The Servant Revisited

Sandrine Bessancort



An SFPG Publication

THE SERVANT REVISITED

A Revisiting of a Classic Tale From Antiquity as Seen Through a Female Dominant Perspective

By
Sandrine Bessancort

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Introduction

Looking back to my time as a little girl, growing up in a tiny village in the foothills leading to the Mont St Victoire, I realise that the darkness keeping me such imaginative company in the present was no less vibrant in my unformed past; a *darkness*, I firmly believe, brought about by the advanced reading age that led me (when I could access them at such an age) to those titles of a more adult nature.

Not pornographic, I hasten to add as, without being judgmental, such material is of little or no interest to me.

No, my adolescent interest was piqued by titles from writers as diverse as Dumas and Hugo to Rachilde and Pierre Louys; each of whom could be guaranteed – if only in miniature in the case of the former duo – to populate their tales with a strong female character – characters such as "Milady" in the case of Dumas Pere and his Three Musketeers, together with La Marquise de Sade from the pen of the precocious Rachilde.

Thus was my interest in reading stories with a strong commanding heroine born and, those stories being few and far between, my re-imagining of many such tales from a female-led, so to speak, perspective. A tinkering for my own pleasure that has led to the pleasure of friends (yes, I do have them and this darkness I here give air to is but a necessary correlative to the decency I find imperative in my day-to-day life) and, now, and hopefully, to the pleasure of a wider range of readers with a passion for stories of strong, commanding and dominating, women who enjoy nothing more than to rule the lives of those men who fall into their toils.

Hence my revisiting of these classic tales from the masters of antiquity.

When we domesticate the imagination we lose the joy of life.

But, sometimes, our more private thoughts should *not* be acted upon and must remain either written or perceived.

But *always* as *imagination.*

Sandrine Bessancort
Honfleur
2012

The Servant Revisited

FROM A TALE BY S.T. SEMYONOV

RE-IMAGINED
BY
SANDRINE BESSANCORT

I

In his mid-thirties, Gerasim had returned to Moscow just at a time when it was hardest to find work, a short while before Christmas, when a man sticks even to a poor job in the expectation of a present.

For three weeks the man for whom the promise of youth had turned into a reality of a less desirable kind had been going about in vain seeking a position.

He had, in the beginning, stayed with relatives and friends from his village some travelling distance from the city, and - although he had not yet suffered great want such as that to be seen amongst those Muscovites for whom the search for gainful employment had long since become a daily and flat out seeking of the alms that achieved no greater good than allowing them to seek them once again the following day - it disheartened him that he, a strong and not unintelligent man, should go without work and the means to support himself.

And, if support himself in luxury, exactly, then at least after a fashion precluding the necessity of charity from those who had once seen his golden youth and expected better of him.

Gerasim had known Moscow from early boyhood. When still a mere child, he had been sent out from the village by his parents to work in a brewery as bottle-washer, and later as an assistant to a groom in one of the grander houses. Humble positions both, and yet there was something in either his disposition that always seemed to lead people to see qualities in him that, if not indicative of greatness, spoke well for his future; his almost girlish good looks seeming destined to become a most handsome maturity.

Looks that explained the knowing nods generated by the prospect of his going on to attain a rank higher than that of a simple peasant.

At the very worst, the more *experienced* women of the village muttered to each other when out of earshot of the insecurities of their menfolk, young Gerasim could expect to make a decent marriage with accompanying dowry or, failing that, a position of *companionship* to some older lady of rank who still enjoyed the thrill of the *“romance”*.

The above views of his potential that had prompted a youthful ego in the direction of dreams and aspirations beyond, perhaps, his intellectual capacities if not the physical and encouraged him to seek his fortune in the wider world, had not come about and, during the last two years, he had been in the employ a merchant in a relatively well rewarded, if a lot less than glamorous, situation.

A situation he would still have held had he not been summoned back to his village for military duty. Whereupon, after having resigned his position, he found that he was not drafted and discovered, having waited in vain for the call to arms, that his former position had been filled already and he was, effectively, without a livelihood. Hence the futile three-weeks spent in the search for a position in the capital and his return to the village.

Of course, after his experiences of the wider world beyond the somewhat narrow and irredeemably set nature of village life – and especially without the means to entertain himself in the manner to which he had grown accustomed – village life itself seemed even more dull and uninteresting to him than it had the first time around.

Intolerably so.

Having had little time for the country life when he had no option but to live it, this second and unsought experience of its joys was hardly likely to prove more favourable and it was not long before he decided he would rather count the stones in Moscow than stay there.

And so it was that he returned for a second time in a matter of weeks to experience just that joyless, payless and, of course, non-existent occupation which, nonetheless, same seemed about all the great city appeared willing to offer him.

The opportunities for *"romance"* of the kind the experienced ladies of the village had earmarked or him were, understandably given his situation and despite the fact his looks had matured in a way equally if not more appealingly from the days of his youth, were not forthcoming and showed no sign of being so.

Every minute it was getting to be more and more irksome for him to be tramping the streets in idleness and not a stone among those his penury and boredom compelled him to count did he leave unturned in his efforts to secure any sort of work. He plagued all of his acquaintances. He even held up people on the street and asked them if they knew of a situation.

All in vain.

Consequently, it was not long before Gerasim could no longer bear being a burden on his people; either those back in the village itself or the friends and former colleagues who, like him, decided to look for a position in Moscow and had, subsequently, met with a sight more success than he.

Some of them, he saw, were annoyed already by his coming to them and others had suffered unpleasantness from their employers for taking up his cause with them.

In this, Gerasim's thoughts were not *too* hard on his friends and acquaintances as it was, in the way already mentioned, a bad time to be in the capital; for when money and opportunity have grown scarce so do those in possession of both become more miserly and uncharitable towards those seeking it out.

Thus the misery born of anxiety and an empty stomach grew with each passing and unsuccessful hour and Gerasim at times would consider more… *unconventional*… ways of *"finding his star"*.

Such are the changes wrought in a fundamentally honest personality hunger or misfortune.

To his credit, he had resisted such temptations so far but it was not unusual for him go a whole day without eating and it would seem scarcely necessary to remind you, the reader, that he was growing desperate and more than once thoughts of theft and schemes of dishonesty flashed themselves across vision made blurred by anxiety and malnourishment.

Very desperate was he growing, in fact.

And *very desperate* people, fundamentally honest or not, and as history and our own experience must surely tell us, provide the fodder upon which the unconventional ways and fundamentally *dishonest* methods of others in the finding of their *own* destinies depends.

Such, and despite his resistance up to this point, was to be both the trap and the destiny into which the down on his luck man was about to fall.

It must be left to the reader and his – or her – independent view of that destiny as to whether Gerasim's fortune was improved or made infinitely worse.

II

One day, weary and dispirited, Gerasim gathered the energies remaining to him and made the long walk to the opposite side of the city; his aim – running out of friends to call upon as he was- being to visit an old drinking friend who lived at the extreme outer edge of Moscow, near Sokolnik.

The man, Yegor Danilych, had been coachman to a merchant by the name of Sharov, in whose service he had been for many years and who had recently passed on and was no doubt, having been a kindly man and both a good neighbour and employer, now selling his wares at a more elevated altitude and to a more divine custom.

This passing, however, had left his younger wife with the deeds to the business and in sole command of its running and, also to Danilych's distaste, its direction.

Including his.

Having ingratiated himself through his willingness and reliability with his master so that Sharov trusted him absolutely and held him in high favour, the coachman had soon realised it would require a rather different approach if he were going to win over the wife and retain the favoured position Sharov's esteem ensured he was given over the other retainers.

An approach that had gained him the confidence of his departed master's wife who was, she had told him to his inner dissatisfaction - for she was younger even than him and not of good breeding, even if she did possess a certain beauty; albeit a beauty of a somewhat *startling* aspect – grateful to have someone at her side who saw past her background and valued her as the lady of substance she now was.

Chiefly, he told on all the servants, and Madame Sharov valued him for it; even as his thoughts mock his young mistress and her pretensions of *"substance"*.

Gerasim approached and greeted the coachman - who was fond of his own skin along with his own best interests but not wholly inhospitable, as well as being tolerably fond of his former drinking companion - gave his guest a proper reception.

Seeming forever hungry and thirsty this past week or so, it was a relieved and delighted Gerasim who found himself served with tea and something to eat as Yegor Danilych, his host, asked him how he was doing.

"Very badly, Yegor," said Gerasim. "I came to Moscow for the army – fruitlessly – and I've been without a job for weeks."

