

MIKHAIL BULGAKOV

THE MASTER AND MARGARITA

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■ RUSSIAN MODERN PROSE ■

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THE MASTER AND MARGARITA

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1. Never Talk to Strangers

At the hour of the hot spring sunset at Patriarch's Ponds two citizens appeared. The first of them — some forty years old and dressed in a nice grey summer suit — was short, well fed and bald; he carried his respectable pork-pie hat¹ in his hand, and had a neatly shaved face adorned by spectacles of supernatural proportions in black horn frames. The second — a broad-shouldered, gingery, shock-headed young man with a checked cloth cap cocked towards the back of his head — was wearing a cowboy shirt, crumpled white trousers and black soft shoes.

The first was none other than Mikhail Alexandrovich Berlioz, the editor of a thick literary journal and chairman of the board of one of Moscow's biggest literary associations, known in abbreviation as MASSOLIT,² while his young companion was the poet Ivan Nikolayevich Ponyrev, who wrote under the pseudonym Bezdomny.*

Entering the shade of the lime trees that were just becoming green, the writers first and foremost hurried towards a colourfully painted little booth with the inscription "Beer and Minerals".

Yes, the first strange thing about that terrible May evening should be noted. Not just by the booth, but along the entire tree-lined avenue running parallel to Malaya Bronnaya Street, not a single person was about. At that hour, when people no longer

¹ **pork-pie hat** — шляпа с круглой плоской тульёй, шляпа-"пирожок"

* См. прим. на с. 526

² **MASSOLIT** — Массолит – вымышленное объединение литераторов

even seemed to have the strength to breathe, when the sun, having heated Moscow up to an unbearable degree, was toppling in a dry mist somewhere down beyond the Garden Ring Road, nobody had come along here under the lime trees, nobody had sat down on a bench: the avenue was empty.

"Narzan,* please," requested Berlioz.

"There's no Narzan," replied the woman in the booth, and for some reason took umbrage¹.

"Is there beer?" enquired Bezdomny in a hoarse voice².

"They'll be bringing beer towards evening," the woman replied.

"What is there, then?" asked Berlioz.

"Apricot squash — only it's warm," said the woman.

"Well, come on, come on, come on!"

The apricot squash produced an abundant yellow foam, and there was a sudden smell of the hairdresser's in the air. Having quenched their thirst³, the writers immediately started hiccuping; they settled up, and seated themselves on a bench with their faces to the pond and their backs to Bronnaya.

At this point the second strange thing occurred, concerning Berlioz alone. He suddenly stopped hiccuping; his heart gave a thump⁴ and disappeared somewhere for a moment, then returned, but with a blunt needle lodged in it. Moreover, Berlioz was seized by terror — groundless, but so powerful that he felt the urge to flee from Patriarch's Ponds at once without a backward glance.

Berlioz glanced back in anguish, unable to understand what had frightened him. He turned pale, mopped his brow with his handkerchief and thought: "What is the matter with me? This has never happened before... my heart's playing up... I'm over-

¹ to take umbrage — обижаться

² in a hoarse voice — хриплым, осипшим голосом

³ to quench one's thirst — утолять жажду

⁴ ...heart gave a thump — сердце встрепенулось

tired... Maybe it's time to let everything go to the devil and be off to Kislovodsk..."

And then the sultry air thickened before him, and out of this air was woven a transparent citizen of very strange appearance. On his little head a jockey's peaked cap, a little checked jacket — tight, and airy too... a citizen almost seven feet tall, but narrow in the shoulders, unbelievably thin, and a physiognomy, I beg you to note, that was mocking¹.

Berlioz's life had been shaped in such a way that he was not used to extraordinary phenomena. Turning still paler, he opened his eyes wide and thought in confusion: "It can't be!..."

But, alas, it could, and the lanky citizen you could see through swayed to both left and right in front of him without touching the ground.

At this point Berlioz was horror-stricken² to such a degree that he closed his eyes. And when he opened them, he saw that everything was over, the mirage had dissolved, the one in checks had vanished, and at the same time the blunt needle had dropped out of his heart.

"Well, I'll be damned!" exclaimed the editor. "You know, Ivan, I almost had a seizure³ just now because of the heat! There was even something like a hallucination..." He tried to grin, but alarm was still dancing in his eyes, and his hands were trembling. However, he gradually calmed down, fanned himself with his handkerchief and, saying quite brightly, "Well, and so..." he renewed the speech that had been interrupted by the drinking of the apricot squash.

