

'a twistedly brilliant emotional rollercoaster'

David Towsey, *Equinox*

ALAN BILTON

THE END OF THE
YELLOW
HOUSE

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Alan Bilton

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REVIEWS

Alan Bilton's *The End of the Yellow House* is, aptly, a Russian doll of a novel in which an Agatha Christie-style whodunnit, a gory horror story, an examination of Soviet political history and a meditation on madness contain one another in a carefully crafted whole - as entertaining as it is thoughtful. - **Gareth Smith, Wales Arts Review**

Set in and around a snowbound Russian sanatorium in 1919, the novel is a darkly witty, hallucinatory exploration of madness, morality, and mortality, in a world in which no definitions are fixed. Part detective story, part surrealist fable, *The End of the Yellow House* riffs on Bulgakov, Gogol, Bruno Schulz and Boney M, but is ultimately a strikingly original and intriguing work in its own right – **Oz Hardwick, Inverse Books of the Year**

A gloriously maverick novel – **Matthew G. Rees, Horla**

Walks a tense tightrope strung between comedy and tragedy with a deft and steady sense of balance... there are plenty of excellent one-liners as this wild juggernaut of a novel careers its way along, splashing mud and blood and tension as it goes. – **Jon Gower, Nation Cymru**

This at-times brutal, at-times comic, at-times surreal but always gripping novel ... is very far from conforming to the rules of the mystery novel – **Michael Stein, New Welsh Review**

A brutal, but often witty and tender tale, *The End of the Yellow House* is a twistedly brilliant emotional rollercoaster. In experiencing its expansive vistas and claustrophobic tunnels, we learn to distrust the vibrant characters here, as well as the very landscape which they inhabit. A delicious mystery on every page --**David Towsey**

A bold and confident novel that throws us into the deep end of post-revolutionary Russian life with fervour and wit. There are knowing nods to Gogol and Bulgakov, but the voice is entirely original, with a gem of a phrase on every page. I love the quizzical, querulous, dry voice and it's a satisfying whilst sometimes disorientating experience... the characters are larger than life, but the mud is real.

Alan Bilton has a real talent for the unexpected left-hand turn, with lines that turn on a sixpence and surreal narrative twists. It reads like a very modern translation of a 19th century Russian classic – if that sounds like your kind of thing, you will love this book – **Mark Blayney**

Also by Alan Bilton

The Sleepwalkers' Ball

The Known and Unknown Sea

Anywhere Out of the World

At Dawn, Two Nightingales

For Pamela

“I am obliged to report that at the present moment
the Russian Empire is run by lunatics.”

— MAURICE PALÉOLOGUE, *French Ambassador to
Russia, 1916*

“The rye’s on fire, the seed’s all dead,
But who will save it and risk his head?
An army of madmen has broken loose,
And like Mamai, they’ll scourge all Rus.”

IVAN BUNIN, *‘The Vigil’*

one

1

When Nikolai found the body, Chief Superintendent Lepinov had been missing for two days. Nikolai – who'd spent most of this time drinking heavily, chasing after Alyona, and quarrelling with Shiskin the cook – had been despatched by Starchenko to fetch a bottle of Holy Water for the Tsar – the usual nonsense about his sickly son, no doubt. Alas, the inebriated Nikolai was a poor choice for such a task; by the time he reached the monastery, he'd lost his bucket, his hat, and – somewhat inexplicably – both boots. Cursing his luck, the old yardman tied the bottle to a long pole and lowered it into the gloom, all the time struggling not to lose his grip and topple in beside it. After a minute or two of effort, the rough pole bumped against something large and round: the Chief Superintendent's arse. Nikolai lit the Icon lamp and spat. No, Chief Superintendent Lepinov was not looking well. Twisted limbs, bloated torso, broken back – and on his head resided a stout padded box, odd bits of tubing sprouting from the top. Removing it, the yardman could see where the Superintendent's skull had been folded in like dough, his eyes seeming to say 'What counter revolutionary force has robbed me of my role in the world struggle?' Nikolai stared at Lepinov with some degree of bitterness. He had lost his good winter boots for this?

By the time the yardman had lolloped barefoot to the Yellow House, it was already time for supper, so the old man sat straight down to eat, fearing that if he announced the Chief Superintendent's death, his belly would remain empty for hours. A sign above his head read 'Comrades! For the sake of your health, preserve cleanliness!', though the place smelt of cabbage, disinfectant and piss.

Ignoring the ceaseless prattling of Zvonkov and Shiskin, Nikolai spooned in his gruel, vague thoughts of the dead man buzzing around his head. Once Lepinov had been here and leant him a few kopecks to buy a

bottle on his name day – well, all and good. But now Lepinov was gone and that was no shame either. No doubt somebody else would come along to bark orders and pull the old man's beard: such was the way of the world. Whether Lepinov, Lenin or Tsar Nicholas himself, there would always be somebody demanding the yard be swept, the coal scuttle emptied, or the shutters fixed. Why work up a sweat digging your own grave? As long as there was bread on the table and something to drink, give thanks to God and go find your place on the stove. Meanwhile the kasha warmed the old man's innards and after a while, the feeling started to come back to his toes.

