Petersburg Tales

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Petersburg Tales
There is nothing to compare with Nevsky Prospect,* at least not in St Petersburg, where it embodies everything. There is no end to the glamour of this street – the belle of our capital city! I know that not one of its pale and high-ranking residents would exchange Nevsky Prospect for the world. Not only the twenty-five-year-old who sports a splendid moustache and a remarkably well-tailored frock coat, but even the individual with white bristles sprouting from his chin and a head as smooth as a silver dish, even he is ecstatic about Nevsky Prospect. As for the ladies! Oh, Nevsky Prospect is even more of a delight to the ladies. Indeed, is there anyone it doesn’t delight? The moment you step onto Nevsky Prospect there is an air of pure conviviality. You may be on some vital, pressing errand, but you will most likely forget all about it once you have taken that step. This is the only place where people come neither out of necessity nor driven by their own compulsion or those business interests that consume the whole of St Petersburg. It is as though a person you meet on Nevsky Prospect is less selfish than on Morskaya, Gorokhovaya, Liteynaya, Meshchanskaya or on other streets where greed

*Nevsky Prospect is a boulevard in St Petersburg, Russia, stretching from the Neva River to the Admiralty Square.
and profit and compulsion are manifest both in those on foot and those flying past in their carriages and droshkies. Nevsky Prospect is the communication hub of St Petersburg. Here a resident of the Petersburg or Vyborg districts who, for several years, has not been to see his friend at Peski or the Moscow Gate* can be sure to bump into him. No directory or enquiry desk will deliver such reliable information as Nevsky Prospect. Almighty Nevsky Prospect! The only place in St Petersburg where a poor man can enjoy himself! How neatly its pavements are swept and, God, how many feet have left their mark on it. The lumbering muddy boot of the former soldier, under whose weight the granite itself seems to crack, and the minuscule slipper, light as a wisp of smoke, of the young lady who has turned her little head towards the shining shop windows like a sunflower turns to the sun, and the clanking sabre of the hopeful ensign as it sharply scratches its surface – all unleash upon it either the force of strength or the force of weakness. What a rapid phantasmagoria takes place on it within a single day! How many changes it endures in just twenty-four hours!

Let’s start in the very early morning, when the whole of St Petersburg smells of hot freshly baked loaves and is filled with old women in tattered dresses and coats besieging churches and charitable passers-by. At that time Nevsky Prospect is deserted: stocky shopkeepers and their assistants are still asleep in their cotton nightshirts or else lathering their fine
cheeks and drinking coffee. The destitute gather by the doors of patisseries, where a sleepy Ganymede,* who the day before had been flitting like a fly carrying chocolate drinks, now crawls out, broom in hand, tieless, and tosses stale pies and leftovers to them. Workers trudge along the streets; now and then Russian muzhiks cross over it as they hurry to work in their lime-stained boots which even the waters of the Catherine Canal,* noted for its purity, would be unable to wash off. At that time of day it is usually unseemly for ladies to be out and about, because Russian folk like to use strong language such as they would probably never hear even in the theatre. Occasionally a sleepy clerk drags himself along with a briefcase under his arm if Nevsky Prospect happens to be on his way to the office. One can definitely say that at this time, until twelve o’clock that is, Nevsky Prospect is no one’s objective: it is used purely as an expedient. It gradually fills up with individuals with their own pursuits, worries and disappointments, but who do not spare it a thought. The Russian muzhik talks about the grivna* or penny coppers, old men and women gesticulate or talk to themselves, sometimes accompanied by rather bizarre gestures, but nobody listens to them or laughs at them save perhaps street urchins in coarse striped smocks carrying empty bottles or newly repaired boots as they race along Nevsky Prospect at lightning speed. At this time of day, however you are dressed, even if you are wearing a peaked cap
rather than a hat, or if your collar sticks out too much above your tie, no one will notice.

