

The Secret City

Hugh Walpole

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BY HUGH WALPOLE

STUDIES IN PLACE
THE SECRET CITY
THE DARK FOREST
THE GOLDEN SCARECROW
THE WOODEN HORSE
MARADICK AT FORTY
THE GODS AND MR. PERRIN

TWO PROLOGUES
THE PRELUDE TO ADVENTURE
FORTITUDE

THE RISING CITY
1. THE DUCHESS OF WREXE
2. THE GREEN MIRROR

THE SECRET CITY

A NOVEL IN THREE PARTS

BY

HUGH WALPOLE

AUTHOR OF "FORTITUDE," "THE DARK FOREST," "THE DUCHESS OF WREXE," ETC.

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TO

MAJOR JAMES ANNAND (15TH BATTALION 48TH HIGHLANDERS, C.E.F.)

IN RETURN FOR THE GIFT OF HIS FRIENDSHIP

In the eastern quarter dawn breaks, the stars flicker pale.
The morning cock at Ju-nan mounts the wall and crows.
The songs are over, the clock run down, but still the feast is set.
The Moon grows dim and the stars are few; morning has come to the world.
At a thousand gates and ten thousand doors the fish-shaped keys turn;
Round the Palace and up by the Castle, the crows and magpies are flying.

Cock-Crow Song. Anon. (1st Century B.C.).

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PART I

VERA AND NINA

THE SECRET CITY

VERA AND NINA

I

There are certain things that I feel, as I look through this bundle of manuscript, that I must say. The first is that of course no writer ever has fulfilled his intention and no writer ever will; secondly, that there was, when I began, another intention than that of dealing with my subject adequately, namely that of keeping myself outside the whole of it; I was to be, in the most abstract and immaterial sense of the word, a voice, and that simply because this business of seeing Russian psychology through English eyes has no excuse except that it is English. That is its only interest, its only atmosphere, its only motive, and if you are going to tell me that any aspect of Russia psychological, mystical, practical, or commercial seen through an English medium is either Russia as she really is or Russia as Russians see her, I say to you, without hesitation, that you don't know of what you are talking.

Of Russia and the Russians I know nothing, but of the effect upon myself and my ideas of life that Russia and the Russians have made during these last three years I know something. You are perfectly free to say that neither myself nor my ideas of life are of the slightest importance to any one. To that I would say that any one's ideas about life are of importance and that any one's ideas about Russian life are of interest... and beyond that, I have simply been compelled to write. I have not been able to help myself, and all the faults and any virtues in this story come from that. The facts are true, the inferences absolutely my own, so that you may reject them at any moment and substitute others. It is true that I have known Vera Michailovna, Nina, Alexei Petrovitch, Henry, Jerry, and the rest--some of them intimately--and many of the conversations here recorded I have myself heard. Nevertheless the inferences are my own, and I think there is no Russian who, were he to read this book, would not say that those inferences were wrong. In an earlier record, to which this is in some ways a sequel,[1] my inferences were, almost without exception, wrong, and there is no Russian alive for whom this book can have any kind of value except as a happy example of the mistakes that the Englishman can make about the Russian.

But it is over those very mistakes that the two souls, Russian and English, so different, so similar, so friendly, so hostile, may meet.... And in any case the thing has been too strong for me. I have no other defence. For one's interest in life is stronger, God knows how much stronger, than one's discretion, and one's love of life than one's wisdom, and one's curiosity in life than one's ability to record it. At least, as I have said, I have endeavoured to keep my own history, my own desires, my own temperament out of this, as much as is humanly possible....

And the facts are true.

[Footnote 1: The Dark Forest.]

They had been travelling for a week, and had quite definitely decided that they had nothing whatever in common. As they stood there, lost and desolate on the grimy platform of the Finland station, this same thought must have been paramount in their minds: "Thank God we shan't have to talk to one another any longer. Whatever else may happen in this strange place that at least we're spared." They were probably quite unconscious of the contrast they presented, unconscious because, at this time, young Bohun never, I should imagine, visualised himself as anything more definite than absolutely "right," and Lawrence simply never thought about himself at all. But they were perfectly aware of their mutual dissatisfaction, although they were of course absolutely polite. I heard of it afterwards from both sides, and I will say quite frankly that my sympathy was all with Lawrence. Young Bohun can have been no fun as a travelling companion at that time. If you had looked at him there standing on the Finland station platform and staring haughtily about for porters you must have thought him the most self-satisfied of mortals. "That fellow wants kicking," you would have said. Good-looking, thin, tall, large black eyes, black eyelashes, clean and neat and "right" at the end of his journey as he had been at the beginning of it, just foreign-looking enough with his black hair and pallor to make him interesting--he was certainly arresting. But it was the self-satisfaction that would have struck any one. And he had reason; he was at that very moment experiencing the most triumphant moment of his life.

He was only twenty-three, and was already as it seemed to the youthfully limited circle of his vision, famous. Before the war he had been, as he quite frankly admitted to myself and all his friends, nothing but ambitious. "Of course I edited the Granta for a year," he would say, "and I don't think I did it badly.... But that wasn't very much."

