

THE ENGLISHMAN

a novella in two parts

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Translated from the Russian

PART ONE

I

On a dark night valuables were being transported in a certain number of specimens: little pectoral crosses, small icons, coins, imperial images. All of it was carefully concealed and disguised from the inspecting hands — from those who wished to find something necessary, for therein lies the joy of all inspecting professions: to arrive at the object of one's work.

Under the patronage of a foreign citizen, all this ware and most precious old stuff was distributed among the airports of Pulkovo, Domodedovo and Sheremetyevo by suppliers and dealers. For carrying it across the border a trusted person was needed. Pavel Sergeyevich Haider was just such a procurer for foreign persons — for German burghers and for the landlords of postmodern London. From every stall of the Suzdal country, of the Pskov and Novgorod lands and of the land of Moscow, he obtained artefacts from grandmothers and grandfathers. He was a valuable man: unlike the other citizens, who were fit only for liaison, he was a historian. Deeply intelligent and noble in appearance, he pronounced his own name in no other way than "Paul," and paced about the little courtyards of Moscow in an expensive suit, conducting important scientific work. He was dressed somewhat unbecomingly for his age: a black suit with a bow tie sat upon him. Grey-haired, stout, with curled moustaches, he paced the expanses of Moscow and of other cities like a country squire.

Such a specialist in the field of Livonian knighthood and of the Order of Malta was not to be found; and in

other periods too he was a master — in a word, a candidate of historical sciences. He gave lectures in Yekaterinburg and was fond of being there. And, most importantly, he had extraordinary access to all the valuables! Without him not one serious exhibition could take place — whether at the Hermitage or anywhere else. In academic circles money was usually scarce; it cannot be said, however, that he was paid little: he could afford a good flat not far from the centre of Moscow, though he had no one in the world but an aunt in the back of beyond and his colleagues. But he was forever stifled by the feeling that he was not paid enough — he was, after all, far too serious a specialist. And in search of funds he was sometimes ready to embark upon an adventure — a concealed one, into which he duly fell on the twenty-third of June, 2xxx.

And so he had given yet another lecture before an enormous audience; it came to an end, and everyone hurriedly quit the hall, some rushing off to boast of their historical interests, others simply inspired by what they had heard. Pavel set off for home through the green courtyards of Moscow. In a day's time he was to travel to Novgorod: there a precious artefact awaited him — a ring lost by Nevsky. It had been dug up, cleaned, and was already awaiting a thorough examination by a specialist at the museum.

On the way home he thought, as was his custom, about the greatness of his own person. *How they work their uncivilised jaws and roll their eyes! And that man who asked me the question about a separate path of development for Russian culture! It comes from nowhere if not from the West, and it is precisely from there that*

one must date the end of the uncivilised state, of the barbarism of the Russian savage, and his transformation into a civilised man. If this culture has a special path at all, then only the one Chaadayev described. He had long thought that all this must one day come to an end. One day — here and now. He was walking through Presnensky Park; out of the grass there rose the colossus of a Russian hero of legend. Pavel screwed up his face, as he always did, at the sight of that image. His moustaches twitched like a cockroach's before the slipper. He could not endure the smell of anything which, in his opinion, conveyed the barbarous Russian character — but he did not betray it! He held himself in with all his strength, both in public and even in his own soul. And meanwhile it was a splendid time of year!

At eight in the evening one might watch the passing crowds; everything shone after the rain, which our hero had sat out in the lecture hall. And the paths, washed by the sky and by the cleaning services of Moscow, shone as well. He sat down, as was his custom, on a bench — to straighten his suit and to see what the time was. The old fellow was hurrying home, after all!

"An ugly little Russian gnome, is he not?" came a voice.

Who could be reading his thoughts? He had, after all, uttered nothing aloud. From fright Pavel Sergeyevich opened his mouth a little, so that his face became distorted. Before him stood a man dressed in a manner altogether not of these parts: a blue suit, everything gleaming and glossy. A man with such a pronunciation could be from nowhere but that house on the Smolenskaya Embankment! In his hands he held an

envelope and some strange ring, and upon the ring was depicted the sign of the Order of the Templars.

"Pavel Sergeyeovich, you must excuse me," he began, in words of an old-fashioned turn. "I was at your lecture. You advanced a simply splendid proposition!"

"A good evening to you! And what in my address interested you so greatly?"

"The thing is that the thesis you formulated concerning the necessity of the Catholicisation of Rus is splendid! For it is a wonderful notion: Rus had no need whatever of Alexander Nevsky — the Livonian Order would have established the true faith and would have brought Rus to the birth of a new culture!"

Pavel was aware that this citizen was highly suspicious — with eyes that darted about like mice. But suspicion the man could not arouse, for it was precisely on this bench that Pavel used to meet with citizens of an extremely suspicious kind. They all brought him things — one a foreign coin, another an old banknote, a list, a valuable document! But all of that took place by arrangement, and with Paul no one had corresponded! He was, however, a quick-witted and a well-known man, and the second quality complemented the first very nicely. This conversation aroused in him no suspicion at all: he knew himself that with such speeches he would attract the right sort of people. But his thoughts? *How did he get inside my head?*

"My name is Daniel. I work not far from here. I see by you that you are ready to hear me out and have no need of preliminaries — so let us come to the main thing..."

Pavel felt a nervous running along his spine, a distinct beating of his heart, and the swift predetermining of his fate.

Here it is — fame, money, foreign, international renown...