"Didn't you ask your old employer to take you back?"

"I did."

"He wouldn't take you again?"

Gerasim had given his usual fatalistic shrug, as if to say:

“What defence has one against cretins of such a type?”

Danilych, who knew his friend’s capacity for thinking himself an injured party well by now, was not impressed and his next words were statement not question:

“The position was filled already.”

Gerasim’s nod had only confirmed what the other man had already noted as certainty.

“You were always too much of a dreamer, Gerasim. It is typical that you should have left your master’s employment so impulsively.”

Too interested in satisfying a demanding stomach and used to such observations when in the man’s company, Gerasim allowed the remark to pass unchallenged and helped himself to more.

“Never,” he told himself, *“has simple bread tasted more delicious.”*

The two of them had met on a day when their respective masters had business in Moscow with each other and had accompanied them on the jaunt, becoming friendly while passing time in a local inn as their employers concluded whatever arrangements it was necessary for them to make with each other. Those arrangements had necessitated regular meetings in Moscow between the two merchant’s and so the acquaintance of the two employees accompanying them had matured into a friendship of a more intimate kind. Intimate enough, anyway, for Yegor Danilych to know something of his new friend’s dreams and aspirations.

“I am amazed you left your position in days such as these at all,” the man finished with a shake of the head for the slightly younger man’s impetuosity.

“I left it only on account of a summons to return for a spell of military duty which did not come about.”

“Yes. You have said already,” said Danilych. “And that is exactly my point.”

Gerasim’s eyes narrowed even as his teeth kept up a rhythmic chomping of the bread he was cramming into his mouth as swiftly as decorum – or what passed for decorum with the truly hungry – allowed.

“I do not speak in riddles, Gerasim, and neither is it a mystery of any kind. Not to me, anyway.”

Pouring himself some more tea, Gerasim waited for his somewhat pompous friend to enlarge upon his thoughts in regard of him.

The wait was not, and the feasting man had not expected it to be, long in coming.

“Had you taken the pains necessary to prove invaluable to your master,” Danilych rolled on, “he would not have refused to take you back but, rather than lose such a valuable worker, dismiss the man who has taken your place.”

The perceived injustice of his position compelled Gerasim to a response now, certain as he was that if it were not for the blindness and stupidity of those whom sheer good fortune had elevated to positions of responsibility and patronage he would now find himself in a more valued situation and not be forced to accept a lecture from a friend.

Even if that friend was filling his stomach.

“How can a man do that,” he began, “if the employer himself be wanting in such loyalty? He knew I left to do my duty to the country by entering the service of a greater cause than his. Yet he treated my plea to return to my former position in a way that showed nothing short of contempt.”

The arms of Danilych went wide as if saying it was no more of an obstacle than he himself, and others like him, had found it necessary to overcome.

“When fortune is not of a type favourable enough to confer upon one the position of master,” he explained, “we are compelled to find our way with the master into whose hands our immediate destiny falls as best we can.”

Gerasim had heard all of this before and bit back his usual response. He had himself witnessed the way his friend found his “*way*” with his master and found such toadying contemptible and unworthy. A toadying Danilych was unwilling to waste upon the women of the taverns they frequented who, the moment they accepted the hospitality of his table and the money providing it became little more than prostitutes in his eyes.

It was no surprise at all for Gerasim to see him once again after a gap of a year and more and find him, still, without the wife who would, no doubt, suffer much under his old-fashioned and unbending view of a woman’s position in relation to a man.

“Toadying to his late master’s young wife,” Gerasim told himself with mild amusement, *“could not come naturally to him.”*

As his thoughts were mocking his friend, Danilych’s tone became accusatory:

“Your problem, Gerasim, is that you have an inflated view of your value and expect our masters to share it, when your energy would be far better directed in flattering the unrealistic way in which they regard their own.”

“Lick the proverbial arse, you mean?” Gerasim could not help himself jeering, hunger or not; such self-abnegation in the cause of another’s vanity finding no appeal with him.

“What's the use of wasting words? You will never understand. Which is why you are here with me in such a way and I am here in this way to be able to offer you the sustenance you so obviously cannot provide for yourself.”

It was, as the truth so often is, a cruel barb but, for once, Gerasim found himself responding to the truth of it and knew Danilych had not arrowed it his way solely to maim.

“I was simply telling you about myself that you may, in my success, find a way forward for yourself.”

As was seldom the way, Gerasim was listening now and, though his friend’s position in life was hardly what he himself would describe as a triumph, he was truly interested to discover if what Danilych the coachman was about to tell him could be as instructive as he appeared to believe.

Even if it were to prove so only for a few months or so; for lots can change in such a space of time.

So Gerasim’s thoughts ran:

“Armed with a full-stomach and some decent new clothes who knows what cannot be achieved?”

“If for some reason or other,” Danilych was continuing, not privy to his friend’s thoughts and unable to quite conceal a certain pride he took from knowing the younger man was actually hanging on his words, “I should ever have had to leave this place and go home, not only would Master Sharov, had I returned, taken me on again without a word, but he would have been delighted and relieved to have welcomed such a valued and trusted worker back into the fold.”

Though he knew he was listening to what was boasting on the part of his friend, Gerasim knew also that there was also a large amount of truth keeping step with it and he was struck to humour the footfall; sensing somehow that it might lead to something more fruitful than the dead ends into which his own vanity and refusal to bend the neck had taken him to this point.

He began by sighing heavily, just as if his friend had finally gotten him to understand a universal truth that had eluded him until now:

“I know it now,” he said. “Your words have the truth of your own situation to give them weight, but…”

He shook his head, simply as a way of making his friend wait for the compliment he could see he was already anticipating.

“But… It's hard to find men like you, Yegor Danilych. If you were a poor worker, your master would not have kept you twelve years.”

Yegor smiled.

Exactly as Gerasim had known he would.

Like most men unfamiliar and, perhaps, unworthy of the phenomenon, he loved nothing better than praise.

With the exception of money.

“You have been telling me this for as long as we have known each other and I have been too stupid to take your wisdom on board.”

Gerasim allowed himself another fake and heavy sigh.

“How often have I told you in the past?” said an emboldened Danilych to his new protégé. “If you were to live and serve as I do, you wouldn't be out of work for months and months.”

“Yes, but what I do not understand,” Gerasim began with an expression parodying his equally disingenuous inquiry, “is how you managed to make yourself so indispensable to his widow?”

For all the subtlety with which Gerasim made his inquiry he might just as well have nudged Danilych in the ribs with the point of an elbow.

His friend, however, simply looked wistful and Gerasim knew that whatever kept him in position under the supervision of his late master’s wife it was not the physical attraction felt for him by his new and female employer.

“You do not exactly shroud the true nature of your thoughts Gerasim,” Danilych rebuked him. “But, alas, you are wrong.”

“Alas?” Gerasim smirked, the rebuke not having put him out of countenance.

This time, Danilych allowed himself a rueful smile.

“Unfortunately, Gerasim, we are not all blessed with your appeal for the female sex. And, besides, she considers herself rather grand of late. Despite her youth and humble birth.”

“She is not a lady, then?”

“You saw my late-master for yourself,” said Danilych by way of reply. “He was a good man but not of a widely admired social provenance. Neither was he physically… *prepossessing*… shall we say?”

He shook his head wonderingly:

“To be serious, and good man that he was, it would not be too much of an exaggeration to state that he was, in his appearance, repulsive; certainly of too marked a condition to be able to find himself, with the help of money or otherwise, a partner both a lady and a beauty.”

Gerasim *had* seen his late master, of course, and could not deny such a description of him.

“So then,” he began after a few moments, “she is neither lady nor beauty?”

To this, Danilych had to give a little thought.

“As to the first, *that* she certainly is not. She is from some nondescript village whose name eludes me in some god forsaken area or other.”

Gerasim congratulated himself for not having divulged the name of his own village; knowing that like many men of his class and station Danilych saw himself as marked for, slightly, better things and was something of a snob.

The snob himself was smiling away now; a rueful smile that pronounced itself still surprised for the way events had turned out:

“She was as raw as one would imagine a girl from such a background to be when my master returned home with her and informed us she was the new mistress of the house.”

“An arranged union, then?”

“If the simple handing over of a sum of money to a father and coming away with a young girl as a wife without the observance of *any* of the formalities normally associated with such arrangements can be described in such a way, yes.”

There was a brief pause as Gerasim betook of more bread and tea, then:

“You did not answer me as to the latter part of my question, Yegor.”

