

The Cleansing Flames

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Chapter 1.

An idea made manifest

The arsonists had chosen their target well. The warehouse was wooden and it contained barrels of vodka, produced at the nearby distillery on the small island in the Malaya Neva.

Pavel Pavlovich Virginsky stood on Alexandrovsky Prospect, looking up at the burning building. Brilliant orange tongues licked out from the windows, questing the black night. Virginsky could sense the fire gorging itself on this plentiful fuel. More than that, he could hear its savage, drunken roar, as it grew in force and intensity. A series of booming explosions, like gigantic belches, resonated within. So far the structure was holding out, but its collapse was surely imminent. The smoke was thick with the stench of burning resin from the timbers, as they started to catch. Weightless seeds of fire swirled in the hot eddies above

and around the building, an aura of destruction. It was in the fire's nature to spread itself, consuming and converting everything in its path. These sparks were the emissaries of that intent. The surrounding apartment buildings, exposed in a tremulous glow, seemed to shiver as they awaited its approach.

The choice of location had a symbolic resonance too, as the avenue had only recently been named in honour of the Tsar.

They had chosen their day carefully too. Easter Sunday night. Even Virginsky had been shocked by this. He considered himself an exemplary freethinker, and indeed was not afraid to call himself an atheist, at least not in the privacy of his own conscience. But even he, that day, had paid a seasonal visit on his departmental head, Prokuror Liputin, to declare Christ Risen and exchange kisses with his colleagues.

Virginsky thought now of the extended embrace in which Porfiry Petrovich had held him, as if peculiarly unwilling to let him go. After the kiss, the older man had looked searchingly into his eyes. His look held a challenge, and seemed to sense Virginsky's unease. Certainly, Virginsky had attended largely as a matter of form, for reasons of professional prudence. It would not do for a magistrate to absent himself from the departmental head's home on Easter Sunday. It would certainly be noted, and a black mark placed against his name. The question asked by Porfiry's glance seemed to be: *Can you really not believe?* Perhaps for that day, he did. He at least saw the wisdom of pretending to. The unease that Porfiry's gaze identified was the spiritual imbalance caused by hypocrisy.

Perhaps that was why he had rushed out to see the fires. He was in awe of those who had started them. By adding blasphemy to the crime of arson, they proved that they were not afraid of the old superstitions; by bearing witness, Virginsky could perhaps expiate some of his earlier pusillanimity.

One thing was for sure, Virginsky was not there in his capacity as a magistrate. He was not wearing his civil service uniform and was dressed instead in an old overcoat from his student days that he hoped would not draw undue attention. Had he been observed by anyone from the department, or by a spy working for other departments, he would have been able to argue that it was within his remit to familiarise himself with the nature of the criminal damage being perpetrated. Should any fatalities result, he and his superior – Porfiry Petrovich – may well have been called upon to lead an investigation. He was simply acquainting himself with the scene of a crime on his own initiative.

Except, as Virginsky knew, there was a little more to it than that.

The fire drew him elementally.

The splendour of it gripped his heart. This was an idea, a terrible, wonderful, ineluctable idea, made manifest. A radical fervour lived in the restless twists of the flames, in their eager stabs and sallies. It was an idea that towered over him. That threatened to destroy him, even though it was – at that moment - an idea he believed in, an idea he hungered for.

He welcomed its heat on his face, almost as if he was welcoming the prospect of his own annihilation. If he must become nothing for the sake of the all-conquering fire, then so be it.

Virginsky was not alone. A crowd of mostly students – the fire was not far from the University district – together with some lowly-looking clerks, and even a number of junior army officers, was gathered there. Like the fire, the mood was constantly fluctuating. At times, a wild elation spread through them. Their shouts rode on the crack and hiss of the flames. Then, suddenly, it was as if they were cowed by what they were witnessing. They knew that something had been unleashed. Perhaps among them were the individuals who had unleashed it. Just as suddenly, the memory of the grievances they held, on their own and others' behalf, shook them out of this muted depression. They spat and fumed. Anti-tsarist slogans jostled with calls for universal destruction.

