

Ruslan and Ludmila

BY

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Dedication

FOR you, the sovereigns of my soul,
Fair ladies, for yourselves alone,
These tales from my hand unroll,
In golden hours of leisure sown;
The whispered fables of past ages,
Shall here fill every playful line.
Receive these eloquent few pages!
For which I ask no praise; for mine
Is but sweet hope; my heart content
If some young girl shall, furtively,
Peruse, her mind on love intent,
These errant songs; or such as she.

Prologue

THERE is a green oak by the bay,
And on the oak a chain of gold:
A learned cat, both night and day,
Circles upon that chain, of old:
And to the right – he spins a song,
And to the left – a tale of wrong.

What marvels there! The wood-sprite rides,
Among the leaves the mermaid hides;
While on deep paths of mystery
Strange unknown creatures leave their spoor;
For huts on hen's legs you can see,
That lack a window or a door;
Wood and valley vision-brimming:
There at dawn the waves come washing
Across the sands and silent shore,
And thirty noble knights appear
One by one, from those waters clear,
Attended there by their tutor;

While a king's son who's riding near
Makes a fierce king his prisoner;
A wizard carries through the sky
A knight, past all the people there,
Over the forests, seas, they fly;
A princess pines there in a cell,
Served by a brown wolf, long and well;
While, with Baba Yaga inside,
A mortar gives that witch a ride;
As King Koschei grows ill with gold.
It's Russia! – Russian scents unfold!

And I was there, and I drank mead,
I saw the green oak by the sea,
I sat there while the learned cat
Told its stories; here's one that
I remember, and now, unfurled,
The tale I'll tell to all the world...

Of deeds performed in ages past,
Things wrought in legendary days.

Canto I: The Abduction

IN his high hall, midst guests amassed,
His fierce sons at his side always,
Sat Vladimir, the Bright Sun, feasting;
His fair daughter he was wedding
To Prince Ruslan, brave and fair,
And from a heavy cup, held there,
To their health, sweet mead was drinking.
Our ancestors ate slowly, they
Long passed the silver bowls around.
They ladled out the wine, that day,
And steaming cups of ale they downed.
Into their hearts they poured good cheer,

Foam hissing at the goblet's rim,
Watching the butlers, prompt, appear,
With vessels filled all to the brim.

In one great hubbub all confounded,
The guests their joyful circle made;
On high a pleasing voice then sounded,
The zither's fleeting music played.
A hush – all listened as Bayan,
That noble singer, praised the pair,
Ludmila's charms, the bold Ruslan,
Love's joining of the brave and fair.

Yet, consumed by ardent feeling,
Ruslan, eating not, nor drinking,
From his 'dear heart' turns not his eyes,
He burns with passion, frowns and sighs.
Tugs his moustache and, impatient,
Counts the passing of each moment.
At one table, midst the feasting,
Three grave young knights are sitting,
Despondent, and with gloomy brows;
Neglectful of the fare, the ale,
They neither eat, nor drink, nor rouse,
Forget the cups, the brimming pail.
They do not seem to hear Bayan,
Embarrassed, they lower their eyes,
These three are rivals of Ruslan,
A deadly brew of love and hate,
Within their hearts' depths, they disguise.
The first: Odin-Rogdai, the brave,
That, with his sharp blade, once gave
A greater breadth to Kiev's fields;
The second, Farlaf, loud and vain,
In feasting first, but, then again,
With the sword the one who yields;

The last one, passionate at heart,
The young Khazar, Khan Ratmir.
Sullen and pale, they brood apart,
And from the feast they take no cheer.

The feast is done. The feasters rise,
And mingle, while all turn their eyes
Towards the newly-weds, the bride
Lowering her gaze, in modesty,
As if her heart quaked inwardly,
The groom all smiling at her side.
Night's shadows now embrace the earth,
And, close to midnight, silence reigns;
The sleepy boyars cease their mirth,
Mead-fuddled, bow, then take the reins.
The groom's delighted, all elation,
Clasping, in imagination,
Caressing, his shy virgin bride;
While the Grand Duke moves to bless
Their union, with fond tenderness,
And sorrow that he seeks to hide.

And now the girl, without delay,
Off to the marriage bed they light;
Dimmed the lamps, yet, many a ray
Of Love's lamp now warms...the night.
Gifts of love are here made ready,
Its sweetest hopes are now found true;
Jealous robes, that tumble sweetly
Byzantine carpets now must woo...
Do you not hear the loving whisper?
And the sound of their sweet kiss?
And then an interrupted murmur,
A last shyness? Expectation
Fills the groom with true delight,
When, at this moment of elation...

Harsh thunder sounds... a flash of light,
The lamp expires, and smoke pours out,
All's darkness, all things sway about,
While the soul of Ruslan freezes....
Then dread silence, all noise ceases,
A strange voice rings out, loudly, twice,
A dreadful form the darkness seizes,
One blacker than a foggy haze,
Then once again the tower is still.
The groom starts up, despite his will,
Upon his brow the sweat like ice.
Trembling, with chill hand, he strays,
Questioning the darkness where
Naught's to be found but empty air...
And never a sign of his dear heart!
The emptiness he grasps at; she,
His Ludmila, snatched suddenly,
Borne away through some evil art.

Oh, if you must find martyrdom
Bearing a passion, hopelessly;
Though to a life of sadness come,
My friends, not all is misery;
Yet if, after long years, pining,
I embraced my love a moment,
After tears, desire, and longing,
Only to find her, in an instant,
Lost forever...my friends, then I
Would, willingly, prefer to die!

Ruslan was simply most unhappy.
What would the Grand Duke have to say?
Hearing the news, brought suddenly,
His son-in-law he sought to flay.
He summoned him, convened the court:
'Where is Ludmila?' overwrought,

He cried, with dread and fiery brow,
Ruslan replied not. 'Friends and kin!
I think of your past deeds, who now
Will pity an old man, seek, and win
My child, by following after?
For their success shall not prove vain –
Yes, wail you wretch! And forever
Cry how you failed her, live in pain! –
Her rescuer a bride shall gain,
And my forefathers' realm also,
Friends, kin, who'll answer to my plea?...
'I', the sad groom said, 'I shall go!
'I', 'I', – with Rogdai, cried loudly –
Farlaf, and the joyful Ratmir.
'We will saddle our horses now,
Happy to seek both far and near.
You'll not be parted long, we vow.
Fear not: the princess we'll pursue.'
His gratitude was great, in tears,
He stretched his hands to them, anew,
Full of sorrow, bowed by his years.

Swiftly, the four knights departed,
Ruslan despondent, and half-dead,
Tormented, near broken-hearted,
Thinking of her whom he had wed.
Mounting their eager steeds, all four,
Race now along the Dnieper's shore,
Leaving a dust-cloud in their wake,
Are soon, upon the course they take,
Lost to sight, while long he'll stand,
The Grand Duke, gazing into space,
Bare, empty fields on either hand,
As his sad thoughts pursue the chase.

Ruslan was silent, full of care,
His reason and his memory dim,
While, haughtily, glancing there,
Over his shoulder, after him
Sped Farlaf, but a pace or so
Behind, crying: 'Friends, now that I
Taste freedom, well if I should spy
Some fierce giant! The blood will flow,
Love many a victim shall afford,
Many through jealousy must bleed,
For passion's sake. Rejoice my sword,
Rejoice, rejoice, my eager steed!'

The Khazar Khan who seemed, already,
To clasp Ludmila for his pains,
In thought, upon his saddle fairly
Danced, youth pulsing in his veins,
The light of hope gleamed in his eye.
Onwards, he makes his stallion fly.
Now rearing his fine steed, teasing,
Now urging his brave mount uphill,
Now leaving him to his prancing.

Rogdai, gloomy, silent, fearing
Some unknown fate, now feels the chill
Of his jealousy far more than
All the rest; his anguished gaze
Now often fixed upon Ruslan,
A dark and dreadful cast displays.

To the same road the rivals keep,
All that day, while the sky is light,
To where the Dnieper's banks are steep,
And, from the east, shade fills the night.
Mist pours down to veil the river;
Their weary steeds have need of rest.

Where their road crosses another
Below the mountain, it seems best
To part: 'To fate,' the riders cry,
Let us entrust ourselves.' And so,
Each steed, unspurred now, by and by,
Choosing a path, meanders slow.

What then, my Ruslan, all distraught,
Alone, in silent desolation?
It seems Ludmila, all you sought,
Was but a dream; a lost elation.
Your visor raised upon your brow,
The reins loose in your powerful hand,
Your ride amid the dark fields now,
And neither faith nor hope command,
Both ebbing there, within your soul.

Yet there's a cave he makes his goal –
A light there; he dismounts, to stand
Before it, and then moves to enter
That slumbering vault, old as nature.
Despondently he walks, to where
An aged man is seated; clear
His eye, and calm his quiet gaze,
Grey with years his tangled hair.
The lamplight falls about him there;
Over the ancient book it plays,
In which he reads. 'Welcome, my son!
With a smile, he now greets Ruslan,
'Twenty long years are past and done;
Faded now, but an aged man,
Here I have waited, patiently,
For this day that I long foresaw;
Bound now by fate's unyielding law,
Come, sit here, and attend to me.
Ruslan, Ludmila's lost to you,

The strength of your great spirit, too
Has waned, and yet these ills will pass.
Though evil chance plagues you, alas,
With faith and hope yet, bravely fight
Against all woes; with manly art,
Advance – though in the dark of night –
With shining blade, and valiant heart.

Ruslan, seek out the one who's wronged you,
The dreaded sorcerer, Chernomor,
Lodged in his mountain fastness, who
Has snatched away young girls before.
No man as yet has entered there,
Nor even set his gaze thereon,
But you shall end this ill affair,
And penetrate his hold; lay on,
And slay the wretch with your own hand.
No more I'll say, where all's amiss:
Your fate now, you must understand,
Depends on your own will in this.'

Our knight knelt at the old man's feet,
And kissed his right hand, joyfully,
A fairer world he seemed to greet,
His heart forgot its misery.
He felt restored: yet, suddenly,
The blood again drained from his face...
'Your sorrow's cause is plain to me,'
The old man said: 'And yet your case
Is not so sad, your woe I'll banish.
You fear the sorcerer's ill passion;
Be calm; no harm shall he accomplish,
She need fear naught in his dread prison.
He draws the stars down from the sky,
He whistles, and the moon must tremble,
Yet he must still see time go by;

His art is weak, though he'd dissemble.
A jealous guardian at her door,
Who keeps her under lock and key,
Yet, impotent, he'll do no more
Though his captive owns to beauty.
He wanders near her cell, in silence,
Cursing the harshness of his lot...
But, fair knight, the light goes hence,
Let peace and rest not be forgot.'

On a bed of moss, Ruslan lies,
By the embers of a dying fire,
Seeking forgetfulness, he sighs,
Tossing and turning, with desire...
Tis all in vain! He yet must speak:
'Sick at heart, though sleep I seek,
Father, my mind: it will not rest.
Life wearies me; what shall I do?
Ill dreams torment your sorry guest.
Converse with me: who then are you,
Blessed confidante of fate? Forgive
The bold nature of my question:
And why in this waste do you live?
Engage me yet in conversation.'

The old man answered him like this,
Sighing; 'I have forgot, dear son,
My distant home, a land of mist.
Finnish by birth, why, I was one
Who tended to my neighbour's sheep,
In lonely vales to which we keep,
And in my carefree youth I knew
The dense oak-groves, the running streams,
The stony caverns, and the few
Pleasures that fill a poor man's dreams.

My days in solitude I spent –
There came an end to my content.

Near our village, there lived a girl,
Named Naina; in all this world,
No sweeter flower of solitude,
Existed, none was lovelier.

One morning I came upon her,
For, playing on my pipe, I viewed
Her by a stream, as there I grazed
My flocks in a grassy meadow.
Young and beautiful, she raised
Her hands to wreath a garland so,
And my fate was sealed forever...

Ah, knight – for it was Naina!
As my reward, I felt the blaze
Of passion for my daring gaze,
For love had set my soul on fire,
Heavenly joy that lifts us higher,
And all the pangs of deep desire.