No, it really wasn't a great deal, and we couldn't tell him that it was. He had always intended, however, to be a great man; the Granta was simply a stepping-stone. He was already, during his second year at Cambridge, casting about as to the best way to penetrate, swiftly and securely, the fastnesses of London journalism. Then the war came, and he had an impulse of perfectly honest and selfless patriotism...., not quite selfless perhaps, because he certainly saw himself as a mighty hero, winning V.C.'s and saving forlorn hopes, finally received by his native village under an archway of flags and mottoes (the local postmaster, who had never treated him very properly, would make the speech of welcome). The reality did him some good, but not very much, because when he had been in France only a fortnight he was gassed and sent home with a weak heart. His heart remained weak, which made him interesting to women and allowed time for his poetry. He was given an easy post in the Foreign Office and, in the autumn of 1916 he published Discipline: Sonnets and Poems. This appeared at a very fortunate moment, when the more serious of British idealists were searching for signs of a general improvement, through the stress of war, of poor humanity.... "Thank God, there are our young poets," they said.

The little book had excellent notices in the papers, and one poem in especial "How God spoke to Jones at Breakfast-time" was selected for especial praise because of its admirable realism and force. One paper said that the British breakfast-table lived in that poem "in all its tiniest most insignificant details," as no breakfast-table, save

possibly that of Major Pendennis at the beginning of Pendennis has lived before. One paper said, "Mr. Bohun merits that much-abused word 'genius.'"

The young author carried these notices about with him and I have seen them all. But there was more than this. Bohun had been for the last four years cultivating Russian. He had been led into this through a real, genuine interest. He read the novelists and set himself to learn the Russian language. That, as any one who has tried it will know is no easy business, but Henry Bohun was no fool, and the Russian refugee who taught him was no fool. After Henry's return from France he continued his lessons, and by the spring of 1916 he could read easily, write fairly, and speak atrociously. He then adopted Russia, an easy thing to do, because his supposed mastery of the language gave him a tremendous advantage over his friends. "I assure you that's not so," he would say. "You can't judge Tchehov till you've read him in the original. Wait till you can read him in Russian." "No, I don't think the Russian characters are like that," he would declare. "It's a queer thing, but you'd almost think I had some Russian blood in me... I sympathise so." He followed closely the books that emphasised the more sentimental side of the Russian character, being of course grossly sentimental himself at heart. He saw Russia glittering with fire and colour, and Russians, large, warm, and simple, willing to be patronised, eagerly confessing their sins, rushing forward to make him happy, entertaining him for ever and ever with a free and glorious hospitality.

"I really think I do understand Russia," he would say modestly. He said it to me when he had been in Russia two days.

Then, in addition to the success of his poems and the general interest that he himself aroused the final ambition of his young heart was realised. The Foreign Office decided to send him to Petrograd to help in the great work of British propaganda.

He sailed from Newcastle on December 2, 1916....

III

At this point I am inevitably reminded of that other Englishman who, two years earlier than Bohun, had arrived in Russia with his own pack of dreams and expectations.

But John Trenchard, of whose life and death I have tried elsewhere to say something, was young Bohun's opposite, and I do not think that the strange unexpectedness of Russia can be exemplified more strongly than by the similarity of appeal that she could make to two so various characters. John was shy, self-doubting, humble, brave, and a gentleman,--Bohun was brave and a gentleman, but the rest had yet to be added to him. How he would have patronised Trenchard if he had known him! And yet at heart they were not perhaps so dissimilar. At the end of my story it will be apparent, I think, that they were not.

That journey from Newcastle to Bergen, from Bergen to Torneo, from Torneo to Petrograd is a tiresome business. There is much waiting at Custom-houses, disarrangement of trains and horses and meals, long wearisome hours of stuffy carriages and grimy window-panes. Bohun I suspect suffered, too, from that sudden sharp precipitance into a world

that knew not Discipline and recked nothing of the Granta. Obviously none of the passengers on the boat from Newcastle had ever heard of Discipline. They clutched in their hands the works of Mr. Oppenheim, Mr. Compton Mackenzie, and Mr. O'Henry and looked at Bohun, I imagine, with indifferent superiority. He had been told at the Foreign Office that his especial travelling companion was to be Jerry Lawrence. If he had hoped for anything from this direction one glance at Jerry's brick-red face and stalwart figure must have undeceived him. Jerry, although he was now thirty-two years of age, looked still very much the undergraduate. My slight acquaintance with him had been in those earlier Cambridge days, through a queer mutual friend, Dune, who at that time seemed to promise so magnificently, who afterwards disappeared so mysteriously. You would never have supposed that Lawrence, Captain of the University Rigger during his last two years, Captain of the English team through all the Internationals of the season 1913-14, could have had anything in common, except football, with Dune, artist and poet if ever there was one. But on the few occasions when I saw them together it struck me that football was the very least part of their common ground. And that was the first occasion on which I suspected that Jerry Lawrence was not quite what he seemed....

I can imagine Lawrence standing straddleways on the deck of the Jupiter, his short thick legs wide apart, his broad back indifferent to everything and everybody, his rather plump, ugly, good-natured face staring out to sea as though he saw nothing at all. He always gave the impression of being half asleep, he had a way of suddenly lurching on his legs as though in another moment his desire for slumber would be too strong for him, and would send him crashing to the ground. He would be smoking an ancient briar, and his thick red hands would be clasped behind his back....

No encouraging figure for Bohun's aestheticism.