Virginsky felt his heart enlarged by the transgressive spirit of those around him, though he was careful not to join in the shouting.

But more than anything, the dramatic tension of the building's fate held them. This was more than spectacle, it was theatre. They could hear the clanging bells of the approaching fire carts, close now, very close. But still, would the engines arrive in time to save the warehouse? Surely not. At any moment the fire would take hold of the building's shell in earnest. Conflagration and collapse were only moments away.

The first of the fire carts thundered into the avenue, pulled by a team of two horses. It seemed to be heading straight for the crowd, which scattered at its approach. The men of the St Petersburg City Fire Company were standing on running boards either side of the steam pump engine. They rode the jounces of speed skilfully, ducking and rising on their knees, their Achilles helmets bobbing like puppets' oversized heads. But as the cart banked to pull up, the firemen swayed precariously. One man fell from the cart. He toppled like a surprised acrobat. His helmet somehow came off in the fall. The speed of it all made it difficult to be certain but he must have hit the ground with his head, because Virginsky saw immediately that he was not going to get up.

The cheers of some of the students shocked him. But when the second fire cart came on the scene, and the fallen fireman was trampled under the horses' hooves, they were silenced. They turned away from his mangled body as if from a distasteful outburst.

And then, at almost the same moment, there was another sequence of explosions from the warehouse and the roof was suddenly no longer there. Huge orange waves burst out, a sea of fire lashing the night sky. The fallen fireman was forgotten.

The crews were too late. In almost the same instant, the walls of the warehouse fell in with a low, grumbling crash. The building was no more. There was only fire.

The horses, though blinkered, were naturally uneasy; they whinnied as they strained their heads away from the heat, shifting their hooves in agitation. The men, though, were too intent on the task in hand to pay any heed to the animals. As they jumped down from the carts, they seemed pathetically tiny in comparison to the vaunting flames. They set to with a grim energy, trailing draw-hoses into the river. (Fortunately, the warehouse was situated within pumping distance of the Malaya Neva, at the point where the Alexandrovsky Prospect joined the recently constructed embankment at the southern tip of the Petersburg Quarter.)

The steam engines began pumping, pistons heaving and sliding with mesmerising monotony. Two white jets shot high into the air, breaking up and vaporising before they reached their target, puny and ineffectual for all the red gleam and glissando power of the fire engine. The crackle of the fire was like laughter on a vast, inhuman scale.

All they could hope to do now was contain it.

More fire carts arrived on the scene, smaller ones, some drawn by just one horse, others pulled by men. These pumps were manually operated, and the jets they produced were weaker than the steam-driven ones.

It seemed to Virginsky that all this was a waste of energy and, in light of the fallen fireman, of life. The fire would prevail. There was nothing men could do. They must give it its head, let it have its way. They could empty the Neva onto it and it would do no good. The fire would stop only when it was ready to. And even if they succeeded in putting this fire out, another one would be lit somewhere else.

The arrival of the firemen embarrassed him. They reminded him that he was a government official. What was he doing standing and watching while they risked everything to fight the fire? The fact that one of them had died made matters even worse. Besides, the police had turned up now. The crowd was thinning. It was time to make his exit.

He fell into step beside a tall, rather shabbily dressed man with a high narrow face that was somehow reminiscent of a bespectacled axe head. The man wore a workman's cap pushed back to his crown and an old service great coat with the insignia stripped off. The two regarded one another warily. It seemed to Virginsky that the other man was keener to get into conversation than he himself was. Virginsky's over-riding instinct was to keep his own counsel.

'It is unfortunate about the fireman,' said the man.

Virginsky nodded minimally.

'Still and all,' continued the other, his voice brimming with daring, 'there must be sacrifices.'

This rankled with Virginsky. 'It's easy to call for others to sacrifice themselves. And cowardly.'