Six months passed, and, full of fear,
I opened up my heart, drew near,
Cried: 'How I love you, Naina!'
Yet my timid words she ever
Scorned, displayed a look of pride;
Vainly flaunting her charms anew,
Indifferently, she replied:
'Well, shepherd boy, I love not you!'

Now all things seemed strange to me,
Gloomy the native oak-trees' shade,
The shepherds' frolics in the glade,
Naught could ease my melancholy,
Sunk deep in dark despondency;
To leave Finland was my mission,

And risk the dangers of the ocean;
To sail, and with a band of brothers,
Attempt thus to achieve high fame,
Naina's fresh attention claim,
Swore it, in the style of lovers.
I found bold fishermen, and we
Took to the waves, to seek for gold,
Shores where all once lived peacefully
Now saw the steel flash bright and cold,
The warring vessels clashing loudly.
Thus, full of hope, I sailed away,
Midst my countrymen, fought fiercely,
Many the foes that we did slay,
Till the snow, the waves, ran redly.
Our fame, it spread; until, I say
Foreign kings feared our arrival,
Their proud squadrons fled, that day,
The northern blades dealing trouble.
Fiercely we fought, cheerfully too
We shared the spoils, and sat down
To feast with men we conquered, who
Ate with us, and with never a frown.
Yet, my heart lost to Naina,
Below the sound of feasts and war,
I yet longed for her, as ever,
Seeking still my native shore.
'Friends,' I cried, 'tis time to leave,
Hang our chain-mail neath an eave
Of some fine hut, in peace of mind!
The oars now stirred; our battles past,
Leaving a trail of fear behind,
We sailed forth, Finland's shores to find,
And proudly anchored – home at last!

Fulfilled, was my enduring dream,
Fulfilled, was all my deep desire!
The moment shone with lightning-fire,
Sweet meeting's bright and ardent gleam!
At the feet of my proud beauty,
I laid my sword, stained and bloody,
Corals, and pearls, and shining gold.
Drunk with passion, I stood dumbly,
Surrounded by her throng of wholly
Envious friends, no longer bold,
But rather, now, turned prisoner.
Yet full of scorn, my love forgot,
She, in her indifferent manner,
Cried: 'Hero fine, I love you not!'

Why speak, dear son, of things that I
Now lack the strength to remember?
Here, in solitude, where I sigh,
The spirit numbed, the grave closer,
Sadly, my sorrows I recall,
And at the thought of times gone by,
Heavy the tear that's born to fall
To my grey beard, from out my eye.

But, listen! In my homeland there,
Amidst wild fishermen, is where,
In the wastes, strange arts folk ply.
Beneath the trees' eternally
Silent roof, in the forest deep,
Grey-haired sorcerers, secretly,
Upon the highest wisdom keep
Their minds directed; they foresee
All; and such is their potency
That all to come, as all long past,
Is subject to them, utterly;
Love itself, and the grave at last.

And, I, who sought love avidly,
Determined that, nevertheless,
I'd rouse love in proud Naina
By magic, spite all woefulness.
Thus, the forest's dark interior
I hastened freely to embrace.
Immured in solitude, I learned
The sorcerer's art, till I had earned,
Through unseen years in that place,
Dread knowledge of fair Nature's power;
Came long-sought momentary grace:
To magic now I might aspire.
'The crown of love and love's desire,
Naina, now is mine', I cried,
Thinking to gain the goal denied,
But fate it was that won the day,
My stubborn enemy always.

Filled with youthful hope, and dreams,
Roused by my desire, I, swiftly,
Cast a spell, and summoned to me,
Midst the forest's shadowy gleams,
Dark spirits, till lightning, briefly,
Magically, the gloom did greet,
And with a whirlwind there did meet...
Earth shuddering beneath my feet.
And, on the forest floor before me,
A crone, grey-haired, I now did see,
A hump-backed form, in my retreat,
With trembling head, yet eyes alight
Oh, my Naina twas, brave knight!...
With silent dread I now measured
That wretched form with my eyes,
My doubt I scarcely could disguise,
And cried: 'Is this my treasured

Darling? Naina can this be you?
Naina where is all your beauty?
What power changed you utterly,
And formed you, terribly, anew?
How long then since I left the light,
And parted from my dear, my soul;
How long?' ... 'Full forty years, all told,'
The crone replied, eyes glittering bright,
'Seventy years are mine this day.
What then? ... Tis thus the years speed by:
Your spring is done with now, I say –
As is my own, life drains away –
And we are old now, you and I.
Yet listen, friend, it matters not,
If fickle youth's forsaken you,
If I am grey, and crooked too,
My liveliness my charms forgot,
If I am not what I was then,'
And, muttering, she spoke again:
'For (tis my secret), nonetheless,
A witch am I, a sorceress!

And so, she was indeed, and I,
I stood there dumb and motionless;
For all my knowledge won thereby,
A perfect fool was I, no less.

And then the horror! For my spell
Had worked on my grey-haired goddess
Successfully, yet far too well;
Fresh passion stirred within her breast.
Her dread mouth twisted in a smile;
In graveyard tones, yet free of guile,
She mumbled out her love for me.
Imagine then my agony!
I trembled, and gazed at the ground;

Despite her coughing, still I heard
A deep, a passionate note sound:
'Well now, dear friend, I, in a word
Find that this heart of mine was born
For tenderness, both night and morn;
My feelings wake, for love I burn,
For all love's passion and desire...
Come to my arms, for you I yearn...
Dear friend, I'm dying of love's fire...'

And thus, she peered at me, Ruslan,
With passionate and lustful eye,
While plucking hard at my caftan
With skinny hands. I thought to die.
Closing my eyes tight shut from horror,
Dreadful it was to linger there,
Till I could bear the place no longer,
Broke free, and ran in deep despair.
She cried: 'O you, of love unworthy!'
Pursuing: 'you disturbed me, truly,
Stole my pure, my innocent days!
You won Naina's love, and yet
You scorn her; faithlessly forget;
Such are the hearts of men always!
All breathe their treason, and none stays.
Alas, I blame myself; the monster
Had seduced me, passionate ever.
Wretched traitor! Now, shame and grief
Are mine! Yet, tremble heartless thief!

Thus, we parted. Since then, in brief,
I've lived a solitary creature,
With disappointment in my heart,
Finding solace deep in Nature,
In peace, and in the subtle art.
Now, the grave is summoning me,

Yet those emotions linger on,
The witch has them in memory;
There, the flame of passion gone
Has turned from ire to enmity.
A black and evil-loving spirit,
She'll hate you as she hates me, friend;
And yet, to all grief there's a limit,
All earthly sorrows have their end.'

Our brave knight listened, eagerly,
To the old man's tale, open-eyed;
No lapsing into sleep, while, swiftly,
Night on its peaceful way did glide;
Deep thought his mind thus occupied,
Until the dawn shone clear and bright...
And then, in gratitude, the knight
Embraced the old man, with a sigh,
And, hopeful, left him, by and by.
He leapt into the saddle; tightly
Gripped tween his strong legs his steed,
And, with a whistle, spurred him lightly:
'Be with me in my hour of need,
Father!' he cried, as, glancing round,
He galloped o'er the empty ground.
'Farewell!' the old sage shouted twice,
'Forgive your bride; by love be bound;
Forget not this old man's advice!'

Canto II: The Sorcerer

YOU, rivals in destruction's story,
Among yourselves know naught of peace,
Pay tribute to a sombre glory,
And revel in your foe's decease!
Let all folk turn to ice before you,
By gazing on your dreadful feast,

For none will heave a sigh for you,
Nor folk regret you in the least.
And you, the knights of Parnassus,
Bring not scorn on your profession,
With all your quarrels, all your fuss;
Swear away, but with discretion,
Bold foes, but of a different kind.
Rivals in love, you too, remain
At ease together, should you find
You can so do! Fair peace, maintain.
Trust me, my friends; whom fate may deign
To grant a girl's heart as his prize,
Should smile, amidst a world of pain:
He's foolish, sinful, otherwise.

Now Rogdai the Bold, in torment,
Chilled by an ill presentiment,
Who, into the wastes, had ridden,
Far from the other three, intent
On solitary thought, went, hidden
Amid the woods, in discontent.
The Evil Spirit gave him pain,
Brought dark confusion to his soul,
He muttered, ever and again:
'To slay, despite all, is my goal!...
Ruslan! Beware, for you shall die...
Your bride will shed a bitter tear...'
Then, suddenly, he gave a cry,
And back upon his tracks did steer.

All this while Farlaf the valiant
Had spent his time deep in pleasant
Slumber, that whole morn till noon;
Then, by a stream, sat in the shade,
To calm his spirit, and in tune,
With silence, dined there in the glade.

Suddenly he saw a rider,
Towards the spot the horseman made,
And Farlaf a moment later
Leaping to the saddle swiftly
Abandoning his meal, his spear,
His helm, his chain-mail, all his gear,
Fled without a glance, abruptly.
'Halt, you coward!' the unknown knight,
Cried out to Farlaf, now in flight,
'Come, your fine head I'll sever, sir!
Let me but meet with you, you cur!
Farlaf who'd recognised the voice
Of his bold rival Rogdai, fled
All the faster, such was his choice,
Fearing the man would strike him dead.
So, will the hare run, in its haste,
Laying its ears back in the chase,
Over the fields, in leaps and bounds,
Flying in terror from the hounds.
Where this fell pursuit now passed
The winter snows, melted at last,
Had caused a muddy stream to flow,
That gnawed at the earth's depths below.
Farlaf's steed rushed at the torrent,
With flying tail and mane, intent
On leaping the moat before it,
Biting down harder on the bit:
But its timid rider now fell,
Head over heels, into the mud,
Unable sky from earth to tell,
Ready to die there in the flood.
Rogdai flew towards the ravine;
His cruel blade in his fell hand.
'Die, coward! Die!' ... And then his keen
Blade he stayed for, you understand,

He saw it was Farlaf there; anger,
Amazement, and sheer vexation,
Showed in his face; thereafter,
Grinding his teeth, in frustration,
He hastened swiftly from the place,
Fuming, his head now lowered... though
Barely able to hide a trace
Of laughter at himself, also.

As, on a mountain track, he rode,
An old woman, beside the way,
Humpbacked, her hair completely grey,
With her staff showed him the road,
Pointing northwards: 'You'll find him there!'
Rogdai, feeling elation flare,
Flew on, his speed unabated,
To where certain death awaited.

And our Farlaf? In the ditch he lay,
Not daring to breathe, wondering
If he was dead, or still living,
Hoping his rival was far away.
The old woman's voice, suddenly,
Rang out above him: 'Come,' said she,
'Stand up, well done, all's quiet now,
You'll meet no other foe, I vow.
A steed I've brought for you to ride;
On your feet; hear what I confide.'

The knight, embarrassed I'll allow,
Now crawled from out the muddy moat.
He looked around, and sighed: 'At least
No bones, are broken!' as the yeast
Of life returned; and cleared his throat.

'Believe me!' the old woman said,
Ludmila will prove hard to find,

She's far away, as good as dead;
You'll not attain her, to my mind.
It's dangerous to roam the earth,
Nor will it bring you happiness,
So, follow my advice, seek mirth
And comfort back at home; success
Would be to live near Kiev quietly,
Free, there, from all anxiety;
Toward your native village wend.
Ludmila won't escape us, friend!

With this the crone vanished, swiftly.
Impatient to be gone, our hero
Now chose upon his way to go.
Forgetting the princess, and glory,
He headed home; though you may know
Deep among the oak woods every
Slightest sound, a bird in flight,
A tinkling stream, gave him a fright.

Meanwhile Ruslan rides far afield;
The forest wilds, the empty places,
But one habitual thought they yield,
Of Ludmila, her sweet embraces.
He murmurs 'Will I find you, true
Bride of my soul? Oh, where are you?
To view your gaze, so bright and clear;
And, your sweet conversation, hear?
Were you destined for this sorcerer?
For his foul prison, dark and cold,
Your bloom lost, as his prisoner,
A mournful virgin, faded, old?
Or shall some bold rival of mine,
Succeed? Why no, you are too fine:
My head is on my shoulders still,
My faithful sword yet serves my will.'

