

“A PAGE OF HISTORY”

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TRANSLATED BY JOANNE TURNBULL

UNIVERSITY lecturer Heinrich Ivanovich Nolde closed the door behind him and felt around with a foot for the stairs: one-two-three. Behind him, through the door, muffled words swarmed. A familiar voice seemed to be knocking with them from inside on the tightly closed panel—“A page of history is turning, gentlemen ... We are witnessing an event ... We shall write a new page ... A page ...” University lecturer Nolde winced: awaiting him at home on his desk were the most ordinary paper pages, the proofs of his monograph on easements.* It was about them that Nolde had wanted to speak, but meanwhile through the door ... The university lecturer took four more steps and passed out into the street. The clamor of voices behind him broke off. Before him the nighttime street, clad in blue-white moon blots, lay silent.

At the end of March 1917 the nights were (remember?) windy. Nolde walked along, treading gingerly on the ground’s moon-blached flatness and listening to the sough of the spring wind. Still-bare trees bending over a fence shook the blue-black shadows from their branches down onto the ground: the shadows skittered on the flat white surface at his feet like pen-and-ink symbols on a colossal sheet of paper. A second-long lull. Then suddenly a burst of noise: somewhere far away at first, then closer and closer, louder and clearer: the white plane surface at his feet (“How strange,” thought Nolde) seemed to sway, to

shudder, and everything—the plane itself, pressed to the soles of his feet, the black-blue symbols on it, the lunar disk above, the trees, the walls, and Nolde himself (at a loss, he had stopped and dropped his cane), and the houses crowded round—everything, after that strange swaying, began ever so slowly to rear up and pitch back into the unknown, arching its white surface. Nolde closed his eyes. A sound familiar to the ear of a man who has long lived among books—the delicate crackle and rustle of a page being turned—but magnified, as if by a microphone, myriad times, was coming closer and closer, descending on him with appalling speed: the rustle became a din, the din a racket, the racket the roar of a hurricane. And here it was, howling underfoot. Afraid to unclench his tight shut eyelids, Nolde only heard everything, but he heard distinctly: houses, tumbled up in the air, were falling back down on their roofs; people shaken out of their beds and dreams were screaming, crushed flat by collapsed brick walls; with short copper sobs, church bells clanged and went silent, buried under the stone piles of their ruined belfries. Forests crepitated like heaps of wind-felled trees trampled by giants; lakes swashed out of their shores; mountains, droning with landslides, fell on their peaks. Racket and roar. Going mad, Nolde clung to a wall, clutching at its ledges and sills: but the wall wobbled, began to rumble and crashed down on him with all of its bricks: consciousness passed away.

At first there was a vague sensation of cold. Then the pressure of an immense slab bearing down from above. Not a rustle, not a sound. Perhaps for seconds, perhaps for centuries, what had once seemed to be “Nolde” gave itself up to a strange feeling of beinglessness: here—and gone. That’s all. The only odd thing was the very fact of consciousness: it seemed somehow superfluous and unnecessary. A thought began to smolder—then went out, and again began to smolder: how is it that I, a thought, am? After that a sense of its body took hazy form and slowly strengthened: its body was lying somewhere far below, flattened by the slab.

At first the possibility of movement seemed a phantasm. But then it began to dawn: what if. Determination grew, became firmer; all at once, at the point where slab and body touched, something miraculous began to happen, a sort of exchange of weights: the slab was becoming lighter and lighter—the body heavier and denser. The

slab trembled and abruptly slid sideways, returning the flattened body to its former three-dimensionality. A pale glint sprang up. Where? By an eye. Whose eye? The eye of a Nolde, yes, Heinrich Nolde . . . That's right, university lecturer Heinrich Ivanovich Nolde. The old overturned verticals were trying to straighten up and resume their places. University lecturer Nolde also attempted to raise himself up on an elbow: the serried houses all around him were silent. Nolde moved his hand—it struck against wood: a shutter made of crude boards covering his head and chest. Where had it come from? Nolde shook the shutter off him and looked around: next to some boarded-up windows glittered an exposed shop window which, evidently, had dropped on him, Nolde, its shutter torn away by the wind.

Nolde scrambled to his feet, legs trembling slightly, found his cane on the ground and poked with it at the innocent wooden shutter.

“What an astonishing illusion,” he muttered. Now everything was clear, except . . . Nolde again glanced around: everything was quiet. Save for someone's rhythmic footsteps approaching in the distance. The ground still shone white like a gigantic moon-blached page with ink blots and strange symbols of dancing black shadows on its wide-open plane.

“A rare example of an illusion,” said the by now braver university lecturer. “I read somewhere—in Lazarus, I believe—about phenomena of this kind. If I'm not mistaken, in his ‘Researches on . . .’” Nolde strode off down the white page, carefully pressing his soles to its motionless surface.

Now everything was clear to him, except . . .