But! And this “but” frightened him like a knife in the back. *This is treason! The most dreadful of sins!*

And here — one must give his soul its due — something in him resisted. He remembered his childhood: left early without father and mother, he had been taken in and brought up by his aunt. Even then he had seen an icon on her wall and asked who that was there. And she had answered in her quiet voice: “That is our Keeper.” And all this spirit of his forgotten antiquity struck him, as it were, in the chest — but by a cold decision he cast it off.

And here there appeared another spirit, and it asked: *And what did that childhood ever give you? Nothing! And your life at the university, and this burdensome work for coppers? You are needed by another country, one that will value you and take you in.*

And that voice was the stronger, because it had not been speaking for the first year.

But I once betrayed my principles — so I shall betray the most sacred thing as well. Trampling the memory of their Nevsky, whom they so revere, I shall crucify what remains of him in myself.

And here he understood that he would go through with it for anything at all — the money was no longer the main thing.

“You are underestimated. In this rotten environment there can be no honest payment for labour. But with us

— there can!” Daniel cut in, raising his voice significantly and flashing his eyes in a devilish manner.

“And what is it you need?”

“You will merely need to hand over to me certain specimens, which I shall indicate.”

Pavel took considerable fright.

“And I beg you: no one will learn anything. Everything is in your hands — money, respect, a house in England.”

And Pavel believed him; he knew that this was the very man himself! *Him* one could trust!

And here the little envelope opened, and the queen glittered in the June sun. There were five hundred pounds in it. Enough — too much.

But you will ask yourselves: why did the envelope arouse no suspicion? In the first place, let us recall the circumstance of Pavel Sergeyevich’s constant meetings. In the second place, he was a distinguished collector of banknotes: he loved exclusive little stamps, little pound notes, dollars with all sorts of marks upon them. And that same queen raised no questions in anyone. A historian, a note-collector, on a bench — why, everyone sits on benches nowadays! And, most importantly: Pavel Sergeyevich had recently been near the monument to Sherlock Holmes and was deeply connected with the embassy — everyone knew of it. And one final circumstance: their dialogue ran continually between the lines, with smiles and with anecdotes. On the envelope was an inscription: “Issue of the year 200x, exclusive.”

This historian was ready to go to a compromise even of himself, without any money — what need was there of money here! But with money, and with authority, it all

came out differently: he, a Westerniser, a lecturer at the centre in Yekaterinburg — now a great financier and proprietor, a landlord and a knight.

And so the English ambassador resolved by this offer to make the initial payment. He had rich experience of working with people, and money always worked.

Now Pavel was under obligation to deliver him all the artefacts. It was necessary only to await his man at the appointed hour, having prepared the artefact beforehand in a carefully preserved package. The scheme itself was fairly simple: to substitute for the artefacts deliberately false but very artful forgeries, manufactured from duplicates. It might have been the work of his whole life and heart, but with a black heart it became merely the work of his life.

Having walked a little and satisfied themselves that no one could hear them, they designated in advance the address of the flat and the time.

“Here is my first request to you! I have a ring for you.”

Upon it there gleamed the face of a saint, but the ring itself was all faded and scorched.

“This ring you will need to exchange with the real one. The thing is that you are being summoned as an expert; after the excavations you will be given time and solitude to deal with the ring. No one will see you, of that I assure you. You will substitute the ring and read the honourable gentlemen a lecture. And the ring, meanwhile, will be yours.”

Notwithstanding that in those rooms hidden from outsiders a whole council would sometimes assemble, Pavel knew: there come two or three minutes when the

outside persons step away from their business. He knew also that exhibits might be sent to Moscow for verification — and there the possibility of making these duplicates always arose. It was clear that the British had indeed obtained these duplicates with all the parameters: an exact copy had been manufactured and handed over.

And our historian listened to the Englishman in every particular and detail — about the time when the precious exhibit would be delivered, and about the places of storage — and marvelled at him himself, as though the man were his research supervisor. Between the parties there was an absolute certainty that the deal had been struck, and the ambassador was certain that the client would not walk away.

“And all the same, how did you know what I was thinking?” asked Pavel.

Sir Daniel pointed a finger at the little finger with the ring upon it.

“Now it will be clear to you,” the Englishman added, with a proud smile.

And so the ring was handed over, and Pavel began preparing for the journey to Novgorod.

II

Along a certain street, early in the morning, on the day before his journey, our hero was walking to the archive. All sorts of crowds of people came his way: some seemed to him murderers, others thieves.

Am I imagining it? Nothing of the kind has ever happened to me before!

It should be noted that since the morning he had felt himself as though in a fever: something in him had died, as it were. He had woken early on that solstice and caught the red dawn. A quiet light. But in his soul he felt a darkness from which he could hide nowhere. The darkness went with him everywhere; he had prayed to it and been faithful to it back when he first came to hate everything around him — and now he had become a part of it himself.

And so the metro carriage set him down by the archive building: by his clearance he was to work with a certain document. Having worked with it, having turned over the stuck-together little leaves of that tower of pages, he set off home. At home nobody was waiting for Pavel. He was a solitary man, as was said earlier — and proud on that account; or perhaps the other way round: proud, and therefore unsociable in daily life. The science of history seemed to mock him: at school he had been fascinated by it alone, but what interested him was precisely the foulness of his native history, while the Western, the English, was for him a model to be imitated. Perhaps that is why a portrait of Elizabeth Tudor hung upon his wall.

