

ALEXANDER
GRIGORENKO

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MEBET

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AD VERBUM

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MEBET

by Alexander Grigorenko

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ALEXANDER GRIGORENKO

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G L A G O S L A V P U B L I C A T I O N S



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PREFACE

The taiga has no history. It does have a memory, however, which persists in half-fantastical legends and tales. Even the stories which claim to be accounts from those who personally participated in great events or witnessed them firsthand – such as the migration of the ancestors of the Yakuts from Lake Baikal to the Lena River – rather resemble folktales. The white man has sought for centuries now to painstakingly sift these fantastical stories for useful material, to melt them down into hard historical facts, perhaps not of a great quantity but at least an acceptable one. Thanks to the white man for this. Nevertheless, deep inside he understands that there is a good share of absurdity to his efforts. Europeans' reason goes astray, dies among the legends handed down in the taiga. It cannot survive in this boundless space, made sacred by blood, which does not obey numbers and figures. The peoples of this ocean of green live in such a way that yesterday and events of a century ago can stand side by side. The Red Army marches into the Mansi villages immediately in the wake of the Vikings. An old Evenki man waits for an appointed meeting not with the aid of a clock or calendar, but by the crackling of a wedge driven into an old pine log. The inhabitants of this world include spirits and deities just as much as forest animals and people. The poor Nanai man Dersu, who killed a tiger in his youth, saw no difference between a man and an animal, and therefore his conscience tormented him for the rest of his life.

Scholars have scrupulously recorded a great many of the countless remarkable things here, and explained their import and their sources, but they remain exotica, something that one can marvel at, even sympathize with, but nevertheless something that one cannot really grasp.

Yet in human history the taiga has played its role, an invisible one that has not been subject to description. For millennia this ocean of green has absorbed bits of the clashes that have raged in the civilized worlds of Europe and Asia, and yet it has given nothing in exchange, it has cast nothing ashore – it has turned everything into a mystery, an enigma, an

undecipherable text. It may be that this is why the taiga remains the only expanse on the earth where human strivings have yet to be explained, and here a person can look forward to the most remarkable and crucial encounter of all: coming face to face with himself.

Alexander Grigorenko

THE FAVORITE OF THE GODS WHO IS A LAW UNTO HIMSELF

Mebet, of the Vela clan, won glory from an early age through his strength and bravery.

No one could best him in games, in fighting, in racing, in the hunt, or in battle. At the bear feast, he could leap over a hundred sleds, and when he was invited to participate in feats of strength, none were willing to vie with him. Never was anyone able to defeat Mebet, whose very name meant “The Strong One.”

He was orphaned early on, but he did not go to live with his kin. He remained on his parents’ hunting grounds and dwelt there alone. Mebet did not invite companions for the hunt, he did not need anyone’s help – he chased elk on his own, and he walked alone in pursuit of the bear. He caught a great many birds. Whenever he was in need, fortune shone on him like a sun that never set beyond the horizon to rise up again. He was a carefree sort, like one who knows that his strength is stronger even than fate.

It happened that Mebet slew an animal in a patch of the taiga that belonged to others, where the Ivsha and Pyaki hunted, and he took his catch into the tundra, into the lands of the Yaptik, Vaynot, and Okotetta clans. When they came to him and reproached him for violating the laws of hunting, Mebet smiled and replied that the beast was free to run wherever it pleased, and Mebet was not to blame for that. His smile came from a position of strength and could make other men ashamed of their own weakness, and this time no one thought to raise his weapon.

But it happened that one day, five men from the Ivsha clan set out against Mebet. In their territory they had found blood on the snow and they followed it in order to catch the thief and hold him to justice. When they had reached the hunter, they saw that it was Mebet, hauling a slain deer on his light sled.

The Ivsha men raised their bows and shouted to him, “Leave the deer, it is ours. You killed it on our land.”