This speech, as was learnt subsequently, was about Jesus Christ. The thing was, the editor had commissioned a long anti-religious poem from the poet for the next issue of his journal. Ivan

¹ **mocking physiognomy** — глумливая физиономия

² **horror-stricken** — охваченный ужасом

³ **to have a seizure** — получить удар

Nikolayevich had written this poem, in a very short time too, but unfortunately had not satisfied the editor with it at all. Bezdomny had outlined the main character of his poem — Jesus, that is — in very dark colours, yet nonetheless, in the editor's opinion, the whole poem needed to be written all over again. And so now the editor was giving the poet something in the way of a lecture on Jesus, with the aim of underlining the poet's basic error.

It is hard to say what precisely had let Ivan Nikolayevich down¹ — whether it had been the graphic power of his talent, or his utter unfamiliarity with the question on which he was writing — but his Jesus had come out as just a living Jesus who had once existed: only, true, a Jesus furnished with all the negative features possible.

And Berlioz wanted to demonstrate to the poet that the main thing was not what Jesus was like, whether he was good or bad, but that this Jesus, as a person, had not existed in the world at all, and that all the stories about him were simply inventions, the most commonplace myth.

It must be noted that the editor was a well-read man, and pointed very skilfully in his speech to the ancient historians — for example, to the celebrated Philo of Alexandria*² and to the brilliantly educated Flavius Josephus,*³ who had never said a word about the existence of Jesus. Displaying sound erudition⁴, Mikhail Alexandrovich also informed the poet, incidentally, that the passage in book fifteen, chapter forty-four of the celebrated *Annales* of Tacitus,*⁵ where the execution of Jesus is spoken of, is nothing other than a later forged interpolation.

¹ **to let somebody down** — подвести к.-л.

² **Philo of Alexandria** — Филон Александрийский, философ и религиозный мыслитель

³ **Flavius Josephus** — Иосиф Флавий, еврейский историк и военачальник

⁴ **sound erudition** — блестящая эрудиция

⁵ **Annales of Tacitus** — «Анналы», последнее и самое крупное сочинение древнеримского историка Публия Корнелия Тацита

The poet, to whom everything being imparted by the editor was news, listened to Mikhail Alexandrovich attentively with his lively green eyes fixed upon him, and only hiccuping occasionally, cursing in a whisper the apricot squash.

"There isn't a single eastern religion," said Berlioz, "in which, as a rule, a chaste virgin doesn't give birth to a god. And without inventing anything new, in exactly the same way, the Christians created their Jesus, who in reality never actually lived. And it's on that the main emphasis needs to be put..."

Berlioz's high tenor resounded in the deserted avenue, and the deeper Mikhail Alexandrovich clambered into the thickets¹ into which only a very educated man can clamber without the risk of coming a cropper, the more and more interesting and useful were the things the poet learnt about the Egyptian Osiris, the most merciful god and son of heaven and earth,*² and about the Phoenician god Tammuz,*³ and about Marduk,*⁴ and even about the lesser-known stern god Huitzilopochtli,⁵ who was at one time much revered by the Aztecs in Mexico.*

And it was at precisely the moment when Mikhail Alexandrovich was telling the poet about how the Aztecs used to make a figurine of Huitzilopochtli from dough that the first person appeared in the avenue.

Subsequently — when, frankly speaking, it was already too late — various organizations presented their reports with a description of this person. A comparison of the reports cannot help but cause amazement. Thus in the first of them it is said that this

¹ to clamber into the thickets — лезть в дебри

² Osiris — Осирис, бог смерти в египетской мифологии

³ Tammuz — Таммуз, бог плодородия в др. Месопотамии

⁴ Marduk — центральное божество вавилонского пантеона, главный бог города Вавилона

⁵ Huitzilopochtli — Вицлипуцли, бог войны у древних Ацтеков

person was small in stature¹, had gold teeth and limped on his right leg. In the second the person was enormous in stature², had platinum crowns and limped on his left leg. The third states laconically that the person had no distinguishing features.

It has to be acknowledged that not one of those reports is of any use whatsoever.