Where this hatred in him had come from he could not himself have said. It must have begun back at the university, when the young and impoverished Haider, in his one jacket taken off another man's shoulders, first found himself at a reception with a foreign delegation. There everything glittered and spoke in a foreign tongue, and he, the best in his year, went unnoticed by anyone. And he decided then to himself that he had gone unnoticed not because he was poor, but because he had been born in the wrong place. With that thought it was easier to live: it shifted the blame from fate onto the ground beneath one's feet. And the ground — well, the ground will bear it.

He was indeed of the opinion that Novgorod and Pskov ought to have been made Catholic. He disguised himself carefully as a true lover of his own history, but in secret he hated and despised all of it. It was from this that darkness and despair were born in his soul. And now, on top of it all, the dreadful portrait was covered by shadow towards evening; clouds crept over the streets of Moscow and hid the light.

Having poured out his tea, he heard a knock at the door.

His face twitched, and he himself staggered. It was a dark evening; the teapot broke, scattering into porcelain fragments. In confusion, having dressed, he ran out and awaited his fate...

And there, behind the door, awaiting him, was!..

"Good evening, Pavel Sergeyevich!"

Everything seemed to go out, and the ordinary white colour returned to Pavel's skin. Behind the door stood his student, Ivan Samoylov.

Drawing back the bolt, he received his guest.

"You must excuse me, professor, but I am passing through Moscow, and tomorrow I must be off to Vladimir. Well, how can I not call upon my professor — my first one, from my first year!"

"What is it you want?"

Pavel felt no warmth towards him, but something shameful was waking in his soul. The thought that he was perhaps betraying his own cause flashed through his head. But he cast it off.

The thing is that Ivan had a habit of calling in on everybody. It did not trouble him that somebody might be asleep at that hour, and somebody else might not be glad to see him. He was a noisy man, abrupt and, one might say, never downcast. He deeply respected teachers as the mediators of knowledge, but he loved to argue with them, and this combination — the absence of any restraint and a love of argument — coexisted strangely in him.

"But how can that be! What would Rus have been without Nevsky!.. Why, God sent him to the earth!"

"So you actually believe in fairy tales! And why did Rus need the yoke at all? Was Poland ever under the Horde's boot? No — and yet they save themselves by this," Pavel objected caustically, as was his habit.

Ivan Samoylov was trying, as it were, to talk him round: perhaps some bright thoughts might appear in him. But Pavel felt his own significance, his pride and his anger, and this prevented him from taking in anything at all.

And in any case he was in a hurry — and had forgotten about it entirely.

"A good night to you! You will most likely be late!"

And Pavel began to gather up his things, which he had never done in his life: he put an umbrella into his hands, handed him his bag, and all but showed the student out.

"Goodbye, Pavel Sergeyevich! You must excuse me! I am only passing through, and I am so rarely here, and you are the man I..."

And the door slammed shut.

The light went out. Shadows crept about the city like cats.

He seemed to hear drunken shouting — as it happens to any dweller of a dormitory district.

"A-ah!" a drunken face was shouting, and the sound of its cries echoed all round the yard. "There is no God, and he will not punish me for drinking! Let the whole world go to blazes! There is no such thing as goodness; malice and baseness alone are eternal in this world! You do not exist! You do not exist!"

And suddenly the face drew a circle upon a sheet of plywood, wrote "god" on it, and spat six times.

"And now kill me! Prove that you do not exist!"

In the sky there appeared a violet discharge of lightning; it crushed the air, and the blow came down upon the earth.

Pavel glanced out of the window and recognised the face of his neighbour — a doctor of philosophical sciences, who had been proving that the notion of a higher justice is a lie. Now he lay face down in the mud, and a heavy rain drummed upon his body. The face floundered in the mud and searched for the light.

This red but proud face in its white shirt did not accord at all with that ragged creature down in the yard.

He fell backwards, and his half-naked body was covered by streams of water.

III

Morning. Another knock at the door.

"Senior Sergeant Glyzin. Have you seen anything suspicious?"

"Well, no... nothing so far."

"Yesterday a body was found in your entrance..."

Here Pavel understood that the talk was of the philosopher, and set out the picture in detail.

Having supplied the necessary information, he satisfied himself that he was free to travel, and that he would not be summoned for any further proceedings.

And yet, despite the thought that he had got off lightly, he felt this strange juxtaposition: the philosopher — the drunkard — the lightning. For the first time he became very frightened; his legs gave way beneath him, but it was time to set out upon his road.

His road lay to the ancient land of Novgorod — it was there that the precious artefact had been found. It could not possibly be left in Moscow: the artefact belonged to another land, and nothing prevented the scholars from carrying out all the procedures and researches in the exhibit's native — and, moreover, splendid — historical setting of the ancient city.

Having reached his destination, he satisfied himself that everything was prepared for the adventure, and began to perform.

He was met by the cold Novgorod air, by damp, and by something marshy. The town in itself was very small — like a civilised little village. But it is, after all, a town of churches, the first capital, as it happens. And there

fluttered in the air that feeling of a forgotten antiquity, of something left unsaid; this town had gone deaf — like a bell: they tore out its tongue, and so it went deaf!

Not far from where he parked stood the museum, where the professional analysis was to be carried out.

First came the formalities: meetings, photographs from the excavation. Then he gave a long lecture on the origin of this ring — and so forth.

But afterwards there really did fall to him a minute in which the ring might be exchanged.

No one at all saw him. Glancing up and to the right, he saw neither cameras nor surveillance.

Here was that instant of which the spy had spoken.

And he drew the sooty old ring out of the package. His hands were trembling, and his whole face was drawn into a frown. And with those slipping hands, leaving fingerprints, he changed the rings about.