Mebet turned and said to them, "Let us reach an agreement, kinsmen. You leave me my quarry, and I will let you keep your lives."

"What kinsman are you to us?" one of the men said, without even waiting for an answer. "You deign to walk through others' land as if it were your own."

Then one of the Ivsha, still quite a young lad who had just started to hunt with his elders and so now swelled with a silly, childish pride, shouted out, "He is making fun of us. There are five of us and he is alone. What are you waiting for?"

The youngling was first to let his arrow fly, seeking to hit the hated thief directly in his face. But Mebet shrugged at death like shooing a horsefly away, with the same gesture. The arrow bounced off a tree and into the snow. He caught the second arrow in its flight and broke it in two, and the third arrow missed him entirely – the shooter's hands were clearly shaking. Two of the Ivsha men stood frozen with their weapons raised, still unable to fire off a shot.

Amid the silence, Mebet's bowstring twanged its brief and terrible song. In a very short instant, as short as the cracking of a twig, he had let three arrows fly and now three of the Ivsha men dropped down into the snow, howling with pain in their struck legs.

"Maybe we should reach an agreement," Mebet proposed again. "You give me the deer and I let you keep your lives."

The Ivsha men said nothing in reply.

Mebet picked up the strap of his sled, turned to them, and said:

"I was sure that you would agree. I wish you good hunting, kinsmen."

Then he walked away without a backward glance.

The Ivsha men kept quiet about this episode to the other clans; it was embarrassing that the five of them were unable to overcome a single man. However, just as time passed, so did their shame. Soon among the people of the taiga and of the tundra, there was no one who had not heard of Mebet, who could catch arrows in mid-flight and was therefore a law unto himself.

Thus he lived his life, young and contented. Even the gods would not unleash their wrath upon such a fortunate fellow. He could get away with everything: the gods had played a sort of game, granting to one mortal man the right to not submit to what all others had to submit to. With Mebet's impeccable luck the gods were toying with mankind, and it pained people to look at his unprecedented way of living. The distrust and envy of other people led them to dub this man of the clan of Vela "The Gods' Favorite" and he bore this moniker until the end of his days. But the most astonishing

thing of all is that Mebet gave no more honor to the spirits than to his fellow mortal men, though he never outright blasphemed against the gods, as often happens among simple people when they are hounded by failure.

The Gods' Favorite occasionally came to the great feasts when large numbers of people came together. The girls and young women hid from him, afraid of being punished by their fathers or husbands for the brazen look that would appear on their faces, unwillingly, when they caught sight of Mebet. He exceeded all others in height by a head, he was stout with firm limbs, his hair and eyes shone, and he had slender, nearly imperceptible cheekbones.

But the old women said that no woman, impressed though she might be by this handsome man of the Vela clan, would readily agree to enter his dwelling, for so different was Mebet from the other men whom the women of the taiga (and their mothers, and their mothers' mothers) had known. If people did not still remember Mebet's mother and father, they would probably have considered him a foundling child left by some mysterious foreign race. There was a time, the elders said, when many outsiders came passing through the taiga, but that had happened so long ago that no one among the living still remembered those peoples or even their names.

There were rumors that Mebet's mother had been seduced by one of the gods, and to stop her husband from killing her when this deception was found out, the spirits drove him into the swamp where he drowned. This happened when Mebet's mother was carrying him and complaining to her kinsfolk about how unbearably heavy her belly was. Mebet knew about these stories and said nothing to dispute them. He thought little of success and glory, for these things came to him of their own accord and therefore were valued nothing. He mostly preferred to think about himself, and with time this became one of his chief pleasures.

Once, people sought to rebuke the Gods' Favorite:

"If you are so strong, then why don't you have wealth and a lofty title? You could become a great leader, the greatest who has even lived or will ever live."

Mebet thanked them for these words of praise but said nothing in reply.

This made the people upset:

"You look down on us, and you fail to show respect even to the most esteemed among us."