First of all: the person described did not limp on either leg, and was neither small nor enormous in stature, but simply tall. As far as his teeth are concerned, on the left side he had platinum crowns, and on the right gold ones. He wore an expensive grey suit and foreign shoes the same colour as the suit. He had his grey beret cocked jauntily over one ear, and under his arm he carried a walking stick with a black handle in the shape of a poodle's head. To look at, he was about forty plus. Mouth a bit crooked. Clean-shaven. Dark-haired. The right eye black, the left for some reason green. Eyebrows black, but one higher than the other. In short — a foreigner.

After passing the bench on which the editor and the poet were located, the foreigner cast a sidelong glance at them, stopped, and suddenly sat down on the next bench, two steps away from the friends.

"German..." thought Berlioz.

"English..." thought Bezdomny. "And look at that — he's not too hot to be wearing gloves."

But the foreigner cast his eye over the square of tall buildings bordering the pond, and it became apparent that he was seeing this place for the first time, and that it had grabbed his interest.

He arrested his gaze on the top storeys, in whose window panes there were dazzling reflections of the broken sunlight that was leaving Mikhail Alexandrovich for ever, then he moved it

¹ **small in stature** — маленького роста

² **enormous in stature** — высоченного роста

down to where the window panes had started darkening, as they do towards evening; he grinned condescendingly about something, screwed up his eyes, put his hands on the handle of the walking stick and placed his chin on his hands.

"Ivan," said Berlioz, "your depiction of, for example, the birth of Jesus, the Son of God, was very good and satirical, but the real point is that a whole series of sons of god had already been born before Jesus — like, let's say, the Phoenician Adonis, the Phrygian Attis, the Persian Mithras. To put it briefly, not one of them was ever born and none of them existed, including Jesus too, and it's essential that, instead of depicting the birth or, let's suppose, the visit of the Magi, you should depict the absurd rumours about that visit. Otherwise, according to your narrative, it turns out that he was actually born!"

At this point Bezdomny made an attempt to stop the hiccups that had him in agony and held his breath, and as a result he emitted a louder and more agonizing hiccup, and at that same moment Berlioz interrupted his speech, because the foreigner suddenly rose and headed towards the writers.

They looked at him in surprise.

"Excuse me, please," he began on coming up, with a foreign accent, but without garbling the words, "if I permit myself, without being acquainted... but the topic of your learned conversation is so interesting that..."

Here he politely removed his beret, and nothing remained for the friends but to half-stand and exchange bows¹.

"No, more likely French..." thought Berlioz.

"Polish?..." thought Bezdomny.

It is essential to add that from his very first words the foreigner made an abominable impression on the poet, yet was found by Berlioz rather to be pleasant — that is, not exactly pleasant, but... how can one put it... interesting, perhaps.

¹ to exchange bows — раскланиваться

"May I take a seat?" asked the foreigner politely, and the friends, involuntarily somehow, moved apart; the foreigner settled in neatly between them and immediately entered the conversation.

"If I heard correctly, you were so good as to say there was never any Jesus on earth?" asked the foreigner, turning his green left eye towards Berlioz.

"Yes, you heard correctly," replied Berlioz courteously, "that is precisely what I was saying."

"Ah, how interesting!" exclaimed the foreigner.

"But what the devil does he want?" thought Bezdomny, and frowned.

"And were you in agreement with your companion?" enquired the stranger, turning to the right towards Bezdomny.

"The full hundred per cent!" confirmed the latter, who loved to express himself in a mannered and ornate fashion.

"Astonishing!" exclaimed the uninvited interlocutor and, looking around furtively for some reason and lowering his deep voice, he said: "Forgive my persistence, but my understanding was that, apart from anything else, you don't believe in God either?" He made frightened eyes and added: "I swear I won't tell anyone."

"No, we don't believe in God," replied Berlioz, with a faint smile at the fright of the foreign tourist, "but it can be spoken about completely freely."

The foreigner reclined against the back of the bench and asked, even emitting a little squeal of curiosity¹:

"Are you atheists?"

"Yes, we're atheists," replied Berlioz, smiling, while Bezdomny thought angrily: "This foreign goose is being a real nuisance!"

"Oh, how charming!" the amazing foreigner cried, and he began twisting his head, looking first at one man of letters, then at the other.

¹ a squeal of curiosity — возглас любопытства

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