

WHITE NIGHTS: A RUSSIAN MOOD

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LISTEN: I shall tell you of the white nights of the distant North.

Here, in the South, amid this exuberant, magnificent and decorative Nature their memory has been haunting me all the while. They come back to me just as, sometimes, through the mist of many years, you recollect a shy kiss of cold girlish lips—such a swift, quivering, timid kiss, given in the twilight of a spring evening, at a flower-laden window-sill, behind the curtain, which swells gently in the breeze.

Southern nights are amazingly beautiful. I remember one of them. It was a black night, as if the heaven and the earth were wrapt in black velvet. A pent-up passion, a burning desire filled the air and fermented among the twigs of the trees and rose from the grasses in the drunken fragrance of flowers. And it seemed that someone whispered in the dark mad, inscrutable words, that someone's slow, hot breath touched your cheeks and fanned the hair on your temples. . . . And not a single star in the heaven, upholstered with heavy, low, solid darkness!

And there were other nights, fairy-like, moonlit nights when the heaven was clad in pale-blue and the sea in cerulean satin; and festive nights, flooded with the splendours of gold and the shimmering sheen of silver, and suffused with the sweet music of waves. There were dazzling, stormy nights, beautiful and terrible like the face of an angel in wrath. There were wearying, strange nights, with a restless wind, unstringing the nerves, with orange light in the white clouds which hid the moon, with tossing stalks of grass and swaying trees.

How often did I then dream of the

white nights of Petrograd. . . . White, mystic, sleepless nights! How can I describe their delicate, disquieting, morbid fascination? The spell of their strange languor begins to work late in the evening. You wait for the coming of twilight, of night, but in vain. The window curtains are white. Impossible to stay indoors. . . .

Midnight. The streets are crowded. But it seems that everybody keeps close to the walls, walks carefully, picking his way, and talks in whispers. It is as if in this false twilight an immemorial mystery is about to disclose itself above the dreaming city, and everybody's heart quivers with forebodings and fears. The heavens stretch over the earth, one-hued, wet, milk-white. Human figures and faces are clearly seen from afar; one can read the signs above show windows and discern the meek eyelashes of sleeping cab-horses. The broad river lies placidly in its dark granite frame, a stream of milk, on which only a few lazy wrinkles are touched into blue. Both the heaven and the water are like the infinitely delicate play of mother-of-pearl, with its elusive hues, pink and blue.

I turn into a broad deserted street. Not a soul, as far as eye can reach. My footsteps awaken sonorous echoes. Enormous many-storied buildings tower on both sides. Not a window is lighted, the pale light of the heaven alone dully shimmers in the black panes, which remind one of blind eyes. A large house stretches the whole length of a block. Five rows of blind eyes. How many people live here? It seems to me I see them lie one above the other, lie on their back, or their side, with open mouths, tortured by morbid dreams, so near and so far from each other!

Who knows what evil ironies Fate has in store for us? Probably, two people who have been all their lives seeking and hungering for each other lie here, side by side, divided by several inches of stone and mortar. And—who knows?—it may be that they are doomed never to meet, never to know each other, never to quench their mutual thirst with light and happiness. Hundreds of human beings are sleeping and dreaming in this stone case, stretched one above the other. What an appalling thought!

Wet, dully glistening houses. Not a soul on the street. A reverie, dreadful and strange, takes hold of my imagination. . . .

Who knows what will be the end of our planet, this tiny speck of dust, dashing along mysterious spirals into a terrible, unknown and infinite abyss? Surely, a day will come when the last miserable, exhausted remnants of humanity will die out, whether from interstellar cold, or heat, or diseases, or madness, or war. But the structures men erected will outlive them. Days and nights will pass noiselessly above them, without disturbing their mournful quiet. Statues and museums, churches and

monstrous houses with blind, staring eyes will tower at night in eternal silence. . . . And the sleepless light of white nights will mysteriously caress the bronze and the stone and will be broken into a dull flash by the panes of dead, blind windows. And no one's solitary footstep will ever arouse a sonorous nightly echo.

I am again among people. They stoop in walking, and their gait is stealthy and careful. Like in the old fairy-tale, they have no shadow, and this frightens me. . . .

Here is a painted woman's face: round, carelessly blackened eyebrows, powder on the flabby skin, flushed cheekbones. Well, she, too, will die and fatten the indifferent earth with her body. But the houses will outlive her and us, and our distant descendants. And when the last man will disappear from the earth's surface, the empty buildings will enigmatically stare with their blind, mournful eyes into the silence and twilight of the white nights.

The day is breaking. Someone kindles in the opal stretches of the heaven and the river deep, delicate, iridescent colours: pink, pale-blue, lilac.

CHRONICLE AND COMMENT

AT THE moment of writing plans are under way to mobilise the Nation's resources in men and munitions for war purposes.

Our Duty

Should hostilities follow, it will mean that the last bulwark of our type of civilisation will be plunged into the passions of a war-driven world, and that the vision of America maintaining the ideal of Peace and of refuge from the European storm will be lost irrevocably. From this point of view, taken into consideration also with the inevitable tragedy of human suffering, the entrance of America into the war would be a calamity for the world. On the other hand, there come

times in the lives of nations as well as in the lives of individuals, when unescapable, disagreeable duties have to be performed. The extreme Pacifists tell us that war is not justifiable under any circumstances, and their argument is a strong one. Yet in the present instance, the best answer to the Pacifists is that the present struggle is not a war—that the term "war" implies an equal honour and dignity on the part of the combatants—and that the great conflict upon which we may at this moment be entering, is more in the nature of police duty that society as a whole ought to share. When in a community any individual becomes so obsessed with one or a group of ideas