"Nikolai!" yelled Zvonkov, his nose red with catarrh. "You were barking last night, you old dog! Out on another spree, eh, you rascal..."

"Not I," said Nikolai, mechanically shovelling food between his greasy lips.

"Not you? Foo – supping from Alexander's cup."

"It must have been the nutters," muttered Nikolai, sadly. His sadness was deep and genuine. As soon as he finished his bowl, he would have to tell one of the doctors about the superintendent and then the cock would begin to crow. Poor Nikolai! Already his head throbbed, and the smell of the corpse hid up his nose.

"The nutters? Not outside my window, Uncle." Zvonkov had a deeply irritating voice, hoarse and whiny at the same time. The orderly stared at Nikolai's feet. "Lost your boots, eh? Dancing with the devil no doubt..."

Had Nikolai lost his boots while in his cups on the way to the monastery, or later, down the well? In his befuddled state, it was hard to remember. Oh, what did it matter? All he wanted was for the orderly to shut his trap.

After scraping the bottom of his bowl, the yardman reluctantly made his way to the doctor's table where Zinaida Yevgrafovna was conducting yet another furious argument with her fellow physicians.

"All this talk of the mind is as bad as theologians pulling their beards out over the existence of the soul," yelled the doctor, her hands dancing up and down the table. "There is the brain, there is the nervous system, and there is the spinal cord. Everything else is simple superstition."

"Superstition?" Aleshin banged on the table with his spoon. "Are you denying that class and social factors play no role? Psychosis conforms to the laws of historical determinism like everything else."

“We are speaking of tissues, colleague doctor!” The dark rings under Yevgrafovna’s eyes and her sharp and pointed nose gave her the expression of a bird of prey, though by the look of her, she hadn’t eaten a mouse in quite some time. “What counts is the movement of proteins along an infinitely delicate network of tubes and fibres.”

“Such talk is non-progressive and undialectic.”

“All mental illnesses are brain diseases,” countered Yevgrafovna, speaking as if delivering a lecture to a packed hall. “As a doctor there can be no other point of view. Frumkin?”

Frumkin’s curly beard looked up from its bowl. “Me? I pat their heads and try not to let them bite.” The *feldsher*, or doctor’s assistant, pulled a smile out of his bag and gestured with his spoon at Zinaida. “To reason with a lunatic is folly...”

“You can dress it up however you like Comrade Yevgrafovna, but this talk of fibers and tubes is just another name for the humors. Why...”

With a start, Aleshin suddenly noticed Nikolai standing there, the old yardman blinking at them like a simpleton. “Yes, well, what is it?”

“Superintendent Lepinov, your majesty, he...”

Aleshin snorted. “Dragged himself out of his ditch, has he? Well...”

“No sir, Master Lepinov, he, ah...”

Nikolai’s eyes seemed to roll backwards as if someone were holding him by the scruff of his neck. His hands trembled and his throat turned dry.

“What? Well? I hope that Comrade Lepinov realises that I will have to report any unauthorised absence to the Red Authorities.”

“I found him with my pole, sir. Down the well, he was, curse him. With his head in a box.”

Aleshin stared at Nikolai as if he were a goose who had just wandered into his study.

“A box?”

“A box, the devil take him. With horns coming out of the top.” Nikolai wrung his cap’s neck like a rabbit, shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot.

Aleshin, Yevgrafovna and Frumkin all stopped eating. What was the yardman saying? As if seeing Nikolai for the first time, they took in the stains on his uniform, the mud on his bare feet.

“Lepinov? Lepinov’s dead?”

The three doctors exchanged glances.

“But I saw comrade Lepinov only...” Aleshin paused. “A box, you say?”

The yardman looked at them craftily and out of nowhere began to growl.

2

Of course, in many ways the news of Chief Superintendent Lepinov's demise was no great surprise. Lepinov was an incorrigible melancholic, a chronic hypochondriac, and, despite his advanced medical training, a devoted spiritualist. He spoke of himself as "a mere visitor to this pale world" (he'd been twice arrested for tax evasion) and described Death as "his one true wife". Typically, his sentences began as a whisper and ended as a shout – almost as if he were picking up messages from the other side. The guests in the Yellow House both feared and despised him. Lepinov would inspect their tired bodies, sigh deeply, and conclude his diagnoses with the doleful conclusion that "from dust we came and to dust we shall return." "We are all but temporary guests here," he averred, "awaiting that invitation that we cannot refuse". As a scientist, he had his eccentricities. The Superintendent refused to wear a pocket watch, because there was no such thing as time. He wouldn't allow his apartment to be cleaned because the souls of the departed lived on as dust. He clapped his hands twice upon entering a room. "I'm not long for this world," Lepinov would say at mealtimes – "why not add a little salt to the kasha?"

