

Ivan Raos

A Game of Preference

“Were you acquainted with Petar Yegorovitch Suhanin?”

“Who was not acquainted with Father Petar Yegorovitch? Who had slept with the most women and won the most duels? Petar Yegorovitch. Who could swear and curse in such a salty way, who was so mindlessly dedicated to dancing, drinking and every kind debauchery? Once again Petar Yegorovitch, always Petar Yegorovitch, my little pigeon. I caroused with him for just the one night, and I shall never forget it. Chairs on tables, and chairs on the chairs, and up to the top climbed Petar Yegorovitch, stark naked, drunk, gloriously and majestically drunk as only a Russian can get. His face burned like a fire, eyes like red hot coals. And when he did the kazachok, he wasn't a man any more, but a demon. As if he were dancing in the very smoke, and so quick, so vivid that your eye couldn't quite catch him. And our hearts would stop; we would be thinking, the man's gone mad. And that was a fleabite for him. They say he danced on knives too. Who wasn't acquainted with Petar Yegorovitch, my hero... And then, all at once, the devil knows what was up with him, he disappeared. And no one in Petrograd, my dear Ivan Petrovitch, knows where he disappeared to.”

"You see, my dear Arcady Nikolayevitch, but I do know where, and why. You will remember his dear wife Darya Vasilyevna, the great beauty? You yourself know that half of Petrograd was crazy for her, not for the woman in her, but for the fairy. And if she had opened her bed for any of us, I dare swear that not one of us would have dared to creep in. Just look, and look, and look. She was so spiritual, Darya Vasilyevna. And you will remember Ferapont Semyonovitch Krilov, that handsome, curly landowner, that plaster saint who, how should I put it, lived on charity in Petar Yegorovitch's house. That Ferapont Semyonovitch was by nature a shy and timid fellow, other people's bread made him still more timid. He loved Petar Yegorovitch and Darya Vasilyevna, loved them indescribably more than you love benefactors and patrons.

Petar Yegorovitch, fierce and irascible, was, so to speak, unbridledly wanton. He never had much truck with common sense. He was ruled by passion, driven by it in fact. When it took deep hold of him, then he would drive a horse until it died beneath him, squeeze girls until they fell into a lethargy, and dance, as you deigned to say, on bare knives. You can imagine how much Darya Vasilyevna had to put up with, how much it all made her feel insulted and humiliated. It even sometimes happened, my pigeons, that she didn't see Petar Yegorovitch for weeks, except Tuesdays and Fridays in the afternoons for their regular preference games. And these games were just another part of the limitlessness of his passion. The capital might have been burning down, but it was impossible for Petar Yegorovitch not to be at the

card table at the appointed hour. Darya Vasilyevna played on his left, and Ferapont on his right. That's how it was from month to month. After the game, Suhanin ceremoniously rose, and departed. And it was known where he was going to. It gnawed at Darya, the dove, she felt like crying.

Dry her eyes, my hearty!

Even iron has its limits, and the human heart has them too. The woman doesn't exist who wouldn't even her husband's debauchery out with an affair of her own. And Darya Vasilyevna was a conceited woman, pride, vain of her own beauty.

One day she unexpectedly addressed Krilov:

"Do you love me, Ferapont Semyonovitch?"

And Krilov raised his vassal's eyes.

"How can you ask that, our little mother, our benefactor?"

"I'm not talking of that kind of love, Ferapont Semyonovitch. Do you love me as a woman?"

He was embarrassed, he blushed, he would have plunged into the earth. He stuttered:

"Our little mother, little mother... For the love of heaven, how could I dare to do that... How could I dare to think of it?"

"Well, Ferapont Semyonovitch, you see, my hero, I love you.

Krilov couldn't put up with these words. He couldn't, old chap.

"You seem to be making mock of a poor fellow, Darya Vasilyevna, our little mother."

"I'm making no mock, Ferapont Semyonovitch."

"Then you're just imagining it, respected Darya Vasilyevna, it's some illusion, some evil fancy..."

"I'm not imagining it, Ferapont Semyonovitch. It's no illusion, as you have graciously suggested, no evil fancy, hero. I have watched you long, known you long. ...Your modesty and humanity have charmed me. Apart from that I am a woman, and my heart requires the devotion of some other heart. Come closer, Ferapont Semyonovitch, you alone have deserved my love."

Krilov didn't approach, but wriggled as if he were sitting upon needles.

"I know, mother," he said, "what this is, I know. This is not about me, little mother benefactor, it's about Petar Yegorovitch. But forgive him, he's not such a bad man, he's not, heavens above. And he loves you. He would have his hands struck off for you. Look how much he loves you. He said to me: "My dear Ferapont Semyonovitch, it's not that I don't love Darya Vasilyevna. Who, my dear cousin, would not love such a lovely and darling little dove. I love her, and I would have my hand struck off for her. But there you are, my blood is cursed, poison blood, my dear fellow." That's just how he said it, my dear fellow."