"Do those most esteemed so lack in appreciation from the many that the disrespect of one man offends them?" he asked them.

Then the people began to seethe with anger and indignation:

"You slay animals in the territory of others. You take what does not belong to you. You are a thief."

After these words were spoken, the smile vanished from Mebet's face, but he answered them in the same calm voice:

"A person takes as much as his strength and mind allow. A baby cannot pursue a beast day after day, it has only enough strength to reach for its mother's breast. A strong man will not stoop to catch the mice that scurry in the earth around his feet, for that would not be worthy of his strength. And what is not worthy of his strength, lessens his strength. Any tribe or people won their territory through their own strength, for those who know how to hunt and show bravery in war will never receive less than they deserve. Therefore, I have taken nothing of other people's things, but only my own."

The people had nothing to answer to that.

In the year when Mebet turned twenty, there was a large bear feast. Mebet alone, without anyone to help him, caught a bear and feasted within the circle of the elders. It even seemed as if Mebet's company was an honor for the elders and not the other way around. Mebet ate little and did not contribute to the conversation. He stood up before the others did and, taking leave of them with a slight bow, he went to watch the people wrestling in the snow and measuring their strength against one another. The smile did not disappear from his face, a face that was magnificent like a vision from another world.

The more kindly disposed said that Mebet's pride was due to his youth. Many suspected that that pride would simply fade along with his youth.

As the Gods' Favorite was walking around, he heard a voice behind him say, "Hey, little one, come here."

Mebet turned and saw an old man lying on his side on a skin spread out next to a big sled. The old man clearly wanted to stand up, but he was unable to.

"Help me get onto my sled. My legs don't work."

Mebet picked the old man up and gently set him on the sled.

The old man stared at Mebet for a long time, as if he could not take in enough of this unfamiliar young man's healthy appearance. Then, his eyes still on Mebet, he suddenly said:

"You're a fool, young one."

"Why is that, sir?" Mebet asked him in a genial tone.

"You aren't even aware that your heart is being broken. One can find all things on earth and in heaven, except for a heart which never breaks."

The Gods' Favorite laughed and walked away.

Another thirty years of his life passed, and his heart had never broken. In his life he had experienced many things that would make a man tremble

and faint. Yet Mebet never trembled, never fainted, and he often thought back to the old man and his empty prophecy. As the years went by, the Gods' Favorite never lost his strength: he could still catch arrows in mid-flight and he needed no companions on the hunt.

THE BLIZZARD MAN

Two months after that feast, Mebet married. He abducted the bride, for he thought that abducted girls serve as a sign of a man's strength, and therefore they were better than wives married according to convention. He had often assisted his peers in such abductions, not out of friendship as much as for the simple amusement, and eventually people came to think that every instance of bridal abduction was Mebet's work.

The girl whom he chose was a beautiful one. But her father had capriciously given her a man's name: Yadne (which means the One Who Goes by Foot), and this had frightened all ordinary suitors away from his daughter. Young men feared that along with this unladylike name, they would bring into their homes an unfeminine and uncanny power. Mebet scoffed at such superstitions, and it was Yadne whom he came to favor.

Only when it came to children did he prove unlucky. Each year his wife would bear a girl, but these daughters died one after another, either still in infancy or at an early age. Mebet wanted to send this wife away and take another, but before he made a final decision to do so, Yadne again fell pregnant and bore him a son.

In the month of winds, when it becomes impossible to tell the earth and sky apart due to the all-encompassing snow, Mebet stepped into the chum, though the tent-like dwelling was considered unclean now that a woman had given birth within, and he picked up the little baby's wet and wailing body. He held it for a brief moment, handed the child back to his wife, and then left without saying a word.

Hadko, or the Blizzard Man, was the name that the Gods' Favorite chose for this son and heir.

