And so Vaginov, following a short one-year stint in one of the Red Army's labour battalions (during which he may or may not have participated in the Civil War's Siberian and Polish campaigns)<sup>1</sup> spent the next several years in Petrograd/Leningrad developing his burgeoning talents in the company of fellow poets, writers, philosophers and historians. It was also during this period, from 1920 to 1926, that Vaginov sped through an inordinate number of literary circles. Some vanished into the ether almost as quickly as they had appeared, while others left a more immediate and tangible legacy; all proved convenient training ground for Vaginov.

Among the ephemeral groups to which Vaginov pledged allegiance in those early years was the Circle of Poets.<sup>2</sup> The Circle of Poets was composed of seven young men dedicated to the art of the late neoromantic Konstantin Mikhailovich Fofanov (1862-1911).<sup>3</sup> They had a charter and a precise æsthetic programme linked to Ego-Futurism<sup>4</sup> (and, to a lesser degree, Imaginism and Acmeism)<sup>5</sup>, but in practice the poets showed themselves to be rather eclectic. The Circle of Poets was disbanded by the Cheka in 1922 after two years of sporadic activity,<sup>6</sup> its only noteworthy achievement being the publication, under the group's imprint, of Vaginov's first book of poetry, *Journey into Chaos*.<sup>7</sup>

By then, Vaginov had made great strides as a poet. He had studied under the reknowned acmeist Nikolay Gumilev,<sup>8</sup> caught the admiring eye of Osip Mandelshtam (whose classically themed verse exerted the greatest influence on Vaginov's early work)<sup>9</sup> and helped found the Islanders, an assemblage of poets closely affiliated with the Serapion Brothers.<sup>10</sup> The Islanders published an almanach and several volumes of poetry which garnered guarded praise from critics, but the group disintegrated before it could really get off the ground.<sup>11</sup>

Vaginov's second collection of poetry, entitled *Petersburg Nights*, never made it to print and was in fact published for the first time, in Germany, only in 1982.<sup>1</sup>

By late 1922, Vaginov had joined well-known poet, prosaist and critic Mikhail Kuzmin's Emotionalists. The Emotionalists were nominally interested in gnostic philosophy and German Expressionism,<sup>2</sup> but in reality championed "[...] little more than the proposition that artists should be able to benefit from the positive side of a literary association without having to surrender their creative individuality to a collective æsthetic program."<sup>3</sup> The Emotionalists managed to bring out three issues of their almanach *Abraxas* until it too was shut down by officials wary of an independent literary journal which gathered such luminaries as Akhmatova, Khlebnikov, Mandelshtam, Pasternak and Olga Ziv.<sup>4</sup> Vaginov himself had submitted several poems, but his most important contributions to *Abraxas* were two short stories, *The Monastery of Our Lord Apollo* and *The Star of Bethlehem*.<sup>5</sup> Significant to us primarily as his first forays into prose fiction, these short stories also represent an overt manifestation of Vaginov's Spenglerian tendencies. His adherence to Spengler's theory on the cyclical nature of history was strengthened by the Bolshevik Revolution and its aftermath. Vaginov saw in Communism the youthful, barbaric vigour of early Christianity, and in the tone, style and theme of both stories, he clearly identifies the last pagans of fallen Rome with the Christian remnants of Russia.<sup>6</sup> While the New Order brings much-needed life to a dead and decaying body, the revitalization comes at the cost of a dark age, where the old world's cultural heritage is all but lost, to be partially reabsorbed only when a new civilization has finally sprung in its place.

Although Vaginov, as stated earlier, realised the historical

significance of the Russian Revolution and was greatly intrigued—often inspired—by his straddling both the old and new worlds, he feared for his fate as an artist. He knew his chances of surviving the coming dark age, of achieving some sort of immortality, were slim at best. When in 1923 he entered the Department of Literature of the Institute for the History of the Arts,<sup>1</sup> he immediately gravitated toward the minor poets and writers of Rome ca. 200-500 A. D. Earlier, in *The Star of Bethlehem*, he had already selected Flavius Philostratus, a little-known author of an obscure work called *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*,<sup>2</sup> to become his literary doppelgänger. Philostratus served Vaginov well as an apologist for all representatives of dead and dying cultures, first in *The Star of Bethlehem*, and then in his long poem 1925, and his first novella, *The Goat Song*.<sup>3</sup>

These last two works in fact represent a marked shift in Vaginov's attitude toward his art, a shift directly attributable to his university studies. Yury Tynyanov, a professor and the nominal head of the OPOYAZ (*Society for the Study of Poetic Language*, otherwise known as the Formalists)<sup>4</sup> school of literary criticism advocated the systematic use of collage, autobiography, parody, grotesque, defamiliarizations<sup>5</sup> and even lack of plot in writing modern prose. It was at this time also that Vaginov, through acquaintances at the Institute, met and joined the Bakhtin circle, "[...] a group of friends with similar literary, philosophical and theoretical interests who enjoyed meeting and debating their common interests."<sup>6</sup> One of the passions Bakhtin succeeded in passing on to Vaginov was Menippism, a literary genre from Ancient Greece which combined verse and prose, tragedy and low humour, parody and earnestness.<sup>7</sup> Vaginov's growing disillusionment with the Revolution and the novel philosophies advanced by such important (and young) literary theorists as

Tynyanov, Bakhtin and Viktor Shklovsky convinced him to turn to satire, and later prose, as a mode of expression more in keeping with the times and his creative frame of mind.

Vaginov incorporated elements of both Formalism and Menippism into *1925*,<sup>1</sup> wherein Philostratus, representing the Past, is pitted against the Present in the form of a co-opted writer, Teptelkin. Philostratus loses the battle and must take refuge in a castle (it becomes an ivory tower in *The Goat Song*) where he will strive to preserve the remnants of his defeated culture in the hope that he will one day, like the Phoenix, rise again. The literary subtext, with its covert references and textual correspondences to Pushkin, Boccaccio and Mandelshtam,<sup>2</sup> lends an additional dimension of timelessness, of cultural singularity and panchronicity which Vaginov would continue to develop in his poetry.

With *The Goat Song* two years later, Vaginov turned more resolutely satirical. He painted a scathing portrait of the Leningrad literary scene, drawing largely on the lives of friends and acquaintances. This witty and caustic *roman à clef* ridiculed the lazy, indulgent self-important demeanor exhibited by those who had arrogated to themselves the title of keepers of the cultural flame, and lampooned others who through greed or moral weakness had abandoned their ideals and unquestioningly espoused the Soviet regime's nihilism.

Vaginov's newly-acquired cynicism permeates *The Goat Song* with a rawness that shocked both the old guard and the growing proletarian literary establishment. Teptelkin, the novella's main character, was brought back to life to incarnate Lev Pumpyansky, a former colleague and self-styled Renaissance man who had gradually, over the decade, and much to Vaginov's distaste, converted to

Marxism and Socialist Realism. We follow Teptelkin every step of the way as he slowly and ineluctably relinquishes his elusive quest for spiritual and creative fulfilment (embodied in Teptelkin's mind by a young Philostratus with whom Teptelkin engages in philosophical discourse) in favour of the more readily obtainable gratification of material and sensual pleasures. While Vaginov thought the about-face performed by Pumpyansky and others of his ilk abhorrent,<sup>1</sup> he also found he could no longer overlook the obsessive self-pity and grand delusions in which some of his high-minded fellow artists insisted in wallowing. Vaginov had by this time dismissed his youthful aspirations as the product of fanciful naivete and was attempting to integrate himself, to a reasonable degree and for his own sake, into Soviet society. The suicide, at the end of the novella, of the Unknown Poet, Teptelkin's counterpart, is a stern warning issued by Vaginov to the writers, poets, painters and musicians of Russia who refused to accept and deal with the destruction of their world: irrelevance means death. Vaginov had thus succeeded in raising the ire of both sides (who scoffed at the idea of reconciliation), doing himself little good in the process: the publication of *The Goat Song*<sup>2</sup> earned him a barrage of attacks so numerous and virulent in their nature that he felt compelled to defend himself in a new introduction to a planned second printing of the novella.<sup>3</sup> Vaginov, who had already grown wary of the usefulness of literary circles and was now working increasingly on his own, was withdrawing ever further from the orbit of the Leningrad literati.<sup>4</sup>

Vaginov's resolution to shed all extraneous influences which might hinder the realisation of his full creative powers was preceded by his participation in one final experiment called OBERIU (*Association for Real Art*).<sup>5</sup> Founded principally by two young poets, Daniil Kharms

and Alexander Vvedensky, in 1927, OBERIU proved to be Leningrad's last flowering of avant-garde literature. Their writings were dubbed absurdist by later scholars; Kharms, in particular, had a special knack for looking at the world through the innocent and fascinated eyes of children. The principal OBERIU tenet was *sdvig*, or displacement, a process by which words, sentences and events were uprooted and deposited into unfamiliar and unexpected contexts, thus rendering the commonplace extraordinary.<sup>1</sup> They drew up a manifesto proclaiming the illogicity of Art and achieved a small measure of reknown for their innovative, unorthodox literary evenings, which usually consisted of a mixture of lectures, readings, plays, movies and music.<sup>2</sup> Vaginov, aloof and for the most part content simply to observe, kept himself in the background and quietly walked away from the group's activities a year after its founding. Though an admirer of Kharms and his friends, he had found their "nonsense poetry alien to his own style."<sup>3</sup>

In early 1930 the Union of Writers, under the ægis of the State, put an end to OBERIU's activities;<sup>4</sup> but by then Vaginov had already struck out on his own. The first fruits of his fully independent labour were *The Works and Days of Svistonov*.<sup>5</sup>

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*The Works and Days of Svistonov* can most aptly be described as a metanovel. In it we follow the daily travails of a talented, if morally bankrupt, novelist in his search for people—ordinary for the most part, ambitious all—upon whom to base the characters of his next book. As an attempt to analyze the creative act in its various phases and facets, *The Works and Days* represents a bold essay for its time. André Gide was among the first to explore the issue within a narrative framework in his turn-of-the-century *sotie*, *Paludes*, and, twenty-five years later, in his novel, *Les faux-monnayeurs*. While the merits of both works

remains the subject of heated debate, scholars and critics alike concur that Gide inaugurated an exciting new era in prose by delving into the writer's psyche and exploring the complex interrelationship between the real and the imagined.

Thence it was just one small step to Formalism and its theoretical musings on artistic immanentism. The Formalists, using the factitious medium of verse to buttress its position, argued that fiction dictated upon the writer its own set of rules, that it contained an inescapable, immovable inner logic rooted in the social and political climate of a given time and place. A writer's personality, that is, his individuality, his specific genius, was deemed secondary, if not illusory. Artistic freedom was but "an optimistic slogan"—it did not "correspond to reality and must give way to creative necessity."<sup>1</sup> This deconstructed, mechanistic view of prose spawned a slew of would-be writers, mostly proletarian, convinced that the 'making of art' was accessible to anyone who had the time to learn its component parts and the scientifically determined order in which to place them. But it also led, among the truly talented, to a type of experimentation (already proven in poetry) that gloried in its limitations and managed to produce highly original and historically significant works. Shklovsky's successful syntheses of collage, parody, grotesques, temporal shifts, dreams, biography and autobiography in such novels as *Sentimental Voyage*, *Zoo or Letters not of Love*, *Third Factory* and *Diary* were part of a modernist vanguard (James Joyce, the French Surrealists and OBERIU—including Vaginov—must be mentioned here) which paved the way for Ionesco, Beckett, Havel, Burroughs, Camus and Sartre; its influence was felt beyond literature into popular film (from Eisenstein to Blier, via Buñuel, Welles and Fellini)<sup>2</sup> and television (e. g. *The Simpsons*, music videos).

In *The Works and Days of Svistonov* Vaginov manages to combine metaphysical ruminations on the creator and the created with formalistic technique, but adds his own peculiarly menippean slant on the goings-on, achieving what Gerasimova dubs a "matryoshka effect".<sup>1</sup> Vaginov not only writes "a novel about a writer writing a novel about a writer writing a novel..."<sup>2</sup> but, in his reluctance to accept any notion as absolute, also avails himself of Formalist methods to parody Formalism! He holds up a mirror to himself, to writers, to Formalism and to Soviet society generally in a bout of serio-comic self-reflection (!) that earned him yet again the harsh disapproval of critics.<sup>3</sup>

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The novella's title, which alludes to Hesiod's *Works and Days*, not only gives us a foretaste of the narrative gist, but also adumbrates Svistonov's writing style, which consists principally in reworking and patching together passages found in obscure books and old newspaper clippings. Chapter One, in particular, is rife with bits and pieces culled from magazine articles and various geographic and historical treatises. Vaginov, in a striking example of Svistonov's 'creative' process, places a short sentence Svistonov has read in one column, and in another shows us Svistonov's dubious reinterpretation. We notice Svistonov retains the original sentence to the point of plagiarism, but far from using it as a springboard for fancy, he only follows it with more episodes drawn, almost verbatim, from books and life. We see Svistonov throughout the novella jotting down in his ubiquitous notebook minor incidents, names on tombstones, comments made by acquaintances, even descriptions of landscapes and city parks; he then strings all these elements together with linking interstices of his own to give the impression of invention. In short, Svistonov is Formalism

run amok. Vaginov explains Svistonov's cavalier attitude toward his profession as the product of maturity: "Svistonov had in fact long since stopped believing he could do anything to help make the world a better place. His sole ambition now was to write, nothing more."<sup>1</sup>

The pity lies in the fact that although Svistonov is a writer of talent, he has absolutely nothing to say about the human condition, offers no insight into the nature of Man or His nobler aspirations. He is "... endowed with a unique vision of the world[, considering] both the living and the dead indiscriminately,"<sup>2</sup> and the "musicality of his art"<sup>3</sup> (reminiscent no doubt of Andrey Bely)<sup>4</sup> made him "a writer of some talent,"<sup>5</sup> but his sole objective is the immortality which art can afford him. He is frightfully candid about his views, actually inserting into his novel a character by the name of Vistonov who is "... obsessed by the transcendent nature of literature."<sup>6</sup> His ambition, however, proves to be his ultimate undoing. Despite the care, even love, he invests in his novel, the book lacks the breath of life: the sincere, impassioned and undeniable creative impulse which invariably goes into the making of true art is absent. Svistonov claims that literature *is* the afterlife, but having foregone his soul to write his novel, the afterlife—immortality—has become unattainable. The effect of robbing others of their souls as he transposes them into his novel<sup>7</sup> even brings about mental and physical pain:

[...] He [...] set about transposing [Trina] into the realm of literature. This was accompanied by various symptoms of illness: heart palpitations, trembling hands, a fever which sapped his body of energy, and pressure on the brain. By morning, Svistonov was sitting in front of the window, limp as a doll. He wanted to cry out in anguish. He felt the keen pain of spiritual bankruptcy throbbing in his head.<sup>8</sup> [...]

Svistonov yawned and put down his fountain pen, which seemed to be writing of its own volition. Several layers of dust had already settled onto his recently rearranged books. Crumbly beetles and wet bugs were gnawing, eating away at and otherwise drilling through the pages. The beetles' clicks were in earnest competition with the clock's tick-tocks. Svistonov, his creative energy spent, drew himself up to the accompaniment of the beetles.[...]

He plodded through the streets, exhausted, his brain emptied and his soul consumed.<sup>1</sup>

He begins slipping in and out of his story, confusing reality with his make-believe world of puppet-shadows. His steady descent into madness and the confines of his novel marks a spiritual death from which there is no salvation; his physical death will release him of his torment, but the renown he craved will forever elude him.

Not that Svistonov was not given a chance to redeem himself. He had noticed the pained and disillusioned reaction their inclusion into his novel had produced on several acquaintances, but he remained unwilling, despite the occasional pang of conscience, to make any changes to his manuscript for fear of upsetting the delicate balance of his work. Ivan Ivanovich Kuku, a stout, fortyish man who has patterned his entire life, all the way down to his whiskers, on Pushkin, Turgenev, Tolstoy and other famous Russian authors, is absolutely crushed by Svistonov's unflattering, but undeniably realistic, portrait. He is so humiliated that he changes his appearance completely and leaves Leningrad in the hope of avoiding the lifetime ridicule which he feels certain will be his lot. Svistonov utterly shatters Masha's idealistic perception of her father when he reads to her his treatment of Psikhachev. Psikhachev's own response is intimated in Svistonov's hallucinatory stroll through the city, when Kuku, Psikhachev, Masha and others drift by in a macabre procession of spectral taunts and jeers:

[...] And out from behind Kuku would pop Psikhachev, spitting incantations in some deserted area: "Here, let me show you how we make pacts with the Devil! but for God's sake, don't speak to Masha about any of this. What's that? You're talented? You're a genius? You'll reveal my evil might for all the world to see? [...] Sarabanda, pukhanda, rasmeranda..."<sup>1</sup>

If Vaginov refrains from using the word 'friend' in speaking of the people with whom Svistonov keeps company, it is entirely due to his protagonist's indifference toward others as fellow human beings, to his cavalier dismissal of their feelings. He chooses simply to ignore the deleterious effects his novel has or will have on them, justifying his actions rather disingenuously in the name of art. He perceives mankind as one vast bookstore: each person, with his own unique experiences—the sum of his life—is but a product to be probed and sniffed and scrutinized before he is deemed useful—and Svistonov proves a highly discriminating consumer. He sums up his philosophy thus:

"People [...] are like books—always a pleasure to read..I think they may be even more interesting than books, certainly richer—you can play with people and place them in various situations."

Svistonov felt himself bound to nothing.<sup>2</sup>

Svistonov's irresponsibility with regard to his 'subjects' leads directly to his madness. Unable to withstand his conscience's unrelenting reproaches any longer, Svistonov seeks refuge in his novel, where at least his torturers are limited to the characters who bustle within.

Several times in the course of the story Vaginov refers to Svistonov as Mephistopheles. Kuku, in fact, carries the analogy further by proclaiming loudly at Toksovo's open-air tavern that he is Faust to

Svistonov's Mephistopheles. Much later, near the end of the novella, Svistonov's inner poet (i. e. his idealistic youth) chastises him for his Mephistophelian behaviour and "[...] Mephistopheles-like [...] contempt for and disgust with the world totally atypical of artists."<sup>1</sup> Vaginov's intention is quite clear: he wants the reader to identify Svistonov with temptation. If Svistonov is able to lure his victims into his prosaic snare, it is only because they too hunger for recognition. Kuku and Psikhachev literally beg Svistonov to "immortalise" them in his next novel—not just through ambition, but also because they feel the new Soviet regime has rendered them redundant. They endeavour to give their lives some meaning (and tweak the authorities' collective nose) by clutching onto outmoded, bourgeois fashions—Kuku is a kow-towing socialite who grooms himself to resemble Pushkin, while Psikhachev immerses himself in freemasonry and the occult—but their attempts leave them unfulfilled until Svistonov comes along and deigns to transpose them into his next book, with predictably disastrous results. For Kuku and Psikhachev appearances are everything, and when they are stripped of them by Svistonov they become nothing.

Psikhachev presents an especially intriguing case, for he is in almost every conceivable way the antithesis of Svistonov. Both characters are in fact manifestations of Vaginov's split personality: let us recall the inner turmoil the author was experiencing at this time as he strove to reconcile his art with Soviet reality. Svistonov incarnates the new era: science, pragmatism, amorality are the words by which he lives. Psikhachev, on the other hand, is a dreamy pseudo-intellectual whose melancholy nostalgia and stifled spirituality reminds one of a younger, more romantic Vaginov. Svistonov is the paroxysm of Formalism; Psikhachev is dubbed "The Soviet Cagliostro".<sup>2</sup> (Their names acquire a greater significance in this dichotomous context:

Svistonov brings to mind the Russian cognate *svistun*, which means both whistler and windbag, while Psikhachev is an overt reference not only to Psyche of Classical Greek mythology, the young girl who embodies Man's quest for God, but also to his questionable mental health [cf. Russian «ПСИХ» ("madman") and English "psychotic"].) Vaginov's unsparing auto-critique, and his relegation of Svistonov and Psikhachev to the status of failures, reflected well his state of mind: resolution was impossible.<sup>1</sup>

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Vaginov was such a creature of circumstances that Russian and non-Russian readers alike must rely heavily upon footnotes to fully grasp and appreciate the numerous historical and textual nuances which their author has taken the care to slip into his novellas. The literary subtext in *The Works and Days of Svistonov* is especially rich in Classical, Russian and autobiographical referents.

Although at first glance Vaginov seems to be inviting us to compare *The Works and Days of Svistonov* to *Faust*, the similarities between plot and characterisation are (purposely) approximate: they serve only to enhance our perception of Svistonov as a Satanic figure. Kuku and Psikhachev, for example, embody, superficially at least, the Fausts of Parts One and Two, respectively. Kuku, the scholarly, debonair man of the world loses the woman he loves through pride and pusillanimity. (Vaginov hints at Kuku's sloth throughout the novella, and Kuku even admits to himself, and later to Nadenka, that he is a "terribly lazy" person—inaction being, in Goethian philosophy, the greatest sin against God), while Psikhachev seeks to better his world through magic. In *Masha and Pasha*, who fervently desire to be acknowledged as adults by their elders, we readily recognise

Homunculus. Svistonov grants them their wish, albeit unintentionally, through his insensitivity: as stated earlier, Masha is disabused of her idolatric illusions concerning her father when Svistonov reads her his relatively unbiased description of him, and Pasha's autobiography, entrusted to Svistonov, doubtlessly provided the opportunistic writer with some unauthorised material for his novel. Tatyana and Pyotr, the devout, elderly couple so strikingly like Baucis and Philemon, are also betrayed by their 'protector': Svistonov, feeling he has exhausted all fictional possibilities with the couple, suddenly stops seeing them in favour of a more promising downstairs neighbour, leaving Tatyana and Pyotr hurt and perplexed. Of course, the fate of each character in *The Works and Days of Svistonov* does not and can not correspond to that of his or her Faustian counterpart. *Faust* is at root a work of hope and love, but the formalist structure of *The Works and Days of Svistonov* and Vaginov's overarching mennipism disallowed a happy ending for any of the novella's protagonists.

Tatyana and Pyotr also form a link with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Gøethe had patterned his Baucis and Philemon on Ovid's account of an Ancient Greek myth in Book VIII, in which an elderly couple gave succour to a Jove in mortal guise; Jove subsequently granted their wish to spend eternity side by side by transforming them into an oak and a lime tree at their death. In the same connective vein, Ovid's near-contemporary, Virgil, had donned the mantle of 'white magician' during Medieval Christianity—which claimed that the Roman poet had predicted the birth of Jesus Christ in his fourth Eclogue—and was accorded by Dante a special place in Hell for enlightened pagans; in Chapter II Svistonov likens himself to Dante's Virgil as he expounds his vision of life, death and art at the bonfire:

"Imagine [...] a kind of poetic shadow leading the living to their graves. Imagine a kind of Virgil in the cottagers' midst surreptitiously leading them into Hell. [...] Now imagine them suddenly realising that Hell is just beyond a hill. Below lies a narrow gully, grey and terribly mournful; they know they will be in it, naked, without so much as the benefit of a fig leaf [...] And imagine this Virgil fellow naked too and making them dance to his tune."<sup>1</sup>

The Bible is likewise indirectly quoted in the bonfire scene. Vaginov, in the voice of the narrator, dubs Svistonov a "hunter of souls", in direct contrast with Christ's image as "fisher of souls". Here again, Svistonov bears a striking resemblance to Goethe's Mephistopheles:

There are few genuine soul hunters in the world. Nothing is more terrifying than a hunter of souls. They are a stealthy lot, and courteous, too; courteousness, in fact, is all that connects them to the outside world. Of course, they have no horns or hooves to give them away; and though they may appear to love life, they love only one thing—art.<sup>2</sup>

Virgil even inspired in Vaginov the same kind of tribute Goethe had proffered Ovid in *Faust*. In Chapter II, Vaginov describes a disgusting man in Nadenka's dream who is eerily reminiscent of *The Æneid's* Charon, Lord of the Underworld:

[...] He is the dreaded Charon; a ragged figure, filthy, repulsive, with white hair copious and unkempt covering his chin, eyes which are stark points of flame, and a dirty garment knotted and hanging from his shoulders.<sup>3</sup>

[...] leaning over her is a man—tall, gaunt, repulsive. He is baldpated, with long, lank hair. His eyes, set in a face of grey, are particularly unsettling—they seem to bore right into her. He is dressed in a filthy brown sixteenth-century costume, like those of period films. Nadenka knows that this man is the master of her fate and will do with her as he pleases. She is

terrified.<sup>1</sup>

Nadenka's dream closes with a description of Hades:

The building is a hive of unceasing movement. People glide noiselessly and indifferently through the darkened hallways. The light is as faint as in a Dutch master's painting...<sup>2</sup>

The dream itself combines two Ancient Greek myths, namely the Cretan labyrinth of Minos from which Nadenka succeeds in escaping and the tale of Orpheus' expedition to Hades to bring back his beloved wife Eurydice. The latter is especially important since it forms, as we have seen, an important aspect of Vaginov's poetics.<sup>3</sup> Orpheus, demigod of music, song and poetry had charmed the guardians of Hell with his lyre and retrieved Eurydice, but broke the condition imposed upon him that he should not set eyes on his wife before crossing back into the realm of the living, thereby losing her forever. Herein lies the artist's eternally dismal lot: whatever creative heights Vaginov may reach, he feels that his mortal condition will always deny him the capacity to express his artistic vision fully.<sup>4</sup>

Yet another myth Vaginov employs in symbolising his belief in Russia's eventual cultural rebirth is that of the Phoenix, personified in *The Works and Days of Svistonov* by Vaginov's spiritual doppelgänger Psikhachev.<sup>5</sup> Fire is fairly prominent in the novella's 'decadent', i. e. bourgeois passages (the burned buildings in Svistonov's dream, the bonfire, Psikhachev's stove, Svistonov's burning of a house of matches during a freemasons' meeting, the candles in Svistonov's and Psikhachev's apartments), and during an improvisational bout of reincarnation-related one-upmanship toward the end of Chapter IV, Svistonov actually baptises Psikhachev Count Phoenix. Vaginov's

association of Psikhachev with himself and with the death of Christian-based culture in Russia is thus firmly established, as is the irrelevance of the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia:

The candlelight shone flickeringly on the table and the antique dinner service. [...]

"Tell me, Count," [Svistonov] asked, [...] "why did you choose to reincarnate as Psikhachev?"<sup>1</sup>

Vaginov, in endowing Svistonov with most of his faults, also furnished him with his material belongings as well, in particular his library. Interspersed at regular intervals in *The Works and Days of Svistonov* are book titles and the names of authors and poets, mostly Classical, with some French, Italian and even Irish works thrown in for good measure. Many found their way into the novella through the formalist door (enumeration being one oft-used technique) but others were included as clues to Svistonov's destiny. In Chapter VII Svistonov is choosing which books will adorn his shelf of memoirs (note once again the obsession with the past) and picks out several authors—Dante, Petrarch, Gogol and Dostoevsky—reputed for their explorations into Hell and/or their dark, seemingly hopeless vision of life (Gogol's *Dead Souls* and Dante's *Divine Comedy* are explicitly mentioned). In Chapter VI he explains to Iya how he has created a heroine through the selective plunder of Balzac's *The Magic Skin*, Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* and Hoffmann's *The Golden Pot*; all three works, not coincidentally, deal with the supernaturally evil, and the first two describe in minute and horrific detail the destruction of its male protagonists by satanic temptation. (*The Golden Pot* is a variant of the Orpheus myth, with a happy ending—a sign that at this point Svistonov still had time to redeem himself.)<sup>2</sup> Svistonov, it seems, cannot avoid the darker side of humanity, and in point of fact seeks it

out. Cagliostro, Volkhov, freemasonry, the Cabal, mandrakes, geomancy, Azazello, Haborym, Thessaly, Isis, Orphic hypostases, Hecate and cemeteries... he is evidently linked body and soul with everything touched or tainted with night, magic and death.<sup>1</sup>

Vaginov also draws on his own verse to enlarge upon the novella's eschatological preoccupations. He had, over the years, subverted some traditional symbols of hope, joy and renewal, such as butterflies, flutes and trees into metaphors for death and decay. Butterflies, for example, appear at the bonfire where Svistonov expounds his literary theories, and they also hover about Tatyana and Pyotr. Pyotr plays the flute, symbol of the Greek god Pan. And on several occasions the protagonists walk in single file, a formation indicative of the blind, single-minded self-absorption of the Russian intelligentsia as they march in a Classical pastoral setting toward their doom. All these elements are present in Vaginov's 1926 poem *The Hellenists*, and picked up separately in many other poems.<sup>2</sup>

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By the time Vaginov had completed *The Works and Days of Svistonov*, the notion of death had become an everpresent reality. His lifelong tubercular condition had always contributed to his pessimistic view of life and the world; then, when he turned thirty, his health took a sudden turn for the worse. His third and fourth novellas, *Bambochada* and *Harpagoniada* (the latter left unfinished), reflected his fatalistic frame of mind. Stylistically, he purged himself of many formalist techniques to concentrate solely on parody and grotesque: these picaresque novellas are laced with a very dark streak of humour heretofore absent in his work. The hero of *Bambochada*, Yevgeny Felinflein—a thinly disguised Vaginov—dies alone in a sanatorium;

the characters of *Harpagoniada*, as the title suggests,<sup>1</sup> are a motley crew of shifty dealers and miserly collectors of kitsch, garbage, hair and even dreams—reminders all of Vaginov's wasted youth. His verse underwent a similar process of purification: he now shunned his prior formalistic experimentation in favour of a more rigorous, semantic euphony and a more classical Russian metre.<sup>2</sup>

And yet, though Vaginov remained deeply sceptical of Soviet Russia's future, both culturally and politically, and of his own fate as a poet and writer, he would not let go of his faith in the timeless power of art. To admit to himself that his life and his work had been in vain, to acknowledge that his struggle to leave the world a piece of himself worthy of admiration had been futile, would have signified a spiritual capitulation too painful to endure. In the end, Vaginov blithely disregarded the frightful possibility of nonexistence: he would, he decided, cheat death.

And he did.



The translation of *The Works and Days of Svistonov* was not as fraught with pitfalls as I had initially feared, though the novella did present me with a number of difficulties. Apart from the usual rearranging of a score or so of sentences and paragraphs to better suit the English way of thinking (each language following its own inner logic and sometimes rendering a literal translation awkward) I had to deal with the subtler socio-linguistic aspects of Russian.

