

PROFESSOR OROCHEV'S DELUSION.



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CHAPTER ONE

Yevgeny Stepanov, handsome, well-built, strong, looked more like an actor than an archaeologist. There had been a time when he dreamed of being an actor of renown—nothing less would suit him.

After secondary school he tried for a theatrical school but failed in the examinations. The producer and other members of the commission that selected new students watched him for some time in silence, then the producer said:

"Nothing natural about you, laddy. Not a scrap of sincerity. Every word and gesture is false."

Stepanov swallowed the insult and began to recite one of Krylov's fables as though nothing had been said:

And God once sent a crow a tasty piece of cheese.

*Upon a fir-tree high ensconced,
He calmly settled down his fast to break. . . .*

"All right, it can get its breakfast another time," the examiner interrupted him.

"What do you mean by that?" asked the astonished Stepanov.

The flabby face of that elderly man underwent a sudden change. Stepanov was almost horrified when he recognized his own features, his own smile; and the examiner added something else to his expression, something extremely unpleasant, something predatory that was also an integral part of his, Stepanov's character.

"But—" he began angrily, trying to explain.

"That'll do, young man," said the examiner. "Too much humbug. Call the next."

Stepanov did not believe the producer. But when the hall-porter closed the door it closed behind Stepanov for ever. There followed hectic days, he had to hurry, he had to get into some higher school. He applied to the university to enter the Archaeology Section of the Department of History. He tried to forget the producer-examiner, he tried to forget his verdict. For the first time in his life he had heard the truth about himself and he did not believe it. . . .

All the people who had ever known him, his teachers and his schoolfellows, had a good opinion of him. At school he had always answered the teachers' questions better and more accurately

than his class-mates, he behaved tactfully and possessed a photographic memory, a sort of filing cabinet in which all the photo-cards were filed in perfect order, cards recording what had been said by history and geography teachers, cards bearing mathematical formulae and theorems, cards with verses and bits of prose.

While he was still at school he realized that all his teachers, or most of them, placed a high value on the short, precise answer, on the resourceful, snappy, knowing response; and he realized that of all nature's gifts to man that of memory was most highly valued by his teachers. College, however, is no school, and the student cannot get far on memory alone. In the Department of History Stepanov soon became known as a hard-working and receptive student. He frequently took part in class discussions and had the knack of taking somebody else's half-formed idea, tersely expounding it, transforming it and, unperceived by the others, claiming it as his own. . . .

With the exception of that day at the Theatrical School, Stepanov was hardly ever flustered at examinations. Now, however, he was faced with an examination of a different kind—today, for the first time in his life, it was not Stepanov's memory or his ability to give a brilliant answer to

a question that was to be examined but his capacity for independent scientific thought.

All were gathered in the Assembly Hall with the exception of one member of the University Council, Professor Orochev.

Nikolai Ilyich was late, and that was something unusual for him. Minutes passed that to Stepanov seemed like hours.

"Suppose he stays away demonstratively," thought the worried Stepanov. "Suppose he doesn't come but sends a note excusing himself on grounds of illness or something. It's not hard to find some pretext." But Orochev came, excused himself and the presentation of the thesis began. Nikolai Ilyich was supposed to speak and he did so without hesitation. The audience listened to him with great respect. He praised the master's thesis presented by his post-graduate student, said that which is always said on such occasions.

Nobody guessed what Orochev was thinking as he made his speech, nobody suspected that his weighty and convincing words did not express the thought that was troubling him.

"It's not Stepanov you're praising, but yourself," Nikolai Ilyich said to himself. "You, Professor Orochev, helped him write that thesis when you were already certain Stepanov couldn't do it himself."

Orochev's thoughts made it difficult for him to speak and it was by a great effort of will that he subdued the inner voice.

He spoke as confidently as usual, with the fervency of former years when he had spoken in defence of his first scientific discovery, a rock drawing made by paleolithic man, found in the taiga; he had defended it against the cynics who delighted in doubting everything. Actually he was praising something worth while. The subject fascinated him. Stepanov's thesis dealt with the most astounding phenomena of the prehistoric world, paleolithic art. His paper had to answer the question that scholars had raised hundreds of times and tried in vain to answer: how was it that primitive man, in the early stages of his material and spiritual development, was able to create an art that was in essence almost mature, an art that was a delightful and laconic reflection of life itself?

