

ILYA ILF & YEVGENY PETROV

THE TWELVE CHAIRS

81.432.1я7

154



■ RUSSIAN MODERN PROSE ■

RUSSIAN MODERN PROSE

ILYA ILF
YEVGENY PETROV

Translated from the Russian
by John Richardson

THE TWELVE CHAIRS

Translated from the Russian

by John Richardson

Оренбургская область
Библиотека им. И. Ильфа и Е. Петрова
Муниципальный отдел



КАРО
Санкт-Петербург

- 849287 -

PART I

THE LION OF STARGOROD

Chapter One Bezenchuk and the Nymphs

There were so many hairdressing establishments and funeral homes in the regional centre of N. that the inhabitants seemed to be born merely in order to have a shave, get their hair cut, freshen up their heads with toilet water and then die. In actual fact, people came into the world, shaved, and died rather rarely in the regional centre of N. Life in N. was extremely quiet. The spring evenings were delightful, the mud glistened like anthracite in the light of the moon, and all the young men of the town were so much in love with the secretary of the communal-service workers' local committee that she found difficulty in collecting their subscriptions.

Matters of life and death did not worry Ippolit Matveyevich Vorobyandinov, although by the nature of his work he dealt with them from nine till five every day, with a half-hour break for lunch.

Each morning, having drunk his ration of hot milk brought to him by Claudia Ivanovna in a streaky frosted-glass tumbler, he left the dingy little house and went outside into the vast street bathed in weird spring sunlight; it was called Comrade Gubernsky Street. It was the nicest kind of street you can find in regional centres. On the left you could see the coffins of the Nymph Funeral Home glittering with silver through undulating green-glass panes. On the right, the dusty, plain oak coffins of Bezenchuk, the undertaker, reclined sadly behind small windows from which the putty was peeling off. Further up, "Master Barber Pierre and Constantine" promised customers a "manicure" and "home curlings". Still further on was a hotel with a hairdresser's, and beyond it a large open space in which a straw-coloured calf stood tenderly licking the rusty sign propped up against a solitary gateway. The sign read: Do-Us-the-Honour Funeral Home.

Although there were many funeral homes, their clientele was not wealthy. The Do-Us-the-Honour had gone broke three years before Ippolit Matveyevich settled in the town of N., while Bezenchuk drank like a fish and had once tried to pawn his best sample coffin.

People rarely died in the town of N. Ippolit Matveyevich knew this better than anyone because he worked in the registry office, where he was in charge of the registration of deaths and marriages.

The desk at which Ippolit Matveyevich worked resembled an ancient gravestone. The left-hand corner had been eaten away by rats. Its wobbly legs quivered under the weight of bulging tobacco-coloured files of notes, which could provide any required information on

the origins of the town inhabitants and the family trees that had grown up in the barren regional soil.

On Friday, April 15, 1927, Ippolit Matveyevich woke up as usual at half past seven and immediately slipped on to his nose an old-fashioned pince-nez with a gold nosepiece. He did not wear glasses. At one time, deciding that it was not hygienic to wear pince-nez, he went to the optician and bought himself a pair of frameless spectacles with gold-plated sidepieces. He liked the spectacles from the very first, but his wife (this was shortly before she died) found that they made him look the spitting image of Milyukov, and he gave them to the man who cleaned the yard. Although he was not shortsighted, the fellow grew accustomed to the glasses and enjoyed wearing them.

"Bonjour!" sang Ippolit Matveyevich to himself as he lowered his legs from the bed. "Bonjour" showed that he had woken up in a good humour. If he said "Guten Morgen" on awakening, it usually meant that his liver was playing tricks, that it was no joke being fifty-two, and that the weather was damp at the time.