The biggest stumbling block for unilingual English-speaking readers with regard to Russian literature has been the Russian names, viz. patronymics. The average reader will often confuse patronymics with surnames, and the widespread practice by servants, clergy,

merchants and noblemen alike in calling one another by their Christian names and patronymics is perplexing. Some translators have the good sense to do away with patronymics altogether, resulting in characters calling one another by their Christian names only, and servants addressing their masters as a more seemly 'Sir' or 'Madam'. I would have chosen this path myself had I not been hobbled by Vaginov, who chose to let several characters go with only a Christian name and patronymic; I might still have converted the patronymics into surnames had I not felt that that would mean overstepping the bounds of artistic and cultural fidelity beyond any right.

My own solution is a compromise—hopefully, one acceptable to both readers and translators. I allow characters within *The Works and Days of Svistonov* to address one another by their Christian name and patronymic, but I only use the surname or a pronoun when the narrator speaks of, or refers to, a character by his Christian name and patronymic (e. g. «Душа у Ивана Ивановича затрепетала» > “A shiver ran through Kuku’s soul”; «Иван Иванович сошел у лицея» > “He got off in front of the Lyceum”). This solution makes, I feel, for a freer, more natural narrative flow in English, and at the same time preserves the novella’s Russian flavour.

I have also done away with Russian diminutives except in those cases where characters are not referred to in the novella by their full Christian name (e. g. Pasha and Masha); elsewhere I have used the full Christian name only, sometimes replacing it with an endearing epithet to emphasise the more tender moments. This I have done to avoid confusing the uninformed reader, who cannot possibly know that Petya is short for Pyotr or Tanya for Tatyana. I had considered availing myself of English equivalents (e. g. Andiekins, Mare, Pauly, etc.) but again felt that such a measure would only betray the novella’s

'Russianness' to no real advantage.

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In his postface to *The Collected Poems of Konstantin Vaginov*, Leonid Chertkov emphasises the gaping stylistic discrepancies between Vaginov's prose and his verse:

Most poets trying their hand at prose will seldom deviate in style from their verse, but Vaginov, contrary to most poets, imbued his prose with an atmosphere all its own. Vaginov the Poet and Vaginov the Novelist are like Stevenson's infamous Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde: whereas Vaginov's poetry is elevated in tone, his prose, though interesting, suffers from a certain sparseness. [...] [His later novels] seem to have had the air knocked out of them.<sup>1</sup>

Leaving aside Chertkov's dubious assessment of Vaginov's prose, we can only concur that Vaginov's novellas do indeed possess a certain ascetic quality about them that is in stark contrast to the ubiquitous verbal and imaginal flights of his verse. For Vaginov, prose offered the opportunity to express another side of his personality which otherwise might have remained mute had he concentrated solely on poetry—and as a well-rounded, multilingual Russian, he could certainly appreciate the advantage of having more than one creative outlet and one single style.

Not that Vaginov's unadorned musings did not cause a wrinkle or two in the transformation of the text into the English: some passages are so plain that one may be excused for thinking they were written by a twelve-year-old. This intentional bluntness is sometimes augmented by the repeated use of certain words, in particular the verbs which Vaginov intercalates in his characters' speech ('said', 'asked' and 'answered' are the principal culprits). It was my impression, as I reread

the first drafts of my translation, that these passages, perfectly acceptable in Russian, would have a false ring to the English ear. Many will no doubt take exception to my methods, but I am of the opinion that a readable text, slightly adapted to give the impression that it has been written in English, is ultimately preferable to an exhaustively faithful text that disregards—even ever so slightly—the demands of the target language and its speakers.

In conclusion, it is my most fervent wish that this translation of *The Works and Days of Svistonov*, regardless of its numerous omissions, additions and other imperfections, represent but the first step toward bringing Konstantin Vaginov to the attention of the wider public he so much deserves. His novellas require a greater investment of time and concentration than most people are used to, but the effort is amply rewarded. There is a certain intellectual paucity in contemporary literature, a dullness characteristic of the Western world's fast-food mentality, that buries worthwhile works under a mountain of mass-produced dross. To those who bemoan the dearth of thought-provoking books and who are in constant search of spiritual nourishment, I can but say, 'Oh, what riches lay buried 'neath Vaginov's grave...'

## Notes

- p. iii <sup>1</sup> Anemone, pp. 17-19. The signatories were N. Tikhonov, I. Sadofev, E. Polonskaya, In. Oxenov, M. Froman, I. Nappelbaum, L. Borisov, N. Chukovsky, N. Braun, A. Kraysky, S. Kolbasev, V. Erlich and V. Rozhdestvensky. As Anemone points out, Chukovsky's and Rozhdestvensky's disingenuous charges against Vaginov were doubtlessly meant to appease hard-liners and pave the way to posthumous rehabilitation.
- <sup>2</sup> Nikolskaya, in her preface to *Zabytaya kniga*, p. 5
- p. iv <sup>1</sup> Nikolskaya, p. 10.
- <sup>2</sup> See bibliography. In 1967 Nikolskaya presented a paper on Vaginov entitled "The Works of K. Vaginov" («О творчестве К. Вагинова») for the Twenty-Third Students' Science Conference held in Tartu, and a brief survey of Vaginov's career by Malmstad and Shmakov was published in 1977 in the journal *Apollon-77*.
- <sup>3</sup> Vaginov and his scholars have always used the term 'novel' to describe his four major prose works, but only *The Goat Song* actually comes close to the generally accepted length of 200 pages for novels (the tally is 187 pages at 37 lines a page in *Zabytaya Kniga*).
- p. v <sup>1</sup> Similar fates befell Yuri Olesha (*Envy*), Mikhail Bulgakov (*The Master and Margarita*), Yevgeny Zamyatin (*We*) and many others. Daniil Kharms and Alexander Vvedensky, Vaginov's peers from OBERIU, both spent time in prison (see below).
- <sup>2</sup> Anemone informs us that in 1932 Vaginov was urged to publicly recant his amoral (read: apolitical), iconoclastic tendencies and, one gathers, to adhere strictly to State-sanctioned Socialist Realism. This led to his collaboration on the book *Four Generations* («ЧЕТЫРЕ ПОКОЛЕНИЯ»), "[...] a history of the revolutionary labour movement in St. Petersburg/Petrograd/Leningrad from the 1880's to the first Five Year Plan." He was also made to supervise

"beginning proletarian writers". Anemone, pp. 16-17.

- p. vi 1 Konstantin Adolfovich Vaginov was also the first Wagenheim to break with the family's long-standing vocation of dentistry. The family practice was so widespread that by the 1860's the people of St. Petersburg often substituted 'Wagenheim' for 'dentist'; Anemone quotes a passage from Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*: "[...] the consciousness that in spite of all possible Wagenheims you are in complete slavery to your teeth;" [p. 190] Anemone, pp. 3 and 20.
- 2 Anemone, p. 4.
- 3 Anemone, p. 5 and Nikolskaya, p. 6.
- 4 Nikolskaya, p. 6.
- 5 Nikolskaya, p. 6.
- 6 Nikolskaya, p. 6.
- p. viii 1 Anemone, p. 8.
- 2 The Circle of Poets («Кольцо поэтов») evolved from an informal literary circle which called itself The Abbey of Buffoons («Аббатство гаэров»). (Perlina, p. 475) The Abbéy referred to The Rectorate («Ректориат»), the name by which the founders of Ego-Futurism (Igor Severyanin, Georgy Ivanov, Graal-Arelsky and Konstantin Olimpov) went. Anemone, p. 24.
- 3 Alexander Alexeevich Izmaylov (1873-1921), an old friend of Fofanov, lent his name as a member of the Ring of Poets, but was not a participant in the group's activities. Anemone, p. 25.
- 4 Chertkov, p. 214.
- 5 Anemone, p. 37.
- 6 Anemone, p. 45.

- 7 *Путешествие в хаос*, 1922. Anemone, p. 45.
- 8 Vaginov was first a member of the Sounding Shell («Звучащая раковина»), beginners to whom Gumilev taught his four “laws” of poetry: phonetics, stylistics, composition and eidology—‘the study of images’, which “[...] sums up the themes of poetry and the possible relations of the poet to those themes.” (Anemone, pp. 89 and 113) Vaginov then graduated to the Guild of Poets («Цех поэтов»)—basically the rank of apprentice—just before Gumilev’s execution by the government on trumped-up charges of treason (the PMO affair).
- 9 Perlina, *Histoire de la littérature russe (La Révolution et les années vingt)*, p. 475.
- 10 The Islanders («Островитяне») included Nikolay Tikhonov, Sergey Kolbasev, Pyotr Volkov, Vaginov (founding members) and Vsevolod Rozhdestvensky. Frederika Nappelbaum, Xenia Levasheva, Vera Lure, Yelizaveta Polonskaya and Nina Berberova were also members at one time or another. Anemone, p. 91. The Serapion Brothers (K. Fedin, I. Gruzdev, Vs. Ivanov, V. Kaverin, L. Lunts, N. Nikitin, V. Pozner, M. Slonimsky, Tikhonov, M. Zoshchenko [Zamyatin and Shklovsky were unofficial members] (Oulanoff, Hongor, in *Terras’ Handbook of Russian Literature*, p. 398)) took their name from E. T. A. Hoffmann’s *The Serapion Brothers* (1819-1821). The first volume includes a story in which a hermit called Serapion “[...] asserted that the mind held absolute supremacy over the organs of perception”; in the eyes of his admirers, this man “[...] possessed a true poetic imagination.” (Robertson, in his preface to *The Golden Pot and Other Tales*, p. ix) *The Golden Pot* was very popular in Russia, and its fantasy, its blurring of inner and outer realities, influenced many a writer. Svistonov mentions the story briefly in chapter VI.
- 11 Artistic differences grew as each individual matured according to his or her talent, and the group collapsed for the lack of cohesiveness. Members nonetheless remained friends over the following years. In 1924, Tikhonov,

Polonskaya and Vaginov also became leading members of the new Union of Poets in Leningrad, thus providing them with an officially sanctioned pulpit for publishing their works. *Anemone*, pp. 96-97 and 109.

p. ix 1 See Chertkov in *The Collected Poems of Konstantin Vaginov* («Собрание стихотворений Константина Вагинова»).

2 Nikolskaya, pp. 7-8.

3 *Anemone*, p. 124.

4 *Anemone*, pp. 124-125.

5 *Монастырь Господа нашего Аполлона* and *Звезда Вифлеема* (Nikolskaya, p. 8 and *Anemone*, p. 126). I was unable to obtain any copies of the short stories. *The Star of Bethlehem* was translated into the German by Peter Urban in 1992 and published in Berlin. See von Heyl's bibliography.

6 A moving example is the following poem, dated 18 March 1923 by Vaginov:

*We are the last remnants of Western civilization  
In this country of wooden huts and Asian blizzards.  
We help Ovid's fate into our house...  
"Fear not, old man, you may lean on me."*

*I threw the old man in. Obvodny Canal.  
The moon is quiet; the water above him is quiet.  
I have killed myself. But the wind — soft silk —  
Caresses my cheeks and aways, ringing like a bell.*

*Collected Poems*, p.90.

p. x 1 Nikolskaya, p. 8.

2 Vaginov was introduced to the works of Philostratus by Ivan Tolstoy, a professor of the Institutè who specialized in ancient religious cults (Perlina, pp. 476-477). Apollonius, a minor Oriental prophet and contemporary

of Jesus Christ; was, after the appearance of Philostratus' biography, co-opted by Roman and Hellenic pagans as a miracle worker to combat the rising tide of Christianity. See Bowersock's introduction to Jones' translation.

- <sup>3</sup> *Тысяча девятьсот двадцать пятый год* (in *Collected Poems*, pp. 107-118) and *Козлиная песнь*, respectively. The latter's title is a literal translation of the Greek 'tragedy' (τραγωδία [τραγός = he-goat + ᾠδή = song]).
- <sup>4</sup> ОПОЯЗ – Общество по изучению поэтического языка. Members included Туньянов, V. Shklovsky, B. Eikhenbaum, L. Yakubinsky, V. Vinogradov, V. Zhirmunsky and S. Bernstein, among others. Hansen-Löve, *Histoire de la littérature russe (La Révolution et les années vingt)*, p. 656.
- <sup>5</sup> The word («остранение») was coined by Shklovsky. Hansen-Löve pp. 618-656 and Colio, pp. 656-667.
- <sup>6</sup> *Anemone*, p. 214.
- <sup>7</sup> From the cynic writer and playwright Menippus (third century B. C.). Nikolskaya, p. 9.
- p. xi <sup>1</sup> 1925 was in fact never published in Vaginov's lifetime. *Anemone*, p. 150.
- <sup>2</sup> Chertkov, p. 224 and *Anemone*, p. 154.
- p. xii <sup>1</sup> The pining philosopher was based on Bakhtin; Marya Petrovna Dalmatova on Yudina; Asphodelev on Alexey Tolstoy. *Anemone*, pp. 214-215, *Perlina*, p. 480 and *Nikolskaya*, p. 12.
- <sup>2</sup> A long extract was published in the literary journal *Zvezda*, while the book itself came out under the imprint of the *Priboy* publishing house (Leningrad). *Anemone*, p. 220 and *Nikolskaya*, p.11.
- <sup>3</sup> *Nikolskaya*, p. 12.
- <sup>4</sup> Although Vaginov had said as much in 1922 in a personal letter, his entry into university the following year

doubtlessly convinced him that he had not quite attained the artistic maturity necessary to strike out on his own (Anemone, p. 119). By 1928-29, however, he had firmly resolved to follow his own path: "La lecture de Dostoïevski [...] provoque chez Vaguinov une méditation mélancolique et pessimiste sur la vie des cercles littéraires : comme Dostoïevski, il voit dans leur existence une conséquence de la carence de la vie publique, de la réduction forcée de l'espace vital nécessaire à la liberté de la création et au développement de l'art." Perlina, pp. 481-482

- 5 ОБЭРИУ = Объединение реального искусства. Apparently the 'u' was added "just for fun", a parody of all the 'isms' which proliferated in the 1920's. Gibian, p. 245. Other members included Nikolay Zabolotsky, Igor Bakhterev and Boris Levin (Gibian, pp. 249-250); the painters Kasimir Malevich and Pavel Filonov, and theatre director Igor Terentev were unofficial members (Gibian, pp. 12-4), as was poet Nikolay Oleynikov (Anemone, pp. 222-223).
- p. xiii 1 See Milner-Gulland and Gibian for a transcript of the manifesto in Russian and English, respectively.
- 2 Gibian, p. 21. See also the explanatory notes appended to the novel, p. xlv (under p. 20).
- 3 «[...] игра Введенского и Хармса в бессмыслинку была [ему] несвойственна.» Makedonov, pp. 57-58.
- 4 Anemone, p. 228.
- 5 *ТРУДЫ И ДНИ СВИСТОНОВА*. The book came out under the auspices of the *Leningrad Writers' Publishing House*. Nikolskaya, p. 13  
Vaginov also contributed a short-story adaptation of *The Works and Days of Svistonov* to *Zvezda*. Anemone, p. 220.
- p. xiv 1 Serman, Ilya in *Histoire de la littérature russe (La Révolution et les années vingt)*, p. 677.

- 2 Shklovsky in fact collaborated with many Soviet directors as a screenwriter (e. g. *Dura Lex* (1926), *Love for Three* (1927), *The House on Trubnaya Street* (1928)), and wrote numerous books on, among others, Kuleshov, Vertov and Dovzhenko. Conio, Gerard in *Histoire de la littérature russe (La Révolution et les années vingt)*, p. 665.
- p. xv 1 Gerasimova, p. 152.
- 2 Gerasimova, p. 152.
- 3 Vaginov was attacked in the press for his "bland literary and ideological stance" («за бесцветную литературно-идеологическую позицию») in specific reference to *The Works and Days of Svistonov*. Kazack, p. 8.
- p. xvi 1 pp. 124.
- 2 p. 61.
- 3 p. 61.
- 4 Chertkov affirms that in terms of Russian prose, Vaginov was really only familiar with the Symbolists. Chertkov, p. 216.
- 5 p. 61.
- 6 p. 135.
- 7 Kuku comes to Svistonov in tears, pleading with him not to go ahead with the publication of the novel:
- Svistonov sensed that this was not a man standing before him, but something more akin to a corpse. (p. 77)
- 8 pp. 62-63.
- p. xvii 1 p. 136. The fountain pen writing of its own volition underscores the dearth of creativity on Svistonov's part in writing his novel, while the beetles' gnawing of his books symbolises the erosion of his soul and sanity as a result of

his unscrupulous methods.

This passage with the beetles is also a paraphrase of the last lines of a poem Vaginov wrote in 1927, *The Song of Words*:

*I smell books and  
Hear beetles tick-tocking  
Away like watches,  
While time below gorges itself on words,  
And a battle rages up above.*

*Collected Poems*, p. 174

p. xviii 1 pp. 136.

2 p. 107.

p. xix 1 p. 124.

2 **Cagliostro, Alexander, count** : (1743-1795) Italian adventurer, born in Palermo; his real name was Giuseppe Balsamo. Cagliostro practiced medicine until he was expelled from the regional medical association, after which he devoted his full attention to freemasonry and the sciences of the occult. He travelled across Europe and enjoyed widespread popularity, especially in Paris. He was exiled from France and returned to Rome after being accused of stealing Marie-Antoinette's necklace. In 1789 Cagliostro was sentenced to death by the Italian inquisition, which had tried him as a heretic, but his sentence was later commuted to life imprisonment. Alexandre Dumas made him the hero of several novels, including *Joseph Balsamo* and *The Royal Necklace*. *Dictionnaire encyclopédique Quillet*, volume 2, p. 997.

p. xx 1 Vaginov wrote many poems during this period which explored his ongoing struggle to reconcile his inner and outer worlds. The last two stanzas of his poem "*The mermaid sang as she awaited her prey*" are striking in the context of *The Works and Days of Svistonov*, specifically Chapter IV:

"Come back, Oh Nymphs!" he cried aloud,  
 "My great and noble dream, come back!"  
 "Why have you robbed me of my life  
 And buried me in grave so black?"

*The guests leapt to their feet: "What now?  
 Such rude and boorish behaviour!  
 What do you want? Life is simple.  
 Please accept this as fact, dear sirs."*

*Collected Poems, p. 177*

- p. xxi <sup>1</sup> Cf. Tatyana's and Pyotr's modest furnishings and possessions, as well as the supper at the end of Chapter VII, with Ovid's version of the Baucis and Philemon's tale.
- p. xxii <sup>1</sup> p. 31.  
<sup>2</sup> pp. 30-31.  
<sup>3</sup> Virgil, p. 156 (Book VI).
- p. xxiii <sup>1</sup> p. 45.  
<sup>2</sup> pp. 46.  
<sup>3</sup> See Anemone, Chapter VIII.  
<sup>4</sup> See Vaginov's poems *Euridika* and *I had no unfulfilled wants* (*Collected Poems*, pp. 157 and 160), among others, as well as *The Goat Song*. Cf. also the Orphic hypostases in Chapter IV, p. 89.  
<sup>5</sup> See also Anemone, Chapter VIII. The phoenix image is very strong in Vaginov's last two collections of verse, *Experiments in Uniting Words by Means of Rhythm* («Опыты соединения слов посредством ритма») and *Likeness of Sound* («Звукоподобие»). *Collected Poems*, pp. 119-208.
- p. xxiv <sup>1</sup> pp. 98-99.

- 2 The fact that grotesques populated these works, as well, was not lost on Vaginov.
- p. xxv<sup>1</sup> One poetic excerpt on p. 55 concerns the Devil ("With his shaggy hand/The Devil pushes the swing..."); and a passage from Alexander Blok's untitled poem "*On the sorrowful earth I forgot about valour*", evidently a favourite of Psikhachev's, laments the loss of youth ("No more dreams of tenderness or glory:/All is gone, my youth flown away" (p. 82)).
- 2 See *Night after night, Two motley blankets, He cares not for himself, As though at noon*, among others, in *Collected Poems*.
- p. xxvii<sup>1</sup> After Harpagon, the protagonist of Molière's *L'avare*.
- 2 See Anemone, Chapter IX.
- p.xxviii<sup>1</sup> Chertkov, p. 226.

# THE WORKS AND DAYS OF SVISTONOV

## Chapter I

### Silence

His wife undressed, grabbed the Turkish towel and began to wash herself, as she did every evening, in the kitchen. She splashed herself with some water, then pressed down on one nostril and blew through the other. She put her hands under the tap, lowered her head and with her moistened palms scrubbed her face. She thrust her fingers into her pale ears, lathered her neck and one side of her back with soap, then ran her hands over her arms up to her shoulders.

Through the window one saw a small house—they called it a cottage—with square, lighted windows, recently painted white and ringed by snow-capped trees; two of the Conservatory's walls and part of the sandstone Academy Theatre, whose tall windows gleamed nightly; and further off, slightly to the right—a bridge, and a straightaway where the Dairy Union stood, the pharmacy rose in splendour and the Pryazhka's murky waters fell into the Griboedov canal near the sea.<sup>o</sup> A large building and a park looked down over the Pryazhka.

Svistonov gazed out the window at this area where theatre, dairy union and pharmacy converged.

The canal flowed behind the apartment building where Svistonov lived. It was host to dredgers in the spring, boats in the

summer and drowned girls in the fall.

On the other side of the canal ran tavern-filled streets where drunken, wheezing, battered-faced harridans stared out from behind corners.

Svistonov felt a compulsion to don his old blue-banded student's cap and boots and step out into the night city where stood the spired Admiralty, the General Headquarters, the Arch, Saint Catherine's Church, the Municipal Duma and the Public Library Building. He wished he were young again.

The world outside had already been cloaked in darkness for some time. Silence pervaded the apartment. Only the clock, which, save for its chime, had survived countless changes of residence, could be heard, tick-tocking away in the dining room.

Svistonov began to dream:

A man is hurrying along a street; Svistonov recognises himself. The walls of buildings are semi-transparent—some buildings have been razed to the ground, others left in ruins—and on the other side of these transparent walls are people, all quiet. Some over there are drinking at an oil-cloth-covered table: the head of the household, a craftsman, pulls his chair back and, looking at the elongated reflection of his face in the samovar, begins to pluck at his guitar. His children kneel on a chair and prop up their heads with their hands; they spend hour after hour gazing by turns at the lamp, the oven and a corner of the floor. Everyone is resting after a hard day's work.

Behind another transparent wall sits a clerk. He is smoking a pipe with an American expression on his face and spending hour after hour watching the smoke swirl, a drowsy fly crawl about the windowsill, and, opposite, through the window and across the

courtyard, a man avidly scour his newspaper for yet another amusing little murder.

And over there across the street, all the widows have assembled to tell each other the intimate details of their shortened marriages.

Svistonov sees that he has been chasing these people for the better part of a day, as though they were some sort of wondrous game. He bends down and peers into a cellar, like a hunter into a den of wolves, for any sign of movement. Suddenly he is sitting in a park, chatting up a fellow reading his paper. He stops a boy on the street, gives him candy and plies him with questions about his parents. He calmly turns into a five-and-dime to browse and discuss politics with the shopkeeper. Affecting an air of compassion, he hands a beggar a ten-kopek piece and revels in the poor man's fabrications. He poses as a graphologist and becomes the darling of the city's upper crust.

Svistonov awoke the next morning and looked at the time; he had no recollection of his dream. He threw on some clothes, taking care not to wake his wife, and sat down to his work in progress. He rewrote one bit, fixed up another, then hurried off to meet with his fellow writers at the writers' club.

The writers were loafing about under their hats and clothcaps, exchanging gossip and keeping each other abreast of the latest news. The editor, a stout, ruddy woman, was smoking behind a weather-beaten old desk, reading a manuscript. Every now and again she sighed and tore her eyes away from the manuscript—the conversations taking place around her were interesting, even cheerful, but the unceasing sound of footfalls and peeling laughter were distracting her from her work. Svistonov walked in and greeted everyone, including the editor. She shook his hand and dove back into her manuscript.

The writers sat around and bantered for roughly four hours,

waiting for others to show up, then waiting to see who would be first to leave. Svistonov stayed—as did everyone—and enjoyed the conversation—as did everyone—then vanished into the elevator and reappeared on October 25<sup>th</sup> Prospect.<sup>o</sup> As it was already somewhat late in the day, the writers and journalists contented themselves with a walk to the House of Print<sup>o</sup> and back. Warming themselves in the spring sun, they talked about how Kruglov wrote like Chesterton and that the Crimea was a wonderful vacation spot, and discussed the merit of exaggerating a book's worth to ensure yearly republication. They stopped by the Moscow Joint Stock Exchange, ate fried pirogis, read the evening edition of the *Red Gazette* for any mention of them in the literary column, then bought some Moscow-based magazines to see whether anything had been written about them over there. When a reference at last was found, it provoked nothing but laughter. Such rubbish! They were accosted on several occasions by university columnists who wanted to know what each of them was currently working on. The writers promptly lied.

It had been hard work sitting at the editorial office for four or five hours. By five o'clock, the writers' heads began to ache. They went home, had supper, and, exhausted, forty winks. By evening, convinced that the day was too far gone to start work, they left with their wives for a spot of tea at some friends' house.

Svistonov lay in bed that evening deliberating what to read—his book on antique Russian utensils, perhaps, which might prove useful for his next short story? Or William of Rubruck's account of his voyage to the Orient in the summer of the year of Our Lord 1253—specifically, the chapter on Tatar soothsayers and witches, and their custom of pouring fresh koumiss on the ground?<sup>o</sup> Or maybe a volume from his

*Collection de l'Histoire par le Bibelot?°*

Svistonov, however, was too lazy to put on the beaver-skin slippers he had fashioned for himself a few years back during the food shortages and subsequent famine. He did not crawl out of bed, climb onto a chair and get the books he wanted with due alacrity. Instead, he turned to his wife and reported all the news from the office.

"Lenochka," he said, lighting a cigarette.

Lenochka put her copy of Panaeva's *mémoires*° down on the bed, propped herself up on an elbow and looked to her husband.

"Count Ekespar,"° drawled Svistonov listlessly, "called his gipsy mistress *Dulcinea*.° He divided his holdings into satrapies and installed a satrap at the head of each. Then, following Genghis Khan's example, he issued rations of three rams a month to his soldiers, two a month to his officers."

"Really?"

"He dreamt of creating a Pan-Mongol empire with German as the official state language and of marching his coloured hordes Westward."

"Now that's the sort of story you ought to pick up on. You could make something interesting out of that."

"I still haven't told you the best part," said Svistonov, waxing animated. "He proclaimed himself the Buddha, corresponded with Chinese generals, and even found a pretender to the Imperial Throne—some englishified Chinese prince who lived in America and blushed whenever people called him 'The Chinaman'."

Svistonov, still smoking his cigarette, stretched out under the sheets, turned around and stared at the wall.

"You know, Lenochka," he started, "it's a shame I've never been to Mongolia. The monasteries there are the country's very soul. You

can't just create 'soul' by reading German folk tales..! If only I could join the Kozlov expedition,<sup>o</sup> or go out on assignment for the *Red Gazette*.."

He had already closed his eyes and was dozing off when the thought of hunters and hunting jolted him out his semi-consciousness state. He was suddenly moved to write. He picked out a book and began to read.

Svistonov never wrote according to a set plan, a she was never one to be struck by a special image of the world. His ideas always emerged fuzzily, a creative block which prevented him from setting anything down right away. Rather, a work of his invariably arose from formless scribbles in the margins of books, from lifted comparisons, cleverly rewritten pages, overheard conversations and idle gossip.

Svistonov lay in bed and read, that is to say, wrote—these two acts being, in his case, one and the same. He marked out a paragraph with a red pencil, and with a black one rewrote it into his working draft. He did not worry about the general lack of sense or coherence—both would emerge later on of their own accord.

What Svistonov read:

In the wine-growing valley of the Alazan river, amidst acre upon acre of orchards, lies the city of Telavi, former capital of the Kingdom of Kakhetia.<sup>o</sup>

What Svistonov wrote:

Chavchavadze<sup>o</sup> sat in a Kakhetian cellar, singing songs about the wine-growing valley of the Alazan river and the city of Telavi, former capital of the Kingdom of Kakhetia.

Chavchavadze was no

fool—he loved his country. His grandfather had been a captain in the Czar's cavalry, but no... no, it was better to be with one's people.

Chavchavadze looked with disgust at the merchant sitting next to him, strumming his guitar and singing a song by Shamil.<sup>o</sup>

"Damned huckster," grumbled Chavchavadze. "You're nothing but parasites, the lot of you!"

The merchant looked at him mournfully.

"Why do you hate me? I am a good man."

Svistonov wrote this extract and pushed the sheet of paper aside. "Chavchavadze," he repeated, "Prince Chavchavadze. And what does Engineer Chavchavadze think of Moscow? M-yes..."

Now that he had settled on Chavchavadze, Svistonov proceeded to read about the death of King Erekle II and the sorrow of his wife Daria.<sup>o</sup>

The dignitaries' wives, swathed from head to toe in long, white veils, sat on low divans, beating their chests and bewailing their king's

untimely death. Opposite the women, on the righthand side of the throne, were the state officials, sitting according to rank in mute and desolate attitudes. The senior ministers presided on a dais, while behind them, with broken staffs, stood the Masters of Ceremony. From the hall's window one beheld the king's beloved steed at the palace gates, saddled backwards. Next to the horse, a bare-headed official sat on the ground.

"Excellent," thought Svistonov. "Chavchavadze will be Georgian ambassador to the court of Paul I, and Count Ekespar a descendant of the Teutonic Knights.° No, maybe not Teutonic... I'll have to double-check that..."

The various details of his future oeuvre were beginning to gel in Svistonov's mind. "A Pole," he thought. "I need a Pole, and maybe an illegitimate son as well. Yes, a Bonaparte, in command of a Russian regiment in the 1880's..."°

"Poland's idolising eyes strain toward France. Henry III° has fled. Napoleon is on the isle of Saint Helena. Napoleon III—the uprising has been quashed. France and Poland are once again twin sisters of culture and chivalry..." mused Przesmycki° as he passed the Church of Notre Dame. "...And watching us is a third knight—Georgia."

Svistonov sat down on the bed. "And we will take Paris." His eyes fell on the floor. "I'll go round the second-hand bookstores tomorrow." And with that, Svistonov, safely tucked in bed, began to snore.

Following a short jaunt the next morning to the editorial office,

Svistonov, trusty briefcase in hand, made for Volodarsky Avenue and its bookshops like a lady who had set off with her purse on a shopping spree at Gostiny Dvor.°

The proprietors and clerks asked Svistonov about his forthcoming novel and suggested books they thought might be of use: "Now here's an interesting item..."; "Do you think you could possibly recommend this one to one of your friends?"

The bacchanal of books had finally ended, and rarities once more become rare. Business had fallen into a bit of a slump since the libraries had stopped selling off their stock at a ruble-twenty a pood.

Svistonov searched for books on Georgia and the Baltic region, as well as for books written by Polish émigrés. The clerks stood back in a corner of the shop drinking vodka, chatting with the regulars and looking out on the street every now and then.