He was also (and this despite the chronic food shortages plaguing the yellow house) enormously fat. Whilst other doctors and guests wasted away, Lepinov ballooned like a pregnant sow. No one knew from whence he received such calories. It was well known that he did secret deals with Shemiakin the Bagman, exchanging morphine for goods from the city, or (malicious tongues whispered) stealing the guests' possessions and selling them on for drugs. Despite the presence of bandits, deserters and anarchists, Lepinov was in the habit of taking long walks in the woods, returning without mushrooms or berries or roots of any kind. At night, he received unknown visitors, admitted by Nikolai, but unseen by anybody else. Yes, everything about him was odd. Urodlivy, the peasant, had cursed him. He had enormous green bags under his eyes. One of his fingernails was so long it had started to curl.

And besides – why not Lepinov? Since the war had started, Death was as likely to snatch the Chief Superintendent as any other. Typhoid was rife amongst the guests in blocks three and four. Lice, bedbugs and excrement were ubiquitous, and the Yellow House was desperately short of heat, soap and water, never mind actual medicine. Robbers, feral children and the starving often broke into the estate's outhouses, and it was a rare day in which the echo of gunfire could not be heard somewhere. If Lepinov had not taken his own life, then there was no shortage of others willing to lend a hand. Indeed, if not for the matter of the strange box – and the fact that Lepinov, for all his faults, was still Chief Superintendent, and something of the old table of ranks still persisted – a soft bed would have been quietly provided for Lepinov's bones around the back of the dispensary along with everybody else.

As it was, however, Aleshin insisted on a thorough investigation. With a barked order, Zvonkov and his son were dispatched to the old monastery to retrieve Lepinov's body from the miracle-working waters, the Chief Superintendent brought back to the house on a two wheeled cart packed in straw.

It was a melancholy journey. Nettles whipped the orderlies' legs and briars pulled at their aprons, while all the time the lantern sputtered like a fat man on the stairs.

Laid out on a slab in the old dairy, the two doctors and Frumkin the *feldsher* examined the Superintendent's corpse, poking at the dead man's lump with their scalpels. The level of decomposition suggested that he had been at the bottom of the well for some time, his hue somewhere between crayfish pink and cucumber green. Lepinov's head had been bashed in with a blunt object, his body vigorously assaulted, hairs plucked from his beard. And his soul? Heaven alone knew: only Lepinov's shade could say for sure...

The makeshift autopsy immediately threw up a series of problems. If Lepinov had died elsewhere then how did his corpse make its way to the well? Why were there no other footprints but Nikolai's amongst the mire at the old monastery gate? And given the fact that he had last been seen only the day before, why did he resemble a shank of rancid meat?

"Well, so much for the holy water," noted Frumkin, tapping Lepinov's skull.

And then there was the factor of the Superintendent's strange headgear

– a peculiar set of padded blinkers, with a small opening for the mouth and a complicated set of tubes emerging from the top.

“I’m sure I’ve seen something like this before,” said Frumkin. “In some old medical brochure maybe... Zinaida?”

“Why would I know?” she snapped, staring hard at the box. Her normally pale cheeks turned red and then she stiffened and looked away. “The thing is an antique. Who would use such a device today?”

“Completely reactionary,” sniffed Aleshin. “But how did it wind up between Lepinov’s ears?”

“Lepinov squirreled away all kinds of strange junk,” said Frumkin examining the tubing. “Kinky stuff, too. But I think we can rule out suicide. Not even our glorious Superintendent could strangle himself and drown at the same time.”

Aleshin fastidiously wiped his gold-rimmed spectacles with a cloth. “A conspiracy ... some kind of seditious scheme...”

A name popped into Frumkin’s mind: *The Tranquilizer*, was that it? Lepinov was certainly tranquilized now. His tongue stuck out of the box like a cuckoo from a clock.

After the preliminary autopsy, the members of the medical team retired to the consultation room and began to smoke. It was nearly dawn by now and all present felt a little giddy and a little sick.

“Okay,” said Frumkin. “What now?”

Aleshin argued that the Chief Superintendent’s demise was a clear case of counter revolutionary activity, and that the matter should be reported to the Red Guard without delay. Zinaida Yevgrafovna countered that the Bolshevik authorities lacked uniforms, ammunition or footwear, and were consequently consigned to their barracks at Chermavka: better to send someone to the railroad at Yamskai, where at least some kind of police officer might be found.

Aleshin made a swift, obscene gesture. “The police are no more than relics of the old bourgeois regime. Why bother? The dictatorship of the proletariat requires a revolutionary form of justice.”

