

OLGA ODINTSOVA

EMPERING

**WINNER OF THE 11TH TRANSPART
INTERNATIONAL CREATIVE
FESTIVAL 2019**



Moscow.

—
1888.

12+

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On 17th October 1888, a terrible tragedy befell the Imperial Train of Russian Emperor Alexander III. A young man serving in His Imperial Majesty's Own Chancellery finds himself entwined in a story of a golden ring when he is charged with the task of finding its rightful owner and returning it to her. This is a story of how one absurd coincidence can send ripples through generations of one family's fate. Extended version with illustrations.

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"One cannot imagine that terrifying moment when we suddenly felt the breath of death beside us, but at the same moment, we felt the greatness and power of the Lord, when He stretched out His gracious hand over us..."

Empress Maria Feodorovna of Russia in a letter to King George I of Greece



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17th October 1888. 12:00.

With a black folder tucked under his arm, a young man in a thin coat was walking through the carriage of the Imperial Train. Suddenly, he caught the toe of his boot on a stray carpet runner and, before he knew it, ended up on the floor. The papers came fluttering out of his holder like a bird taking wing. The train, going at full speed, turned a corner and caught the wind through the windows, sending the papers flying even further. Dismayed, the young chap began to dart around the carriage in a hurried attempt to catch them all and stuff them back into his folder.

Once he seemed to have gathered them all up, he counted them and discovered that one document was missing. He looked around and spotted the corner of his missing piece of paper sticking out from under a closed wooden door that led to a compartment. The young man stepped towards the paper, bent down to snatch it up, and at that moment caught a glimpse of a girl through a crack in the door.

To this young chap, her face seemed truly angelic. And her laughter, oh, her laughter! He remembered that laugh for a long time thereafter, albeit with a cold shiver.

The young man knocked on the door and opened it, “I beg your pardon gentlemen,” he said, catching surprised looks from an elderly gentleman and a young woman sitting opposite each other. “I would not dare bother you if it were not for one circumstance...”

The young lady looked at the young man with interest. She noticed that he carried a leather folder embossed with the words “His Imperial Majesty's Chancellery” and graciously tilted her head, slightly lifting the corners of her lips. Her left arm was in a bandage. With a smile, the elderly fellow asked the young man, “Circumstance? You mean the circumstances that led you and I to end up on the Imperial train, instead of the one that would be more befitting of rank?” He laughed good-naturedly.

“Indeed. Forgive me,” said the young man, feeling ashamed for even being there. “The circumstance is actually that the wind blew my papers all over the carriage, and it was under your door that I found the last missing piece...”

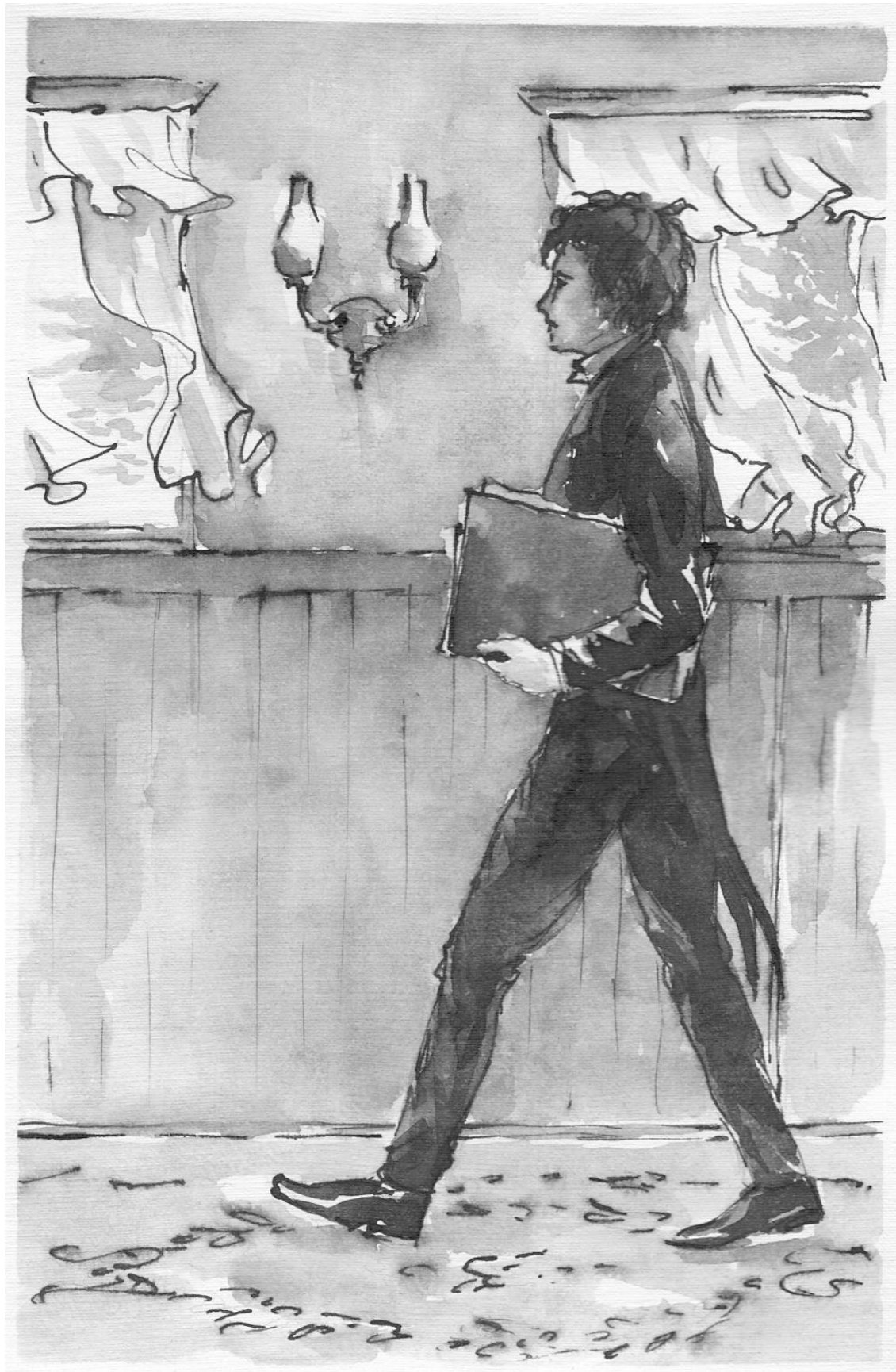
“Oh, what a pickle, young man! Come, take a closer look, maybe you will find something. In fact, come on in! Sit with us, the more the merrier. Travelling with company is always more interesting. It makes time fly by. I truly enjoy talking with different people, and I am especially glad of any opportunity to converse with smart and decent human beings. I'm sure that we will have plenty in common to talk about.” The man smiled with a cunning flash of the eye, sneaking a kind glance at the young lady. He was extremely talkative, and his calm joyfulness was so infectious that the young man decided to stay awhile. The conversation was diverting for all three of them in the compartment, especially after it turned out that they all knew each other, albeit indirectly, by duty.