I can see as though I had been present Bohun's approach to him, his patronising introduction, his kindly suggestion that they should eat their meals together, Jerry's smiling, lazy acquiescence. I can imagine how Bohun decided to himself that "he must make the best of this chap. After all, it was a long tiresome journey, and anything was better than having no one to talk to...." But Jerry, unfortunately, was in a bad temper at the start. He did not want to go out to Russia at all. His father, old Stephen Lawrence, had been for many years the manager of some works in Petrograd, and the first fifteen years of Jerry's life had been spent in Russia. I did not, at the time when I made Jerry's acquaintance at Cambridge, know this; had I realised it I would have understood many things about him which puzzled me. He never alluded to Russia, never apparently thought of it, never read a Russian book, had, it seemed, no connection of any kind with any living soul in that country.

Old Lawrence retired, and took a fine large ugly palace in Clapham to end his days in....

Suddenly, after Lawrence had been in France for two years, had won the Military Cross there and, as he put it, "was just settling inside his skin," the authorities realised his Russian knowledge, and decided to transfer him to the British Military Mission in Petrograd. His anger when he was sent back to London and informed of this was extreme. He hadn't the least desire to return to Russia, he was very happy where he was, he had forgotten all his Russian; I can see him, saying very

little, looking like a sulky child and kicking his heel up and down across the carpet.

"Just the man we want out there, Lawrence," he told me somebody said to him; "keep them in order."

"Keep them in order!" That tickled his sense of humour. He was to laugh frequently, afterwards, when he thought of it. He always chewed a joke as a cow chews the cud.

So that he was in no pleasant temper when he met Bohun on the decks of the Jupiter. That journey must have had its humours for any observer who knew the two men. During the first half of it I imagine that Bohun talked and Lawrence slumbered. Bohun patronised, was kind and indulgent, and showed very plainly that he thought his companion the dullest and heaviest of mortals. Then he told Lawrence about Russia; he explained everything to him, the morals, psychology, fighting qualities, strengths, and weaknesses. The climax arrived when he announced: "But it's the mysticism of the Russian peasant which will save the world. That adoration of God...."

"Rot!" interrupted Lawrence.

Bohun was indignant. "Of course if you know better--" he said.

"I do," said Lawrence, "I lived there for fifteen years. Ask my old governor about the mysticism of the Russian peasant. He'll tell you."

Bohun felt that he was justified in his annoyance. As he said to me afterwards: "The fellow had simply been laughing at me. He might have told me about his having been there." At that time, to Bohun, the most terrible thing in the world was to be laughed at.

After that Bohun asked Jerry questions. But Jerry refused to give himself away. "I don't know," he said, "I've forgotten it all. I don't suppose I ever did know much about it."

At Haparanda, most unfortunately, Bohun was insulted. The Swedish Customs Officer there, tired at the constant appearance of self-satisfied gentlemen with Red Passports, decided that Bohun was carrying medicine in his private bags. Bohun refused to open his portmanteau, simply because he "was a Courier and wasn't going to be insulted by a dirty foreigner." Nevertheless "the dirty foreigner" had his way and Bohun looked rather a fool. Jerry had not sympathised sufficiently with Bohun in this affair.... "He only grinned," Bohun told me indignantly afterwards. "No sense of patriotism at all. After all, Englishmen ought to stick together."

Finally, Bohun tested Jerry's literary knowledge. Jerry seemed to have none. He liked Fielding, and a man called Farnol and Jack London.

He never read poetry. But, a strange thing, he was interested in Greek. He had bought the works of Euripides and Aeschylus in the Loeb Library, and he thought them "thundering good." He had never read a word of any Russian author. "Never Anna? Never War and Peace? Never Karamazov? Never Tchekhov?"

No, never.

Bohun gave him up.

IV

It should be obvious enough then that they hailed their approaching separation with relief. Bohun had been promised by one of the secretaries at the Embassy that rooms would be found for him. Jerry intended to "hang out" at one of the hotels. The "Astoria" was, he believed, the right place.

"I shall go to the 'France' for to-night," Bohun declared, having lived, it would seem, in Petrograd all his days. "Look me up, old man, won't you?"

Jerry smiled his slow smile. "I will," he said. "So long."

We will now follow the adventures of Henry. He had in him, I know, a tiny, tiny creature with sharp ironical eyes and pointed springing feet who watched his poses, his sentimentalities and heroics with affectionate scorn. This same creature watched him now as he waited to collect his bags, and then stood on the gleaming steps of the station whilst the porters fetched an Isvostchick, and the rain fell in long thundering lines of steel upon the bare and desolate streets.

"You're very miserable and lonely," the Creature said; "you didn't expect this."

No, Henry had not expected this, and he also had not expected that the Isvostchick would demand eight roubles for his fare to the "France." Henry knew that this was the barest extortion, and he had sworn to himself long ago that he would allow nobody to "do" him. He looked at the rain and submitted. "After all, it's war time," he whispered to the Creature.

He huddled himself into the cab, his baggage piled all about him, and tried by pulling at the hood to protect himself from the elements. He has told me that he felt that the rain was laughing at him; the cab was so slow that he seemed to be sitting in the middle of pools and melting snow; he was dirty, tired, hungry, and really not far from tears. Poor Henry was very, very young....