Yevgrafovna and Frumkin could not agree – murder was murder, even in wartime. Eventually it was agreed that Petr, Zvonkov’s son, should take the last remaining horse and try to make contact with some kind of revolutionary authority. Given the circumstances, this was by no means a

straightforward plan. Chermavka was nearly twenty miles away, and with the October rains, the roads were swiftly turning into thick rivers of mud. There were other dangers too. Ryabovsky's estate had been ransacked and abandoned. The nearest village, Chulm, was without any adult males since the Red Army conscripted the peasants, taking deserters' families hostage. Davydovka was some twenty versts in the opposite direction, Voronezh beyond that— that is, if Denikin and the Volunteer Army hadn't already overrun it. Yes, the Yellow House was but a tiny island in a great sea of blood; it was only a matter of time before the tide broke angrily o'er it.

Aleshin loosened his necktie and checked his watch: nearly six. If Zvonkov's son left at dawn, he might reach the Red Army before nightfall. Despite Yevgrafovna's protestations, there was no point in heading toward the railway: the lines would inevitably be sabotaged, telegraph wires cut.

Petr was sent for and arrived looking sleepy and scared. Tufts of his hair pointed in all directions like a way sign.

"Comrade Zvonkov Junior," began Aleshin, clicking his heels together. "It is the people's will that you should go from this place and make contact with the larger Red forces of progression."

Petr blanched and immediately began to cough, his chest as clogged as a peasant's chimney.

"Tell them Chief Superintendent Lepinov has been murdered and we require assistance," said Yevgrafovna. "Also, some bandages, and a little sausage..."

The boy looked at them blankly. "The chief?"

Aleshin stepped forward in a military manner. "Proceed Southeast toward the Red encampment at Chermavka. Avoid peasants, Greens, and Counter-Revolutionary forces. Maintain iron discipline at all times."

The boy's eyes widened. "The chief is dead?"

Yevgrafovna stepped forward and stared intently at Aleshin. "Chermavka? No, no, the station at Yamskai. The station master, Kukushkin will..."

"Kukushkin? That fool couldn't pluck a goose. No, no, report to Comrade Ablemov and..."

"This is a matter for the police not the military..."

Aleshin slapped his sides in exasperation. "Comrade Yevgrafovna, there are no police. Revolutionary justice is the prerogative of..."

“Justice? And what is this Red Justice? When soldiers last came, the nurses all had to hide.”

Petr stared at the various pale and angry doctors and began to cough. The truth was, he had no idea of the way to Chermavka, or the railway line either.

“So,” said Frumkin, “do we give the pup a gun?”

The group fell silent.

“No, no, the lad will be fine,” said Aleshin. “Eh, boy? Mm, what do you say?”

The doctor patted his head and Zvonkov arrived with his good winter coat. “Don’t get mud on it,” he said. “And don’t put anything heavy in the pockets.”

Outside rain had started to fall in crude, thick strokes. The avenue of birch trees lined up as if before a firing squad. It was just about dawn.

“God speed son,” said Zvonkov, with some emotion. “The Lord protect you and bring you home.”

Petr nodded. Beyond the fence with the rusty nails lay the outside world, open like a door.

“Stick to the roads. Watch out for wolves. Don’t let anyone steal your coat.”

The lad coughed like a steam train.

“Here, take this. ‘Tis a protective charm, belonging to your late mother. Of course it did her no good, but still...”

Petr wiped his nose and placed the charm around his neck and a small crust of bread in a bag. Yana the horse whinnied and looked back at him. Her eyes were large and black and stared at the boy as if she knew exactly how all this was going to pan out.

3

Exhausted by events, Gregory Aleshin retired to his apartment and lay down on his bed. So: historical determinism had decided that he should succeed Lepinov as Chief Superintendent. Well, politically, who else was appropriate? Yevgrafovna was a crude materialist and Frumkin a fraud. Yes, the responsibility for the Yellow House now fell entirely and irrevocably upon his head – a not entirely comfortable position given the proximity of the White Army and the bands of outlying Cossacks. Still, the good doctor knew that, ideologically speaking, he was the only one up to the task.

Aleshin was the youngest of the three doctors, but compensated for this by adopting a mature, military manner entirely in keeping with the seriousness of the situation. In this his long, fair hair, smooth chin and gold-rimmed spectacles (he was extremely shortsighted) clashed unavoidably with the Red Army uniform he wore beneath his doctor's smock, but there was little he could do about that. His features were pretty and his watery eyes a little dreamy. He countered this by speaking as harshly as possible, barking at nurses, orderlies and colleagues in a strident voice borrowed from one of Tolstoy's generals.