And indeed there was no difference whatever. Where had it been manufactured so exactly? In what workshop? This was the ring of Alexander Nevsky!

Here he was struck by an exclamation:

“Well, how do you find the specimen?! It was I who told them to dig there. The metal detector was accurate in those parts! And the moment I found it, I sent word to the ministry at once.”

They must have their own man there, who passed it on to the English court. Or perhaps that is the spy himself? Though what am I thinking — why am I acting so swiftly and so smoothly? He gave me exactly the time I needed to make the exchange.

But that man was Fyodor Nikitich Vilnov, and he was connected with nothing at all. He had given him the time

out of his own simplicity of heart. And it should be noted that this man was simple-hearted and intelligent — a combination rarely met with. A true master of his craft, he had directed excavations for twenty years and had not abandoned his work, notwithstanding his tiny salary. He was sincerely convinced: the ring was in the hands of a professional!

But “in the hands of a professional” does not mean “in safe hands”!

Coming out of the museum, he went straight to his hotel nearby. But nobody in such a town will sit within four walls, and he set off for a walk. He walked for a long while and looked at the well-known churches: the Saviour on Neredita rose above the field like a white ship above a sea of grass; the Church of the Dormition on Volotovo Field put one in mind of a curd Easter cake upon an emerald tablecloth; and the citadel was vast. St Sophia’s Cathedral spread out its crooked little towers — and everything here had long gone out: there has been no life here since the fifteenth century.

And then, as happens after a long walk, he fell asleep.

IV

The year was 1242; the German occupation of Pskov was under way. Pavel was in the dress of a German knight; houses were burning everywhere, sheds had been pulled down. In one window a light glimmered — small children had been left in there. A tall knight came up to him; he wore a helmet that closed the whole face, and a white shield with a black cross. He spoke with authority:

“Set the house alight! Quickly!”

And the knight gave him a torch; it glimmered upon the black snow and lit up the bloody stains.

Pavel staggered; he took off his helmet and saw bloody stains upon his own forged gauntlets. He went towards the house and stumbled; the torch rolled across the snow but did not go out. The green, glittering eyes of the knight were watching him. Suddenly the knight took off his glove and threw it on the snow — a hand with a ring upon it was bared.

In that hand he recognised Daniel. The hand pointed at the house with authority and with malice.

He went towards the house. There a light glimmered from a burning splinter and spread out of the darkness. Infants lay covered by nothing but a single dirty smock. Their parents had been killed not long before and lay beside the hay. He lit up this wooden house with the torch and brought it still closer to the wooden roof, to set it ablaze.

Here he heard the neighing of a horse: a Russian mounted warrior was holding a sword at his throat.

He knocked the torch away with his sword and turned the point towards his throat.

A grim face was looking at him, gleaming out from under the cover of night.

“Where is the ring?” asked the warrior.

And here he saw that this horseman was Alexander Nevsky.

“Where is the ring?!” cried the prince.

Pavel went dumb with terror and could neither move from the spot nor utter a word.

Alexander swung his sword and cut off his hand. The severed right hand left a crimson trail upon the snow. The prince brought the point to the little finger and drew the ring off it. He carried the ring out into the light and began to examine it; snow, mud and blood were reflected in it. Alexander put it on the little finger of his own right hand.

“And now answer: where is your sovereign!”

Having repeated this many times, the prince swung his sword...

Pavel woke... His right hand ached badly... It was the dead of night, and shadows ran along the walls.

He found the ring and made to throw it away, but it began to glow, and even so our hero did not dare to do it.

He lay down again, but it was frightening to fall asleep.

Pavel Sergeyevich slept on until morning.

V

Having woken, he resolved to travel. But it was necessary to travel also because he was expected...

At his threshold a man was already waiting. He was in a plain suit, and it was written upon his face that he was, so to speak, in a hurry, and that everything ought to be done a little faster.

"You are from D.?"

"You have splendid curtains in your dining room!" the stranger announced himself.

This was the verification code agreed upon at their very first meeting — with it he might cross the threshold.

The stranger's name is of no importance whatever to know — he did not give it upon meeting either: he simply came into the flat in silence and took away the package with the ring prepared for him, having satisfied himself that it was indeed inside.

Haider felt a certain relief. It had all passed by; the responsibility was no longer his, and there was nothing to trouble himself about.

He knew: that man had been the *hors d'oeuvre*, and by evening the main course would arrive!

VI

As had been agreed, at six o'clock in the evening Pavel Sergeyevich awaited the coming of Daniel. The latter was already on his way from his little house. In general he was a secretive and suspicious man, but he knew how to bewitch people somehow and to inspire an unutterable trust in himself: outwardly always sociable, hospitable and very well brought up, he was a master of his work. He had been born in Wales, into a small but aristocratic family. His father had been a resident of a knightly order — and from there he had carried that coloniser's burden all his life. At school he had been interested in the crusades; he often compared himself with a crusading knight and had always dreamed of matching that image. And now this face was climbing the little Moscow staircases.

In flat number six the bell rang.

"Unutterably glad to see my friend! It has fallen to me to have the great honour of working with you!" said the Englishman.

A bottle of whisky was set upon the table. There was no label upon it with the contents translated, but it was somehow...

"Brought it from Wales... The taste of seaweed opens up on the second swallow. We drink but little."

And this emphasis upon "we" was made so delicately that it was clear: he had designated as a peculiarity of "theirs" refinement, civilisation — in contrast to...

And in the drink one really could sense the seaweed characteristic of it.

