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The Vanishing Futurist

Written by Charlotte Hobson

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The Vanishing Futurist

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What is man? He is by no means a finished or harmonious being. No, he is still a highly awkward creature. Man, as an animal, has not evolved by plan but spontaneously, and has accumulated many contradictions . . . To produce a new, 'improved' version of man – that is the future task of Communism. Man must look at himself and see himself as a raw material, or at best as a semi-manufactured product, and say: 'At last, my dear homo sapiens, I will work on you.'

LEON TROTSKY

There are things which a man is afraid to tell even to himself, and every decent man has a number of such things stored away in his mind.

FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY

ON THE NIGHT of 21 January 1919, the Russian inventor, physicist and polymath Nikita Slavkin vanished.

In the months and years that followed, the Soviet press reported that the Socialisation Capsule, Slavkin's latest invention, represented an extraordinary advance in human knowledge. Slavkin, building on the theories of his hero Einstein, had revolutionised our understanding of the universe. What's more, his disappearance was proof that his theories had a practical application: he had found a means of subverting time itself. 'The Vanishing Futurist', as he was dubbed, became a Soviet icon. Monuments and streets were named after him, biographies written, children's books, portraits, films. No word has been heard from him since that day. Yet the idea persists, based on Slavkin's own remarks, that one day he will reappear; that if his Socialisation Capsule can distort our perception of temporal reality, then it can equally reinstate it.

In the 1950s, the film *The Vanishing Futurist* showed Slavkin climbing into his Capsule and fading away. It ended with one of the characters saying dreamily, as the camera panned over a scene of empty, sunny countryside, 'Who knows? Perhaps Nikita will come back for us one of these days. "Come on, jump in, comrades," he'll say. "Don't you want to see Communism for yourselves?"'

1

In May 1914, much against the advice of my parents, I took up the post of governess to the Kobelev family, of No. 7, Gagarinsky Lane, Moscow. My new house was a large, ramshackle building, in need of a good coat of paint; it was reddish-brown, with a hefty, slightly sagging façade of white columns and pediment. On the other three sides leaned a mass of shabby outbuildings: coach house, stables, laundry, kitchens, bath house, servants' accommodation, a courtyard full of poultry and an overgrown lilac hedge. As I put my head out of the carriage, my first impression was of the dizzying scent of lilac and the heavy branches of pale, wet blossom gleaming in the half-light. My second was of a surprisingly deep and oily puddle, into which I immediately stepped.

I include these details because, now that I sit down to piece together these memoirs, it strikes me that they give a rather accurate shorthand of my life with the Kobelevs. Before I left my home in Cornwall, my parents and their friends had informed me at length of the mistake I was making. Several girls of our acquaintance had gone off to France or Italy to work as governesses, while Jenifer Trevargo was in Austria and, so we heard, skiing like a demon, but Russia was generally held to be a country of wild Cossacks, bears, anarchists

and so forth. My father, a solicitor in Truro who had no natural inclination towards adventure, would never have given his permission if it had not been for the fact that the introduction came through the redoubtable Miss Clegg. Miss Clegg was born and bred in Truro, a solid, leathery woman as dependably stuffed with good Chapel values as a pasty is with potato, despite the fact that she'd been working as a governess in Moscow for almost a decade. Nonetheless, my mother wept when I told her I wanted to go.

'Oh, you are unfeeling! Aren't there enough children needing to be taught in . . . in Devon, or somewhere?'

But I was a bookish, scrawny girl, a spinster in the making; argumentative and contrary to my father (as he often said) and disappointingly serious to my mother, who wanted to gossip with me about clothes. Reading Tolstoy had made me long to visit this country full of peasant women in birch-bark sandals, young officers as fresh as cucumbers, forests filled with unheard-of berries. In any case I'd spent four years since leaving school underoccupied and at home. I taught a little, I assisted with the Sunday school, I helped my mother with the house. No suitors appeared to ask for my hand, if one discounts James Andrews, who had walked me home from Chapel a few times, talking gloomily about marine insurance. My parents had made it clear that not much could be expected of me, but still I hoped for a little more than this.

Nonetheless, in my first weeks it was unsettling to discover that my relatives' warnings – particularly those

made from a position of absolute ignorance and prejudice – proved remarkably accurate. The food *was* rich and indigestible, the climate lowering, the arrangements chaotic, and the house not terribly clean. The servants – of whom there were an astonishing number, perhaps forty – were constantly travelling up and down from the Kobelevs' country estate at Mikhailovka, south of Moscow, so it was months before I learnt their names, let alone their duties, which in some cases seemed absurdly specific: a pickling chef, and two large, liveried footmen who brushed the hats. When they weren't brushing hats they were usually asleep on the front doorstep, and one had to step over their legs to get in or out. The family was further swollen by all sorts of hangers-on, retired employees such as Mrs Kobelev's aged French governess Mamzelle, Mr Kobelev's old aunt Anna Vladimirovna, and friends or relations who seemed to drift in, staying for a meal, a day or a week as the fancy took them.