His favourite book was Chernyshevsky's *What is to be Done?* and he modelled himself on its hero, Rakhmetev. Stern, ascetic, and unemotional, Chernyshevsky's protagonist exercised daily, ate only meat, and slept on a bed of nails to curb sexual desires. Like Aleshin, Rakhmetev had no time for the inessential: only politics and science were real, everything else an effeminate distraction ('Yes, yes,' thought the doctor, underlining his favourite passages in red.) From Chernyshevsky's tome, Aleshin imbibed the need for rigorous personal discipline, sexual abstinence, and the strict renunciation of any personal feelings or thoughts. All that was soft and tender had to be strangled, he averred; the New Man must be single minded in the cold pursuit of the future. And what future was this to be? Why, a future of timetables, efficiency and maximum productivity.

In a black notebook, Alshin recorded his meals, reading list and exercise regime. The figures were exact and the handwriting neat. Sometimes Aleshin's record keeping took up so of his evening that he didn't have time to sleep.

This morning though, which is to say, the morning after Lepinov's demise, he permitted himself a moment to rest and reflect. So: Lepinov's wish had finally been granted – he had gone to lie with his bride. Yes, well, all well and good: a flabby recidivist like Lepinov had no place within the ruthless organization of the revolutionary vanguard. As for his murderer, nu, the Red Guard would deal with that: take the dog out and put him up against a wall.

In truth, of course, Aleshin was well aware of the shortcomings of the armed representatives of the People's Will. The Red soldiers who had turned up at the house over a month ago had been dirty, drunk and insolent: they had attempted to rape Alyona, and the Three Graces (as the nurses were called) had been forced to take refuge inside Lepinov's private chambers. The purpose of the soldiers' visit, as far as Aleshin could judge, had been theft, extortion and intimidation, and they had gone about this in a completely undirected manner. They demonstrated none of the iron will, which Trotsky, as Commissar for War, had asserted, was the prime asset of the Red Soldier; rather, they had shot at the windows of the bathhouse and taken away as many vegetables as they could drunkenly stack on their cart.

Aleshin rubbed his sore eyes and tried to sleep. Taking over the running of the Yellow House, countering the rampant waste and inefficiency of Lepinov's reign, defending the estate against the threat of Denikin's Whites: all this required pure, hard determination and absolute dedication to the cause. Socialist citizens were responsible not only for their actions, but also for their thoughts – like the mad, in a way. Aleshin elected to sleep for precisely twenty minutes and then awake refreshed.

Alas, no sooner had he decided this, then he was disturbed by a frantic rapping at his door. It was Old Man Starchenko, the Yellow House's ancient *Prizhivalschik* or Estate Manager. The old man's features resembled a candle that had been allowed to burn down; at any moment, his eyes seemed ready to dribble down past his nose.

"Your excellency... I am most sorry to disturb you, sir, but, well..."

Aleshin stared at the old retainer through his gold-rimmed spectacles.

“Yes? Yes, well, spit it out...”

“Doom sir! Destruction! The whole globe is spinning from its axis and will dash itself to bits.”

Aleshin rubbed his forehead and waited for the ancient servant, dressed as if still living in Catherine’s day, to calm down. Starchenko was as giddy as a schoolgirl, but nobody knew his way round the estate like he.

“Well?”

“Churkin, sir... he’s dead too.”

The doctor leapt from his bed. “Dead? How so?”

“Hung sir. By his very own neck.”

“Hung? Nonsense, nonsense ... well, let me see”.

Blinking in the insipid light Aleshin followed the old man’s back to the servant’s quarters, the part of the estate that had changed least since the days of the Old Count. Churkin was permitted to sleep in a small room there, though nobody could quite remember whether he was a servant, patient or guest. Tirelessly enthusiastic and hardworking, Churkin was happy to chop wood, wash clothes, sweep floors – everything which Nikolai and Alyona were supposed to do, but about which they complained so bitterly. True, Churkin was a little touched, and babbled all sorts of religious nonsense if you let him, but he rarely complained, never shirked, and invariably carried out all orders to the letter.

And there he was, his feet hanging twelve inches above the floor, a noose of coarse binding twine around his neck. Aleshin noticed with distaste the spread of brown on his leggings, the pool of urine beneath his toes. With Churkin gone, who would clean up now? Starchenko leaned in with his lamp. Churkin looked very much surprised and more than a little confused.

“He must have heard of the Chief Superintendent’s death and ... oh heaven preserve us, sir!”

“Suicide? Nonsense – suicide is impossible in revolutionary conditions.”

In truth, the room was so small, to hang oneself would indeed require great presence of mind. It looked as if with one small step Churkin could hop down and recommence his duties.

“A great darkness,” whispered Starchenko. “The opening of a vast and terrible void...”

Aleshin stood on tiptoes and examined Churkin’s dirty, purplish neck. “This is intolerable. Get him down man, get him down.”

“Me sir? Oh dear, well...”