"Let us be honest with each other," continued the native of Wales. "You do not know society life, the real kind! I wish to invite you this very evening to the place where we gather. You may be sure: you will not have to pay for anything."

They set off through the streets of Moscow.

Somewhere a building site was going up, and the façades were hung over; crowds of scooter-riders wheeled about the roads, making it impossible not merely to walk but to coexist in peace!

The Moskva River flowed; the high-rise masses of the New Arbat came into view. And now the colleagues approached the Smolenskaya Embankment.

The familiar colonial building appeared. The gentlemen went in beneath the flag of the United Kingdom.

"Such honour to see you at our dinner!"

So it sounded all about him; everyone knew him and was courteous with him. He was an invited guest, and from the feeling of this significance there appeared in him, for the first time in many years, a tremor.

In the great hall a snow-white cloth had already been laid. Music struck up — live and classical; or, more precisely, sharp and classy.

Dialogues were carried on, long ones and in English; now and then mockery could be seen — concealed, and very fine.

People came up to Pavel and shook his hand. One dry gentleman with a decoration ribbon questioned him at length about Livonian knighthood and, having heard him out, said: "You speak remarkably well — for a Russian."

Pavel bowed and took it for a compliment. He noticed nothing at all that evening: he was happy.

Waiters ran between the tables and carried round the dishes.

Roast beef with Yorkshire pudding, kidney pies — everything meaty and bloody was heaped upon the table, and the guests, like beasts of prey, ranged over the field in search of quarry. The Englishmen with their correct jaws partook of the flesh of calves and drank blood baked in sauce.

Pavel Sergeyevich sat beside his patron.

“To Great Britain!”

“Cheers!”

Thus did they empty their glasses.

“And all the same, what correctness and what etiquette are laid down in this procedure!” said Daniel. “We follow it more than anyone. And you too shall soon behold it: in Westminster an estate is being prepared for you — just such a one as here. Only consider it: without Russians!”

“I am manifoldly grateful for these gifts!” answered Pavel.

“Gentlemen!” said Daniel. “Among us is a most talented historian, Pavel Haider! He always has something to impart to us!”

Here Pavel felt himself incredibly free to speak out.

“Ladies and gentlemen! First of all it is worth remembering that history is a complex and interesting science, in which I have had the good fortune to occupy myself for more than thirty years at the level of a candidate of sciences. In that time I have understood: history teaches us to follow the path of civilisation. But

is a country worthy of life that does not follow it? My answer will be plain: such a country has no right to coexist with developed states.”

Everyone supported his words; rapturous slogans of support rang out.

There were many more ovations and all the rest of it, but the time to disperse was drawing near.

After the reception Pavel and Daniel came to the following agreement.

“This will be the last thing I ask of you! Nothing more will be required from you. Tomorrow you buy the goods, the day after we collect them, and the day after that you fly to London. To remain here longer is dangerous for you: I am risking my own safety and yours.”

“And what am I to do?”

“In the first place, you will travel to Suzdal with my guide. He will come to you at nine in the morning, and you will set off in his car. He will tell you everything in detail. And remember: tell no one of your expedition — let it simply be sick leave.”

Pavel, having parted from him upon that word, went off to his own devices.

VII

Along the way he met a multitude of drunkards; the street had been transfigured by the revellers of the night. It was a twilit hour, but it was impossible to tell that it was now night: from one side crimson hosts of the heavens were advancing, while from the other the sun still shone golden. It seemed to Pavel Sergeyevich that everyone was looking at him strangely. As he walked along a dark side street, a monster with black eyes came out to meet him; coming closer, he made out a man with black hair — and froze within that gaze. A deathly fear ran across Pavel's face. The man looked at him for a time, and then stepped aside.

He reached his building and with fear turned the key in the lock. The light lit the room for a long while, but then it too went out.

Darkness lit up the bedroom. In it there had grown, as it were, an invisible dark forest in which the historian slept; though, as a matter of fact, he always felt himself to be in that forest as he fell asleep.

Night came.

He saw that something horned was climbing in to him through the ventilation pane; looking closer, he understood that this face resembled the philosopher's. Bloody fangs shone in the darkness.

"You shall not kill me!"

Suddenly there appeared in his own flat a man with a lion's head; in his hand he held a mace, and a blue light came from him.

The lion went up to the demon and pierced his belly with his claws. A little stream of blood spurted against the wall. Streams of blood crawled down the wallpaper.

He raised the torn-off horned head above himself and pointed a claw at Pavel. Pavel, covering himself with the bloodstained sheet, pulled it in terror over his face.

“And now answer: where is your sovereign?” the lion roared. “Answer!”

Pavel Sergeyevich woke in a stupor; for a long time yet the nightmare turned about in his head, and he could not get up.

He turned on the light — there were no bloody smears anywhere. In the kitchen a rustling was heard; he became frightened: he felt somebody’s breathing behind his back.

And even when he had put out the light, he sensed something warm.

PART TWO

I

Ivan Samoylov was exceedingly glad of his meeting with his teacher. But the thought of origin and of purpose gave him no peace. In what does the meaning of the universe manifest itself? Who is God? In these questions he could not be satisfied by science: it gave an exhaustive answer, but it did not answer the essence of the question. From Moscow he was travelling by train to Vladimir, and from there onward to Suzdal.

It should be said that Ivan was a scientific man but not a religious one; and yet he was tormented by questions of who governs this world and in what its meaning is manifested. Notwithstanding all the qualities that make for getting on well with people, he had no friends at all. He simply could not imagine how one might find companionship in games and computers — such tedium!