Danilych had to think about it until he recalled what that latter part had been.

“Is she a beauty?”

Gerasim nodded, mouth again too full to make intelligible sounds.

“Who can say? One man’s nectar can be another’s arsenic. But she is certainly no siren of the conventional kind.”

Mouth still full, Gerasim could only arrange his features into a questioning expression.

Danilych continued:

“It cannot be denied that her curves are all woman, despite her youth, but the face that would not inspire the most debased of our artists is, without question, a strangely unsymmetrical arrangement.”

He became thoughtful:

“And, yet…”

He was looking into the distance wistfully now and Gerasim could tell his mistress, lady or not, had at least inspired positive feelings on a more… *human*… level.

“…And yet, that face radiates a certain… *sensuousness*.”

His eyes found Gerasim's own:

"I must confess that most men who look upon her find that face…"

Gerasim waited as his obviously smitten, smitten physically that is, friend searched for the most apposite description.

With a nod and a knowing smile, Danilych located it:

"…*alluring*."

Gerasim continued to chew and Danilych took his lack of a response for the less than remarkable description as a lack of understanding:

"Do I need to spell it out?" Danilych laughed. "Or has that bread of mine you seem intent upon depriving me robbed you of your senses?"

Knowing the rebuke to be gentle and *still* hungry, Gerasim simply grunted and tore off another hunk from the depleted loaf.

"She is," the older man told him, "of that kind of woman born to be fucked rather than loved."

Now Gerasim's interest was gained and his eyes widened with shock for this unheard of profanity upon his friend's lips.

A friend he knew to be religious; though more in an alms against oblivion way than from sheer belief.

"If the sounds she could fetch from my master from the privacy of their bedroom were to be believed," Danilych continued, face a mixture of wonderment and envy, his position being of the live-in variety and providing him with much experience in this respect, "her humble origins were no barrier to her gaining possessions of such skills normally to be found only in the most gifted of those courtesans so treasured by royalty."

Gerasim nodded sagely, as if he were the older man and Danilych were petitioning him for his views on a subject on which he had by far the greater experience; which, both men knew, given Danilych was closer to his late master in looks and deportment than he was to his younger drinking companion, was pretty much how matters stood between them in this respect.

"Yet, if she is as indifferent to your charms as you say, at least in the romantic sense, you must have found another way to…" Gerasim smiled winningly, "…*woo* her."

Danilych shrugged as if it were of no matter but could not hide the pleasure he took from what he perceived as his triumph with the young mistress.

"She is young and of bad breeding," he mused, "even if she does attempt to adopt the ways of her betters. With such types flattery is always the trump of choice."

The two men shared knowing laughter, even if Gerasim's did resemble the *"trump"* Danilych had remarked upon.

"There is nothing a woman enjoys hearing more – even one as lowly as my *mistress* – than a compliment. Be generous on enough occasions and they can become… *addicted*… to the hearing of them. It is not unheard of for them to even become generous to the provider of their enjoyment."

Again the men laughed.

"And you, of course," Gerasim offered, "enjoy nothing more than to be the cause of self-esteem for your betters?"

"*My betters?*", Danilych spluttered. "*Her?*"

His head shook with wonder.

"It is bad enough for a man-of-character to find himself, through no fault of his own, in the employ of a woman," he told Gerasim, head still shaking with what he obviously considered an indignity. "But, when that woman is not only far younger but of inferior breeding and adopts airs and graces to which she has no right, it takes great resolve to bear up under the cross with the necessary dignity."

As he took in the misery induced by his friend's own self-pity that was at least a match for that he had recently seen upon the faces of his fellow residents of the streets who had not tasted food for a day or so and were unsure as to when it would past their lips next, Gerasim made sure to fight back the mild contempt he felt rising lest it rise too powerfully and reveal itself upon his face.

He had already accepted the man's hospitality, after all, and was hoping for something still more substantial.

Upbraiding him for being unappreciative of his own good-fortune was *not* the best way to go about achieving such an aim.

"It must be difficult for so proud a man as you, Yegor," Gerasim the actor agreed, nodding his accord and continuing to humour his friend.

"You have only the faintest of notions on that score, Gerasim."

"She is a harsh mistress, then?"

Anger sparked in the coachman's eyes and Gerasim knew his pride had been stung by the intimation such a… *girl*… could not only be his *"mistress"* but be harsh to him.

The man's next words proving Gerasim correct:

"You have known me long enough, Gerasim Poliakoff, to understand at least something of my nature," he said, pulling the collar of his jacket in at the neck with both hands as if this in itself were irrefutable evidence of a man of substance."

“You are angry, Yegor, but I intended no disrespect.” Gerasim shrugged apologetically. “It is, after all, no more than the traditional way of describing a woman who occupies such a position of… of…”

He saw Danilych was ready to pounce on this next word and harried his thoughts for the word *“authority”* that had been on his lips.

“…*responsibility,”* he finished.

“Hmm,” Danilych half-assented, not entirely convinced. “I tell you, Gerasim, were a mere woman – and especially a mere woman of *her* type - to even attempt to treat me in the *‘harsh’* way you describe, it would go very badly with her.”

Again came a repetition with the collar pulling.

“Of *that*, you may be assured; be you assured of nothing else in either this world or the next.”

The man was working himself into a lather and Gerasim had experienced much the same with him on other occasions when he considered he was receiving less than the respect he was due. A reaction he shared with other small men of Gerasim’s acquaintance. And yet, of disgrace there was none when it came to the shameless cultivation of an employer, be he male and deemed *“worthy”* enough. To hint though at even the possibility of tendering the same toadying to a *mistress* who was both younger and *not* considered worthy was to send the small man in question into a lather.

A trap into which Gerasim saw he had fallen and took immediate steps to rectify:

“But, then, at least the wiles supplied by greater intelligence and experience have allowed you to fashion something bearable from your changed situation.”

A slight softening marked the man’s rough skinned features but Gerasim knew he work to do still:

“It is a tribute to you, Yegor Danilych, that you have turned such an invidious situation to your advantage.”

His friend’s reply assured Gerasim he had hit upon the right approach and his own flattery had saved the day:

“This, at least, is true,” Danilych agreed with a certain, unmistakable, smugness, his own description of the young woman employing him in regard of her pretensions, as mentioned, not so far removed from his own; recognition prevented only by a certain lack of the self-awareness necessary for one to have a healthy sense of one’s own failings.

Gerasim paused before going on, nervous now the moment was upon him, though he hid it well:

“And you will, of course,” he smiled winningly, “use the influence your silver-tongued and insincere flattery has gained you to seek a position for a friend?”

At this Danilych’s smugness became more… *reflective.*.. and he averted his eyes from the need displayed in those of his friend’s.

Opposite, Gerasim saw instantly the same story repeated again.

Hospitality and tea, and then…

Nothing.

Suddenly though, Yegor Danilych began to smile.

“Why not, old friend?”

III

Yegor came back within half an hour.

He lighted his pipe and took several turns about his quarters before coming to a halt in front of Gerasim who had finished the last of the bread some time before and would have asked for more had he not more pressing matters to attend to with the man.

A man whose countenance spoke of mild unease and did not bode well for the supplicant's hopes.

"She is in need only of a servant," he told Gerasim, unable for some reason to quite look him in the eye.

Gerasim sighed with disappointment, having expected the worst and braced himself to hear it but finding himself more than a little crushed just the same as words of resignation fell from his lips.

"And, of course, she requires a woman."

"She already has one," Danilych told him by way of lowering his spirit still further, though it was not his intention. "But she is old and of no use for the kind of work the *mistress* requires and simply cooks and cleans."

It was the second time he had spoken the word *"mistress"* since Gerasim himself had described her as such - on both occasions with a certain amount of venom – and, what with his earlier observations on the subject, it did not cost Gerasim a great deal in the way of mental effort to discern a considerable… *bitterness*… toward this girl of humble birth who was both younger than Danilych and now, with the passing of her husband, his *master*, so to speak.

"And what kind of work would that be, Yegor?" he asked, sensing all might not be lost after all.

"It is of no matter to you," he was told, a little more sharply than could possibly be necessary, he considered, about to say as much when his friend went on:

"I told her you would not be interested," Danilych answered the original question without contriving to answer it at all. "I said you were a man of commerce and could be of service to her with the accounts and so forth, but she was adamant that her husband had left her more than capable of taking care of those for herself."

"You still do not say what kind of work she has in mind for her servant?" Gerasim pressed, oblivious or uncaring of his friend's astonishment for his continued interest.