Starchenko made such a hash of it that Aleshin was forced to try to undo the bindings himself. Unfortunately, he couldn’t cut the twine either.

“Damn and blast it, you dog...”

Churkin swung between them like a pendulum, whilst outside Ilya the cock began to crow – a full hour late, reflected Aleshin, scratching his nose.

“Go and get Nikolai – or Zvonkov, at least. There must be some kind of blade in the house.”

Starchenko shuffled out, leaving Aleshin alone with the corpse. The body hung there, heavy and awkward, filling the room entirely.

‘A shame about the simpleton,’ thought the doctor. ‘The revolution requires broad backs.’

Glancing around, he patted down Churkin’s jerkin, something long and heavy weighing down one pocket. What was that thing? The object was so heavy that the fabric was torn, a dirty strip of rag hanging down from the side. The doctor removed the offending item and then gazed back at the corpse. What a fool, what a goose! Churkin’s tongue stuck out like a child trying to taste snow.

By the time Starchenko returned with Zvonkov, the object was gone, Churkin’s box and satchel emptied entirely.

In his large, well-appointed room above the gymnasium, the Tsar impatiently awaited Starchenko and the vial of Holy Water from Saint Leonilla’s well. Ho, what was keeping the doddering fool now? Things were going from bad to worse all over the estate. The soup was awful, the bread mixed with straw, the plates badly washed: yes, the forces of chaos were squatting at the very gates. How the Tsarina put up with this was quite beyond him: she could not abide dirt, sloth or unsatisfactory service of any kind, and flew in to a rage if so much as a hair were found in her *krass*. One could only imagine that she was distracted from the times they were living in by her ceaseless maternal concern for Alexei – the child for whom the life-giving waters of Saint Leonilla were required. Poor Alexei; at the thought of his son, the Imperial Autocrat’s eyes turned damp and pale. Fishing in his mouth, another tooth popped out: soon his mouth would be as soft as a carp’s. Yes, tooth by tooth, brick by brick, the old world was crumbling. He was no longer permitted to tour the Imperial Garden,

his Royal couch had been impounded, he hadn't had a proper bowel movement for weeks. While he remained cooped up in this room all of Rus was ablaze.

Finally, a soft knock was heard and his Imperial Majesty called "Come."

Starchenko arrived looking terribly distracted, his frock coat stained, and wig skew-whiff. His whole body looked as if he had been placed in an apple press, his nose bending over to sniff his toes.

"The water?"

"Here, your majesty."

In reality, Starchenko had swiftly filled an old bottle with water from the communal butt: what did it truly matter? At least he'd remembered to top it with the requisite cloth.

"Yes, yes, very good..." said the Tsar, moving his hand across the stopper whilst mumbling something vaguely resembling a prayer. Then the Tsar paused and stared at Starchenko intently. "Last night I dreamed that you were a pickle. What do you suppose this means?"

"I have no idea your majesty." "Further misfortune, no doubt."

With this, the Tsar seemed to grow distracted, and he absent-mindedly sipped from the bottle himself.

"Yes, we have been born into dark times ..."

"Indeed, your majesty."

"At night, sparrows fly in and pluck at my beard with their tiny little beaks. Peck, peck, peck! And when they sing, they sound just like a speech by that Jew, Kerensky. How can this be?"

"I don't know your majesty."

"Well – there it is. Take this cup to my boy. Tell Alexandra that I love her and long to caress her hand once more."

"Of course, your majesty."

The Tsar was naked below his shirt and strained fearfully upon his commode – alas, to no avail. All that was released was a silent, sulfurous blast of air.

4

Before her expulsion from the Advanced Psychiatric Institute in Moscow, Zinaida Yevgrafovna had felt herself to be teetering on the edge of a great intellectual discovery. That madness was a degenerate condition, handed on from generation to generation was well understood. Alcoholism, idiocy, sterility – all these were passed between parties via some kind of defective germ plasm, as the case of congenital syphilis plainly showed. But what was the exact nature of the vessel in which this tainted cargo set sail? For Hippocrates, the answer to the mysteries of wellbeing lay in the humors: phlegm, bile, gastric juices, all the fluid substances of man. Hence the physician's desire to purge the individual, whether by vomiting, sweating or the extraction of blood, rebalancing the elements, thereby draining the excess. Though the notion of humors had since been supplanted by an understanding of the nervous system, something of the sense of the body's internal sea remained. Man was nearly all liquid, biology taught, his mind prone to spring tides and autumn floods. In a way, the discovery of an intimate waterway of fibers and tubes only served to strengthen the suspicion that somewhere in the viscous tunnels of the body lay the source of all of mankind's unhappiness.

