

Aleksandr Bogdanov
Immortality Day

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1.

One thousand years have passed since the day the genius chemist Fride invented a formula for physiological immunity. Injecting the formula into the bloodstream renewed the body's tissues and sustained its eternal blossoming youth.

The dreams of medieval alchemists, philosophers, poets, and kings had come true.

Cities in their previous forms ceased to exist. Thanks to the ease and universal accessibility of air travel, people were no longer limited by distance and settled all over the earth in luxurious villas surrounded by greenery and flowers.

Each villa was equipped with a spectrotelephone that connected its apartments with theaters, press agencies, and civic organizations. On a glass screen in the leisure of their own homes all could enjoy the songs of artists, theater performances, the speeches of orators, and conversations with friends.

Where there were once cities, enormous skyscrapers now towered, housing community centers, schools, museums, and other civic establishments.

The earth was transformed into a single massive fruit garden. Trained forest rangers oversaw the artificial breeding of wild animals in designated parks.

There was no shortage of water. Water was obtained by running electricity through a compound of oxygen and hydrogen. Refreshing fountains poured cascades of water into shady parks. Earth was adorned with symmetrical ponds that shined like silver in the sun and contained all types of fish.

Artificial suns made of radium had already melted the polar ice caps, and at night electric moons cast a gentle glow over the earth.

Only one danger threatened earth: overpopulation. For people were no longer dying. The people's legislative committee approved a law prohibiting women from bearing more than thirty children during their endless lives on earth. Children born over this quota were relocated to other planets in hermetically sealed spaceships when they reached their five hundredth birthdays, the age of maturity. Humanity's unlimited life permitted very distant journeys. In this way, humanity came to colonize not only earth, but all neighboring planets in the solar system.

2.

Having woken on a luxurious bed made of platinum wires and aluminum, Fride took a quick shower, did his routine gymnastic exercises, put on his clothes woven from a light thermofabric that emitted heat in the winter and kept the body

cool in the summer, and ate a breakfast of nutritional chemical bars and an extract of processed wood fiber that tasted of Bessarabian wine. All of that took about an hour. To avoid wasting time he connected his bathroom via microphone to a newspaper agency broadcasting world news.

A tranquil and happy feeling of strength and health spread throughout his entire body, which seemed to be made of only bone and muscle.

Fride remembered that midnight would mark one thousand years since the discovery of human immortality. A thousand years! Almost in spite of himself, he began to take stock of his life.

The adjacent room held a collection of Fride's written works, totaling about four thousand volumes. His diary, discontinued after eight hundred fifty years of life, was also there. It was written in a simplified syllabic method (not entirely unlike ancient stenography) and occupied sixty enormous folios. Further behind his study was an art studio, next to it a sculpture workshop, and further still, a hall in the Varienocorne style that had replaced the decadence of the previous decor, and it was there that Fride wrote poetry. Finally, there was a symphony hall with string and key instruments that he played by means of various mechanical devices allowing him to achieve an unusual fullness and brilliance of sound. Situated above the house was a chemistry lab.

Fride's genius was versatile and reminiscent of the virtuosity of one of his maternal ancestors – Bacon, who was not only a great scientist, but also a playwright whose works had long been misattributed to Shakespeare. In the course of a millennium Fride had proven himself in all spheres of the arts and sciences.

From chemistry, where, so he thought, he exhausted all the powers of his intellect, Fride moved on to sculpture. In the course of eighty years he became an equally accomplished sculptor, bringing into the world many wonderful things. From sculpture he turned to literature: in a hundred years he composed two hundred dramatic plays and up to fifteen thousand poems and sonnets. Then painting attracted him. As a painter he was mediocre. Still, he mastered the technique perfectly, and after fifty years of practice, all of the critics assured him of a glorious future. As a painter of promise he worked for another fifty years before moving on to music: he composed several operas that had some success. In this fashion, at different times, Fride moved from astronomy to the mechanics of history, and then, finally, to philosophy. After that he no longer knew what to do. His brilliant mind had absorbed everything that contemporary culture had to offer, and he returned once again

to chemistry.