One evening, Ruslan was riding
Along a steep and rugged shore,
The waters, below him, gleaming,
As if at peace for evermore.
When, suddenly, an arrow whirred
Above his head; close by, he heard
The clang of chain-mail, and the pound
Of horse's hooves across the ground,
'Halt! Halt' There came a thunderous shout.
He turned then, as the cry rang out.
A fierce rider, shrilly whistling,
Over the open field there flew,
With his lance raised high; and, bristling,
Ruslan turned, to meet him. Nearing,
The other cried: 'Friend, I'll slay you;
Come, my sharp blade you shall meet;
Look for your bride beneath my feet.'
His anger saw Ruslan redden,
He'd recognised that strident voice...

But my friends...What of our maiden?
To leave the knights must be our choice,
For a while; we'll find them later.
For, surely, it's high time we sought
The fair princess, and gave a thought,
To Chernomor, the sorcerer.

A confidante of errant fancy,
Immodest too, occasionally,
I've told how that gentle beauty,
Ludmila, vanished so swiftly,
Snatched away from poor Ruslan,
Amidst the fog on either hand.
Unhappy bride! When newly-wed,
Torn thus from out the marriage bed.
That villain soared with you on high,

Fled in a whirlwind through the air,
Through clouds of smoke, the gloomy sky,
Sped with you to his mountain lair.
There, you found yourself, now voiceless,
Your senses lost, your memory,
Trembling, immured in misery,
In that sorcerer's dread fortress.

So, in high summer, frequently,
From my threshold, I would see
The rooster, the henhouse sultan,
Chase some fearful mate. He ran
Through the yard, in his passion,
With his wings embraced the hen,
While on high, in ruthless fashion,
The grey kite circled slyly; then
That ancient thief of the poultry,
Would fall like sudden lightning,
All the yard's inmates frightening,
And swoop on them, disastrously.
To the heavens the villain soars,
Grasping the prey in savage claws,
Bearing it to some dark crevasse.
In vain the rooster sees them pass,
He whom fear and sorrow freeze;
The bird cries out to his mistress;
Only a few feathers, weightless,
Drift downwards, slowly, on the breeze.

Until the morn, the young princess
Lay lost in deep oblivion,
As by some dreadful nightmare stunned,
Until, at last, from sleep's excess
She woke, but not to see the sun,
Possessed by fear and restlessness,
Her spirit seeking for someone

Most dear, now that the night is done.
'Where are you, love?' she softly cries,
Calls louder, but her question dies,
About the room she casts her eyes:
'Ludmila, whose is this chamber?'
Amidst the pillows set about her,
She lies beneath the downy covers,
A canopy high overhead;
Fine curtains veil the feather bed,
Tasselled, woven in rich colours;
Bright brocades are everywhere,
And precious gems, winking, blazing;
Fragrant perfumes fill the air,
That golden censers are raising.
Enough...I need not tell you more;
Scheherazade, long before,
Has forestalled me, in describing
A house of magic; though, I'm sure,
However fair the house we sing,
Without true love, naught's in the thing.

Three maidens of wondrous beauty,
In garments both fine and lovely,
Now glided in, with scarce a sound,
And all bowed deeply to the ground.
One maid came closer, silently,
Then, with ethereal fingers,
Plaited the princess' braids, for she
Knew that fair art which yet lingers.
A diadem of pearls she set
Upon that brow, pallid as yet.
A second maid approached and hers
Was a face bowed low, in modesty;
Now she clothed Ludmila, swiftly,
In an azure silk gown that fell

Over her slender form; as well
As a veil, fair and fine as mist,
That the shoulders barely kissed,
Crowning the gold hair of that belle;
Envious the soft veil that kisses
Charms worthy of heaven above;
Then shod her feet, the princess's,
In dainty shoes all might approve.
The third maid brings the princess
A sash encrusted o'er with pearls,
The while a singer for the guest
Many a pleasant song unfurls.
But neither her bright jewellery,
Her gown, nor the pearls about her,
Nor those songs of sweet flattery
Can raise her spirits, or amuse her;
To view her beauty, and attire,
In vain, the mirror draws her eye;
Her fixed gaze, with ne'er a sigh,
To silent longing does aspire.

Those, to whom the truth is dear,
That read the secrets of the heart,
Are – when a maid neglects to peer
Into her glass, sits sad, apart,
Not even glancing, on occasion,
In spite of habit, and of reason,
At her own image – soon agreed,
Her sorrow must be great indeed.

Now Ludmila, alone once more,
Uncertain what to do, I'm sure,
Wandered to a trellised window,
Gazing down at the scene below,
On empty fields, and clouds anew,
Where all seemed dead, and snow lay deep,

And softly carpeting the view,
Clothing every mountain steep
Above white silent plains, the sombre
Land wrapped in eternal slumber.
No smoke trail from a chimney there,
No snow-bound traveller to be seen,
None blew a sounding horn, to share
Their joy with all that barren scene.
Only, with a low dull whistling,
A fierce blast of wind, went whirling,
Making the cold bare forest sway,
Etched, far, against the sky's chill grey.

With tears of despair, Ludmila
Covers all her face in horror.
Ah! What awaits her, heaven knows!
Now, through a silver door she goes,
Sweet music sounding as she enters,
She finds herself among the splendours,
Of gardens, bounded, captivating,
Finer than those owned by Armida,
Those Solomon had in his keeping,
Or our great Prince of Taurida.
Before her, they sway and rustle,
Magnificent in all their beauty,
Palm trees, laurels moving gently,
And a row of fragrant myrtle,
Proud crowns of cedars, tall and fine,
And golden orange trees in line,
Reflected where the waters shine;
The hills, the groves, the forest pine,
Revivified by spring's new wine.
The winds of May blow cool and fresh,
Across the bright enchanted vale,
As in the branches' trembling mesh,

There sings a Chinese nightingale;
And diamantine fountains play,
With pleasing sounds amid the grass,
Rare statues glistening in the spray,
As if they breathe; were Phidias,
Graced by Pallas and Apollo,
To gaze upon them it must follow
His chisel would fall from his hand,
Consumed with envy he would stand.
Hemmed in by marble barriers,
Pure waterfalls descend as planned,
In pearly arcs, like crystal tears,
While some sweet plashing stream appears,
From forest shade, to soothe the land.
Shelters of peace and coolness, fair,
The brave pavilions flicker brightly,
Through the green leaves, here and there,
As blossoms fall on pathways lightly.
Yet, inconsolably, Ludmila,
Walks on and on, sees not a thing,
This conjured luxury glides by her,
She's saddened now by everything,
Wandering the paths unknowing,
About the magic gardens going,
Such bitter tears weeping freely,
On unforgiving skies now gazing,
With gloomy eyes. Then, suddenly,
Her gaze grows sharper; less forlorn,
To her lips she brings a finger;
It seems a dread intent is born,
The fatal path lies open to her:
Between two cliffs, both tall and sheer,
There hangs a bridge, tis set on high;
With heavy sadness she draws near;
She views the torrent flowing by,

The sounding water, cold and deep;
She sobs aloud, she beats her breast,
For death alone might bring her rest,
And yet she shrinks back from the steep,
And wanders on, her thoughts oppressed.

Soon, my beautiful Ludmila,
Longing to rest her weary feet,
Dries her tears, and looks about her,
Her heartfelt thought, a wish: to eat!
She sits upon the grass beneath her,
And suddenly, above her seat,
A canopy's rustling shelter
Spreads a coolness and, in a trice,
Before her is a sumptuous dinner,
The gleam of crystal; some device
Brings a harp's tones to her arbour;
The captive princess wonders greatly,
Yet all the while thinks, secretly,
'Far from my love, a prisoner I,
Why not escape this fate, and die?
Villain, whose disastrous passion
Serves to torment, yet seeks to please,
I fear not your power, your mission;
Ludmila's suffering she may ease!
I need no tent, no wondrous feat,
No tedious music, wine nor meat –
I shall not dine; naught shall I hear,
I'll die, at once, without a tear!'
She thought – and then began to eat.

The princess rose and, in a trice,
The tent, and every strange device...
Was gone; she heard the harping cease,
And, as before, all was at peace.
Ludmila, now alone once more,

Wandered on from grove to grove,
While floating in the deep azure,
The moon, the queen of night, did rove,
Below her, mist the hills did keep
The far slopes quietly covering.
The princess was inclined to sleep,
And some sudden power, arising,
Gentler than a breeze in spring,
Raised her tenderly in the air,
And to the palace then did bring
Her, laying her on her bed there.
Midst the scent of evening roses,
On that sad couch she reposes.
The three fair maids appear once more,
And fuss around her as before,
Undressing her, with movements sure.
And yet they leave a faint impression
Of a quiet reproach to fate,
That might some true heart agitate,
That's filled with secret compassion.
But let us hasten on; the princess
Is tended to with gentle care,
Delightful in her sweet undress,
Robed in a snow-white silk affair,
She lies down, to rest her there.
Then with a sigh the maidens bow,
Wishing to leave the princess now;
Thus, they quietly close the door,
What does our captive? As before!
She trembles like a leaf, in fear;
Dares not breathe, lest ghouls appear;
Her limbs grow cold, and dim her eyes,
Sleep flies at once beyond her sight,
Yet, straining, with her gaze she tries
To pierce the darkness of the night...

She hears her heart fluttering quite...
And hesitates...the silence murmurs,
A sound of footsteps approaching,
She hides her face beneath the covers –
And instantly – what fear encroaching! –
A flare of light illuminates
The gloom with its sudden brightness,
The door flies open, there she waits;
The sound of marching feet abates;
Proud, silent Moors then, in a line,
With glittering sabres, pair by pair,
Enter decorously; they bear
A long grey beard upon the fine
Pillows that they hold; while, proudly,
A hump-backed dwarf enters, gravely,
To whom the beard's attached; a tall
Cap clothes his head, and covers all
His shaven pate in house and hall.
The fellow now draws near the bed,
And, as he does so, lowers his head.
With this, the princess leaps at him,
Snatches the hat as he draws near,
Catches it, falling, by the rim,
And, as she does so, shrieks with fear,
Raising her hand close to his ear,
While, stunned, the Moors stir not a limb.
The dwarf he writhed, her cries to hear,
The princess turned even paler;
He raised both his hands to cover
His two ears, and turned to run,
But fell, entangled in his beard,
Rose, and then fell again; not one
Of the Moors in his wits appeared,
But running to him, where he sat,
Each gripped the sorcerer by the arm,

And, failing to retrieve the hat,
Bore him off, to seek peace and calm.

But what of our knight; our hero?
Do you, dear friends, recall the fight?
Quick, dear Orlovsky, go borrow
A pencil, sketch their duel by night!
Neath the moon's shimmering glow,
The two fight fiercely, I may say,
Hearts full of anger, blow on blow,
Their lances now hurled far away;
Their swords are splintered from the fray;
With blood their chain-mail is spattered
Both their shields are pierced and shattered....
The brave knights grapple, by and by,
Black dust thrown high into the sky,
As their steeds themselves engage,
The combatants, twined, motionless,
Clasp each other; tis war they wage,
Yet glued to their saddles, no less,
Their limbs squeezed near to excess.
Rigid now, locked tight together,
Swift fiery blood runs through each vein,
Yet breast to breast, they toil in vain...
But both weaken now, and waver,
One soon must fall – and, suddenly,
With iron hand, our knight, tears free,
Ousts from the saddle his tired foe,
In his arms he lifts him, wholly,
And hurls him to the waves below,
'Die then, my envious rival, go,
Drown deep!' he cries maliciously.

You dear reader, recalled aright,
The foe brave Ruslan sought to conquer;
Twas Rogdai, eager for the fight,

The hope of Kiev, fierce admirer
Of Ludmila; that valiant knight,
Following Ruslan's tracks before,
Had found him by the Dnieper's shore;
Overtook him, yet his strength,
In the fight, had waned at length,
Deserted him, and midst the wave
He met his end, though bold and brave.
A beguiling mermaid grasped him;
To her chilly breast she clasped him,
While, greedily, she kissed the knight;
Downwards, laughingly, she drew him,
Then, gripping him, sank out of sight.
Yet, often, in the night, thereafter,
His vast ghost, wandering inland,
Or silent, rising from the water,
Appalled some lonely fisherman.