As he grew, he proved a good son. At the age of twelve he brought a wolf home, and at seventeen he caught an elk. True, he was unable to hide his catch in the proper way, and so the meat was plundered by some forest animal. Still, Mebet was pleased, and only one thing troubled his heart: Hadko had not inherited his father's magnificent features. He was strong and stately,

but he had prominent cheekbones and dark eyes like his mother. Worse yet, he heeded the laws of other men: he would stop pursuing an animal when it ran into the territory of other clans, he would not fish in rivers belonging to others, he respected the shaman and, whenever he was among a multitude of people, he would bow deeply to his elders. It brought the Gods' Favorite no pleasure to see this, but he did not reproach his son.

Whether Mebet's mother had lain with one of the gods or not remained only a rumor, though it was close to the truth. But no one had any doubt that Hadko was born to an ordinary man. Soon Mebet was convinced that his son feared violating human customs more than he feared any beast – whenever Hadko went hunting, he was calm and composed, and he proved successful more often than not.

At a feast the Blizzard Man caught sight of a lovely girl from the Pyak clan. He started to ask his father to visit her parents and speak with them about arranging a betrothal and the paying of the bride-price.

“Do you really like this girl?” Mebet asked him.

“Yes, father, I really do.”

“You love her?”

“Yes, I love her.”

“Are you prepared to make her your wife, so that she would bear you children, and are you prepared to sustain her and protect her?”

“I would do anything for her. I will not let any spirit or beast get close to her.”

The Gods' Favorite kept his blue eyes on the dark, shining eyes of his son, as if he was seeking to find there any common traits. His son however sought in his father's eyes only an answer, and he prayed to the heavens that the answer would be yes.

After a long silence Mebet said:

“If you love this girl and you are prepared to protect her all her life from spirits and beasts, is that not the bride-price? Isn't your desire to be with her greater than two or three dozen reindeer that are spread over the taiga or tundra for the benefit of whoever can catch them? Beasts wear their hides so that you can take them whenever you have the desire to do so. So why should you need to pay any bride-price, then? Merely to please old man Pyak, who is greedy like everyone else?”

Hadko's gaze dimmed and became dull like the water from melted snow.

“Father, give me a small portion of your herd,” he asked quietly, almost in a whisper.

Mebet refused. “Do you want me to take this woman for a wife?”

Hadko thought that he had understood what his father wished, but he had been wrong.

“No,” Mebet said. “I am not opposed to your marrying her. She really is beautiful, I can see that. Go and take her, and bring her to our camp. I will accept her as if she were my own bride and I will treat her kindly. Just do not ask me for any deer, let alone any beads, or hides, or copper pots. You know that I would readily pay the price for anything, just not for the weakness of my own son.”

“What should I do?”

“Do whatever you want. I have said my piece, but I will not get in your way. You have long since taken seven steps from your father, so why do you need my counsel?”

Thus they parted. For several days Hadko did not say a word, he dedicated himself feverishly to all the work that was assigned to him. His mother would ask what had happened between him and his father, but she did not expect to hear an answer. Yadne herself was afraid of bringing the subject up with her husband: the Gods’ Favorite never raised his voice at his wife, but he never spoke with her unless it was about something urgent.

However, over these days, as Mebet looked at his glum son, he felt a burden lifted from his heart, for he could tell that a young and taut anger was ripening within Hadko.

One day his son went off into the taiga without telling anyone. When he vanished, so did a new spear, three dozen arrows, a reindeer, a sled, and Mebet’s best dog. Hadko had set off on a long campaign and though several days had passed and it was now the new moon, he had not returned. His mother was tormented by the thought that he would never come back. At night Yadne would weep. Mebet kept silent, but when he had finally had enough of his wife’s lamentations, he grabbed her by the chin and told her quietly:

“Do you think that you can draw him out of the taiga with your howling, like people lure birds out of the marsh by playing a flute?”

Then, after a pause, he added in a condescendingly gentle air:

“He has some of my blood within him. That is enough to get him back home safely. Don’t cry, you will only do him something ill.”