Through his chemistry experiments he resolved the final problem that society had struggled with since the time of Helmholtz: the question of spontaneous conception and the animation of inert matter. There were no other problems left.

Fride worked in the mornings. From his bedroom he usually headed straight into the lab.

Warming up his glass bulbs on the electric stove, he hastily recited in his head formulas that were so familiar that there was no need to write them down. During this routine, a strange feeling came upon him, one that had recently become more frequent.

His experiments no longer interested or absorbed him. It had been a long time since he felt the joyful rush of enthusiasm that used to kindle his soul, to inspire and fill him with supreme happiness. His thoughts were inadvertently following familiar beaten paths – hundreds of combinations came and went in redundant and tiresome patterns. He stood, sensing the heavy and anxious emptiness in his soul, thinking:

Physically, man became a likeness of God. He can rule over worlds and space. But could human thought, which the people of the Christian era said was limitless, really have its borders? Could the brain, which includes only a certain number of neurons, be capable of producing only a finite number of ideas, images, and feelings – but no more?

If this is so, then ...

A terror of the future overcame Fride.

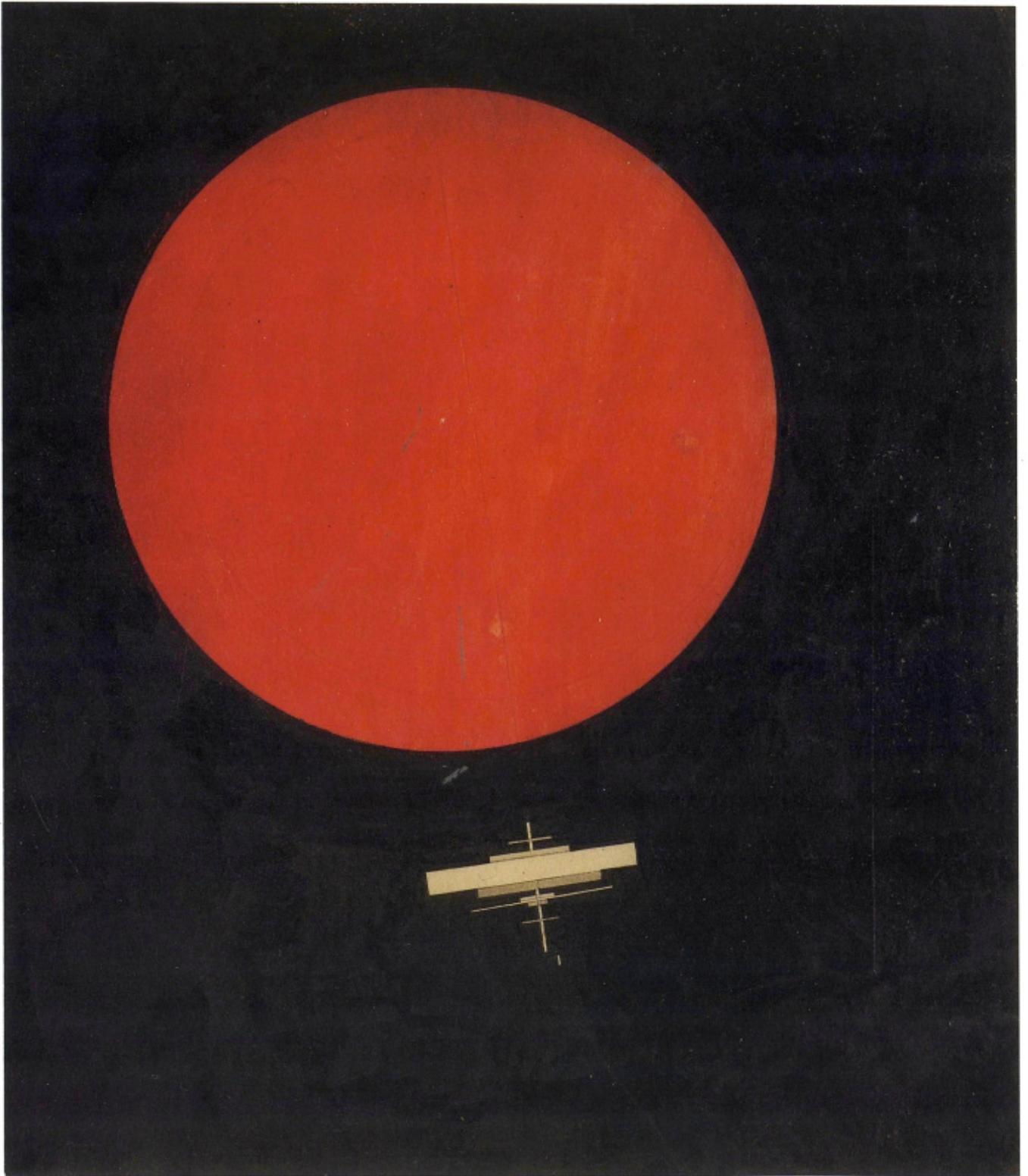
Upon hearing the familiar melody of the automatic clock announcing the end of his work period, he breathed a sigh of deep relief – a feeling he never used to associate with his studies.