On the other hand, however – and the longer I stayed in Moscow, the more it seemed to me that this was the only hand that mattered at all – from that first auspicious whiff of lilac, there was something irresistible about the Kobelev household. The front door swung open to reveal a large, dusty, red-papered hall and the colossal rear view of a footman in brown-and-gold livery. Without looking round, he held the door open with one hand and with the other cupped his mouth so that his voice would carry further.

'Priekhala Mees!' he bellowed. 'The Miss has arrived!'

Immediately the servants began to appear in the hall,

as if they had been hiding behind doors in anticipation. Several young maids cannoned into each other as they arrived at a run. People clustered on the stairs to peer at me through the banisters. A hum of interested conversation arose, as though nothing so exciting had happened for weeks – although I later discovered that almost any arrival, even the clock-winder’s weekly visit, was greeted with equal enthusiasm.

A plump young woman with her hair in a turban, a little younger than myself, arrived, frowning. ‘Miss Freely? I’m Sonya Kobelev. Welcome.’ She gave me her hand with a limp, regal air that confused me: as I shook it, it occurred to me that perhaps she had expected it to be kissed. ‘This is my younger brother, Pasha—’

‘How do you do, Miss Freely.’ A young man with a conspicuously well-tended moustache came up behind her, smiling. ‘Pleased to welcome you to our abode.’ He spoke with an accent that hovered somewhere between Russian and lowland Scots. ‘As you can perhaps tell, I have already completed my schools certificate in English, thanks to a Miss Edie Campbell from Melrose.’

‘She must have been an excellent teacher.’

‘I hate to correct you, but you probably mean, “She’s done a grand job”, don’t you?’

‘Oh, for goodness’ sake, Pasha, don’t start teasing her already,’ snapped Sonya. ‘Ah, here come your charges, Miss Freely – my youngest brother and sister, Dima and Liza—’

They arrived panting and grinning – a solid, fair-haired boy and a taller, skinny girl with plaits.

‘Hello, miss. Do you speak Russian?’ the girl asked.

‘No, not yet—’

‘Then I say to you what servants are saying,’ she told me. ‘They are saying, in England all ladies ride bareback like monkeys. Is it true? I want to ride bareback.’

‘Liza!’ hissed Sonya. ‘Miss Freely, do come this way. My father is looking forward to meeting you.’

Dima put his hand in mine. ‘I am waiting and waiting for you, miss,’ he said sweetly. ‘Papa says you will teach me Rugby football.’

In the study Mr Kobelev, a tall, slight man with a grey-streaked beard, came forward to greet me. ‘Welcome, welcome, my dear Miss Freely – sit down with us, drink some tea. You must be tired.’

I took a seat. As the room was painted dark green, full of smoke, and unlit, I could barely see who was opposite me. At last I made out two ancient ladies – the old governess Mamzelle and Mr Kobelev’s aunt – behind a large brass samovar, bobbing their heads and smiling at me. I bobbed and smiled back, and they wagged their heads all the more energetically.

Pasha came to my rescue, murmuring at me to stop first. ‘Otherwise you could be nodding at each other for days.’

‘Is that why the last governess left?’

‘Yes, a very sad business. In the end her head fell off.’

‘Is she ill?’ the aunt said loudly to Mr Kobelev, in French. ‘She’s making barbaric noises.’

‘No, no, Aunt, *soyez tranquille*.’ He leant across to talk to me. ‘So, my dear, you have met the children

already.' He was in his late fifties, I supposed, but seemed younger, with the same dark-brown eyes as Pasha. He pulled Dima to him and stroked his cheek. 'They are good children, though perhaps a little wild, eh, you monkeys? I have always encouraged them to be free-thinkers. And I must warn you, in this house we do not believe in discipline for its own sake, and certainly not in the nursery.'

'I am glad to hear it,' I said. 'Being too strict with children is a failure of imagination.'

'Good, good,' he replied vaguely. 'You see, Miss Freely, their poor mother is ill, and I am very often away on business. They have not had an easy childhood.'

'Oh, I'm so sorry.' Miss Clegg had intimated that Mrs Kobelev had some kind of health trouble, but she didn't know the nature of it; all she had heard was that the poor lady hardly left the house. 'Is she . . . is she well enough to meet me?'

Mr Kobelev called to his daughter. 'Sonya! Why not take Miss Freely to meet your mother straight away?'

Sonya frowned. 'If you think it is the right time, Papa . . .'

'It's never the right time. Now will do as well as any.'

So I was shown immediately to Mrs Kobelev's room, the heart of the house, dark and hot and smelling of face powder and eau de cologne and slept-in sheets and violet lozenges. I stopped in the doorway, uncertain how to advance; but after a moment or two my eyes became accustomed enough for me to make out a great deal of furniture, occasional tables and objects, and a chaise

longue pushed against the wall, with a figure lying under several rugs.

‘Enter.’

‘Mama? Here’s Miss Freely – the English governess.’

‘How do you do, Miss Freely?’ Sofia Pavlovna Kobelev turned slowly and I saw a thin, expressionless face.