Ippolit Matveyevich thrust his legs into pre-revolutionary trousers, tied the ribbons around his ankles, and pulled on short, soft-leather boots with narrow, square toes. Five minutes later he was neatly arrayed in a yellow waistcoat decorated with small silver stars and a lustrous silk jacket that reflected the colours of the rainbow as it caught the light. Wiping away the drops of water still clinging to his grey hairs after his ablutions, Ippolit Matveyevich fiercely wiggled his moustache, hesitantly felt his bristly chin, gave his close-cropped silvery hair a brush and, then, smiling politely,

went toward his mother-in-law, Claudia Ivanovna, who had just come into the room.

"Eppole-et," she thundered, "I had a bad dream last night."

The word "dream" was pronounced with a French "r".

Ippolit Matveyevich looked his mother-in-law up and down. He was six feet two inches tall, and from that height it was easy for him to look down on his mother-in-law with a certain contempt.

Claudia Ivanovna continued: "I dreamed of the deceased Marie with her hair down, and wearing a golden sash."

The iron lamp with its chain and dusty glass toys all vibrated at the rumble of Claudia Ivanovna's voice. "I am very disturbed. I fear something may happen." These last words were uttered with such force that the square of bristling hair on Ippolit Matveyevich's head moved in different directions. He wrinkled up his face and said slowly:

"Nothing's going to happen, Maman. Have you paid the water rates?"

It appeared that she had not. Nor had the galoshes been washed. Ippolit Matveyevich disliked his mother-in-law. Claudia Ivanovna was stupid, and her advanced age gave little hope of any improvement. She was stingy in the extreme, and it was only Ippolit Matveyevich's poverty which prevented her giving rein to this passion. Her voice was so strong and fruity that it might well have been envied by Richard the Lionheart, at whose shout, as is well known, horses used to kneel. Furthermore, and this was the worst thing of all about her, she had dreams. She was always having dreams. She dreamed of girls in

sashes, horses trimmed with the yellow braid worn by dragoons, caretakers playing harps, angels in watchmen's fur coats who went for walks at night carrying clappers, and knitting-needles which hopped around the room by themselves making a distressing tinkle. An empty-headed woman was Claudia Ivanovna. In addition to everything else, her upper lip was covered by a moustache, each side of which resembled a shaving brush.

Ippolit Matveyevich left the house in rather an irritable mood. Bezenchuk the undertaker was standing at the entrance to his tumble-down establishment, leaning against the door with his hands crossed. The regular collapse of his commercial undertakings plus a long period of practice in the consumption of intoxicating drinks had made his eyes bright yellow like a cat's, and they burned with an unfading light.

"Greetings to an honoured guest!" he rattled off, seeing Vorobyainov. "Good mornin'"

Ippolit Matveyevich politely raised his soiled beaver hat. "How's your mother-in-law, might I inquire?" "Mrr-mrr," said Ippolit Matveyevich indistinctly, and shrugging his shoulders, continued on his way.

"God grant her health," said Bezenchuk bitterly. "Nothin' but losses, durn it." And crossing his hands on his chest, he again leaned against the doorway.

At the entrance to the Nymph Funeral Home Ippolit Matveyevich was stopped once more. There were three owners of the Nymph. They all bowed to Ippolit Matveyevich and inquired in chorus about his mother-in-law's health.

"She's well," replied Ippolit Matveyevich. "The things she does! Last night she saw a golden girl with her hair down. It was a dream."

The three Nymphs exchanged glances and sighed loudly.

These conversations delayed Vorobyandinov on his way, and contrary to his usual practice, he did not arrive at work until the clock on the wall above the slogan "Finish Your Business and Leave" showed five past nine.

Because of his great height, and particularly because of his moustache, Ippolit Matveyevich was known in the office as Maciste. Although the real Maciste had no moustache. (Translator's Note: Maciste was an internationally known Italian actor of the time.)

Taking a blue felt cushion out of a drawer in the desk, Ippolit Matveyevich placed it on his chair, aligned his moustache correctly (parallel to the top of the desk) and sat down on the cushion, rising slightly higher than his three colleagues. He was not afraid of getting piles; he was afraid of wearing out his trousers-that was why he used the blue cushion.