Canto III: The Sword

MY verse, you've sought still to abide
Midst shadow, for my friends' delight!
And yet, it seems, you could not hide
Your peaceful lines from envy's sight.
A pallid critic has already
Asked why, as if to mock Ruslan,
I have called his lovely lady
A 'maiden' and a 'princess'; surely
There is but malice in the man?
My kind readers, mark, tis true,
There's envy in the fellow's eye!
Come Zoilus, Homer's critic, you,
Come, tell me what I should reply?
Blush, wretch; may God defend your wit!
Blush, for I'd seek not to quarrel;

Content with being right in spirit,
I'll stay silent, meek, and humble.
You'll understand me Clymene,
Lowering now your languid gaze,
Dull Hymen's victim; yes, I see...
A secret tear, you'll shed always,
Upon my verse, the heart may know;
You blush now, and your eyes grow dim;
A muted sigh, yet even so
Well understood! Fear life and limb,
Oh, Jealous One, for with Anger
A wilful Cupid shall conspire,
And Revenge's hour brings closer
The crown to which such heads aspire.

A cold dawn's light already shone
On the tall mountain peaks around
Yet in that wondrous palace none
Was moving; there was not a sound.
Hiding his chagrin, Chernomor,
Hatless, and angered to the core,
Sat, in his robe, upon the bed,
His servants crowding round, all there
Busied about his beard and head,
Combing the tangles from his hair.
While, for the benefit and beauty
Of his long whiskers, their duty
Was to ensure pure balm's outflow
Scented the curls they were tending,
When, in a trice, there came flying
A winged serpent, through the window;
Its iron scales rattling loudly,
The serpent shook and closed its wings,
Before their eyes, it coiled in rings;
And there stood Naina; swiftly,

'Greetings!' she cried, 'dear brother,
One long held in honour by me,
Ere now Chernomor by rumour
Alone I knew, yet covertly
Fate has sent us a common foe,
And we are joined in enmity;
There's threat of danger to follow,
Its cloud hangs over you, I see;
While the call of slighted honour
To vengeance, now summons me.'

The dwarf, full of cunning, he
Gave her his hand, unctuously:
'All-seeing, wondrous, Naina!
Most precious is our alliance,
We will shame the Finn, together;
I fear not his dark connivance.
Know then my beard's wondrous power:
It gracefully adorns my face,
And while its beauty is in place,
Then, not even for an hour,
Despite his hostile sword, shall man,
The merest mortal, here, impair
Aught of mine, not my least plan;
For she's mine, Ludmila the Fair,
And to the grave he's doomed, Ruslan!
'He's doomed, he's doomed,' spitefully,
The witch repeated, dark her gaze,
'Weak is our every enemy,
And fated to defeat always!
Then she hissed, with hisses three,
Thrice she stamped and, black wings raised,
Once more a serpent, fled swiftly.

In a glistening robe of brocade,
The dwarf, cheered by the sorceress,

Thought a journey he should make,
His whiskers too, to his fair maid;
To her fair chamber he would take,
Straight to the feet of the princess,
His humble love, his beard's excess.
Room to room he passes through,
No princess offered to his view,
Into the park, far, he wanders,
Past laurels, trellises, meanders,
The lake, gazebo, waterfall!
Is there a trace of her – why no!
Who could express the taste of gall,
The passion raging in him so?
So, angered he could barely see.
The dwarf cries out: 'Hasten, swiftly,
You servants, all my hope's in you!
Go seek Ludmila, do you hear!
Find the maid now, and see you do!
You'll rue the day if she's not here!
Don't toy with me; come to my call –
Or with my beard I'll choke you all!'

Now, Reader, I shall speak, once more,
Of our fair princess; all that night,
Pondering her fate, tears she bore,
Yet smiling at the dwarf's sad plight.
Though fearful of that strange figure,
The dwarf now seemed ridiculous,
A clown of sorts; and fear can never
Survive true laughter long in us.
When the sun's bold rays reached her,
She left her bed; unconsciously,
Glancing at the tall bright mirrors,
Lifting from her pure white shoulders
Those golden curls, unwittingly.

Her hair's unconscionably matted,
Her garments are all scattered round;
Carelessly, her braids were plaited,
In one corner her robe she found,
And, sighing, plucked it from the ground,
Then dressed, yet still she kept an eye
On the mirrors, though tearfully;
And a whim seized her, by and by;
She'd try his hat on, just to see;
All's silent, none can see her there,
And none's concerned in the matter...
At seventeen, with golden hair,
No hat exists that will not flatter!
Adornment is no idle thing!
She twirls the hat, tis straight, askew,
All on one side, and thus, playing,
Quite back to front she sets it, too.
And so? A wonder of days past!
Her bright reflection disappeared.
She turned it round, the spell it cast
Had ceased, Ludmila re-appeared;
Replaced the hat – no image there;
Removed it, there she stood, again!
'Good, I'm safe from you! I dare
The vilest dwarf to give me pain.
All my troubles shall be banished!
And flushed with joy, as before,
She set the sorcerer's hat once more,
Backwards on her head, and vanished!

Let us return, if rather late,
To our brave hero; shame on us,
For leaving Ruslan to his fate,
While hats and beards surrounded us!
For, after conquering, Rogdai, he

Rides through a forest, dark and deep,
Until he comes to a broad valley,
Beneath the sky, where dead men sleep.
He trembles then, against his will,
Scattered bones lie yellowing still.
The ancient battlefield, stripped bare,
Stretches to barren distance there.
A sword clasped in a bony hand,
Arrows, armour, lie unconcealed,
Dull harness, and a rusted shield,
A grassy helm – yet not unmanned,
An old skull mouldering there inside;
Here some hero's skeleton, whole,
Beside his steed, on his last ride,
Spears, lances, unattained their goal,
Their points now buried in the ground,
With tangled ivy wrapped about...
The waste gives birth to ne'er a sound,
Unheard now is the warrior's shout,
While the dark vale of death is crowned
By that high sun that lights the rout.

The knight he gazed about, sad-eyed:
'O vale, what field of war were you?'
Now, sighing to the wastes, he cried:
'Your victims scattered o'er the view?
By whose swift stallions trampled down,
In that last, savage, blood-stained hour?
Who, dying here, gained true renown?
Whose final prayer won Heaven's dower?
Why overgrown? And doomed to fight
With the grasses of oblivion? ...
Perhaps, in Time's eternal night,
I, too, shall win not salvation!
Perhaps on some silent hill I'll lie,

There they'll inter the brave Ruslan,
Unpraised, unsung by our Bayan,
No longer granted word, or sigh!

Yet swiftly he composed his thought,
Knowing a hero needs a sword,
And armour, and both these he sought,
Deprived of both by past discord.
He slowly walked about the field,
Amidst the piles of mouldering bone,
Seeking a sword, a helm, a shield,
And armour for himself alone.

He woke the mute plain, frequently,
With many a clank and ringing sound,
He chose a shield quite randomly;
A helm and sonorous horn he found,
But yet he lacked the blade he sought.
Many a sword, but all too short,
He saw abandoned on the ground,
Yet none that he might take away,
Naught that would suit of all he saw,
For he was a prince of days of yore,
And not some frail knight of our day;
So, a lance he grasped, in his hand,
Good steel it was, you understand,
To stave off boredom, all in play,
And then went swiftly on his way.

The glow of sunset slowly pales,
Above the fields that sleeping lie;
From mist that all the heaven veils,
A golden moon ascends the sky;
The steppe grows dim, Ruslan rides by,
Upon a darkening path, and sees,
Ahead, a black mound, if you please;
A snoring sound his ears assails,

Piercing the mist, most dreadfully.
Slowly he nears the thing he's found:
It seems to breathe, this wondrous mound;
Ruslan rides closer, fearlessly,
Listening, gazing, as he draws near,
But now his horse balks, pricks an ear,
Not a single step more, clearly,
Will it take, for it shakes its head,
Stubbornly, its mane is bristling.
And suddenly, the moon, unclouded,
From the mist, palely issuing,
Illuminates the mound, revealing –
A sight of wonder, and of dread.
What form of words might realise
The living Head before his eyes?
The vast brow is relaxed in sleep,
Each snore that rises from the deep
Shakes the feathers on the helmet,
Sets them fluttering in the darkness.
It towers there in the gloom and yet,
With dreadful beauty, as the nameless
Guardian of the silent wasteland,
There amidst the boundless plain,
Appearing to the brave Ruslan,
Formidable; he stirs again,
Perplexed he would arouse the thing,
Wake this object from its dreaming.
Inspecting the Head more closely,
Around its bulk he takes a ride,
Before its nose, halts silently,
And prods at that great nose, inside,
With his lance, till, grimacing,
The Head yawns, its eyes opening,
And sneezes at this sharp tickling...
A whirlwind rose, the plain shook too;

From whiskers and eyelashes flew
A parliament of owls; the sneeze
Echoed midst groves of silent trees;
The horse it neighed and sprang away,
Ruslan could scarce make it obey;
A voice cried, loudly, at the sight:
'Where goes thou, O foolish knight?
Back, for I jest not, back you go!
Such impudent clowns, I swallow!
Ruslan looked round, contemptuously,
While reining in his horse once more.
'What is it that you want of me?'
The Head cried, loudly, as before,
'Fate, is it, sent you as my guest –
Well go, it's night, I wish to rest!
Be off with you, begone, I say!
Farewell, goodbye, be on your way!'
But faced with rudeness, our brave knight,
Exclaimed in anger, now, instead
Of fleeing, bristling for a fight:
'Silence now, you, empty head!'
All that is said, is proved again:
A great skull hides a tiny brain!
I ride my road, no grudge I bear,
Yet when I strike, none do I spare!

Then, dumbfounded, filled with ire,
Constrained, its eyes alight with fire,
The swollen Head, alive with malice,
Its dry and pallid lips trembling,
Sent vapour from its mouth, at this,
And from its ears, hotly rising –
It suddenly began to blow
That burning steam towards the knight;
His steed, its eyes dim, bowing low

Its head, chest straining, at the sight,
Tried, in vain, the path to follow,
Through the gloomy, rain-filled night;
Fearful and near-blinded, suffering,
It turned, and well-nigh staggering,
Into the peaceful waste, took flight.
Ruslan wished to return once more –
But saw no hope, the prospect grim;
The Head's voice followed after him,
And thundering madly, gave a roar:
'O knight, O hero where go you?
Stop, stop, sir knight, come, turn anew!
You'll only break your neck for naught;
Rider, fear nothing; favour me
With a blow, from that lance you've brought;
You'll kill your steed, most certainly.'
And of its tongue the Head made free,
Taunting our hero, till it brought
Tears of hot anger, all unsought,
To Ruslan's eyes, and, silently,
Our knight replied, cold steel he flung,
Transfixing that insolent tongue,
With his quivering lance; then blood
Ran from the frenzied mouth, the flow
At once a river in full flood;
And with the pain, surprise and woe,
In a trice, its impudence spent,
Gnawing the steel, and turning pale,
It turned to him, its gaze intent.
Just so, some actor's voice will fail,
Some lesser scion of the Muse,
Who, deafened by the crowd's abuse,
No longer sees aught before him,
Turns pale, forgets the part he read,
Forsakes thus the role assigned him,

Trembles and then bows his head,
Stammers, cogent speech denied him,
While the audience strikes him dead.
Now, like a hawk, our hero flies,
Seeing where the advantage lies,
Towards the Head all confounded.
Then on the cheek with heavy hand,
Encased in steel, a blow doth land.
The very plain itself resounded;
A bloody foam now stained the grass,
And painted red the dewy ground,
While, reeling from the blow, the mass
Swayed and toppled, rolled around,
Helm clanging, o'er the earth did pass,
Leaving an empty space behind.
Not empty! For a hero's blade
Brave Ruslan in its place did find.
Elated, one swift move he made,
Seized the sword, and ran with speed
Intent upon that bloody deed,
Across the stretch of blood-stained ground,
To lop away the nose and ears;
Ready to smite, quenched now his fears,
The sword he lifts, fresh strength he's found –
When suddenly, he hears, amazed,
A groan, a plea, his arm still raised...
And quietly he lowers the blade,
His anger gone; the blow unmade.
Desire for vengeance dies away,
His soul is softened by that plea,
So, ice and snow will melt by day,
Struck by the noon rays, rapidly.