At twelve o’clock Nevsky Prospect is overrun by tutors of all nationalities with their pupils in batiste collars. English Joneses and French Coqs walk arm in arm with the charges entrusted to their parental care and, with suitable aplomb, they explain to them that the signs above the shops are put there to allow us to discover what is to be found inside those shops. Governesses, pale misses and rosy-cheeked Slavs step majestically behind their dainty fidgety little girls, telling them to lift up their shoulders and straighten their backs; in short, at this time Nevsky Prospect is a pedagogical Nevsky Prospect. But the closer it gets to two o’clock, the more the number of tutors, teachers and children dwindles; in the end they are supplanted by their fond fathers strolling arm in arm with their flashy, brightly arrayed, weak-nerved companions. They are gradually joined by all those who have completed their fairly important domestic tasks, such as discussing the weather and the sudden appearance of a small pimple on the nose with their doctor, enquiring about the health of their horses and children – who by the way show great promise – or reading a poster and an important newspaper article about the comings and goings of people, and finally having a cup of coffee or tea; and they in turn are joined by those whom an enviable fate has endowed with the blessed title of officials with special responsibilities.*
They are joined in turn by those who serve in the Foreign Office and are distinguished by the nobility of their pursuits and their habits. God, what wonderful posts and jobs there are! How they animate and delight the soul! But alas! I’m not a civil servant and I’m denied the pleasure of witnessing how delicately my superiors treat me. Everything you come across on Nevsky Prospect is imbued with propriety: men in long frock coats, hands in pockets, ladies in pink, white and pale-blue satin redingotes and hats. Here you will encounter unique side whiskers, tucked under the necktie with unusual and amazing skill, velvety side whiskers, satiny ones, side whiskers as black as sable or coal – but those alas belong solely to the Foreign Office. Providence has prohibited black side whiskers for those who serve in other departments: they must, to their great chagrin, wear ginger ones. Here you will encounter marvellous moustaches that no pen or brush could depict, moustaches to whom the better part of a lifetime has been devoted – objects of long vigils, night and day – moustaches which have been sprayed with the most delightful perfumes and aromas and pomaded with the most precious and rare assortments of creams, moustaches twisted by night in thin vellum paper, moustaches on which their owners bestow the most touching devotion and which are the envy of all passers-by. Thousands of varieties of hats, dresses, scarves – colourful and dainty – which hold the affection of their wearers for sometimes two whole days will
bedazzle just about anyone on Nevsky Prospect. It is as though an entire sea of butterflies has suddenly surged up from flower stalks, forming a bright cloud rippling above black beetles of the male sex. Here you will encounter such waists as you have never even dreamt of: so slender and slight, no thicker than a bottle’s neck; waists which, when chanced upon, you will respectfully dodge to avoid inadvertently jostling them with a rude elbow: your heart is overcome by bashfulness and fear lest even a reckless breath of yours could snap this most charming work of nature and art in two. And what ladies’ sleeves you will encounter on Nevsky Prospect! Oh, what a delight! They bear some resemblance to two hot-air balloons, so that a lady might suddenly be lifted up into the air were there not a man to hold on to her; for it is as pleasant and as easy to lift a lady up into the air as raise a champagne-filled glass to one’s lips. Nowhere do people exchange bows so magnanimously and freely upon meeting each other as they do on Nevsky Prospect. This is where you will encounter a unique smile, a smile that transcends art, a smile that at times makes you melt with pleasure, at times makes you bow your head down as you see yourself all of a sudden lower than the grass or makes you lift it up as you feel yourself soaring above Admiralty Spire.* Here you will meet people conversing about a concert or the weather with singular grandeur and self-esteem. Here you will encounter thousands of inscrutable characters and phenomena.
O Creator! What extraordinary characters one comes across on Nevsky Prospect! There are many such people who, when meeting you, invariably look at your shoes, and if you have walked past, they will turn round to look at your coat tails. I’ve yet to understand why this is. At first I imagined they were shoemakers, but that, however, was certainly not the case: they mostly serve in various departments, and many of them are perfectly able to write a memorandum from one government department to another; or else they are people who spend their time going out, reading newspapers in patisseries – in other words, most of them are respectable people. This hallowed hour between two and three in the afternoon, which could be known as Nevsky Prospect at its most bustling, is when the main exhibition of man’s best endeavours takes place. One sports a dandified frock coat with the best beaver fur, another a remarkable Greek nose, a third has superb side whiskers, a fourth has beautiful eyes and a striking hat, a fifth wears a talisman ring on his dainty little finger, a sixth flaunts her little foot in a charming little shoe, a seventh wears a tie that provokes astonishment, an eighth a moustache that knocks you down with amazement. But the clock strikes three and the exhibition is over, the crowd thins out… At three o’clock there is another change of scene. Spring has suddenly arrived on Nevsky Prospect: it is swamped entirely by civil servants in green uniforms. Hungry titular councillors, court councillors and the rest all do their very best to quicken
their step. Young collegiate registrars, provincial and collegiate
secretaries hurry to make the most of their time and walk along
Nevsky Prospect with a demeanour that belies the fact that they
have just sat in their office for six hours. But the older collegiate
secretaries and titular and court councillors walk briskly with
their heads bowed: they have no business scrutinizing passers-
by: they have not quite torn themselves away from their con-
cerns. Their heads are still full of clutter and whole archives of
unfinished matters; for a long time, instead of shop signs, they
see a box of documents or the Office Director’s round face.