He scarcely looked at the Neva as he crossed the bridge; all the length of the Quay he saw only the hunched, heavy back of the old cabman and the spurting, jumping rain, the vast stone grave-like buildings and the high grey sky. He drove through the Red Square that swung in the rain. He was thinking about the eight roubles.... He pulled up with a jerk outside the "France" hotel. Here he tried, I am sure, to recover his dignity, but he was met by a large, stout, eastern-looking gentleman with peacock feathers in his round cap who smiled gently when he heard about the eight roubles, and ushered Henry into the dark hall with a kindly patronage that admitted of no reply.

The "France" is a good hotel, and its host is one of the kindest of mortals, but it is in many ways Russian rather than Continental in its atmosphere. That ought to have pleased and excited so sympathetic a soul as Henry. I am afraid that this moment of his arrival was the first realisation in his life of that stern truth that that which seems

romantic in retrospect is only too often unpleasantly realistic in its actual experience.

He stepped into the dark hall, damp like a well, with a whirring snarling clock on the wall and a heavy glass door pulled by a rope swinging and shifting, the walls and door and rack with the letters shifting too. In this rocking world there seemed to be no stable thing. He was dirty and tired and humiliated. He explained to his host, who smiled but seemed to be thinking of other things, that he wanted a bath and a room and a meal. He was promised these things, but there was no conviction abroad that the "France" had gone up in the world since Henry Bohun had crossed its threshold. An old man with a grey beard and the fixed and glittering eye of the "Ancient Mariner" told him to follow him. How well I know those strange, cold, winding passages of the "France," creeping in and out across boards that shiver and shake, with walls pressing in upon you so thin and rocky that the wind whistles and screams and the paper makes ghostly shadows and signs as though unseen fingers moved it. There is that smell, too, which a Russian hotel alone, of all the hostelries in the world, can produce, a smell of damp and cabbage soup, of sunflower seeds and cigarette-ends, of drainage and patchouli, of, in some odd way, the sea and fish and wet pavements. It is a smell that will, until I die, be presented to me by those dark half-hidden passages, warrens of intricate fumbling ways with boards suddenly rising like little mountains in the path; behind the wainscot one hears the scuttling of innumerable rats.

The Ancient Mariner showed Henry to his room and left him. Henry was depressed at what he saw. His room was a slip cut out of other rooms, and its one window was faced by a high black wall down whose surface gleaming water trickled. The bare boards showed large and gaping cracks; there was a washstand, a bed, a chest of drawers, and a faded padded arm-chair with a hole in it. In the corner near the window was an ikon of tinsel and wood; a little round marble-topped table offered a dusty carafe of water. A heavy red-plush bell-rope tapped the wall.

He sat down in the faded arm-chair and instantly fell asleep. Was the room hypnotic? Why not? There are stranger things than that in Petrograd.... I myself am aware of what walls and streets and rivers, engaged on their own secret life in that most secret of towns, can do to the mere mortals who interfere with their stealthy concerns. Henry dreamt; he was never afterwards able to tell me of what he had dreamt, but it had been a long heavy cobwebby affair, in which the walls of the hotel seemed to open and to close, black little figures moving like ants up and down across the winding ways. He saw innumerable carafes and basins and beds, the wall-paper whistling, the rats scuttling, and lines of cigarette-ends, black and yellow, moving in trails like worms across the boards. All men like worms, like ants, like rats and the gleaming water trickling interminably down the high black wall. Of course he was tired after his long journey, hungry too, and depressed.... He awoke to find the Ancient Mariner watching him. He screamed. The Mariner reassured him with a toothless smile, gripped him by the arm and showed him the bathroom.

"_Pajaluista!_" said the Mariner.

Although Henry had learnt Russian, so unexpected was the pronunciation of this familiar word that it was as though the old man had said "Open Sesame!"....

He felt happy and consoled after a bath, a shave, and breakfast. Always I should think he reacted very quickly to his own physical sensations, and he was, as yet, too young to know that you cannot lay ghosts by the simple brushing of your hair and sponging your face. After his breakfast he lay down on the bed and again fell asleep, but this time not to dream; he slept like a Briton, dreamless, healthy and clean. He awoke as sure of himself as ever.... The first incantation had not, you see, been enough....

He plunged into the city. It was raining with that thick dark rain that seems to have mud in it before it has fallen. The town was veiled in thin mist, figures appearing and disappearing, tram-bells ringing, and those strange wild cries in the Russian tongue that seem at one's first hearing so romantic and startling, rising sharply and yet lazily into the air. He plunged along and found himself in the Nevski Prospect--he could not mistake its breadth and assurance, dull though it seemed in the mud and rain.

But he was above all things a romantic and sentimental youth, and he was determined to see this country as he had expected to see it; so he plodded on, his coat-collar up, British obstinacy in his eyes and a little excited flutter in his heart whenever a bright colour, an Eastern face, a street pedlar, a bunched-up, high-backed coachman, anything or any one unusual presented itself.

He saw on his right a great church; it stood back from the street, having in front of it a desolate little arrangement of bushes and public seats and winding paths. The church itself was approached by flights of steps that disappeared under the shadow of a high dome supported by vast stone pillars. Letters in gold flamed across the building above the pillars.

Henry passed the intervening ground and climbed the steps. Under the pillars before the heavy, swinging doors were two rows of beggars; they were dirtier, more touselled and tangled, fiercer and more ironically falsely submissive than any beggars that, he had ever seen. He described one fellow to me, a fierce brigand with a high black hat of feathers, a soiled Cossack coat and tall dirty red leather boots; his eyes were fires, Henry said. At any rate that is what Henry liked to think they were. There was a woman with no legs and a man with neither nose nor ears. I am sure that they watched Henry with supplicating hostility. He entered the church and was instantly swallowed up by a vast multitude.