'Hero, you've made me see the light' –
The Head now offered, with a sigh –

Your blow has shamed me so, sir knight,
Indeed, my guilt I can't deny;
From this time on I'll obey you,
But, sir knight, prove generous!
I was a knight, and valiant too,
And yet my fate's inglorious!
In bloody battle with the foe,
No man could ever equal me;
Happy was I, and were still so,
If not for my brother's rivalry!
Oh, evil, hunch-backed Chernomor,
For all my woe you are to blame!
Malformed, bearded, running sore,
A blot upon the family name!
My handsome form, from my first youth,
He could not view without dismay,
And so, within his soul, in truth,
He hated me, both night and day.
For I was ever tall and straight,
While he, a wretch of little height,
The younger, was so made by fate,
A cunning demon, filled with spite.
Moreover, know, to my distress,
His beard a magic does possess
A fatal power that lurks therein,
He scorns the world, for there, within
That beard, as long as it's unharmed,
Lies his defence – his life is charmed.
One morning, with a friendly air,
Slyly, he said: 'Your help I need,
And on a most crucial affair.' –
One can't refuse such pleas, indeed:
'In a book of magic,' so he said,
'On a far, silent seashore, there
Beyond the eastern peaks, I've read,

A mute stone vault has in its care
A charmed sword, a sword to fear!
A blade that's fated, it seems clear,
To someday harm the two of us –
To trim my beard, and take your head,
So that dark text claimed as I read:
We must gather that sword to us,
Before some evil spirit claims it,
Judge for yourself in the matter!
'Well,' said I, 'tis as you see fit,
How hard can that be, my brother?
To the world's end, I'll dare to go.'
I lifted a pine tree on my shoulder,
And my brother on the other, so
That he his wise advice might offer;
Then off we set, upon our journey;
At first, to spite all prophecy,
Thank God we met with no distress,
No trouble marred our happiness.
Beyond the far-off mountain range,
We found that silent cave of stone;
I entered in, though all seemed strange,
And took the sword there, for our own.
Fate wished it not, I must suppose:
Since a fierce quarrel soon arose –
Of little substance, I'm afraid!
The question: who should bear the blade?
I reasoned, while my brother raged,
We argued, until, finally –
A clever ruse – he quietly,
Gazed at me, and seemed assuaged.
'We'll dispute in vain no more –
Tis foolishness,' cried Chernomor:
'Our kinship we'll thus dishonour,
Reason decrees we cease debate;

Whether tis this one or the other
Bears the sword, we'll leave to fate.
'Let each place an ear to the ground,'
(Such tricks, has malice ever found!)
'And let him bear the sword forever,
Who first shall hear a ringing sound.'
Then to the earth dropped my brother.
I also lay down, foolishly;
Though hearing naught, I thought to lie,
And so, deceive him, and yet I
It was who was deceived, you see!
Without a sound the villain rose,
Behind my back, and on tiptoes,
He came behind me, swung the blade;
The sharp sword whistled in the air,
I scarcely heard the noise it made,
Ere of my head my neck was bare –
Though, by some supernatural power,
That head lives on, to this sad hour.
The briars clothe my skeleton,
In that far place, a land forgot;
He left my body there to rot,
This head he carried here, anon;
To guard the sword was then my lot,
Alone, in this deserted place,
And yet, by some eternal grace,
You win the blade, sir knight, this day;
Take it, God be with you alway!
If you should meet the dwarf, sir knight,
Athwart your path, that sorcerer,
Then upon him slake my anger,
Slay that serpent, at first sight!
And, so revenged, I'll, finally,
Depart this world without a sigh –

And, in my gratitude, will I
Forgive the blow you gifted me.'

Canto IV: The Castle of the Twelve Maidens

EACH morning, as I rise from sleep,
To God I give my thanks, truly,
That in our day He seeks to keep
Us from the likes of sorcery.
And then our marriages are safe –
All honour, all glory to them! –
New-wedded husbands need not chafe,
Such dark designs won't undo them.
Yet there are spells still, I rue them,
Other charms; there's no debate,
That smiling lips, and eyes of blue,
And voices sweet, shall be our fate –
O, my friends! Believe them never!
Their poisons will intoxicate,
I fear them, and choose quiet, as ever.

O, Genius of Poetry,
O Bard of things visionary,
Of love's mystery, devils, dreams;
Dweller in hell and paradise,
Of my inconstant muse, it seems,
The confidante, defence likewise;
O, Northern Orpheus, who redeems
All things in my playful story,
Forgive me still, though I aspire,
To follow you, your wayward lyre,
In sweet deceit, to win mere glory.

For have you not heard Zhukovsky
Sing, my friends, of how a villain
Sold his soul, sinning utterly,

His daughters' souls too, one by one,
To the devil, and how through prayer,
Fasting, faith, and charity,
And true repentance, in full share,
Found a patron, wise and saintly;
How he died, how his twelve daughters
Fell, into an enchanted sleep.
What delight and fear they brought us,
Those visions rising from the deep,
Wondrous scenes, in darkest night,
Black demons, and heaven's anger,
The sinner severed from the light,
The virgin beauty of each daughter.
We wept with them, and wandered there,
Around that castle, steeply walled,
And while they slept, could not but care
For them as they lay, still, enthralled.
On Vadim then we called in prayer,
And when the twelve awoke, the blessed,
Then to their father's place of rest
We accompanied them, relieved.
Well then, perchance? ...we were deceived!
Shall I, alone, speak what is true?

Young Ratmir had spurred on his way,
Southwards, impatient to pursue
Before the sun was lost from view,
Ludmila, Ruslan's bride; yet day
Now faded and the sky grew black;
He tried to pierce the mist, in vain,
Before him, that obscured his track,
And covered all the distant plain,
And veiled the river at his back,
The last light lost in gilded trees.
Past darkened cliffs he quietly goes;

He gazes round, but nowhere sees
A place to offer him repose.
But now he rides into a vale,
Espies a castle built on high,
Its towers dark above the dale;
Its battlements reach to the sky.
And on the wall a maid doth glide,
Moves like a lone swan on the tide,
Lit by the last pale twilight ray,
Her song nigh lost in some quiet bay,
Deep within the silent valley:

'On darkening fields, the night falls swiftly;
A cold wind rises, late the hour.
Too late, young traveller, to journey!
Take welcome refuge in our tower.

By day we feast, and we make merry;
All is true bliss and peace by night.
Come then, and join us, here alight,
Come, young traveller, with us tarry!

Here, you'll find there's many a beauty;
Sweet gentle speech, and kisses bright.
Come now, ascend the secret height,
Come, young traveller, with us tarry!

For you, at dawn, we'll drink a bevvvy;
A cup of wine, ere you take flight.
Come now, ascend the tranquil height,
Come, young traveller, with us tarry!

On darkening fields, the night falls swiftly;
A cold wind rises, late the hour.
Too late, young traveller, to journey!
Take welcome refuge in our tower.'

She beckons to him, ever-singing;
The warrior rides beneath the wall:
To the gate her singing brings him,
Fair maidens greet him, blushing all.
Gentle voices rise about him,
He's surrounded, cannot stray,
Captivating glances bind him;
And now his steed is led away.
The young man enters the palace,
The swarm of hermitesses passes
Round him, one his helm removes,
One his armour, another proves
Quite equal to his sword and shield;
Now his steel cladding for the field,
Must be replaced with lighter clothing.
But first the warrior is led
To a Russian bath, all steaming.
From silver tubs the water's fed,
Vaporous waves softly plashing,
And cooler founts gently splashing.
Rich rugs parade their luxury;
The warrior lies down to rest,
With all their subtle warmth he's blessed,
While, with gaze lowered, silently,
Each charming, and half-naked maid
Ministers to him, tenderly,
All crowd around him, grant their aid,
Plying sweet service, gracefully.
For over him one maiden waves
Birch branches, from which the vapour
Draws a fragrance; another laves
The knight's weary limbs, all over,
With dew culled from spring's fresh roses,
Cooling them; while her work closes
With perfuming his curly hair.

And Ratmir, filled with pure delight,
Forgets Ludmila, lost to sight,
And all her wished-for beauty, there;
He languishes, in sweet desire,
His roving glance more brightly glows,
He melts with longing, heart afire,
And, filled with expectation, glows.

Soon, from his bathing, brave Ratmir,
Now dressed in velvets, doth appear,
And to a rich feast sits him down,
The lovely maids all gathered round.
No Homer, I; in sounding verse,
He sang of warriors, hardy souls,
Their splendid banquets did rehearse,
The chiming cups, the foaming bowls.
A follower of Parny, I,
Would rather praise, with careless lyre,
Bare shoulders in the night, a sigh,
A loving kiss, its tender fire!
Lit by the moon the fortress towers;
I see a distant chamber; there,
His lonely dreams his only fare,
Our knight now sleeps away the hours;
His brow, his cheek, are all aflame,
His lips half-parted, yield deep sighs,
As if sweet kisses he would claim,
While gazing into loving eyes.
Low moans oft from his lips depart,
And, as if in dream, he tightly
Presses the covers to his heart,
While the clear moon glitters brightly;
And in deep silence, now, the door
Creaks open, and across the floor
A maid is passing— gliding lightly,

Gleaming, in the gentle moonlight.
Begone winged dreams, fly from his brow!
Wake Ratmir, for your time is now!
Waste not the precious hours of night!...
She draws near; outspread he lies,
Slumbering in voluptuous bliss;
The quilt slips down, he moans and sighs,
His brow the covers hotly kiss.
Breathless, unmoving, she, like one
Both pure and chaste, seemingly
An Artemis, stands silently,
Gazing on her Endymion;
Yet on the bed she sets a knee,
Then leaning o'er the sleeping one,
And trembling inwardly, with this
Bows down her face and thus, I deem,
With a mute and passionate kiss,
Wakes the warrior from his dream...

But now the virgin lyre, my friends,
Has fallen silent in my hands;
Its tune Ratmir no more commands –
My timid voice, grown weaker, ends,
A song I dare no longer sing:
Ruslan to mind we here should bring,
Ruslan, the peerless, and the true,
Hero, and faithful lover too.
Full wearied by that stubborn fight,
Beneath the Head he lies, asleep,
And sweet it was to rest that night.
Yet early dawn now fills the deep
And glowing heavens with its light.
Clear is the air; a playful ray
Gilds his locks and brow with gold,

Ruslan rises, mounts; on its way
His steed darts, eager now, and bold.

And time runs on; it's harvest day;
Soon yellow leaves fall from the trees,
In woods, the chilling autumn breeze
Has silenced the birds, completely.
And heavy clouds of sombre mist
Along the chill vales wind, discreetly;
Winter is near, the bare hills kissed
With cold, while our Ruslan, bravely,
Continues on his northward track,
And meets with obstacles at every
Pace; hurls some hero on his back;
With some witch or giant must fight;
And sees, as in enchanted dream,
Veiled by the mist, the subtle gleam
Among the trees, one moonlit night,
Of mermaids in the branches swaying,
Each, on her lips, a subtle smile,
Beckoning slyly to him, saying,
To him, not one word the while...
And yet no secret charms could win him,
Desire slumbered deep within him;
None such can harm the fearless knight,
He heeds them not, he seeks the light,
Ludmila, everywhere, is with him.

