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M o s c o w

**SOVIET LITERATURE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE**

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НА КРАЮ ОЙКУМЕНЫ

*На английском языке*





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# P R O L O G U E



fresh autumn breeze swept over the ruffled surface of the Neva. In the bright sunshine the tall, slim spire on the Fortress of Peter and Paul was a streak of gold piercing the blue canopy of the sky. Below it Palace Bridge gracefully curved its broad back over rising and falling waves that sparkled and splashed against the granite steps of the embankment.

A young sailor sitting on a bench glanced at his watch, jumped up and walked off rapidly along the embankment past the Admiralty building whose yellow walls reared their crown of white columns high into the transparent autumn air. He walked quickly, paying no attention to the holiday atmosphere that surrounded him. He strode along with a light and confident step, the exercise warmed him, and he pushed his sailor cap on to the back of



his head. He crossed a garden whose trees were aflame with autumn tints, passed along one side of an open space and for a moment stood before the entrance to the Hermitage Museum where two polished granite giants supported a massive balcony raised over a humped pavement. Scars made by German bombs were still to be seen on the giant bodies. The young man entered the heavy doors, took off his greatcoat and hurried towards a white marble staircase leading from the semi-gloom of the vestibule to a brightly-lit colonnade surrounded by a row of marble statues.

A tall, slim girl, smiling with pleasure, came to meet him. Her attentive eyes, set wide apart, seemed to grow darker and warmer. The sailor looked at the girl in some embarrassment but when he saw that she was just putting her cloak-room check into her open bag he knew that he was not late. His face lit up and he confidently proposed starting their tour of the museum with the Gallery of Antiquities.

The young people passed through the crowd of visitors, making their way along rows of columns supporting a brightly painted ceiling. After looking at the remains of vases and stone slabs bearing inscriptions in unknown languages, dismal, black statues from ancient Egypt, sarcophagi, mummies and other funereal appurtenances that seemed even more depressing in the gloomy galleries of the lower story, they felt the need for bright colours and sunshine. The youth and the girl hurried to reach the upper rooms. Passing through two more rooms they made their way to a side staircase that led to the upper galleries from a small room with tall, narrow windows through which gleamed a pale sky. A number of conical octagonal show-cases stood between the white columns but the small items of ancient art exhibited in them did not seem to attract the attention of visitors.

Suddenly the girl's eyes caught a patch of marvellous blue-green light in the third show-case; it was so brilliant that it seemed to be a source of light in itself. The girl led her companion to the show-case. A flat stone with round edges lay on a sloping bed of silver-coloured velvet. The stone was extraordinarily pure and translucent, its glowing blue-green colour was unexpectedly joyous, brilliant and deep. On the upper surface, obviously polished by the hand of man, cleanly-cut human figures, no bigger than one's little finger, stood out in sharp relief.

The colour, brilliance and light emanating from the transparent stone formed a striking contrast to the dull severity of the gallery and the pale tones of the autumn sky.

The girl heard her companion heave a deep sigh and noticed in his eyes a dreamy look that bespoke memories evoked by the stone.

"That's just like the southern sea on a fine afternoon," said the young sailor slowly; the absolute confidence of one who has seen things resounded in his words.

"That's something I've never seen," replied the girl, "only I feel some sort of depth in that stone, some sort of light and joy . . . I can't exactly explain . . . Where do people find stones like this?"

Neither the general heading over the four show-cases: *Antae Burials: 7th Century, Middle Dnieper, River Ros*, nor the label on the show-case itself: *Grebenets Burial Mound, Ancient Clan Shrine*—told the young people anything. The other objects that surrounded the wonderful stone were equally incomprehensible: broken knives and spearheads so ugly and damaged by rust as to be unrecognizable, flat bowls, and some sort of pendants of blackened bronze and silver in the form of a trapezium.

"All this was dug up in Kiev Region," the young man hazarded a guess, "but I've never heard that stones like that are found anywhere in the Ukraine . . . Who could

we ask?" And the young man looked round the big gallery.

It was just their bad luck that there was not a single museum guide anywhere within sight, nobody but the woman caretaker on her chair near the staircase.

From the staircase came the sound of footsteps and a tall man in a carefully pressed black suit came down into the gallery. From the way the caretaker got up and greeted him with deference the girl guessed rightly that he was a man of importance in the museum. She gave her companion a quiet nudge but he was already on his way to meet the newcomer; standing to attention, sailor-fashion, he began:

"May I ask you something?"