Darya laughed.

"I don't doubt your loyalty to your friend, nor his, as he puts it, cursed poisoned blood, but you have to understand me. Understand that I too have poisoned blood, and that I am only a woman, a weak and injured woman, my dove. And you, if you love

me, Ferapont Semyonovitch, don't be afraid of responding... And love me."

"Forgive me, my little mother benefactor, but I shall go mad of all this."

But what Darya Vasilyevna had once got into her head she made sure to happen.

"Understand me once and for all, Ferapont Semyonovitch: I wish to deceive my husband. If you won't do it, and I prefer you to all men, then I shall give myself to the nearest coachman."

"Please excuse me, but..."

"Yes or no?"

And after Ferapont was still silent:

"I command you!" she screamed and shook with anger.

Thus she grabbed him roughly by the hand, and out of his mind as he was, pulled him off to her bed.

"Forgive me, mother, forgive both me and Petar Yegorovitch... for love of heaven, mother," and he was abject.

The smiling sun strolled along the Nevski Prospekt.

"Let the Lord have mercy on us, mother, but Petar Yegorovitch might catch us!"

"That's just what I want," said the inflamed woman.

Krilov was struck dumb with horror.

And, my friend, Arkady Nikolaivitch, Suhanin really did catch them in the marriage bed. He went quite stiff. If he had caught the devil there he

wouldn't have gone so far out of his mind. He stood at the door, went neither backwards nor forwards. He couldn't get a word out. And she, the little devil, she wriggled on the quilts, uncovered herself and stretched out and said:

"Welcome, Petar Yegorovitch, my hero. Do you like it," she said, "catching us here like this. I wanted to give you a little surprise. It doesn't mean anything, my pigeon, I love you just the same, and I would have my hand struck off for you, but there you are, there's cursed blood in me, poisoned blood, my hero. You know what kind of blood it is. And don't blame Ferapont Semyonovitch, such a friend as you can't find anywhere. If you have anything to say, say it to me, and if you intend to rage, rage at me."

Petar Yegorovitch had no need of this explanation. He knew Ferapont Semyonovitch in his soul, in his frightened abject little soul. But for Darya to behave like this, he couldn't reconcile himself to it even in his dreams. It is true that he had erred, erred a great deal. All the brats in Petrograd knew of his debaucheries. But was it his fault that nature had made him that way, that his virility cast him now this way, now that way, that it was actually tearing him apart? Thus shifting the guilt from himself to nature, he felt himself growing, growing gigantically.

"You, Darya Vasilyevna, " he said, "think you'll play the fool with me? Make mock of me? It won't work, wife, it won't work...You seem to have forgotten that I am Petar Yegorovitch, Petar Yegorovitch, Petar Yegorovitch..."

And that "Petar Yegorovitch" grew inside him like some marvellous deity, some unique and inviolable value, grew with his rage into a madness, a moan, a death rattle.

The last time he pronounced it sadly, drawing it out, like the quietest of prayers, and dejectedly removed his hands from the neck of his strangled wife.

Ferapont Semyonovitch was standing stark naked in a corner of the room, dumb, petrified. He couldn't whisper out a single word.

And Suhanin held his stiff, bent fingers in front of him and couldn't tear his gaze away from the smile of the murdered woman.

There was a long silence in the folds of the silent curtains. Then the wind rocked a branch, and a single yellow leaf fluttered into the room. And this yellow, autumnal leaf recalled Suhanin from his unknown somnambulistic world. And as if he had unexpectedly come to recognize the truth, he shook himself and shuddered at his crime. Noticing Krilov, he threw himself to the ground and began to kiss his feet in a frenzy:

"What have I done, Ferapont Semyonovitch, my hero, what have I done? Here I am, prostrate before you, kissing your feet, your sainted little feet. Trample on me, kill me, if you have any feeling..

And Ferapont Semyonovitch burst into tears, fell down beside him, moaned and began to hug and kiss him.

"What will become of us without her, Ferapont Semyonovitch, what will become of us without her?"

“Without the little mother?”

When they had calmed down, they took the body of the departed and secretly carried it away to the Tambov governorship to Ferapont's mortgaged estate.

If your way takes you there, as it has me, you will see a marvellous palace with three wings, all in greenery, on the green bank of the Volga, you will see a grave the like of which you have never seen even in Italy. And if you ask the peasants whose is the palace and whose the grave, they will answer to you thus: “Lord Ferapont Semyonovitch's, who had luck with the cards in Petrograd, and redeemed his mortgaged estate and raised all this for himself and his descendants. Yes, yes, many years he lived on the charity of some nobleman, and now again there is some sort of pauper living with him.”

But don't believe them. That pauper was Suhanin, who had built it all. Now, the story could well end here. But no. It's only just about to begin. As I said, I passed through the Tambov governorship. I was overtaken by night in front of the palace, and resolved to spend the night there. You can imagine how astonished I was when I saw Suhanin and Krilov. They had somehow become rapidly bent, grey and older. I saw that they were not happy with my visit. And yet, they could not but recognize an old friend. We embraced, and yet there was no real joy to it.