She, still invisible, meanwhile,
Protected by the magic hat,
And free of the sorcerer's vile
Advances, dreams of this and that.
As silent, sad, our fair Ludmila,
Walks the gardens, she, as ever,
Longs for her love, and heaves a sigh,
Or thinks of Kiev's fields afar,

To which her lonely heart would fly;
Her father, brothers, to mind's eye,
She brings, and wonders how they are,
And her old nurse, and naught can mar
Such thoughts – forgot captivity,
And separation! Yet we see,
Her soon reverting from illusion,
And then our fair princess we own,
Is once again mired in confusion,
Wandering, silent and alone.
Meanwhile the lovesick sorcerer's men,
Search all the day, and search again,
Throughout the castle and the park,
Looking for the lovely captive;
Afraid to rest, or prove inactive,
Yet seek in vain, until the dark.
Ludmila merely toyed with them.
In some faery grove they'd see her,
For, hatless, she'd appear to them.
A cry of 'Here! Here!' she'd utter,
And they'd race after her, en masse.
But then – invisible once more –
On silent feet, their ranks she'd pass,
And flee them, as she had before.
Hour after hour, they would find
Traces of her errant wandering:
Plucked from out the branches' rustling,
The golden fruits she'd leave behind,
They'd hear the stream's water tinkling,
Or note crushed grasses, where she'd dined:
And knew then, how she drank and ate,
Midst birch groves, or neath some cedar;
To shelter, nightly, was her fate,
While tears expressed her sorry state –
Calling to her spouse, Ludmila

Languished ever, yawning sadly,
And rarely before dawn, rarely,
Leaning her head against a tree,
She'd doze a little, and be free
Of woe and weariness; yet she,
Ere darkness fled, and it grew light,
Made for the water, falling bright
From some high place, to bathe her eyes:
And, once, the dwarf, to his surprise,
Seated, early, at his window,
Observed a spray of water rise
As if flung from the fall below,
By unseen hand, towards the skies.
Until nightfall, now here, now there,
Ludmila wandered, full of care,
Through the gardens, in her longing,
And oft they'd hear the rise and fall,
Of her sweet voice, in the evening,
Gather threads from a Persian shawl,
Or some fair garland of her making,
Or a tear-stained handkerchief, all
But the fair one they were seeking.

Choked with anger and frustration,
Tormented by his jealous passion,
The sorcerer devised a plan;
To catch Ludmila was his mission.
So, the lame blacksmith, Vulcan,
Fair Aphrodite's spouse, began
To forge a net, his wife to snare,
And to the gods' mocking laughter
Exposed her gentle form as, after
Her deeds with Mars, she rested there...

One day the princess, sat quietly,
Within a marble gazebo,

Suffering from ennui, full weary,
Gazing on the flowering meadow,
As the branches gently swayed.
Suddenly, she hears, the maid,
A voice calling out: 'Dear friend!'
And sees the faithful Ruslan nigh,
His face, his form, yet dim his eye,
And pale his face, blood doth descend
From his pierced thigh. 'Tis you, Ruslan!'
She cries, heart fluttering, and lo,
Flies to him, like some swift arrow.
'Here...bleeding...all pale and wan?'
Reaching him, she clasps him tight
Yet finds...the vision vanishes!
Horror! 'Tis but some ghostly knight,
And she ensnared in silken meshes.
The hat has fallen from her brow;
'She's mine!' the cry; he sees her now,
The sorcerer, stands, before her eyes.
She falls, quite senseless, to the ground,
And yet a dream comes to surround
The maid, within its wings she lies.

What fate attends on our princess!
O, dreadful sight, the dwarf it seems
With brazen hand seeks to caress
Ludmila's charms, the while she dreams!
Is he to know the taste of bliss?
Yet, high, some horn rings out...at this
He turns; a challenge then? With dread
The sorcerer pales; confused, once more
He sets the hat upon her head;
The horn sounds, louder than before!
And, shouldering his beard, he goes,
To meet, it seems, with unknown foes.

Canto V: The Rescue

AH! How sweet is my princess!
The maid I like the best of all;
Sensitive, modest to excess,
And to her marriage vows no less
True; capricious? – not to recall,
Just sweeter for her liveliness.
She knows how to win us, truly,
Enchants us with her charm, always;
Must one not contrast that, hourly,
With our Delfira's harshness, say?
The first the lovely gift was sent
Of so delighting hearts and eyes;
Her speech, her smile, both realise
In me love's passion and intent;
While, for spurs and whickers meant,
The latter's a Hussar in disguise!
Blessed the lover who at evening
Finds a fair Ludmila waiting,
Naming him her heart's true friend;
Yet twice-blessed he who, in the end,
Shuns Delfira, swiftly fleeing,
And far from her his way does wend;
While best of all is not to meet her.
Yet – naught of this is to the matter!
Who's trumpet call is it that sounds;
Who challenges the dwarf to fight?
Who's dealt that sorcerer a fright?
Ruslan, it is, whose call resounds,
Echoing through the castle grounds;
Beneath the battlements he waits,
The horn much like a storm doth blow,
His steed is champing, at the gates,
And with its hooves it churns the snow.

The prince is poised yet, suddenly,
A thunderous blow strikes his steel helm,
Dealt by some hand, invisibly,
Destined to well-nigh overwhelm;
Ruslan half-stunned, lifts up his head,
And spies a mace above, on high –
For Chernomor soars through the sky;
The dwarf indeed would see him dead.
Ruslan crouches, thrusts up his shield,
Waves his sharp sword, and scorns to yield;
The dwarf flies upward to the clouds,
Vanishes there among mist-shrouds,
Then plunges at the prince once more.
Yet Ruslan, with his sweeping blade,
Strikes the sorcerer to the floor;
Dismounts, the blow received, repaid,
And runs to grasp him by the beard;
The sorcerer struggles, groans, and then
With Ruslan clutching him, tis feared –
The steed bemused – flies off again;
Into the clouds the dwarf soars still;
The hero's borne, beyond his ken,
Over the mountains bare and chill,
Grasping the beard hard, with a will,
His arms aching, interminably;
Over the gloomy forest, high,
Over the mountain range they fly,
Over the dark depths of the sea,
Ruslan clinging, as they speed by.
Weakening, awed by Ruslan's strength,
The dwarf turns, slyly, to Ruslan,
'Prince, I'll harm you not!' at length,
He cries: 'Honour to you, brave man!
I'll forgive you, your blow forget,
And so, descend, though we're ill met,

Though upon one condition only...'
'Silence, sorcerer!' cried the knight,
'Ruslan deals not with wizardry,
With one whom torment yields delight.
Never will there be contract made!
The thief must fall to my steel blade.
Up to the stars, go soar in flight,
Yet lose your beard to darkest night!'
The sorcerer feels his courage fade,
With silent sorrow, deep frustration,
He tugs his beard in consternation,
Trying to win his freedom so:
But Ruslan will not let him go,
Teasing and tweaking, with elation.
Two whole days the dwarf flies, slowly,
And on the third he cries for mercy:
'Oh, sir knight, but show compassion,
For I can scarcely breathe: no more,
My life is yours; my fate is sure;
I will descend where'er you say.'
'Ah, you tremble! With scant delay,
Submit yourself to my command!
My fair Ludmila I demand.'

And Chernomor, humbly, obeys;
He sets off homewards with the knight;
And, in an instant, they have sight
Of his dread fortress through the haze.
There Ruslan took his sword in hand,
And with his free hand grasped the beard,
And much like grass in meadow-land,
Clean through the length of hair he sheared.
'There now!' he cried, dismissively,
'Where, thief, is all your beauty? Gone,
With all your powers!' Then, securely,

His helm he tied the beard upon;
And whistling, he called up his steed;
The horse flew to him, magically,
The sorcerer, half-dead indeed,
He thrust in a sack, cheerfully,
And fearing to waste a moment, soared
Through the air to the mountain-top,
And, with the dwarf secure aboard,
Into the palace, and there did stop.
Spying the beard, upon his helmet,
To mark his victory, proudly set,
The crowds of Moors that he now met,
The throngs of slave-girls, fled away,
From hall to mighty hall he strode,
Called 'Ludmila!', from bay to bay,
Seeking his spouse in that abode;
Hearing naught there but the echo
Of his voice, from empty reaches,
That never a trace of her bestow;
His eagerness scant patience teaches.
He enters the garden by a door –
Gazes around, but finds her not,
Anxious, determined but unsure –
All seems dead, mute every spot,
Silent groves and chill gazebo,
The river banks, its placid flow,
In meadow, valley, no Ludmila,
No sign, no sound of her, ever.
The prince, seized as if by fever,
Feels a chill, his eyes grow duller,
In his mind dark thoughts arise:
'Grief...captivity,' he sighs,
'A moment... the water there...'
Sad fancies, and he bows his head,
In silent longing, filled with dread,

Still as a stone; while woe and care
Consume his mind, his heart on fire,
Tormented by despair, desire.
The shade it seems of his princess
Clings to him, and seeks his kiss...
And in his passion's wild excess,
He rages round the park, at this,
Cries out, to Ludmila calling,
Great rocks from the hillside falling,
As he attacks them with his sword;
Cracks the gazebo, fells the trees,
Sends the bridges crashing downward,
And turns to waste the shrubberies!
Far off the echoes ring abroad,
As thunderous noises fill the breeze;
Eagerly, he seeks a victim,
Swings right and left to land a blow –
When suddenly there before him,
Ludmila lies; by flailing so
He's knocked the hat quite off her brow...
No more invisible, she's there,
Chernomor's cap dislodged somehow,
And in full sight the young and fair...
Vanished is all her magic power,
Dispelled by the hero of the hour!
He's freed Ludmila from the snare,
And, scarce believing his own eyes,
Intoxicated, joy his share,
Falls at her feet, in sheer surprise;
He tears the net, you may depend,
From his most true and faithful friend,
With tears of love, to her doth bend;
And yet the maid seems to slumber,
Her eyes and lips sealed together,
Some secret dream doth her attend.

Fixed is Ruslan's gaze, his fears
Torment him, rooted to the spot...
When suddenly a voice he hears
The Finn's voice comes, to ease his lot:

'Take heart, dear prince! Be on your way,
Bear home the sleeping Ludmila;
Strength of heart be your mainstay,
Be faithful now to love and honour.
For Heaven's righteous bolt will fall,
Peace shall reign, and love shall bless –
In shining Kiev, your princess
Will rise from sleep, no more in thrall
To her strange dream; so ends distress.'

Ruslan, in happier frame of mind,
In his arms now takes his bride,
Leaves the heights, and goes to find
His steed, and then prepares to ride
And leave the fortress far behind.

With the dwarf in his sack, they go
Down to the valley-floor below;
There in his arms Ludmila lies,
Fresh of face, as the dawn in spring,
Her braid coiled in a golden ring,
On the hero's shoulder, she sighs,
As through her hair the breezes stray,
A soft glow o'er her cheeks doth play
A rose she seems, to Ruslan's eyes.
How oft, as he rides on his way,
Her breast heaves, in her deep slumber!
How oft she breathes her lover's name,
Murmuring in a languid whisper!
Love, and her dreaming, bring that same
Image to her... and, as she sleeps,

He feels her breathe, he sees her smile,
Or her blind tears flow as she weeps,
While he rides on, mile after mile...

Along each vale, o'er mountain height,
He journeys on, both day and night;
Ne'er halting, to his road he keeps.
And does the young prince, languishing,
Aflame with unassuaged desire,
And in great torment, never tire
Of his role, in closely guarding
His slumbering princess like this;
But smothering his deep longing,
Rests content, chastely dreaming,
And in that only seeks his bliss?
So, the wise monk writes, when telling
The story of our prince, and his
Has proved the text that kept alight
The legend of our noble knight:
And I believe it; love unshared
Is merely passion, dull, impaired:
In mutual pleasure lies delight.
When languid spring the heart enthralled,
Your sleep did not, fair shepherdesses,
Resemble those of our princess's...
As on one evening, now recalled,
My lovely Lida, slyly scheming,
Beneath a birch tree, in the glade,
Seemed untroubled in her dreaming,
At rest within the forest's shade...
Ah, that first kiss of love, conveyed,
So shyly, lightly, shall not fade;
So gentle it broke not her dream,
So placid did her slumber seem...
What nonsense; it exists no more!

Why seek such love to remember?
Of joy and sorrow, but an ember
Glow, of what died long before.
And I must seek – in its December –
Ruslan, his bride, and Chernomor.

