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Opening Extract from...

A Gentleman in Moscow

Written by Amor Towles

Published by Hutchinson

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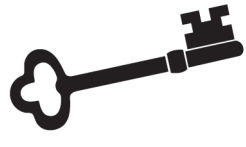
A GENTLEMAN IN MOSCOW



AMOR TOWLES

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For Stokley and Esmé

MOSCOW c. 1922

How well I remember

When it came as a visitor on foot
And dwelt a while amongst us
A melody in the semblance of a mountain cat.

Well, where is our purpose now?

Like so many questions
I answer this one
With the eye-averted peeling of a pear.

With a bow I bid goodnight
And pass through terrace doors
Into the simple splendors
Of another temperate spring;

But this much I know:

It is not lost among the autumn leaves on Peter's Square.
It is not among the ashes in the Athenaeum ash cans.
It is not inside the blue pagodas of your fine Chinoiserie.

It is not in Vronsky's saddlebags;
Not in Sonnet XXX, stanza one;
Not on twenty-seven red . . .

Where Is It Now? (Lines 1–19)
Count Alexander Ilyich Rostov
1913

21 June 1922

APPEARANCE OF COUNT ALEXANDER ILYICH ROSTOV BEFORE THE EMERGENCY COMMITTEE OF THE PEOPLE'S COMMISSARIAT FOR INTERNAL AFFAIRS

Presiding: Comrades V. A. Ignatov, M. S. Zakovsky, A. N. Kosarev

Prosecuting: A. Y. Vyshinsky

Prosecutor Vyshinsky: State your name.
Rostov: Count Alexander Ilyich Rostov, recipient of the Order of Saint Andrew, member of the Jockey Club, Master of the Hunt.
Vyshinsky: You may have your titles; they are of no use to anyone else. But for the record, are you not Alexander Rostov, born in St. Petersburg, 24 October 1889?
Rostov: I am he.
Vyshinsky: Before we begin, I must say, I do not think that I have ever seen a jacket festooned with so many buttons.
Rostov: Thank you.
Vyshinsky: It was not meant as a compliment.
Rostov: In that case, I demand satisfaction on the field of honor.

[*Laughter.*]

Secretary Ignatov: Silence in the gallery.
Vyshinsky: What is your current address?
Rostov: Suite 317 at the Hotel Metropol, Moscow.
Vyshinsky: How long have you lived there?

Rostov: I have been in residence since the fifth of September 1918. Just under four years.

Vyshinsky: And your occupation?

Rostov: It is not the business of gentlemen to have occupations.

Vyshinsky: Very well then. How do you spend your time?

Rostov: Dining, discussing. Reading, reflecting. The usual rigmarole.

Vyshinsky: And you write poetry?

Rostov: I have been known to fence with a quill.

Vyshinsky: [*Holding up a pamphlet*] Are you the author of this long poem of 1913: *Where Is It Now?*

Rostov: It has been attributed to me.

Vyshinsky: Why did you write the poem?

Rostov: It demanded to be written. I simply happened to be sitting at the particular desk on the particular morning when it chose to make its demands.

Vyshinsky: And where was that exactly?

Rostov: In the south parlor at Idlehour.

Vyshinsky: Idlehour?

Rostov: The Rostov estate in Nizhny Novgorod.

Vyshinsky: Ah, yes. Of course. How apt. But let us return our attention to your poem. Coming as it did—in the more subdued years after the failed revolt of 1905—many considered it a call to action. Would you agree with that assessment?

Rostov: All poetry is a call to action.

Vyshinsky: [*Checking notes*] And it was in the spring of the following year that you left Russia for Paris . . . ?

Rostov: I seem to remember blossoms on the apple trees. So, yes, in all likelihood it was spring.

Vyshinsky: May 16 to be precise. Now, we understand the reasons for your self-imposed exile; and we even have some sympathy with the actions that prompted your flight. What concerns us here is your return in 1918. One wonders if you came back with the intention of taking up arms and, if so, whether for or against the Revolution.

