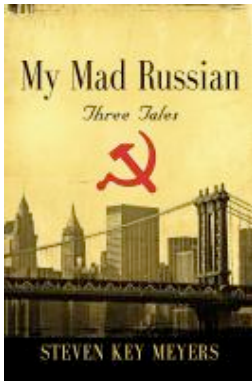


# My Mad Russian

*Three Tales*



STEVEN KEY MEYERS



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**Three Tales**

**Steven Key Meyers**

My Mad Russian: Three Tales

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## Prologue

My detective, Bob Argent, left word with my butler in Katonah one Friday evening past 11:00. Our guests, including the distinguished cellist who played after dinner, had already retired, and Dora and I were thinking of bed. Argent couldn't stay on the line, but Franz found me promptly, and I had William bring the Cadillac around at once. In the country the November air felt raw.

"Fill 'er up, Mr. Berlin?" William asked as I got in back. Normally he gassed up at our own pump before we returned to town Sunday evening.

"We'll do that on the Taconic," I snapped. "No time now."

That put the proper spirit into him. To Dora I had explained that the office needed me. In not quite twenty years of marriage, the office had never before needed me on a Friday night, but she said simply, "Hurry back, dear. Or will you stay in town?"

"William, of course drive carefully," I now directed, "but please with as much speed as you can."

His cap tilting backwards, he said into the mirror, "Yes, sir, Mr. Berlin," and thanks to the sixteen cylinders of the Cadillac's engine, I was flung against the leather and the trees began flashing past amidst screeches of rubber as we rounded the curves. It was a 1930 model, which I bought one week before the 1929 Crash; four years later, I was glad that I had. I grabbed a strap and hung on, nauseous.

Without further instruction William pulled into the service area on the Taconic State Parkway, a cottage group in glazed white terra-cotta suggestive of an alpine village. Lights blanched the faces of the attendants and wiped out their shadows. We were off again within minutes.

“The house, Mr. Berlin?” William asked when decisions loomed at Hawthorne Circle.

“Yes, please, the house,” I affirmed. My limestone Beaux-Arts house on 54th Street, the north side of the block anchored at Fifth Avenue by the University Club and at Sixth by the Warwick Hotel.

But Argent’s summons came because of what he had observed, not at my house, but next door to it, a brownstone six stories tall a few steps to the west, also my property.

For years I had rented it to gentry for whom a good address was desirable, but such had vanished with the Depression’s onset, or my tenant had, anyway. After the house stood vacant for two years, I turned it over for a peppercorn rent—one dollar a year—to a young genius, Pioty Alexandreyevitch Primov. The mad Russian had fitted it out as an electrical laboratory, where he conducted research on his Shado-Rays and assembled for sale the *Primover*, an electric musical instrument powered by them whose eerie caterwauling made me absolutely weary of life. My wife, however, was devoted to the *Primover*, studied with its inventor, and was fast becoming an expert player.

Though the *Primover* was something new under the sun, it was Primov’s mastery of Shado-Rays in the astonishing form he called *Shadio* that was to serve as the basis for the large investment I was preparing.

*Shadio* held promise of being an advertising and decorating gold mine. It would transform the American streetscape: Anyone walking past a store window rigged with *Shadio*



would unwittingly, invisibly animate it. Bulbs and neon tubes would spark alive, flashing slogans and patterns in lights across the glass, with designs, colors and rhythms that varied with the personal silhouettes and individual gaits of passersby. More mundane devices might also operate at *Shadio's* command, lifting items, revolving them, making the window dance.

And in the home, *Shadio* would vary the lighting, open and close curtains, turn radios on or off as one moved from room to room, as well as function (so Primov assured me) as a burglar alarm. All in all, *Shadio* represented the most enticing financial opportunity of my life, and the first of any appeal to come my way since the Crash.

On 54th, I told William to pull up. He nosed to the curb in front of the bar of the Dorset Hotel. Thus ended our mad dash into the city from Ca D'Ora, fifty miles in just over one hour.

We sat behind the car's smoked glass. All was quiet. Aside from an occasional taxi, a man or two walking down the street, nothing moved. On every floor of Primov's house light leaked from the edges of shades and curtains.

The bar's brass revolving door whooshed a breath, my door opened, and Bob Argent, removing his hat, shoved into the backseat next to me.

"Evening, Mr. Berlin," he said. "Sorry to disturb you so late."

"Hello, Bob. What's—uh—going on?" Though I tend to fall into it when with him, I don't think his argot suits me.

"Not quite sure, sir. No one's gone in or out since I called your house. Telephoned after a Ford dropped off four guys who ran up Primov's steps and forced the door with crowbars. Set off a god-awful racket—some kind of alarm. One of them might have been your friend Col. Dead Eyes. The Ford drove off, but see that delivery van?" He pointed to a one-ton truck,

of the kind used by department stores, idling twenty yards ahead of us. We saw the flare of a match in the driver's side mirror. "Pulled up five minutes ago. Seems to be waiting."

"What for, Bob?"

"Won't know until that door opens."