'I quite agree. I was not calling for sacrifices. Merely observing their inevitability. If only the Tsar would abdicate voluntarily, in order to hand power over to a socialist central committee.' His mouth hiked up on one side sarcastically. 'If such deaths occur,' he continued, his voice serious again, almost icily so, 'it is not the fault of those who wish to overthrow the unjust regime. You would do better to lay the blame at the feet of the regime itself. It has made such acts necessary by clinging onto power.'

Virginsky said nothing. He puckered his lips disapprovingly.

'You were there, watching the red rooster rampage, I saw you,' commented the other man.

Virginsky shot him a questioning glance.

'Yes, I saw you. Indeed, I was watching you. Your face. You want... *this*.' His eyes slid shyly back towards the fire. 'As much as any of the others, though perhaps you were not as... vociferous. Still and all...'

‘One may approve the aims of those who wish to change society so that it functions along more just lines, without approving their methods. I cannot condone the loss of life.’

‘But was he killed by those who started the fire or was he killed by the St Petersburg City Fire Company who failed to ensure his safety as he travelled on the cart? Or indeed by the Governor of St Petersburg, who has failed to introduce statutory regulation to improve the safety record of fire engines? He is not the first fireman to take a tumble from a galloping fire cart. He was a worker - my comrade, my brother. I do not exult at his death. Unlike some of those... heartless... bastards. Still and all, I am not sure I must hold the fire-starters responsible. You will admit that they were scrupulous in attacking property – government property at that. The risk to life was minimal.’

‘This was not the only fire set tonight. His may not be the only death. And I doubt the people will thank them for burning the vodka.’

The same one-sided sarcastic smile returned to the man’s face. ‘As I said before, there must be sacrifices.’

Virginsky felt the man’s hand on his arm, pulling him to a halt; he glared resentfully at the presumption.

‘My friend, there is something I would like you to read.’ The man’s smile now was entirely lacking in sarcasm. It was strangely sweet and ingratiating, almost vulnerable. But he continued to hold onto Virginsky’s arm tightly, as though he would not release him until he had responded to the challenge in his last statement.

‘Kindly let go of my arm.’

‘Will you read it?’

‘I cannot say. I don’t know what it is.’

‘Do you realise what a risk I have exposed myself to in asking this of you?’ There was a strange glint in the man’s eye.

‘You have put me at risk too.’

‘No. The risk is greater to me. You may be an *agent provocateur*.’

‘And so might you.’

The man began to laugh. His laughter was like an axe hacking into soft wood. ‘We may both be. And we may unwittingly entrap one another.’

‘I do not find the prospect amusing.’

‘Permit me to assure you, I am not an *agent provocateur*.’

‘It matters nothing to me. And besides, you would say that, even if you were,’ observed Virginsky.

The other man smiled. ‘I am a sincere and well-intentioned citizen. I consider myself to be a patriot.’

‘Of course.’

‘And you?’

Virginsky shrugged. ‘This is ridiculous. I have nothing to say to you.’

‘If I release your arm, what will you do?’

‘Go about my business.’

‘That would be a shame. For you. And perhaps for us.’

‘Who is this *us*?’

‘A small group of people who think as you do.’

‘You do not know how I think.’

‘I saw your face!’ The stranger’s insistent cry sounded like a denouncement.

Virginsky cast a nervous glance over his shoulder; at the same time he tried to pull away, though without conviction. The man tightened his grip. Virginsky clicked his tongue impatiently. ‘Why do you hold on to me?’

‘I told you, I have something I want you to read.’ The man’s voice was hushed again. ‘If you will agree to read it, I’ll let you go.’

‘Why are you so concerned with having me read this manifesto of yours?’

‘I didn’t say it was a manifesto.’

‘What else would it be?’

‘It might be a poem.’

‘You mean a manifesto in the form of a poem. I’ve seen enough of those.’

‘So, it is not without precedent. That you would read a poem.’