Rostov: By that point, I'm afraid that my days of taking up arms were behind me.
Vyshinsky: Why then did you come back?
Rostov: I missed the climate.

[*Laughter.*]

Vyshinsky: Count Rostov, you do not seem to appreciate the gravity of your position. Nor do you show the respect that is due the men convened before you.
Rostov: The Tsarina had the same complaints about me in her day.
Ignatov: Prosecutor Vyshinsky. If I may . . .
Vyshinsky: Secretary Ignatov.
Ignatov: I have no doubt, Count Rostov, that many in the gallery are surprised to find you so charming; but I, for one, am not surprised in the least. History has shown charm to be the final ambition of the leisure class. What I do find surprising is that the author of the poem in question could have become a man so obviously without purpose.
Rostov: I have lived under the impression that a man's purpose is known only to God.
Ignatov: Indeed. How convenient that must have been for you.

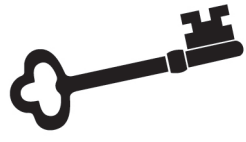
[*The Committee recesses for twelve minutes.*]

Ignatov: Alexander Ilyich Rostov, taking into full account your own testimony, we can only assume that the clear-eyed spirit who wrote the poem *Where Is It Now?* has succumbed irrevocably to the corruptions of his class—and now poses a threat to the very ideals he once espoused. On that basis, our inclination would be to have you taken from this chamber and put against the wall. But there are those within the senior ranks of the Party who count you among the heroes of the prerevolutionary cause. Thus, it is the opinion of this committee that you should be returned to that hotel of which

you are so fond. But make no mistake: should you ever set foot outside of the Metropol again, you will be shot. Next matter.

Bearing the signatures of
V. A. Ignatov
M. S. Zakovsky
A. N. Kosarev

BOOK ONE



1922

An Ambassador

At half past six on the twenty-first of June 1922, when Count Alexander Ilyich Rostov was escorted through the gates of the Kremlin onto Red Square, it was glorious and cool. Drawing his shoulders back without breaking stride, the Count inhaled the air like one fresh from a swim. The sky was the very blue that the cupolas of St. Basil's had been painted for. Their pinks, greens, and golds shimmered as if it were the sole purpose of a religion to cheer its Divinity. Even the Bolshevik girls conversing before the windows of the State Department Store seemed dressed to celebrate the last days of spring.

"Hello, my good man," the Count called to Fyodor, at the edge of the square. "I see the blackberries have come in early this year!"

Giving the startled fruit seller no time to reply, the Count walked briskly on, his waxed moustaches spread like the wings of a gull. Passing through Resurrection Gate, he turned his back on the lilacs of the Alexander Gardens and proceeded toward Theatre Square, where the Hotel Metropol stood in all its glory. When he reached the threshold, the Count gave a wink to Pavel, the afternoon doorman, and turned with a hand outstretched to the two soldiers trailing behind him.

"Thank you, gentlemen, for delivering me safely. I shall no longer be in need of your assistance."

Though strapping lads, both of the soldiers had to look up from under their caps to return the Count's gaze—for like ten generations of Rostov men, the Count stood an easy six foot three.

"On you go," said the more thuggish of the two, his hand on the butt of his rifle. "We're to see you to your rooms."

In the lobby, the Count gave a wide wave with which to simultaneously greet the unflappable Arkady (who was manning the front desk) and sweet Valentina (who was dusting a statuette). Though the Count had greeted them in this manner a hundred times before, both responded with

a wide-eyed stare. It was the sort of reception one might have expected when arriving for a dinner party having forgotten to don one's pants.

Passing the young girl with the penchant for yellow who was reading a magazine in her favorite lobby chair, the Count came to an abrupt stop before the potted palms in order to address his escort.

"The lift or the stairs, gentlemen?"

The soldiers looked from one another to the Count and back again, apparently unable to make up their minds.