Argent is an outstanding private detective who does occasional work for my firm, though usually of a financial nature. A World War veteran, and veteran, too, of several years with the New York Police Department, he holds degrees earned at night in law and accounting. In addition to being smart and capable, he is of intimidating size. Months earlier I had asked him to keep watch on Primov.

We sat for some time. I sorely wanted to go inside my house and put the whole thing out of my mind, pull the covers over my head and go to sleep. Instead we sat. William ran the engine to keep the heater going.

Finally, starting with the top floor, every light in the house went off and its double front doors opened. A short figure in a shapeless overcoat peered up and down the street, leaned over to set the door stops, then straightened up to allow three men to maneuver past him a sizable packing case on a hand truck. The case cleared the threshold, and the men carefully bumped it onto the stoop.

The short one—who indeed looked to be the man I called *Col. Dead Eyes*—closed the door and wiped down the doorknobs with a cloth he shoved in his pocket as once more he looked up the street. A limousine was no unusual sight on that block.

"Bob, you're right," I said. "The short one in gabardine? That's Col. Dead Eyes."

"Christ," said Argent. He knew that I believed Col. Dead Eyes to be an operative of the secret Soviet security apparatus, the NKVD.

Meanwhile the men were bumping the packing case down the steps to the sidewalk. It measured some three feet wide and three feet deep by four feet tall, and obviously was heavy. I imagined that it must contain the newest *Primover*, retail price \$2,000, for the instrument's dimensions were about the same when its two protruding antennae were detached. But to make it howl required plugging it into a trunkful of tubes and speakers; did the thieves not know this?

Col. Dead Eyes impatiently gestured to the truck and, groaning, it made a U-turn and pulled to the curb beside him. Its side was painted with the name of a Grand Street furniture store. We could see the colonel's men lift out and position a ramp, then apparently push the packing case up and aboard the truck.

"So Stalin's got a hankering for electric music?" I remarked. "Wants a *Primover* of his own, for those long Moscow nights?" And welcome to it, I was thinking.

"Mr. Berlin, I think they're making off with the original," Argent murmured. "With the man himself."

This jolted me. "Good God! Can he breathe?"

"They won't kill him. Not in transit."

We heard the truck's rear doors slam shut. Two men apparently remained in back. The other two piled into the cab and, with a grinding of gears and gasping of smoke, the vehicle moved towards Sixth Avenue, passing within ten feet of us.

Argent prompting William, we turned around and followed discreetly, past the El. I expected the truck to take us to the waterfront regions of warehouses and piers I visited only when embarking on a Cunarder.

But at Seventh Avenue it turned. The stoplight delayed us, but we were able to make up the distance in the gaudiness of

Times Square, catching up as it passed the gilded front of the Paramount Building. Our car felt dangerously conspicuous.

“Any guesses?” I asked Argent.

“Headed for the docks, Mr. Berlin—maybe in Jersey. At any rate, I’m guessing some pier that Finnish ships use.”

But not Jersey; short of the Holland Tunnel, at Charles Street the truck turned onto Pier 46 and was admitted through sliding gates of chain-link. We hung back across West Street, beneath the elevated highway, and watched it approach a gangway slanting off a freighter tied up at the wharf. On the ship’s bow was painted some long Scandinavian name. The Hudson River gleamed like metal.

The truck’s rear doors were thrown open, the ramp flung down and, men massing to arrest its slide, the case guided to the ground. Working the hand truck beneath it, they wheeled it towards the gangway.

“OK, Mr. Berlin, we call the cops now, we get ‘em on New York soil,” Argent said. “‘Cause, though Shorty don’t know it, they’re going to have to winch that thing aboard, and that takes time.”

“Let me think about this, Bob.”

The packing case proved too wide for the gangway. The men turned it. It almost fit; almost, but not quite.

“We wait, Mr. Berlin, it becomes Federal. Once it’s on board? Customs, Coast Guard, F.B.I.”

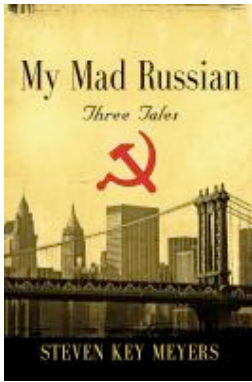
“Bob, I understand. But there are considerations.”

Among them the fact that only that afternoon—November 17, 1933—President Roosevelt had announced that, after fifteen years of shunning the Soviet Union, the United States was recognizing it and posting an ambassador. That presented the possibility that the packing case in effect was a diplomatic pouch—that Primov was already beyond our reach. The thought gave me a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

At the gangway, caps came off and heads were scratched. Col. Dead Eyes furiously shook his fist at the gunwales—he was positively jumping up and down—and there ensued much shouting back and forth. Displeased, he crossed his arms and began slapping his bicep in a Cossack tattoo. The men put themselves into attitudes of waiting.

Argent spoke up. “Mr. Berlin, there’s a phone just back there.” He gestured at a lunch counter aglow beneath the highway. “Shall I?”

“Not just yet, Bob.” I nibbled at the carved ash wood of my walking stick. “Let me think.”



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