"What? Have things reached such a pass with you, Gerasim, that you would consent to act the flunkey for…"

He looked about him furtively that he could be convinced he was not about to be overheard and his voice dropped a level:

"…for a low-born and opportunist harlot whose provenance makes even that humble village of yours you speak of and decline to name seem almost aristocratic?"

Gerasim could offer only a fatalistic smile.

"You know me as well as anyone, Yegor, to be able to answer yourself on that score. But I promise you, if experienced for enough time the absence of food in the stomach and a mattress upon which to lie can force change upon a man and his notions of what he will and will not accept."

Hardship and its ready excuses or not, Danilych appeared unconvinced.

"But… still…? Can you really have fallen so far from those lofty and - if I may so – unrealistic dreams and aspirations with which I once suffered myself to be regaled? You, for whom the whole world was an adventure just waiting to be plucked until you were in a position to best grasp it?"

The shrug of the one-time dreamer was, again, fatalistic:

"In five days," Gerasim went on, "I will have reached the age of thirty-five. And yet this landmark sees me seeking the charity of friends and sleeping both rough and hungry upon the streets. My thoughts at this time are less of *'adventure'* and tend more towards survival."

Danilych's expression seemed to ask:

"And that is an excuse to allow yourself to sink to such a level?"

"Do not be so ready to judge until you yourself find yourself without the means to live," Danilych," rebuked Gerasim. "Did I not explain only moments ago that the lack of a food and the lack of a roof under which to eat it can effect mighty changes upon that man suffering from the lack?"

"Evidently so," Danilych snorted, somewhat superciliously and superior, certain in the way of one yet to suffer such setbacks in life that there would be no such shedding of basic principles should the same fate befall him.

"Be as condescending as you wish, Yegor. But the answer is, *yes*. Yes I…"

"Gerasim, in the name of…"

"…I *will*," Gerasim continued over his friend, "consent to act in such a way – whatever that way may be - until such a time as I can find more… *suitable* employment."

Danilych looked positively wretched at this and Gerasim laughed, rising to clap him upon the back before taking his seat once more.

“Come, Yegor. It is not as bad as all that. Certainly, the position of servant is not one I can honestly say I look fondly upon. But it hardly merits the kind of look from you I would expect if I had just asked you to direct me to the local knouter.”

“It is just that … I fear it would be the… the…”

“Be the, what?” Gerasim asked as his friend broke off in mid-sentence.

Danilych looked for the world like a man having an admission wrung from him by the Secret-Police:

“Would it not shame you, Gerasim,” Danilych began, “to be no more than a household skivvy for a… a… girl?”

“A skivvy? But I thought she had a woman to take care of that kind of…”

“What matters it, if that work be of a menial and… *personal*… kind?”

Again Gerasim’s eyes narrowed, puzzlement genuine this time.

“Personal?”

“You… You would be required to attend… *Madame*.

“Attend?”

Danilych threw his arms up in the air with exasperation, realising his friend fully intended for him to have to spell out the exact nature of the service expected from him – even if he was not entirely sure what *exact* meant when it came to *“Madame’s”* requirements.

“You will be expected to…”

The older man got no further when a door opened at Gerasim’s back and a female voice spoke.

There had been no knock as simple courtesy required and neither, it turned out, was there to be an apology for the lack forthcoming.

“Is this the man looking for work,” came a voice behind and to Gerasim’s side.

It was a voice such as he had heard many times from serving girls and the like and betrayed her origins as instantly as if they were a brand upon the forehead.

And there was worse.

Before he had even turned to look at her Gerasim knew beyond as shadow of a doubt that the woman speaking was from his village.

Then he did turn.

IV

Gerasim's first sight of the girl who was soon to be his mistress, perhaps, had hit him with the power of a thunderbolt.

His first thought on her behalf being that Danilych had been right.

She was no beauty.

There was an askew quality to her countenance that pre-empted any possibility of such a description. Everything about the face that appraised him from the position she had taken up at Sharov's old desk after he had followed her through, an old desk now hers, appeared as if out of alignment with its constituents. From the nose that seemed to curve to its left before returning to the straight and narrow and ending in nostrils that were slightly flared after the fashion of the Mongols to the east, to the pronounced cheekbones that gave the impression of beginning exactly where her eyelids ended and piercing and unflinching eyes began, and then down to a wide mouth with lips so full they looked as if swollen from a beating, the whole impression was of nature awry.

And yet…

His friend had remarked that her face was sensuous and Gerasim could do no more than agree; realising as he stood before her in his unaccustomed role of petitioner before a member of the opposite sex that his body had *never* made a response of such immediacy and potency before.

A response so powerful he crossed his hands in front of his groin, not wishing to check for himself with eyes whose direction she would be sure to follow, certain that the instantaneous desire this girl who could be no more than three and twenty had instilled in him must be visible.

"So Gerasim Poliakoff," she began in a throaty voice that sounded older than its years yet, as well as being exactly as Yegor had described in the way of inferior elocution, possessed alongside it something… *compelling*, "you are in need of a position?"

"Y-Yes, I…" he began before breaking off, puzzled. "You know my name? Have we then met befo… Oh! I see. My good friend Yegor Danilych supplied you my details."

"No," she told him, eyes fixed upon him in a way he could only describe to himself as… *hungry*; a response from women he was not unused to but one, on this occasion that disturbed him somehow.

"Danilych mentioned only your forename as his *'good friend*, Gerasim'. Your family name it turns out, though he was not to know it, was not necessary as I already know you."

"You, er, do?" Gerasim feeling curiously unsettled by this girl/woman. "Then I must apologise for I seem to have forgotten…"

“There is no need for apologies… on *this* occasion,” she came in firmly, phrasing her statement in such a way as to tell him that soon there may well be times when contriteness of such a kind on his part *would* be required.

What form such acts of contrition might take she neglected to mention.

“I was,” she went on, “but an ill-favoured child back in Ydensk when you were of the age I have now reached and the girls and women of our village vied for your favours.”

Gerasim’s mind raced back to days that had not seemed special at the time but had been lent that glow of hope and possibility supplied by nostalgia during days when there was precious little of either to be had.

The recesses of his memory could find no trace of her in their files.

“Even in a village as small as ours it is unlikely my family name would strike a chord with you,” she told him, realising his thoughts, of a past nature anyway, were absent of her presence, “as we were at the bottommost end of even that lowly a pecking order.”

“I… I am afraid to say that you do have me at a disadvantage.”

Her smile was of the condescending kind reserved for that person one knows to be in dire need and for whom much is invested in the finding of favour as she applauded his response:

“That is polite and nicely put,” she praised, “and a marked improvement upon the treatment myself and my family had come to accept as usual from the rest of the village.”

Her eyes held his and seemed to pierce right through him as she added:

“An improvement that is just as it should be now that I am no longer an ill-favoured child and you certainly cannot be said to be the promising young man.”

Even as he bit upon his tongue, Gerasim marvelled at just how far he had fallen that he would accept insults of such a kind.

And from such a person!

“Though you have not changed so much physically you would no longer find favour with the women of our village.”

This breach of what was considered acceptable conversation between a man and a woman who were almost complete strangers underpinned, yet again, Danilych’s less than admiring observations in regard to the girl and supplied Gerasim, despite the nature of their respective situations, with a certain feeling of superiority that allowed him to gain control of his outrage.

Biting back the rebuke that had sprung instantly to his lips, he waited.

A wait that was not long in the making as, either oblivious, uncaring, or both, the low-born and pretentious girl who yet held his immediate well-being in her hands continued:

“Such is the way of fate and change,” she went on, “and yesterday’s slave can soon become tomorrow’s master. For I am no longer little Tamara Vlacic of Ydensk but Madame Sharov of Sokolnik and I insist upon receiving the proper respect from my people.”

“My People?” her words thudded against the walls of his cranium. *“Slave?”*

Something of Gerasim’s temper flared up here and it was an effort to quell it on his part. Petitioning did not come easy to him and doing it in front of and to a woman even less so. And especially to one from his own village who had so obviously allowed the serendipity providing her present good-fortune to go completely to her head.

No surprise then that, along with the disturbance at his groin, he had not quelled the temper born of frustration and irritation entirely and his prospective *employer* was not slow to see the evidence of it that lingered in his expression.

“You do well to bite back your anger, Gerasim Poliakoff,” she warned. “We live in hard times and I am assured by friends of my late husband who occupy important government positions that they must only become even harder. I have already heard from my servant Danilych that you are in desperate straits and can neither feed nor place a roof above your head. Men who find themselves in such a situation must, if they are in possession of any sense be…”

The unsymmetrical features arranged themselves into a tight little smile.