Svistonov returned home pleased. He had found:

1) *Recueil de diverses pièces, servant à l'histoire de Henry IV roy de France et de Pologne. À Cologne, chez Pierre de Marteau, MDCCLXII.*° Inside, an ex libris with D. A. Benckendorff's° coat of arms had been crossed out; the coat of arms bore the motto *Avec Honneur.*°

2) *The Russian Baltic Seaboard, N° 1; Yu. Samarin, Publisher; Prague, 1868.*

3) *Essai critique sur l'Histoire de la Livonie... par C. C. D. B. MDCCXVIII.*°

... and many other books bound in soft pig- and calfskin.°

Svistonov frowned on electricity; this explained why candles were already burning in the apartment. Lenchka was sitting at the table, reading.

... I laid myself down upon an exquisite bed and slept very peaceably for roughly four hours.

Upon awakening, I noticed a small flute resting on the windowsill; I took hold of it and began to play an aria in honour of the beautiful woman whose portrait hung before me. Unbeknownst to me, however, was the fact that this flute had been the handwork of wondrous cunning; for no sooner had I begun to blow into it than water sluiced clamorously forth from every fountain, while in the garden, various species of birds rose up in song so loud as to cause the trees to drop their fruit.

These singular events quite discomposed me, and I incontinently ceased my playing, fearful that someone might have been disturbed by the babel I had produced and come to kill me for my impudence.

As day shrank into dusk, I elected to remain in this place of beauty and wonder, and spent the night underneath an arbour. There I slept till midday, but, seeing not a soul in the garden...

Svistonov had come upon this musty, loathsome little book several years earlier at a flea market. He had been experimenting with a variety of literary styles at the time.

Lenochka was sitting by the candles. She found the book deathly dull; it was in any case a sight less interesting than Walter Pater.<sup>o</sup> She was famished, but was waiting for Svistonov for dinner. She walked up to the middle window and watched for him.

She sat back down and picked up where she had left off, then remembered she had neglected to dust the apartment. She went into the next room, got out the stepladder and set about dusting Svistonov's

books.

"It's been so long since Andrey has written any poetry," she thought to herself. She shifted the stepladder over slightly, pulled out Svistonov's old notebooks and stood perfectly still, rag in hand.

She thumbed his notebooks—replete with poems people had once found incomprehensible, but whose meanings later became all too clear—and found a lock of her hair in one. Another contained some dried flowers. The poems had faded, been discoloured by time, but still burned brightly in her heart.

Lenochka wiped the dust off the spine of each book. Their numbers had grown so, but Good Heavens, what books!° There were diaries of anonymous bureaucrats, how-to books of lascivious university students, letters between a man (a railway worker, apparently) and his wife, slender pamphlets printed by graphomaniacs, pseudo-philosophical treatises scratched out by actors, voluminous leather-bound albums of over-enthusiastic adolescents, and a calendar from St. Petersburg for the year of Our Lord 1754, with inscriptions: '6. *Let blood from leg*'; '19. *Snow*'; '28. *Bought some straw*'; beauty manuals, from *Gli ornamenti della donna-Giovanni Marinello* (1562)° to today's handbooks; cookbooks, medical treatises, old books on long-forgotten dance crazes, books on card games... Shelves creaked under the weight of classics; piles and bundles of books were strewn about the house.

Lenochka sat herself down on the stepladder and read some of the poems. She recalled the time and place her Andrey had penned each one, what he had been wearing, and what she had been wearing, as well.

The doorbell rang. Lenochka put away the stepladder, threw down the rag and answered the door.

Svistonov was perusing his newspapers, circling with a red pencil passages which Lenchka would later cut out and glue onto separate sheets of paper.

The soup was getting cold.

"Why don't you finish your paper later?" suggested Lenchka. "Talk to me."

"What about?" asked Svistonov, still reading.

"Anything! Even the weather will do!" Lenchka answered back, trying to get some kind of conversation going. "Tell me whether the leaves are out, or where we'll be going this summer..."

"To Toksovo,° most likely," mumbled Svistonov idly as he got up. "The air there is bracing."

He retired to the living room for a bit of a lie-down. He had had some wine with his dinner and was now unable to either read or write. He followed Lenchka's movements as he lay sprawled across the sofa, watching her putter about the room and then poke around the books.

"Lenchka, read me some clippings, would you?"

Lenchka got out a stack of sheets covered with newspaper clippings, sat down by the candles, and read aloud.°

*November, 1914*

According to a number of wounded German soldiers, morale among the troops is very low. Although their officers still talk of victory, the troops themselves no longer believe them.

June 21st, 1913

## OSMAN

A paragon of perfection!  
 To smoke it is pure delectation!  
 Yes, this cigarette *extra fin*  
 Will satisfy your urge *en plein!*<sup>o</sup>  
 To Shaposhnikov Products do we pledge:  
*Criez bravo, messieurs*, for they've got the edge!

Uncle Mikhey

July 29th, 1913

## THE AMERICAN MILLIONAIRES' BALL

... the majority of ladies arrived at the ball either in plain country dress or as fairy-tale princesses. They wished to make clear their disapproval of militant SUFFRAGETTES.

## AN INVASION OF FLEAS

Fleas of late have been multiplying throughout the city at an alarming rate. Apartment buildings, hotels, theatres and movie houses are reporting that they are being overrun by fleas.

Improper maintenance of premises in the summertime leads to a proliferation of fleas. Apartment buildings have appealed en masse to the Workers' Health Improvement Board for help in ridding them of the pests. The fleas will be exterminated at very little cost by fumigation.

In addition, several hotels have asked the authorities that they rid their buildings of bedbugs. The authorities have promised to do so with the greatest dispatch...

HEATED WORDS AGAINST GERMAN DOMINATION...

"Lenochka, how many times have I asked you to gather all the clippings and arrange them in chronological order? Is that so hard to do? And how many times have I asked you to mark down the date and name of the newspaper on each clipping, no matter how insignificant? You know it would make things so much easier..."

Lenochka picked up the clippings and looked at her hero.

"Of course, dear," she answered soothingly. "I'll be sure to take care of it."

"Month, day and name of newspaper," he repeated forcefully.

Overall, though, he was pleased with the reading. It had stimulated his imagination.

Lenochka took out her pin-cushion and started darning socks. The candles, set in alabaster candlesticks in the form of grapevines, crackled. Svistonov grew bored.

"Lenochka, read me some novellas."

The 'novellas' were what he called another set of newspaper clippings.

Lenochka got up from her chair, fetched a small, morocco-bound book and riffled through the pages.

"The one about the tailor," asked Svistonov.

That was novella number thirty-three.

"THE NOVELIST-EXPERIMENTER"

"A writer should have firsthand experience of whatever he intends to describe." Such is the credo advanced by Dmitry Shchelin, a tailor who has spent nearly two years on a novel based on the horrors of modern life.

Two months ago, Shchelin needed to end a chapter with his main character attempting to poison himself. With this in mind, Shchelin decided to experience the pain of suicide for himself.

He got some poison, drank it and lost consciousness. He was rushed from his apartment to Mary Magdalen Hospital, where he spent almost two months recuperating.

Shchelin left the hospital and resumed work on his 'novel'. This time he had his hero try to drown himself. Last night, at two o'clock in the morning, Shchelin jumped off Tuchkov Bridge into the Lower Neva below. The bridge nightwatchman and a policeman noticed him just in the nick of time; they paddled out in a rowboat and pulled him out of the water.

The 'novelist-experimenter' was brought back to Mary Magdalen unconscious. He regained consciousness this morning.

Our story, however, does not end here: Shchelin must now find out what throwing oneself under a train is like. "Only then will all the events in my novel seem real and painful."

The lot of this tailor-turned-novelist is indeed a hard one.

"Shall I read on?" asked Lenchka.

Svistonov nodded and closed his eyes.

## A STRANGE TALE

It goes without saying that courts of law often see rather bizarre cases—so bizarre, in fact, that one is never quite sure whether to laugh or cry. In a recent issue of the Leningrad journal *Court Is Now in Session*, for example, we read of an amusing incident at Akhtubinsk° Provincial Court, where a concerned citizen filed a complaint against a fellow who had raped a cow.

Acting on the recommendation of the Public Prosecutor, an examining magistrate undertook an inquiry into this astonishing misdeed. The investigation wore on, and the case grew bigger. Charges were laid against the 'rapist', and the case, along with a bill of indictment, was referred to provincial court. Unfortunately, our Criminal Code has no article which provides for the prosecution of this sort of crime, and the court at Akhtubinsk found itself at an impasse.

"This is unbelievable! How do we settle the matter?"

The Provincial Court displayed a tremendous amount of wit in getting out of this tight spot. The law clearly states that a rape charge cannot be brought to trial unless the victim has filed a formal complaint. So you know what the court did? It ruled that "...in light of the failure on the part of the victim to file a complaint regarding the rape of her person..."

Lenochka read on:

## THE TATTOOED MAN

By virtue of Articles 846, 847, 848 and 851 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, and by the decision of the Ashkhabad° Regional Court, Ivan Grigorev Bodrov, peasant of the village of Chernyshev, Nikolo-Kitskaya County, Karensky District, Penza Oblast, has been charged under Articles 1, 13 and 21° of the Penal Code and is wanted by the authorities.

The accused is twenty-nine years of age, of medium height and build, well-proportioned, has grey eyes and the following tattoos on his body: 1) on his chest, between the nipples: a crucifix bearing the inscription 'N.K.!' ; along the sides of said crucifix are flowers—a type of lily beside the right nipple, and a flower of undetermined species beside the left one; 2) below the crucifix, on either side of his rib cage: a two-headed eagle—the eagle on the right side is a copy of that found on the Russian State Seal, with the letter 'N.' inscribed in the middle of the scythe; the eagle on the left side is similar to the seal of... ; 3) on his abdomen, above the navel and slightly to the right: a lion rampant; the lion stands on an arrow, the head of which points to the right; 4) to the right of the lion, and level with it: a portrait of St. George astride his horse, slaying the dragon; 5) to the left of the lion, and level with it: a woman (an Amazon) on a horse; the horse's head is turned toward the lion; 6) on the front of his upper left arm: a woman lifting the hem of her skirt; 7) on the front of his lower left arm: unidentified flowers above some lilies; ... 10) almost on his elbow, but slightly below it: a butterfly with its head turned toward the aforementioned flowers; 11) on the front of his upper right arm: a woman lifting her skirt up to her

thigh; 12) below his elbow, on the inner arm: a heart pierced by an arrow, an anchor and a cross; 13) immediately below the anchor, the heart and the cross: a naked woman standing on a head, her left arm raised and holding a sword; 14) to the right of the naked woman holding a sword: another woman, half-naked and larger in size, resting her head in her left hand; 15) to the right of the second woman: a third woman, half-naked and holding an open fan behind her head; 16) to the left of the sword-wielding woman: a mermaid holding a sword; 17) on the front of his lower right thigh: a curly-haired woman with a necklace, no legs, and her torso tapering into a blur;

Lenochka blushed.

Svistonov took the book and finished the novella himself:

.....  
 .....  
 .....

**Anyone knowing the whereabouts of this man must report to the authorities. Persons in possession of any of the accused's belongings must hand them over to the Trustee's Office immediately.**

Svistonov felt he could begin work shortly. The first novella about the tailor had struck him as vaguely insulting. He turned a deaf ear to the second one. The third novella seemed to him worthy of attention—it made one think. He handed the book back to Lenochka and, heedless of his wife's further reading, began to imagine Novella N° 35 as a drawing.

"What the hell," he muttered.

Lenochka stopped and looked at him.

"Darling," she said, "you've had too much to drink again,

haven't you? Do you feel all right?" She walked to the bed.

"Get me a piece of paper," said Svistonov. "And a pencil."

He took the paper and began to draw a naked man.

He started with the legs—big, muscular, erect on a hardwood floor—brought his pencil upward, delineated a large, brawny torso and hands with shovel-shaped fingernails, and capped the body with a handsome head sporting a small, malevolently twirled mustache.

"Do we have any water-colours?" he asked.

"I think so," answered Lenchka. She found them after a bit of searching and brought them to him.

Svistonov evenly coloured his drawing pink, retrieved Novella N° 35 and got down to business.

He picked out a fine brush, moistened the tip with his tongue and set about painting the tattoos in various colours, referring now and again to the novella for details. He painted a silver crucifix flanked by white lilies between the man's nipples. Beneath it he rendered the coat of arms and its two-headed eagle, and, just above the navel, a stylized lion rampant. He fit the women out in calico skirts. The girl with the fan had a sort of circus air about her, the dog had something sexy going for it, his dragon was a cheery green fellow, and above the man's unmentionables, in gold letters, he painstakingly traced out *God Save Me...*

The background he coloured black.

Svistonov rose from the bed, spat out a fly that had flown into his mouth, and looked up on a shelf and into the bedside table for a book. He lit some candles set in bronze, Empire-style candlesticks and took his shaving mirror out of the bedside table.

"Lenchka, put the kettle on."

While Lenchka boiled the water, Svistonov smoked and

contemplated his drawing, which he had positioned between the candles and the mirror. The black background let very little light through; the pink man was coming in out of the hallway. Svistonov was amused. He put the drawing aside and started shaving, wondering where to spend the evening and if there were anyone with whom he should like to strike a friendship.

Svistonov walked into the House of Print. A literary evening was in progress.

A young writer named Marya Stepanovna was giving a reading. After seven years of acclaimed literary activity, which, along with her winsome personality, had gained her the hearts of society's finest, Marya Stepanovna duped her public in such a contemptible and objectionable manner that everyone present dropped their eyes at once and felt a queasy, spiritual void. A man appeared, pulling along a hobby horse on a leash; then a youth turned some cartwheels. This same youth then rode around the hall in his underpants on a green toy tricycle until Marya Stepanovna took the stage.

"Shame on you, Marya Stepanovna!" they howled from the front rows. "What do you take us for, anyway?"

Marya Stepanovna, wondering why she had chosen to perform at all, read her poem in an even voice as though nothing had happened.°

Svistonov was in the next room, reclining in an easy chair whose colourful back was covered with black cariatids, and listening intently to the voices around him.

A voice in a grey clothcap argued that Cain and Abel did lend themselves to irony.

A voice in a blue cap said he was writing a Book of the Dead,

which he would dedicate to Pushkin, Lermontov, Yesenin and others.

A third voice in glasses noted in a deep voice that literary criticism was being confused with administrative policies.

A man drinking tea in another room shouted: "Won't you please accept it?"

A man sitting in a chair, hat in hand, remarked wittily: "Dead men don't move their elbows!"

At intermission, Svistonov pressed his way through the noisy crowd and into the hall.

The public was fuming over the show.

"You're not angry with me, I hope?" Svistonov asked Valyavkin, who was coming out of the hall.

"I realise it's art, but was the guillotine absolutely necessary?" he returned, throwing up his arms in bewilderment.

They elbowed their way into the dining room and sat down at a table next to the fireplace.

Svistonov examined his raised glass.

"Let's drink," he said, clinking Valyavkin's glass. "Here's to your next reading, to your performance! You've been blessed with this talent by Mother Nature Herself!"

Other writers soon joined them, and by and by the gathering had developed into a free and easy affair. Jokes alternated with beer, newly written poems with tirades against critics, and discussion of recently published books with asides on their authors' quirky mannerisms.

Meanwhile, Valyavkin, who was from out of town, was alternately animated and dejected.

He looked around the dining room.

He had thought he would be greeted here with open arms, but

he was, in fact, completely and seemingly deliberately ignored.

"Oh yes, we're well aware of what's going on in Moscow," began a man at a neighbouring table, looking askance at the Muscovite and laughing nervously. "A poet will step onto a stage, his chest all puffed up and his striped socks showing, stretch his arm out and start exalting himself: '*Shakespeare and I!*' Or he'll count out objects one by one at the top of his voice and have us believe it's poetry! You're all living like caged canaries in Moscow, you have no room to breathe. But here in Leningrad we have spacious palaces..."

The speaker was by this time addressing Valyavkin directly when he was interrupted by a young advertising agent:

"Our poets and our writers live and breathe in the fresh air of Detskoe Selo, close to Pushkin's penates! We do good, honest work here in Leningrad; you Muscovites are nothing but hacks!"

"Come now, let's not fight over such nonsense!" said the secretary of the local trade union committee in an effort to soothe tempers. "Moscow has its virtues, as does Leningrad. And while it is true that we here work in relative tranquillity, and they in the hubbub of a capital city, no one has yet been able to determine which is more beneficial—peace and quiet or hustle and bustle."°

Kuku, who sat at another table, was tempted to move to the piano. He was drawn to a girl with an enormous mouth, a doleful, blackhead-infested nose, and hair that grew from just above her eyebrows and had become scanty through her many abortions. She was grandiosely striking the keys and singing:

Goodbye, my friend, goodbye...°

The room seemed still, and the girl desirable. Spring, however,

had not yet arrived, and her pull on him was not as strong as it should have been. Still and all, he rather liked the cut of her shoulders—they sloped a great deal—not to mention the manner in which she held her quivering hands up in the air before letting her fingers dance across the keys.

Everyone knew Kuku—though Svistonov had never paid him much attention until this moment. Now, in search of material for his novel, he decided to finally make his acquaintance. He finished his drink and watched Kuku step to the piano where the girl sang and played.

A covey of giggling youths had clustered round Svistonov.

"Introduce me to Kuku," he said. "I want him for my novel's main character."

Several young people got up and rushed across the room.

Ivan Ivanovich Kuku had an unusual passion for letterwriting. He was a stout, forty-year-old man, remarkably well-preserved. His face—enhanced by sideburns—his forehead—wreathed in a chestnut crown of hair—and his earnest voice commanded immediate respect from all who made his acquaintance. "Such an intelligent face," people said, "such sideburns, such penetrating eyes..! Ivan Ivanovich is without question a man to be reckoned with." Kuku sensed this respect. He took meticulous care of his sideburns. He strove to have his eyes constantly sparkle with inspiration and to always have a warm smile on his face, so that everyone might think he thought nothing but deep and wonderful thoughts. He did everything with panache: he shaved regally, smoked with charisma and uttered even the most banal of statements in dazzling fashion: "I fancy a bit of steak, today."

"There's no doubt about it, I look like a great man!" he told

himself each time he stopped in front of a looking-glass on the street. Even schoolchildren stared at him and asked one another: "Who *is* that guy?"

But Kuku had nothing—not his wit, not his heart, not his imagination—that he could claim his own. He was a man without convictions. That which others approved, he approved. He read only critically acclaimed books and refused to read anything else as a matter of principle. He desperately wanted to be a man of great intellect and noble soul. The pursuits of others became his own: when everyone took to religion, he did too; when everyone lionized Freud, so did he.

His only original personality trait was his passion for letters. Kuku loved to write letters and shuddered as he did so. They always began in the following manner: "I am an honest man and therefore must inform you, sir, that you are a rogue;" or: "You have allowed yourself to circulate a malicious rumour concerning a respected individual; you, sir, are a scoundrel;" or: "You have declined an invitation to show me your drawings at the place I had recommended we meet. Allow me to inform you, sir, that your drawings are vulgar, and that I had only evinced any interest in them as a personal favour to you."

Friends on the receiving end of such letters merely shrugged. "Poor Ivan Ivanovich," they would say upon running into one another on the street, "we ought to pay him a visit and cheer him up. It's nothing but a case of nerves. If we ever gave up on him, he'd be all alone in the world, and goodness knows what would become of him then." All would agree on this course of action, but before anyone could find the time to call on him, Kuku would appear at their doorstep, haggard, hunched and contrite.

The meeting took place in the light of the chandeliers.

Svistonov and Kuku walked toward each other. They were amazed that for some reason they had not been properly introduced until that moment. Kuku told Svistonov that he had been following the author's work since his youth and had long wanted to meet him to express his admiration. Svistonov told Kuku that he had heard many great and interesting things about him, that it was a shame he did not write, because if he ever decided to take pen in hand, the result would most surely make for interesting reading.

A shiver ran through Kuku's soul; it seemed he had found a soul mate at last. He began to sing like a nightingale and strike poses like some beauty queen. "See how smart, how well rounded I am!" he seemed to be saying to Svistonov. "My dear, dear friend! I suffer so! I've virtually no one to talk to; I'm surrounded by louts! Oh, Ivan Dmitrievich is a nice enough fellow, but he knows absolutely nothing about biology. Dmitry Ivanovich is no slouch in philosophy, but then again, he's a horrible man. Konstantin Terentevich knows a thing or two, but keeps to himself; and although Terenty Konstantinovich isn't afraid to speak his mind, he's an imbecile."

"Have you read this yet?" he asked Svistonov, pulling out a book he had just received. "It's completely changed my outlook on life."

They left the House of Print together. Kuku was charmed, Svistonov delighted. They agreed to become friends.

Kuku lived on Ligovka Avenue in a huge apartment building which had everything: a pharmacy, stores, a small green area, baths... practically a city in its own right. His friends adored him; they considered him an unformed genius. They were astounded by his

erudition and took his flitting about for the unfocused nature of genius. "If that man ever manages to harness that store of knowledge of his, he'll change the world," they always told themselves as they left Kuku. They also felt terribly sorry for him.

Spring had arrived; Kuku thought he would go out for a ride to the suburbs. He took a seat in the commuter train, alighted at Detskoe Selo<sup>o</sup> and boarded the bus for the palace of Catherine the Great, converted into a museum.

He got off in front of the Lyceum and stood at the entrance in profile, a pose he found flattering above all others. He watched the street and pretended to read. He flipped a page every few minutes and glanced around for familiar faces.

Meanwhile, a crowd was beginning to form in front of the Lyceum. A few people ran up to the Pushkin Memorial, looked intensely, engraved the image into their minds, returned to their post and bandied impressions.

"You're right, it does look a lot like him."

"He hasn't got the same nose, though."

"Did you notice his forehead?"

"You'd swear it was him with that frock-coat he's wearing."

"What kind of hat do you suppose that is?"

Kuku moved on, taking Delvig's<sup>o</sup> poems with him. The crowd followed him from a distance. He walked past the Pushkin Memorial.

"Do you suppose he's wearing makeup?" whispered a girl.

"Say, maybe you're right! I'll bet they're shooting a picture in the park!"

"S-sh! Quiet, or they'll go away!"

The crowd melted away, leaving the youths to follow Kuku alone. He walked past the palace, turned left at the outbuildings,

crossed the Chinese foot-bridge, turned left again onto a path, then crossed another foot-bridge onto an islet.

Kuku loved greatness with a strange, but sincere passion. He could stand for hours on end admiring a great man's portrait. He craved fame, yearned to perform some extraordinary feat. He devoured the biographies of great men and exulted in any resemblance between a great man and himself.

Kuku returned to the Lyceum after a brief stroll around the islet; he strode grandly to the Pushkin Memorial, filled with emotion, then sat down on a bench and contemplated the boy of bronze.

The youths were still on the Chinese foot-bridge, waiting for a movie crew. They ran to the gate and looked left and right for a carload of actors and directors, cameras and cameramen speeding in for a shoot. But there was not a cloud of dust in sight, and dinnertime had arrived.

Slightly disappointed, and wondering aloud what it had been all about, the young cottagers dispersed and went home.

Svistonov, meantime, was hurrying toward the Lyceum.

Morning. People were rustling through the park on their way to the office while Svistonov sat on a bench, waiting for Kuku. It was cool, it was grey, it was dreary. Svistonov got up from his bench and walked through the park.<sup>o</sup>

Busts showed black against a background of rime-coated trees.

A cart rolled into the Admiralty courtyard.

Marines marched along the carriage way beyond the rail fence.

A hearse trundled toward Republican Bridge.

The Palace of Art, freshly repainted in its original colours, appeared to whisk away from the square.

Atop a column, an angel; beneath the angel, a barreling quadriga; and beneath the quadriga, two storeys and an arch out of which an automobile has just shot.

An airplane up above flew in the direction of the Peter and Paul Fortress.

Finally, Kuku, sporting a summer hat, stepped off a streetcar.

Svistonov walked over.

And shook his hand.

Today they were going to the Hermitage.° Svistonov was in the mood for some hunting scenes.

Kuku preferred to loiter flauntingly from room to room and study people.

"Would you believe," began Kuku, "that as a child, it frustrated me no end that I did not have a nose like Gogol's, or limp like Byron, or have jaundice like Juvenal..?"°

## Chapter II

### Toksovo

The train slowly pulled into the station. Kuku and Svistonov disembarked, bought some cigarettes and took a cabriolet to the cabin they had reserved in Leningrad.

Svistonov and Kuku set up house in a room whose windows looked out onto the road. This room and a log hallway comprised the entire cabin. It had been built slapdash, specially for cottagers. The walls were covered with the cheapest of wallpapers, and the furnishings consisted of just one small table and two plank beds, all made of pine.

The new tenants garnished the bare walls with books they had brought with them. Kuku converted his end of the room into a den. He tacked a sheet of blue blotting paper onto the table, then arranged some candlesticks and a stack of blank writing paper; he drew out a couple of goose quills, handing one to Svistonov and keeping the other for himself. He imagined the two of them working evenings side by side, like the Goncourt Brothers,<sup>o</sup> he dreaming up stories, and Svistonov... But now it was high time he got down to work, high time indeed...

A bonfire was burning one evening at the foot of a hill several versts<sup>o</sup> from Toksovo. Cottagers were lying on the ground in a half-circle, tossing pine branches into the fire and discussing politics.

May-bugs flitted about sapling pines.

The growth below ran into a wall of sand.

Among the cottagers sat Svistonov, a deaf laundress called Trina

Rublis, Kuku and Nadenka, a city girl.

Trina Rublis was a girl with a wild and flamboyant past. Until recently, she was also possessed of great beauty. She had inexplicably fallen prey to obesity some two years earlier and grown soft. Her ashen hair no longer elicited the admiration of old, and her rosy cheeks had swollen and turned sallow.

Who knows what thoughts ran that night through the mind of this creature who lived in a world devoid of sound? Perhaps she imagined a handsome officer of the Dikaya Division using his dead comrade's passport to marry her hurriedly in Detskoe Selo during Yudenich's advance on Petrograd<sup>o</sup> and then disappearing, perhaps unwillingly, without a trace.

Kuku sat proudly at the city girl's feet, looking over the campfire at the rippling lake.

Svistonov gave the laundress' hand a squeeze and—seeing as no one was listening, and knowing that she could not hear him—started prattling and poking fun at her, at this once-beautiful deaf woman. She watched his lips and wondered when to laugh.

"You see how I've brought Kuku and that girl together?" Svistonov went on, stroking Trina's hand. "I am going to transport them to another world, a world more real, more lasting than this brief existence could ever offer them. They will spend their lives there and flourish and grow for all eternity, even as they lie in their graves. Art consists in extracting people from one world and drawing them into another dimension. Literature has more substance than this perpetually crumbling world could ever hope to have."

There are few genuine hunters of souls in the world. Nothing is more terrifying than a hunter of souls. They are a stealthy lot, and

courteous, too; courteousness, in fact, is all that connects them to the outside world. Of course, they have no horns or hooves to give them away; and though they may appear to love life, they love only one thing—art.

“You have to understand,” continued Svistonov (he knew Trina would understand nothing at all) “that art is in no way a celebration, or a chore: it is a struggle to populate another world, to populate it so densely that it brims over with diversity and is imbued with a reality all its own. One could compare literature to the afterlife; literature, in essence, is life after death.”

The bonfire was almost out. The cottagers fanned out in search of more brushwood.

Kuku dozed proudly at Nadenka’s feet.

Svistonov got up, moved over toward the cottagers who had fallen asleep, sat down and started gazing at the lake and the outline of a scrawny, solitary birch. He watched the others return with firewood and studied the sleepers.

“Imagine,” he resumed, thoughtfully bending over, “a kind of... poetic shadow leading the living to their graves. Imagine a kind of Virgil<sup>o</sup> in the cottagers’ midst, surreptitiously leading them into Hell. Imagine them picking their noses and following him in single file with bouquets in their hands... they think they’re out on a simple stroll. Now imagine them suddenly realising that Hell is just beyond a hill. Below lies a narrow gully, grey and terribly mournful; they know they will be in it, naked, without so much as the benefit of a fig leaf, but still clutch onto their bouquets. And imagine this Virgil fellow naked too and making them dance to his tune.”

Svistonov was almost shouting into the twilight.

Trina was taken aback and looked all about her—with whom

was Svistonov angry?

They made their way down a hill and clambered up another; they made their way down that hill and clambered up yet another. Lakes flanked them all along the way.

Trina gestured that she loved grass and the feel of the warm sun on her back.

She turned her head toward Svistonov and patted her back.

He thought she was cold. He removed his jacket and threw it over her shoulders. She smiled and ran off, glancing back several times, beckoning him. He chased after her.

They reached the bank.

"I want to go for a swim," signaled Trina.

Svistonov turned around, took a few steps and sat down with his back to the lake. Trina hid behind some bushes and took off all her clothes save her blouse. It was held up with two pink straps, and the front had a rose embroidered on it. She hung her stockings onto a bush.

Trina ran into the water and made plashing noises. Svistonov understood this to mean he could now turn around. He reluctantly edged toward the water. He could make Trina out some distance away; her head was wrapped in a towel. She swam back to shore and lay down in the sand, the water barely washing over her.

Svistonov waded in with only his shirt. They took each other's hand and swam away.

No one at the bonfire had noticed their absence—or at least they pretended they had not noticed.

Trina nestled down with Svistonov in front of the fire.

Swayed by dusk and the brisk night air—or perhaps by some

other driving force—Fedusha, an orator and poetry reader, called on everyone to jump through the fire, but his suggestion was shot down. The activities director instead moved for a game of skittles.

It was Sunday, and because the sun was shining, groups of urbanites were swarming out of Toksovo's remote gothic train station with their musical vanguard for a day in the country. Horns glittered in the sun; workers and their flower-bedecked wives hurried after them. The men plucked blades of grass or leaves from bushes and chewed on them.

Other groups consisted of teenagers in red kerchiefs, of young men and women in bathing suits with sandals in their hands, and of schoolchildren who for one reason or another had been held up in town and arrived late. Each group was furnished with posters and assigned an instructor recognizable by his or her armband.

It was on such days that the Russkaya Shveytsaria Tavern blazed to life.

The tavern was a raucous hub of activity. Patrons toasted with beer, hugged one another, ate ice cream, laughed heartily, darted from one table to another, had eggs, sausage, sour clotted milk and cucumbers, drew lollipops out of their pockets or handbags and sucked on them...*Tooty-toot-toots* echoed here, there and everywhere.

Two hours later the hills overlooking the lake began to teem with life as well. The orchestra set itself atop a hill, somewhere under two or three pines. People swam in bathing suits of all colours, or lay on their stomachs, soaking up the sun. The hills were again awash with the sounds of *tooty-toot-toots*.

