

**THE INSPECTOR-GENERAL
(OR "REVIZOR") A
RUSSIAN COMEDY**

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The inspector-general (or "Revizor") A Russian comedy by Nikolai V. Gogol & Arthur A. Sykes

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NIKOLAI V. GOGOL & ARTHUR A. SYKES

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THE INSPECTOR-GENERAL.

THE INSPECTOR-GENERAL (OR
"REVIZÓR.") A RUSSIAN COMEDY:
BY NIKOLAI V. GOGOL.

TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL,
WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES,
BY ARTHUR A. SYKES.

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INTRODUCTION.



“DON'T blame the looking-glass when your own face is at fault.” This Russian proverb was appropriately chosen by Gogol as a motto for his famous comedy. *The Inspector-General* is a faithful reflex of the seamy side of provincial life in Russia, and a typical set of droll but dubious characters live again in its pages. The play is indeed a mirror, and a not too flattering one, to the more shady section of Muscovite society. Apart, however, from the general tone of satire, which would be more keenly appreciated by its victims, there is in the *Revizór* so much rough-and-ready wit, and such a series of humorous situations, that the comedy appeals also to non-Russian readers. As to plot, there is scarcely any. The central incident of the piece is the arrival of a supposed “revizór” in a country town somewhere in the south of Russia. This functionary has no exact English analogue, but he may be defined as an inspector commissioned by the Government, with unlimited powers to inquire into the abuses of pro-

vincial administration. It is needless to say that such a petty autocrat would be about the last person desired as a visitor by the local chinovniks whom Gogol depicts. They are certainly a collection of black sheep, and the approach of this much-dreaded official does not add to their peace of mind. After years of undisturbed jobbery and plunder, they are rudely confronted with the prospect of administrative exile to Siberia. It appears that the Town-Governor has regularly blackmailed the merchants, who in their turn have recouped themselves out of Government contracts. The Judge is more distinguished as a Nimrod than as a Solomon; he has turned the court-house into a kennel, and done a roaring traffic in bribes. Artémi Philippovich, the Warden of the Hospital, has left the patients to be cured by "nature" and the ministrations of an inarticulate foreigner, who is innocent of any knowledge of Russian. Of the others, Luká Lukích, Director of Educational Establishments, to give him his full style and title, is, if possible, more incapable than his subordinates. The Postmaster Shpyókin's weak point is his taste for opening and reading other people's letters; while the Police-Officers are generally too drunk to be employed on duty. Such is the model community, for which the imaginary inspector's escapades have a tragi-comic result.

The comedy was first produced at St. Petersburg in April 1836, during the reign of the Tsar Nicholas. Russian literature at that date showed signs of a revival. Derzhávin, the court poet, and Karamzín, as a romance-writer, were now going out of fashion. It was felt that the mania for adaptation from the French had been rather overdone. Even as early as 1823 Griboyédov had raised a protest. He satirised the inordinate and slavish Francophilism of the age in a powerful play, *Góre ot Umá* (Wit comes to Grief). Krílóv, the fabulist, also contributed to this reaction by producing some genuine Russian work, though on different lines. Sixty-eight years old in 1836, he was at the height of his popularity, and had not ceased issuing his immortal series of Fables.¹ Another prominent *littérateur* was Zhukóvski, then aged fifty-three. He is best known to the outside world as the author of the national anthem, "*Bóshe Tsaryá Khraní*" (God save the Tsar). Of Gogol's more

¹ His last fable, *The Velmósha* (Grandee), was published in 1843. It described a *saintant* magnate as being sent to Paradise on the ground that he would only have done mischief if he had concerned himself with the duties of government. This satire on the authorities was accordingly pigeon-holed by the censors. Krílóv, however, found means of reading it to the Tsar Nicholas, who was greatly amused, and embraced him, with the words, "Write away, old man, write away!" He died, however, the following year.

immediate contemporaries, some half-dozen have achieved European fame. Pushkin, the poet, and Lérmontov, the novelist, were thirty-seven and twenty-two years old respectively when the *Revisor* first came out. They were both destined for the same fate—to be killed in duels by Frenchmen, the former in 1837, and Lérmontov four years later. Other well-known names are those of Turgéniev (1818-1883) and Dostoyévski (1821-1881), the famous pair of novelists. More celebrated than all is, perhaps, Count Lyóf Tolstóy (born in 1828), but he belongs rather to a subsequent generation. Gogol's own age at the date of the *Inspector-General* was twenty-seven, as he was born in the same year as Tennyson and Gladstone.

Nikolái Vastlyevich Gógol¹-Yanovski came into the world at Sorochíntsi, his father's estate, near Poltava, the scene of the famous battle, exactly a century before, between Charles XII. of Sweden and Peter the Great. The date of his birth is variously given as March the 21st, or 31st, 1809. The poetic and historical surroundings of his birthplace in the Ukraine must have largely influenced his childhood and determined the bent of his future career. He

¹ The word *gogol* is the Russian name for the "golden-eye," a kind of wild duck (*fuligula clangula*), called in German *die Schelle Ente*, from the bell-like sound of its flight.