He described to me afterwards that it was as though he had been pushed (by the evil, eager fingers of the beggars no doubt) into deep water. He rose with a gasp, and was first conscious of a strange smell of dirt and tallow and something that he did not know, but was afterwards to recognise as the scent of sunflower seed. He was pushed upon, pressed and pulled, fingered and crushed. He did not mind--he was glad--this was what he wanted. He looked about him and found that he and all the people round him were swimming in a hazy golden mist flung into the air from the thousands of lighted candles that danced in the breeze blowing through the building. The whole vast shining floor was covered with peasants, pressed, packed together. Peasants, men and women--he did not see a single member of the middle-class. In front of him under the altar

there was a blaze of light, and figures moved in the blaze uncertainly, indistinctly. Now and then a sudden quiver passed across the throng, as wind blows through the corn. Here and there men and women knelt, but for the most part they stood steadfast, motionless, staring in front of them. He looked at them and discovered that they had the faces of children--simple, trustful, unintelligent, unhumorous children,--and eyes, always kindlier than any he had ever seen in other human beings. They stood there gravely, with no signs of religious fervour, with no marks of impatience or weariness and also with no evidence of any especial interest in what was occurring. It might have been a vast concourse of sleep-walkers.

He saw that three soldiers near to him were holding hands....

From the lighted altars came the echoing whisper of a monotonous chant. The sound rose and fell, scarcely a voice, scarcely an appeal, something rising from the place itself and sinking back into it again without human agency.

After a time he saw a strange movement that at first he could not understand. Then watching, he found that unlit candles were being passed from line to line, one man leaning forward and tapping the man in front of him with the candle, the man in front passing it, in his turn, forward, and so on until at last it reached the altar where it was lighted and fastened into its sconce. This tapping with the candles happened incessantly throughout the vast crowd. Henry himself was tapped, and felt suddenly as though he had been admitted a member of some secret society. He felt the tap again and again, and soon he seemed to be hypnotised by the low chant at the altar and the motionless silent crowd and the dim golden mist. He stood, not thinking, not living, away, away, questioning nothing, wanting nothing....

He must of course finish with his romantic notion. People pushed around him, struggling to get out. He turned to go and was faced, he told me, with a remarkable figure. His description, romantic and sentimental though he tried to make it, resolved itself into nothing more than the sketch of an ordinary peasant, tall, broad, black-bearded, neatly clad in blue shirt, black trousers, and high boots. This fellow stood apparently away from the crowd, apart, and watched it all, as you so often may see the Russian peasant doing, with indifferent gaze. In his mild blue eyes Bohun fancied that he saw all kinds of things--power, wisdom, prophecy--a figure apart and symbolic. But how easy in Russia it is to see symbols and how often those symbols fail to justify themselves! Well, I let Bohun have his fancies. "I should know that man anywhere again," he declared. "It was as though he knew what was going to happen and was ready for it." Then I suppose he saw my smile, for he broke off and said no more.

And here for a moment I leave him and his adventures.

VI

I must speak, for a moment, of myself. Throughout the autumn and winter of 1914 and the spring and summer of 1915 I was with the Russian Red Cross on the Polish and Galician fronts. During the summer and early autumn of 1915 I shared with the Ninth Army the retreat through Galicia. Never very strong physically, owing to a lameness of the left hip from

which I have suffered from birth, the difficulties of the retreat and the loss of my two greatest friends gave opportunities to my arch-enemy Sciatica to do what he wished with me, and in October 1915 I was forced to leave the Front and return to Petrograd. I was an invalid throughout the whole of that winter, and only gradually during the spring of 1916 was able to pull myself back to an old shadow of my former vigour and energy. I saw that I would never be good for the Front again, but I minded that the less now in that the events of the summer of 1915 had left me without heart or desire, the merest spectator of life, passive and, I cynically believed, indifferent. I was nothing to any one, nor was any one anything to me. The desire of my heart had slipped like a laughing ghost away from my ken--men of my slow warmth and cautious suspicion do not easily admit a new guest....

Moreover during this spring of 1916 Petrograd, against my knowledge, wove webs about my feet. I had never shared the common belief that Moscow was the only town in Russia. I had always known that Petrograd had its own grace and beauty, but it was not until, sore and sick at heart, lonely and bitter against fate, haunted always by the face and laughter of one whom I would never see again, I wandered about the canals and quays and deserted byways of the city that I began to understand its spirit. I took, to the derision of my few friends, two tumbledown rooms on Pilot's Island, at the far end of Ekateringofsky Prospect. Here amongst tangled grass, old, deserted boats, stranded, ruined cottages and abraded piers, I hung above the sea. Not indeed the sea of my Glebeshire memories; this was a sluggish, tideless sea, but in the winter one sheet of ice, stretching far beyond the barrier of the eye, catching into its frosted heart every colour of the sky and air, the lights of the town, the lamps of imprisoned barges, the moon, the sun, the stars, the purple sunsets, and the strange, mysterious lights that flash from the shadows of the hovering snow-clouds. My rooms were desolate perhaps, bare boards with holes, an old cracked mirror, a stove, a bookcase, a photograph, and a sketch of Rafiel Cove. My friends looked and shivered; I, staring from my window on to the entrance into the waterways of the city, felt that any magic might come out of that strange desolation and silence. A shadow like the sweeping of the wing of a great bird would hover above the ice; a bell from some boat would ring, then the church bells of the city would answer it; the shadow would pass and the moon would rise, deep gold, and lie hard and sharp against the thick, impending air; the shadow would pass and the stars come out, breaking with an almost audible crackle through the stuff of the sky... and only five minutes away the shop-lights were glittering, the Isvostchicks crying to clear the road, the tram-bells clanging, the boys shouting the news. Around and about me marvellous silence....