How is a soldier expected to prevail on the field of battle, the Count wondered, if he cannot be decisive about ascending to an upper floor?

"The stairs," he determined on their behalf, then vaulted the steps two at a time, as had been his habit since the academy.

On the third floor, the Count walked down the red-carpeted hallway toward his suite—an interconnected bedroom, bath, dining room, and grand salon with eight-foot windows overlooking the lindens of Theatre Square. And there the rudeness of the day awaited. For before the flung-open doors of his rooms stood a captain of the guards with Pasha and Petya, the hotel's bellhops. The two young men met the Count's gaze with looks of embarrassment, having clearly been conscripted into some duty they found distasteful. The Count addressed the officer.

"What is the meaning of this, Captain?"

The captain, who seemed mildly surprised by the question, had the good training to maintain the evenness of his affect.

"I am here to show you to your quarters."

"These *are* my quarters."

Betraying the slightest suggestion of a smile, the captain replied, "No longer, I'm afraid."

Leaving Pasha and Petya behind, the captain led the Count and his escort to a utility stair hidden behind an inconspicuous door in the core of the hotel. The ill-lit ascent turned a sharp corner every five steps in the manner of a belfry. Up they wound three flights to where a door opened on a narrow corridor servicing a bathroom and six bedrooms reminiscent of monastic cells. This attic was originally built to house the butlers and ladies' maids of the Metropol's guests; but when the practice of traveling

with servants fell out of fashion, the unused rooms had been claimed by the caprices of casual urgency—thenceforth warehousing scraps of lumber, broken furniture, and other assorted debris.

Earlier that day, the room closest to the stairwell had been cleared of all but a cast-iron bed, a three-legged bureau, and a decade of dust. In the corner near the door was a small closet, rather like a telephone box, that had been dropped in the room as an afterthought. Reflecting the pitch of the roof, the ceiling sloped at a gradual incline as it moved away from the door, such that at the room's outer wall the only place where the Count could stand to his full height was where a dormer accommodated a window the size of a chessboard.

As the two guards looked on smugly from the hall, the good captain explained that he had summoned the bellhops to help the Count move what few belongings his new quarters would accommodate.

"And the rest?"

"Becomes the property of the People."

So this is their game, thought the Count.

"Very well."

Back down the belfry he skipped as the guards hurried behind him, their rifles clacking against the wall. On the third floor, he marched along the hallway and into his suite where the two bellhops looked up with woeful expressions.

"It's all right, fellows," the Count assured and then began pointing: "This. That. Those. *All* the books."

Among the furnishings destined for his new quarters, the Count chose two high-back chairs, his grandmother's oriental coffee table, and a favorite set of her porcelain plates. He chose the two table lamps fashioned from ebony elephants and the portrait of his sister, Helena, which Serov had painted during a brief stay at Idlehour in 1908. He did not forget the leather case that had been fashioned especially for him by Asprey in London and which his good friend Mishka had so appropriately christened the Ambassador.

Someone had shown the courtesy of having one of the Count's traveling trunks brought to his bedroom. So, as the bellhops carried the aforementioned upward, the Count filled the trunk with clothes and personal

effects. Noting that the guards were eyeing the two bottles of brandy on the console, the Count tossed them in as well. And once the trunk had been carried upstairs, he finally pointed to the desk.

The two bellhops, their bright blue uniforms already smudged from their efforts, took hold of it by the corners.

"But it weighs a ton," said one to the other.

"A king fortifies himself with a castle," observed the Count, "a gentleman with a desk."

As the bellhops lugged it into the hall, the Rostovs' grandfather clock, which was fated to be left behind, tolled a doleful eight. The captain had long since returned to his post and the guards, having swapped their belligerence for boredom, now leaned against the wall and let the ashes from their cigarettes fall on the parquet floor while into the grand salon poured the undiminished light of the Moscow summer solstice.