Nevsky Prospect remains deserted from four o’clock on, and
it is doubtful you will come across a single clerk. The odd seam-
stress from a shop might run across Nevsky Prospect holding
a box, or else the pitiful victim of a philanthropic lawyer, with
only a fleecy overcoat to call his own; or some visiting eccentric
who takes no notice of the hour; or a tall thin Englishwoman
carrying a handbag and a book; or a workman, a Russian in a
thick cotton frock coat gathered at the back, with a wispy little
beard, who spends his life just anyhow, and forever twitches
his back and arms and legs and head as he steps circumspectly
along the pavement; or occasionally some humble artisan. You
will meet no one else on Nevsky Prospect.

But as soon as dusk descends upon the houses and streets
and the duty policeman, having covered himself with mat-
ting, clambers up a ladder to light the street lamp, and those
prints that dare not expose themselves in daylight now appear in small ground-level shop windows, then Nevsky Prospect revives and begins to stir. Then comes that mysterious time of day when street lamps give everything an enticing, wonderful glow. You will encounter very many young men, mostly bachelors, in warm frock coats and overcoats. At this time there is a feeling of purpose, or rather something akin to purpose, something utterly baffling; everyone’s pace quickens and generally becomes very uneven. Long shadows flash along walls and pavement, their heads very nearly reaching Police Bridge. Young collegiate registrars and provincial and collegiate secretaries spend a very long time strolling up and down the street, but the elderly collegiate registrars and titular and court councillor mostly stay at home, either because they are married or because their live-in German cooks prepare delicious meals for them. Here you will encounter those esteemed old men who at two o’clock strolled with such self-importance and amazing dignity along Nevsky Prospect. You will see them running along like young collegiate registrars to take a peep under the hat of some lady spotted from afar, whose fleshy lips and heavily rouge-plastered cheeks are so pleasing to many of those who walk by, but above all to those tradesmen, workmen and merchants who always wear German frock coats and walk about in large groups, usually arm in arm.
“Stop!” Lieutenant Pirogov called out at that time of day, tugging at a young man in cloak and tails who was walking beside him. “Did you see that?”

“I did. She’s amazing, truly Perugino’s Bianca.”*

“Who are you talking about?”

“That one, the one with dark hair. And what eyes! My God, what eyes! Her whole bearing and figure and her profile – it’s a wonder!”

“I’m talking about the blonde who was behind her over there. Why don’t you go after the brunette if you like her that much?”

“How can I?” exclaimed the young man in tails, blushing. “As if she were one of those who stroll along Nevsky Prospect in the evenings; she must be a very distinguished lady,” he continued with a sigh. “Her cloak alone is worth around eighty roubles.”

“You fool!” cried out Pirogov, pushing him hard towards where her bright cloak was fluttering. “Go on, you ninny, you’ll miss your chance! I’ll go after the blonde.”

The two friends went their separate ways.

“We know what you’re all like,” mused Pirogov with a self-satisfied confident smile, convinced that no beauty could resist him.

The young man in cloak and tails stepped timidly and anxiously towards where the colourful cloak was fluttering in the distance, now flashing brightly as it approached a street lamp, now momentarily covered in darkness as it moved away from
it. His heart was pounding, and he instinctively quickened his step. He dared not even think of having any claim on the attention of that beauty who was flying off in the distance, let alone allowing himself any of the lewd thoughts that Lieutenant Pirogov had hinted at. All he wanted was to see the house, catch sight of the dwelling place of that heavenly creature who seemed to have flown down from heaven straight onto Nevsky Prospect and who would most likely fly off God knows where. He rushed ahead so fast that he repeatedly knocked sedate grey-whiskered gentlemen off the pavement. This young man belonged to a class of people which constitutes quite a strange phenomenon among us, and he belongs as much to the citizens of St Petersburg as a person who appears in our dreams does to the real world. This exceptional social group is very uncommon in this city, where everyone is either a civil servant, a merchant or a German craftsman. He was an artist. Is that not indeed a strange phenomenon? A St Petersburg artist! An artist in the land of snow, an artist in the land of the Finns, where all is wet, plain, level, pale, grey and misty. These artists have nothing in common with Italian artists – proud, passionate like Italy itself and its sky – on the contrary, these are mostly kind, meek folk, timid, easy-going, quietly enjoying their art, drinking tea with a couple of friends in small rooms, modestly discussing their favourite topic and showing no interest at all in anything else. They are always inviting some old beggar woman to their
place, making her sit for a good six hours in order to commit her pathetic impassive countenance to canvas. They paint a perspective of their room, which is full of artistic junk: plaster casts of arms and legs turned coffee-coloured with time and dust, broken easels, an overturned palette, a guitar-playing friend, walls daubed in paint, an open window through which you glimpse the pale River Neva and poor fishermen in red shirts. They almost all use greyish dull colours – the indelible hallmark of the north. They do however apply themselves to their task with genuine pleasure. They often foster real talent within themselves, and if only Italy’s fresh air were to blow on them, this talent would flourish as freely, widely and brightly as a plant that is finally brought out of a room into the open air. They are on the whole very self-effacing: a star and a thick epaulette throw them into such confusion that they automatically lower the price of their artwork. They occasionally enjoy playing the dandy a little, but this dandyism always comes across as too drastic and a bit random. You might at times come across them in an excellent tailcoat and a grubby cloak, or an expensive velvet waistcoat and a frock coat smeared with paint. Similarly, on one of their unfinished landscapes you will sometimes see a nymph’s head, painted at the bottom of the canvas, which the artist, for lack of space, had sketched on the soiled backdrop of a previous painting he had once worked on with delight. They never look you straight in the eye; if
they do, it will be a somewhat dull and vague look: they do not pierce you with the hawk-like gaze of an observer or the falcon-like stare of a cavalry officer. This is because, as they register your features, they will simultaneously see those of some plaster cast of Hercules that stands in their room or have in mind a picture they still want to paint. That is why they often reply incoherently, sometimes inappropriately, and the muddle in their heads only magnifies their bashfulness.