In the early autumn of 1916 I met at a dinner-party Nicolai Leontievitch Markovitch. In the course of a conversation I informed him that I had been for a year with the Ninth Army in Galicia, and he then asked me whether I had met his wife's uncle Alexei Petrovitch Semyonov, who was also with the Ninth Army. It happened that I had known Alexei Petrovitch very well and the sound of his name brought back to me so vividly events and persons with whom we had both been connected that I had difficulty in controlling my sudden emotion. Markovitch invited me to his house. He lived, he told me, with his wife in a flat in the Anglisky Prospect; his sister-in-law and another of his wife's uncles, a brother of Alexei Petrovitch, also lived with them. I said that I would be very glad to come.

It is impossible to describe how deeply, in the days that followed, I

struggled against the attraction that this invitation presented to me. I had succeeded during all these months in avoiding any contact with the incidents or characters of the preceding year. I had written no letters and had received none; I had resolutely avoided meeting any members of my old Atriad when they came to the town.

But now I succumbed. Perhaps something of my old vitality and curiosity was already creeping back into my bones, perhaps time was already dimming my memories--at any rate, on an evening early in October I paid my call. Alexei Petrovitch was not present; he was on the Galician front, in Tarnople. I found Markovitch, his wife Vera Michailovna, his sister-in-law Nina Michailovna, his wife's uncle Ivan Petrovitch and a young man Boris Nicolaievitch Grogoff. Markovitch himself was a thin, loose, untidy man with pale yellow hair thinning on top, a ragged, pale beard, a nose with a tendency to redden at any sudden insult or unkind word and an expression perpetually anxious.

Vera Michailovna on the other hand was a fine young woman and it must have been the first thought of all who met them as to why she had married him. She gave an impression of great strength; her figure tall and her bosom full, her dark eyes large and clear. She had black hair, a vast quantity of it, piled upon her head. Her face was finely moulded, her lips strong, red, sharply marked. She looked like a woman who had already made up her mind upon all things in life and could face them all. Her expression was often stern and almost insolently scornful, but also she could be tender, and her heart would shine from her eyes. She moved slowly and gracefully, and quite without self-consciousness.

A strange contrast was her sister, Nina Michailovna, a girl still, it seemed, in childhood, pretty, with brown hair, laughing eyes, and a trembling mouth that seemed ever on the edge of laughter. Her body was soft and plump; she had lovely hands, of which she was obviously very proud. Vera dressed sternly, often in black, with a soft white collar, almost like a nurse or nun. Nina was always in gay colours; she wore clothes, as it seemed to me, in very bad taste, colours clashing, strange bows and ribbons and lace that had nothing to do with the dress to which they were attached. She was always eating sweets, laughed a great deal, had a shrill piercing voice, and was never still. Ivan Petrovitch, the uncle, was very different from my Semyonov. He was short, fat, and dressed with great neatness and taste. He had a short black moustache, a head nearly bald, and a round chubby face with small smiling eyes. He was a Chinovnik, and held his position in some Government office with great pride and solemnity. It was his chief aim, I found, to be considered cosmopolitan, and when he discovered the feeble quality of my French he insisted in speaking always to me in his strange confused English, a language quite of his own, with sudden startling phrases which he had "snatched" as he expressed it from Shakespeare and the Bible. He was the kindest soul alive, and all he asked was that he should be left alone and that no one should quarrel with him. He confided to me that he hated quarrels, and that it was an eternal sorrow to him that the Russian people should enjoy so greatly that pastime. I discovered that he was terrified of his brother, Alexei, and at that I was not surprised. His weakness was that he was impenetrably stupid, and it was quite impossible to make him understand anything that was not immediately in line with his own experiences--unusual obtuseness in a Russian. He was vain about his clothes, especially about his shoes, which he had always made in London; he was sentimental and very easily hurt.

Very different again was the young man Boris Nicolaievitch Grogoff. No relation of the family, he seemed to spend most of his time in the Markovitch flat. A handsome young man, strongly built, with a head of untidy curly yellow hair, blue eyes, high cheek bones, long hands with which he was for ever gesticulating. Grogoff was an internationalist Socialist and expressed his opinions at the top of his voice whenever he could find an occasion. He would sit for hours staring moodily at the floor, or glaring fiercely upon the company. Then suddenly he would burst out, walking about, flinging up his arms, shouting. I saw at once that Markovitch did not like him and that he despised Markovitch. He did not seem to me a very wise young man, but I liked his energy, his kindness, sudden generousities, and honesty. I could not see his reason for being so much in this company.