“…*pleasing*, to their masters.”

It was a smile, Gerasim noted, this alongside the rising temper he was in the process of quelling that, if not outright in its vindictiveness, was at least revealing of the pleasure she took in having someone who was once the most sought after man in her village standing before her as a supplicant.

She, of course, as her supplicant suspected but could not be sure, having never been sought after in the place of their birth at all, except by those lecherous enough and willing enough to pay her father for the attentions they could not receive for nothing elsewhere. The lowliness and desperation of her family ensuring, surprisingly, that she did not hate her father for accepting such a method intended to boost the family coffers and thus alleviate their suffering. Not even when he sold her to the man Sharov – but it could not prevent, nor should it have, the contempt with which she regarded him from then on.

Even if his less than familial care of his youngest daughter had turned out *extremely* well.

For her.

Of her family, we must note, she now saw *nothing*.

Unaware of the above but convinced of the pleasure she took from his reduced circumstances, a response which hinted to him of the less than refined nature of her former life, Gerasim mentally rebuked his friend Danilych for describing the dire circumstances of his plight and weakening his bargaining position in such a way. Anger, as always, inviting less than pleasant thoughts in regard of its recipient. Thoughts that took a somewhat unworthy pleasure from Tamara Vlacic's description of the big important coachman as her *"servant"*.

So much for Danilych's self-vaunted *"influence"* over the girl.

Realisation of which did nothing to lessen his anger and mortification at being spoken to in such a fashion. For though he was not of Danilych's more antique attitude towards the fair-sex – at least those he considered of *"lower worth"* – Gerasim, nonetheless, had certain ideas of his own when it came to what was correct and what was not between the sexes.

"Certain ideas," had he but known it, that his empty stomach and suddenly roofless existence were, from desperation – and, perhaps, *something* else – about to allow challenged.

"Of course," she was continuing, having used the opening gambits of their one-sided conversation to scent him out and sensing now an audience made captive by its desperation, "I suppose I am really a 'Mistress'."

She sniffed, unimpressed.

"But I don't like that word. It is too… too…"

"Ambivalent," Gerasim offered, not so much to assist her quest for the elusive word but to remind her that he, at least, had been the beneficiary of a *certain* amount of schooling.

"I was about to say… *confusing*," she said, tight smile replaced by something even less encouraging.

Gerasim reminded himself to tread carefully:

"Just as well swallow one's pride on a full-stomach and a bed upon which to lie, rather than do exactly the same with a groaning belly upon the streets of Moscow."

"I am no longer *anyone's* mistress," she told him emphatically, having expected him to have, at least, some small recollection of both her and her family and not to know he was almost entirely bereft of any memories of either them or her. "My days in the village are long behind me and will not be returning, as you will do well to remember if I decide to allow you to serve me."

The girl was, without doubt, and exactly as Yegor had described, puffed up with her own new self-importance and adopting airs and graces that were not hers to assume by right.

At this precise moment also, he knew she held his immediate fate in her hands.

As did she.

“You remain silent, I notice,” she offered, nodding to herself as if she had just been served a divine right to treat him as she wished – at least that was the way Gerasim interpreted it. “That is all to the good, Gerasim Poliakoff. You appear to be learning humility at last. It will make your life in my service easier.”

A shudder of unease travelled up from Gerasim’s toes at the way she had said this last:

“…life in my service easier.”

The delivery of the word *“life”* from those over-puffed but undeniably sensual lips had reverberated inside his eardrums with all the clarity of a warning bell and appeared to be calling him to arms against an invader.

“Then you… you have a position for me?” he asked when the ringing had stilled and still his desperation reigned.

Her expression became hard and she stared up at him from her seat at the bureau.

She looked displeased and, with an amazement that did not banish the sensation, he realised he felt a little… *fearful*… in the long silence between them that followed.

And not simply at the thought a position might not be forthcoming.

V

When she broke the silence her tone was admonitory:

“My husband would never allow himself to be interrupted by those who served him and I see no reason I should not be accorded the same respect. For the second time now you have spoken without either permission or invitation and I would advise you not to do so a third time.”

Gerasim’s mouth dropped open at this unheard of affront to his dignity.

A girl from his village, telling him, for all intents and purposes, to *‘speak when spoken to’*?

His cheeks coloured red and he felt he must tear verbal strips from this… *girl*… who seemed intent upon humiliating him.

Finding himself silent instead, he wondered why he was taking such abuse.

Desperation was, of course, one reason, the more considered running alongside his repressed temper reminded him.

While below, with an argument of a quite different kind but no less persuasive, the disturbance at his groin made its own case.

“I consider myself a master,” she went on quickly and he took from her haste the impression that she did so that he might not fill any silence between them with words that would force her to ask him to leave her presence and her property.

It seemed to him that she was investing some importance in having a formerly *superior* man from her village occupy the position of her… *servant*… and, though it was a position he knew would shame him – even if he had been at pains not to let Danilych know this.

“For me, it is a description that is not… How did you describe it?”

Gerasim waited.

“I asked you a question, Gerasim Poliakoff and you have my permission to answer it.”

Was his outrage greater than his amazement? Even he could not tell. *She*, allowing him permission to speak?

The world truly was full of wonders, he told himself.

Many of them unpleasant.

“Ambivalent,” he heard a voice that was his own tell her in a way that added to the world’s capacity for miracles.

As she consigned the word to memory in a way that told him she was at least part intelligent, her face fair lit up at this concession on his part to allow himself to be spoken to in such a way. She was, he knew, gaining more confidence in her ability to… *manage*… him by the second and, for reasons we have already marked, he appeared to be, if not content, *willing* to let her do so. It could not be good.

"When a man refers to another as master," she went on, asymmetrical features fairly glowing now with each backward step she forced upon him, "there is no mistaking, unlike with the use of the word *'Mistress'* the relationship of one to the other. There is no word of the kind I can discover, other than the one I mention, that refers to a female with such… *authority*… over another."

Upon the word *"authority"* her eyes had seemed to burn into his own and he felt the most curious sensation come over him. Suddenly, it was as if those more substantial constituents ensuring blood functioned as blood had received an alchemist's special touch and been turned to water. His legs felt as if they must give way and his breath shortened. None of the sensations assailing him, however, powerful enough to lessen the response at his groin.

Quite - and in a way that disturbed both his sense of propriety *and* manhood - the opposite, in fact.

"I explain this to you Gerasim Poliakoff," she went on, looking for all the world to Gerasim like a General who had spotted that piece of battleground crucial for victory and managed to occupy it before a rival commander, "because I intend to offer you the position of manservant to me and it is how I will wish you to address me for as long as I choose to keep you."

Just at that moment when Gerasim felt he could not be shocked further, she found another way to both stun and outrage.

Was she serious?

Address her as… *'Master'*?...

For as long as *she* kept *him.*

"I do not make this offer lightly, Gerasim Poliakoff," she was continuing over his amazement, "and, once you accept, it will not be a position short in duration. I sense in you all the material necessary to make a lady a most obedient and attentive retainer and intend to instruct you in the ways most likely to ensure devotion is added to those qualities."

Gerasim felt as if he had walked from tea and bread in his friend's quarters into a waking dream that seemed intent upon doing battle with all he held morally and socially correct. For though it was true he was *not* Danilych, he did share a less… *scriptural*… view of how matters worked in respect of both class and sex. Yet here was a girl from his village, socially his inferior and some twelve years his junior, turning a world upon its head that, while it had not been particularly kind to him of late, at least made a certain sense.

“There is no need to say anything,” she continued. “from what I have read in the books contained in my late husband’s library, it is considered in the highest circles that the best servants are those who prove their devotion to duty with actions rather than words. If what I expect from you so far, or at any time afterwards, is not to your liking then you are perfectly at liberty to return to the streets of Moscow.”

She paused to await his decision and, as he shuffled uncomfortably, he saw a small flicker of… What?... Disappointment?... scud across her features as she took the movement for an intention on his part to do exactly as she had just described and consign his fortune to the hands of fate that had proved themselves unwilling to… *caress* his prospects exactly.

When he remained in position it seemed almost as much of a shock to her as it did to him.

A shock that achieved two separate outcomes at one and the same time.

The first of those shocks being Gerasim’s as the awareness of just how desperate he had become that he would accept such a state of affairs between them vied with the less than *manly* pleasure a part of him seemed to be taking from her treatment of him.

