



12 Chairs in Russian

Ilya If, Eugene Petrov

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12 Chairs was first published in 1928. It remains the most famous and popular work in Russia today. We Americans cannot figure out what makes it so humorous. The plot involves a con-man, his accomplice and a priest all competing to find jewelry which has been hidden in the upholstery of a chair after the Revolution in which all personal property became the property of the state. We cannot understand what is funny about this, but apparently the Russians do. Perhaps it is because they lived through these terrible times and thus looking back at it seems funny. Ilya Ilf was born on October 15, 1897 in Odessa Ukraine. Eugene Petrov was born December 13, 1903 in Odessa, Ukraine. Together they are known for writing three books, 12 Chairs, The Little Golden Calf and Little Golden America. The last one describes the adventures of the two authors, Ilya Ilf and Eugene Petrov, who arrived in New York City, bought a car and started traveling around the United States. They went to Chicago and San Francisco and then swept back through the Southern States. When they arrived back in New York to return to Europe, they said that they had traveled ten thousand miles. Sadly, like so many expatriate Russians who lived in America and could have stayed here, they went back to the Soviet Union and did not live long. Ilya Ilf died on April 13, 1937. Petrov died on July 2, 1942. In case you find that my Russian is not very good, I must explain that I took just one class in 1964 in Russian 50 years ago at the University of California at Berkeley. My teacher there was Olga Raevsky, who is still there on the faculty as Professor Emeritus of Slavic Languages and Literatures after these 50 years. She gave me a passing grade. If you do not like my Russian, do not blame me, blame her. I do wonder if she remembers me. I need to thank the lady from Moscow at the book stall for Biblionne at the Oakland Antiquarian Book Fair on February 8-9, 2015 who recommended I consider reprinting the book 12 Chairs.

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