Hadko returned when the cold in the taiga began giving way to wind and snow. His skin was blackened by the frozen air and from fatigue, and he drove a sled that was heaped with catch: elk meat, fox and marten skins. His mother came rushing to meet him, but her son walked blindly past her outstretched arms and stumbled into the chum. He slept for two whole days.

When he finally awoke, he greedily downed a great deal of food, accepting all that his mother offered him. Yadne sat opposite him and wept almost inaudibly.

Mebet did not greet Hadko nor did he enter the chum where his son was recuperating after such a great hunt. Hadko expected to bear his father's wrath, but his own young and bright anger had still not died out. It was with a light heart and fearlessness that he came forth from the chum to meet his father.

Mebet stood in the middle of the encampment with his arms across his chest. When his son had come up to him and stopped an outstretched arm's distance away, expecting a blow or a harsh word to come, the Gods' Favorite took something from his chest and offered it to Hadko. It was a knife of exquisite craftsmanship, large with a curved blade of blue metal, like a crescent moon, and it was kept in a sheath made from leather and white bone.

Hadko's hands trembled, and the anger within him died. He wanted to fall to his knees, but Mebet grabbed him by the sleeve of his deerskin:

"Take it, it is yours now. You are a grown hunter now. You can take my new spear. And take my bow as well, it will serve you well."

This was all too much for Hadko and he collapsed at his father's feet nevertheless.

Mebet smiled and went to his chum. As he pushed the flap over the entrance aside, he turned to his son and said:

"Did Voipel obey you? After all, he obeys only me..."

"He served as my eyes, my nose, my hands, and my will," Hadko replied. Tears were flowing down his cheeks, but he did not even notice them or raise a hand to wipe them away.

"Voipel is yours now," Mebet said and disappeared into the chum.

The north wind, which rages fiercely and fearsomely and can blow through anything, is what the word *voipel* designated, and it was the name given to Mebet's best dog, which was recognized as the king among the dogs of the taiga and tundra. Other dogs knew that any fight with this broad-chested, shaggy monster with icy blue eyes could only end in death. Once they caught wind of this dread foe, they would flee from their owners. The threat of being hanged with a belt frightened them less than Voipel's fangs.

Mebet's dog was all around good in anything to do with hunting, large migrations, and battle.

THE BETROTHAL

The next morning, Hadko and Mebet set off with their two sleighs into the taiga, so that they could bring a hidden part of Hadko's catch back to their camp. This was namely the remains of an elk and two deer which Hadko had killed when he was only a short distance from the camp. The Blizzard Man had proved capable of hanging the meat from the branches of huge pine trees so that it could not be plundered by wolves. It warmed Mebet's heart to see that his son had inherited his strength. Soon this joy was mixed with pride: the deer hides were branded with red arrows, the mark of the Ivsha clan. They marked their war reindeer with a red arrow. As Mebet loaded his sled with this catch, he thought that his son's dark eyes might not be alien to his at all, only different. After all, no one knows exactly how those favored by the gods are supposed to look. And no one knew how many in this world might have been granted freedom from human custom, and yet could retain their strength and good fortune. It pleased Mebet to reflect on this, he enjoyed these musings until sundown and fell asleep calm and content.

The next day, Mebet left the chum early in the morning and found his son engaged in an odd activity that he was not able to make sense of right away, so astonished was he. Hadko was tying red ribbons to his sled, which was heaped with his catch from the great hunt. The same red ribbons fluttered in the brisk wind on the horns of two white-faced reindeer, which had been taken from the herd without even asking.

The Gods' Favorite stood there frozen and stared. He remembered what the ribbons meant. There was no doubt about it: his son was setting off to be betrothed to that girl from the Pyak clan. He was heading off, as was the custom among men, loaded with gifts and tokens of his affection.

Hadko did not wait for his father to say anything, he spoke first:

"Father, you did not give me the bride-price. I caught the bride-price on my own. You said that you would not stand in the way of what I felt to be necessary. Now I am doing what I feel is necessary, everything as it should be."