The steppe stretches out around them,
Where clumps of spruce trees appear;
And there's a tall mound standing clear,
With darkened summit, before them,
Outlined against the bright blue sky.
Ruslan sees now, there sits the Head;
His steed, with greyhound's pace, draws nigh;
The wonder of wonders seems dead,
Yet looks on them with silent gaze,
A forest of black hair hangs o'er
The mighty brow, a tangled maze,
The face is lifeless, charms no more,
Tis pallid, like a lump of lead;
Vast lips apart, as if in dread,
Huge teeth set in a fleshy bed...
While over that near-cadaver,
The judgement hour already looms.
Ruslan flies to it, with Ludmila,
While at his back the dwarf still fumes.
'Noble Head, all hail!' he cries,
I return, and bring the traitor!
The miscreant's our prisoner!
With this, the Head revivifies;
Ruslan's cry has roused a feeling
Now it wakes, as if from dreaming;
The Head looks all about, and groans,
Sighs, loudly, in its dreadful woe....
On seeing the proud knight, it moans,
And spies its brother there also.

Its nostrils flare, a crimson hue
Spreads o'er its cheeks, and from the eyes
A flame of fiery anger too,
Beams out its fury to the skies.
With gnashing teeth, to its brother
In language harsh, and icy cold,
A fierce reproach it seeks to utter,
As if some passing-bell has tolled...
Suddenly, its speech seems fainter,
The face grows pale, the eyeballs roll:
Soon now it will no longer suffer,
For death frees that tormented soul...
And then the prince, and Chernomor,
See it shudder; it breathes no more,
Extinguished like some fading coal.
The Head remains there, unmoving.
The knight rides silently away;
The dwarf, behind the saddle, trembling,
And clinging there as best he may,
While, in some vile tongue, invoking
The demons to whom sorcerers pray.

On the sloping, shaded margin
Of some nameless little river,
Amidst the pine-trees, dark within,
And sheltering in a glade therein,
A hut stood; there slow-moving water,
Bathed its reed fence, while the breeze
Made scarce a murmur through the trees;
A place of calmness, solitary
In aspect, yet not melancholy,
Built some unknown soul to please.
The place its secrecy maintained,
The forest round it dark and deep,
As if a silence bound to keep

That from the world's creation reigned.
Ruslan halted there, close by it.
It was the very dawn of day;
The valley, glowing in the quiet,
Amidst the mists of morning lay.
He set the princess on the grass,
He sat beside here then, and sighed,
In deep despondency, alas,
Yet sweet hope lingered there, inside.
When, suddenly, he saw sailing,
Down the quietly-flowing river,
A boat, while the sound of singing
Floated to him on the water.
His net upon the surface cast,
A fisherman leaned on his oar,
Back to his hut he came at last,
And landed on the wooded shore.
There, a young maid ran outside;
The prince observed her, silently,
Quite captivating, sweet was she,
Nor sought her smiling face to hide;
Admired her loosely hanging hair,
Her slender form; her smiling gaze,
Her neck, and both her shoulders bare,
Her beauty such as garners praise.
The pair met again with pleasure,
And sat beside the cool water,
Bent upon an hour of leisure,
Deep in love with one another.
Yet who has our brave Ruslan,
Recognised in this fisherman?
Who then is he, the happy lover?
Tis Ratmir, one born for glory,
For great deeds retold in story,
In love and war his rival; he

Had yet found new serenity,
Ludmila, glory, both forgot,
A calm existence now his lot,
Embracing his love, tenderly.

The prince approached them, while Ratmir
On seeing Ruslan, gave a cry,
Welcoming him, as he drew near...
And Ruslan clasped him; eye to eye,
'What do I witness here? he sighed,
'Why have you quit the warrior life,
The sword that you once glorified?'
'Enough, my friend, enough of strife,'
Ratmir replied, 'my soul is weary
Of fame and glory, and the fight,
Such are phantoms, vain and empty,
Mere ghosts that cannot bear the light.
Love is the glory that shines bright,
And peace proves dearer to the heart.
No more athirst for war's madness.
Rich in my new-found happiness,
Why from these oak-woods should I part?
All else I have put by forever,
Even my longing for Ludmila.'
'I'm glad of that, my good Ratmir,
For Ludmila I've brought with me.'
'Is it so? Then good news I hear,
And you have set the princess free...
And she is with you? Where is she?
May I? – Yet, no, I'll not betray
My friend, who proves so very dear,
For she's the one who, day by day,
Transforms me, as you see here.
She is my life, my joy, my truth!
True love she has revived in me,

Restored to me my long-lost youth,
Granted me peace, and certainty.
For I was promised happiness,
By twelve fair maidens, all in vain;
Twelve sirens, each a sorceress,
Who offered me what brought but pain;
For her, I quit their fortress ward,
Guarded by oak-trees, and forgot
Battle and glory, helm and sword,
Chose love and peace, here, as my lot.
A recluse, tranquil and unknown,
I dwell, delight my only goal,
Beside my friend, my love, my own,
Who is the light, now, of my soul!

The sweet shepherdess made no move,
But listened quietly at his side;
She smiled sweetly, or she sighed,
Fixing her gaze upon her love.

There, the fisherman and the knight,
Their hearts and souls upon their lips,
Sat, on the shore, while it was light –
Till night achieved the day's eclipse.
Dark grew the woods below the hill;
Time for our hero to depart!
The moon arose, and all was still;
Cloaking the maiden, his dear heart,
As she slept, in a robe, Ruslan,
Went to mount his faithful steed;
Ratmir followed; a thoughtful man
Silent, preoccupied indeed,
Yet wishing the prince victory,
Love, and glory, and happiness...
Recalling, involuntarily,
His proud youth, with quiet sadness.

Why has destiny not fated
My fickle lyre only to sing
Of fine deeds, to things (outdated),
To love, to friendship music bring?
Why, poet of sad truth, must I
Sing vice, and malice, with a sigh,
For future generations tell
Of secret doings, and rehearse
The treachery that now befell,
Our noble pair, in truthful verse?

Farlaf, still seeking the princess,
Though of her love all unworthy,
Having lost his chance at glory,
Hid, waiting for the sorceress;
And in a solemn hour she came,
Naina, yes, that very same,
That seer who some foul witch begat,
Crying: 'You must know me, surely?
Saddle a horse, then; follow me!'
And then...she turned into a cat;
The horse was saddled; just like that,
Off she went; he followed closely,
Through the oak-woods, deep and gloomy.

Veiled by clouds of mist, the valley
Slumbered quietly, in the night,
While the moon slid, silently,
From cloud to cloud, then cast its light
On a hill, thus, brilliantly,
Illuminating it, outright,
While, beneath it, Ruslan, sitting,
Troubled by his endless longing,
Kept vigil o'er his sleeping bride.
There he pondered, deep in thought,
Dreams on dreams, a rising tide,

Flowing through him, all unsought,
As cool wings above him brought
Slumber; soon his eyes grew dim,
Till, at the maiden's feet, falling,
Sleep, in an instant, conquered him.

Now a sinister dream he dreams:
Within it, sees that bride of his,
Pale and motionless; she seems,
Poised on the brink of an abyss...
When, suddenly, she vanishes,
He stands alone above the deep...
But, then, a voice – tis hers no less,
Calls, seeking aid... and in his sleep,
He plunges, careless of his life;
Into the dark, pursues his wife...
But then, recovering from his fall,
Sees Vladimir, in his great hall,
Surrounded by his grey-haired knights,
With his twelve sons, seated by him,
And a crowd of guests, as he alights,
At phantom tables, dining nigh him.
Yet the old prince is full of ire,
As full as on that day of parting,
And all sit silent, round their sire,
And not a one of them is moving.
No cheerful noise, none are at ease,
No bowl from which to drink anew...
While there, among the guests, he sees,
The face of Rogdai, whom he slew,
Drinking from a frothing cup;
As if alive, he sits; the dead man,
Cheerful, quaffing, ne'er looks up,
To meet the stunned gaze of Ruslan.
And Ratmir's there, midst friends and foes;

The voice of Bayan rising, clear,
Accompanied by the zither, flows,
Chanting of heroes and good cheer.
Now Farlaf enters, with Ludmila,
The old man chooses not to stand,
But bows his head, sadly, to her;
Princes, boyars, on either hand,
All of that noble crowd, are silent;
Then, all vanishes, they are gone!
A mortal cold, in an instant,
Grips the prince, who yet sleeps on.
Sad tears he sheds, weeps bitterly;
He stirs: thinks, then, that he but dreams!
Yet languishes, tormented clearly;
And, still, he cannot break, it seems,
The spell that holds him, securely.

A pallid moon lights the mountain;
The trees are embraced by darkness,
Pure silence grips the vale, again...
Farlaf, the traitor, makes his ingress.
There, lies an open patch of ground,
His fearful heart now skips a beat,
He sees, ahead, the gloomy mound,
Ruslan asleep, at Ludmila's feet,
The prince's steed circling round.
The witch has vanished in the mist,
His fearful heart begins to pound.
The bridle falls from his slack fist,
And yet he quietly draws his blade,
As he prepares to slay the knight,
With but the one blow, shrewdly made...
He rides closer, but scent and sight,
Rouse the charger; its enemy
It senses, stamps, yet all in vain!

Ruslan hears naught; the dream, tis plain,
Still weighs upon him, dreadfully!...
Stirred by the witch to seek his gain,
Farlaf now plunges the cold steel,
Three times into our hero's breast...
And with the spoils of his ill quest,
Away, into the dark, doth wheel.

Beneath the mountain, till dawn-light,
Ruslan lay there, insensible.
The hours passed, an endless trickle
Of blood flowed from the wounded knight.
Yet, at day-break, he woke in pain,
When, uttering a heavy groan,
He tried to rise; but flesh and bone
Proving unequal to the strain,
Like one who's dead, lay still again.

Canto VI: The Victory

YOU tell me, oh, my gentle friend,
To tune my light and carefree lyre,
Take up the story, for your pleasure,
And my priceless hours of leisure
Devote now to the faithful Muse...
And yet you well know that I choose,
Quite drunk on bliss now, to forget
Those barbs that forced me to defend
My toil, not seek the tale to end,
Though the fond notes linger yet.
Intoxicated with delight,
I've lost the habit; for tis you
For whom I breathe, tis you, my light,
And glory I no longer woo!
The hidden fires of genius,
Invention, and sweet thought, have died,

Love and pleasure now are, thus,
The dreams that in my mind reside.
But you who loved my little story,
You command me now, as ever,
Relishing both love and glory,
My Ruslan, and my Ludmila,
Vladimir, and Chernomor,
Naina, and the faithful Finn,
All who sought your ear to win;
Though, listening, as I held the floor,
You sometimes dozed, with a smile,
As o'er the words I would linger,
Yet oft, most tenderly, awhile,
I found your gaze dwelt on the singer...
Enamoured, I'll take up the idle
Strings, and, seated at your feet,
Give a slight tug to the bridle,
And our young hero's tale complete.

Yet what say I? Where is Ruslan?
Sprawled, as if dead, on the field.
His blood congealed where it ran,
While the crows, above him, wheeled.
The armour's still, the horn calls not,
The crested helm lies there forgot!

Yet round the prince, still, stride by stride,
His charger goes, bowed low his head,
The proud fire in his eyes has died,
His golden mane seems dull as lead!
He waits for his master to arise,
Spiritless, his circling slow;
But in chill sleep our Ruslan lies,
His sword and shield, as yet laid low.

And Chernomor? He's in the sack,
Forgotten by the witch, Naina,
Still strapped there to the charger's back,
Knowing naught, and even meaner
Than before; both bored and angry;
Cursing the prince and his princess,
Hearing naught, he peeks out, slyly,
To find – a miracle no less!
He sees the hero lying dead;
A pool of blood beneath his head;
Ludmila gone, the vista empty,
And quivers now with joy, instead,
And thinks it's over, and he's free!
And yet he's wrong as we shall find.

