

In the Tower

A Recorded Dream

By Valery Brussov

There is no doubt that I dreamed all this, dreamed it last night. True, I never thought that a dream could be so circumstantial and so consecutive. But none of the events of this dream have any connection with what I am experiencing now or with anything that I can remember. Yet how otherwise can a dream be differentiated from reality except in this way—that it is divorced from the continuous chain of events which occur in our waking hours?

I dreamed of a knight's castle, somewhere on the shore of the sea. Beyond it there was a field and a stunted yet ancient forest of pines. In front of it there stretched an expanse of grey northern billows. The castle had been roughly built with stone of a terrible thickness, and from the side it looked like a wild and fantastic cliff. Its deep, irregularly placed windows were like the nests of monstrous birds. Within the castle were high gloomy chambers with sounding passages between them.

As I now call to mind the furniture of the rooms, the dress of the people about me, and other trifling details, I clearly understand to what period my dream had taken me back. It was the life of the Middle Ages, dreadful, austere, still half-savage, still full of impulses not yet under control. But in the dream I had not at first this understanding of the time but only a dull feeling that I myself was foreign to that life into which I was plunged. I felt confusedly that I was some kind of new-comer into that world.

At times this feeling was more intense. Something would suddenly begin to torture my memory, like a name which one wants to remember and cannot. When I was shooting birds with a cross-bow I would long for another and more effective weapon. The knights, encased in their armour of iron, accustomed to murder, seeking only for plunder, appeared to me to be degenerates, and I foresaw the possibility of a different and more refined existence. As I argued with the monks on scholastic questions, I had a foretaste of some other kind of learning, deeper, fuller, freer. But when I made an effort to bring something into my memory, my consciousness was bedimmed anew.

I lived in the castle as a prisoner, or, more truly, as an hostage. A special tower was allotted to me. I was treated with respect, but was kept under guard. I had no definite occupation of any kind, and the lack of employment was burdensome to me. But there was one thing which brought happiness and ecstasy into my life: I was in love.

The governor of the castle was named Hugo von Rizen. He was a giant with a voice of thunder and the strength of a bear. He was a widower. But he had one daughter, Matilda, tall, graceful, bright-eyed. She was like St. Catherine as the Italians paint her, and I loved her passionately and tenderly. As Matilda took charge of all the housekeeping in the castle, we used to meet several times a day, and every meeting would fill my soul with blessing.

For a long while I could not make up my mind to tell Matilda of my love, though of course my eyes betrayed my secret. I uttered the fateful words quite unexpectedly, as it were, one morning at the close of winter. We met on the narrow staircase leading to the watch-tower. And though it had often happened that we had been alone together—in the snow-covered garden, and in the dim hall, under the marvellous light of the moon, for some reason or other it was specially at this moment that I felt I could not be silent. I pressed myself close up against the wall, stretched out

my hands and said, "Matilda, I love you." Matilda did not blench, she simply bent her head and answered softly, "I love you too, you are my chosen one." Then she ran quickly up the stairs and I stood there, against the wall, still holding out my hands.

In the most consecutive of dreams there is always some break in the action. I can remember nothing of what happened in the days immediately following my confession of love. I remember only that I was walking with Matilda on the shore, though everything showed that some weeks must have elapsed. The air was already filled with the odours of spring, but the snow still lay on the ground. The waves, with thunderous noise, were rolling in with white crests on to the stony beach.

It was evening, and the sun was sinking into the sea, like a magic bird of fire, setting the edges of the clouds aflame. We walked along side by side.

Matilda was wearing a coat lined with ermine, and the ends of her white scarf floated in the wind. We dreamed of the future, the happy future, forgetting that we were children of different races, and that between us lay an abyss of national enmity.

It was difficult for us to talk, because I did not know Matilda's language very well, and she was quite ignorant of mine, but we understood much, even without words. And even now my heart trembles as I remember this walk along the shore within sight of the gloomy castle, in the rays of the setting sun. I was experiencing and living through true happiness, whether awake or in a dream—what difference does it make?