All these operations were watched timidly by two young persons-a boy and a girl. The young man, who wore a padded cotton coat, was completely overcome by the office atmosphere, the chemical smell of the ink, the clock that was ticking loud and fast, and most of all by the sharply worded notice "Finish Your Business and Leave". The young man in the coat had not even begun his business, but he was nonetheless ready to leave. He felt his business was so insignificant that it was shameful to disturb such a distinguished-looking grey-haired citizen as Vorobyandinov. Ippolit Matveyevich also felt the young man's business was a trifling one and could wait, so he opened folder no. 2 and, with a twitch of the cheek, immersed himself in the papers.

The girl, who had on a long jacket edged with shiny black ribbon, whispered something to the young man and, pink with embarrassment, began moving toward Ippolit Matveyevich.

"Comrade," she said, "where do we ..."

The young man in the padded coat sighed with pleasure and, unexpectedly for himself, blurted out:

"Get married!"

Ippolit Matveyevich looked thoughtfully at the rail behind which the young couple were standing.

"Birth? Death?"

"Get married?" repeated the young man in the coat and looked round him in confusion.

The girl gave a giggle. Things were going fine. Ippolit Matveyevich set to work with the skill of a magician. In spidery handwriting he recorded the names of the bride and groom in thick registers, sternly questioned the witnesses, who had to be fetched from outside, breathed tenderly and lengthily on the square rubber stamps and then, half rising to his feet, impressed them upon the tattered identification papers. Having received two roubles from the newlyweds "for administration of the sacrament", as he said with a smirk, and given them a receipt, Ippolit Matveyevich drew himself up to his splendid height, automatically pushing out his chest (he had worn a corset at one time). The wide golden rays of the sun fell on his shoulders like epaulettes. His appearance was slightly comic, but singularly impressive. The biconcave lenses of his pince-nez flashed white like searchlights. The young couple stood in awe.

"Young people," said Ippolit Matveyevich pompously, "allow me to congratulate you, as they used to say, on

your legal marriage. It is very, very nice to see young people like yourselves moving hand in hand toward the realization of eternal ideals. It is very, ve-ery nice!

Having made this address, Ippolit Matveyevich shook hands with the newly married couple, sat down, and, extremely pleased with himself, continued to read the papers in folder no. 2. At the next desk the clerks sniggered into their inkwells. The quiet routine of the working day had begun. No one disturbed the deaths-and-marriages desk. Through the windows citizens could be seen making their way home, shivering in the spring chilliness. At exactly midday the cock in the Hammer and Plough cooperative began crowing. Nobody was surprised. Then came the mechanical rattling and squeaking of a car engine. A thick cloud of violet smoke billowed out from Comrade Gubernsky Street, and the clanking grew louder. Through the smoke appeared the outline of the regional-executive-committee car Gos. No. 1 with its minute radiator and bulky body. Floundering in the mud as it went, the car crossed Staropan Square and, swaying from side to side, disappeared in a cloud of poisonous smoke. The clerks remained standing at the window for some time, commenting on the event and attempting to connect it with a possible reduction in staff. A little while later Bezenchuk cautiously went past along the footboards. For days on end he used to wander round the town trying to find out if anyone had died.

The working day was drawing to a close. In the nearby white and yellow belfry the bells began ringing furiously. Windows rattled. Jackdaws rose one by one from the belfry, joined forces over the square, held a brief meeting, and flew off. The evening sky turned ice-grey over the deserted square.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента

Уважаемый читатель!

Размещение полного текста данного произведения
невозможно в связи с ограничениями по IV части ГК
РФ

Эту книгу вы можете прочитать в Оренбургской
областной универсальной научной библиотеке им.
Н.К. Крупской по адресу: г. Оренбург, ул. Советская
20 тел.: для справок: (3532) 61-60-30