Toksovo's promontories were transmogrified into living mountains of flesh, and posters flapping in the wind took on the

appearance of standards and banners dappled with sparkly white, yellow, black and gold letters.

Withered old Tatyana and withered old Pyotr were leaving their cabin. Pyotr locked the door and jiggled the handle.

"Well, here we are, out in the open air. Ten years since we've been to the country. Did you remember to bring the papers and the magazines? Nothing like reading on the cool grass in the shade of a tree..."

"You haven't changed a bit!" rejoined a lighthearted Tatyana dreamily as she put on a pair of gloves and popped open her long, lacy bone-handled parasol.

They headed straight for the lake, tending alongside a field. Tatyana wore a short plaid skirt—thus exposing her bow legs to the younger crowd's ridicule—and a décolleté blouse of crêpe de chine embellished with a slightly worn blue ribbon.

"It's rather warm, isn't it?" asked Tatyana.

"Yes, it is," acknowledged Pyotr.

"Look!" said Tatyana, bending down. "Flowers!"

"Buttercups!" added Pyotr. "You haven't aged a bit!"

"I'm off!"

Tatyana continued along a path, plucking flowers here and there, making a wreath. Pyotr eased himself onto a stump and opened his newspaper. His face was lined with wrinkles; he stooped and was near-sighted. Tatyana burbled a love song as she made her way down the dale, twining her wreath. Her tiny, aged hands sprightly gathered clover, camomile and bluebells, and her withered little legs were practically steady as they carried her across the grass.

"This is a good place, Tatyana," she heard quaver a voice from

up above.

Then again—silence.

The only sound comes from a rustling newspaper.

Down below, butterflies flutter noiselessly about. Grey hairs peek out from under a blue bonnet. And Tatyana laughs! Ah, youth! She spreads her handkerchief on the ground, sits on it, doffs her bonnet, lays her wreath upon her head and listens to the buzzing, humming, rustling grass.

Every morning, for as long as she can remember, Tatyana has had to sponge Pyotr down. Such a bother! The scrawny old man simply stands in a water basin while she goes about her business washing him.

Pyotr had once been a flautist at the Academy Theatre. He was a sensitive musician. Tatyana would always be sitting in the hall somewhere with a girlfriend, listening to him play.

Up on the hummock Pyotr puts his paper down on the grass, removes his flute from its case and begins to play.

Svistonov, loitering above the lakeshore and watching the festive crowd below, hears the flute.

The couple have a dog; it is the child they never had. A small, smart-looking, rapidly—but imperceptibly—aging nine-year-old terrier. It still wears a pink ribbon round its neck and races down roads with its snout pressed to the ground as in days gone by, but its owners no longer call it Traviata°—just 'old girl'. This 'old girl' has a little pink bow and is sitting by her old master who is busily spitting into his flute, while down below, the other 'old girl' is lying on the ground with a wreath of flowers on her head and a little blue bow in her hair, scanning the skies and sucking on a blade of grass.

The terrier suddenly spurts toward the old woman, lies down next to her and stares into the grass. He seems to be on the verge of

dropping off.

Svistonov brushed aside the shrubbery with his walking stick.

Trina followed daintily along with her head cocked.

Pyotr played with ever-mounting passion.

Svistonov watched and listened a while from the height of a hill before making his way down.

"Let me introduce myself: Andrey Svistonov."

"Pleased to meet you," answered the old man, discomposed, lowering his flute. Svistonov's sudden appearance had startled him.

Svistonov sat down next to him. Trina stood a ways back.

"You play divinely," said Svistonov. "I love music. I've been wanting to meet you for quite some time."

The old man blushed.

"I hear you playing nights..."

Svistonov and Kuku ran into Nadenka during a stroll around the lake. She was accompanied on either side by the Telyatnikov siblings, Iya and Pasha, and dawdling about with a switch. Pasha was a twenty-one-year-old who considered himself old beyond his years, but he could generally be relied upon to make intelligent observations; seventeen-year-old Iya was a know-it-all. Pasha was an intense, dour young man who claimed he was genetically dysfunctional and had been perverted at a very early age. Iya bubbled over with life and talked about Anatole France. Brother and sister were friends with Nadenka, but hated each other.

The Telyatnikovs spotted Svistonov and Kuku and hailed them. Everyone gathered and exchanged greetings.

"Andrey Nikolaevich!" bubbled Iya, joining Svistonov on his right. "I've got a great new joke for you!"

Kuku, Nadenka and Pasha followed behind. Pasha considered Svistonov an important writer and watched with envy as Svistonov and Iya exchanged pleasantries. He became exultant when Svistonov half-turned his head without breaking stride and spoke to him: the youth eagerly took his place on Svistonov's left. Ambition was one trait Iya and Pasha shared alike.

Kuku and Nadenka dropped back from the others.

"How about a game of skittles?" suggested Svistonov as they drew within view of the cottages.

Pasha acceded, much as he despised the game as a contemptible, insignificant pastime. Iya was only too glad to oblige and quickly fetched the pieces from the pit.

Svistonov grabbed a skittle and demarcated the target area. He noticed Kuku and Nadenka atop a hill and walked toward them.

"We're about to have a game of skittles," he said. "Would you care to join us?"

Kuku respectfully declined.

"A remarkable man, that Svistonov," pronounced Kuku as he held Nadenka by the elbow and helped her down to the lake. "So jovial, witty and good-natured... He's obviously smitten with Toksovo, but I'm afraid I can't say the same for myself—I find the scenery here disappointingly ordinary. I much prefer life in grander settings, keeping company and conversing with great men..."

"But look around you, Ivan Ivanovich!" said Nadenka, lifting her face. "See how lovely it is up here!"

She had the most incredibly beautiful eyes: hazel...

The azure sky and cloudlets were reflected in the lake.

Kuku laid his coat over a tree stump for Nadenka and sat down next to her on the grass.

"The night is doing something to me, Nadenka," he said softly. "Wasn't it on a night like this that Prince Andrey first saw Natasha at the ball and fell in love?° Do you like Natasha?"

Nadenka was drawing absent-mindedly at her cigarette, watching her smoke rings dissolve into thin air.

"Why do you smoke, Nadenka? It doesn't become you in the least. You should be bursting with joie de vivre and gay abandon! Won't you give up smoking, Nadenka? For me?" Kuku's voice was choked with genuine pain.

Nadenka flicked her cigarette onto the dry turf and watched it smoulder.

"I'm still set on a career in the movies," she said after a pause.

"It wouldn't be right, Nadenka," muttered Kuku.

"Why not?"

"It's just not you. Trust me, I know these things. You must be Natasha!"

Svistonov was on the hill with the Telyatnikovs. He and Iya sat under a tree, listening to Pasha recite his poetry.

"Very good!" said Svistonov. "You show promise."

Pasha beamed.

"So you honestly believe I can make a go of it?" he asked.

"I most definitely do!"

Svistonov looked down below and thought it best they be on their way.

"Would you be kind enough to go ask Ivan Ivanovich what time it is?" he said, turning to Iya.

Iya whisked down as fast as her legs could carry her.

Kuku was admiring the lake when Iya popped up in front of him and asked him the time.

Kuku pulled out his watch.

"Ten," he replied sternly. "Where's Svistonov?"

"He's waiting for us up on the hill."

Iya stepped toward Nadenka. "Bored?" she asked in a hushed tone.

Svistonov, Nadenka and Kuku formed a threesome. Iya and Pasha followed behind.

"Do you think Svistonov invited us to a game of skittles just so Kuku could make eyes at Nadenka?" Pasha asked sullenly.

"Oh, puh-lease!" said Iya. "Why are you so suspicious of everybody? He just likes being with young people."

Another Sunday. Cabriolets were parked in front of a Protestant church. The church was jammed with tow-headed boys, and girls who looked like paper roses. An organ played. Light streamed in through the stained-glass windows.

Up on the balcony stood Nadenka and Kuku; behind them, Svistonov and Trina. Nadenka and Kuku observed the christening below, darting occasional glances toward the aisle where the bride, the groom and the wedding party waited to step to the altar as soon as the christening was over.

The groom was nervous and shifted from foot to foot. The bride was red as a lobster.

"Andrey Nikolaevich, this is ideal material for your novel!" whispered Kuku, leaning backward, in Svistonov's ear. "Capture the moment before it's too late!" He turned and continued to observe the proceedings.

Nadenka had drawn her fair head close to his, and he began to fantasise about his own wedding. His countenance blared with pride.

He imagined himself standing alongside Natasha, that is, Nadenka: she wore a white dress and bridal veil, and held a candle with a white bow tied round it, and the church's vaults echoed...

Kuku reached for his handkerchief and pretentiously wiped away his tears.

Trina's thoughts turned to Riga, beautiful Riga... She remembered her dreams and her ramble in the woods with Toropov, a student who had been spending his summer in Riga.

Her reverie was broken by Kuku. His chest muscles suddenly tightened in a coughing spasm. He now watched the goings-on below with scorn. The wedding party lurched forward. The church stirred. All heads turned toward the aisle. Svistonov watched, too.

The organ played. Then the minister spoke. Then the organ began anew.

One could see the sun-kissed leaves quivering in the trees through the stained-glass windows.

"Mm-yes, very nice," sniffed Kuku, "but I should like more splendour at my own wedding."

The cabriolets sped homeward as Nadenka, Kuku, Svistonov and Trina quit the church.

"Shall we have some beer?" proposed Kuku.

They joined the throng and made their way to the open-air tavern by the orchard. The tables and benches were all taken. Laughter; the pungent odour of beer; wisps of smoke; perspiring faces; singing; the strains of balalaikas, guitars and mandolins.

"It's bloody Auerbach's cellar brought to life!" remarked Kuku to Svistonov. "The only ones missing are Faust and Mephistopheles!"

"Ivan Ivanovich, stop it already!" Svistonov shot back. "All these literary references..! Life has to be lived simply, spontaneously."

A table was finally freed. All four sat down and ordered beer. Meanwhile, the siblings had succeeded in shoving their way through to their table.

"May we join you?" they asked, somehow finding room at the end of the bench.

"See how I hold my liquor, Pasha?" said Iya after her fifth glass. "Not much of a man, are you?"

"I can drink as much as the next man," snorted Pasha, "but what's the point?"

"I just remembered a really funny story!"

"I couldn't care less about your stories!"

"Well, I couldn't care less about your poetry!"

"Must you two fight?" pleaded Nadenka.

A heated discussion was taking place at the table next to them:

"Nope, you're wrong about the Germans. When I was a prisoner in one of their camps..."

"That broad over there isn't half-bad... I think I'll go make my move..."

"Come back here, ya mush-brain! Sidddown!"

To the left:

"Mitya, would you look at that ass! Masha, Masha, c'mere!"

To the right, under some pine trees:

"I tell you, Petya, culture's a great thing. In fact, Ivan Trofimovich told me people even went to the stake for it!"

"Yeah, right, culture! Just drink your beer, you idiot!"

"Mitka, I've seen the light—I'm even attending church! But don't you go around saying anything to anybody, all right?"

A voice from the crowd, waiting to be seated:

"Volodya! Hey, Volodya! How about taking your nap in the

cesspit?"

A tottering drunk shouts:

"C'mere, why don't ya! I'll knock yer block off!"

A group of teenage boys dragging a girl along by her hands erupts beyond the fence. The girl is disheveled, her dress askew. Warm tears stream down her face. She cries out:

"I'm sick! I feel si-i-ck! Let me cover my face!"

She tries to break free. The boys laugh. They are wrenching her wrists. She tries to throw herself down onto the ground, but is snatched back up by her sneering captors. She goes limp.

"We found her doing it in the bushes with some guy," explain the boys to the onlookers. "We're taking her to the police."

"No, no, you're not Natasha, you're Gretchen," mumbles an inebriated Kuku. "I'm Faust, Svistonov is Mephistopheles, and Trina is Martha!"

"Stop talking nonsense," snaps Svistonov.

A aging workman staggers to their table.

He stops, stands unsteadily.

"My dear sirs and madams, if you don't mind my asking..."

Kuku, beside himself, nudges Svistonov and whispers:

"It's the scene outside the city gate! He'll be calling me Doctor any second now!"

The workman's eyes bore into Kuku's face, and after a moment's concentration:

"If I may be so bold, sir: are you by any chance a doctor?"

Kuku chortles self-contentedly.

Kuku, Nadenka, Svistonov, Trina, Pasha and Iya were leaving for a remote lake: all had agreed that a picnic was a splendid idea. They

brought along blankets, cushions, canned meat, cigarettes and cognac.

The sun was only just peeking from behind the hilltops when they set off. It had rained the day before, and presently a whitish fog was racing down the hills toward the lakes, but the skies were otherwise clear. The sparrows twittered and flew into the damp, dew-spangled foliage, perching and swaying on shrubs before skirring off over the winding road. Ditches on either side of a rapidly drying road that was yellowing by the hour were close to overflowing.

Iya made a fairly good living. She wore yellow shoes and a second-hand, foreign-made coat; she also had a thonged yellow tote-bag. It was she who had bought the cognac, as well as a head of Dutch cheese, a fresh jar of caviar, and several jars of fruit drops and compote. She led the procession, her green knapsack strapped fast onto her back.

Pasha had not bought anything, but Nadenka took him under her wing. She loaded him with a package of her favourite cookies, some jelly turnovers, a blanket, a pillow, a towel, a bar of soap, a mug and a toothbrush.

Trina brought a cheesecake and cutlets.

Kuku was resplendant. He had gone back to town to fetch a pair of cuff links and his mackintosh, and had even bought a new cap for the occasion. In his handbag, resting side by side with Pushkin, was veal, roast beef, knives, forks, interlocking glasses and a bottle of French wine.

Svistonov did his part, too: he hauled along a pup tent, a mirror and a camera.

Svistonov was still pretending to court Trina, curious as to the sort of rumours the two of them would inspire. He plucked some flowers from a ditch and offered them to her.

Nadenka turned around in surprise: Kuku, determined to keep

pace with Svistonov, had also plucked her some flowers and arranged them into a bouquet.

Pasha sprinted far into a field and returned with a bundle of cornflowers.

"Can you whistle?" Svistonov asked Iya. "Could you whistle a tune for us?"

Iya began to whistle, masterfully.

"Quick time," urged Svistonov. "Everybody in step."

Kuku, smiling, fell in step.

Nadenka asked how it was done. Kuku demonstrated.

Onward they marched to the nearest village, Iya whistling a fox trot.

They reached the village. The dairy-maids and children watched inquisitively, wondering where the devil these people were off to like that in military formation. The six marchers felt the stares of curiosity upon them and smiled.

"Keep in step," exhorted Svistonov. "Louder, Iya, louder!"

"Shall we stop for lunch?" inquired Kuku.

"Let's! I'm so hungry I could eat a horse!" replied Iya.

"How about you, Nadenka?"

"Gladly!"

"Let's head for that pine tree over there, then. We'll find nice, cool shade and dry ground there."

"Would you hand me my bag?" Nadenka asked Pasha.

Iya threw off her green knapsack and dug out its contents.

Kuku opened his handbag and got out the knives, forks and glasses.

"Just think," said Kuku, "only a few years ago, wolves were

roaming these parts."

"You're kidding?!" returned Nadenka.

"We all thought the end was near back then, but here we are, drinking and eating, everything exactly as it used to be."

"Oh, really?" asked Svistonov, cracking a smile.

"I read a new biography of Napoleon yesterday. I'm really rather sorry I'm not short!"

Iya uncorked the bottle of wine after Kuku had unsuccessfully tried to pry the corkscrew away from her. Nadenka carved the roastbeef: she had been unanimously elected 'picnic hostess'. She was more than happy to oblige.

Kuku pulled out a copy of Turgenev's correspondence with Dostoevsky and began to read it aloud after everyone had eaten their fill. His fellow picknickers, however, were already nodding off, waylaid by their meal.

Nadenka dreams that she is in a room with two windows. The sun outside is bright, so very bright.

A girl is sitting by one of the windows: leaning over her is a man, tall, gaunt, repulsive, baldpated with long, lank hair. His eyes, set in a face of grey, are especially unsettling: they seem to bore right into her. He is dressed in a filthy brown sixteenth-century costume, like those of period films. Nadenka knows that this man is the master of her fate and will do with her as he pleases. She is terrified.

She runs away, through innumerable rooms. The building is enormous, a veritable labyrinth; this man is its only tenant. She dashes across a hallway and back into the same bright rooms, the same living rooms and their stucco walls. She glimpses him several times in a malicious cackle at the other end of a hallway; each time, she starts off again with the foreknowledge that he will find her regardless.

She finally runs into some sort of kitchen and senses a way out. She looks at one of the walls and realises at once why she cannot rid herself of her pursuer: there is a map of the building, and on it a fine copper wire tracking her every step. The wire's end is small but free, and Nadenka sees herself bending it so that it points to the opposite wall. She knows now that the wire will no longer give her away.

She races out into the street. Everywhere, buildings are unfinished, as yet nothing more than tall—six storeys and over—shells with immense, two-storey gaps where the windows should be. Huge mounds of dirt, lime and scrap metal choke the street.

Only one building stands completed, far away. A light shines inside. She screws up her courage and makes a run for it.

She stumbles on through the unfinished buildings, keeping to the basements. The darkness is impenetrable, like in a mineshaft. Razor-sharp iron rods bristle all around her. She is lost! The buildings are pressing down on her, they will come crashing down at any moment...

Suddenly she sees the light.

A very young man approaches her, haloed by her cherished light. He is very handsome. She runs to him and relates her escape from the maze. Triumph washes over the young man's face when she tells him how she hit upon the idea of bending the wire. He takes her into his arms and gingerly carries her to the light and into the building.

"We'll stay here," he tells her. "I know of a room. The maze is just next door, but that man will never think of looking for you here."

The building is a hive of unceasing movement. People glide noiselessly and indifferently through the darkened hallways. The light is as faint as in a Dutch master's painting...

Nadenka shuddered, woke up and looked around. Kuku was

sitting under the tall pine, flipping the pages of a book. Svistonov was leaning against the tree and staring at her. She felt strange.

Pasha lay on the ground with his knees up and the odd sensation of plummeting into an abyss. His big toe swelled as he fell, and a boil appeared and turned into an eye. It was all very disgusting, and he quickly woke himself up. He rubbed his eyes, felt his foot and yawned.

"I've just had the most ridiculous dream: an eye was growing out of my foot! Say, Ivan Ivanovich, I've heard you're an expert on dreams."

"You mean you can interpret dreams?" asked Nadenka excitedly.

"Now there's an interesting topic," thought Kuku. He replied authoritatively:

"The Ancients attached great importance to dreams. There was even an entire branch of science—and I use the term 'science' loosely—devoted to it, called oneirocriticism. No one in the Classical world doubted that dreams were the doings of some divine power." Kuku, elated at his own erudition, looked round to see if he had everybody's undivided attention.

"Ergo," he resumed, "a dream is an omen of things to be. But considering the hour at which your dream occurred, Nadenka, and the fact that we all had a hearty meal just prior to it, it's unlikely that your dream meant anything at all."

Kuku cast a triumphant eye over his audience, and, in a bid to further impress Nadenka, mentioned Apuleius.<sup>o</sup>

"According to Apuleius bleak, foreboding dreams are the product of gluttony," he stated bombastically. "Furthermore, oneirocritics held that drinking two cups of wine, even in the morning, was sufficient to undermine a dream's veracity—a line of

thought to which I myself, I hasten to add, do not subscribe, in spite of the fact, Nadenka, that I know nothing of your dream," concluded Kuku, lifting his hands inquiringly.

"Would you mind terribly telling us what your dream was? I admit I find the subject frightfully interesting. I could spend all day telling you about the dreams of famous people, if you like. Let me tell you a few... Oh, but just look at this view! I hadn't realised how beautiful it is here. And the hills..!"

Kuku, completely forgetting that Nadenka had not yet told him her dream, jabbered on after a moment's reflection:

"I'd like to tell you first about..."

Iya and Pasha drew closer, but Nadenka was disappointed, and only listened half-heartedly—she was not interested in the dreams of famous people. And although her nightmare had ended happily enough, she felt as though everything around her had grown dark, even cold. The skies had in fact become overcast since lunch.

Thunder rumbled in the distance.

Everyone rushed to fetch their bags and carried them over to the pine tree. Pasha and Iya helped Svistonov set up the tent. The bags were brought in, and everyone gathered inside.

"Well, where's the rain?" asked Kuku jokingly.

"It won't be long, now," assured Iya. "I run a nature column in the *Red Gazette*; I'm an expert on weather."

It was dark inside the tent. Svistonov lit a cigarette.

"Andrey Nikolaevich, put that out!" said Nadenka angrily. "It's stifling enough in here as it is."

Svistonov threw out his cigarette.

"Pasha, don't you dare! Get away from me!" ordered Nadenka.

"Nadenka," said Kuku, "it's dark, and a storm is raging outside..."

Now's the perfect time. We're all ears."

The storm had moved on.

Pasha was smoking alone by the pine, mulling over Nadenka's kiss. Was it just a friendly kiss or... something else? Just a friendly kiss, most likely—it was too light, too unsubstantial.

"She doesn't love me; she *can't* love me. How could anyone love someone as closemouthed as me? Besides, I have no future. Oh, I'll graduate from the Institute and probably go on to teach geography, but..." He laughed. "I suppose it's best to forget about a career in journalism and let Iya make all the money. Still, Nadenka *is* rather fond of the theatre, and movies, and sweets..."

"Daydreaming, are we?" asked Nadenka, coming up along a path directly behind Pasha. "I think daydreaming's great fun. Why don't I just sit down, and you lay your head on my knees and go right on daydreaming? I'll make believe I'm the heroine in a movie, a woman of the world, and you're a despondent, lovesick young suitor! Here, let me run my fingers through your hair."

Pasha lay down submissively on the grass and rested his head on the hem of Nadenka's dress.

"I love you," he mumbled. "I truly do!"

"Wonderful!" cut in Nadenka, "A little more passion, now... Yes, yes, like that! Oh, my love!" she cooed, dropping her chin and bringing her hand to her heart. "You really are stricken with grief! How unfortunate that we should meet now, when I already love another! He may be a wretch and a cur, but I love him with all my heart! It can't be helped." She heaved a sigh. "But you're so pure, so delicate, so..."

"Oh, Nadenka!" moaned Pasha.

"Kiss my hand and shed a tear, then get up and walk over to the

edge of the cliff: I'll come running to you," said Nadenka, trying not to move her lips.

Pasha very obediently stands up, kisses her hand and slowly walks toward the scarp.

Nadenka sits still and watches him a moment, then darts forward, crying "Arnold! Oh, Arnold!" and trying to run as attractively as possible.

"Pasha, you're an angel! Here, let me give you a kiss!"

The pine branches rustled, and the dog-roses were flush with berries. Ivanov, a former anarchist, stood up. He was of average height and wan complexion, with a rich mane of hair, and moved about with the help of a cane. He eased himself onto a bench by a picket fence.

Zoya Znobishina walked out onto the veranda of her cottage near the lake. She yawned and clasped her hands behind her neck, then lifted her face, brought her elbows together and yawned again. She sat down in her rocking chair and looked at her hands, then looked to her right, toward the yard, and yawned yet again. She watched her cat with interest as it slunk toward a pigeon, then got up and walked across the veranda and down the stairs into the yard, thinking how hot the sun was and how it was time she got dressed.

Some mothers at a cottage perched on a neighbouring hill were effusively talking about their children hard at play. Naturally, the children were all born engineers, and already showed signs of remarkable potential: one of them whistled like a locomotive, and another dreamt of one day living in a submarine.

Zoya wandered back to the veranda. She drew her shawl over her shoulders, then pulled it back down. She bit her lips. Everything was just so boring! She maundered on along a path, biting her lips.

Ivanov stood up and bowed.

"Bored?" asked Zoya, sitting down next to him. "Having a hard time of it lately, aren't you?"

"Nope, life's no bowl of cherries." She brought her knees together, raising them slightly, and looked at Ivanov. "I wish there were more people like Svistonov around. There's a happy man, for you."

"Shallow, you mean."

"You're just jealous."

"Hm! You and your Svistonov..!"

"Oh, you! Just you wait! I'll introduce him to you, and he'll tell you exactly what kind of a man you are. He'll look you over and describe you to a T. You're ideal material for him, too—he loves lifeless people."

"I am not lifeless!"

"You are, too!"

"It's so boring here!" she said, biting her lips.

It was Zoya's birthday.

Zoya was a pink and ruddy woman who had recently dyed her hair. She did not conceal her years. She was expecting company in the persons of Pavlusha Uronov, dramatic actor; Allochka Bazykina, or Birdy, as everyone called her—both to her face and behind her back; Vanya Galchenko, a young sophisticate; and Senya Ipatov, whose dreams of becoming a singer never materialised. They were all very interesting people—or such, at least, was their opinion of themselves.

Petya, the ice-cream man, had been instructed to come by the house with his cart by five o'clock, right after dinner. From morning, Zoya and her maid had been preparing raspberries; Ivanov came in to

lend a hand. Caterers came and went, some bearing cottage cheese, some sour cream, others mushrooms and fish.

Vanya Galchenko, the young sophisticate, was the first to arrive. He brought Zoya a nineteenth-century fantasia he had purchased at a flea market. It was a reproduction of a bowl— Pompeian, evidently.

"Oh, no, I can't," apologised Zoya, thrusting her hands forward. "I'm right in the middle of these raspberries."

"That's all right," answered Vanya. He took Zoya's bare elbow and kissed it, wishing her a happy birthday and leaving her gift on the highboy.

"Why don't you wait out in the yard? I'll be with you in a minute."

Vanya went into the yard and plopped onto a bench. He was a plain man with a small forehead. A slightly baggy-eyed look about him suggested someone who seldom got a good night's sleep. His eyelashes were especially short. He wore a faded blue suit, and his tie stuck out in a lump from underneath his waistcoat. He played a bit of piano, could sing and dance, and had a great appreciation of St. Petersburg and its environs ever since first reading Kurbatov.<sup>o</sup> Between 1918 and 1924, for lack of anything better to do, he had been visiting museums. He was now working somewhere as a civil servant.

Vanya tired of sitting and waiting and left through the gate. He stepped onto the road, looked in the direction of the gothic train station and waited for the other guests to arrive.

A cloud of dust drifted up from the road, and Vanya glimpsed the head of a horse. The horse clambered up the hill, hitched to a cabriolet carrying Birdy and Pavlusha Uronov. Galchenko hurried to the cab, helped Allochka Bazykina down and greeted them both.

"Well, what's new?" he inquired, hoping nothing was.

Vanya talked about the weather, the train and how dusty the city was as he escorted his friends to the veranda. He then returned to the road and resumed his ditchside excursion after changing his hat for a handkerchief which he secured onto his head by tying its four corners into knots.

The afternoon guests had nearly all arrived. They were sitting on Zoya's benches and beechwood chairs, playing forfeits, when Psikhachev, a collector of things foul, as he self-mockingly styled himself, showed up quite unexpectedly.

"As you can see," he said, greeting Zoya as she came out onto the veranda, "I haven't forgotten today's your birthday. I know I haven't an invitation, but I thought I'd come anyway."

He was a rather stout man, middle-aged, with a jaundiced complexion and lightly curling grey hair. His dress was sloven: the bottom of his pant legs were frayed, and his waistcoat was covered with grease stains.

Zoya welcomed him and returned to the pother of her kitchen.

The guests were tossing about a handkerchief and yelling out words; several got down on their knees, trying not to soil their clothes in the process. Vanya's navy-blue cap lay upside down on a chair and was steadily filling up with the glitter of pencils, pen knives, brooches, rings and notebooks.

Dasha the maid poked her head out the veranda door and watched with glee as the guests cavorted on the lawn. She was a plump, rubicund-faced woman with bare feet and a cheerful disposition who much appreciated Zoya's friends for the respect and courtesy they always showed her. She watched them blindfold a robust and recalcitrant Pavlusha Uronov and sit him down on a stool. A

balding Senya Ipatov held the object-laden cap aloft while Birdy picked out a silver-rimmed pencil on the tip of her toes. Gasping for breath from too much laughter, she asked in her reedy voice what was to be done with the forfeit. After careful consideration, Uronov took on a sepulchral tone and replied: "Spin around on one leg!"

The tousle-haired maid then witnessed Vanya by the pink, metallic sphere lying near the flower-bed raise his leg, fold his arms over his chest and spin.

Everyone clapped their hands and chanted "Faster, faster!"

Vanya spun faster and faster.

Birdy next pulled the notebook out of the cap.

"And what are we to do with *this* forfeit?" she asked, laughing jubilantly.

Uronov considered the question a second time and, raising his hand in the air, answered:

"Feed the pigeons!"

Dasha craned her neck and saw the guests place their chairs all in a row, then sit on them and shake their heads like pigeons. She also saw Kuku steal a kiss from Nadenka.

The evening guests—in other words, the balance of the cottagers—began to trickle in after supper.

The air was brisk. Zoya brought out some warm clothing for her guests. Ladies were each given a handkerchief, a jacket and a muffler. She threw a raspberry velvet coat on Uronov's shoulders—it was due in for alterations anyway.

The talent show was underway.

Uronov recited a poem:

With his shaggy hand  
The Devil pushes the swing...

He performed loudly, brilliantly. His blue suit stood out nicely against the verdured background.

Pasha falteringly recited some of his own verse.

Birdy trilled a tune about a clown.

Psikhachev, his foot resting on the fence's cross-beam, was talking with Svistonov.

"...So you see how I could make for an interesting character. You should include me in your book. You know, I once struck an Austrian prince, and I'm quite the ladies' man. These people in there are nobodies; why waste your time with them?"

He looked over at the guests.

"Now, I'm different. Would you like me to give you the low-down on all of them? You'd like that, wouldn't you? Just don't forget to put me in your novel. Get your notebook out and take down everything I say."

Svistonov smiled and took out his fact book.

"I have a Ph.D. in Philosophy. What's the matter, don't you believe me? Listen, you can tell everyone how mean-spirited I am, you can write about all my petty antics, I don't care. I'm an ambitious man; I want to be in your novel!

"Are you a good writer? I mean, really good? You'll give an accurate description of me, won't you? I want everybody to point at me and say: 'There goes Psikhachev!' You can use my real name—it has a nice ring to it."

"Are you really a ladies' man?" asked Svistonov with a grin.

"Here's what happened: I was studying in Switzerland at the

time—picture a lakeland and all that other nonsense. I romanced her against a background of mountains, toyed with her, but I didn't take her, you see..."

"Weren't you able to?" asked Svistonov.

"I like to lead women on."

"A little stale, don't you think? I doubt it would do for my novel."

Svistonov put his notebook down and twiddled with his pencil, which was attached to his pocket by a small silver chain.