‘Very well, Madame. I am sorry to find you indisposed.’

‘Yes . . . please, forgive my English, I do not speak it these days.’ She spoke in a monotone, barely moving her lips; and altogether she was so slight and so still, underneath her rugs, that I wondered if she was paralysed. ‘Tell me, have you met my little ones, how do you find them?’

‘Well, we’ve hardly met, but I’m sure we will get along very well. I shall bring you a timetable of their lessons . . .’

‘My husband will be in charge of all of that.’

‘Oh, yes, I see – well, perhaps you would like me to give you a report on their progress each week, or month?’

‘Each month, yes, indeed,’ Sofia Pavlovna agreed faintly.

‘I think that’s enough, Miss Freely,’ said Sonya. ‘Shall we go?’

I followed Sonya out onto the landing, where Pasha was waiting for us.

‘So you’ve met the invalid,’ he said sardonically. ‘Don’t expect her to show any more interest in you.’

‘Your poor mother. What is . . . is she . . .’ I didn’t know quite how to ask.

‘My mother has neurasthenia,’ Sonya said, pursing her lips. ‘She’s suffered from it for many years, since Dima was one or two. It’s a nervous disease. She has to stay in bed most days, although now and again she manages a meal downstairs. Liza and Dima visit her in the evenings, if she is feeling well enough. We’re all quite used to it – but for goodness’ sake, don’t worry her with the children’s progress. If there’s anything you need, my father is the one to approach. Now, let me show you to your room.’

Her tone did not invite further discussion, and I discovered that this was the rule of the house. Mrs Kobelev’s illness was not mentioned, and we steered the course of our thoughts around her like ships beating against the wind.

Sonya said goodnight at the door of my bedroom, a small, high-ceilinged chamber with grey silk curtains that seemed shamefully luxurious to me. The one tall window was almost entirely obscured by the large fleshy green fans of a horse chestnut tree. I removed my soggy shoes and for a long time after she had left me I leant out of the window, breathing in the leafy sweet air. It was still light, hours after darkness would have fallen in Cornwall; this added to my disorientation. A wood-pigeon sang, hidden somewhere inside the tree, and stopped – sang, and stopped – as though listening for an interloper. In the silence that followed, I found myself holding my breath.

*

Governesses are famously long-lived. When I met her in 1914, the Kobelevs' retired governess Mamzelle was in her mid-eighties, timid and furry as a vole and still running errands for the whole family. She had outlasted all her relatives in France. As I write this I am not far from eighty myself. A whole lifetime has passed since I went to Russia. My daughter Sophy has grown-up sons of her own. My husband, Paul, died six months ago, and since then I have the strange sensation that the present, my creaky old body in the little terraced house in Hackney which we bought together, is no longer my home.

For several months Sophy has been trying to persuade me to clear the attic of a lifetime of accumulated papers, and I have been feebly resisting. She is quite right that it must be done, of course; I know that. I am merely taking a moment to gird up my loins before I dredge Slavkin's story up from its decades of silence. Last week Sophy, running out of patience, hauled several boxes down and left them by my chair.

'Have a look through, Mama, and on Saturday I can throw out what you don't want to keep.'

A peculiar smell wafts up to me from the boxes. It brings back my time in Russia even more clearly than its contents – the rank tobacco everyone smoked incessantly, the poor-quality 'wartime' paper, the fumes from the oil lamps. As I sift through I feel bemused by the scraps that have survived, from the utterly banal and pointless (a little printed prayer with a saccharine painting of St Barbara, a half-empty notebook) to things that grip my heart – letters from my parents and copies

of my own letters to them, pages of earnest pieces of self-criticism written during the days of our commune, newspaper articles about Slavkin's inventions, and photographs. Overexposed and faded, all that is preserved in the pictures of our young selves is a smudge of shadow for eyes and, on every face, a smile.

All week I rehearse how I am going to open the conversation with Sophy. Paul wanted us to tell her everything years ago, but I persuaded him it would be too confusing, too painful. Now he's gone, it is frankly a worse moment than ever to begin, but I have no choice. 'I'll come back for you if you don't,' he whispered – still managing to joke, even at the end.

I find myself writing an account for her instead, using the papers as my starting point. This way, I think, will be more truthful – more complete – than if I stammer it out incoherently. Immediately I am amazed by how vividly the memories rush to my pen – voices, images, jokes. I remember my brother Edmund at Charing Cross station walking down the platform, waving goodbye to me and pretending to fall off the end. I remember Miss Clegg's sonorous elocution as we crossed Europe, giving me advice on where to buy a winter coat for a good price, and how to avoid the multitude of unsuitable situations that Russia would present. 'The Kobelevs are a respectable old Moscow family,' she kept repeating, all the way across Europe. 'You will encounter nothing untoward with them, I assure you!'

I can feel even now the tiny, rebellious frisson that rose up in me in response. I assure *you*, I thought, I'll do

my best to encounter untowardness. 'Untoward!' shall be my motto.

And in so far as such an aim can be judged, I think I was rather successful.