The second, and far more crucial for his future and just what would be its nature, being the girl’s realisation that the handsome older man – the same man the fate that had suddenly decided to smile upon her seemed to have placed at her mercy and the same handsome man she had once harboured childish and all but forgotten fantasies in regard of – was that far from reacting to her provocation in the way of the hot-head for which he had once held a reputation, he remained in place before her.

But it was not just his continued presence in front of her that sent fire through her veins at the prospect of his entering her service.

There was, she told herself, unsure if he was even aware of just how deep it ran, the taint of defeat about him. He had sought his dreams and found them beyond him. Now, even the basic tasks of keeping himself seemed beyond his capacity. His eyes held a beaten quality and she suddenly knew with complete and utter certainty that if she pushed through the last remaining barrier of delusional optimism with which he sought to dress his desperation she could force him to submit his life to the service of her own.

The fire that had been travelling her veins made landfall in a more… sensitive… part of her anatomy and it was all her willpower could achieve not to let a deep sigh of welcome from escaping her wide mouth and large sensuous lips.

It was a landfall, had she not been of such a mind already, that confirmed her in the intention to have a man of her very own.

Especially as she had not, except in her dreams, expected that man to be *Gerasim Poliakoff*.

The same dreams that pictured her *man* as a captive.

“Very well,” she said, struggling to contain the inner exultation threatening to overwhelm her that could, so easily, lead to rash behaviour that would dash her hopes. “You remain here still and I can only believe that your present desperation and the bleak outlook for your future prospects has made you realistic. This is healthy for you now that our positions when in the village are reversed in such a marked way.”

Again, she paused, a part of her still believing it too wonderful to be real that Gerasim Poliakoff, the golden boy of her village, was before her in such a way and worried, despite the growing confidence she had in regard of her ability to manage him, that the hot-headedness and impulsive behaviour for which he was renowned might re-appear suddenly and compel him to leave before she had won the time necessary in which to employ her womanly charms and enslave him.

The word itself inflamed her.

“Enslaved.”

“The man who enters my personal service,” she told him with all the regal, if poorly enunciated, pretension Danilych had marked, “may be assured of protection from the hardships offered by the world beyond my doors at this time and, according to those who should know, some considerable time to come. We will speak of the conditions my offer of security insists upon later but, for now, it is enough that I see some intention of your sincerity to… *work*… for me.”

For the first time he could remember, as the young girl spoke to him with such authority, Gerasim felt himself intimidated by a member of the opposite sex and a part of him felt sickened by his response.

But still he remained in position before her and found his eyes drinking in the form of his fellow villager hungrily, the disturbance below deck that had been with him upon entering her presence – from the very first moment he had lain eyes upon her in Danilych’s rooms, in fact – as pressing now as it had been to begin with.

More so.

Everything about her that was out of step with conventional notions of female beauty worked by way of a consolation supplied by nature to make her a sexual force he could sense was growing more irresistible to him by the moment and his intimidation stemmed from the fear it would grow so irresistible he would be unable to do anything but what it required of him.

Suspicions that were *not* about to be proved groundless.

“You wish to take the position with me, then?” she asked.

Feeling as if mesmerised, Gerasim also felt himself nodding.

“I need to hear you say it,” she told him with, unbelievably, the hint of a rebuke in her tone for the handsome older man.

Gerasim struggled to make saliva as her eyes remained on his. Unwavering and relentless. Commanding, in fact, it shamed him to acknowledge.

"Y-Yes," he managed to croak, sensing the sexual attraction he held for her and willing to eschew all consequences – no matter how humiliating – in order to let her create a platform upon which she might feel comfortable in the exercise of them.

"That is to the good," she told him, still holding her eyes with his own, eyes that looked more… *exciting*… to him by the second – less so the lofty, almost contemptuous, expression below them.

"But before I except your petition to become my manservant," she went on, "there are two further proofs of your sincerity I require."

Her face became stern, or perhaps we should say: sterner.

"Fail me in one of them and I will be forced to look for my manservant elsewhere."
He could scarcely believe that he was standing before this young woman to hear himself described as a potential *'manservant'* to her and, had he not so recently gorged himself upon Danilych's bread and his stomach been part full, he would have described what he was experiencing as no more than hallucination brought on by lack of food.

Something he had not entirely discounted.

"Firstly," she began, "I insist you answer me again as to your intent to become my servant."

Suspicions of hunger and hallucination or not, the word was already formed and again about to leave his lips when she spoke again:

"Secondly, you must address me in the way I described and insist upon."

Standing before her with the evidence of the lust she compelled from him unabated and, thankfully, unobserved, Gerasim felt like two people inhabiting the same body. The one unable to quite believe he had accepted the disrespect handed out to him thus far and sure this latest demand would compel him to seek redress in no *polite* form. The other, even as its less influential doppelganger looked on, ready to accede to a demand for which compliance would once have been unthinkable.

It was only, in fact, the imperative supplied by a need for more saliva that delayed said compliance for a second or two:

"Y-Yes… M-Master," he heard himself answer.

Unable to help herself, the sheer exhilaration of the triumph she was winning from him in so short a space of time sent a frisson of pleasure through her so strong she knew it could not be missed by the man she was in the process of subjugating.

The joys that were to come as a direct result of taming so proud and once desired a man and having him at her beck and call – joys she pictured even as she progressed the process - all but threatened to overwhelm her.

Not the least of the delights pictured being an image of herself on a visit to their former village with her liveried and utterly respectful, attentive and obedient manservant in tow.

“You will acknowledge me as your Master from this time on?” she asked, voice inflexible despite the frissons of anticipated fulfilment doing battle with her desire to appear imperious that made such a response so difficult.

“Y-Yes.”

This time she had but to raise a shaped eyebrow.

“That is… I mean… Yes, hmm, Master, that is.”

She nodded, satisfied. This was but the opening salvo in a scenario of domestication that would see the one-time object of her childish affections become the satisfier of her desires of a more… *perverse*… and adult nature.

“I shall overlook your forgetfulness this time, Gerasim,” she told him as if she were for all the world a Czarina with the power and the authority to have him publicly flogged for such wilful… *lese majeste*. “But you must be warned that I will not be so easy with you in the future and will treat you harshly should I consider you to be showing me less than the deference I deserve as your Master.”

And now Gerasim came to the conclusion that he simply *had* to be hallucinating.

“Treat me harshly?”

What was this world into which his fertile imagination had set him down? In the space of no longer than a few minutes he had been reduced from a man seeking no more than temporary employment – employment of a kind demeaning to him, certainly, but employment nonetheless – into a creature who appeared bereft of the pride that generally defined the term *“manhood”*. A creature, moreover, and especially if the reaction of that other and more physical manifestation of manhood were to be believed, taking some kind of degenerate enjoyment in being treated so.

It cannot be said whether he would have been surprised to know the girl in the act of mastering him divined his thoughts, but such had she done.

And exulted in them.

Under no illusions of being a beauty, she was of a likewise realistic outlook when it came to the effect her body and features could have upon men - they had, after all, provided the foundation upon which she had designed the marital slavery into which Sharov had slid after purchasing her hand.

The same Sharov who had thought she would be no more than an overawed peasant girl willing to overlook his physical shortcomings and be an obliging and wifely drudge – of both the domestic and physical kind.

In little more than a matter of a week, he had become no more than an obedient and obliging lapdog.

A position, she smirked to herself, that was many times more… *elevated*… than that she had in mind for the handsome scion of the Poliakoff line.

One of the many things she had in mind designed to speed his descent occurring to her now and, encouraged by her success thus far, ready for her to implement.

"As so many of your duties to me will be of a personal nature and you are, after all, a man still…"

She paused as something in his reaction other than outrage at the mocking *"a man still"* emboldened her and, not having intended to be quite so explicit about those *"duties"*, she sensed a slightly more detailed description of what would be expected from him would fall upon receptive ears – as unwilling as a part of him might be to hear them.

"…I will, naturally, need to be convinced of the loyalty of the man who performs these tasks for me. The intimate servant of a lady must be totally trustworthy and immune to both gossip and gossiping as the slightest hint of an indiscretion of such a kind would earn instant dismissal and…"

She fixed him with a look intended to convey a warning of the most dire kind:

"…given that my husband, and now I, know and remain very friendly with the Commissar of Police, could expect a charge of defamation of character to be laid at his door that would, I have no doubt, result in a length of time at a penal institution."