During the autumn of 1916 I spent more and more time with the Markovitches. I cannot tell you what was exactly the reason. Vera Michailovna perhaps, although let no one imagine that I fell in love with her or ever thought of doing so. No, my time for that was over. But I felt from the first that she was a fine, understanding creature, that she sympathised with me without pitying me, that she would be a good and loyal friend, and that I, on my side could give her comprehension and fidelity. They made me feel at home with them; there had been as yet no house in Petrograd whither I could go easily and without ceremony, which I could leave at any moment that I wished. Soon they did not notice whether I were there or no; they continued their ordinary lives and Nina, to whom I was old, plain, and feeble, treated me with a friendly indifference that did not hurt as it might have done in England. Boris Grogoff patronised and laughed at me, but would give me anything in the way of help, property, or opinions, did I need it. I was in fact by Christmas time a member of the family. They nicknamed me "Durdles," after many jokes about my surname and reminiscences of "Edwin Drood" (my Russian name was Ivan Andreievitch). We had merry times in spite of the troubles and distresses now crowding upon Russia.

And now I come to the first of the links in my story. It was with this family that Henry Bohun was to lodge.

VII

Some three years before, when Ivan Petrovitch had gone to live with the Markovitches, it had occurred to them that they had two empty rooms and that these would accommodate one or two paying guests. It seemed to them still more attractive that these guests should be English, and I expect that it was Ivan Petrovitch who emphasised this. The British Consulate was asked to assist them, and after a few inconspicuous clerks and young business men they entertained for a whole six months the Hon. Charles Trafford, one of the junior secretaries at the Embassy. At the end of those six months the Hon. Charles, burdened with debt, and weakened by little sleep and much liquor, was removed to a less exciting atmosphere. With all his faults, he left faithful friends in the Markovitch flat, and he, on his side, gave so enthusiastic an account of Mme. Markovitch's attempts to restrain and modify his impetuositities that the Embassy recommended her care and guidance to other young secretaries. The war came and Vera Michailovna declared that she could have lodgers no longer, and a terrible blow this was to Ivan Petrovitch. Then suddenly, towards the end of 1916, she changed her mind and announced to the Embassy that she was ready for any one whom they could send her.

Henry Bohun was offered, accepted, and prepared for. Ivan Petrovitch was a happy man once more.

I never discovered that Markovitch was much consulted in these affairs. Vera Michailovna "ran" the flat financially, industrially, and spiritually. Markovitch meanwhile was busy with his inventions. I have, as yet, said nothing about Nicolai Leontievitch's inventions. I hesitate, indeed, to speak of them, although they are so essential, and indeed important a part of my story. I hesitate simply because I do not wish this narrative to be at all fantastic, but that it should stick quite honestly and obviously to the truth. It is certain moreover that what is naked truth to one man seems the falsest fancy to another, and after all I have, from beginning to end, only my own conscience to satisfy. The history of the human soul and its relation to divinity which is, I think, the only history worth any man's pursuit must push its way, again and again, through this same tangled territory which infests the region lying between truth and fantasy; one passes suddenly into a world that seems pure falsehood, so askew, so obscure, so twisted and coloured is it. One is through, one looks back and it lies behind one as the clearest truth. Such an experience makes one tender to other men's fancies and less impatient of the vague and half-defined travellers' tales that other men tell. Childe Roland is not the only traveller who has challenged the Dark Tower.

In the Middle Ages Nicolai Leontievitch Markovitch would have been called, I suppose, a Magician--a very half-hearted and unsatisfactory one he would always have been--and he would have been most certainly burnt at the stake before he had accomplished any magic worthy of the name. His inventions, so far as I saw anything of them, were innocent and simple enough. It was the man himself rather than his inventions that arrested the attention. About the time of Bohun's arrival upon the scene it was a new kind of ink that he had discovered, and for many weeks the Markovitch flat dripped ink from every pore. He had no laboratory, no scientific materials, nor, I think, any profound knowledge. The room where he worked was a small box-like place off the living-room, a cheerless enough abode with a little high barred window in it as in a prison-cell, cardboard-boxes piled high with feminine garments, a sewing-machine, old dusty books, and a broken-down perambulator occupying most of the space. I never could understand why the perambulator was there, as the Markovitches had no children. Nicolai Leontievitch sat at a table under the little window, and his favourite position was to sit with the chair perched on one leg and so, rocking in this insecure position, he brooded over his bottles and glasses and trays. This room was so dark even in the middle of the day that he was often compelled to use a lamp. There he hovered, with his ragged beard, his ink-stained fingers and his red-rimmed eyes, making strange noises to himself and envolving from his materials continual little explosions that caused him infinite satisfaction. He did not mind interruptions, nor did he ever complain of the noise in the other room, terrific though it often was. He would be absorbed, in a trance, lost in another world, and surely amiable and harmless enough. And yet not entirely amiable. His eyes would close to little spots of dull, lifeless colour--the only thing alive about him seemed to be his hands that moved and stirred as though they did not belong to his body at all, but had an independent existence of their own--and his heels protruding from under his chair were like horrid little animals waiting, malevolently, on guard.