3.

At two o'clock Fride was in the collective dining hall he visited daily solely to visit his numerous offspring and descendants, many of whom he had never met.

He had around fifty children, two thousand grandchildren, and several dozens of thousands of great- and great-great-grandchildren. His descendants, now scattered around many different countries and even worlds, could have comprised the population of a major city in ancient times.

Fride did not feel any familial affection towards his children and grandchildren, as was common for the people of the past. His family



Il'ia Chashnik, *Red Circle and Suprematist Cross*, 1925. India ink and watercolor on paper.

was too numerous for each of its members to hold a special place in his heart. He loved them all with an abstract and noble love, one that was reminiscent of a love for humanity in general.

In the dining hall he was greeted with due ceremony and was introduced to a still very young man of two hundred fifty: his grandson Margo, a distinguished astronomer.

Margo had just returned from a twenty-five-year-long absence. He had been on an expedition to Mars and now spoke with abandon about his travels. The Martian population – the megalantropes – had quickly mastered all of the cultural traditions of earth. They wanted to visit their teachers from earth; however, their immense height precluded them from fulfilling their wish. Presently they were setting to work on the construction of two large air ships.

Fride was distractedly listening to Margo's tales of Martian flora and fauna, of its canals and the cyclopic constructions built by its dwellers. And all of this, described by Margo with such passion, did not touch him in the least. Three hundred years ago, he had been among the first to fly to Mars, and had spent almost seven years there. Later, he made two or three additional brief excursions to the planet. By now each nook and cranny of Mars was as familiar to him as those of earth.

However, so as not to offend his grandson by his lack of attention, he asked:

"Please tell me, my young companion, while on Mars, did you meet my old friend Levionach? And if so, how is he?"

"I certainly did meet him, our venerable patriarch," Margo answered eagerly. "Levionach is busy constructing a tremendous tower as tall as the Elbrus."

"I knew it, I knew it," murmured Fride with a mysterious smile. "I predicted that upon reaching a certain age, all Martians would be consumed with a passion for tall buildings. And with that, my dear young companion, I must bid you farewell. I have an important task I must hurry to. I wish you all the luck in the world."

4.

Margarita Anche, a blossoming woman of seven hundred fifty, and Fride's current wife, was the president of an amateur philosophical society. Fride's relationship with her was becoming a burden.

While still several miles away from her villa, Fride announced his approach by means of phonogram. Fride and Anche lived separately in order not to infringe upon each other's independence.

Anche greeted her husband in the alcove of mysteries and miracles – a wondrous pavilion

where everything was illuminated with a soft ultra-chromolite hue, the eighth color in the spectrum of light. It was unknown to ancient peoples with their underdeveloped sight, just as green was unknown to primitive people.