“You had far better look about you! Why, none of this will exist in a few decades! But that will remain! What is the use of the temporary, when there is the infinite!”

Usually, after such conversations, the people he spoke with scattered from him like wild animals from a hunter. For society loves gossip, mockery, fashionable things, and not the eternal and the bright. Man, by virtue of his condition, loves the darker and the gloomier rather than the bright — whether this is conditioned by its accessibility or by its being unconcealed; whereas the light must be obtained, and it is difficult on that account. But which is more primary in the world — light or darkness? From the universal point of view, darkness;

from the human, light. And it was precisely to learn about this that our hero had come — to ask the abbot of the monastery. And he had come precisely to Suzdal: he sensed that it would be easier to learn of it there. And simpler.

And so, after his journey about the Golden Ring and Moscow, Suzdal awaited him, and afterwards his native city of Khabarovsk. Ivan visited Moscow exceedingly rarely, and after his visit to Suzdal he meant to take a train eastward — which is why he had taken his leave of the professor as he did. Throughout all of Pavel Sergeyevich's wanderings, Ivan was living in Vladimir; and it was there that the desire to go to Suzdal flared up in him.

And so he stepped down onto the plain earth of Suzdal. Birch trees shone in the distance. A light breeze passed over the field. Everything about that evening was pleasant: the way the smoke drifted from the little cottages, and the way the children played by the small houses. And in general it was a pleasant town, and a very rustic one. Ivan's road led to the Monastery of the Deposition of the Robe.

II

At three in the afternoon everything in Pavel Sergeyevich's room was prepared for the coming of his guest. He cleaned, he dined, then he cleaned again and waited; then he did something else again and waited. But the guest was still not there... He went out onto the landing, and there a man of about thirty in a hat was waiting for him.

"I have come to you today for the little book!"

In answer to this password Pavel led him to the flat.

Pavel was tormented by the question: either they are not told the number of the flat, only the building, or else it is necessary that you should let the guest across the threshold yourself. The second suited best of all.

The man introduced himself as Vasily Ivanovich Stuzhev. He was of a hefty height, with a long face, and dressed without fail in the manner of a tourist.

The same he requested of Haider, who parted with his own attire reluctantly. Everyone understood perfectly well: to walk about a village in a suit would be strange. They spoke a little of ordinary things; Vasily enquired how the historian had slept, what he had eaten, where he had been, what his mood was — in short, he spoke with him as with a true friend.

"Let us go over the terms," Vasily began. "Now we drive to Suzdal in my car. When we arrive, you will need to buy an icon, which I shall indicate to you. You will buy it with your own money, and afterwards, I promise, sir will give you five times as much. Then the order of actions is known to you."

"May I call in at the monastery nearby?" asked Pavel.

"For what purpose?"

"I have an aunt there who serves as a nun."

The question had been agreed with Daniel, and consent followed.

The two of them set off.

The journey was fairly comfortable for Pavel. In the first place, the entire system of taking food was fitted out right there in the car, so as to avoid stops. Every second was regulated. Every ten minutes Vasily enquired what Pavel Sergeyevich was doing: had he a wish to eat, to drink, was he bored, had his leg gone numb.

Thus did they arrive at their destination.

They parked beside the monastery. Getting out of the car, they made for the place where old icons and household ware are sold.

Vasily's gaze fell upon an old icon of the Mother of God. Vasily pointed at it.

Pavel entered into the business.

"How much does it cost?"

"Ten thousand two hundred."

"And where is it from? Why so dear?"

"It is the nineteenth century. Many have prayed before it. It hung in the monastery here."

The saleswoman wrapped up the heavy, faded Mother of God.

It was Daniel who had reported this icon: his experts had informed him that there was a miracle-working icon on sale at an ordinary stall in Suzdal. It was necessary to verify everything with the help of a specialist, and that

specialist turned out to be Pavel. After a thorough examination he could give a valuable conclusion.

They put the icon away in the boot and went towards the monastery.

Their way was barred by a barefoot woman in black clothing; her face betrayed the marks of madness.

"Here is your little ring! Take it, my dear — you have earned it."

Pavel staggered; Vasily's face was likewise contorted.

"And what is it for?" asked Vasily.

"For trading in Christ. You will not carry the Mother of God away in a little chest!" she said, and her mouth twisted into a crooked smile.

Pavel lost the power of speech; some people led the woman away.

A holy fool.

"Pasha!" he heard.

A woman in black clothing came out to meet him.

This was a woman of about eighty; deep wrinkles covered her face, but she herself shone with happiness. Her eyes were moist.

They stepped aside, while Vasily remained at the entrance to the monastery.

"How is life for you here?"

"The Lord has spared me so far. We are God's people: we labour day after day, and the Lord sends us rest for our labours. In labour there is a great rest; idleness is itself a burden. But an evil deed is worse than idleness... I feel it: something is not right with you, my heart tells me so. Why, I am as a mother to you — you remember, you lost your mother then, and I brought you up from

your very childhood. Always I felt everything in you — and now, Pasha, I feel it.”

Pavel was greatly frightened by these speeches. These events frightened him, and he felt confusion.

“But I know: I shall give you this cross — keep it safe. My heart feels... Let this cross be my duty.”

Here Pavel took fright once and for all; he took the little cross, said farewell to his aunt and made to go, but was met by Samoylov.