To this class belonged the young man we have described, the artist Piskarev, diffident and shy, but harbouring in his soul sparks of feeling ready, given the right opportunity, to burst into flame. He hurried with secret trepidation in pursuit of the object that had so affected him, and he seemed taken aback by his own boldness. The unknown creature to whom his eyes, thoughts and feelings were so drawn suddenly turned her head and glanced at him. God, what divine features! The most charming dazzlingly white brow was fringed by hair as beautiful as agate. These magnificent locks, some showing below her hat, cascaded in curls and brushed a cheek delicately flushed by the evening chill. Her lips held on tightly to a host of utterly delightful daydreams. All that is left from childhood memories or that brings on dreams and quiet inspiration by the light of a lamp – all that seemed to blend, merge and be reflected in her perfectly shaped lips. She glanced at Piskarev, and his heart quivered at her look. She looked at him sternly,
her face showing a sense of indignation at such an impertinent pursuit; but even anger looked bewitching on that beautiful face. Overcome with shame and shyness, he stopped, lowering his glance; but how could he lose sight of that divine being and not even discover the sacred place where she dwelt? Those were the thoughts that crossed the young dreamer’s mind, and he resolved to pursue her. But to avoid being noticed he hung back, looking around casually, examining shop signs but all the while not losing sight of a single step taken by the unknown girl. Passers-by had begun to flit by less frequently, the street grew quieter; the beauty glanced back, and it seemed to him that the hint of a smile flickered on her lips. He shivered and could not believe his eyes. No, it was that street lamp with its deceptive beam that had projected the semblance of a smile on her face – no, his own daydreams were mocking him. His breath faltered in his breast: he was overcome by an indefinable trembling fit; his senses were on fire and everything in front of him was turning misty. The pavement fled under him, carriages with their galloping horses appeared motionless, the bridge was expanding and splitting at the arch, a house stood on its roof, the sentry box was collapsing towards him, and the sentry’s halberd, along with the golden lettering and the painted scissors of a shop sign, seemed to glow on his very eyelash. And a single glance, a single turn of a pretty head had generated all this. Not hearing or seeing or taking in anything, he rushed
after the light footsteps of those beautiful little feet, trying to temper the speed of his own steps as they flew in time with his heartbeat. Sometimes he was overcome by doubt as to whether her expression had really been so friendly – and he would stop for an instant, but his pounding heart and the irresistible force and turmoil of his feelings urged him onwards. He did not even notice how a four-storey house rose before him, how four rows of lit-up windows suddenly stared at him and how the railing by the entrance confronted him with its iron impact. He saw the stranger fly up the stairs, look back, lay a finger to her lips and make a sign to follow her. His knees trembled; his senses and thoughts were on fire; a lightning bolt of joy pierced his heart with unbearable keenness. No, this was no dream! God, so much happiness in a split second! Such a wonderful life in just a couple of minutes!

But was he not asleep and dreaming all this? Could it be that she, for whose single heavenly glance he was ready to give up his life, the approach to whose dwelling place he regarded already as indescribable bliss, could it be that she had really been so well disposed and attentive towards him just now? He flew up the stairs. His thoughts were not of the earthly kind, nor was he inflamed by earthly passion – no, in that instant he was pure and chaste, like a virgin youth still breathing an indefinable spiritual need for love. And that which would have aroused brazen thoughts in a depraved individual made