"Certainly. What is it you want to know?" said the scientist, screwing up his near-sighted eyes to examine the young couple.

The sailor told him what had interested them. The scientist laughed.

"You have a nose for good things, young man!" he exclaimed approvingly. "You've lighted on one of the most interesting exhibits in our museum! Did you examine the carving closely? No? Too small? And what do you think this thing is for? Look!" He reached up and took hold of a wooden frame hinged to the upper edge of the show-case and lowered it over the glass. A big magnifying glass came into position exactly opposite the stone. He pressed a switch and a bright light was thrown on its surface. More interested than ever the young couple peered through the magnifying glass. The enlarged carving seemed to come to life. On one edge of the transparent, blue-green stone, fine but scanty lines traced the nude figure of a girl standing with her right hand raised to her cheek. Rolls of thick, curly hair lay on her delicately moulded shoulders. The face had been carved with great attention to detail.

The remaining part of the stone was filled by three male figures, their arms round each other's shoulders; these figures were drawn with far greater skill than that of the girl.

The shapely muscular figures had been caught in motion. There was something dynamic in the turn of the bodies, strong, urgent and at the same time restrained. The big man in the centre, taller than those on either side of him, had thrown his mighty arms round their shoulders. The side figures, armed with spears, stood with their heads bent attentively. The poses expressed the tense vigilance of warriors ready at any moment to repulse the attack of an enemy.

The three tiny figures were the work of a great artist. The basic idea—fraternity, friendship and the common struggle—was expressed with extraordinary force.

The charm of the bright, transparent stone, that served both as material and as background, greatly enhanced the beauty of the cameo. A limpid, warm tint that seemed to emanate from the depths of the cold transparent stone tinged the bodies of the three embracing men with the golden joy of sunshine....

Under the figures and on the smooth, lower edge some incomprehensible marks had been hurriedly and irregularly scratched.

"Have you had a good look? I can see you're thrilled with it." The voice of the archaeologist gave the young people a start. "Good. If you like, I'll tell you something about that stone? It is one of the riddles that we sometimes meet in the historical documents of the past. Listen while I tell you just what the riddle is. That stone is a beryl, in general not a particularly rare mineral, although blue-green beryls of such pure water are rare enough; they are found in South Africa and nowhere else in the world. That's the first point. The carving on the stone is a cameo and ornaments of this type were greatly

admired in Greece when ancient Hellenic art was at its best. Now the beryl is a very hard stone and such a carving could only have been made with a diamond which the Greek sculptors did not have. That's the second point. Next, take the three male figures—the central one is undoubtedly a Negro, the one on the right a Hellene, and that on the left, one of the Mediterranean peoples, probably a Cretan or an Etruscan. Lastly, the quality and technique indicate that the work belongs to the most flourishing period in the history of Greece; nevertheless there are a number of features that show that it was made at a much earlier date. And then, the spears are of a peculiar shape unknown in either Greece or Egypt. . . . So you see there are several contradictions, a number of incompatible indicants . . . but despite them the cameo exists, it's before your eyes. . . .”

The archaeologist paused and then continued in the same abrupt way:

“There are many more historical riddles. All of them tell us one thing: how little we know. We have very little knowledge of how the ancient peoples lived. Amongst the Scythian works of art in our gold repository, for example, we have a gold buckle. It is two thousand six hundred years old and carries the image of the extinct sabre-toothed tiger in all its details. Yes, yes, and the palaeontologists will tell you that the sabre-toothed tiger became extinct three hundred thousand years ago. . . . Ha! And in Egyptian tombs you will see frescoes on which every kind of animal found in Egypt is drawn with amazing accuracy. Amongst them is an unknown animal of tremendous size that looks like a giant hyena—such an animal is unknown in Egypt, in all Africa, in fact. And then, in the Cairo Museum, there is a statue of a girl found in the ruins of the city of Akhetaton, built in the 14th century B.C.—she is not an Egyptian and the work is not Egyptian, it is like something from another world. My col-

leagues will tell you that it is con-ven-tion-al-ized," drawled the archaeologist with a touch of sarcasm. "In connection with this I always like to recall another story. On those same Egyptian wall paintings you often come across a little fish. Just a tiny fish with nothing special about it except that it is always drawn upside down, belly upwards. How could the Egyptians, whose drawings are always so precise, draw such an unnatural fish. Explanations, of course, were forthcoming: it was explained away by conventionalism, by religion, by the influence of the cult of the god Amon. The conclusions were quite convincing and everybody was satisfied. Then it was discovered that there is a fish in the Nile today exactly like the one in the paintings—it swims belly upwards! Very instructive. But I'm running away with myself! Good-bye, you'll find the riddles of history interesting. . . ."