III

Ivan had already been strolling about the sunlit town for two hours. After his walk he decided to look in at the Monastery of the Deposition of the Robe. From his very first step he heard the voices of those at prayer: here there was real life, free of any discussion of ways of earning money, of wages and of other unnecessary things.

There, in the distance, a voice was singing. Everything was hallowed by this wondrous singing; the vault rose above the space and the altar. And amid this loftiness he felt a certain constraint.

People perform all these rites, and do not see the light. Why, there it is — beneath the ceiling.

Everyone was constantly crossing themselves, and at Ivan, who did nothing but look at the ceiling, they glanced askance. And this strange combination of holy prayer and prideful believers astonished him.

And there it is again: people believe, but do not see the summit. Again they try to explain — and cannot.

He felt a wish to ask somebody for an explanation, but only the priest answered: it is all, he said, from your sins. And this pointing to sins did not please him.

“But sin is not our problem, and society is not sinful from the beginning. It is a distortion, and not normal behaviour. In order to move away from it, one need not think about sins all the time.”

These speeches aroused the indignation of the father, and he had no wish to hear any of it.

And then Samoylov walked off along the paths of the monastery; he walked for a fairly long time, until he met a certain man sitting on a bench.

"Well then, Ivan — are you too seeking the meaning?"

This rang faintly in his ears, and he turned his gaze upon this man.

The man was of an altogether ordinary appearance and height; the only thing that stood out in him was his distinct, clear speech.

"Who are you?" asked Ivan.

"I am a man, as you are. I try to find the meaning in everything. I served in the monastery here, but with that my path came to an end. For I used to speak to them of the different religions: in all of them one God is glorified, and everyone tries to distort Him. All this is division. Over my years I have come to this: whatever church you may enter, God will let you in and man will drive you out. From man's mind come all the consequences."

"And in what is your meaning?"

"In transfiguration. It is all simple: all our work teaches us. Different people come our way in this world; we meet with them, we talk; there are many occurrences in a life, and after all of it — transfiguration. The passing from one form of matter into another. And at the end of that passage — God."

"How interesting that is!" said Ivan. "That is what I am seeking."

"Then you have found it, because you were seeking. And I was seeking you. And so we have come to the meaning — it is God. Everyone tries to prove Him; Thomas Aquinas proved Him, but afterwards said himself that his works were rubbish. It is all because His

existence need not be proved: in its essence it is a fact. But people say of justice that there is none: the best languish in poverty, while the dreadful feed upon gold. Yet few understand that in this world everything is turned upside down. Luxury is to our harm — it only corrupts a man, whereas simplicity elevates him. But one should not go to the extreme either: a good man lives worthily even in luxury. All will receive gifts for their actions: there is no sin — there are actions. And who will receive a good gift for them and who will not, God shall determine.”

After these words there was much more conversation; they walked along together with this man. It should be said that his name was Andrey Stavrin; this man was not solitary, as one might suppose — he had two children. And such knowledge he had obtained by passing through all the paths, having come to know everything, from paradise to moksha. They walked on for a long while yet, until they met Pavel Sergeyevich.

IV

When Samoylov came out to Pavel Sergeyevich with some other man, he thought that it was time to go: none of this fitted in any way into the plan of the journey. And besides, Daniel had already telephoned Vasily several times.

“What a meeting, Pavel Sergeyevich!” cried Samoylov.

But Haider backed away and made to leave.

“Saving your honour?” asked Stavrín. “Would you like the lion to scratch you a little in your sleep as well? For he can. What have you got there, in the boot? Do not disgrace the holy face!”

This frightened the old man once and for all: he ran to the car park and jumped into the car, throwing away the little cross. And Vasily and Pavel drove off westward. Pavel Sergeyevich wanted to cry out at everything he had seen; his nerves failed him rarely — on the contrary, he was a calm man. But now he was in a peculiar frame of mind.

V

By the flat Daniel was already waiting for him.

"Splendid work," the Englishman cut in, with a glitter in his eyes.

They went into the building; Vasily carried in the icon of the Mother of God.

Having opened the package, they saw her in all her grandeur and beauty. The paint was slightly rubbed, the brass had blackened a little near the frame, but the icon was in excellent condition.

"Assess the find, master!"

And here there began a detailed analysis of every particular from Pavel Sergeyevich — down to who had prayed before it, and in what weather.

"A splendid find! Here are your fifty-one thousand, as promised. I fulfil my obligations."

"I thank you!"

"And now, since all obligations on your side are fulfilled, let us proceed to the fulfilment of those on mine. Tomorrow I shall come for you in person — there will be none of my intermediaries. You will not need to go out, and it will be extremely dangerous to do so! At ten in the evening be ready to await me in your flat."

He left in the English manner.

Now freedom was setting in for Pavel. He could allow himself all the liberties that had been hidden here. But it was necessary to pack his things, and with this Pavel occupied himself for a whole day and night.

After that day he lay down upon his bed and fell asleep.

He saw that he was sitting upon a peasant hut. The hut had sagged all over, and of its former owners only the crockery remained. Everything had died out; a wind walked over the rotted November field, and there was not a soul about. Suddenly a charred dead man came up to him.

He was in peasant dress; badly worn bast shoes and torn black clothes hung loose upon him.

"What shall I pray with, accursed one? Where is the Mother?!" the peasant wailed.

"Stand off, Nikifor!" — a woman with a sickle came running up. "Here is your Vasily," she said, and brought the sickle to his throat. She herself was dressed in a light white gown; her long black hair spread over the ground.

And here Pavel saw Vasily Stuzhev. With a slanting stroke the woman cut off his head with the sickle, brought it up to herself and drank the dripping blood.