"Why don't we go about it from another angle?" he suggested. "Let's say you're an easy-going, unpretentious fellow who values the little things in life. You're indifferent to the burning issues of the day because you know there's no solving them, anyhow. Your sense of curiosity is more... superficial than deep. You took courses in philosophy out of curiosity, and studied botany out of curiosity..."

"You know, I only ever went to university to run it down. I may have a degree in philosophy, but I've never put any stock in it, ever. The whole thing was just a lark."

"There *is* something about you I can't quite put my finger on," teased Svistonov.

"My life, my beautifully planned life, is falling apart at the seams!" cried Psikhachev ruefully. "I can't write about myself! If I knew how, I wouldn't have turned to you!"

"I'm afraid it's a touch too romantic," said Svistonov, putting away his pencil, "and altogether wanting in originality."

"What the hell is so bloody romantic about my life?" spluttered Psikhachev, drawing closer to Svistonov. "A man spends his entire life wishing he could make a mockery of the world, but he can't! He despises all those around him, but he can't humiliate them! He realises

how much people loathe him, but he's powerless to expose them for the frauds that they are! If I had your gift for words, I'd crush them all! Can't you see the tragedy?"

"It is unfortunate, Vladimir Yevgenevich, but hardly tragic."

Suddenly, from inside the house:

So many diamonds in the caves...

Psikhachev made no answer, and Svistonov said nothing more.

Dusk.

The house is brightly lit. They mutely watch the silhouettes in the windows embrace one another and leisurely make for home.

"So it's your learned opinion that I'm no more interesting than those people in there?" asked Psikhachev after a lengthy pause.

"It isn't a matter of more—I find all people interesting in their own way."

"I'm not asking you whether *you* think I'm interesting; I want to know if I'm interesting comparatively speaking."

Zoya stepped out onto the porch and into the yard. Svistonov, catching sight of her approaching white figure, precipitously asked Psikhachev for his address and scribbled it down in the dark.

"Why are you both just standing there?" asked Zoya as she came upon the two dumb men.

She turned to Psikhachev.

"You dance, don't you?"

Psikhachev nodded.

"Yes, I do."

They bumped into Nadenka and Kuku on their way back in. Kuku was following Nadenka out and swaying rhythmically to the

music.

"And where are you two off to?"

"We've just finished dancing up a storm: we're going outside for a bit of fresh air," answered Nadenka breathlessly.

"All right, but mind you, don't be long!"

Nadenka and Kuku sat down on a bench.

"Ah, the moon," said Kuku, "so romantic. It's a pity we have so little use for romance in our sober age. But you know, Nadenka, man's base nature is such that the moon still has the power to move me. Do you remember, 'member, 'member..?"

He brushed aside a branch.

"Myths and legends shrouded in the mists of time... Ah, Nadenka, what inspiring music! I've a notion to speak of ill-starred doubles, of two evil knights and a pretty townswoman! How I wish I'd lived in those bygone days! I can picture myself in a gothic castle, at that ever-fateful hour of the night..."

And in an explicative whisper:

"...Midnight. My double appears, tall and whey-faced. He beckons me. He lowers the drawbridge; the chains rattle. We tread slowly into the black fields. We stop, and he throws down his gauntlet.

"We begin to fight. I am racked with worry! I think of my young wife who lies waiting for me in our great castle, alone in our empty bed! That young woman, Nadenka, is you!"

"What a marvelous idea for a movie!" answered Nadenka. "Pity, the music's stopped!"

"Oh, Nadenka!" intoned Kuku, "Nadenka, let me mold you! I'll make such a woman of you! It will be so peaceful, just the two of us..! Or we can travel the world, visit exciting, far-off lands and take in their monuments... And I'll be famous, although... I am terribly lazy..."

"I'm not giving up the movies," said Nadenka, shaking her head.

"Not even for me?" asked Kuku in mock confidence.

"S-sh! There's Pasha!"

Pasha was standing on the lighted porch and sweeping the dusky yard with his eyes for Nadenka.

She and Kuku froze.

"What an unpleasant character," said Kuku under his breath.

Pasha stood a while, then irresolutely turned inside.

The unsteady guests boisterously bid one another good night. Svistonov and Ivanov left through the wicket.

"I've heard said of you that you're a very unpleasant character."

"Idle talk," explained Svistonov as he took Ivanov by the arm. "Being a writer isn't a particularly pleasant business. One must never show too much, nor too little."

"Above all, one must bring harm to no one," observed Ivanov.

"Of course!" replied Svistonov. "The night is so still, and Kuku such a charming man! Such grand aspirations, and a terrific propensity for famous people! Have you known him for very long?" he asked.

"Oh, about five years..."

"So, how would you explain the fact that he..."

Svistonov and Ivanov did not return to their cottages till early morning.

Zoya was sound asleep amidst a jumble of gifts, paper, cigarette butts and other sundries.

She awoke sprawled across her bed and heaved a sigh of relief.

"Well?" she asked Ivanov at dinnertime. "What do you think of Svistonov?"

"Charming man!"

"Just you wait..!"

As Kuku became more convinced with each passing day that Nadenka was his Natasha, there began to grow in him the resolve, the inner perseverance and the range of abilities which always attend new love. He seemed to grow younger: his eyes acquired a youthful gleam, and his limbs grew nimbler. He felt life bubbling inside him and began to exude genuine charm.

Suddenly, autumn and its attendant golden leaves were just around the corner. The cottagers would soon go their separate ways, leaving Toksovo cloaked in a pall of silence and rain. But Kuku's heart was alive with song—the song of a man in love!

Nadenka could not take her eyes off Kuku; she was irresistibly drawn to him. She turned crimson whenever they met, and her eyes brimmed with trust.

Finally, Nadenka left.

Then Kuku.

### Chapter III

## Kuku and Kukureku

The train chugged along at a snail's pace toward Leningrad. The suburban cars clattered. Trina was reading a book; her fingers, made rosy by the setting sun, were assiduously turning pinkened page after pinkened page.<sup>o</sup> She was being held spellbound by a fable and skipping all the descriptive passages.

She was contented. She had a man in her life again.

Svistonov stood restlessly by the window.

They hailed a carriage near a monument. An hour later, the Hôtel Angleterre was in sight.

Svistonov helped Trina with her coat, dimmed the lights and sat down at the table.

Trina remade the bed, removing the blanket and sheets and rearranging them to her satisfaction. She fluffed the pillows. It was not enough: the room still lacked domestic warmth.

Svistonov was at work, writing, reading and behaving just as though he were at home. He was busily transposing living, breathing people into his novel when he felt a twinge of pity and decided to stupefy them through the music of vowels, through his rhythms and inflections.

He had, in all truth, nothing to say. He simply took people and transposed them. Yet for all that he was a writer of some talent, endowed with a unique vision of the world: he considered both the living and the dead indiscriminately. The resulting works were invariably strange and disconcerting things. The musicality of his art,

and the civility he displayed in life, were Svistonov's shields and the reason for which he always blanched whenever he committed a faux pas.

Trina, unable to wait any longer for Svistonov to come to bed, fell asleep.

The lamp was still on as dawn broke. A good many sheets of paper were covered in a fine, lopsided handwriting, and the notebook was often out and nervously, hurriedly consulted. Svistonov's hands trembled like a drunkard's. He shifted his head around now and again to see if he had wakened Trina or was keeping her up, but she was fast asleep.

Slumber had revived Trina's youthful features. Her girlish mien soon diverted Svistonov from the world which was rising before him. He put his pencil down, tiptoed toward Trina, undressed, sat down by the bed, gently stroked her hair, studied her parted lips, listened closely to her steady breathing...

He felt safe. She could not overhear his thoughts or relay the details of his novel to anyone. He could say whatever he liked to her: she was the ideal listener. Let there be rumours, let people say about him what they will—he and Trina would never live together. He had no need of her for that. Even so, there was no reason for him to simply cast her aside: he might be able to put her—her past, her future—to use in one of his chapters.

He began to think back to everything he had heard about her. He returned to his desk, and, after some consideration, set about transposing her into the realm of literature. This was accompanied by various symptoms of illness: heart palpitations, trembling hands, a fever which sapped his body of energy, and pressure on the brain. By morning, Svistonov was sitting in front of the window, limp as a doll.

He wanted to cry out in anguish. He felt the keen pain of spiritual bankruptcy throbbing in his head.

They had some coffee shortly afterward and parted ways. Trina smiled awkwardly.

Svistonov bought a newspaper on his way to the editorial office, read it and cursed. He was incensed that the paper would heap this sort of abuse on him. He was sure of running into the critic in the publishing house's stairway, and just as sure the latter would draw him aside and proffer his apologies:

"Andrey Nikolaevich, it's just the way things are nowadays. Personally, I enjoy your books very much, but you know how it is... I had to tear you apart."

The critic, as it turned out, did indeed rush up the stairs to Svistonov for a word.

"Have you any idea who you're dealing with?" growled Svistonov all aquiver. "I'll drag your name through the mud! You may think you're nothing but small fry to me..!"

Svistonov spent the entire evening at home seeking some way to wreak vengeance upon the critic, to no avail. The man was uninteresting in himself, a literary cipher. He decided forthwith to attend a lecture at the Geographic Society and meet up with Pasha.

"Nadenka's a wonderful girl, isn't she?" commented Svistonov to Pasha at intermission. "Kuku seems quite taken with her."

"He's just using her," said Pasha redly. "A man as intellectually gifted as he is frightening. I was at the ball last night at the Institute of Cinema: he danced with her all night. Hovering around her... A regular cock of the walk... Wouldn't even let me near her."

"You know what, Pasha? To hell with the lecture, let's get ourselves some beer!"

"Thanks, I could use a drink."

"Don't worry, Pasha, she'll come back to you."

"Andrey Nikolaevich, if I had the money, I'd get myself stinking drunk!"

"Think of your talent, Pasha," cautioned Svistonov. "Believe me, my boy, she's not worth the trouble. Save yourself for literature. Have you written anything about your life, like I told you to? It would take your mind off your unrequited love, and Nadenka will have come back to you in the meantime."

Pasha pulled out a large notebook.

"Here it is, Andrey Nikolaevich, my life story. Just promise me you won't show it to anyone."

"I'll give it a good once-over," assured Svistonov, stuffing the manuscript into a pocket. "So, was Kuku a graceful dancer? Yes, yes..."

"And was she radiant..?"

"Did he take her home afterward..?"

"Did he give the driver a handsome tip after he and Nadenka had taken their seats in the carriage..?"

"And you say you felt like drinking yourself into a stupor..?"

"She didn't call me over once during the evening! Not once! Why weren't you there, Andrey Nikolaevich?"

"It slipped my mind. Say, I just got paid today: how do you feel about riding out to the islands? It'll do you good."

"I feel like eating something spicy!"

"All right, then, we'll get you some herring and ice-cream. Cold, spicy food is generally helpful against heartache!"

Svistonov, regretting his absence at the ball, decided to take Pasha out on the town the way Kuku had done with Nadenka after the Institute.

"Would you care for some flowers, Pasha?" asked Svistonov.

Pasha gave Svistonov a bewildered look. They walked past the Bolshoy Drama Theatre, the Apraxin Market and Gostiny Dvor.

Svistonov bought Pasha some flowers.

A carriage bearing Pasha and Svistonov whisked across the deserted islands.

"Feeling better?" asked Svistonov.

"Much!"

"What does all this greenery remind you of?"

Pasha, lugubriously:

How I love Nature's resplendent ebb,

Her forests gilt in crimson and gold...°

"That's Kuku all over," thought Svistonov. "Nadenka would never say such a thing."

"What band was playing last night?" The two travelled the length of the islands as Svistonov, in an attempt to recreate the previous evening as faithfully as possible, chattered away with Pasha as he imagined Kuku had with Nadenka.

He leaned back into his seat, took out his notebook and began to write:

Kukureku and Verochka quit the Bolshoy Drama Theatre.

"Verochka, why don't we ride out to the islands where Blok used to go?"

"By car?" asked Verochka.

"If you like," replied Kukureku, "But I would prefer a carriage, myself."

"Oh, no, let's take a taxi!"

"Why don't we walk to Gostiny Dvor,° then?"

"Do you like flowers?" asked Kukureku. He helped Verochka across the street and bought her some flowers.

They walked past Gostiny Dvor's deserted arcades, past the watchmen dawdling behind the taut cordon of ropes, and onto October 25<sup>th</sup> Prospect.

"Don't you just love this street, Verochka? Think how often it's served the purposes of literature... Amazing!"

Verochka crept along with her eyes opened wide and her flowers pressed against her breast. Her dream was finally coming true! This was the beginning of a new and wonderful life... Although she thought it a pity they were not in Berlin, where the pavement glistened so brightly one could see the reflections of cars and passersby in it.

Kukureku hailed a cab and helped Verochka in. They were off to the islands.

Kukureku looked all around him...

Pasha stirred.

"What are you writing?"

"I'll be right with you, Pasha."

Svistonov hastened to finish this first draft.

Kukureku walked Verochka to the gate as the rising sun kindled the upper stories of the surrounding houses. He stared out into Alexandrovsky Park and sighed:

How I love Nature's resplendent ebb,  
Her forests gilt in crimson and gold...

He kissed Verochka's hand and took his leave of her.

Kukureku was quite pleased with the fact that he had held himself in check—just like Blok—and delivered Verochka home safe and sound. He whistled all the way home.

Back home and well-rested, Svistonov turned to reading. He read slowly, as though he were lolling about a particularly charming neighbourhood. Sitting in his easy chair and ruminating each sentence over a cigarette was bliss to him, and the passages that most caught his eye were read again and again in both recent and older translations.

The night droned by. Svistonov began to think about the day ahead: what to do, where to go... He watched a streetcar speed past, looked at the busy crowd and at some mounds of yellow sand before sitting down at his desk. He wrote a letter in which he asked a friend to put his collection of candy wrappers, his memoirs, and the diaries of friends and relatives at his disposal, with, of course, the promise that he would return them all in perfect condition.

He decided to take a nap. As he laid himself down to sleep, a feeling of knowing Kuku intimately—not just his usual words and actions, but his innermost thoughts, as well—came over him. He could now proceed with his novel in an altogether more systematic fashion.

The first thing Svistonov realised was that a successful characterisation of Kuku depended on wholly preserving the man's corpulence, his sideburns, even his love for Detskoe Selo. In short, he could not have conceived a more extravagant personality in his wildest dreams. Oh, he might make some changes here and there once the novel was finished, but for the time being, he felt that even the character's name ought be in the same vein as Kuku's. He had hit upon Kukureku during a midnight stroll.°

Work progressed slowly, but surely.

Ivan Ivanovich Kuku finally made his literary appearance. His pompous figure flitted gaily across the pages of Svistonov's novel, lounging contentedly on one of Dostoevsky's old divans, reading books from Pushkin's private library at the Pushkin House and meandering through Yasnaya Polyana.<sup>o</sup> Kuku's speech and apartment building were kept whole, though Svistonov did, admittedly, move the building to another part of town.

Svistonov proved just as 'free' with his treatment of himself. Personal belongings—a knick-knack on his desk, for example—popped up regularly in all his novels, and he often took some autobiographical incident and grafted it onto a character. Readers always gasped in wonder—"Look how disparagingly he writes about himself!"—and rumours would begin to circulate, each more startling than the one before. Svistonov, of course, was never above adding fuel to the fire.

Svistonov was on his way to a literary society of youngish rumour-mongers with a rolled-up, half-completed copy of his chapter on Kukureku.

The society awaited his arrival, ready to be astounded and amazed, to delight in the tenuous relationship between fact and fiction, to feed their minds and fire their imaginations.

"Ah, Svistonov!" they gasped. "Now there is an interesting writer. I'll wager that Kamadasheva character of his is none other than Anna Petrovna Ramadasheva herself!"

This coterie of rumour-mongers fancied itself a genuinely good judge of literature. They would run down a writer and wangle a reading out of him; the writer, assuming these were simple but sincere

people, would acquiesce. During the reading, the rumour-mongers' eyes would light up, and their entire bodies effervesce with excitement, but at its conclusion they would simply give the writer a hardy pat on the shoulder and say: "Bah! Kamadasheva is really just Ramadasheva," and "Your story's a little derivative of Pavel Nikolaevich's, isn't it?" The writer would slump dumbfounded into a chair and scratch his head: "I've just made an ass of myself! What the hell ever made me read to these people?"

The city's rumour-mongers were split into several cliques, but members mingled freely with one another. Thus, when a rumour to the effect that Svistonov had proposed to give a reading at Nadezhda Semenovna's reached their ears, everyone expected an invitation. Several took the precaution of calling on Nadezhda Semenovna beforehand and asking if they could bring over a few friends from such and such a clique.

And so the intimate gathering that had originally been planned had turned into a full-blown party by the time Svistonov finally arrived. Young and old alike were pressed together on sofas, pouffes, chairs, the rug and window sills. Everyone had been waiting for him and engaged in lively discussions.

Svistonov kissed or shook each rumour-monger's hand, then settled into a chair by a table. As hostess, Nadezhda Semenovna sat nearest to Svistonov; she did not wish to miss a single word. Everyone settled down and listened attentively.

There was intermittent giggling and whispering. People recognised friends, missed yet others... 'Who is that?' they would mumble to one another in frowned consternation. Then the answer would come to them like a bolt of lightning, and the susurrations begin anew.

They all gathered thickly round Svistonov to congratulate him.

"Please, please!" said Svistonov, in a manner that let everyone understand he meant "Thank you! Thank you!"

Everyone sat down around the table for tea. The samovar bubbled and cookies crunched as Svistonov set about gleaning fresh gossip.

"Have you heard the latest? Alexey Ivanovich has gone and married some pretty young thing. He's taken on a whole new lease on life! Now there is a character for your novel!"

"He's great material, all right—to die for! But what a wedding! They held it specially at Detskoe Selo, as near Pushkin's penates as possible. The ceremony took place right in Saint Sophia's Cathedral!"

"Perfect!" Svistonov remarked to himself. "That has Kukureku written all over it!"

"And then there's Nikandrov... That man spent his entire life searching for the ideal Turgenevan woman, and he finally found her at the age of forty. Married her, too. Now *h e's* got everything *h e's* ever wished for!"

Svistonov left at evening's end, and the rumour spread all over town like wildfire: Kukureku was none other than Kuku himself.

Back home, and with the night's events still fresh in his mind, Svistonov put the finishing touches on a chapter:

Verochka's Turgenevan qualities became more apparent with each passing day—there was definitely something of Liza about her. Kukureku's love for her grew stronger and stronger; his soul burned with desire.

Verochka's mother gave Kukureku her consent to court her

daughter. He took Verochka to the Pushkin House and Literaturnye Mostki°. They even rode out to Mikhaylovskoe.°

Their romance was a quiet affair. Kukureku often listened to Verochka on the piano while he sat in his easy chair, feeling, at times, not unlike Lavretsky.° Verochka would play Chopin with the lightest and gentlest of touches until day's end, when the lights would finally flash on...

As it so happened, Kuku was falling deeply in love with Nadenka. His rendezvous with Svistonov had become infrequent for lack of time, and he was as yet unaware of Svistonov having already lived his life for him. Kuku and Nadenka rode out to the suburbs with regular frequency and once even visited Mikhaylovskoe. Kuku, however, did not compare Nadenka to Liza,° but to Natasha: Nadenka would always be his Natasha, and she would never grow old.

The rumour rapidly went the rounds. People watched Kuku closely, watched him do the things Svistonov had said he would. The rumour at length reached Kuku. He was ecstatic: he had at long last made his way into literature!

He related the news to Nadenka, telling her it was the greatest moment of his life.

"Nadenka," he gushed, taking her hand, "it's all too much! Andrey Nikolaevich has chosen to immortalize me! He's written a novel about me: by all accounts, an extraordinary novel! They say there hasn't been anything like it since the Symbolists. The writing is superb! He's managed to capture an entire era!"

"But hadn't the two of you made plans to write together?"

"I'm too lazy, Nadenka; nothing came of it."

Nadenka looked at Kuku. She respected him and considered

him an exceptionally intelligent man.

"That's wonderful, Ivan Ivanovich!" she said sweetly. "I'm so happy for you! Andrey Nikolaevich has often told me how much he thinks of you, and what a fascinating person you are."

"It's Christmas<sup>o</sup> all over again, Nadenka! Let's go out for a walk along the Neva: we'll buy ourselves a cake and celebrate! Ah, dear Nadenka! We'll be celebrating our wedding day before too long. Let's only invite our closest friends! Not a word to anyone, though. We'll just oh-so-casually send out the invitations: *A bride and groom cordially request your presence at Saint Sophia's Cathedral in Detskoe Selo...*"

Lenochka's letter to Svistonov from Staraya Russa:<sup>o</sup>

"Darling! How's your new novel coming along? Are you having to work very hard on it? Don't wear yourself out, now—get your sleep nights and eat properly.

How are your Pole, your Count and your Georgian? Have you managed to lay your hands on all the necessary material? The papers say your book is due out soon.

You've asked me to tell you everything I remember about Liza in *A Nest of Gentry*.<sup>o</sup> My, but you're lazy! I'm just joking, dear! I realise you need to know what it is about her that sticks out in people's minds. I brought up the subject after dinner, and here's what was said:

M i d d l e - a g e d l a d y, pinched, long-nosed, forty-eight:

Liza liked to shut herself off from the world. And read the Scriptures. She loved nature and birds. She liked to daydream. She had

no friends. Her nanny had a great influence on her as a child. She considered herself guilty of sin for having fallen in love with Lavretsky, a married man.

T e a c h e r, female, twenty-six:

She was a landowner's daughter. I remember vaguely... There's a garden. She enters a monastery, because she's fallen in love with Lavretsky.

Her nanny would read her the Lives of the Saints instead of fairy tales. She would also get Liza up early in the morning and bring her to church.

L o c a l c r i t i c:

I don't remember a single thing about it. I read it such a long time ago that I've plumb forgotten what it's about.

L o c a l D o n J u a n:

I remember Lavretsky standing at the bottom of the stairs. The sun was shining through Liza's hair. I remember her walking with an older man. I remember the postcards. He sat in a chair while she stood with a fishing pole in her hand.

That's all I managed to get for you today, darling. You can imagine how bored I am here! All they ever talk about is their diseases and how much their husbands make. Hugs and kisses."

Svistonov sat down against a background of long-shut books and opened his next chapter. Work was going well, and the atmosphere was relaxed. Svistonov liked flowers: a thick glass tumbler with violets in it graced his desk.

Svistonov was writing as he never had before: an entire city blossomed before his eyes, a city of his imagination where characters moved, sang, talked and married. He had the distinct impression of being in a void—or rather, in a theatre, sitting in a darkened box and in the role of a young, elegant, romantically inclined spectator. At that moment, he loved his characters utterly: they were radiant. He felt a rhythm within, an insatiable desire for harmony which perfectly expressed itself on the written page in the choice and order of his words.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door, and the spell was broken.

"Who could that be?" thought Svistonov irritably. "I shouldn't even answer... Never a moment's peace..."

He listened closely.

There was another knock at the door.

"Damn! Can't even get in a few hours' work," he grumbled. "The hell with it! I've lost my concentration, anyway."

He slapped his folder shut and unlocked the door. It was Kuku.

"Hello, Andrey Nikolaevich! Forgive me for barging in like this, but you know how it is... Pre-wedding jitters..!"

"No, no, please, come in!" said Svistonov, taking Kuku's coat.

"Well, what's new with you?" inquired Kuku. "How's the novel? I've heard it's coming along splendidly."

Svistonov was fiddling with the manuscript.

"I've still got a ways to go on it."

"Would you terribly mind just reading me some of it? I've heard I'm in it."

"I'm sorry, Ivan Ivanovich, but I'd rather not."

"But I was told that... I..."

Kuku, proud and plump, was visibly crushed.

"Andrey Nikolaevich," he said after a few seconds' pause, "you can't... you *couldn't*... For the sake of our friendship, I beg of you..."

Svistonov thought it pusillanimous to refuse. He sat down in his particoloured armchair, slid out the manuscript and began to read.

The enthusiasm and surprise on Kuku's face grew with each sentence.

"What style!" he gasped, shaking his head. "What depth! Andrey Nikolaevich, I never expected such scope, such range..!"

Svistonov went on. Then Kukureku appeared, and a waxen pallor overtook Kuku's features. He sank into his easy chair and listened openmouthed till the end.

"Andrey Nikolaevich, I... I..."

Svistonov had finished. Kuku left white as a sheet. He felt completely naked and defenseless, alone against a world that mocked him. Panic swept over him, and a confused, apologetic smile drifted across his face. He was crestfallen by Svistonov's scathing portrayal and terrified of the prospect of bumping into friends. He felt they could see right through him, that no one would speak to him ever again, that they would turn away or walk right by him, carrying on merrily with their wives and friends as though he did not exist. Tears welled up in his eyes. He leaned against the building and, weeping inwardly over his fate, watched Svistonov go off somewhere.

Kuku did not step out of his huge apartment building that

evening as was his habit. Instead of fetching Nadenka and the two of them spending the night together about town, he locked himself up in his room.

He did not know what to do; he was on the verge of tears. He wanted to kill Svistonov for robbing him of his life. He fantasised about boxing Svistonov's ears, knocking out all his teeth, putting his eyes out and dragging his body through the streets. He reminded himself that that would not do, that he was a man of breeding... He resolved to write Svistonov a letter, then remembered that Kukureku had already written the letter for him. The sudden thought of Nadenka cut him to the quick, and he broke down into tears. He imagined her reading Svistonov's novel, in thrall to its rhythms: her lips twist sardonically, then convulse with contemptuous laughter...

A voice next door struck up the nanny's aria from *Eugene Onegin*.<sup>o</sup> Kuku banged his fist against the wall; the singing stopped. There fell a horrible hush. Then he heard footsteps, and the voice bellowed: "Mind your own damn business!"

Kuku sat stout and thickset at his table and thought only that another man had lived his life in his place—a pitiful, loathsome life at that. What was there left for him to accomplish? Nadenka meant nothing to him now; he no longer loved her and could not, would not, marry her—to do so would be altogether redundant, an unbearable reprise of a life already lived. Even if Svistonov were to tear up his manuscript, Kuku still knew how his life would unfold. His self-respect was irreparably shattered; his life lost all meaning.

Kuku went to Svistonov's the following morning regardless. He had already made up his mind to avoid all contact with friends, and was tearfully pleading with Svistonov to tear up his manuscript.

"What is it that you want?" wailed Kuku. "Must I get down on my knees and beg? If you have the least shred of decency, you'll tear that thing up. To hold a highly respected man such as myself up for ridicule the way you do is... is... Why, if this were another era, you'd already be dealing with my seconds!

"But nowadays, curse the luck..." he muttered, burying his face in his hands. Svistonov sensed that this was not a man standing before him, but something more akin to a corpse.

"Andrey Nikolaevich, I implore you: give me the manuscript... Let me destroy it..."

"Ivan Ivanovich, it wasn't you I depicted in my novel, or your soul. Besides, no one can reproduce a person's soul with much accuracy. True, I helped myself to a few factual details..."

But Kuku did not let Svistonov finish—he made a frantic dash for the table, bent on seizing the manuscript. Svistonov, seeing his world on the brink of collapse, shot:

"How is Nadenka?"

The face of a man gone mad shuffled toward Svistonov.

"You son-of-a-bitch! You bastard! You know better than I how she is!"

Kuku clenched his fists and paced up and down the room.

The air was stifling. Svistonov flung open a window and watched his neighbours out in the courtyard come home from work and commiserate.

"Too late," he thought to himself, "I'll have to bring the manuscript over to the typist's tomorrow." Kuku had still not gone; he sat in the armchair and brooded.

For a moment, Svistonov considered making changes to the passages which seemed to upset Kuku so—others had come to him like

this before, but never in such pain.

"I really must be going," said Svistonov, standing and simpering as Kuku on put his coat.

They left together. Svistonov held the manuscript in his hand; Kuku eyed it and said nothing. He was desperately fighting the urge to grab the manuscript and make off with it.

They parted at the intersection without exchanging a word.

Kuku no longer called on or wrote to Nadenka. The following days were very trying ones for her. She went often to Kuku's building-cum-city, but he was never home. He remained plump and jovial, but balked at her outstretched hands. His deep bass became a mere croak. She would sometimes see light coming from his window as she entered his building's courtyard, and race up to his apartment and ring the doorbell, but there was never any answer.

Kuku entered a veritable hell. He was haunted by the folly, the absurdity of Kukureku's image. He put an end to his suburban outings, shaved his sideburns, changed clothing, even moved to another neighbourhood—to no avail. He continued to experience the most horrid mental anguish. He had become a totally different person: Svistonov had managed to strip him of his very essence and leave him only a residue of filth, bitterness, suspicion and self-doubt.

Much to his surprise, Kuku, free now of all trace of pride and conceit, did not become the hollow shell of a man he at first thought he would.

He changed physically. He lost weight, his lips grew pursed, and his face took on an air of bitter scorn.

Still dreading a chance meeting with old friends, he stole away to another city.

## Chapter IV

# The Soviet Cagliostro

Psikhachev lived in a small wooden house on Bolshaya Nevka quay, whence he travelled to all parts of Russia. The house was quiet and astonishingly translucent, fronting toward a quiet, little park and a quiet, lonely quay.

A small co-op with grimy windows and a teahouse stood in the distance.

No one suspected that the Soviet Cagliostro lived here.°

Yellow-potted flowers sat on the windowsills. The self-styled Doctor of Philosophy was pacing the backyard and pondering a new adventure: performing hypnotism in Volkhov.°

Volkhov: reknowned for its houses which seem to stand on chicken legs, and the dances held by its chief club executive on his wife's birthday.°

Volkhov: reknowned for its biennial aggregation of prestidigitators. Volkhov has never seen real actors.

The kindly cynic was pensively walking around the yard. A lamp with a pink, bouquet-trimmed shade shone in his daughter's room. He neared her window and peeped in.

"Dear child," he thought, "getting ready for bed. She has no idea how hard it is for her father to make ends meet."

The Soviet Cagliostro was in low spirits this evening.

A lone passerby was hurrying along the quay.

The passerby struck a match to better see a piece of paper he had drawn out of his pocket.

Psikhachev recognised Svistonov and stepped through the gate.

"Have you come to pay me a visit?" asked Psikhachev.

"No," answered Svistonov, "but I'll be dropping in tomorrow. I'm expected elsewhere tonight."

"Go on!" said Psikhachev with a wave of his hand.

"What reeks?" asked Svistonov the next day as he began his inspection of Psikhachev's house. "Don't you ever change or take your shoes off? Do you sleep on this sofa? Well, that's quite a blanket! Oh, Vladimir Yevgenevich, if you only knew the day I've had..! I'm exhausted!"

Svistonov picked up a photograph on the table.

"Is this boy you?"