This idea had bothered Orochev in the days of his youth, had cost him many sleepless nights, there had been sudden flashes of illumination followed by disappointment, but later he had almost forgotten it.

The old enthusiasm returned during his work over Stepanov's thesis and with it came the old excitement.

As Orochev worked over this thesis for another man he did not spare Stepanov's self-respect but sent him running around the libraries to study all available ethnological literature in English, French and German on the present-day primitive and half-primitive peoples of Africa, South America, Oceania, Australia, Greenland and Northern Canada. He mustered all his erudition, made use of endless archaeological and ethnographical data to find at least a partial answer to the difficult question: why was paleolithic art so perfect?

As he worked he forgot that he was writing for somebody else. He even forgot his reasons for doing it. Nikolai Ilyich had long since become convinced that Stepanov was incapable of writing the thesis himself. True enough he could have turned Stepanov down as a post-graduate student of little ability and incapable of independent thought. To do so, however, he would have to admit his own mistake. Orochev himself had recommended Stepanov for his post-graduate course and had rejected young men and women immeasurably more competent and talented.

He had been cleverly deceived, did not see through Stepanov and believed he was really worth something. At that time there had been a spot of bother in the Department of History. His

enemies (and who has not got them?) accused him of evading the task of training young scientists, they claimed that he feared responsibility, feared difficulties and that everybody had got used to this situation.

Other professors recommended and supported other students, their favourites, naturally, and sometimes even requested Orochev's support. They had such efficient students, capable of independent work, fashioned from some special clay. . . . That cut Orochev to the quick. In what way is my Stepanov worse than the others? The man tries hard and will be left at a loose end merely because Professor Orochev is compliant and doesn't want to offend his colleagues. Nothing of the sort! Other students may be marvels of ability but there is one thing my Stepanov possesses—modesty!

Orochev was deluded by Stepanov's excellent manners, his photographic memory and his precise answers at examinations. And then his own pride was touched. Nikolai Ilyich did not wish to admit his error not only to other people, but even to himself.

"It's early to judge Stepanov," he said to those who did not believe in the young man's abilities. "He's young, inexperienced and spiritually and intellectually timid. It is more a question of

character than intellect. Character is plastic, it can be remoulded."

He did not, however, succeed in remodelling Stepanov's character either in the first or the second year. Before he knew it the time arrived when the thesis had to be written.

The thesis was written, typed and bound in a good cloth cover. It contained exactly the number of pages required of a master's thesis, neither more nor less.

So far everything was going well. Nobody knew that Orochev had been helping Stepanov, that the work had been done in Orochev's home.

Pride, even malice, drove Nikolai Ilyich on. He doesn't pay enough attention to training the youth? "Let their ultraclever and supremely independent students write as well as my Stepanov," he said to himself as he read over a well-sounding passage in a just finished chapter and almost forgot that Stepanov had had nothing whatever to do with that passage or even with that chapter. Stepanov had, of course, written some of the chapters, but little of what he wrote remained. Orochev did not grudge either time or effort. Now all this was past.

The thesis made a good impression, even an excellent impression, on all who read it. The work

contained new and daring ideas, expounded with great skill and based on numerous facts.

As the session drew to a close Orochev's thoughts troubled him. Why should he worry? The only person who knew that Orochev had written the thesis was Stepanov himself. He, at any rate, would never betray the secret! But did Stepanov realize what a superb gift Nikolai Ilyich had made him? Hardly! As a matter of fact Orochev himself only realized it when he saw the excited faces of the audience and heard such sincere and moving words as are rarely spoken at such sessions.

All eyes were fixed on Stepanov and his concluding speech was twice interrupted by applause. Loud applause came from a grey-headed elderly man with a happy smiling face who sat in the second row—Yevgeny Stepanov's father. As soon as the meeting of the University Council was over he went up to Orochev, took him by the hand, thanked him and said:

"We have arranged a modest banquet today in honour of the presentation of Yevgeny's thesis. I hope you won't refuse to dine with us, Nikolai Ilyich."