The charred peasant embraced with his violet bones this woman, over whom scarlet blood was running.

"And did you sell the Mother to the English too?" the woman shouted, and Pavel woke.

VI

Pavel Sergeyevich spent the whole of his last day on packing. He was in truth afraid.

Have I, perhaps, done something wrong? Have I done harm to somebody? Why, I really did betray first one thing, then another, and then my own self! I sold myself! To whom, and for what money? A trifle!

He tried to drown it all in swallows of the whisky Daniel had left.

His mind gradually came into order.

Well then, I have stepped over the little cross! And I stepped over it long ago — in my soul, when I sold it at a lecture; and now I have stepped over it bodily as well! But there is no road back! I have drowned it in blood!

And here he remembered the woman with the sickle and the man with the lion's head; he became frightened. Convulsions shook his mouth; he began to weep in silence. His heart was breaking. He looked at himself in the mirror and struck it with his foot; in the end it fell and shattered to pieces. In the kitchen he found a knife — a strange thought flashed through his head. But he took another swallow of whisky, and his reason came back to normal. Fangs seemed to have grown in him, and his reason had hardened; in the twilight he awaited Daniel.

VII

The Englishman came into the flat with its broken mirror and packed belongings; a large yellow suitcase had settled itself in the middle of the room.

"It is time!" said Daniel. "Vasily Ivanovich has died, and so I shall be your driver as well."

"How dreadful! And of what?"

"Cardiac arrest, apparently. But this business will admit of no lyrical digressions. Either you remain with nothing in this world, and with a criminal case besides, or you live and prosper, knowing that at present all is well, and that somewhere you have wrought a very great many most agreeable nastinesses."

And they got into the car amid the deep stillness of night; only the roar of the black automobile could stir the air.

Before setting the historian down at the airport, Daniel warned him:

"So, these are your tickets. Nothing has been discovered so far, and you may pass through passport control calmly, fearing nothing. First to Istanbul, and only then to Heathrow — do not confuse anything. When you have flown, you must telephone me."

"I am most grateful to you!"

VIII

Pavel walked into the airport building; enormous advertising signs surrounded him. It was strange to observe how, in the stillness of night, you are met by an airport building that shines this way always.

Everything went easily and successfully: Pavel Sergeevich was checked and permitted to fly. Despite his fear at the customs post, he was admitted to the flight.

And the flight went well. The windows of the portholes lit up with the light of the June sun — Istanbul.

After a short transfer Pavel boarded a British aircraft and at once caught that colonial smell. *This is the one that will deliver me!*

And it delivered him. London, unusually, met him with clear weather. Then followed a journey on the underground: little districts, little brick houses — all of it unaccustomed to us. The people somehow... Well, in general, as they are everywhere.

But where was he to settle? A house had been promised, after all. A telephone call followed.

"Ah, Pavel Sergeevich! And how do you find it here with us?"

"Why, everything is perfect. Only where is my house?"

"So then, your house is at the following address: Poverty Street, forty-six."

"You are joking!" the historian howled. "It was not for this that I stole—"

"My dear fellow, you are in England now — what more do you want?"

And Daniel put down the receiver...

The evening rolled on, and Daniel spent it by the fireside, reading aristocratic newspapers, while Pavel Sergeyevich spent it in a hostel, counting how much money he had left. Out of hopelessness he wanted to run, but there was nowhere to run to.

He was falling asleep...

There appeared a knight with the same ring. "Are you satisfied?" asked Daniel.

The crusader Daniel took off his dreadful helmet and went to the gallows.

"This one I shall cut down myself!" commanded Nevsky.

He swung his sword; at that moment Pavel Sergeyevich saw Daniel's face — frightened and darting about.

The blow of the sword came down upon the head, and his red head rolled across the fresh snow. The hand with the signet ring remained lying by a log soaked in blood.

Alexander Nevsky took off the ring, raised his sword and clove it in two. Splashes of mud scattered from it in all directions.

"And the rest of the crusaders — to the gallows!" commanded the prince.

Pavel Sergeyevich woke from some sort of commotion.

"Somebody has been run over!"

On the ground lay a body with the signet ring of the Templars.

After that morning the days dragged on, grey and all alike, like the bricks of the houses there. His money was melting away: fifty-one thousand, converted into pounds, turned out to be a sum ludicrously small. Pavel

Sergeyevich tried telephoning — Daniel, and some other people whose numbers had been written down for him on the envelope — but the telephones were silent, or answered in other men's voices: no such person. He went to the embassy — they did not let him past the gates. He went to a certain university to offer lectures on Livonian knighthood; they even heard him out, and even nodded, and said: we will contact you. Nobody contacted him.

One evening he tried to write a letter to his aunt. He wrote out: "Greetings..." — and wrote out nothing further. Where was he to write? To the monastery? And what was he to write? He crumpled up the sheet and sat for a long time, looking at his little finger, upon which there was now no ring at all — and never, if one thinks about it, had been.

IX

What can be said about the others?

Pavel Sergeyevich's aunt served in the monastery for a long time yet, pitying her only relative. And then she died.

Haider's case aroused serious interest and was even successfully solved.

Ivan Samoylov received an education in history and intends to go on to a master's degree; a son, incidentally, was recently born to him. He and Stavrin meet often — the latter is now as a teacher to him. As for Pavel Sergeyevich, he gave his street lectures until his very last day. Towards the end, migrants came to them, but more often rats and bedbugs. He lost his reason once and for all and died after two months of wandering in destitution.