He was an impudent young man, Hadko, and he had not been afraid of falling to the ground with his face bloodied before he could say all his impudent words. Mebet remained silent. He saw the bright mark of the Ivsha clan on the hides skinned from the caught deer, and he realized that his son was not as he had imagined him just the day before: it was not through Hadko's own bravery that he had plundered others' possessions, but rather he had done so unwittingly and fortuitously.

His mother came forth from the chum with a smoking piece of meat on a large wooden plate, but upon noticing her husband's heavy silence, she was reluctant to go up to her son, and so she simply set the plate down on the snow. Hadko rushed up to take the meat and then, burning his fingers, he put it in his deerskin bag. "Thank you, mother!" he said merrily, almost shouting the words.

On this morning Hadko was not only impudent, he was also proud and probably quite pleased with himself. He leaped, light as a feather, onto the overloaded sled and so vehemently did he lash the reindeer that the animals went wild – they spun the sled around like turbulent water spins a tiny boat. The happy young man was wrapped up in a snowy white cloud, and from this cloud his loud, merry, and silly words were heard:

"Just wait until this evening! Until the evening..."

The sled and the animals hauling it vanished in the distance. The Gods' Favorite turned to his wife and studied her face for a long time.

"Where did he get the ribbons from?" he asked softly, nearly in a whisper. "Where did he get the ribbons and the meat for the road?"

Yadne averted her gaze.

Neither by that evening, nor the next day, nor the third had Hadko returned. On the morning of the fourth day one of the reindeer – the other missing – dragged the sled back into camp. The sled had been reduced of half of its contents. A few red shreds fluttered in the air. Driving the sled was a young man with a pockmarked face whom they did not know.

Under a deer hide on which one could make out a red arrow lay Hadko. When Mebet threw this covering aside, his son did not make even the slightest movement. His mother stood nearby, aghast. "He'll come to," Mebet calmly thought and gave Hadko a slap on the cheek. His son moaned, tossed about, and seemed to be trying to say something, but he was unable to. Such a stench issued forth from him that even Yadne, whom normally nothing could faze, turned away.

Finally Mebet said, "You have both visited the One-Eyed Witch."

The pockmarked young man who had brought Mebet's son back spoke quickly and apprehensively. It was a confusing tale. From his rambling account Mebet gathered that they indeed had gone to visit the One-Eyed Witch, but only Hadko had eaten mushrooms there, and a great many of them. Hadko had also drunk the urine of an elk which had grazed all summer among mushrooms. The pockmarked young man had not eaten any mushrooms nor drunk the elk urine, and he had tried to dissuade Hadko from this bad business, but Hadko had not listened. Since Hadko was not capable of driving his reindeer himself, the other young man was forced to bring him home, like one hauls an ailing or dead man.

"What is your name?" Mebet asked the pockmarked young man.

"Makhako," he said, somewhat embarrassed, because in Nenets this name meant "stutter," and he indeed had stammered a bit. Makhako, it turned out, belonged to the same Vela clan as Mebet, which meant that this was a visit from one of his own kinsmen, though so distant a relative that Mebet had never met him before.

Mebet took his son by the arm like an infant and turned him over, so that the stench would not be so repugnant to the nose and carry to the distant chum. He ordered Hadko's mother to light the stove there and place a pot of steaming meat broth next to Hadko, so that their son could drink it when he finally came to.