With a wistful eye, the Count approached the windows at the suite's northwest corner. How many hours had he spent before them? How many mornings dressed in his robe with his coffee in hand had he observed the new arrivals from St. Petersburg disembarking from their cabs, worn and weary from the overnight train? On how many winter eves had he watched the snow slowly descending as some lone silhouette, stocky and short, passed under a street lamp? At that very instant, at the square's northern extreme a young Red Army officer rushed up the steps of the Bolshoi, having missed the first half hour of the evening's performance.

The Count smiled to remember his own youthful preference for arriving *entr'acte*. Having insisted at the English Club that he could only stay for one more drink, he stayed for three. Then leaping into the waiting carriage, he'd flash across the city, vault the fabled steps, and like this young fellow slip through the golden doors. As the ballerinas danced gracefully across the stage, the Count would be whispering his *excuse-moi*'s, making his way to his usual seat in the twentieth row with its privileged view of the ladies in the loges.

Arriving late, thought the Count with a sigh. What a delicacy of youth.

Then he turned on his heels and began to walk his rooms. First, he admired the salon's grand dimensions and its two chandeliers. He admired the painted panels of the little dining room and the elaborate brass mechan-

ics that allowed one to secure the double doors of the bedroom. In short, he reviewed the interior much as would a potential buyer who was seeing the rooms for the very first time. Once in the bedroom, the Count paused before the marble-topped table on which lay an assortment of curios. From among them, he picked up a pair of scissors that had been prized by his sister. Fashioned in the shape of an egret with the long silver blades representing the bird's beak and the small golden screw at the pivot representing its eye, the scissors were so delicate he could barely fit his thumb and finger through the rings.

Looking from one end of the apartment to the other, the Count took a quick inventory of all that would be left behind. What personal possessions, furnishings, and *objets d'art* he had brought to this suite four years before were already the product of a great winnowing. For when word had reached the Count of the Tsar's execution, he had set out from Paris at once. Over twenty days, he had made his way across six nations and skirted eight battalions fighting under five different flags, finally arriving at Idlehour on the seventh of August 1918, with nothing but a rucksack on his back. Though he found the countryside on the verge of upheaval and the household in a state of distress, his grandmother, the Countess, was characteristically composed.

"Sasha," she said without rising from her chair, "how good of you to come. You must be famished. Join me for tea."

When he explained the necessity of her leaving the country and described the arrangements he had made for her passage, the Countess understood that there was no alternative. She understood that although every servant in her employ was ready to accompany her, she must travel with two. She also understood why her grandson and only heir, whom she had raised from the age of ten, would not be coming with her.

When the Count was just seven, he was defeated so soundly by a neighboring boy in a game of draughts that, apparently, a tear was shed, a curse was uttered, and the game pieces were scattered across the floor. This lack of sportsmanship led to a stiff reprimand from the Count's father and a trip to bed without supper. But as the young Count was gripping his blanket in misery, he was visited by his grandmother. Taking a seat at the foot of the bed, the Countess expressed a measure of sympathy: "There is nothing

pleasant to be said about losing," she began, "and the Obolensky boy is a pill. But, Sasha, my dear, why on earth would you give him the satisfaction?" It was in this spirit that he and his grandmother parted without tears on the docks in Peterhof. Then the Count returned to the family estate in order to administer its shuttering.

In quick succession came the sweeping of chimneys, the clearing of pantries, and the shrouding of furniture. It was just as if the family were returning to St. Petersburg for the season, except that the dogs were released from their kennels, the horses from their stables, and the servants from their duties. Then, having filled a single wagon with some of the finest of the Rostovs' furniture, the Count bolted the doors and set out for Moscow.

'Tis a funny thing, reflected the Count as he stood ready to abandon his suite. From the earliest age, we must learn to say good-bye to friends and family. We see our parents and siblings off at the station; we visit cousins, attend schools, join the regiment; we marry, or travel abroad. It is part of the human experience that we are constantly gripping a good fellow by the shoulders and wishing him well, taking comfort from the notion that we will hear word of him soon enough.