"Please, make yourself at home."

"Could I take a look at your correspondence? Letters you've received, letters you've written..? I might find something of interest in them.

"May I look inside?" asked Svistonov, walking to the dresser.

"Let's see... one moth-eaten tail-coat, and... You've a top-hat, haven't you? Where is your family album?"

Psikhachev withdrew momentarily to fetch a glossy leather-bound album. Svistonov turned each page and examined every photograph, trying to put the pieces together. Psikhachev stood at the table cupping his chin in his hand.

"Introduce me to your family," said Svistonov.

"I'm sorry, I'm... I'm afraid that's impossible..." replied Psikhachev timidly.

His fourteen-year-old daughter burst into the room: "Daddy, Daddy! The Countess is asking for you!"

"I'm coming, Masha," answered Psikhachev, scurrying out the door in a marked fret.

"Let me introduce myself," said Svistonov, striding over to the teen-aged girl.

Masha curtsied.

"You attend public school, don't you?" asked Svistonov as he released her hand.

"No, Daddy won't let me."

Svistonov looked closely at her frail, smartly dressed figure.

Psikhachev scampered back in.

"Run along now, Masha. Off with you!"

She cast a coquettish slant in Svistonov's direction.

"I said out!"

Masha left the room. A minute later, she ran back in.

"Daddy, the Prince is here!"

"Oh, for goodness' sake! Would you excuse me?"

Psikhachev took his daughter by the hand and scuttled back out the door. The curtain door shut. Svistonov lit a cigarette and waited. A cursory glance at Psikhachev's library revealed books whose spines were dusty and mouldering. Svistonov checked off each title.

"How is it that all these titled people come to see you?"

"Er... Just a coincidence," replied Psikhachev nervously.

"Hm-hm. Well now, what is it you want to tell me?"

"Are you interested in who's living with whom?"

"Not really."

"What are you interested in?"

"In you. What you think of the last few years, your feelings, your thoughts... Tell me, what made you want to belittle science so?"

"I just thought it an original thing to do."

"Naturally, you wrote poetry in your time?"

"On gonorrhoea!"

"Bravo!"

"Thank you."

"Daddy, Mum's calling you!" shouted Masha from the other room.

"Coming, child."

Svistonov walked over to a shelf. He opened an anthology of Blok's poetry to the page kept by the marker.

No more dreams of tenderness, or glory;  
All is gone, my youth has flown away.°

Svistonov stifled a chuckle. He went to the window.

Psikhachev was returning from the co-op with a loaf of bread.

Psikhachev kept a library on the occult, freemasonry and sorcery in his bedroom, but Svistonov early on understood that Psikhachev put no faith whatever in the occult, freemasonry or magic.

People love to look at pictures: women sigh wistfully over fashion magazines, engineers get a lump in their throat over a new foreign engine, and old men shed tears over photographs of dead children. Psikhachev nodded as he thumbed through a book containing drawings of mandrakes that looked like monks; talismans representing the sun and the moon; Mars; geomantic trees; Sephiroth tables; demons; a squat Azazello pulling a billy-goat on a leash; a Mephistopheles-looking Haborym flying on a winged, goggled-eyed dragon; and a slightly gaunt Astarte.°

Psikhachev's great ambition as a youth was to be a ladies' man. From 1908 to 1912, he wore nothing but white clothes and a black velvet hat with a scarlet feather stuck in it. His relatives merely considered it the caprice of a rich man.

The young Psikhachev spent many a pleasant night poring over treatises on the correct procedure for making pacts with the spirit world. Many a dreamy night.

He had a reputation among laymen as something of a mystic, a fact which greatly pleased the young Psikhachev. (The apprehensive glances he still sometimes occasioned remained a source of gratification.) Rumour had it that he was the hierophant of some secret society, that he had climbed the rungs of the hierarchal ladder all the way to the top. He claimed he was of Thessalian descent—and Thessaly, as everyone knows, was famed for its sorcery.°

Psikhachev's bedroom did, in fact, accomodate portraits of Greek men and women in periwigs and caftans which dated back to Catherine the Great and Alexander I. The room also contained a bell glass—originally intended for a clock—which housed a mother-of-pearl crucifix; a family album from the 1830's, replete with poems, water-colours and vignettes; and a Greek bible bearing the names of Rali, Hari and Marazli.°

As his inspection of Psikhachev's residence came to an end, Svistonov began to take a shine to this Soviet Cagliostro. "His life is so sad!" he thought. "What good is his reputation as the Soviet Cagliostro when he knows he's nothing but a poseur, knows he's no Greek, no clairvoyant, just plain Vladimir Yevgenevich Psikhachev? Even if the Pope himself were to send him his blessing every year, what good would it do? He doesn't believe in the Pope."

The host and his guest sat in the bedroom beneath the antique

portraits, smoking cigarettes, drinking vodka and munching on tomatoes. Psikhachev expounded on his secret society while Svistonov savoured his cigarette and exhaled the smoke through his nose.

Svistonov imagined Psikhachev's night: that great night of self-doubt which every human being must endure, and which must end in victory or defeat; that night which can last months, even years. Svistonov attempted to piece together the events of this night while Psikhachev jabbered away.

It occurred when he was still a young man, at a time when the leaves rustled differently, and the birds sang now-forgotten songs. He believed he would one day rid the world of its glittery pall—fancied himself a devil of sorts. There he was, leading a cavalcade astride a black stallion,<sup>o</sup> when some young people, stuffing themselves with candy, slapped the horses on and joked merrily.

Svistonov felt a pang in his heart.

Psikhachev noticed how pale Svistonov had become and feared he had made too great an impression on his guest.

"Psikhachev... Rali-Hari... Marazli!" blurted Svistonov, derisively breaking the silence. "Tell me, how did you go about making a pact with the Devil? You're a very interesting man; I'm quite willing to include you in my novel."

The quiet apartment's tenant cheered up considerably. He heard the sound of music—sweet, solemn, exquisite—swell all about him until the dulcet harmonies seemed to fill the room, gush out the front window into the small garden and slam against the wall of the house next door. It was the sort of music heard by couples on the threshold of marriage—if they are very young and very much in love.

Psikhachev drew himself up from his armchair.

"In order to make a pact with one of the more important spirits,

I first had to go out and whittle a wand from the branch of a hazel tree with an unused knife. I proceeded deep into a forest and with the wand traced a triangle in the ground, wherein I stuck two candles, stationed myself and made my appeal: 'O Emperor Lucifer, Lord of unruly spirits, hear my plea...'"°

Svistonov smiled.

"That's not the pact I had in mind, Vladimir Yevgenevich. I was thinking more along the lines of your inner pact."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean, when did you first sense you had lost your will... realised you'd died inside and become a fraud?"

The music stopped. There, in front of Psikhachev, sat a man who was drinking his liquor and making jokes at his expense. Psikhachev was suddenly filled with disgust: he had become uninteresting to his own eyes. After a minute he became agitated.

"What do you mean by... fraud? You mean you don't believe I have a doctorate in philosophy?" His face acquired a sudden baleful and malevolent intensity.

"Of course, I do," replied his guest politely. "You've misunderstood me. You call yourself a mystic—maybe you are, and maybe you aren't. You say you're an idealist—maybe you are, and maybe you aren't."

Psikhachev bristled.

"Then again, maybe by dint of repeating to anyone who would listen that you *are* a mystic—albeit with tongue in cheek—you've come to believe that you really are one? I'm only extrapolating for the sake of the novel, you understand," explained Svistonov with a smile. "There's absolutely no reason to be upset. After all, I need to be able to see things through your eyes. Please don't take it seriously."

Psikhachev's face lit up, and the gleam in his eyes came back.

Svistonov looked upon this man who was talking about gymnosophy, the high priests of Isis, the Eleusinian mysteries and the School of Pythagoras,<sup>o</sup> and who obviously knew little on all subjects—or at least less than he should have known.

"Well?" inquired the host. "Do you like it here?"

"Yes, I do, very much," replied Svistonov. "You lead quite an ascetic life." Svistonov's voice was tinged with reverie.

Psikhachev was trying to convince Svistonov of the power and mystery of the order to which he belonged.

He was, all things considered, a decent enough man.

He called the month of May *Adar Mapagon*; June *Hardat*; July *Terma*; August *Mederme*;<sup>o</sup> and his home Eleusis. He sometimes signed his surname

15, 17, 4, 10, 5, 12, 19, 10, 5, 8, 7, 7

with a flourish.<sup>o</sup> The end result was admittedly long and spelled out 'Psishachev' instead of 'Psikhachev'; but a special set of hieroglyphs was employed for more covert correspondences which he signed Mephistopheles.

What host and guest talked about that night is of little concern to the reader. Suffice it to say that at evening's end they kissed each other's cheeks warmly at the door, after which the host rapturously watched his guest slip into the night and climbed back upstairs, candle in hand.

Psikhachev was conspicuously awake. His shadow paced the bedroom to and fro. He was deep in thought. He sat down at his desk and stived a sheet of paper with numbers.

Svistonov, for his part, was plodding through a fog and wondering what it would be like if both of them believed in evil powers.

Very late one evening, at the appointed time, the initiate Svistonov was let into a dimly lit room. From behind a curtain issued a voice—Psikhachev's. On a large table in the middle of the room lay an unsheathed sword. A faceted icon lamp bathed the scene in a soft glow.

Psikhachev's voice asked Svistonov:

"Is it still your wish to become a member of our order?"

Svistonov answered affirmatively. Psikhachev sent the initiate into a lightless room to meditate.

Svistonov was called back in. Psikhachev sat at the table holding the sword. One question followed another, until finally:

"Your request is just and true. On behalf of this most luminous order, from which I draw my power and my might, and on behalf of all its members, I pledge to you our safeguard, our justice and our assistance."

Here Psikhachev raised his sword—Svistonov noticed it was not a very old sword—brought the tip down to Svistonov's chest and grandiloquently continued:

"But if you should ever betray us, if you should ever prove disloyal, then know you this..."

Psikhachev laid his sword on the table and uttered an incantation which Svistonov repeated. Svistonov then took the oath.

"Congratulations!" concluded Psikhachev.

Everyone proceeded downstairs and off to the tearoom.

Psikhachev took hold of Svistonov's arm and suavely

undertook to introduce him to the members of his order—middle-aged women all. The heavy smell of perfume irritated Svistonov's nose, and the ladies' listless, clumsy motions offended his eyes. Several smoked scented cigarettes while others debated such lofty matters as whether tables could fly.

Svistonov, a stranger among strangers, bowed and stood still. The hostess stepped forward and said:

"A friend of Psikhachev's is a friend of ours."

Svistonov smiled politely.

"Let me introduce you to everyone..." Psikhachev snatched the initiative away from the hostess and introduced Svistonov to each member himself.

They reminded Svistonov of animals. One looked like a goat, another a horse, a third a dog... Though he wore an expression of deferential amicability, Svistonov was experiencing an almost uncontrollable feeling of disgust.

"You're the writer, aren't you? We can't begin to tell you how much we appreciate art! Vladimir Yevgenevich has told us all about you!"

Svistonov could only bow in reply.

To preclude the possibility of any awkward pauses, and to allow her guest a moment to catch his breath, the hostess approached Psikhachev and reminded him of his to perform each lady's musical leitmotiv.

Psikhachev assented to her request.

Svistonov observed his hostess. He discerned in her conceit, canny and obliging, of the kind characteristic of people "under the influence of Mercury", as Psikhachev would put it—one of those people who know how to turn their faults into advantages. She was a

woman of cunning and audacity, and Psikhachev played her a suitably reflective piece.

"Whatever else he may be," thought Svistonov to himself, "Psikhachev is an exceptional improviser. Great memory, too—knows all the great composers. His ability to counterpoint the most unexpected musical themes is impressive."

Each lady had her leitmotiv performed by Psikhachev. The audience sat perfectly still in rapt admiration. Psikhachev looked triumphantly at Svistonov.

"I played for you," he whispered. "Especially for you!"

Svistonov squeezed Psikhachev's elbow in recognition.

"We're something like the Orphic hypostases<sup>o</sup> today, aren't we?" said Psikhachev all aglow. "You're the lyrics, and I'm the music!"

"Yes!" replied Svistonov with spurious enthusiasm.

Psikhachev felt himself a man of destiny in the company of these women.

"Our silence was more eloquent than our applause could ever have been!" gushed the hostess as she joined the two men standing at the piano.

A general discussion on music and the nature of the soul began, but talk soon turned to Psikhachev's recent trip to Italy. He pulled out a three-faced statuette of Hecate<sup>o</sup> and showed it to everyone.

"May I call your attention to the nose," he asked. "See how round it is. Who knows, it may be genuine! I bought it in Naples; I keep it with me wherever I go."

He shoved it back into his waist-coat pocket.

"This way, it stays close to my heart!" he said, looking affably at Svistonov.

Shall I tell you all about Isis?" he asked.

He moved in closer to the women, who were sitting in a semi-circle.

"Oh, please do!"

"Isis is a Hermetic deity with beautiful, long, cascading hair. She has a disk on her head, either mirror-bright or flanked by two coiling snakes."

Psikhachev gave a demonstration of the snakes coiling.

"She holds a sistrum in her right hand, and a vessel of gold dangles from her left. This goddess' breath is more redolent than any Arabian fragrance..!"

"I know this because... I have met her."

Psikhachev froze his eyes in an attempt to convey a sense of mystery. He rose from his chair and raised his arms in a ritualistic gesture.

"She is Nature, Mother of All Things, Mistress of the Elements! She is the Beginning of Time and Sovereign of Souls!" Psikhachev turned ashen.

"In the unfathomable hush of night, You move through us and through all things. I know Fate has sated Herself with my endless and immense sufferings.

"You come to me gently, a translucent apparition in ever-changing dress. I behold the full moon, the stars, flowers, fruit!"

Psikhachev fell silent.

Suddenly, from a corner of the room, rang out the shrill voice of a woman:

"Your pleas have not left me unmoved, Psikhachev. I am the Mother of Nature, Mistress of the Elements..."

Everyone turned their heads. It was Svistonov.

Psikhachev regained his composure: "You've driven the

apparition away."

The evening wore imperceptibly on. Psikhachev divined the colour of each woman's soul: Marya Dmitrievna's, it turned out, was blue; Nadezhda Ivanovna's pink; Yekaterina Borisovna's pink, bordering on lilac; and the hostess' silver with black polka dots.

"Well, this is how we while away the hours," said Psikhachev in the sun's morning rays as he bid Svistonov good night by the quay. "How did you find it?"

"Marvelous!" answered Svistonov. "Fantastic!"

Meanwhile, Yablochkin, the young shop assistant whom Psikhachev called Cato,<sup>o</sup> was writing a profile of himself at Psikhachev's instigation.

He wrote about his parents and grandparents, his friends and foes, his income. He plumbed the very depths of his soul.

The new Cato zealously took to Plutarch's<sup>o</sup> biography of Cato entrusted to him by the pseudo-hierophant himself. Questions arose at every page; Yablochkin riddled the book's margins with interrogation marks.

His apartment was on the sixth floor; the city lay at his feet. His room basked in the light of dawn as in the glow of dusk. He began to get up earlier and go to bed later, filling his extra hours with books. He felt himself growing wiser with each passing day.

Svistonov met Cato at Psikhachev's house. The hierophant was sitting under his antique family portraits and explaining the numerical alphabet to his pupil.

Svistonov sat down in another chair with an anthology of extraordinary and unforgettable tales and copied a page for his novel:

“la nuict de ce iour venuë, le sorcier meine son compaignon par certaines montagnes & vallees, qu’il n’aoit oncques veues, & luy sembla qu’en peu de temps ils aouyent fait beaucoup de chemin. Puis entrant en vn champ tout enuironné de montagnes, il vid grand nombre d’hommes & de femmes qui s’amassoient la, & vindrent tous a luy, menans grand feste...”<sup>o</sup>

Svistonov got to thinking: how would all these men and women react when they finally read his novel? For the moment, they greeted him with shouts of delight; but would the uneasy murmur of wounded pride, of friendship betrayed and of scoffed-at dreams soon fill his ears?

Yablochkin scrawled

12,	11,	10,	9,	8,	7,	6,
A,	B,	C,	D,	E,	F,	G.

Svistonov sat by the window, shadow-like.

Psikhachev fretted over his health. Jars, glasses, and cups of sour clotted milk swarming with flies littered the apartment while tomatoes ripened on a cracked windowsill.

“You must be pure of heart,” Psikhachev urged Yablochkin. “Let the Holy Flame burn within you. This is a definitive moment in your life: once you’ve been made a Knight, we’ll be expecting great and noble deeds worthy of the title.”

Yablochkin felt he had just been initiated into a great mystery. Stepping outside, he perceived the world through entirely new eyes. The city blazed in a unfamiliar light; even people looked different somehow. He was determined to perfect himself and enlighten others.

Svistonov guessed what was happening to Yablochkin and regretted having to shatter his dreams and drag him back into his drab, meaningless existence by exposing Psikhachev's true colours. He knew Yablochkin would make it a point to read his novel—the one penned by Psikhachev's best friend.

"Oh well, let the chips fall where they may... I can't spare Psikhachev." He settled in comfortably in Psikhachev's easy chair, in Psikhachev's bedroom, and set about transposing him into his novel.

Psikhachev was dusting his relics, going on about Yablochkin and making plans. The Neva was freezing over: Red Army regulars would soon be skiing on it, and an area fenced off and cleared for a skating rink where young people could dance to the strains of a waltz.

Svistonov looked at Psikhachev. "Poor devil," he thought, "he's really bringing it on himself."

"Shall we put some tea on, dear friend? It's gotten a bit chilly in here."

"Would you like me to light the stove?" asked the host.

"Could you, please? We'll spend a nice cosy evening right here. Let it snow! What do we care?"

Psikhachev went downstairs into the backyard and fetched some firewood.

Svistonov wrote down what details he needed for his novel.

"Anyone for a game of cards?" he asked.

He stepped to the stove and nonchalantly rubbed his hands over the roaring fire, deep in thought.

"Surely you must have a deck of cards lying about somewhere? Why don't we set up a card table and ask your wife and daughter to join us in a game of vint?"<sup>o</sup>

They played vint till midnight. Svistonov lost every game—a small service he was more than happy to perform. He saw the colour in Mrs. Psikhachev's cheeks and knew exactly what she was thinking: now she could afford to buy her husband a bottle of that Burgundy he was so very fond of for dinner tomorrow night; and of course she would absolutely have to have that nice Andrey Nikolaevich over—his friendship had so brightened her husband's life.

Psikhachev's bidding was impeccable, and he too blushed with excitement.

They took turns shuffling the deck. The cards were all creased, with gilt edges. They could not help but be marked.

Svistonov lost one game after another. He felt it was the least he could do for his hosts in return for their hospitality.

Outside, beautiful snowflakes drifted to the ground as the Psikhachevs and their guest played cards under the beautiful family portraits. Masha and Svistonov sat with their backs to the backyard window. She began to flirt with Svistonov. Svistonov played along and told her gypsy stories.

Masha flushed with rage and assured him she was no child.

"Poor Psikhachev," mused Svistonov as he left the conviviality of the Psikhachev household.

"Pity it's too late to pay Yablochkin a visit," he thought, glancing at his watch. "Might as well take a walk around town."

Svistonov flipped up his collar and was gone.

Yablochkin had a girlfriend: her name was Antonina. Antonina worked at a candy factory and wore a red kerchief.

Yablochkin had begun to send Antonina cryptograms in which he professed his love for her and asked her hand in marriage. He

enciphered his letters in numerical code, although there was no one from whom to keep their love secret—neither of them had friends.

Yablochkin liked to tell Antonina jokes during their walks along the embankment's rippling waters or in the sweet-smelling factory yard.

He resolved to introduce her to the "smart, friendly men who live in that house over there." He assumed Svistonov and Psikhachev lived together.

"They're so smart, Antonina, it scares me. No matter when I come over, there they are, poring over some drawing of circles and squares. The older one does all the explaining while the younger one listens and takes everything down."

The guitar weeps. Over there,  
Songs of freedom, songs of fields.  
We'll forget our sorrows there,  
Char-à-banc, my char-à-banc...

"There they go again!" smiled Antonina. "God, they're loud!"

In the window overlooking the yard was Psikhachev, his head poised over Svistonov's.

"Never a dull moment with you, eh, Vladimir Yevgenevich? What do you have in store for us this evening?"

"The same as every Saturday night."

"Could you play us some Mozart? Or... no, play whatever you like—something old."

The window slammed shut.

Across from the lit window stood Yablochkin and Antonina. They could make out some of the antique portraits in a corner of the room.

"It's so cosy in there," murmured Yablochkin. "The bookshelves, the potted plants... So peaceful!"

The music died down.

Psikhachev and Svistonov quit the back porch and walked across the yard onto a lane.

"My dear Andrey Nikolaevich, you seem somewhat sceptical about the antiquity of our order. Allow me to dispell any doubts you may have..."

The moon was new. An academic meeting was taking place in Psikhachev's two-window bedroom, dubbed 'The Chapel'. He had taken out the beds and brought in the antique portraits and the masonic chair he had purchased at Alexandrovsky Market.

Psikhachev sat in the president's chair wearing a pair of spurred boots and a sash. He was reading and interpreting selected passages from the Bible, Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius<sup>o</sup> and Confucius. On his right sat Svistonov; on his left a former cavalryman and Yablochkin; and in front of him a prince-turned-ice-cream-vendor.

Psikhachev concluded his exegeses and proceeded to interrogate his disciples. What books they had read since their last meeting? Had they made any interesting observations or discoveries? Had they succeeded in recruiting any new members? If so, who were these people, and how might the order benefit from them?

Yablochkin fastened his eyes onto Psikhachev and hung on his every word.

The cavalryman fidgeted in his seat as he waited to express his disagreement over something.

Svistonov was bored and a little uncomfortable. He was beginning to feel uneasy about deceiving everyone.

He started fiddling about with some matches by way of distracting himself, making a tower and then setting it on fire. Reproachful glances were cast at him from every direction.

"They actually believe him! They really think their order is powerful! Oh well, who knows? Maybe Psikhachev will send a letter to the Pope one day and, God forbid, even receive money from America! The order will actually begin to thrive, and people will naturally assume that it's always been so!"

"Brothers, let us discuss the honing of our spiritual skills. We must focus all our efforts to this end, to developing the power of our minds. I am convinced that the day is at hand when we will be able to move objects telekinetically.

"My novice brethren, I am leaving for the East shortly to seek benisons for you. They will pray for us there and fill our souls with peace and light.

"Are there any questions you would have me ask? I will do my best to obtain the answers for you."

The meeting dragged on well past midnight.

Svistonov and Psikhachev were discussing the Knights Templars° one evening when a pop-eyed man, obviously suffering from Basedow's disease, was invited in.

"Baron Medam," said Psikhachev, introducing the man to Svistonov. He took the Baron aside and gave him his last ruble.

The Baron bid them good day and disappeared.

"You know, he was a count back in the eighteenth century. I was once a guest in his castle," said Psikhachev meaningly. "Pity you weren't there."

Svistonov grinned.

"But wait," continued Psikhachev, "I remember now... You were there. You wore a sleeveless blue jacket made of some sort of material (ravishing, really) and I seem to recall you giving me a ring inlaid with a cut gem."

"And you gave me this," returned Svistonov, taking a ring bearing a heart, a sword and a cross out of his pocket.

"Quite right!" exclaimed Psikhachev. "How you've changed!"

"Allow me to address you as Count... Count Phœnix, if memory serves. We're in St. Petersburg now, of course."

"Of course, Baron," replied Psikhachev, taking Svistonov's arm. "We absolutely must drink to this occasion!"

They bowed low to one another.

Count Phœnix slipped behind the curtain door. A buffet door squeaked open and shut, and a bottle of vodka was brought in.

"Olya! Olya!" yelled Psikhachev. "Bring in the tablecloth! Andrey Nikolaevich, as it turns out, is not Andrey Nikolaevich at all—he's my friend! You know, the one I told you about!"

"Oh, yes... Of course!"

Psikhachev was in a fluster: his eighteenth-century silver pepper-box was missing.

"Go down to the co-op, Olya. We're having dinner by candlelight tonight."

Psikhachev and Svistonov had, not coincidentally, read the same books; the two friends even shared the same memories. The candlelight shone flickeringly on the table and the antique dinner service. A stack of fruit from the LUCS Co-op<sup>o</sup> rose mountain-like from a silver platter. Bunches of green grapes glistened. The vodka was set aside in favour of red wine. Count Phœnix recalled the courtesy with which Catherine the Great had received him, and spoke

querulously of his wife, whom he had yet to forgive. The imposturous Psikhachev glanced quickly at Svistonov—to what degree was he, too, pretending? Svistonov, however, was genuinely enjoying himself. He relished these improvised dinner parties. This evening he was in luck.

“Tell me, Count,” he asked, gulping down a handful of grapes, “why did you choose to reincarnate as Psikhachev?”

Psikhachev had not gone on a trip in quite some time. He now spent his mornings moulding beads out of a substance of his own confection and stringing them into necklaces, meditating over earrings and brooches.

He was helped in this task by his wife and daughter.

The substance was kept in old tea and fruit-drop cans. Red, blue, white, orange, black and green lumps covered the table. Olya tore a piece off the green lump and rolled it into a sausage. Masha cut the sausage into nice, even slices, which Psikhachev then fashioned into beads. Thus had the Ford assembly line made its way into this sleepy little household.

At night Psikhachev threaded the beads and gave them a coat of copal. Two or three days later he would hawk them to friends at Gostiny Dvor as the latest fashion from Paris.

Masha was fed up with necklaces. She wished her father would bring her, as he had so often promised, to some magnificent masked ball where everyone wore colourful costumes. She wanted to see her father win at cards in some dark gambling den and give his winnings to the needy. As things stood, he only ever took her—and again, only very rarely—to the movies, the park (where she would try to guess what he had hidden in his pocket), or to his magic show in said park, at the conclusion of which he was obligated to denounce himself to the

audience and, revealing that everything had been but sleight of hand, show how it had all been done.

Svistonov decided it was time he took his leave of Psikhachev and sought new material and characters.

"In the meantime, I'll let Psikhachev rise in my novel, like dough."

## Chapter V

# Collecting Names

Svistonov wended his way by a monastery's white picket fence, past a public high school and an obstetrics clinic, and through a gate. He rounded a church, skirted an outhouse with muslin-trimmed fanlights and crossed a second gate.

He leaned over tombstones, lifted his gaze toward angels holding crosses, and with his nose pressed against the window panes peered into crypts. He watched relatives of the deceased march past him and sit by their loved ones' headstones littered with Easter eggs and bread crumbs. A dwarfish old man clutching a bouquet at Klimov the writer's grave caught his attention. The old man laid down the bouquet, reverently dug a furrow around the grave, stuck his cane into the ground and fastened the flowers together. The touching scene left Svistonov stock still.

He resumed his burial vault voyeurism. He found a pair of vagrants in one crypt sitting on chipped metal chairs and playing cards. They were locked in.

An elderly gentleman sat at the grave of a Japanese man. He noticed Svistonov staring at him and offered to explain himself:

"No one comes to see him. I've nothing else to do, so I come here. I feel sorry for the poor fellow."

Some drunken men at one small grave were picturesquely stretched out on the ground. The least inebriate among them got up, fetched the priest and removed each man's hat. The priest looked furtively about and began his service without further ado. When it was over, the man, still tipsy, paid the priest, put everyone's hat back on,

turned toward the grave pleased and said:

"Well, Ivan Andreevich, we've paid you our last respects: we've drunk to your memory and given you a decent burial service. I hope you're satisfied."

Svistonov noted the incident down and was about to move on when he recognised an acquaintance, a satirist who was standing near a propeller-shaped monument and conversing with the priest. He called the priest Father, exuded faith, hope and love; then, seizing a moment, he gave Svistonov a wink. Svistonov smiled.

The priest left deeply touched and with the thought that perhaps there was hope yet for this younger generation. Svistonov walked up to the satirist.

"Hunting, are we? A noble pursuit."

"Yes, I'm trying to shed as much light as I can on modern society."

"Say, you wouldn't happen to have anything on..? asked Svistonov, leaning into the satirist's ear.

"As a matter of fact, I do!" beamed the satirist. He blithely lit a cigarette and threw away the match. "But I'm afraid I can't let you have it. I'm saving it for one of my adventure stories."

"I'll rework it. I only need a detail or two, to add a bit of colour."

"Listen..." said the satirist, his eyes alight; he looked round and, noticing an elderly lady nearby, whispered something into Svistonov's ear.

"Oh, and, er... Would you mind terribly if I made use of your encounter with the priest?" asked Svistonov, about to take leave. "I'd include the cemetery and the flowers, as well."

The satirist winced.

"Andrey Nikolaevich, I never expected you to stoop so low. I

thought I could trust you; I'm sorry to say you've proven me wrong."

Svistonov was listening to the twittering of birds, admiring a railway bed and watching children play tag behind a fence when Pasha, pencil in hand, finally found him. They sat down, and Pasha ran through a list of names he had jotted down at the cemetery for Svistonov to choose from.

"Your story wasn't bad," remarked Svistonov, recalling Pasha's manuscript. "So, have you heard anything about Kuku lately?"

"Not a thing," answered Pasha.

"Listen, Pasha, would you do me a favour and pass this note on to Iya?"

## Chapter VI

### An Experiment on Iya

Iya entered Svistonov's apartment brimful of arrogance.

It was her belief that she knew everything, that she was entitled to give her opinion on everything, that she was entitled to pass judgment on everything and steadfastly maintain that she was right.

Iya had been apprised of Svistonov's unusual furnishings: he lived by candlelight; he had a custom-made oak cabinet containing fabulous jewels and precious stones; and artfully arranged articles of exceptional rarity adorned his bedroom walls.

She passed the main entrance, crossed the courtyard and climbed the black staircase.

She tugged the pull and heard the jangle of bells.

Svistonov, who had been waiting for her, quickly flung the door open.

Iya stepped into the half-lit hallway.

A mirror reflected burning candle. The cheap wallpaper made Iya flinch.

Svistonov helped his guest with her coat and guided her through the pitch-dark kitchen into the bedroom.

Iya paced the room and expressed her opinion on every item.

She looked over an eclectic assortment of fascinating seventeenth-century treatises, assumed them to be by Racine and Corneille, and declared that she was not very keen on either one.<sup>o</sup>

Her glance fell on some sixteenth-century Italian books. She snorted that Horace and Catullus were no longer relevant in this day and age.<sup>o</sup>

Svistonov sat in his chair and listened intently.

He asked her what she thought of a plate hanging on a wall.

Iya walked up to a blue plate tricked with white, muscular men and ovine tritons, took it into her hands and arrogantly pointed out that she was familiar with these objects: this, of course, was a Danish wedding dish.