It must have been on the following morning that I was told Hugo wished to speak to me. I was taken into his presence. He was seated on a high bench covered with elk-furs. A monk was reading a letter to him. Hugo was glowering and angry. When he saw me, he said sternly:

"Aha! Do you know what your countrymen are doing? Was it such a little thing for us to defeat you at Isborsk. We set fire to Pskov, and you besought us to have mercy. Now you're asking help from Alexander, who glories in the appellation of Nevsky. But we are not like the Swedes! Sit down and write to your people of our might, so that they may be brought to reason. And if you refuse, then you and all the other hostages will pay cruelly for your refusal."

It is difficult to explain fully what feelings took possession of me then. Love for my native land was the first which spoke powerfully in my soul—an elemental, inexplicable love, like one's love towards one's mother. I felt that I was a Russian, that in front of me were enemies, that here I stood for all Russia. At the same moment, I perceived and acknowledged with bitterness that the happiness of which Matilda and I had dreamed had for ever departed from me, that my love for a woman must be sacrificed to my love for my native land. . . .

But scarcely had these feelings filled my soul, when in the very depths of my consciousness there suddenly flamed an unexpected light. I understood that I was sleeping, that everything—the castle, Hugo, Matilda, and my love for her, everything was but a dream. And I suddenly wanted to laugh in the faces of this stern knight and his monk-assistant, for I knew already that I should wake and there would be nothing—no danger, no grief. I felt an unconquerable courage in my soul, because I could go away from my enemies into that world whither they were unable to follow me.

Holding my head high, I replied to Hugo:

"You know yourself that this is not true. Who called you to these lands? This sea is Russian from time immemorial, it belonged to the Varyagi. You came here to convert the people, and instead of that you have built castles on the hills, you oppress the people and you threaten our towns even as far as to Ladoga itself. Alexander Nevsky undertook a holy work. I rejoice that the

people of Pskov had no pity on their hostages. I will not write what you wish, but I will encourage them to fight against you. God will defend the right!”

I said this as if I were declaiming upon a stage, and I purposely chose ancient expressions so that my language might fit the period, but my words threw Hugo into a frenzy.

“Dog!” cried he to me. “Tartar slave! I will order you to be broken on the wheel!”

Then there came swiftly to my remembrance, as if it had been a revelation, given to a seer from on high, the whole course of Russian history, and I spoke to the German triumphantly and sternly, as a prophet.

“Know this, that Alexander will overcome you on the ice of the Chudsky Lake. Knights without number will there be hewn down. And our descendants will take all this land under their domination and have your descendants in subjection to them.”

“Take him away!” cried Hugo, the veins of his neck swelling and purpling with anger.

The servants led me away, not to my tower, but to a noisome underground place, a dungeon.

The days dragged away in the damp and darkness. I lay on rotting straw, mouldy bread was thrown into me for food, for whole days I heard no sound of a human voice. My garments were soon in rags, my hair was matted, my body was covered with sores. Only in unattainable dreams did I picture to myself the sea and the sunlight, the spring, the fresh air, and Matilda. And in the near future the wheel and whipping-post awaited me.

As the joy of my meetings with Matilda had been real to me, so were my sufferings in her father’s dungeon. But the consciousness in myself that I was sleeping and having a bad dream did not become dim. Knowing that the moment of awakening was at hand and that the walls of my prison would disperse as a mist, I found in myself the strength to bear all my tortures unrepiningly. When the Germans proposed that I should buy my freedom with the price of treachery to my native land, I answered with a defiant refusal. And my enemies themselves esteemed my firmness, which cost me less than they thought.

Here my dream breaks off. . . . I may have perished by the hand of the executioner, or have been delivered from bondage by the victory of the Battle of Ice on April 5th, 1241, as were other hostages from Pskov. But I simply awakened. And here I am, sitting at my writing-table, surrounded by familiar and beloved books, and I am recording this long dream, intending to begin the ordinary life of this day. Here, in this world, among these people who are in the next room I am at home, I am actually . . .

But a strange and dreadful thought quietly arises from the dark depths of my consciousness. What if now I am sleeping and dreaming—and I shall suddenly awake on the straw, in the underground dungeon of the castle of Hugo von Rizen?