A beautiful silk tunic – cut above the knee in order not to restrain her movement – gracefully and lightly enveloped her slender frame. Her loose black hair fell in waves along her back. An aroma of a subtle and sensuous perfume followed her.

"I am very glad to see you, dear Fride," she said, kissing her husband on his pronounced, distinctive forehead, which looked as if it was sculpted out of marble. "I need you for a very important piece of business."

"I guessed as much, from our previous telephonoscope conversation," responded Fride. "I must confess, I was somewhat surprised by your mysterious look. So, what's the matter? Why such urgency?"

"I wanted it that way, my dear," said Anche with a playful smile. "It may be folly, but sometimes I am visited by desires that I have difficulty chasing away. By the way, where are we going to celebrate the Holiday of Immortality tonight? Also, you might recall, today is the eighty-third anniversary of our marriage."

"Oh dear," thought Fride, and answered reluctantly:

"I don't know! I haven't thought about that yet."

"But, certainly, we are going to celebrate together?" asked Anche, with some anxiety trembling in her voice.

"But of course," said Fride. An unpleasant feeling was spreading through him, and for that reason he hastened to change the topic:

"What is this important business of yours?"

"I'll tell you right away, my dear. I wanted to prepare a surprise for the new millennium. An idea, that I will acquaint you with, has been occupying me for several decades, and only now has acquired a final definition."

"Hmm, something from the area of irrational pragmatism?" joked Fride.

"Oh, no!" Anche retorted with a graceful smile.

"In that case, something that has to do with politics?" Fride went on:

"You women are always ahead of men in these respects."

Anche laughed.

"You are a wonderful oracle, dear. Yes, I am working on organizing a cell to undertake a civil revolution on earth and I need your help. You must become our ally and help disseminate my ideas. Given your connections and influence, that won't be difficult."

"All depends on the character of your

plans,” countered Fride, after a short pause. “I cannot promise you anything in advance.”

Anche crossed her eyebrows slightly and continued:

“My idea is to abolish the last remaining legislative chains that bind the people of earth. Let each given man individually enact what in ancient times was called the state. Let him or her be autonomous. No one is to restrict them. Central power is to have control only over the organization of common wealth.”

“But aren’t things essentially this way already?” contradicted Fride. “Tell me, how and where is a citizen’s will infringed upon?”

Anche flared up and continued with passion:

“And what about the law that limits women to having only thirty children? Is this not a restriction? Is it not a barbarous violence towards women? It is true that you men do not feel the burden of this law?”

“But isn’t this law born out of economic necessity?”

“Then we have to leave its resolution not to a fluke of nature, but to the wise intervention of reason. Why should I reject my thirty-fifth son, the fortieth, and so on, and keep the thirtieth on earth, when my fortieth son may be a genius, and the thirtieth – a pathetic mediocrity! Let only the strong and distinguished ones remain on earth, and let the weak ones leave it. Earth must be an assembly of geniuses.”

“These are improbable fantasies, which are not even new. They were expressed one hundred fifty years ago by a biologist called Madlen. We cannot break rules that are wise. By the way, I must tell you that ancient women did not think the way you do. They had what is called maternal compassion: they loved the weak and deformed children more than the strong and beautiful ones. No, I will not be your ally. More than that, as a member of the government and a representative of the Council of the Hundred, I will veto your actions.”

“But you, being a genius, should not be afraid of revolts!”

“Yes. But as a genius I foresee all of the terror that will befall earth if the question of relocation were decided by citizens’ free will. This would trigger such a struggle for power on earth that it would destroy mankind. Although, mankind will unavoidably perish anyways, but for other reasons; it will seal itself off in a hermetic cycle of monotony,” concluded Fride, as if he was talking only to himself. “But why should we bring the fated moment nearer?”

Anche was silent. She did not at all anticipate a rejection.

Coldly turning her classical profile to Fride, she said woundedly:

“Do as you will! I can’t help noticing that recently something is amiss in our relationship. I do not know; perhaps it has become a burden for you.”