But experience is less likely to teach us how to bid our dearest possessions *adieu*. And if it were to? We wouldn't welcome the education. For eventually, we come to hold our dearest possessions more closely than we hold our friends. We carry them from place to place, often at considerable expense and inconvenience; we dust and polish their surfaces and reprimand children for playing too roughly in their vicinity—all the while, allowing memories to invest them with greater and greater importance. This armoire, we are prone to recall, is the very one in which we hid as a boy; and it was these silver candelabra that lined our table on Christmas Eve; and it was with this handkerchief that she once dried her tears, et cetera, et cetera. Until we imagine that these carefully preserved possessions might give us genuine solace in the face of a lost companion.

But, of course, a thing is just a thing.

And so, slipping his sister's scissors into his pocket, the Count looked once more at what heirlooms remained and then expunged them from his heartache forever.

One hour later, as the Count bounced twice on his new mattress to identify the key of the bedsprings (G-sharp), he surveyed the furniture that had been stacked around him and reminded himself how, as a youth, he had longed for trips to France by steamship and Moscow by the overnight train.

And why had he longed for those particular journeys?

Because their berths had been so small!

What a marvel it had been to discover the table that folded away without a trace; and the drawers built into the base of the bed; and the wall-mounted lamps just large enough to illuminate a page. This efficiency of design was music to the young mind. It attested to a precision of purpose and the promise of adventure. For such would have been the quarters of Captain Nemo when he journeyed twenty thousand leagues beneath the sea. And wouldn't any young boy with the slightest gumption gladly trade a hundred nights in a palace for one aboard the *Nautilus*?

Well. At long last, here he was.

Besides, with half the rooms on the second floor temporarily commandeered by the Bolsheviks for the tireless typing of directives, at least on the sixth floor a man could hear himself think.*

The Count stood and banged his head on the slope of the ceiling.

"Just so," he replied.

Easing one of the high-back chairs aside and moving the elephant lamps to the bed, the Count opened his trunk. First, he took out the

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*In fact, it was into the suite directly below the Count's that Yakov Sverdlov, the first chairman of the All-Russian Executive Committee, had locked the constitutional drafting committee—vowing he would not turn the key again until they had completed their work. Thus did the typewriters clack through the night, until that historic document had been crafted which guaranteed for all Russians freedom of conscience (Article 13), freedom of expression (Article 14), freedom of assembly (Article 15), and freedom to have any of these rights revoked should they be "utlitized to the detriment of the socialist revolution" (Article 23)!

photograph of the Delegation and placed it on the desk where it belonged. Then he took out the two bottles of brandy and his father's twice-tolling clock. But when he took out his grandmother's opera glasses and placed them on the desk, a fluttering drew his attention toward the dormer. Though the window was only the size of a dinner invitation, the Count could see that a pigeon had landed outside on the copper stripping of the ledge.

"Why, hello," said the Count. "How kind of you to stop by."

The pigeon looked back with a decidedly proprietary air. Then it scuffed the flashing with its claws and thrust its beak at the window several times in quick succession.

"Ah, yes," conceded the Count. "There is something in what you say."

He was about to explain to his new neighbor the cause of his unexpected arrival, when from the hallway came the delicate clearing of a throat. Without turning, the Count could tell that this was Andrey, the maître d' of the Boyarsky, for it was his trademark interruption.

Nodding once to the pigeon to indicate that they would resume their discussion anon, the Count rebuttoned his jacket and turned to find that it was not Andrey alone who had paid a visit: three members of the hotel's staff were crowded in the doorway.

There was Andrey with his perfect poise and long judicious hands; Vasily, the hotel's inimitable concierge; and Marina, the shy delight with the wandering eye who had recently been promoted from chambermaid to seamstress. The three of them exhibited the same bewildered gaze that the Count had noticed on the faces of Arkady and Valentina a few hours before, and finally it struck him: When he had been carted off that morning, they had all assumed that he would never return. He had emerged from behind the walls of the Kremlin like an aviator from the wreckage of a crash.