"Just a minute, Professor!" exclaimed the girl. "Excuse me, but can't you explain this riddle yourself. . . . Tell us what you think about the stone. . . ." The girl stopped in embarrassment.

The archaeologist smiled.

"There's no getting away from you. All that I can tell you is sheer guesswork, that's all. One thing is certain: real art reflects life, art itself is living and can only rise to new heights in the struggle against the old. In the distant past, when that cameo was carved, slavery, oppression and lawlessness reigned supreme. Many people lived out their lives in perpetual misery. There were slaves, however, who fought for their emancipation, and oppressed people who rose up in arms against their oppressors. And when one looks at this cameo one feels that the friendship of the three warriors arose out of the fight for liberty. . . . Perhaps they fled from slavery to their own countries. . . . I think that cameo is further evidence of a struggle waged in a distant epoch and hidden from us by time. It is even possible that the unknown artist also took

part in the fight.... Yes, he must certainly have been there, otherwise his work could not have been so perfect. And look how both of you fixed your attention on the cameo.”\*

The young man and woman, overwhelmed by the mass of information they had been given, again pressed close to the magnifying glass. The stone seemed even more mysterious and incomprehensible to them.

The pure, clear and deep colour of the sea ... and on it the figures of three men linked in fraternal embrace. The brilliant, scintillating stone and the golden tinge on the perfect, undraped bodies stood out with even greater force in the cold, dull gallery of the museum.... The young girl, full of life and feminine charm, seemed to be standing on the seashore.

With a sigh the young sailor straightened his aching back. The girl still kept her eyes on the stone. The shuffling of feet and the noise of an approaching excursion group resounded down the corridors. Only then did the girl tear herself away from the case. The switch clicked, the frame was lifted and the blue-green crystal lay sparkling on its velvet bed.

“We’ll come here again, won’t we?” asked the sailor.

“Of course we shall,” answered the girl.

The young man took her gently by the arm and they walked down the white marble staircase deep in thought.

\* There is no such cameo in the Leningrad Hermitage Museum or in any other museum



## I. THE SCULPTOR'S APPRENTICE

**T**he flat rock jutted far out into the sea. It had retained the warmth of day and the youth sitting there was not in the least disturbed by the fresh gusts of wind that found their way between the cliffs. The sea, invisible in the darkness of night, splashed faintly against the foot of the rock.

The young man stared into the distance, contemplating the point at which the end of that silver band called the Milky Way disappeared into the darkness. He was watch-



ing the falling stars; a cluster of them had flashed up to pierce the sky with their fiery needles, and disappear behind the horizon, fading like burning arrows falling into the water. Again the fiery arrows flashed across the heavens, flying into the unknown, to the fabled lands that lay beyond the sea on the very borders of Oicumene.\*

"I will ask grandad where they fall," decided the youth and thought how wonderful it would be to fly like that through the sky direct to some unknown destination.

But then he was no longer a youth—a few more days and he would attain the age of a warrior. He would never be a warrior, however, but would become a famous artist, a sculptor of renown. His innate ability to see true forms in nature, to sense and remember them, made him different from most people... Or so his teacher, the sculptor Agenor, had told him. And so it was, for there, where others passed indifferently by, he would halt in sheer amazement, seeing that which he could neither comprehend nor explain. The countless manifestations of nature charmed him by their constant mutations. Later his vision grew clearer and he learned to distinguish the beautiful and retain it in his memory. There was elusive beauty in all things, in the curve of the crest of a running wave, in the locks of Thessa's hair when the wind played in them, in the stately columns of the pine trunks and in the menacing rocks that rose proudly over the seashore. From the moment he first became conscious of this he had made the creation of beautiful forms his aim in life. He wanted to show beauty to those unable to perceive it for themselves. And what could be more beautiful than the human body! To mould it, however, was the most difficult of all the arts. . . .

\* Oicumene—the name given by the ancient Greeks to the inhabited world which was surrounded by water, Oceanos.