During the brief time when Mebet was carrying his son in and giving the young man's mother orders, Makhako shuffled awkwardly by the sled. It was clear that he wanted to get away from here as quickly as possible. However, the Gods' Favorite lay a hand on Makhako's shoulder as if the young man were an old friend and said:

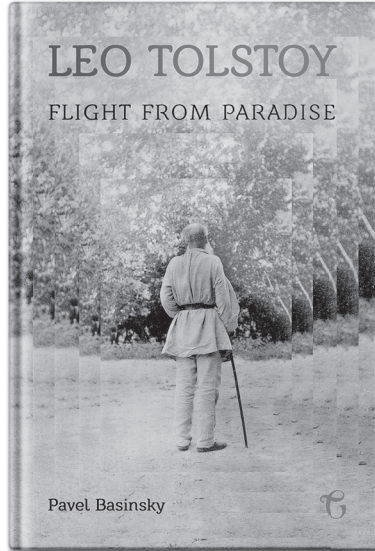
"You will be my guest. Let's go inside, there is food aplenty. I have been waiting for you, kinsman."

Makhako, though unable to believe his luck, followed Mebet docilely and sat down at the place appointed him. It was the place for honored guests.

There, treated to a rich feast, he told the story of Hadko's betrothal. Mebet laughed then as he had never laughed before in his life.

Leo Tolstoy – Flight from Paradise

by Pavel Basinsky

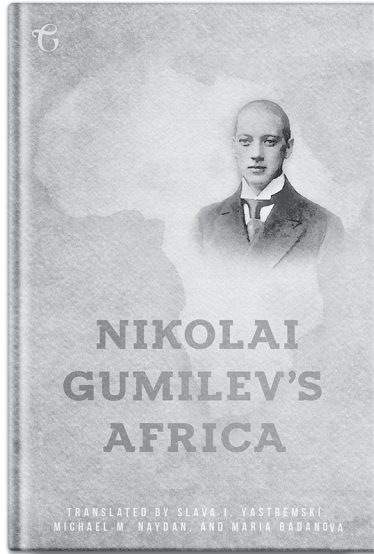


Over a hundred years ago, something truly outrageous occurred at Yasnaya Polyana. Count Leo Tolstoy, a famous author aged eighty-two at the time, took off, destination unknown. Since then, the circumstances surrounding the writer's whereabouts during his final days and his eventual death have given rise to many myths and legends. In this book, popular Russian writer and reporter Pavel Basinsky delves into the archives and presents his interpretation of the situation prior to Leo Tolstoy's mysterious disappearance. Basinsky follows Leo Tolstoy throughout his life, right up to his final moments. Reconstructing the story from historical documents, he creates a visionary account of the events that led to the Tolstoys' family drama.

Flight from Paradise will be of particular interest to international researchers studying Leo Tolstoy's life and works, and is highly recommended to a broader audience worldwide.

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Nikolai Gumilev's Africa



Gumilev holds a unique position in the history of Russian poetry as a result of his profound involvement with Africa. He extensively wrote both poetry and prose on the culture of the continent in general and on Ethiopia (Abyssinia, as it was called in Gumilev's time) in particular. During his abbreviated lifetime Gumilev made four trips to Northern and Eastern Africa, the most extensive of which was a 1913 expedition to Abyssinia undertaken on assignment from the St. Petersburg Imperial Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography. During that trip Gumilev collected Ethiopian folklore and ethnographic objects, which, upon his return to St. Petersburg, he deposited at the Museum. He and his assistant Nikolai Sverchkov also made more than 200 photographs that offer a unique picture of the African country in the early part of the century.

This volume collects all of Gumilev's poetry and prose written about Africa for the first time as well as a number of the photographs that he and Nikolai Sverchkov took during their trip that give a fascinating view of that part of the world in the early twentieth century.