It turned out that the young lady was one of Empress Maria Feodorovna's ladies-in-waiting and the man was a reputable doctor close to the Tsar and his family. His professional assistance aboard the Imperial Train had been required literally minutes before his own train was to depart, and with no time to disembark and rejoin the retinue, the gentleman stayed put on the Imperial Train as it began to pull off earlier than indicated in the schedule. Later it arose that this was because the royal family had arrived at the station an hour early and were hardly expected to sit and wait for the scheduled departure. Thus, the doctor was forced to travel in a second-class carriage, though this time on the Imperial Train.

Every now and then, throughout their conversation, those closest to the Imperial court came to see the doctor, be it to enquire about his health or to complain about their own. The Empress' lady-in-waiting was soon called upon and had to take her leave, but the young man stayed to talk to the doctor. Time truly did fly by thanks to the elderly gentleman, an excellent conversationalist who generously seasoned his discussions with amusing jokes and witty remarks.

“We’re really going quite fast, don’t you think?” said the doctor, retrieving a silver pocket watch on a chain from his waistcoat. The young fellow caught a glimpse of the back of the watch; it was engraved with the State Emblem of the Russian Empire, meaning that this had been a gift from the Tsar himself for having excelled in his duties. The hands pointed to two o’clock in the afternoon.

“Indeed,” said the young man. “If you will, I will bring us something to eat.” The young man left the compartment. At that moment, there was no way he could have known that the next quarter of an hour would forevermore split his life into ‘before’ and ‘after’.



17th October 1888. 14:14.

The sound of scraping metal tore through the air around the train track. Carriages hurtled off the rails on the embankment, most of them amassing into a heap of iron, splintered wood, and scraps of upholstery. Wails could be heard all around, people screaming. Those who had already escaped the rubble tried to free others.

The blood. The wounded. The dead.

Darkness. Grinding metal. Light. Someone's arm.

The young man's heart was beating wildly in his chest. His head was foggy, he could not get to grips with what had occurred, but intuitively he reached for his folder with the documents next to him. Something on his forehead was burning. Blood. Hell. A blue carriage. A blue carriage!

Fragments of blue metal. White satin splattered with blood, smeared with dirt and grass.

Screams everywhere. Where is the Emperor? Is he alive?

Clutching at his head, the young fellow peered into the pile of twisted metal where the Sovereign may conceivably be trapped. Collective concern for the Emperor's whereabouts seemed to grow with even more urgency than for that of the people's own wellbeing, even after a catastrophe such as this one. The sentries, who were supposed to stand every hundred metres along the railway line, quickly scurried to the site of the crash.

Emperor Alexander was aided out of the rubble and the people got a glimpse of their ruler alive and well. There was a loud sigh of shared relief. The Emperor is alive. The royal family too.

The young man was also overcome with relief, though not enough to drive out the terror. Nearby he saw a bandaged arm. He crawled over to her and hauled aside a sheet of metal... It was the Empress' lady-in-waiting. She wasn't breathing. Her face, which had been so beautiful and aristocratic, was now disfigured with large shards of glass. The young man's hands trembled. He gathered the strength to get up and go in search of the doctor.

The young man heard a groan a few metres away where the rescuers had not yet got to. He turned to discover it was the doctor. He lay on the ground in a distorted position, moaning heavily with each breath bringing more pain. Limping, the young man hurried over and tried to talk to him, to help him. "Granddaughter..." the elderly man repeated. "My granddaughter..."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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