“Perhaps,” Fride responded dryly, “one must get accustomed to the thought that love does not last forever on earth. You are the eighteenth woman in my life whom I have married and the ninety-second whom I have loved.”

“But of course!” said Anche, angrily biting her lip, pink stains marring her golden complexion. “But for some reason you husbands demand that your wives remain faithful to you to the end, and always claim it your prerogative to cheat on her first.”

Fride shrugged: “That’s the rule of strength, which you’ve just been advocating.”

Anche was trembling with anger, but masterfully took hold of herself and responded with a proud dignity:

“So we are to part. Well then. I wish you all the best in your future life.”

“I sincerely wish you the same!” responded Fride, trying not to acknowledge the bitterness of her words.

His sole feeling was that of a heavy languor. Thirty-one times he had endured these words from a woman, accompanied by the same gestures, the same expressions, and the same tone.

“How old all of this is getting! And how trite!” he thought, while getting into an elegant, toylike airplane.

5.

Fride spent the evening on a flying platform five thousand meters above earth, with a large group of youth gathered to celebrate Margo’s return. They were seated around a round revolving table, the top of which would glide on rails of air, bringing and carrying back flowers, fruit, and stimulating and exciting drinks that were wondrously aromatic and pleasant to the taste.

Down below, earth was illuminated with beautiful bright lights, the lights of cars moving down the network of smooth highways – all sportsmen who from time to time indulged in this type of outmoded transportation. Electric moons, with their phosphorescent light, were pouring a soft blue onto the gardens, villas, canals, and lakes. Seen from a distance, with the play of light, its reflections and half-shadows, earth seemed enveloped by a translucent silver mesh.

The youth, especially young Margo, who had not seen earth for twenty-five years, admired the beautiful sight that opened before them.

Margo turned a mechanical knob, and the chair on which he was seated rose up on its legs

in such a way that everyone could see him as he spoke.

“Friends! I suggest that we drink a toast in honor of the universe!”

“Excellent!” The gathered guests joined in happily. “A toast and a hymn!”

During the celebrations people often sang national hymns composed by the patriarchs of great families. This is why Margo followed his first suggestion with a second:

“Friends! Since we are honored today by the presence of our esteemed patriarch Fride at this table, I suggest that we sing his hymn ‘The Immortal One.’”

All eyes were now on Fride. He sat absorbed in his thoughts, and upon hearing his name, nodded in assent.

Accompanied by a majestic symphonion, clear male and female voices joined in the hymn, composed in sonorous and bold major tones. The hymn consisted of eight-line stanzas, each concluding with these words:

*Blessed is the one soul of the universe,
Spread around grains of sand and stars,
Blessed is omnipotence, since it is
The source of eternal life.
Blessed is immortality, which made people
like gods!*

The sound of this magnificent chorus soared above and seemed to be simultaneously a prayer and an exalted breath of the sky itself, bringing its mysterious blue depth closer to earth.

Only Fride sat there, indifferent to all that was happening around him. When the singing was over, everyone regarded him again. One of his more or less close grandsons, the chemist Lynch, took it upon himself to break the silence:

“Venerable patriarch! What is the matter with you? You are not joining us in the singing of your hymn.”

Fride lifted his head. For an instant he thought that he shouldn’t mar the young crowd’s happiness with his doubts; however, this thought was immediately replaced by another: sooner or later they all will inevitably experience the same thing as him.

And Fride said:

“This hymn is the greatest error my mind has committed. Omnipotence and immortality deserve curses, not praise. Yes, let them be damned!”

Everyone turned to the patriarch in amazement. He paused, looking at his audience with an expression of deep suffering and torment:

“Eternal life is an unbearable torture. Everything in this life is repeated; such is the cruel law of nature. Entire worlds are created out

of chaotic matter, ignite, fade away, collide with others, get pulverized into dust, and then are formed anew. And so it goes on like this without end. Our thoughts, feelings, desires, actions, all get repeated, even the very idea that ‘everything repeats itself’ returns to my mind for the thousandth time. This is intolerable!”

