EVGENY ONYEGIN

CANTO I

*From the Russian of Pushkin*

I

My uncle, rich and well respected,

When his old bones began to ache,

Determined not to be neglected,

(A proper line for him to take).

The moral’s hardly worth exploring,

But, Oh my God! How deadly boring

There at bedside night and day

And never walk a step away !

The meanness and degradation

To smile and keep his spirits up,

Then lay the pillows in their station

And sadly tilt a medicine cup,

To sigh and think at every cough

When will the Devil take him off?

II

Such was our young man’s mood and spirit,

Driving apace in dust and din.

’Twas Jove’s decree he should inherit

The garnered gold of all his kin.

Oh friends who heard my earlier story

That led Ludmila to her glory

Come, meet my hero, there’s no time

For introductions set to rhyme.

It was in Peter’s famous city

Onegin passed his infant days.

You too perhaps who read my ditty ?

At least you’ve trod its pearly ways.

Et ego ⎯⎯ but I came to see

The North does not agree with me.

III

Bravely evading war’s mischances

His noble father lived in debt,

Gave each year three splendid dances

And kept his name in the Gazett.

Eugene was not at all neglected ;

*Mamzelle* (most carefully selected)

Handed *Monsieur* a healthy child,

Lovable, but a trifle wild.

Monsieur l’Abbé avoided quarrels ⎯

A joke is better when you teach ⎯

Never insisted much on morals,

Or grew emphatic in his speech.

He could not bite and would not bark.

When ambling round the Summer Park.

IV

The years of boyhood duly ended,

Monsieur departed from the scene,

While hope and melancholy blended

Excited and dismayed Eugene.

Freedom at last, and money handy,

He dressed like a London dandy,

Hair a la mode, divinely curled,

And sallies forth to view the world.

He was equipped for good society.

Spoke French (and wrote it) with esprit,

Led a mazurka with propriety,

And bowed to just the right degree,⎯

Everything that in brief is meant

By charming and intelligent.

V

We all take up our spot of learning

Somehow or other, God knows how !

Enough to keep the brain from turning

And leave a polish on the brow.

Experienced critics, unromantic,

Labelled him clever but pedantic,

And yet he knew the art to please,

To listen and converse with ease.

Whate’er the theme, it never found him

In dull and unresponsive mood,

And if the topic grew beyond him

He smiled as if he understood,

And earned a tribute from Madame

By an unlooked-for epigram.

VI

The Classics now are out of fashion,

Let no-one therefore think the worse

Of Eugene that he had no passion

For Latin grammar, prose or verse.

He had been known occasionally

To round a letter off with *Vale*,

And greatly daring to translate

An epigraph with name and date.

He saw no point in archaeology,

Where dust and dirt have settled long,

And all he kept of this philology

Was tags of Virgil (quoted wrong)

And little stories, grave and gay,

From Tarquin to the present day.

VII

As to the tender melting lyric,

Its music never reached his heart,

What are Iambus, Trochee, Pyrric,

To one who know them not apart ?

In place of honouring the Muses

An economic work he chooses,

And with a grave judicious air

Deciphers in an easy chair

That complicated and ethereal

Legend that Adam Smith has told,

How if the State has raw material

A people may dispense with gold.

His father did not understand,

And mortgaged the remaining land.

VIII

I fear that it would try your patience

To tell you all the things he knew.

It was not always Wealth of Nations,

He had a nobler aim in view.

Had marked it down while still aboy,

His one complaint, his only joy,

With more than dictatorial might

Ruling his thought both day and night.

*Amour* ? Of course, I knew you’d say so,

The swelling theme, the gentle crime,

That ruined the melodious Naso

And snuffed him out before his time,

All by the barren Pontic foam,

Far distant from his hearth and home.

IX

X

He soon revealed a natural talent,

Adopting the Protean style,

Could turn from *ingenu* to gallant

Or turn the villain with a smile :

Be *sympathique* and confidential,

Not losing sight of the essential,

Keep silent for an hour, and then

Be the most eloquent of men.

His artless *billet-doux* included

As much of love as words will hold,

Never a hint of self intruded :

His eye was moist, his look was bold,

And more than once he drew quite near

To dropping an authentic tear.

XI

Despairing accents low and broken

Are certain of their destined aim,

A modest equivoke well spoken

Can set a virgin heart aflame.

Innocent is she ? Or retaining

Prejudice from an early training ?

Watch for the moment when she cares,

There is a tide in these affairs.

A challenge now. By way of trial

Secure a private rendezvous.

The hunt is up. Brook no denial.

The field of love is clear to view.

So to the culminating date,

When you instruct her *tête à tête*.

XII

Eugene could stir a tender feeling

In the coquette expert in arms,

And neatly deal a wound past healing

To any rival for her charms ;

Bonmots that raised an instant tetter,

His booby-traps were even better,

Yet happy husbands, all the same,

Asked him to dinner and he came.

Such Faublas’ friend and life-long student

(A knowing and accomplished spouse),

Timorous Greybeard (how imprudent !)

And Magnus of the antlered brows,

When no complaint about his life,

Himself, his dinner, or his wife.

(XIII, XIV)

XV

Awake at last, the sun is shining,

Three invitations on the tray.

A children’s party, dancing, dining,

Are all attractive in their way.

A problem, though, a bore, a worry,

Not to be settled in a hurry ;

Which to begin with ? I declare

One really can’t go everywhere !

Meanwhile, as fresh as any flower,

In a loose-fitting Bolivar,

Onegin spends a thoughtless hour

Sauntering down the boulevard.

The day glides on. It won’t be long

Before the punctual dinner-gong.

Translated by Reginald Mainwaring Hewitt

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