"No thank you," answered Orochev drily, almost sharply. "You will excuse me but I always dine at home."

The old man was disappointed, called his son and asked:

"Why did Orochev refuse my invitation? Try and persuade him, Yevgeny."

His son's answer astonished the old man even more than Orochev's refusal.

"Refused? So much the better. I'm tired of him, Dad. I'm not going to persuade him."

CHAPTER TWO

Eighteen months later the fat, cloth-bound manuscript was transformed into a book with a handsome cover on which there was a picture of a herd of reindeer and the long silhouette-like figures of primitive men aiming their bows at some running animals—Y. Stepanov, *Paleolithic Art*.

When Stepanov's former schoolmates saw the beautiful, expensive book in the windows of a shop on Nevsky Prospect, none of them was surprised at Yevgeny's quick rise to scholarly fame or his publishing a scientific book. In school he had always got a mark of "excellence" and had been a favourite with the school director and the teachers. Yevgeny's father and other relatives were not surprised that he had made such rapid progress either. The good reports he had earned almost from the first day of school, the augmented stipend he had been awarded at the university

and his certificates of merit had prepared them for his success. The strangest thing of all was that Yevgeny Stepanov, Master of Science,* was himself not surprised. He was, from time to time, troubled by doubt long before the book was published—he doubted his right to receive so much help from Orochev.

He did not immediately make up his mind to submit his manuscript to the publisher. He was very cautious and feared trouble.

"Do you know, Nikolai Ilyich," he once said to Orochev, the most guileless smile hovering on his lips, "I have received an offer to publish my thesis in book form."

Orochev stared at his former student so intently that the latter was compelled to drop his eyes.

"So what.... So what...." muttered Nikolai Ilyich. "Congratulations."

Neither the professor's voice nor his face expressed any particular pleasure. But the essential word had been said. Did this not mean that Orochev himself approved of it?

Stepanov handed the manuscript in to the publisher and a couple of months later got

* History and other humanities in the U.S.S.R. give a Science and not an Arts degree as in England and the U.S.A—*Tr.*

favourable reviews from the publisher's readers, that merely required the author to make some insignificant changes. The manuscript went to print but the doubts remained.

Stepanov's doubts were stronger than ever when he read the galley proofs where every paragraph, every phrase, every idea, reminded him of Orochev and of the narrow sheets of paper covered with Orochev's characteristic writing. It seemed that little more was necessary to make Stepanov refuse to sign the proofs, go to his professor in repentance and even defray the cost of setting the type. He did not, however, possess sufficient courage, will-power and decency. The idea of seeing the cover and title page of the book with his name on them was far too tempting.

The world had changed beyond all recognition since Yevgeny Stepanov received his degree of Master of Science and published a book on paleolithic art. At any rate it seemed quite different to Stepanov and people also looked differently at him. True enough, the houses on Nevsky Prospect still stood in the same places and the Neva still flowed under the same bridges and under the same dull Leningrad sky. But still the world was different. In the course of some eighteen months something like a miracle had hap-

pened. Stepanov took part in learned conferences, reviewed material for publishers, delivered lectures. Newspaper offices and publishers telephoned him, the porter at the Institute of the History of Material Culture opened the door for him with respectful admiration. Girl students wrote him *billets-doux*. He didn't read them as he had neither time nor inclination to bother about this love nonsense. Many letters came to him through his publisher, the Academy of Sciences Publishing House, where readers addressed them to him. His book on paleolithic art was read in the Western Ukraine, in Central Asia and on the Kuril Islands. His readers not only thanked him for having told them about little-known things but also because his writing was interesting, exciting and impassioned, because he had been able to bring to life on the pages of his book a distant epoch in human history and arouse in his contemporaries sympathy and profound interest in the creative thought of primitive man.

During the first days after the presentation of the thesis Yevgeny Stepanov felt somewhat embarrassed whenever he met Orochev. He avoided speaking about his work. When the book was published Stepanov gave considerable thought to the inscription he would put in the copy he presented to Orochev. Finally he decided on the most mod-