



NIKOLAI GOGOL

The Government
INSPECTOR

Sovereign

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THE GOVERNMENT INSPECTOR



NEW EDITION



SOVEREIGN



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INTRODUCTION

The Government Inspector or Inspector-General is a national institution. To place a purely literary valuation upon it and call it the greatest of Russian comedies would not convey the significance of its position either in Russian literature or in Russian life itself. There is no other single work in the modern literature of any language that carries with it the wealth of associations which the Inspector-General does to the educated Russian. The Germans have their Faust; but Faust is a tragedy with a cosmic philosophic theme. In England it takes nearly all that is implied in the comprehensive name of Shakespeare to give the same sense of bigness that a Russian gets from the mention of the Revizor.

That is not to say that the Russian is so defective in the critical faculty as to balance the combined creative output of the greatest English dramatist against Gogol's one comedy, or even to attribute to it the literary value of any of Shakespeare's better plays. What the Russian's appreciation indicates is the pregnant role that literature plays in the life of intellectual Russia. Here literature is not a luxury, not a diversion. It is bone of the bone, flesh of the flesh, not only of the intelligentsia, but also of a growing number of the common people, intimately woven into their everyday existence, part and parcel of their thoughts, their aspirations, their social, political and economic life. It expresses their collective wrongs and sorrows, their collective hopes and strivings. Not only does it serve to lead the movements of the masses, but it is an integral component element of those movements. In a word, Russian literature is completely bound up with the life of Russian society, and its vitality is but the measure of the spiritual vitality of that society.

This unique character of Russian literature may be said to have had its beginning with the Inspector-General. Before Gogol most Russian writers, with few exceptions, were but weak imitators of foreign models. The drama fashioned itself chiefly upon French patterns. The Inspector-General and later Gogol's novel, *Dead Souls*,

established that tradition in Russian letters which was followed by all the great writers from Dostoyevsky down to Gorky.

As with one blow, Gogol shattered the notions of the theatre-going public of his day of what a comedy should be. The ordinary idea of a play at that time in Russia seems to have been a little like our own tired business man's. And the shock the *Revizor* gave those early nineteenth-century Russian audiences is not unlike the shocks we ourselves get when once in a while a theatrical manager is courageous enough to produce a bold modern European play. Only the intensity of the shock was much greater. For Gogol dared not only bid defiance to the accepted method; he dared to introduce a subject-matter that under the guise of humor audaciously attacked the very foundation of the state, namely, the officialdom of the Russian bureaucracy. That is why the *Revizor* marks such a revolution in the world of Russian letters. In form it was realistic, in substance it was vital. It showed up the rottenness and corruption of the instruments through which the Russian government functioned. It held up to ridicule, directly, all the officials of a typical Russian municipality, and, indirectly, pointed to the same system of graft and corruption among the very highest servants of the crown.

What wonder that the Inspector-General became a sort of comedy-epic in the land of the Czars, the land where each petty town-governor is almost an absolute despot, regulating his persecutions and extortions according to the sage saying of the town-governor in the play, "That's the way God made the world, and the Voltairean free-thinkers can talk against it all they like, it won't do any good." Every subordinate in the town administration, all the way down the line to the policemen, follow—not always so scrupulously—the law laid down by the same authority, "Graft no higher than your rank." As in city and town, so in village and hamlet. It is the tragedy of Russian life, which has its roots in that more comprehensive tragedy, Russian despotism, the despotism that gives the sharp edge to official corruption. For there is no possible redress from it except in violent revolutions.

That is the prime reason why the Inspector-General, a mere comedy, has such a hold on the Russian people and occupies so important a place in Russian literature. And that is why a Russian critic says, "Russia possesses only one comedy, the Inspector-General."

The second reason is the brilliancy and originality with which this national theme was executed. Gogol was above all else the artist. He was not a radical, nor even a liberal. He was strictly conservative.

While hating the bureaucracy, yet he never found fault with the system itself or with the autocracy. Like most born artists, he was strongly individualistic in temperament, and his satire and ridicule were aimed not at causes, but at effects. Let but the individuals act morally, and the system, which Gogol never questioned, would work beautifully. This conception caused Gogol to concentrate his best efforts upon delineation of character. It was the characters that were to be revealed, their actions to be held up to scorn and ridicule, not the conditions which created the characters and made them act as they did. If any lesson at all was to be drawn from the play it was not a sociological lesson, but a moral one. The individual who sees himself mirrored in it may be moved to self-purgation; society has nothing to learn from it.

Yet the play lives because of the social message it carries. The creation proved greater than the creator. The author of the *Revizor* was a poor critic of his own work. The Russian people rejected his estimate and put their own upon it. They knew their officials and they entertained no illusions concerning their regeneration so long as the system that bred them continued to live. Nevertheless, as a keen satire and a striking exposition of the workings of the hated system itself, they hailed the *Revizor* with delight. And as such it has remained graven in Russia's conscience to this day.

It must be said that "Gogol himself grew with the writing of the *Revizor*." Always a careful craftsman, scarcely ever satisfied with the first version of a story or a play, continually changing and rewriting, he seems to have bestowed special attention on perfecting this comedy. The subject, like that of *Dead Souls*, was suggested to him by the poet Pushkin, and was based on a true incident. Pushkin at once recognized Gogol's genius and looked upon the young author as the rising star of Russian literature. Their acquaintance soon ripened into intimate friendship, and Pushkin missed no opportunity to encourage and stimulate him in his writings and help him with all the power of his great influence. Gogol began to work on the play at the close of 1834, when he was twenty-five years old. It was first produced in St. Petersburg, in 1836. Despite the many elaborations it had undergone before Gogol permitted it to be put on the stage, he still did not feel satisfied, and he began to work on it again in 1838. It was not brought down to its present final form until 1842.

Thus the *Revizor* occupied the mind of the author over a period of eight years, and resulted in a product which from the point of