Zinaida had been expelled from the Institute after the revelation she'd been caught secretly infecting her patients with Rat Bite Fever, a febrile agent intended to cleanse the brain. Although cleared of any criminal intents (her subjects were drawn from the ranks of the very lowest kind of lunatic) Yevgrafovna had nevertheless been quietly farmed out to the provinces – to the Yellow House at Bezumiye more precisely, where her once glittering intellectual career seemed destined to sink beneath provincial mud.

When she'd arrived, some fifteen years ago, the sanatorium still functioned primarily as a spa, its 'cure' dependent upon the so-called *Christy* waters of Saint Leonilla's well. That this Miracle Making elixir was pure superstition was clear to all. That the whole set up was essentially a

moneymaking racket for the Sanatorium's Chief Superintendent – first Bezenchuk and then Lepinov – was also beyond doubt. And yet, slowly, somewhat reluctantly, Yevgrafovna had made her home here. This had little to do with her patients; the wealthy, aristocratic clientele who came to take the waters were of no concern to her. They were depressed and unhappy, somewhat in the manner of Chekhov's minor players, but they were not, to Yevgrafovna's mind, demonstrably ill: their ineffectual melancholy was a result of their own passivity rather than degenerate tissues. Hence, Yevgrafovna was left alone to pursue her own scientific investigations in her laboratory. Samples were taken, chemicals analysed, new elements introduced. And when the prosperous and upscale patients began to drift away, replaced by the chronic patients shipped in from Davydovka and elsewhere – well, this simply afforded Yevgrafovna the opportunity to begin to put her various medical theories into practice.

Unlike the morbid and ghoulish Lepinov, the guests admired and believed in Dr Yevgrafovna. She had no favourites and demonstrated no prejudice. Her physical examinations were flawlessly thorough, every nook and cranny professionally swabbed. The guests had no doubt that whatever the doctor removed or inserted into them was for their own good: besides, she never smelt of alcohol and her smock was as clean as November snow.

When the war with Germany began, Yevgrafovna's gender saved her from being posted to the front along with the other doctors. Instead, she was joined by lickspittle Reds (Aleshin), dubious con men (Frumkin) and peasant nurses she could easily bend to her will. But now Lepinov seemed more interested in the spirit world than profits – foo, everyone knew that without Zinaida Yevgrafovna the whole place would have gone to seed. Instead, it took in wounded soldiers from the front, admitted inmates from a nearby, all but bankrupt asylum, and did its best to treat typhoid patients from both neighbouring villages and even Voronezh itself. Only when the revolution came did the Yellow House start to drift away from any earthly realm...

The day after Lepinov's death, Yevgrafovna went about her rounds in her usual energetic and efficient manner. She checked that the bedding had been boiled, the dispensary hadn't been broken into, there were no animals in the consulting room. Afterwards she toured the typhus wards

(wards that, characteristically, both Aleshin and Frumkin tended to shy away from), encouraged the guests in ward five to exercise, and made sure that the chronics in ward three were vigorously washed and scrubbed.

The first Yevgrafovna heard about Churkin was whilst she was bleeding the guests there: milking time on the farm, as Frumkin put it. Nadya, the youngest, darkest and shortest of the Three Graces, arrived to assist, her eyes already puffy from crying.

“Colleague Nadya,” said Yevgrafovna, appraising her depressive condition and sore lids. “What is wrong? Are you upset about Chief Superintendent Lepinov?”

“Lepinov? That creep?” Nadya dabbed her eyes. “No, no – it’s Ivan – the sweet soul.”

Yevgrafovna started. “Ivan? Ivan Churkin? Why, whatever do you mean?”

“Zvonkov told us. Strung up his was – by his neck. The little dove! And such a kind, Christian boy.”

Yevgrafovna couldn’t believe it. Churkin gone, and she the last to know? In a fury, she marched over to Aleshin’s office and knocked twice on the young doctor’s head.

Aleshin regarded her with weary indulgence.

“Comrade Churkin has been assassinated by unknown class elements. I conducted a comprehensive investigation and concluded that the cause of death was asphyxiation by means of twine. I then gave leave to Nikolai to bury him in the small field behind the dispensary.”

“Buried?” Yevgrafovna could not believe her ears. “Do you mean to say you’ve already inhumed the remains?”

“Indeed. What with the level of disease present and the severe shortage of soap, such a decision was the only progressive course of action. This is no time for female sentiment, Comrade Yevgrafovna! During wartime communism, it is imperative that...”

Yevgrafovna stared at Aleshin’s boyish face and gold rimmed spectacles and felt an intense desire to smash both. “This is an outrage. How dare you presume to dispose of the evidence?”

“Evidence? Comrade Yevgrafovna, my first duty is to the maintenance of order and political morale. As the new Chief Superintendent, I simply could not allow...”

Yevgrafovna’s cheeks twitched. “You? I need hardly remind you that I

am the senior doctor at this institution and that as such...”

“Longest standing, perhaps ... but may I remind *you* that as the highest-ranking Party member it is my responsibility to undertake complete ideological control during these revolutionary times.”