His inventions were, of course, never successful, and he contributed, therefore, nothing to the maintenance of his household. Vera Michailovna

had means of her own, and there were also the paying guests. But he suffered from no sense of distress at his impecuniosity. I discovered very quickly that Vera Michailovna kept the family purse, and one of the earliest sources of family trouble was, I fancy, his constant demands for money. Before the war he had, I believe, been drunk whenever it was possible. Because drink was difficult to obtain, and in a flood of patriotism roused by the enthusiasm of the early days of the war, he declared himself a teetotaller, and marvellously he kept his vows. This abstinence was now one of his greatest prides, and he liked to tell you about it. Nevertheless he needed money as badly as ever, and he borrowed whenever he could. One of the first things that Vera Michailovna told me was that I was on no account to open my purse to him. I was not always able to keep my promise.

On this particular evening of Bohun's arrival I came, by invitation, to supper. They had told me about their Englishman, and had asked me indeed to help the first awkward half-hour over the stile. It may seem strange that the British Embassy should have chosen so uncouth a host as Nicolai Leontievitch for their innocent secretaries, but it was only the more enterprising of the young men who preferred to live in a Russian family; most of them inhabited elegant flats of their own, ornamented with coloured stuffs and gaily decorated cups and bright trays from the Jews' Market, together with English comforts and luxuries dragged all the way from London. Moreover, Markovitch figured very slightly in the consciousness of his guests, and the rest of the flat was roomy and clean and light. It was, like most of the homes of the Russian Intelligentsia over-burdened with family history. Amazing the things that Russians will gather together and keep, one must suppose, only because they are too lethargic to do away with them. On the walls of the Markovitch dining-room all kinds of pictures were hung--old family photographs yellow and dusty, old calendars, prints of ships at sea, and young men hanging over stiles, and old ladies having tea, photographs of the Kremlin and the Lavra at Kieff, copies of Ivan and his murdered son and Serov's portrait of Chaliapine as Boris Godounov. Bookcases there were with tattered editions of Pushkin and Lermontov. The middle of the living-room was occupied with an enormous table covered by a dark red cloth, and this table was the centre of the life of the family. A large clock wheezed and groaned against the wall, and various chairs of different shapes and sizes filled up most of the remaining space. Nevertheless, although everything in the room looked old except the white and gleaming stove, Vera Michailovna spread over the place the impress of her strong and active personality. It was not a sluggish room, nor was it untidy as so many Russian rooms are. Around the table everybody sat. It seemed that at all hours of the day and night some kind of meal was in progress there; and it was almost certain that from half-past two in the afternoon until half-past two on the following morning the samovar would be found there, presiding with sleepy dignity over the whole family and caring nothing for anybody. I can smell now that especial smell of tea and radishes and salted fish, and can hear the wheeze of the clock, the hum of the samovar, Nina's shrill laugh and Boris's deep voice.... I owe that room a great deal. It was there that I was taken out of myself and memories that fared no better for their perpetual resurrection. That room called me back to life.

On this evening there was to be, in honour of young Bohun, an especially fine dinner. A message had come from him that he would appear with his boxes at half-past seven. When I arrived Vera was busy in the kitchen, and Nina adding in her bedroom extra ribbons and laces to her costume; Boris Nicolaievitch was not present; Nicolai Leontievitch was working in

his den.

I went through to him. He did not look up as I came in. The room was darker than usual; the green shade over the lamp was tilted wickedly as though it were cocking its eye at Markovitch's vain hopes, and there was the man himself, one cheek a ghastly green, his hair on end and his chair precariously balanced.

I heard him say as though he repeated an incantation--"Nu Vot... Nu Vot... Nu Vot_."

"_Zdras te_, Nicolai Leontievitch," I said. Then I did not disturb him but sat down on a rickety chair and waited. Ink dripped from his table on to the floor. One bottle lay on its side, the ink oozing out, other bottles stood, some filled, some half-filled, some empty.

"Ah, ha!" he cried, and there was a little explosion; a cork spurted out and struck the ceiling; there was smoke and the crackling of glass. He turned round and faced me, a smudge of ink on one of his cheeks, and that customary nervous unhappy smile on his lips.

"Well, how goes it?" I asked.

"Well enough." He touched his cheek then sucked his fingers. "I must wash. We have a guest to-night. And the news, what's the latest?"

He always asked me this question, having apparently the firm conviction that an Englishman must know more about the war than a man of any other nationality. But he didn't pause for an answer--"News--but of course there is none. What can you expect from this Russia of ours?--and the rest--it's all too far away for any of us to know anything about it--only Germany's close at hand. Yes. Remember that. You forget it sometimes in England. She's very near indeed.... We've got a guest coming--from the English Embassy. His name's Boon and a funny name too. You don't know him, do you?"

No, I didn't know him. I laughed. Why should he think that I always knew everybody, I who kept to myself so?

"The English always stick together. That's more than can be said for us Russians. We're a rotten lot. Well, I must go and wash."

Then, whether by a sudden chance of light and shade, or if you like to have it, by a sudden revelation on the part of a beneficent Providence, he really did look malevolent, standing in the middle of the dirty little room, malevolent and pathetic too, like a cross, sick bird.

"Vera's got a good dinner ready. That's one thing, Ivan Andreievitch," he said; "and vodka--a little bottle. We got it from a friend. But I don't drink now, you know."

He went off and I, going into the other room, found Vera Michailovna giving last touches to the table. I sat and watched with pleasure her calm assured movements. She really was splendid, I thought, with the fine carriage of her head, her large mild eyes, her firm strong hands.

"All ready for the guest, Vera Michailovna?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered, smiling at me, "I hope so. He won't be very

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