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AN ENGLISH QUEEN AND STALINGRAD
THE STORY OF ELIZABETH ANGELA
MARGUERITE BOWES-LYON (1900–2002)

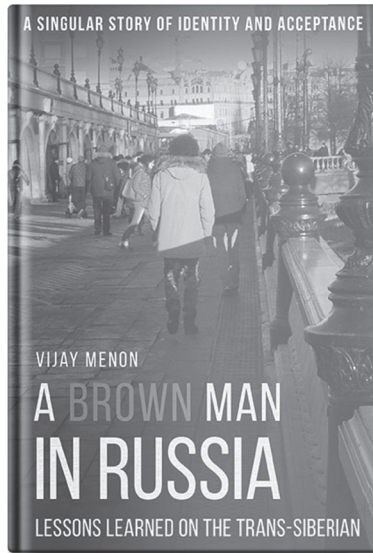


The author traces the Queen Mother's formative years, her family life in the palace environment, her growing adoration and ascension to the British throne, how she arranged aid to Stalingrad and was ultimately named an honorary citizen of that city, and other little-known details from the life of the Queen and her circle.

With a foreword by Yuri Fokin, Russia's ambassador to the UK in the period 1997–2000, who was personally acquainted with the Queen Mother, the book will undoubtedly appeal to the British public and to anyone interested in Russian-British relations and the two countries' World War II history. Illustrated with photographs from private collections and from the Battle of Stalingrad Museum, some of which readers will see for the first time.

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A Brown Man in Russia
Lessons Learned on the Trans-Siberian
by Vijay Menon



A Brown Man in Russia describes the fantastical travels of a young, colored American traveler as he backpacks across Russia in the middle of winter via the Trans-Siberian. The book is a hybrid between the curmudgeonly travelogues of Paul Theroux and the philosophical works of Robert Pirsig. Styled in the vein of Hofstadter, the author lays out a series of absurd, but true stories followed by a deeper rumination on what they mean and why they matter. Each chapter presents a vivid anecdote from the perspective of the fumbling traveler and concludes with a deeper lesson to be gleaned. For those who recognize the discordant nature of our world in a time ripe for demagoguery and for those who want to make it better, the book is an all too welcome antidote. It explores the current global climate of despair over differences and outputs a very different message – one of hope and shared understanding. At times surreal, at times inappropriate, at times hilarious, and at times deeply human, A Brown Man in Russia is a reminder to those who feel marginalized, hopeless, or endlessly divided that harmony is achievable even in the most unlikely of places.

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Mebet concerns a man of the taiga, a hunter, in a moving narrative that blends ethnographic detail, indigenous mythology, and the snowy landscapes of the Arctic. The protagonist is a Nenets, a member of one of the peoples who call far northern Russia home. Dubbed “The Gods’ Favorite” for his seeming imperviousness to harm or grief, Mebet earns the envy and derision of his fellow tribesmen. He lives that carefree and blessed life until his old age, when one day a supernatural messenger arrives to lead him to where the realms of the living and the dead meet. Now the God’s Favorite must confront the price to be paid for his elevated position, and a series of dread trials that lie in store.

Called a dark and terrifying fantasy and the Nenets *Lord of the Rings* by Russian writer and journalist Sergey Kuznetsov, Grigorenko’s *Mebet* is a powerful story about humanity, personal fate, and responsibility. Leading Russian literary critic Galina Yuzefovich welcomed *Mebet* as a true epic for the Nenets, a book that is profound, thrilling and vibrant. Whether the book will earn that lofty place within Nenets culture remains to be seen, but the very publication of the book marks a watershed event.



Alexander Grigorenko was born in Novoche-
kassk, south of Moscow, but has spent most of
his life in the depths of Siberia. Since complet-
ing his studies at the Kemerovo University of
Cinema and Photography, he has worked as a
journalist for the East Siberian bureau of *Rossi-
yskaya Gazeta (Russian Newspaper)*. *Mebet* is
his highly-acclaimed debut novel, and the first
installment of the trilogy, followed by *Ilget* and
The Blind Man Lost His Fife which were pub-
lished in 2013 and 2016 respectively. He is a finalist for the literary awards
such as The Big Book (2012), NOS (2013), and Yasnaya Polyana (2015). For
his third novel *The Blind Man Lost His Fife*, Grigorenko was awarded the
prestigious Yasnaya Polyana Literary Award in 2016. He lives near the city
of Krasnoyarsk.