Tamara Vlacic saw that her words had penetrated – given she was serious and the consequences involved, why would they not – but was more interested in the fact that the greater reaction she could discern from him was… *anticipation*.

Thinking back to the animalistic way in which the men who had paid her father to use her young body and the instinctive ways she had known to make them both more gentle and more respectful, this along with the control she had so effortlessly exercised over her late-husband, she was forced to admit that the considerable pleasure she had taken in knocking the rough edges off these beasts while making then more… *pliable*… was nothing in comparison to the feeling of well-being an utter rightness she felt in her growing control of the man before her.

He, after all, was *not* some pawing village bumpkin – even if he did share provenance with the same paying abusers of her own time there.

This was Gerasim Poliakoff!

The golden, the handsome, the promising, Gerasim Poliakoff.

Both gold and promise absent now and leaving only the handsome as he, incredibly to a young mind that was not so wondering it could not take advantage of the opportunity presented it, waited with baited breath to hear more of the intimate bodily duties his young *"Master"* expected him to perform for her.

Not so surprising, really, that a young girl's jubilation might prompt her to be a little more revealing, a little more… *daring*… than she had initially intended.

"You will need, I am sure, much instruction before you are adept in the ways of a lady's toilette and I will be patient to an extent," she warned him, drawing out his excitement further. "But you are not a stupid man and I will expect you to soon grasp what is required of you and to begin anticipating what your Master requires without the need for words… Understand?"

The unnecessary question had been asked solely to again receive the pleasure of having him address her in the way she demanded and the search for absent saliva was undertaken once again.

Then, search successful:

"Yes, Master."

There had been, she thrilled, apart from the need to moisten lips and tongue, no hesitation this time and the young woman took it as a tribute to her encroaching dominance and the strength of his need that ensured he was unable to gainsay it.

"Very well," she assented. "As I began to explain," she began as his tongue immediately exited to again moisten anticipatory lips, "many of your duties to me will be very personal and I must be sure of the man performing them for me. My late-husband had something of a passion for all things French and some of the literature he collected is very informative on the subject of how best a lady may maintain a male Body-Servant."

Gerasim felt as if the breath had been sucked from him upon hearing the term:

"Body-Servant!"

For reasons he could not understand, the term galvanised him.

Understanding would, however, come.

It would not, however, be comprehension healthy for his manhood.

"According to the etiquette," she was continuing over what she knew was his near complete absorption, "there can be no question of the lady being anything other than totally convinced of that Body-Servant's loyalty, devotion and obedience to her person."

Gerasim Poliakoff scarce believed what he was hearing, even as he knew it to be true and that *this* was exactly what the perverted near child was about to ask of him.

“He will, of course,” she continued, unconcerned it appeared in regard of his response, “bathe and then dress her in the clothes it will be his responsibility to maintain. He will also, it scarcely requires saying, be readily available to satisfy any womanly urges his Master may feel from time to time.”

The look of complete and utter amazement she saw upon his face was reward in itself for what was - even in elevated and decadent circles - a statement of outrageous forwardness.

“There will be, of course,” she told him with an emphasis and severity that penetrated even his incredulity, no question of the servant’s cock being placed in his Master’s cunny or on any part of her person.”

Had the world’s insect population gathered in her office right then, she told herself, it would have had no difficulty effecting an entrance into his body by means of his gaping mouth.

“Men, however,” she went on, offering the prospect of honey after an astringent, “*even* Body-Servants, have needs and good service will find itself rewarded in a… *suitable*… fashion.”

Shock and affronted morality aside, never in his life had Gerasim Poliakoff felt such a need to tear the clothes from a female back and have his way with the body contained within as he felt at that moment. His manhood that had been alert and at full-mast from virtually the first second of their meeting was now engorged to an extent that was beyond his capacity for comparison and, for once, it was not food and its lack causing him to feel light-headed.

“There will be many duties I will expect from you of a less intimate variety but those I have described will be the ones I expect you to master with most swiftness.”

This time she had no need to ask that same unnecessary question:

“Yes, Master.”

It took all her will to suppress a smile that, while she did not believe for a moment it would alter the outcome of their *business* together on the evidence of his reaction to her proposal, would be, naturally, of too triumphant and gloating a nature to risk. Only that morning she had woken, as she had most mornings since the death of Sharov had placed her in the position she occupied now, with the same desire that had accompanied her into sleep proving as durable and, seemingly, unreachable as ever it had been during the times of its first picturing back in the village. Danilych having long been designated a specimen unworthy and uninteresting for even as lowly a position as she had in mind for the man who took her fancy, where was she to find a servant of the kind she sought?

Yet now, not hours from her rousing and the resumption of her perverse longing, here she was with no less a man than Gerasim Poliakoff ready to commit himself to her service.

And ready to do so in the full knowledge that he would be a man no longer but simply the faithful until death – or so she intended and had seen nothing in him to discourage her from the intention – retainer and Body-Servant of a younger woman who would rule his life with a rod-of-iron from henceforward. Loyalty bought by the infatuation she could already see taking a hold of both his conscious and sub-conscious thoughts. An infatuation easily maintained, she knew by the simple promise of reward for behaviour both diligent and obsequious enough.

Humiliating rewards she would enjoy both administering and witnessing.

Tearing her thoughts away from the decadent and perverted future she envisaged – especially for her man – Tamara Vlasic decided it was time to progress to the latest piece in the puzzle.

“And now for that final, for now, proof of your intention to be a loyal and devoted servant to me.”

Unable to fathom just what form such proof might take, let alone able to guess at the *“for now”* and what she might mean by it, the stunned and utterly ensnared Poliakoff could only look on and wait as she prepared to instruct him in its delivery.

Straightening herself on the high-back bureau seat, eyes not leaving his and staring into them with utter confidence, she allowed him to watch as her hands smoothed their way down her full and hour-glass body in a way that was as erotic as anything he had *ever* witnessed; a downward journey that came to a halt at her knee where she took a hold of her shiny grey skirt and its undergarments.

Still gazing into the eyes that were now transfixed upon the hands at her knees, she slowly raised her skirts until the toes of two highly-polished black boots, pointed at the toe and laced to calf-length, came into view.

For a few seconds that seemed like eternity to Gerasim, no words were spoken and he could do no more than stare upon the boots she had, for some reason, revealed to him.

It taking only a second or two more before she decided he was not about to divine her intentions for himself and that instruction was required.

“Before we place our… *arrangement*... on a more legal footing,” she said, “I wish, for now, one last symbolic gesture of your intention to devote your life to my service.”

Gerasim knew she was speaking nonsense and that simply going along with her now would not place an obligation of any longevity upon him – though the *“legal footing”* part of her little speech did give him pause for thought; and that he could call a halt to anything that followed on from the strange and sudden fixation with the girl compelling him to go along with her undeniably… *warped*… requirements.

And yet…

“I would like you to lower yourself to your knees and kiss the toe of each shiny boot of mine you see before you,” her request cut into his thoughts.

Instantly, his eyes rose to meet hers and she saw that he knew what it was she was asking of him – symbolic or not.

She also told herself – again presciently – that he would be telling himself simply to go along and enjoy the ride while winning himself a place to housed and fed at the same time until such a time as he considered himself fit make another assault on the outside world that had proved itself so unreceptive to his efforts up to now.

“We shall see about that,” she promised herself with a mocking internal smile belying the expression that was blank and anticipatory at one and the same time he currently stared upon.

“I will wait ten seconds,” she told him, averting her gaze to the side as if already dismissing him. “If your lips are not upon my boots in a respectful fashion by the time I have counted to myself that exact number I will expect you to gone and will have you forcibly ejected if that proves not to be the case.”

Still looking to the side and, for the first time, truly nervous, she began the count; knowing that there could be no going back if he did not do as she ordered and her desires would become but dreams once again.

She had reached seven when she sensed him move and, thinking him about to leave, could not bear to look.

By the count of nine she turned her head and was in time to see the back of his still thick and golden hair.

This as he fastened his lips to the toecap of her left boot.

VI

“Oleg and I have been expecting it since the master passed,” the old woman whose name was Elena Borzov confided to Danilych as they shared tea at the kitchen table.

The Mistress, or *“Master”* as she preferred to be addressed, had gone for her afternoon stroll with her manservant and was, no doubt, soaking up the adulation of the rest of the town’s wives and homemakers who had heard of her unconventional insistence upon the masculine for and, incredibly – to the consternation of husband’s less enamoured of what might become a trend – approved.