‘Then it is a poem? I’m afraid I do not have an ear for poetry.’

‘That’s not true now, is it? You were very moved by the poetry of fire. Back there.’

‘Unhand me.’

The man released his hold. ‘You are free to go. Of course.’

But Virginsky did not move away. ‘Very well. I will read your damnable poem.’

The man produced a bundle of handbills from inside his greatcoat. He held one out to Virginsky. ‘Take it quickly,’ he hissed.

Virginsky obeyed.

‘Now put it away. Read it when you are alone.’

‘So,’ said Virginsky. ‘Our business is concluded.’

The man smiled. ‘I was not wrong about you, was I? You won’t let me down.’

‘I’ve no idea what you are talking about.’

‘You will read it. And perhaps afterwards, you will seek me out to discuss it.’

‘Seek you out? How am I to do that?’

‘You will invariably find me at moments such as this.’ The man gave a strange smile. ‘Do you realise what a risk I am taking telling you this?’

‘Then why tell me?’

‘Because I saw your face,’ insisted the stranger. ‘I saw your face when the flames were reflected in it.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘You don’t need to know my name. Not yet. Perhaps one day.’

‘But if I am to seek you out, I will need your name.’

‘If you cannot find me, I will find you.’

‘This is ridiculous!’ exclaimed Virginsky. ‘Mystification. You must give me more to go on.’

The man’s expression darkened. ‘You ask questions like a magistrate.’

‘I am a magistrate,’ confessed Virginsky, to his own surprise.

The other man’s laughter was so soft it was almost silent. ‘That makes you either a very dangerous man, or an exceptionally useful one.’

‘I needn’t have told you,’ Virginsky pointed out.

‘And so I should trust you?’

‘Sir, permit me to remind you – you initiated this conversation. You held onto my arm. You forced your manifesto on me. I asked nothing of you, least of all that you should trust me.’

The other man smiled and nodded approvingly. ‘I chose you not just because of your hunger -’

‘My *hunger*?’

‘For the flames,’ explained the stranger. ‘I chose you also for your intelligence.’

‘I do not appreciate being chosen.’

‘Of course you don’t. Which is another reason why I chose you!’ The man was delighted at his paradoxical remark.

Virginsky gave an exasperated sigh.

The man seemed to relent. 'If you were to look for me in a tavern, you would do well to start in Haymarket Square.'

Suddenly, the night seemed to cry out in protest. It was a bestial sound, a baying, looping roar, vibrating with panic and wild fury, a hundred contorted throats stretched in the darkness. For a moment, Virginsky could not explain it and it frightened him for that reason: it was as if pure irrationality had been given voice. Was this what the great idea released? You started from reason and rationality, and ended with this – the sound of animal terror in the night.

It frightened him too because it was so close.

He looked towards the source of the noise. It was coming from the Zoological Gardens, he realised with relief. The animals were jittery at the unnatural brightness that seemed to surround them, and at the whiff of fire in their nostrils.

When he looked back, he saw that his companion had gone. Virginsky thought he detected a lingering smell of something pungent and combustible where the man had been.

Ahead of him he could see the contained flickering of the beacons at the top of the twin rostral towers on the Strelka. The ceremonial lights seemed feeble in comparison to the destructive wildness of the fire he had just come from. A plank walkway led across the ice towards the tip of Vasilevsky Island; in a day or so, it would be replaced with a pontoon bridge.

The walkway was clear. Wherever his companion had gone, he had not crossed the river there.

The boards creaked and dropped dangerously as Virginsky stepped on to them. His heart lurched. He took two steps and the boards sank sharply. His arms windmilled as he struggled to keep his balance

Virginsky swore under his breath, suddenly unsure that he would make it to the other side. The walkway had felt more solid when he had crossed it earlier that evening. All the comings and goings to and from the fires must have weakened the ice beneath it. In many ways it was the worst possible place to cross the river, now that the river was so close to thawing.