Fride held his head in his hands. It seemed to him that he was going mad.

They all stood astonished by his words.

A moment later Fride spoke again, loudly and sternly, as if challenging somebody to a battle:

“What a great tragedy human life is – to receive power from God just to transform into an automaton that repeats itself with the precision of a mechanical clock! To know in advance what the Martian Levionach will do or what your beloved woman will say! An eternally living body joined to an eternally dead spirit, cold and indifferent, like an extinguished sun!”

No one knew how to respond. Only the chemist Lynch, having come to his senses after the initial shock of Fride’s speech, addressed him:

“Dear teacher! It seems to me that there is a way out of this situation. What if we were to resurrect the cells of the brain and recreate ourselves, to achieve reincarnation!”

“This is not a solution,” scowled Fride bitterly. “If such resurrection is possible, it would only mean that the present, currently existing ‘I’ with all of my thoughts, feelings, and desires, would disappear without a trace. Someone else, unknown and alien to me, would go on thinking and feeling in my stead. In antiquity people composed fables about a man’s soul, after death, entering another being and forgetting about his previous life. How would my renewed and resurrected state be different from such primitive beliefs about death and reincarnation? In no way at all. Should humanity have used its genius to gain immortality simply to return to the problem of death?”

Fride abruptly fell silent, rolled his chair towards the end of the platform and, as he waved goodbye, added:

“Forgive me, my friends, for leaving you. I regret to see that I ruined your good time with my speech.”

Already getting ready to fly back to earth, Fride shouted from his airplane:

“One way or another, only death can put an end to the torments of the spirit!”

These perplexing last words shook everyone and cast on their spirits a vague premonition of some impending tragedy. Margo, Lynch, and the rest all rolled their chairs to the edge of the platform and, for a long time, anxiously followed the movement of Fride’s airplane, its glowing

blue lights gliding through the vast expanse of the night.

6.

Fride decided to commit suicide – however, he faced the difficulty of choosing an exact method for dying. Contemporary medicine was capable of reviving corpses and restoring individual body parts. All of the ancient means of killing oneself – cyanide, morphine, carbon monoxide, strychnine – were of no use.

He could have blown himself up or flown into space to become a satellite of some planet. However, Fride chose self-immolation, and moreover, self-immolation in its ancient barbarian form – being burned at the stake, although the technology of his time allowed for near-instantaneous combustion of large masses of material with the use of radium.

“To burn at the stake! At the very least, it will be beautiful.”

He wrote his will:

“After one thousand years of my existence I have come to the conclusion that life on earth is a cycle of repetitions, especially intolerable for a man of genius, whose entire being yearns for innovation. This is one of nature’s antinomies. I resolve it with suicide.”

He built a pyre in the alcove of mysteries. He bound himself with chains to an iron pole, around which he piled up kindling.

Mentally, he surveyed all that he was leaving behind on earth.

Not one desire, not a single attachment was he able to seize on! A terrible loneliness pursued him, a kind of loneliness the ancients could never have imagined. Back then, in the old times, people were lonely because of their inability to discover in others what their spirit yearned for. Now loneliness came for the spirit that no longer searched for anything, in fact could not search for anything; it had itself become dead.

Fride was departing earth with no regrets.

One last time he remembered the myth of Prometheus and thought:

“Divine Prometheus has stolen fire and led people to immortality. Let this fire grant the immortal people what wise nature had intended for them: death and the renewal of spirit in eternally living matter.”

At midnight the explosion of fireworks marked the arrival of the second millennium of human immortality. Fride pressed an electronic button, which lit the fuse, and the pyre went up in

flames.

Terrible pain, of which he had some vague childhood recollection, disfigured his face. He frantically struggled to pull himself free, and an inhuman scream resounded in the alcove.

But the iron chains held him firmly. Tongues of fire twisted around his body hissing:

“Everything repeats itself!”

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Aleksandr Bogdanov was a revolutionary activist, philosopher, sociologist, economist, writer, and naturalist who was actively engaged in medicine and research activities.

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