Yevgrafovna looked as if one of the Typhoid patients had suddenly sneezed in her face.

“These are meaningless terms. I am the senior medical practitioner at the Yellow House and therefore...”

“Comrade Yevgrafovna,” said Aleshin, coldly. “Superintendent Lepinov may have cast a blind eye at your illegal and unsanctioned experiments, but I have no intention of such leniency. Unless you wish your activities to be reported immediately to the representative of the people’s army, I suggest that you...”

“This is completely unacceptable,” said Yevgrafovna, shaking like a leaf. “In this matter, you have no legitimacy and no jurisdiction. Your order to bury Churkin is both gratuitous and, in the circumstances, highly suspicious. When Petr returns with the police then...”

“What times do you think you are living in – those of Alexander the First? There is no law outside of Revolutionary Justice, and there is no authority except that of the party. The White dogs are sniffing at the post, Comrade Yevgrafovna – if you choose to contradict the will of the proletariat, then I cannot be held responsible for the consequences.”

Yevgrafovna wanted to strangle the young pup, but what else could she do? Instead of snapping Aleshin’s glasses, she angrily took her leave, the black bile in her spleen bubbling away inside her.

Despite her misgivings, there was nowhere else to go but Frumkin’s. The *feldsher* was strolling near the old orangery with one of the newly arrived guests from Davydovka: Martynov, or something. For some reason Frumkin kept the new arrivals as far away from Yevgrafovna and Aleshin as possible – to try out his so-called ‘talking cure’, she surmised. Frumkin was chatting away with Martynov like Dr Ragin in Chekhov’s famous story. The two of them seemed to be sharing some kind of a joke and Zinaida watched Frumkin’s shoulders fairly shake with mirth.

“Colleague Frumkin? Colleague Frumkin, a word if you please...”

“What? Oh, sure, sure.” He turned back to the tall, bearded inmate and patted him on the back. “Um, you know your way back to your room, don’t you? Oh, right, off you go.”

Playing with his curly hair, Frumkin wandered over. The *feldsher* was short, jumpy and fuzzy, like a recently escaped sheep. His lively eyes glittered with skeptical amusement.

“Zinaida! You’re looking as fetching as ever. Have you boiled that smock? No? Your hair?”

Scowling, Yevgrafovna set out the details of Churkin’s burial and Aleshin’s ascendance to the throne. Frumkin shrugged.

“Hey, if he wants to put his neck in the noose, that’s his business. We have a saying amongst our people: get yourself noticed, get yourself problems. Come on – let’s walk.”

So saying, Frumkin took Yevgrafovna’s arm and promenaded with her toward the dispensary.

“We both know Aleshin is an idiot. Revolutionary this and ideological that – it’s like he’s cramming for some test. None of it means anything, probably even less.” Frumkin tickled his curls. “The thing is to keep our heads down and see who turns up at our door first. If it’s the Reds, then ‘Hello Comrade, welcome to the proletariat struggle.’ If it’s the Whites, then ‘Down with Red Terror.’ And if it’s the Cossacks then I’ll be hiding under Alyona in the pantry.”

“Aleshin’s claim to promotion lacks all legitimacy. The pup is barely out of short trousers. What gives him any right to...”

“Well, he’s a party member, not a woman or a *zhid*. But if he wants to play at being Lenin, let him shave his head and grow a beard. Why worry? If there’s a search, rustle and tell them you’re paper.”

“And Churkin?”

“Churkin was a sweet kid but no brain. Maybe he saw something, or maybe he got in the way. Who knows? Aleshin may talk of throttling the bourgeoisie, but I don’t see him as the strangling kind. Death by a thousand memos, maybe...”

Yevgrafovna shook her head as if trying to clear it. What was that just above her hairline? Dried blood?

“And Lepinov? Perhaps Aleshin saw only one way to create a vacancy.”

“It had to be somebody strong enough to drag Lepinov’s belly over to the well, and trust me, that’s no small undertaking. Aleshin? He stores weights under his bed but still breaks into a sweat trying to pick up his dictionary. Look, I’m no great fan of revolutionary discipline either, but let Aleshin wear out his jack boots for a while. When the Whites come,

they'll be kicking the air like Churkin's."

Was Frumkin right? And yet his flippancy irritated Yevgrafovna and seemed to mask some deeper purpose.

"I'm not sure that you grasp the serious nature of the situation," she growled. "There is a murderer at large in the Yellow House and we have no idea as to their reason or purpose."

"My dear Zinadia," said Frumkin, opening his palms. "There are hundreds of murderers out there, just waiting to do us in. What do you want us to do? Night has fallen over Russia. Wake me up when the cock crows."

And with that he kissed Yevgrafovna on the hand and strolled back to the orangery like a holiday maker taking in the air. All around him, the rain fell like curses.