"My dear friends," said the Count, "no doubt you are curious as to the day's events. As you may know, I was invited to the Kremlin for a *tête-à-tête*. There, several duly goateed officers of the current regime determined that for the crime of being born an aristocrat, I should be sentenced to spend the rest of my days . . . in this hotel."

In response to the cheers, the Count shook hands with his guests one by one, expressing to each his appreciation for their fellowship and his heartfelt thanks.

"Come in, come in," he said.

Together, the three staff members squeezed their way between the teetering towers of furniture.

"If you would be so kind," said the Count, handing Andrey one of the bottles of brandy. Then he kneeled before the Ambassador, threw the clasps, and opened it like a giant book. Carefully secured inside were fifty-two glasses—or more precisely, twenty-six *pairs* of glasses—each shaped to its purpose, from the grand embrace of the Burgundy glass down to those charming little vessels designed for the brightly colored liqueurs of southern Europe. In the spirit of the hour, the Count picked four glasses at random and passed them around as Andrey, having plucked the cork from the bottle, performed the honors.

Once his guests had their brandy in hand, the Count raised his own on high.

"To the Metropol," he said.

"To the Metropol!" they replied.

The Count was something of a natural-born host and in the hour that ensued, as he topped a glass here and sparked a conversation there, he had an instinctive awareness of all the temperaments in the room. Despite the formality appropriate to his position, tonight Andrey exhibited a ready smile and an occasional wink. Vasily, who spoke with such pointed accuracy when providing directions to the city's sights, suddenly had the lilt of one who may or may not remember tomorrow what he had said today. And at every jest, the shy Marina allowed herself to giggle without placing a hand in front of her lips.

On this of all nights, the Count deeply appreciated their good cheer; but he was not so vain as to imagine it was founded solely on news of his narrow escape. For as he knew better than most, it was in September of 1905 that the members of the Delegation had signed the Treaty of Portsmouth to end the Russo-Japanese War. In the seventeen years since the making of that peace—hardly a generation—Russia had suffered a world war, a civil war, two famines, and the so-called Red Terror. In short, it had been through an era of upheaval that had spared none. Whether one's leanings were left or right, Red or White, whether one's personal circumstances had changed for the better or changed for the worse, surely at long last it was time to drink to the health of the nation.

At ten o'clock, the Count walked his guests to the belfry and bid them goodnight with the same sense of ceremony that he would have exhibited at the door of his family's residence in St. Petersburg. Returning to his quarters, he opened the window (though it was only the size of a postage stamp), poured the last of the brandy, and took a seat at the desk.

Built in the Paris of Louis XVI with the gilded accents and leather top of the era, the desk had been left to the Count by his godfather, Grand Duke Demidov. A man of great white sideburns, pale blue eyes, and golden epaulettes, the Grand Duke spoke four languages and read six. Never to wed, he represented his country at Portsmouth, managed three estates, and generally prized industry over nonsense. But before all of that, he had served alongside the Count's father as a devil-may-care cadet in the cavalry. Thus had the Grand Duke become the Count's watchful guardian. And when the Count's parents succumbed to cholera within hours of each other in 1900, it was the Grand Duke who took the young Count aside and explained that he must be strong for his sister's sake; that adversity presents itself in many forms; and that if a man does not master his circumstances then he is bound to be mastered by them.

The Count ran his hand across the desk's dimpled surface.

How many of the Grand Duke's words did those faint indentations reflect? Here over forty years had been written concise instructions to caretakers; persuasive arguments to statesmen; exquisite counsel to friends. In other words, it was a desk to be reckoned with.

Emptying his glass, the Count pushed his chair back and sat on the floor. He ran his hand behind the desk's right front leg until he found the catch. When he pressed it, a seamless door opened to reveal a velvet-lined hollow that, like the hollows in the other three legs, was stacked with pieces of gold.