The presence of Gerasim the servant walking a respectful pace behind, parasol at the ready to protect her complexion from the sun should the day turn out to be a scorcher, yet another source of envy and admiration.

It was for many wives, after all, a tonic to see a strong and financially independent woman in charge of her own destiny.

A tonic made all the more refreshing by the presence of the man with the parasol who followed her every footstep with deference and obedience as if his very life depended upon it.

And such an *“attractive”* man, at that.

“I know we have not always seen eye-to-eye, Olga,” Danilych began with what was a masterpiece of understatement, the two of them having detested each other since Sharov’s time and only reaching an accommodation when both found themselves sidelined by the presence in the *“Master’s”* life of her new manservant; “but I will be sorry to see you leave.”

“Do not trouble yourself too much on our account,” she told him with an attitude he had not suspected and was not simply stoic but, almost, lighthearted and carefree. “Oleg has been hounding me to end my term here and says we have more than enough coming our way from his joinery to put an end to *‘my drudgery for that woman’*.”

“Then I envy you, Olga Borzov,” Danilych told her truthfully, dependent as he was upon the wage paid to him as coachman of which he remained in receipt from that same *‘woman’*. “The place is not the same since poor Master Sharov took his leave of us and I...”

He broke off abruptly to stare into his cup, weary of berating himself for the same error of judgment over and over again, only looking up when a hand, gnarled and weathered from years of domestic toil, placed itself over his own.

“You must not blame yourself, Yegor Danilych,” she rebuked him in a kindly way. “You could not be expected to know the man you called *‘friend’* was neither of those things – and certainly not a man by any reckoning.”

Danilych could only nod agreement.

“There is truth in what you say, Olga. Even though I no longer consider him a man and certainly *not* a friend; there had been nothing in his behaviour prior to his coming here that gave rise to suspicion concerning his… *manhood*.”

“It is difficult to believe after witnessing what I have witnessed,” she snorted.

“Quite the opposite was the case, I am obliged to say,” Danilych assured her. “I promise that had you seen his temper upon those occasions when his dignity was called to account then such a lack would have been the very last thing to arouse your doubts.”

“Hmmph!” she scoffed. “And where is this dignity you speak of now?”

Danilych could only shrug.

“What man deserving of being described as such could consent to be treated the way that he…?”

The old woman made a quick side-to-side glance to ensure they were not overheard, despite knowing it would be some time before the *“Master’s”* return, only turning back to Danilych when she was quite certain on the score.

“… that he allows… *her*… to treat him?”

“A customer for whom Oleg has taken on work is employed in the capacity of clerk in Bondarchuk’s office assured him that…”

Again her head went from side to side, an even more intense scrutiny made of her surroundings than that of a few seconds previously; which was not so surprising given she was about to speak of confidential legal matters that, along with the workings of Police and doctors and other persons of a professional capacity had long held the peasantry in awe.

“…He assured Oleg that the legal document your former friend signed and had witnessed by Bondarchuk himself at *her* insistence was so little short of being a deed of indenture as to make the difference of no importance.”

The eyes of Danilych widened with amazement. The behaviour of Gerasim Poliakoff to this point had been of a kind inconceivable to him. But this?

“I repeat this only to you,” the old woman told him. “We both of us, after all, live under the threat of police involvement should knowledge of *her* private business be assumed to have started with us.”

The head of Danilych was shaking from side-to-side at the news she had just imparted to him.

“But Elena…” he began, unable to quite believe the truth of what she had confided to him. “…Can this really be so? Surely even Poliakoff could not consent to…? What you describe is as close to slavery as makes no difference.”

“And you are surprised? After seeing the way he fetches and carries for her? All the while prohibited from the use of his tongue without express permission from *her*?”

At this Danilych laughed:

“Now you are simply being fanciful, Elena Borzov,” he chided her. “Taciturn and uncommunicative he may well have become of late but, then, we can hardly be said to have made an effort to engage such a disgrace of a man in conversation. Not even that of the most basic kind.”

“I speak things only as I see them,” she told him, face a little peeved that he could doubt her on the subject. Have I not overheard her give him permission to speak.”

“It is beyond simple comprehension,” Danilych told himself.

“I *see* things, Yegor Danilych,” she told him, expression meaningful. “Why else would she be in such a hurry to dismiss me from the service I have given these twenty years or so?”

“What kind of things?” he asked, intrigued, as all persons of his kind are intrigued by the hearing of gossip of the more… *licentious*… kind.

“He polishes her boots and shoes,” she began, “did you know that?”

Danilych sighed at what was hardly a revelation to him.

“I live here, Elena Borzov. Of course I know he polishes her…”

“With his tongue,” she came in.

“His tong…?” began an instantly astounded Danilych.

“I have seen him do it,” she stated emphatically. “I have also seen him lick the sweat from her feet when she thinks they cannot be seen.”

Danilych was instantly uncomfortable.

“Elena,” he started, “I am not at all sure this is a conversation we should…”

“Her feet are not the only things she insists he lick,” the old woman spoke over him.

It took a few moments for this to sink in with him, then:

“Elena!”

“Oh, don’t be so shocked. I am almost twice your age. Do you think I spent my youth with nuns?”

“That’s all very well, Elena, but…”

“Not only have I seen him kneeling between her legs to give her that pleasure for which a cock is unnecessary…”

“Please, Elena! This is not decen…”

“…but I have spied her turning her back upon him that he may place his tongue at the disposal of that from which she ejects her… *shit*.”

Only the opening of the kitchen door prevented the old lady from shocking Danilych further as the object of their derision entered.

Gerasim Poliakoff was dressed in the sober and, to Danilych’s mind, altogether too tight uniform Tamara Vlacic had chosen and designed for him in his new life as her flunkey and, as always when it was necessary for him to either speak or even to be in his former friend’s presence he could not bring himself to meet the coachman’s eye.

“It is time I left,” Elena Borzov said, rising from her seat and heading for the back door. “My twenty years here are at an end.”

Danilych rose to his feet and, quite spontaneously, the two hugged. “take good care of yourself, Yegor Danilych,” she told him before, with a look of the utmost contempt in the direction of the waiting Poliakoff, took her leave.

“Well, what is it?” Danilych asked when he was alone with his former friend. “You have the look of a ma… Of a *person* who needs to say something.”

Again Gerasim could not meet the eye of the man responsible for introducing him to the young woman who had proved to be his nemesis and he simply spoke his words whilst looking at a point beyond the man’s shoulder.

“The… *‘Master’* wishes to see you in the office immediately,” he informed him.

*****

Precisely five minutes after he had entered, Danilych left the *“Master’s”* office to find an anxious and guilt-ridden Poliakoff waiting for him.

“Yegor,” he began in as contrite a way as Danilych had heard from him. “You must believe I did not wish it to come to this. If there is anything I can do to help you must…”

“Yes, There is,” Danilych cut in. “You would do both me and the world of true men a service if you took yourself off to the nearest tree and strung yourself up from it by the neck.”

“Yegor, I…”

“You have it all now,” Danilych told him with understandable bitterness. “Not only are you the *‘Master’s’* lapdog but now you can truthfully be described as her coachman and household drudge.”

Gerasim hung his head in shame and resignation.

Shame for those words he knew to be true and resignation for the certainty he had become the woman’s creature and the secret panels she had located within his soul that had opened to reveal his weakness and, thus, give her an unanswerable source of power over him, had unleashed a perverted force under which he could do nothing more than bend in order that he did not snap.

“You have left the world of men, Gerasim Poliakoff,” Danilych assured him and for you there can be no return. What you have allowed yourself to be fashioned into at her hands is what you will remain and I. for one, have not the slightest shred of sympathy or fellow feeling for you.”

Gerasim tried unsuccessfully, once again, to form an apology his former friend might accept before his shoulders slumped and he gazed at the kitchen floor it had just become his responsibility to clean miserably.

“My rooms will be your rooms the moment I pack my things, Gerasim,” Danilych said, informing him of what he already knew as the slightly warmer tone of voice in which he spoke and the unusual use of late of his former friend’s forename brought that former friend’s eyes up hopefully.

“Before I leave, though,” he went on with a smile that should have raised Gerasim’s suspicions, “there is something I must leave you with.”

The fist that exploded into Gerasim’s face and sent him near senseless to the floor contained all the pent-up rage of the displaced man.

“*That*,” Danilych told the prone and stricken form, “is most likely the last time *anyone* will treat you as a man.”

Moving towards his rooms for what would be the last time, Danilych turned to add one last remark:

“I only hope life with your *‘Master’* will be worth it.”

END

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