Pleased with herself, but disappointed with Svistonov's trappings, Iya sat down in the Venetian chair, mistaking it for a shoddy imitation of a Moorish original.

"I can read you a chapter from my novel, if you like," said Svistonov.

Iya nodded.

"I thought up a female character yesterday," Svistonov continued. "I took Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*, Balzac's *The Magic Skin* and Hoffmann's *The Golden Pot*,<sup>o</sup> and came up with this..."

"That's disgusting!" cried Iya. "That's just the sort of drivel I've come to expect from a country as backward as ours! Even I could do as much! Let me be frank with you: I've never liked your novels—you refuse to take the present into account. You may say I just don't understand, but if I don't, then who will? What kind of reader are you after anyway?"

Iya left feeling she had handled herself very well under the circumstances and shown Svistonov she was not to be trifled with.

## Chapter VII

### Sorting Books

Svistonov caught cold in his unheated apartment. His nose was red, his sinuses were inflamed and he had a slight fever. He decided to stay home, fire up the stove and put some much needed order into his library.

Sorting books according to subject, however, is no simple task: the choice of headings is always open to question. Svistonov thought long and hard on how best to rearrange his books for quick and easy reference.

He tried dividing them according to their 'nutritional value'. He dealt first with the memoirs, allotting them three shelves. Of course, there was an argument to be made for including the works of several great authors—Dante, Petrarch,<sup>o</sup> Gogol, Dostoevsky—into this category: after all, their works are, at bottom, memoirs— memoirs of spiritual experience, as it were. But then he would have to include the works of explorers and founders of religions as well, wouldn't he? And aren't physics, geography, history and philosophy, in the greater scheme of things, simply one vast memoir of humankind? Svistonov finally gave up, telling himself that any writer worth his salt held all books to be equally nourishing.

Shouldn't time, then, be the guiding criterion? But to place a 1573 edition alongside others from 1778 and 1906..! His library would become nothing more than a string of authors in various translations, row upon row of Homers, Virgils and Goethes. No, this would doubtlessly have an adverse effect on his own work: his focus would

constantly shift from the characters to peripheral details, such as the year of publication, the quality of the paper and the binding, and the commentaries. This type of system might prove useful in due course, but not now, not while he was still in the midst of developing his own characters. A line had to be drawn somewhere. He would not let himself be swayed by commentaries; the original works sufficed in themselves. Commentaries are addenda only.

Svistonov finally ruled in favour of the classics. He cleared a shelf, grabbed Gogol's *Dead Souls*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the works of Homer and a few others, and laid them all out in a row.

"People," mused Svistonov, pausing momentarily, "are like books—always a pleasure to read. I think they may be even more interesting than books, certainly richer—you can play with people and place them in various situations."

Svistonov felt himself bound to nothing.

## Chapter VIII

### In Search of Minor Characters

Svistonov did not stay at home for very long. He needed minor characters, city scapes, theatres... He was out of the house by the following evening.

He zealously transferred urban minutiae into his novel.

Shoppers milled about invalids.

"Yes," answered a woman buying some game, "my name is Nikolay Wilhelmovich Kirchner, and yes, I was once a professor."

The professor still wore the same old grease-stained skullcap and the same old coat. His bare feet were still shod in the same old galoshes held together with string. Still the same old gold-rimmed glasses, the same old bundle in his hands. And he still felt the compulsion to hurry off somewhere—anywhere—and stand in endless queues.

The professor received a monthly stipend of one hundred rubles and made his home at the Bristol Hotel,<sup>o</sup> but none of it really mattered anymore—eternity had caught up with him. He had become a surly man; his eyes acquired a piercing, maniacal glint, and his lips curled with just a hint of cynicism.

He and Svistonov had been bumping into each another for the past ten years without ever exchanging a word. Today, however, the professor was terribly upset: he had just been ignominiously thrown out of the State Philharmonic's head office. They had taken him by the arm, flung him out into the street, turned and slammed the door shut in his face! Imagine the nerve..! After all, his sister had just the other night broken her leg at the end of a concert there: she slipped and fell down the stairs on her way out.

Svistonov bid this incidental character goodbye and moved on to a pair of minor characters—the elderly couple from Toksovo.

Pyotr and Tatyana were delighted at Svistonov's visit. They were lonely people who liked nothing more than to talk, and Svistonov let them talk to their heart's desire about the life they had once led. They showed him how well regarded musicians had once been by trotting out a medal and an autographed certificate awarded them by some high-ranking official, and showed him portraits of various high-ranking pupils, boys in uniform whom Pyotr had taught the balalaika many years earlier.

"Now don't you be fussing over me, Tatyana Nikandrovna!" said Svistonov. "I'm not a fussy man! We had such a nice time in Toksovo, I thought I'd drop in and spend a quiet evening in your company.

"You've a very cosy home, Tatyana Nikandrovna. It struck me the moment I walked in. Ah, I knew you'd have jam!

"I'm no musician of Pyotr Petrovich's calibre, of course, but I am an enthusiast. As a matter of fact, I quite often find myself in the mood for a bit of music, and I'm hoping Pyotr Petrovich here will play us a tune on his flute after tea!"

"And what do you play?" asked the old man.

"The piano—but just a little," answered Svistonov. "Actually, I barely get by with one finger! I know just enough to read sheet music and play accompaniment."

"But you gave it up, eh?" asked the old man sympathetically. "People have so little patience! None of my own pupils ever grew up to be musicians. I remember giving lessons to the children of a certain State councillor... wonderful boys. Now they're saying they used to ride

us the whole time, but there isn't a word of truth in any of it; Tatyana will vouch for me. And so well brought up! They'd been taught manners, you see: they were refused sweets or made to stand in a corner at the slightest impropriety. Their mother would always apologise, but then their father would come home and yell: 'Wait till I get my hands on them!' And they would never let you leave without first feeding you. Very important people, too, and they always insisted that I sit with them—so I wouldn't feel left out, you see..."

"And they gave you letters of reference," chimed in Tatyana. "They sent you new pupils and found you all sorts of work."

"And what can we possibly say about the gifts? Christmas *and* Easter! If word got to them that you were to be married, they insisted on being the guests of honour; if you were expecting, the man offered to be your child's godfather; and if your son turned into a revolutionary at university, he went over to the town governor's himself to straighten the matter out."

Svistonov sipped his tea and helped the old man reminisce. He posed one question after another, now sighing, now silent, now nodding, now humming, now clearing his throat.

"Why don't I bring the gifts out?" suggested Tatyana.

"Pyotr, what have you done with the key?" she shouted from the other room.

Pyotr got up. Svistonov heard the squeaking of drawers being pulled open.

"Does your watch keep time?" asked Svistonov in a subdued voice.

"Not only does it keep time, but it strikes the hour as well," replied the old man with obvious relish. "Here, listen..."

He got a glass from the sideboard, turned it upside down and

placed his watch in the bottom.

The watch very clearly struck eleven.

"Here's a list of all our gifts, and the year they were given," said Tatyana, handing Svistonov some brownish sheets of paper.

The list included everything but the kitchen sink: there were flower baskets with visiting cards, a barometer, a cigar box, cuff links, a tiepin...

Svistonov went over the list while the elderly couple withdrew momentarily to fetch the remainder of their treasures.

"We've kept everything... Haven't sold a thing!.. We've suffered all manner of privations, but refused to part with any of it..!" they blurted in a duet as they laid their gifts out on the table for Svistonov.

Svistonov grew rather fond of Pyotr and Tatyana. He came to the conclusion that they were not quite so minor after all, and resolved to call on them more often.

Svistonov followed the same route home every day and eventually struck up a friendship with a policeman, smoking and chatting with him.

The policeman often read him his poetry:

At the streetcar points  
Stands my Aglaya.  
She changes the points,  
Cannot take her eyes off me;  
And from my post  
I see her sweet lips.

The policeman was a bit wary of Svistonov at first, but eventually relented. Svistonov was a good man who simply enjoyed

talking to people.

Svistonov and the policeman often sat together smoking and discussing poetry, then they would get up and amble down the street with their hands clasped behind their backs.

The trees were shimmery-blue when the policeman acquainted Svistonov with his beloved boyhood village. He boasted of the superior apples that grew there, and how many poods of dried apples his family had stored back home. He told Svistonov how many kinds of Antonovka apples there were, and how grafting the twigs of an apple tree onto a birch, oak or linden tree yielded differently tasting apples. And he described how his village made alcohol from ants by stewing them in a bag and then squeezing out the juices.

Svistonov asked him about his village's customs and superstitions: Did they have a library? What sort of sex life did the teenagers enjoy? He begged him to remember the tiniest detail, saying it was of essence for his book.

They sat thus on a bench by a gate for several hours. The policeman spouted whatever came to his mind and answered all of Svistonov's queries while Svistonov made notes under a porch light.

Much time passed—again. The elderly couple stood at a tiny window in their third-story apartment. The sun was picture-perfect, the window open wide. Pyotr held fast onto Traviata's legs while Tatyana combed the dog's belly and tail with an ivory comb.

"What's the matter with you, Traviata?" asked the old woman. "Why are you barking and whimpering? You know it's for your own good. We've got to give that neck of yours a brushing; you know you can't reach there with your teeth. Between the eyebrows, now..."

"Take a look at these bite marks," said Pyotr, running his thumb

through the dog's coat. "Little wonder she's been so depressed lately."

"I wish I could see Nadenka's soul!" blatted Tatyana. "I should think she has a beautiful soul."

"Yes, she's quite a lady, very poised... Comb over here. She obviously comes from a good family. Do you think Ivan Ivanovich will marry her? Stop your squirming, Traviata!

"Look out the window, Traviata, look who's down there. See the big dog? Look, Traviata, he's on a leash!

"It would be a shame if they didn't," answered Tatyana.

"Look how many there are! Hold on... One of them just jumped on you!"

"Where?"

"Remember how handsome you were in your jacket? Now look at you! You won't even shave! Oh, and remember my grey satin dress with the bugles on it..? There you go, Traviata, clean as a whistle. You can put her down, now."

"Look at her shake herself!"

"Come on, Traviata, let's dance!" Tatyana grabbed the dog's front paws and dragged it around in circles.

Traviata shuffled round and round with her back arched, raising her snout now and again and letting out a yelp. Tatyana lifted her into her arms, and the old dog rested her head on her mistress' shoulder, closed her eyes and started wheezing.

Tatyana began to sing in a jingling voice:

Lullaby, lullaby,  
My little child,  
Kitty, oh kitty, come spend the night,  
And rock Traviata to sleep.

"That's my old girl! My poor, balding dear!" The small grey child sensed its masters' pity and began to whine.

The flautist's wife doted on animals. She fed every stray cat who wandered into the building and took in abandoned kittens, outraged at people's capacity for cruelty.

She kept a woodshed in the courtyard. This shed was, to all intents and purposes, her home.

Every chicken and every rooster had a name ('girl' or 'boy'); they even ate bread crumbs out of her hand. She also kept goats.

And into this peaceful ménage stormed Svistonov. He realised how lonely Tatyana was, and ascribed it to unfulfilled maternal instincts. He took to bringing the dog treats, to petting and praising it—all acts of kindness which did wonders for the old woman's spirits.

"See how everybody loves you?" she told Traviata. "Everyone just adores you, they're all mad about you! Wait till I have that winter coat knitted for you! Won't you be a darling then!"

"Have you had her for very long?" asked Svistonov.

"About six years," answered the old woman.

"Oh, well, she has a few years left in her yet!"

"Of course, she does! She's still just a pup!" asserted Tatyana, keeping her dear dog's true age a secret.

"Won't you stay for dinner?"

Svistonov stayed.

Tatyana sat Traviata at the table and wrapped a bib around her neck.

"You'll have to forgive us," said the old woman. "Traviata's the child we've never had."

They all sat down and started on their soup.

Traviata finished hers first. She looked at the others and whined.

She loved to eat.

“Feeling peckish, are you, Traviata?” said Tatyana.

Traviata pricked up her ears and whined again.

Tatyana took Traviata’s bowl into the kitchen and poured her a second helping of cold soup. Traviata lapped up every drop.

Tatyana brought in the roast next and gave Traviata a nice, big slice and a bone served in a dish with painted flowers. She lapped up her milk while the others sipped their tea, then jumped off her chair and begged to be walked.

After dinner, Svistonov accompanied Pyotr on the piano. The old man sat beside him and played his flute.

## Chapter IX

### Battling the Bourgeoisie

A man by the name of Deryabkin lived in the same building as Pyotr and Tatyana.

Deryabkin's greatest fear was vases. His proletarian soul shuddered at the very mention of the word. They were the reason he refused to let his new wife bring a bundle of geraniums and fuchsias—a woman's fancy!—into their rented room. He likewise objected to her hanging a picture of her mother on the wall: ignoring her pleas, he yanked the nail out of the wall and hid the hammer.

"If you want to live under my roof, you'll learn to abide by my rules! I'll have no part of this foolishness!"

Lipochka hopped onto a streetcar the following morning and returned the flowers to her mother, who was busily scrubbing Deryabkin's shirt collars. She threw her tiny hands up in disgust:

"Ooh, men! So they don't care for flowers, do they!"

They had lunch. Lipochka's mother fetched some window curtains.

Mother and daughter admired the handiwork. Lipochka's grandmother had crocheted the curtains herself.

"Look what I've brought back, Pava dear!"

"My name isn't Pava, it's Pavel! Must you be so informal?"

"Look at the pretty pattern..."

"Window curtains," Deryabkin remarked drily, "are for the petty bourgeois. I won't have them in my house. We'll go to the Arcade Saturday and buy something appropriate."

Svistonov was prowling the streets. He stopped at the Arcade on Nevsky Prospect for lunch.

Deryabkin swaggered obliviously through the crowd. Lipochka was scrambling to keep up with her husband, holding on tightly to his coat sleeve.

"Oh, look at that vase over there! Can we have it?"

"Stop it with the vases, already!"

"There's a piggy bank!"

"Stop pestering me!" said Deryabkin exasperated and tugging his sleeve. "And what's with this bourgeois habit of yours of clinging to me this way? Can't you walk properly?"

"Buy us a picture, Pava, we'll hang it over the bed."

"Enough, already!"

"Well then, how about a lampshade?"

"I won't buy a lampshade, either."

Deryabkin had elevated his fight against the bourgeoisie to an art form. He lay awake nights wondering how to guard himself against this evil. Why, just the other day he was walking along a street, when suddenly, he came upon a waxen Philistine brazenly displayed in a store window! The Philistine was dressed in lamé and wearing lipstick, and her hair had been permed according to the latest fashion in Paris!

"To hell with hairdressers!" he told himself. "They haven't changed a whit and likely never will. But for trusts and co-ops to sink this low..!" Deryabkin was heartsick over the infiltration of materialism in Soviet stores and trusts.

"Garbage," declared Deryabkin of a featherlight Murano vase.°

"You're absolutely right," said Svistonov, standing to the side. "It is garbage. And may I add what a pleasure it is to meet someone as discriminating as yourself."

"What kind of fish is that?" asked Lipočka, turning round.

"It's a dolphin," answered Svistonov.

"She's always going on about goldfish!" explained Deryabkin. He thought he had seen this man before in the courtyard.

The familiar-looking man rumbled knowingly. Deryabkin, sensing an unexpected ally, was beside himself with joy.

"Didn't I tell you so, Lipočka? Our fellow citizen here is of the same opinion as I."

"Yes... It's everybody's duty to fight philistinism," sighed Svistonov, grinning into his collar.

This individual was clearly a man of culture and knowledge.

"Could you—we've met before in the courtyard, haven't we?—could you help us pick out a few things? My name's Pavel Deryabkin, debt collector."°

"Svistonov, writer."

"Excellent!" said Deryabkin. "You see, Lipočka, even a writer agrees with me!"

Deryabkin loaded Lipočka up—he considered carrying packages beneath a man's dignity—and fastened himself to Svistonov's arm.

"Won't you come over for some tea?"

Svistonov followed Deryabkin and Lipočka down into their basement apartment.

A red and black cloth runner, of the sort that once graced the main entrances of buildings, covered the floor. The room was furnished with a dining table and a mirror near the entrance. An eerie cleanness reigned inside. The windows practically looked like crystal; even the sills had been scrubbed to a shine. The floor was a sparkling yellow.

"Proper hygiene," asserted Deryabkin, "is the first sign of culture. Look how we've arranged our toothbrushes." Deryabkin pointed Svistonov to the shelf above the sink. "See, we keep the soap in a small case to keep out the bacteria. And now that I've won on that front, I've taken up another challenge: my handwriting. I've been working on it nights. Good penmanship teaches a man patience and perseverance."

This man of culture and letters was Deryabkin's first guest. Deryabkin's thirst for knowledge was unquenchable, and he did much more than just spend his evenings perfecting his penmanship: he listened to the radio, as well. In fact, he was in complete awe of it. Its educational possibilities seemed limitless. He could learn everything he had always wanted to know about opera without ever leaving home. And the money he saved..! It was a frequent topic of conversation between him and his wife. But woe to her if she dared make noise while he sat listening with his shiny earphones on his head! Lipochka was always very careful to keep quiet.

"I'm terribly anæmic; my only comfort is sleep. I can fall asleep whenever I feel like it, and for as long as I want," avowed Lipochka as she sat down on the motley sofa.

"How did you learn to sleep at will?" asked Svistonov, resting his elbow on the back of the sofa.

"One learns an awful lot of things at evening club meetings," sighed the hostess.

"And you have such refined tastes," clucked Svistonov sympathetically. "It must be difficult having to settle with keeping house."

"I spend most of my time tearing about town," replied the hostess. "I won't be much longer for the world at this rate. Such a fuss

over book covers! I've had to run down to the bookbinder's nearly every day."

"Which books are those?" asked Svistonov, his curiosity piqued. The hostess proudly motioned her guest to the bookcase.

"These are my Pavel's favourite books."

Svistonov leaned forward: *Days of Old*, an architectural society's year-book.<sup>o</sup>

"You've a highly developed esthetic sense," said Svistonov, straightening himself up. "These cloth covers are a perfect complement to your apartment's furnishings."

It was then that Svistonov decided to make himself at home at the Deryabkins'.

"Andrey Nikolaevich said this... Andrey Nikolaevich said that... Andrey Nikolaevich bought us tickets to tonight's concert... Andrey Nikolaevich is taking us to the museum..." became common utterances at the Deryabkin household.

The elderly couple upstairs grew jealous.

"We must have offended him somehow..."

Deryabkin's circle of friends included the following people:

Anna Nikolaevna Plyushar, aged sixty, spinster and retired schoolteacher with two upper teeth and a braid rolled into a bun. A spinster with no place to dance the mazurka.

And she had been such a lithesome dancer in those yellow-laced shoes of hers—always the belle of the ball at finishing school, where she swam stony-faced every morning with her arms folded across her chest: "This is all very well and nice, but one mustn't forget work."

Jean, hairdresser and man of culture, very prim; now forced to shave and style every Tom, Dick and Harry. It used to be such a

pleasure cutting people's hair and shaving them, getting the low-down on the Senate or on events abroad, finding out how amateur night had gone at Countess number three's... But customers nowadays adamantly refused to talk or be talked to.

Jean had had access to the city's finest families. He wore a top hat and jacket on feast-days. Receiving communion was such a pleasure in those days, too: officers stood up front in their gold-woven, full-dress uniforms and white trousers, with their cocked hats tucked under their arms and their brightly-clad wives by their side... He knew them all. And they always smelled of perfume and eau-de-cologne. Why, standing outside the church doors at the end of mass, one barely had the time to properly greet everybody as they left.

Vladimir Nikolaevich Golod, owner of the Decadence Photography Studio; his wooden-faced subjects never failed to gaze transfixedly into the camera.

Indyukov, former contractor, first-class drunkard and enemy of the people.

This was a tight-knit and very nearly happy group of people.

Indyukov respected Plyushar for the well-read and intelligent woman that she was; Plyushar appreciated Indyukov's sedate nature (although he was a bit of a lush). Opinions between the spinster and the elderly widower differed somewhat on the proper upbringing of children, but Indyukov thought that they agreed totally, which pleased him a great deal.

Jean, although born to a lower station than Plyushar, had nonetheless managed to acquire a certain polish: he spoke a bit of French (required of all hairdressers of his day) and knew all the ins and outs of the city's theatre scene. It was through him that Plyushar was introduced, albeit belatedly, to backstage life.

Of course, this group was no different than any other in also having a veteran officer among its number. (Does anyone know of someone who has *not* served in the recent past?) Malvin was drafted while still a smooth-cheeked boy, and had been an army man ever since. As a freshman at the Gorny Institute,<sup>o</sup> he was celebrated for his proficiency in dancing the mazurka. Malvin was an acutely lonely man, a fact which most certainly accounted for his devotion to Deryabkin. Everyone knows the type: shy and oftentimes giddy people whose greatest joy in life usually consists in recalling fond memories of better years.

They all congregated at Deryabkin's on Sundays and holidays. Svistonov was accepted as a member of the group and made a point of never missing a Sunday meeting.

Plyushar had respect for literature, but held that a writer's first concern should be to educate. Jean was partial to humorous anecdotes; science fiction was Malvin's genre of choice; and Indyukov professed indifference toward books in general. In short, there was always a great deal to discuss and debate.

One Sunday, they managed to put Plyushar in her cups; there she sat in her shortened skirt and buttoned-up blouse, all flushed and aflutter..! Then Indyukov had a sip too many and fell to blathering. Malvin kept filling Svistonov's glass and asking him his thoughts on the present state of literature. Deryabkin was anxious that Svistonov see his friends at their very best, wanted him to know the kind of people with whom he kept company.

"Anna Nikolayevna is going to dance a mazurka," he pointed out to Svistonov. "She's been unusually modest since you've joined us, but I suspect she's gotten over it now..."

And then something very picturesque happened from

Svistonov's point of view. The hosts and their guests moved the table over to the side. Deryabkin grabbed his guitar and began to strum. Everyone, with the exception of Plyushar and Malvin, sat down along the walls.

Malvin approached Plyushar, asked if he could have this dance, put his arms around her waist and swept her across the room. He performed a variety of steps, trying very hard to recapture the magic of his glory days, then knelt down when Plyushar began to whirl around him. He hopped back onto his feet and twirled her once more before they skimmed anew across the floor.

Svistonov admired Plyushar's tousled braid, the bulging blue veins lining her temples; Malvin's slightly stiff and supercilious countenance, his bald spot and perspiration; the colourful, bearded Indyukov—who was placidly dozing in a corner—and the Deryabkins' rattan chairs and sofa, the last of which was but a mattress on a long egg-crate covered with chintz.

Svistonov did not divide people into good and bad, pleasant and unpleasant: there were simply those whom he could use in his novel, and those whom he could not. He deemed this particular group useful and, moreover, felt like a fish in water in their company. Svistonov did not compare himself with Zola (who wrote of real people and kept their names) Balzac (who based his characters on people he only met later) or N (an acquaintance who once played a beggarly prank on himself for no other reason than to observe a friend's reaction), though as a fellow writer he considered their behaviour as perfectly acceptable in the name of art. He assumed they would all eventually have to pay a price for their practice, but what price he would have to pay personally, he neither knew nor cared: he only lived for the moment, not for the morrow. The very process of kidnapping people and transposing them

into his novel thrilled him.

He was also keenly aware of the world's parodic nature as opposed to some imagined norm. "We may think a common metre beats within our breasts, but the world moves to its own rhythm," is how a poet might put it.

Svistonov had in fact long since stopped believing he could do anything to help make the world a better place. His sole ambition now was to write, nothing more. A poet would describe Svistonov as Mephistophelian, but Svistonov, in all truth, did not perceive himself as such. Quite the contrary: he saw life as a matter of utmost clarity and simplicity.

A poet would no doubt beg to differ and reply that Svistonov does indeed possess Mephistophelian qualities, that there is a Mephistopheles-like component within him which manifests itself as a contempt for and disgust with the world totally atypical of artists. A poet is what he is because of his lofty, obscure style and his search for some sort of relationship between this world and the beyond; Svistonov, on the other hand, was a man of sober mind and, more obviously, considerable will.

The world had long ago turned into a curiosity shop where Svistonov was concerned, an amusing assortment of freaks and monsters. And by some strange quirk of fate, he had become something like its keeper.

Deryabkin's working day consisted in going to apartments—actually, not apartments as such, but merely the entrance halls (where these were to be found) and the meters therein. His was the task of recording the amount of electricity consumed monthly by each household. Deryabkin had a gaping mouth and crew cut.

Plyushar's day consisted in wiping noses, speaking French and taking children and their dogs out for a walk in the public garden—weather permitting, of course. She would drag some little girl through the square and say: "...Repeat after me, Nadya: *'C'est qu'on ne connaît le prix de la santé que lorsqu'on l'a perdue;*"° and Nadya would toddle behind and repeat the words.

Plyushar loathed children, and the walks in the garden were never more than perfunctory.

Deryabkin loved to argue religion with Jean.

"But your faith is a lie and a drug! You've obviously never read a book in your life!"

Deryabkin did his utmost to outargue Jean, to gain the upper hand on him, but the greying hairdresser refused to give in. He remembered a certain Privy Councillor, a gentleman of great perspicacity. This Privy Councillor was sitting at home in front of a mirror one morning, being shaved by the expert hands of Jean, when he told the hairdresser that "...people should pay less attention to the clergy's vices and give more thought to the idea."

On weeknights, Deryabkin treated his friends to an evening of radio. Lipochka served tea and cold cuts while women sang gipsy ballads and Hawaiian guitars wailed. They listened to poetry readings, and the music of Danish and other composers. Sometimes they even listened to an entire opera.

Deryabkin had made a speaker out of some cardboard and lacquered it. This black funnel held court on the table alongside the jam and shouted, and sang, and laughed, and transmitted the most sublime sounds imaginable.

## Chapter X

### The Teenager and the Genius

Masha hurriedly set the lamp down by the mirror and answered the door.

"Andrey Nikolaevich! My gosh, you're soaked to the skin and pale as death!

"Would you like some milk?" she asked after a short pause. "We have cream!"

She helped Svistonov with his coat and took it into the kitchen. She escorted him into the dining room, rushed all smiles to the sideboard, pulled out a crystal milk-jar and gingerly brought it to the tip of his nose. Svistonov examined the contents.

"Is your father home?" he asked.

"No, Daddy's attending to some business." She began to root about in the sideboard for the little cup her father had given her for her birthday.

"Here you go!" she said, sitting Svistonov down and handing him her favourite cup.

Svistonov took a sip.

"Could you stay a while? I'm a little frightened here by myself."

"Well, I only came over for a minute..."

Masha's distressed aspect, however, persuaded Svistonov to change his mind.

"...But I'll stay if you're scared."

Gusts of wind were shaking the tiny house and rattling its two windows. Heavy storm warnings were in effect for the evening.

"I hope something will be left of our oak tree," said Masha. It

suddenly occurred to her that her hair was still wrapped in newspaper curlers.

She tore the papers away and threw them into the fireplace.

"Wait here a minute..."

Masha returned with an armful of dried birch logs for the fireplace and stripped the bark. Svistonov chipped off the splinters for lights.

"Your socks are all wet. Would you like me to bring you Daddy's slippers?"

Svistonov sat comfortably in a chair, wearing Psikhachev's slippers. He had not been around teenagers in some time, and found himself at a loss for words. He also felt a bit uncomfortable being alone in the house with Masha.

He heaved a sigh of relief when Masha took the conversational initiative into her own hands, but soon realised that his answers to the teenager's questions were empty and vapid. He was even somewhat dismayed at having no pearls of wisdom to offer Masha.

Masha had read that writers were proud and brilliant individuals, that writers were sharp-witted people who broke all conventions and for whom life held no secrets. Masha meant to discover what these secrets were.

She was determined to have Svistonov read her his new book—she knew her guest always carried it about him like some rare gem.

Moreover, Psikhachev had convinced his daughter that Svistonov was a genius, a word which now as ever holds a certain irresistible cachet. It was Masha's hope now to speak frankly with Svistonov, to have a heart-to-heart chat with this genius.

Svistonov felt a pressing need to keep the conversation alive.

## Chapter XI

### Silence

Stacks of paper were piling up around Svistonov. Reams of scribbled sheets were thrown out. A number of characters who coincided with one another were discarded. Several characters merged into one, and their collective traits were redistributed. The ending was moved to the beginning, and the beginning became the ending. Nineteen-twelve was changed to nineteen-oh-eight, and summer to winter. A great many sentences were excised, others added.

Svistonov reached the part about the elderly couple. He chose a passage from an 1842 children's book, *The Little Star*, which began with:

**"Have you ever watched little old ladies..."**

and rewrote the rest:

**caper about a park with nothing on their minds but the flowers and the trees and the birds and the blue sky? And have you ever watched little old ladies tie on their capes and bonnets to skip away across the green grass and breathe in the fresh air like God's little birds?**

He copied

**"Well, there once was..."**

and rewrote:

"... a little old lady who was adored by all. Dogs barked rapturously at the very sight of her and licked her hands. Cats purred and rubbed themselves against her legs; tiny kittens frolicked with her.

And why was this elderly lady the object of so much affection? Because she was a sweet, kindly woman, a mother to everyone. She often sat on the rug with her dog and fed it pastries. She had something of a sweet tooth herself, but was always willing to part with them for Traviata, who of course loved her all the more for it.

Her name was Sasha.

Sasha went to church every Sunday. One could not help but admire the manner in which she stood so humbly and prayed so fervently during the service. Her gaze never wavered from the icons—as ill-bred, unattentive little children are wont to do—as she beseeched the Lord to make her a gentle, God-fearing woman, to bring happiness and good health to her husband, to Traviata... to all people on Earth.

With her head filled with thoughts such as these, time passed quickly enough; so much so that Sasha, unlike the small elderly folk around her, for whom mass often seemed excruciatingly long, never left church feeling tired.

This humble, unpretentious old woman was an inspiration to all. She was thoughtful and obliging, kind to young people, and on affable terms with all her neighbours. Whenever she needed something, whether it be a pan or an iron, she always asked for it with such demurity that one was very hard put to refuse. She blushed at the slightest compliment.

Little old lady. Sometimes, at night, on one of those rare occasions when her husband was out, she would open her trunk and take out all her old clothes, her embroideries, Easter eggs, pencil stubs,

posters, opera programmes, fashion plates, cards from well-wishers, envelopes and cartes de visite. She would read the pages from her old calendars, one of which included this poem—

The sun shimmers in the sky,  
 And the wind is warm.  
 Thickly, good people  
 Promenade Gostiny Dvor.  
 Wondrous enticements innumerable  
 Lie on tables in glittery heaps:  
 Candy, pussy willows, dolls and hourglasses...

—and remember when pussy willows were sold all around Gostiny Dvor.”