However amazed I was at finding a man who had so to speak been the king of Petrograd and then disappeared without trace, I had my wits about me enough not to mention this to him even once, and not seeing the hostess, I didn't ask after her.

But the talk unfolded bit by bit, and by evening I had captivated Petar Yegorovitch so much with my news and my wit that he forced me to stay with them another ten days.

You can't imagine, respected Arkady Nikolaievitch, how much and in what way these two prematurely aged men loved each other. Once while hunting Krilov grazed his finger. It was such a tiny scratch that not even a child would have cried.

But Suhanin was completely aghast.

“Ferapont Semyonovitch, my friend, but you are bleeding.”

“But it's nothing, my dear, Petar Yegorovitch.”

“Nothing? But this blood is gushing and spurting out, my hero.”

“How is it gushing, it's already dried.”

“Dried, what dried? It could go nasty. What would I do without you Ferapont Semyonovitch. Come now, cross your heart, what would I do without you?”

And he wouldn't leave him alone until he had washed and disinfected this scrape. That's how much they loved each other, Arkady Nikolai...

Once, right after lunch, we set off in a boat down the Volga. The water was stirring, the banks still more so, the breeze refreshed us. The friends asked questions about Petrograd, and my tongue was loosened and the words kept flowing.

“I am sorry, but I shall have to leave you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow already?” they both grieved. “What's

the day tomorrow?"

"Saturday," I said.

"Then today's Friday," they said paling.

"Ivan Petrovitch," said Suhanin confusedly, "friend, do excuse us, but we have to return. Ah, Ferapont Semyonovitch, how could we have forgotten?"

And he began rowing hurriedly and incompetently.

"Leave the oars to me," I said, "and perhaps we'll get along faster."

Amazingly, he obeyed at once. We went back without a word. How confused and excited they were. They stared at the distant palace, and I could feel their trembling.

"Tie us up to the bank," said Krilov at once, "for the love of God, tie us up to the bank, and we'll get there the sooner... And you do whatever you want...you can go downstream, downstream if you like..."

But, Arkady N., I didn't set off downstream. I wanted to find out the cause of their haste, especially since I recalled several such afternoons when they had retreated into isolation.

Arriving at the palace, I asked Matvey where the master was. He said that they were in the small drawing room, but it was more than my life was worth to disturb them.

I made out it was a matter of indifference to me and went to my own room. Then with secret steps I made my way to the small drawing room. The door

was ajar. Probably they had forgotten to draw the bolt in their haste and excitement. Suhanin had his back turned to me, and Krilov displayed his profile. They had several cards in their hands, which they discarded carefully and with elderly hesitation. And when they had discarded them all, Krilov picked up the scattered cards and with a very smooth movement handed them across the table into empty space.

"Darya Vasilyevna, please have the goodness to shuffle."

You can imagine my astonishment when, instead of Darya Vasilyevna, some invisible hands took the cards from Kirov's hand and started to shuffle them lightly.

Then they lifted them up, dealt, spread and arranged them again. And they played. Lord, they played so cautiously, so certainly, and with so much charming refinement.

And by the big beads of icy sweat, I could tell I was not dreaming.

At the end, the players rose, offered their hands somewhere into the void, as if they were shaking hands with someone, and with great respect they kissed the bare air above their empty hands. They found me petrified on the threshold. They started. Then Suhanin gave me a gentle pat on the shoulder.

"Please excuse us, Ivan Petrovitch, for leaving you alone. And don't be alarmed at what you have seen. It's nothing at all. These are our preference games. Tuesdays and Fridays. Darya Vasilyevna is not a woman to be placated with excuses. You see, not even death can stop her from coming to the game.

That's the way it is, my pigeon. That's the way Darya Vasilyevna is."

And then they related to me the entire story as I have told it to you.

Antun Šoljan

Ship in a Bottle

All museums are alike, as if they carried on from each other, room after room, in some imaginary sequence. In whatever country they are, whatever it is they are exhibiting, after a certain time everything loses its sharpness of edge and clarity of colour, from the half-light, the dust and the sheer transitoriness, and becomes the same: that impartiality of the cemetery.

Marine museums are no exception: in many cities, around many seas, the same lacquered flotsam under glass, the same smell of floor polish, even the same visitors, who have all wandered in from the life of the present as if they were exhibits of fragments from the past. I don't quite know why they attract me so much. My voracious memory has mixed them all up – Greenwich, Monte Carlo, Dubrovnik, Copenhagen, San Francisco – as if they were all to be found in a single unreal city on the coast of some ancient and long ago unreal sea.

Perhaps I simply don't remember in which city it was, which sea it was on, or perhaps I simply managed to find my way to that unreal generalized museum; I only know that I can't tell you where it was: but I did see that ship in a bottle. Perhaps everyone