But he did not want to get caught on the Petersburg side.

He took slow, shuffling steps, his arms extended either side of him, a tightrope walker suspended over the icy depths of the Neva. He counted his steps. It was an old habit, from his student days, when he had wandered the streets of the city, often in a semi-starved trance.

By the time he got to the other side, he had counted eight hundred and twelve. His calves were aching with tension, almost locked solid. But as soon as he set foot on the Strelka, and felt the firm kick of the ground beneath him, his legs turned to jelly.

There were scattered groups of drunkards wandering over the Strelka, shouting raucously and passing bottles around. Virginsky hurried quickly on.

He crossed the Bolshaya Neva by the Isaakievsky Bridge and soon found himself in Admiralty Square. The square was filled with looming shapes, monstrous silhouettes stalking the night. It took a moment for Virginsky to understand what he was seeing. These were the temporary constructions of the fair, the *balagany* - great square booths for street theatre and puppet shows; he could also make out two towering ice mountains, a dormant carousel and a row of swing boats idling in their frame. It had all been thrown up in the days before Easter. The square was almost empty now, just a few drunken revellers staggering bewildered between the closed-up booths. It made an eerie impression on Virginsky's nerves. The ghosts seemed to be waiting for him to leave so that they could continue their revelry. At one moment he thought he could hear the echoing din of the clashing sounds that would fill the square tomorrow. It was as if something violent and yet vital was about to be unleashed on the city.

He realised it was just the cries of the roaming drunks.

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Back in his rented room on Gorokhovaya Street, Virginsky lit a tallow candle and set it on the small desk beside his bed. His bottle green civil service uniform was hanging on the back of his door. It seemed to look down on him disapprovingly.

Virginsky shook his head at the notion. He was simply projecting his own self-disapproval onto the uniform, turning a set of clothes into a conscience. Wasn't this how man created God in the first place? If it wasn't a set of clothes it was an idolatrous object, or some more sophisticated refinement of that – a symbol or a set of stories.

At any rate, the uniform was nothing more than the externalisation of his conscience. Still, it made him uncomfortable. He turned his back on it deliberately.

He wanted tea, but it was too late to disturb Anya, his landlady's servant.

One day I will have my own samovar, he decided. Then I can drink tea whenever I want.

Virginsky imagined the axe-headed man's sarcastic smile, as though he had overheard his thoughts and was mocking their pseudo-revolutionary tenor. *Samovars for all!*

He sat at the desk and took out the handbill. What he read chimed strangely with his own recent sentiments:

“God the Nihilist.

I do not say that God is dead,

Nor deny that God exist.

But this I affirm instead:

God is a Nihilist.

God is man-made, but no less real;
Of man's fears, does he consist.
Stitched from such stern material,
No wonder God's a Nihilist.

The only Truth is human reason.
God knows this and does not resist.
Religion is a dog with fleas on,
So says God the Nihilist.

Thus God assents to his own undoing,
And ushers in the realists.
Faith's a juice for slaves to stew in,
Now all our Gods are Nihilists.

For every nation creates its own God,
And on its God, it does insist.
Which I think you'll agree is odd,
Knowing God's a Nihilist.

Human conscience governs all.
The one true Law is humanist.
There was no apple and no fall,
And the only God, a Nihilist.”

Virginsky couldn't resist a smile. It was undoubtedly nonsense, and would not stand up to scrutiny, but still there was a certain originality to the central idea. God a nihilist, indeed! He would have to remember that for Porfiry Petrovich. He dared say it would succeed in provoking the old man.

But really, what was the point of it all? What did the author hope to achieve?

In truth, the poem struck him as quite tame and harmless, even with the added call to arms that was printed beneath in bolder typeface:

Christ the enslaver, Not the saviour.

Pull down the icons! Steal the precious stones!

Set fire to the crosses! Desecrate the churches!

A church is itself a desecration of the one Truth – Human reason.

He would add it to his collection, but he had to confess he was disappointed.