Meanwhile, aided by Naina,
With the slumbering Ludmila,
Farlaf rides on, Kiev in mind:
His heart is full of hope and fear,
Ahead the Dnieper, cold and clear,
Flows through its familiar fields,
He spies the golden-domed city,
Soon the gate an entrance yields;
The people cheer him, joyfully,
And their Ludmila, whom he shields;
They run to tell Prince Vladimir,
That, all unknown, our traitor's here.

Meanwhile, the Bright Sun, Vladimir,
Sat brooding on his vanished dear,
His spirits neath a heavy pall,
In his great mansion, languishing,
His knights and boyars, nobles all,
Gloomily, about him, sitting.
When, suddenly, he hears loud cries,
A wondrous din, the door's flung wide,

A knight appears, the nobles rise,
Murmuring at the noise outside.
And then there is confusion merely:
'Ludmila here! And Farlaf...truly?'

The old Prince rises from his chair,
With altered face; he sees her there,
And, treading heavily, makes haste
To embrace his troubled daughter,
Seeks to kiss the young and chaste
Maid, tenderly, that doting father.
And yet the maiden pays no heed,
Clasped in traitorous arms, indeed,
Lost in enchanted sleep, she lies,
As at the aged Prince, they gaze
While restless and confused, he sighs,
And stares at the knight, in a daze.
Finger to his lips pressed, slyly
'She's asleep.' – Farlaf, the wily,
Says – 'Not long ago I found her,
Near Murom, in the forest waste;
The evil goblin there I faced,
Who as his captive had bound her;
Long we fought, for thrice the moon
Above the battlefield rose, bright;
The goblin fell, and in her swoon
I bore the princess from the fight;
And who shall rouse her from her dreams?
And when shall this fair sleeper wake?
Who knows? – Fate's laws lie hid, it seems!
Yet consolation we should take
From hope; be patient, for her sake.'

At once, the fateful rumour flies
Throughout the halls and, everywhere,
Folk gather swiftly, in surprise,

Till seething crowds o'er-flow the square;
The house of grief throws wide its doors
To all, through which that throng now pours,
To where the princess lies, asleep,
On her high bed of rich brocade;
The princes and the knights, ranked deep,
Surround the place, and guard the maid.
They show their sadness; trumpets sound,
Tambourines, horns, harps; drums pound;
The old Prince weeps, and clasps her feet,
While Farlaf, mute, white as a sheet,
Trembling, silently repentant,
His brashness now anxiety,
Is likewise on the maid attendant.

Night fell, but none in the city
Closed an eye, for one and all
Gathered together, talked about
All that had happened in the hall,
Wives forgotten, the men without.
But when the horned moon on high
Sank, and vanished from the sky,
All Kiev stirred; then many a cry
Rang out, a clang of arms; they fly
To the walls; there Kiev gazes...
Tents gleaming in the field, they spy,
Beyond the river's sunlit hazes,
Shields, lances, armour brightly shine,
Far off, more riders, line on line
Of carts raise black dust in the air,
No sign of fresh assault is lacking;
All this is scarce a new affair –
The Turkic Pechenegs attacking!

Meanwhile the mighty seer, the Finn,
Who o'er the spirits power could win,

Midst the wastes, awaited, quietly,
The day that he had long foreseen,
When fate would bring, inevitably,
All that must flow from what had been.

Deep in the steppe's parched wilderness,
Beyond the farthest mountain chain,
Home of the winds' wild blusteriness,
Where the sorcerer's gaze shall gain,
Though late the hour, no entrance there,
There lies a wondrous vale; a pair
Of rock-born springs, it boasts: the one
Leaps o'er the stones, a living thing,
Gone splashing down the dale, in fun,
The other's waters dead, scarce flowing;
All's quiet around, the winds asleep,
Absent that chill breeze of the spring,
The ranks of pine-trees silence keep;
No bird flies, no deer stands drinking.
Here, two spirits have their dwelling,
At the very heart of stillness,
Guardians of the wilderness,
Present since the world's beginning...
The hermit now before them stands,
Two empty pitchers in his hands;
Their trance is broken and, in fear,
They flee the place, disturb their dream;
He, stooping to the waters, clear,
Dips each jar in a different stream,
And then has vanished in thin air,
But, in an instant more, is stood
Where Ruslan in the valley there,
Lies still and silent, bathed in blood;
The aged seer bends o'er the knight,
Laves him with the dead stream's flow,

The prince's flesh, healed, shines with light,
His body yields a wondrous glow.
Then, upon the wounded hero,
He sprinkles the living water,
And Ruslan rises, full of vigour;
New life is his, fresh strength; and, lo!
He looks clear-eyed upon the day;
Vanishing, like an evil dream,
The past disperses on its way,
A cloud's brief shadow on the stream.
Yet where's Ludmila? He's alone!
A tremor of fear runs through him.
A voice, in a familiar tone,
That of the Finn, carries to him:
'Your fate will be as I have shown!
Bliss is in store for you, my son.
Though first your sword must strike the foe,
For, now, a blood-stained feast awaits;
Yet you shall find your love, e'en so
And peace shall crown fair Kiev's gates;
Touch this ring to her brow, and lo!
You'll free her from the evil spell;
At sight of you your foes will fear,
Malice and wrath shall disappear,
All dark intrigue you will dispel,
Malice will die, and peace shall bless.
Prove worthy, both, of happiness!
Farewell brave knight for many a day!
Beyond the grave...your hand I press...
We two shall meet again, I pray!
Intoxicated with delight,
Ruslan now feels restored to life,
Stretching his arms out, to the light,
Yet sees no sign there of his wife.
Not one trace does the wasteland yield!

He stands alone, on the empty field,
But for his steed, that rears and neighs,
With the dwarf behind, in his sack;
Ruslan soon leaps astride its back,
Ready for action, fit to blaze—
No faith or effort shall he lack —
Through fields and oak-woods, on his track.

What meanwhile of Kiev the Fair,
Besieged, and under savage threat?
Folk now crowd the battlements there,
Upon the field their gaze is set;
Despondently, they must await,
Heaven's judgement upon them all;
The rest, within, bemoan their fate,
Silent the streets; no cry or call.
Vladimir, in sorrowful prayer,
Kneels beside his sleeping daughter,
While his brave warriors prepare,
To meet the foe, and seek their share
Of noble deeds, amidst the slaughter.

The dawn light shines; the enemy
Pour from the high hills, endlessly;
In force, they cross the silent plain,
Faster with every yard they gain,
And flow towards fair Kiev's wall;
The trumpets sound the battle-cry;
Out of the gates brave horsemen fly;
Towards the foe speed one and all,
Ready to conquer or to fall.
Now scenting death, the chargers rear,
Bright swords beat on steel battle-gear;
While, through the air, fierce arrows hum;
The field runs red; yet on they come!
The riders rush to meet, headlong,

Then tangle, in one furious throng;
Here, straight towards the foe men steer;
There, breaking ranks, fall back in fear;
Some knight on foot unseats a rider;
Through the field runs his lone charger:
The noise of battle fills the sky;
Here Pechenegs, there Russians die;
Now toppled by an iron mace,
Struck now by a steel dart in the face;
Crushed by a shield, a broken reed,
Or trampled by some maddened steed...
They fought until the fall of night;
Yet neither side met with defeat!
Men slept – none now could keep his feet –
Beside the corpses from the fight;
And long their sleep; though oft a groan
Arose, from where the dying lay;
While now some foe was heard to moan,
And now some Russian voice to pray.

But daybreak turned the shadows paler;
Cold dawn crept doubtful, from the east,
Turning the waves to flowing silver,
As through the mist, the light increased.
The hills and forests brightened then,
The heavens woke; yet not those men,
All motionless, immersed in sleep,
The ranks at rest, the silence deep.
When, suddenly, the dream broken,
The warriors now rudely woken,
The enemy stirred, in wild alarm,
As a fierce battle-cry rang out,
Swiftly re-arming, at the shout;
Here was some foe to do them harm;
In a jostling crowd, the Kievites too,

Gathered quickly, and sought a view
Of the battlefield between them,
And saw a knight wreaking mayhem,
In shining armour, as if ablaze,
Darting here, there, amidst the haze;
From his charger, slashing, stabbing,
Trampling the host, his horn blowing...
Ruslan it was, like God's lightning,
Striking the infidels, on sight,
The dwarf, in his sack, benighting,
As the enemy camp took fright.
Wherever his bright sword alights,
Wherever his charger passes by,
He slays whoever's in his sights,
Heads part from shoulders, and men die.
Soon, with a shout, the ranks engage,
And, in the blink, now, of an eye
Heaps of blood-stained bodies lie
On the trampled field's gory stage,
Headless dead and wounded living,
Spears, arrows, mail; the trumpets sound,
The Russian horsemen come flying,
The Pechenegs can but give ground!
Summoning their scattered horses,
Facing disaster now, their forces
Powerless against this Slavic foe,
The savage raiders turn and flee,
Before the remorseless enemy,
Who deal them blow on fearful blow,
Sending them to the fires of hell;
Kiev rejoices...straight to the city,
Now conqueror of the infidel,
Waving the sword of victory,
Our hero rides, with gleaming lance,
And bloodied mail; as he speeds by,

His shining helm draws every glance –
Chernomor's beard waves there, on high;
On wings of hope, he flies along
Through noisy crowds, to the Prince's hall.
Revived by the excited throng,
And filled with joy, amidst them all,
He enters the silent mansion,
Where lost in dream, our Ludmila,
As yet still slumbers on and on,
While at her feet stands her father,
Prince Vladimir, immersed in thought.
Saddest and loneliest, at his court,
Many a tear he's forced to yield,
His friends drawn to the battlefield.
Yet, shunning glory, Farlaf is there,
Far from the warring enemy,
Guarding the doorway to that pair,
Disdainful of war's anxiety.
The moment he recognised Ruslan,
His blood froze and, speechless, the man
Fell to his knees, in dire confusion...
Dire treason calls for retribution!
But Ruslan flew to his sleeping bride,
Recalling the gift that he did bring,
And, as he stood there, at her side,
He touched her sweet face with the ring...
Then, wondrously, the young princess,
Opened, instantly, her bright eyes!
And marvelling at the strangeness
Of that long sleep, looked in surprise
All about her, and far beyond him,
As though her dream still lingered yet,
And then her sight grew clear...she knew him!
And so, in deep embrace they met.
Granted new life, his soul on fire,

Prince Ruslan scarcely heard or saw,
While mute with joy, her aged sire,
Embraced the beloved pair once more.

And the end of my long story?
That, dear friend, you must surely guess!
Vladimir's anger faded swiftly;
Farlaf knelt to him, to confess,
Before Ruslan and Ludmila,
His shame at his sad villainy;
The Prince forgave him; while, forever
Robbed of his powers of sorcery,
Chernomor joined his retinue;
And so, they feasted there, anew,
In Vladimir's hall while, in praise,
Wise Bayan sang such tales as last,

Of deeds performed in ages past,
Things wrought in legendary days.

Epilogue

Thus, to the world indifferent,
In peace, and quiet indolence,
I sang, my lyre obedient,
A tale lost to ancient silence.
I sang – forgot my grievances
At blind fate, my old enemy,
The treasonous idle glances,
The foolish gossip aimed at me.
Borne upon the wings of fancy,
My mind flew beyond the world,
While, unseen, dark clouds around me,
A mighty storm its powers unfurled!
And I was lost...but you, the sacred
Guardian of my early days,

O Friendship – you who comforted
My troubled soul, with tender gaze! –
You brought me, then, calmer weather,
Brought peace, once more, to my heart,
You granted freedom from the tether,
Freedom, that fuels youth's fiery art.
Far from the shores of the Neva,
The Caucasus' high peaks I view,
At every stony cliff, and boulder,
Dumb feeling grips my heart anew,
At Nature, wild, and melancholy,
My soul immersed in languid thought,
Lost as ever in her beauty –
Yet my poetic fires are naught;
In vain I seek the lost elation:
Past, now, the time of poetry,
Of love, of joyful dreams, for me,
The time of heartfelt inspiration!
The days of rapture were not long,
Vanished the goddess, now, of song,
The Muse of murmured incantation...