Svistonov shut his writing book and wondered where to fit in this last bit, how to weave it into his novel and whether perhaps he should have a go at the foreword. He reached back for a book he had put aside, opened it to where he had left his bookmark and, changing one word for another, wrote:

## FOREWORD

Is there anything so pleasurable as a good book? Have you ever noticed, dear readers, how time flies when you are in the middle of a good book? It is something each of you has experienced on a number of occasions, I am sure, even if you might not yet have had the opportunity to read all that much. And have you ever noticed which books you have enjoyed the most? These, of course, were books which

were written in a clear, straightforward manner and rang true. Suppose a writer describes a particular species of flower in a manner so incredibly accurate that the moment you see an actual specimen for the very first time, you recognise it immediately for what it is—simply on the basis of the description you will have read! When this writer goes on to describe a forest, you see the trees and feel the chill shadows that they cast onto the summer-sun-drenched ground. The characters in his novel are transformed into living, breathing people. You become familiar with their features, their physiognomy, their habits... You feel as though, were you to run into them in the street, you would recognise these people immediately.

And however many decades, or even centuries, pass from the writing of this book, the beauty of the descriptions within will never fade, for they are and forever will remain true to life.

And so do I begin my story, one which will flow as the tranquil brook whose banks are dotted with silver daisies and blue forget-me-nots...

The next morning, Svistonov read what chapters he had, and other loose bits besides, and realised he had failed to include any parks. Not a single park. Neither an old nor a new one. No private parks, no public parks. And novels, like cities, simply cannot subsist without green space.

Svistonov left for work—all the more so since the day was nice. He was walking past the monument to Peter the Great when he heard someone singing and turned round.

Tramping toward the monument from Senate Square was a grey-bearded man wearing a long-tailed coat that had turned green with age. He stopped in front of the Bronze Horseman,<sup>o</sup> shook his fist

and said:

We give you bread,  
And you give us wigs!  
All these pogroms are your fault!

Then he bowed his head and trudged away.

Svistonov noted down the episode and carried on to Workers' Park. He bought some cigarettes and chocolate from an invalid. He lit up, then surveyed the park and its location: "What makes this park special? Are its busts of soldiers? Should I describe these people sitting over there on the metal railing round the fountain? The Admiralty and its colossal statues? The bustling, swirling, courting masses..?"

Svistonov leaned against a tree.

Three o'clock in the morning. A bar. Svistonov is sitting next to the band and elaborating Psikhachev's encounter with the Georgian. He has taken full advantage of the authorisation given him by Psikhachev in the Toksovan hills and not changed his name or altered it in any fashion.

Svistonov portrayed him thus:

Psikhachev and Chavchavadze met in a bar. A band consisting of a cellist (an old man in a velvet jacket) a violonist (a Russian wearing a grey suit and spats) and a pianist (a stuttering Jew) were on stage.

"Don't tease me, oh please, no, don't..." they crooned.

An elderly gentleman rose from a table and with a peremptory wave of his hand—"Shut up!"—ordered his young drinking

companion in black leather gloves and a Russian shirt to be quiet. The young man's hat lay on a marble slab.

The old man listened to the melancholy song, covered his eyes with his hands and wept.

Chavchavadze was eating chicken.

"The poor, old devil," said Psikhachev to the Georgian who had invited him to lunch. "Don Juan himself was never more stricken," .

"Why don't you just do your job and predict my mother's future?" replied Chavchavadze, handing Psikhachev a yellowing piece of paper. "You've had your fill of drink and food!"

Home again. The candle is burning low, the wick is askew, and the flame is licking the wall socket.

Svistonov got out a railway candle and wedged it into the candlestick. He lit a cigarette, thought a bit, and leaned over a blank sheet of paper.

Psikhachev told his friend's mother's fortune, then stood up and walked to the old man's table.

"You've led a miserable life, haven't you?" he whispered into the old man's ear.

Psikhachev spent his evenings in taverns moonlighting as a graphologist; but it was compassion which brought him to the old man's table. Force of habit nonetheless compelled him to ask:

"Would you like your handwriting analyzed?"

"Vladimir, is that you?" exclaimed Ekespar, cutting Psikhachev short. "What are you doing here?"

This sudden turn of events nonplussed Psikhachev.

"I hear you're the Cagliostro of Leningrad now!"

"Well, what about you? What have you been up to?"

"Ah, my dear friend! There isn't a place I haven't been to or a thing I haven't done!"

"My, but you've changed these past fifteen years..."

"Well, you certainly look the worse for wear..!"

. . . . .

The policeman cheerfully saluted Psikhachev. Psikhachev shook his hand.

"Lovely man," said Psikhachev. "You wouldn't believe the things he's told me about apple trees!"

Ekespar and Psikhachev gaddled about town, nattering, well into the white night.

"More scenery," Svistonov thought to himself, "it needs more scenery!"

The sun sluggishly lifted his head over the road; the trees soughed softly in the deserted Summer Garden. In the distance flowed the Neva.

A tax collector was on his way to meet Ekespar and Psikhachev.

Meanwhile, a writer by the name of Vistonov, obsessed by the transcendent nature of literature, was studying the morning vistas. He would transpose them later into his novel.

He had already committed several neighbourhoods to paper when he ran into Psikhachev and Ekespar at the mosque.

"Morning, friend!" said Vistonov, proffering his hand. "And how are you?"

"Couldn't be better!"

"All right, let's end the chapter on that note. I'll expand the Vistonov character in the next chapter and write about the Toksovan hills, Kuku's self-exile and Vistonov's friendship with Psikhachev."

The dough had fully risen—the novel's setting, its scenery, its outlines... Everything had fallen into place.

Svistonov yawned and put down his fountain pen, which seemed to be writing of its own volition. Several layers of dust had already settled onto his recently rearranged books. Crumbly beetles and wet bugs were gnawing, eating away at and otherwise drilling through the pages. The beetles' clicks were in earnest competition with the clock's tick-tocks. Svistonov, his creative energy spent, drew himself up to the accompaniment of the beetles.

"What to do, what to do?" he asked himself, before settling on a walk.

He plodded through the streets, exhausted, his brain emptied and his soul consumed.

The novel was finished. Its author wanted nothing more to do with it, but it followed him wherever he went. Svistonov sometimes had the odd sensation of living his novel. He frequently bumped into Kukureku in some strange street, shouting: "Peek-a-boo! You know who Kuku is, don't you, Svistonov? *You're Kuku!*" And out from behind Kuku would pop Psikhachev, spitting incantations in some deserted area: "Here, let me show you how we make pacts with the Devil! But for God's sake, don't speak to Masha about any of this. What's that? You're talented? You're a genius? You'll reveal my evil might for all the world to see?" Psikhachev would pronounce the magic words: "Sarabanda, pukhanda, rasmeranda..."<sup>o</sup> and Svistonov would see himself with Masha at the foot of a young tree, talking about

her father: "Masha, I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but your father isn't the great man you take him to be. In fact, he's a horrid, despicable little man. He isn't a mystic at all; God only knows what he is! He can't see past the end of his own nose, and as for those glasses he once had—you know, the ones he says let him see into some invisible world—well, they never existed, so he couldn't very well have lost them, could he? He lied when he told you that a German professor had given them to him as a gift, and he lied when he told you they let him see your ancestors having supper." Oddly, Masha never looked fourteen—she was always eighteen. And there were Pasha, Trina and the policeman, marching toward him in single file...

Svistonov stepped out.

"Tim-tim... Hey, char-à-banc, ti-ta, ta-ti-ta... they went their ways at sea..." Houselights shone on the gates and corners of buildings as the strains of song and guitar wound their way through the side streets and back to the quay, only to melt away between the stars and their reflections.

The daytime city looked like a playtown from up high. The trees did not grow randomly—they had been arranged; the buildings had not been built—they had been placed. The people and streetcars were windup toys.

Svistonov spent his nights smoking cigarettes and gazing down at the upturned lighted buildings along the Fontanka. In the water a long, cast-iron railing swayed to and fro while a bank of translucent clouds scudded across the sky, concealing the moon.

Svistonov's brow was furrowed with boredom and loneliness. The shimmering lights in the water below, once a source of childhood wonder, no longer amused him.

He felt as though the world around him were fading away with each passing day. The places he had described were blurring into wastelands. He lost all interest in his friends.

Each of his characters embodied a range of human prototypes; each of his settings incarnated a gamut of lands and locales.

The more he dwelt on his recently published novel, the emptier the world seemed, and the more tenuous his grasp on reality became.

He realised he was trapped inside his novel—with no way out.

Svistonov saw his characters wherever he went. They each had different names, different bodies, different hair, different mannerisms... but he recognised them just the same.

Svistonov had crossed over, fully, completely, into his novel.

## Notes

Many of the people and places (as well as Ancient gods, Russian games, customs, etc.) referred to by Vaginov in *The Works and Days of Svistonov* are either unknown or forgotten by the majority of English readers. The notes included here are meant to help the reader gain a better understanding into Vaginov's, and Svistonov's, world, and, hopefully, a greater appreciation of the novel itself.

I have omitted such names as Pushkin, Dante, Confucius, Goethe, Byron, Gogol et al. under the assumption that readers with even a passing knowledge of history and literature will be familiar with these people and their works.

CE = Collier's Encyclopedia

GDU = Grand dictionnaire universel du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle

GSE = Great Soviet Encyclopedia

PLc = Petit Larousse en couleurs

WNW = Webster's New World Dictionary

WTI = Webster's Third New International Dictionary

- p. 1    ° **Griboedov canal** : sic. The Prazhka actually empties into the Moyka River. The sea is the Gulf of Finland.
- p. 4    ° **October 25<sup>th</sup> Prospect** : present-day Nevsky Prospect.
- ° **House of Print** : present-day House of Friendship («Дом дружбы»). (Jaccard, *Daniil Harms et la fin de l'avant-garde russe*, pp. 439-440)
- ° **William of Rubruck** : (ca. 1220-1293) Flemish Franciscan monk who was King Louis IX's (France) envoy to the Great Khan in Mongolia. (PLc, p.1531)
- p. 5    ° 'le Bibelot's *Collection of History*'; both le Bibelot and his book are unattested.
- ° **Panaeva, Avdotya Yakovlevna** : (*née* Branskaya) (1819/20-1893) authoress whose memoirs constitute an important source of knowledge of literary life in 1840's and '50's Russia. (*Handbook of Russian Literature*, p. 558)

- p. 8
- **Teutonic Knights** : also the **Teutonic Order** and the **Order of the Knights of the Hospital of St. Marie of the Teutons in Jerusalem**. A military and religious order which originated in Acre (Palestine) in 1190. By the fourteenth century, the Teutonic Order had gained control over the entire Baltic Coast from the Pomeranian border to Finland. Their defeat in battle in 1410 by the Polish-Lithuanian king Ladislas signaled the beginning of the end for the order. (CE, vol. 22, p. 183)
  - Napoleon and his brothers, cousins and nephews all had a tremendous sexual appetite which resulted in a rather large number of illegitimate offspring. Charles-Louis-Napoleon's (Napoleon III) own paternity is extremely dubious. Napoleon's only legitimate male heir, the Duke of Reichstadt, died in July 1832 at the age of 21. (Bierman, John, *Napoleon III and His Carnival Empire*, p. 22)
  - **Henry III** : (1551-1589) elected King of Poland and, shortly afterwards, in 1574, crowned King of France upon his brother Charles IX's death. (PLC, p. 1284)
  - **Przesmycki, Zenon** : (1861-1944) Polish critic, poet and translator who introduced modernism and symbolism to Polish literature; wrote under the pseudonym of **Miriam**. (*Larousse du XXe siècle*, tome 5, p. 828)
- p. 9
- **Gostiny Dvor** : market area along present-day Nevsky Prospect.
  - '1) *Anthology of Plays Illustrating the Life and Times of King Henry IV, King of France and Poland*. Published by Pierre de Marteau in Cologne, 1762.  
My own copy of *The Works and Days of Svistonov* has 'MDCLXII', although in the Russian translation, the year indicated is 1762. The typesetters who worked on *Zabytaya kniga* no doubt used the original 1929 edition as their model and misinterpreted the Roman numeral system, with which Russians are generally unfamiliar.
  - **Benckendorff, D. A.** : most likely Count Alexander Benkendorf (1784-1854), a veteran of the Napoleonic Wars who was exemplary in his loyalty to Nicholas I during the failed military coup of 1825 (Decembrist uprising). He was subsequently appointed Senator, Head of the Secret Police

and Commander-in-Chief of the Imperial Headquarters for his valour. (GDU, vol. 2, p. 544)

- *'With Honour'*
- *'3) Critical Essay on the History of Livonia... by C. C. D. B. 1718.'*
- I have not been able to determine the factual existence of the books mentioned here, but they were almost certainly part of Vaginov's personal library.
- p. 10 ◦ **Pater, Walter** : (1839-1894) English man of letters, famous for his highly personal, impressionist criticism. (CE, vol. 18, p. 499)
- p. 11 ◦ Undoubtedly another instance of Vaginov running through a partial list of his literary inventory.
- *'The Adornments of Donna Giovanni Marinello'*
- p. 12 ◦ **Toksovo** : urban-type settlement 29 kilometres north of present-day St. Petersburg, site of a tuberculosis sanitarium and several sports centres. (GSE, vol. 26, p. 204)
- pp. 12 ◦ Whether Vaginov, a notorious pack rat and collector of  
18 contemporary kitsch, is quoting actual clippings from newspapers and magazines is unfortunately unverifiable at the present time.
- p. 13 ◦ *en plein* : archaic. Contemporary French would have it read *à plein*.
- P. 15 ◦ Vaginov here is poking fun at a slogan of the time ("Writers, to the factories!") which urged poets and writers to work in state factories, Party thought averring that no belletrist could accurately portray the proletariat without having some grounding and experience in the workers' daily lives. (Gerasimova, p. 153)  
Dmitry Shchelin, of course, lives in Leningrad.
- p. 16 ◦ **Akhtubinsk** : city on the left bank of the Akhtuba River, a branch of the Volga. (GSE, vol. 2, p. 75)
- p. 17 ◦ **Ashkhabad** : capital of present-day Turkmenistan.

- ° In my copy of *The Works and Days of Svistonov* the man accused has been "...charged under Articles 1, 13 and 1..." Whether this is simply an error on the part of the book's typesetters, or a mistake in the probable original clipping, willingly quoted by Vaginov, is unknown at the present time. Having no copy of the (undetermined) period's criminal code, I was unable to certify whether the final number was between 14 or 19, or a number ending with a 1. My choice of 21 is thus completely arbitrary.
- p. 20 ° The House of Print show is a veiled parody of the infamous OBERIU theatrical evening 'Three Left Hours', held 24 January 1928. At one point, a member of the group was to ride "...around on a three-wheeler in improbable lines and figures." (Jaccard, *Daniil Harms et la fin de l'avant-garde russe*, pp. 213 et 439) Vaginov himself read a sampling of his verse with a ballerina dancing around him on stage. (Nikolskaya, p. 10)
- p. 22 ° The Leningrad *Oberiuty* harboured particular enmity against the Muscovite futurists and *zaumniki* ('transrationalists'), who, they asserted, "castrate[d] the word and [made] it into a powerless and senseless mongrel." (from George Gibian's translation of the OBERIU manifesto, in *The Man with the Black Coat*, p. 247) Vaginov, of course, observed the feud with dispassionate interest.
- p. 23 ° I am unfamiliar with the songs on pp. 22, 55 and 95 and the poetic excerpts on pp. 57, 131 and 133.
- p. 26 ° **Detskoe Selo** : formerly Tsarskoe Selo (1728-1918), renamed Pushkin in 1937; located 24 kilometres south of present-day St. Petersburg. Its Lyceum produced an inordinate number of famous and influential men, including Pushkin. (GSE, vol. 28, pp. 683-684)
- ° **Delvig, Anton Antonovich** : (1798-1831) Russian poet and baron, a great deal of whose verse was formally and thematically inspired by ancient Greek poems. He attended the Tsarskoe Selo Lyceum in his youth and was Pushkin's closest friend. (GSE, vol. 8, p. 109)
- p. 27 ° Svistonov is perambulating Admiralty Park and Palace Square.

- p. 28 ° **Hermitage** : former Winter (i. e. imperial) palace and residence, converted into one of the world's greatest museums of Western art following the Bolshevik Revolution.
- ° **Juvenal** : (ca. 60-140 A.D.) Latin poet, author of *Satires*, in which he attacks the vices of his age. (PLc, p. 1328) The jaundice attributed him is one of many apocryphal details which had accumulated in the centuries following his death; in fact, virtually nothing is known of his life. (Barr, in his introduction to Rudd's translation of Juvenal's *The Satires*, pp. x-xi)
- p. 29 ° **Goncourt Brothers** : famed writing team of 19<sup>th</sup>-century France who eventually lent their name to their country's highest literary award. (PLc, p. 1253)
- ° **Verst** : a Russian unit of distance equal to 1.067 kilometres. (WTL, p. 2545)
- p. 30 ° **Yudenich, Nikolay Nikolaevich** : (1862-1933) leader of the counterrevolution in northwestern Russia during the Civil War (1918-1920). His failure to take Petrograd (see below) in October and November 1919 led to his defeat, and he retreated to Estonia with the remainder of his army. (GSE, vol. 30, p. 445)
- ° **Petrograd** : St. Petersburg was renamed Petrograd by the 1917 provisional government following Emperor Nicholas II's abdication. The city became Leningrad upon Lenin's death in 1924.
- p. 31 ° **Virgil** : The Virgil to whom Svistonov is referring is of course the one who guides Dante through Hell and Purgatory in *The Divine Comedy*, not the original Roman poet (70-19 B.C.) who penned *The Aeneid* (whose hero Aeneas also travelled to the Underworld). Medieval scholars considered him a 'white magician' who, in his fourth Eclogue, foretold the birth of Christ. (Sayers, in her notes to her translation of Dante's *Inferno*, p. 344)
- p. 35 ° **Traviata** : for Giuseppe Verdi's 1853 opera, *La Traviata*. (PLc, p. 1605)

- p. 38 ° Kuku is referring to Chapter 9, Book Six of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. (Maude, pp. 496-507).
- p. 40 ° Kuku's literary allusions at the open-air tavern all refer to Goethe's *Faust*.
- p. 47 ° **Apuleius, Lucius** : (125-ca. 180 A.D.) Latin writer, author of the comedy novel *The Golden Ass*. (PLc, p. 1028) In the dying days of Roman paganism, Apuleius and Apollonius of Tyana were considered two great magicians, often held up against Christ as miracle workers. (Lindsay, in his introduction to his translation of Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, pp. 25-27)
- p. 52 ° **Kurbatov** : (1878-1957) chemist and art historian. Vanya probably read his *Petersburg* (1913), *The Beauty of Petrograd* (1915) and *Gardens and Parks* (1916). (*Санкт-Петербург. Петроград, Ленинград – Энциклопедический справочник*, Научное издательство (БСЭ), 1992, стр. 307-308)
- p. 61 ° A reference to Homer's "rosy-fingered dawn" in the *Iliad*.
- p. 65 ° Excerpt from one of Alexander Pushkin's best-known poems, *Autumn* («Осень»). (Pushkin, *Selected Works*, pp. 84-87 [extract])
- p. 67 ° **Kukureku** : 'kukareku' is the Russian equivalent of 'cock-a-doodle-doo'. Note also Pasha's earlier appellation of Kuku as a 'cock of the walk'.  
Svistonov has not only found an ingenious pun on Kuku's name, but has maintained the avian motif. The cuckoo bird (kuku) is infamous for taking over other birds' nests; Kuku, in the same vein, usurps the personalities of famous people in order to survive.
- p. 68 ° **Yasnaya Polyana** : birthplace and estate of author Leo Tolstoy, located 14 kilometres from Tula. (GSE, vol. 30, p. 435)
- p. 71 ° **Literaturnye Mostki** : a section of Volkov Cemetery, where many of St. Petersburg's writers and poets lay buried. (GSE, vol. 14, p. 557)
- ° **Mikhaylovskoe** : village in the Pskov Oblast and site of Pushkin's family estate. Pushkin wrote more than one hundred works there, including *Boris Godunov* and parts of

*Eugene Onegin, Count Nulin and The Gypsies.* (GSE, vol. 21, p. 361)

- Lavretsky and Liza : see p. 73 in text and comment below (*A Nest of Gentry*).
  - p. 72 ◦ 'One whose name-day it is' («ИМЕНИННИК») in the Russian original. Orthodox Christianity accords much more importance to a person's name-day than to his or her birthday.
  - *Staraya Russa* : balneopelotherapeutic health resort situated 99 kilometres south of Novgorod. (GSE, vol. 24, p. 470)
  - *A Nest of Gentry* : novel by Ivan Turgenev (1858).
  - p. 76 ◦ *Eugene Onegin* : P. I. Tchaikovsky's 1878 opera based on Pushkin's 1823-1831 novel in verse.
  - p. 79 ◦ *Cagliostro* : see notes to introduction, p. xxxiii.
  - *Volkhov* : city 122 kilometres east of present-day St. Petersburg. (GSE, vol. 5, p. 571).
  - 'Name-day' («ИМЕНИНЫ») in the Russian original.
  - p. 82 ◦ This excerpt is from Alexander Blok's 1908 untitled poem "On the sorrowful earth I forgot about valour, heroic deeds, and glory..." («О доблестях, о подвигах, о славе/Я забывал на горестной земле...») (anonymous plain prose translation [accompanied by Russian original], in *The Heritage of Russian Verse*, pp. 264-266)
  - *Mandrake* : the root of a poisonous European plant formerly thought to have magical powers because of the fancied resemblance to the human shape. (WNW, p. 821)
- Geomancy** : divination by random figures formed when a handful of earth is thrown on the ground, or as by lines drawn at random. (WNW, p. 564)
- Sephiroth** : (Hebrew word meaning 'splendour') Name given by cabalists to the ten spheres or emanations of radiance of the Divine Essence, which are: Crown, Wisdom, Intelligence,

Greatness, Strength, Beauty, Firmness, Splendour, Foundation and Sovereignty. (CE, vol. 5, p. 85)

**Azazello** : also **Azazel**. In Jewish demonology, the head of fallen angels who came down to earth to wed human females and create a race of giants. The ancient Hebrews sacrificed goats as an act of propitiation (cf. Vaginov's first novel *The Goat Song*. (*Dictionnaire du Diable et de la démonologie*, p. 24)

**Haborym** : also **Aym**. Three-headed Duke of the Infernoes, commander of twenty-six legions of the damned. As the demon of fires, he travels astride a serpent, brandishing a torch. (*Dictionnaire du Diable et de la démonologie*, p. 92)

**Astarte** : also **Ishtar**. Assyro-Babylonian goddess of love and fertility who was often worshipped in the form of orgies. (PLc, p. 1310)

p. 83 ° **Thessaly** : region in North-Central Greece. According to Ancient Greek myths, the Thessalians were the originators of equitation and the first Hellenes to become civilised. Cf. the Thessalian witches of *Faust* and the innumerable references to Thessalian witchcraft by Classical authors.

° **Rali, Hari, Marazli** : despite extensive research, I have been unable to establish the origins of these names.

p. 84 ° Cf. *Faust, Part One* (*Night, Open Country*).

p. 85 ° The origin of this rite (and the ones on pp. 89 and 98-99) is certainly masonic and/or cabalistic, but I failed to find one like it in any of my extensive readings on the subjects (although the witch in part one of Goethe's *Faust* (*The Witch's Kitchen*) does make use of geomancy in her preparation of the rejuvenating elixir).

p. 86 ° **Gymnosophy** : the doctrine of a sect of ancient Hindu philosophers who went naked, lived ascetically, and practiced meditation. (WTI, p. 1015)

**Isis** : foremost ancient Egyptian goddess, ruler of love, sexuality, ceremonies, health, healing, immortality, time, stars, planets, moon and night. (Ann & Imel, *Goddesses in*

*World Mythology*, p. 83) Her worship became widespread in Ancient Greece and Rome. (CE, vol. 13, p. 309)

**Eleusinian mysteries** : secret religious rites celebrated at the ancient Greek city of Eleusis (later in conjunction with Athens) in honour of the goddess Demeter and her daughter Persephone. (WNW, p. 440)

**Pythagoras** : sixth-century B.C. Greek philosopher and mathematician, chiefly known for his eponymous theorem on the sum of a triangle's angles. His philosophy was based on a belief that numbers were the source and principle of all things. (PLC, p. 1503)

- I have not found any masonic, cabalistic or ancient religious manual or text making use of any of these variants in their appellations of the months. 'Terma' may be a variant of Greek *thermæ* ('warm'), while the other three names are almost certainly Semitic (cf. *Adar*, the sixth month of the Jewish year). (WNW, p. 15)
- I have likewise been unable to establish the veracity of this numerical alphabet.  
Daniil Kharms, Vaginov's compère from OBERIU, and admired futurist Velimir Khlebnikov, the father of *zaum* (transsense) poetry, both had "cabalistic leanings in letters and alphabets." (Milner-Gulland in *Daniil Kharms and the Poetics of the Absurd*, p.267)
- p. 89 ◦ **Orphic hypostases** : triad of muses who inspired Orpheus, the Thracian poet and musician in Greek mythology who symbolized the spirit of music. (WTI, p. 1593)
- **Hecate** : ancient Greek goddess of magic, moon, night, darkness, wealth, goodness, ceremonies, education and knowledge. (Ann & Imel, *Goddesses in World Mythology*, p. 179) Her worship was chiefly at crossroads, traditionally ghostly places, and she was associated with hellhounds and other formidable underworld creatures. Her statues were often threefold, facing all ways down the crossroads; she came to be interpreted as a triple personality (moon in heaven, Artemis [huntress-goddess] on earth, underworld power). (CE, vol. 12, pp. 6-7)

- p. 91 ° **Cato** : (234-149 B.C.) one of Rome's first great Latin writers. He was an ascetic conservative and a nationalist who denounced the Hellenisation of Rome. (PLc, p. 1115)
- ° **Plutarch** : (ca. 50-125 A.D.) peripatetic Greek writer, member of the Delphic priesthood. (PLc, p. 1488)
- p. 92 ° 'as day turned into dusk, the warlock and his companion continued their journey through alien hills and valleys. It seemed to the sorcerer that they had managed to travel a great distance in very little time. 'Then they entered a hill-hemmed field and came upon a festive gathering of men and women, who greeted them with open arms...' (*Middle French*)  
Cf. Walpurgis Night in *Faust, Part One*
- p. 93 ° **Vint** : a whist-type card game. (WNW, p. 2553)
- p. 96 ° **Seneca** : (ca. 4 B.C.-65 A.D.) Latin tragedian and essayist whose works propounded the stoic doctrine. (PLc, p. 1560)
- Epictetus** : (ca. 50-135 A.D.) Roman Stoic philosopher whose distilled doctrine consisted of a morality based on the distinction between what is dependant and independant of man. (PLc, p. 1195)
- Marcus Aurelius** : (121-180 A.D.) Roman philosopher-emperor, stoic. He regarded all religions in his empire benignly save Christianity, whose followers he had persecuted the duration of his reign. (PLc, p. 1389)
- p. 97 ° **Knights Templars** : a military and religious order, est. 1118 by small band of knights to protect pilgrims on their way to the Holy Land. The Knights Templars adhered to the Benedictine, semi-monastic rule (original name: Order of the Poor Knights of Christ). Its members, most of whom were of aristocratic stock, turned the order into the foremost bankers of Europe by the end of the thirteenth century and exercised great influence in Spain, France and England. Its subsequent worldliness earned it a charge of heresy and immorality in 1307, and the order was suppressed and its lands seized by the mid-fourteenth century. (CE, vol. 14, p. 122)

- p. 98 ° **LUCS** = Leningrad Union of Consumers' Societies («ЛСПО = Ленинградский союз потребительских обществ»). (*Glossary of Russian Abbreviations and Acronyms*, p. 356.)
- p. 104 ° A revealing glimpse into Iya's literary leanings: the fiery Russian futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky was also contemptuous of Racine and Corneille (see «Той стороне» (*To the Other Side*), Mayakovsky, *Works (Two Volumes)*, vol. 1, pp. 104-106)
- ° **Horace** : (65 B.C.-5 A.D.) Latin poet revered by Renaissance humanists as a model of the classical virtues of balance and measure. (PLC, p. 1293)
- Catullus** : (ca. 87-54 B.C.) Latin lyrical poet. (PLC, p. 1115)
- p. 105 ° **Melmoth the Wanderer** : Charles Robert Maturin's 1820 novel is generally considered the epitome and crowning achievement of Gothic literature. Its principal female character is Immalee, a being of pure good who is eventually corrupted.
- The Magic Skin* : written in 1830. This novel, interestingly, was criticised as being derivative of Hoffmann (see below) (GDU, vol. 2, pp. 136-137). Its two heroines are Fœdora, who represents the evil, material world, and Pauline, who embodies man's higher, spiritual nature.  
Cf. also Balzac's 1835 offering, *Melmoth Reconciled*.
- The Golden Pot* : E. T. A. Hoffmann's 'modern fairy-tale' was a work of seminal importance in the development of Russian literature. Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoyevsky and the Symbolists, to name but a few, were deeply influenced by Hoffmann's 'earthy' grotesques. (Ingham, E, T. A. *Hoffmann's Reception in Russia*) Two girls vie for the love of Anselmus, *The Golden Pot's* hero: Veronica (the image of Imperfect Man) and the sylph-nymph Serpentina (representing Harmony of Being).
- p. 106 ° **Petrarch** : (1304-1374) Italian poet, one of the great humanists of the Renaissance; wrote in both Latin and Italian. He was also (not unlike Vaginov) an historian, archeologist and collector of classical texts. (PLC, p. 1478)

- p. 108 ° **Bristol Hotel** : this hotel figures prominently in Mayakovsky's poem «Братья писатели» (*Fellow Writers*). (Mayakovsky, vol. 1, pp. 89-90)
- p. 117 ° **Murano** : Venice suburb famed for its glass artwork (PLC, p. 1428)
- p. 118 ° Deryabkin's profession is no doubt meant as a reference to Mayakovsky's infamous 1926 poem, *Conversation with a Tax Inspector about Poetry* («Разговор с фининспектором о поэзии»). (Mayakovsky, vol. 1, pp. 357-365)
- p. 120 ° *Days of Old* : unattested.
- p. 122 ° **Gorny Institute** : military school in pre-revolutionary St. Petersburg. (*Большая советская энциклопедия*, т. 12, 166)
- p. 125 ° 'We never realise how precious our health is to us until it is lost.'
- p. 126 ° 'Name-day' in the Russian original.
- p. 132 ° **Bronze Horseman** : E. M. Falconet's commemorative statue of Peter the Great.
- p. 136 ° **Sarabanda, pukhanda, rasmeranda** : my research has failed to establish these words as actual masonic and/or cabalistic incantations.

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