

Torn between knowledge and superstition

Peter Delpout

The Forgotten Season



THIS FIRST NOVEL by much-praised director and filmmaker Peter Delpout is set in the mid-nineteenth century. Every week, Lidia, a sick child in a remote country village, receives the stigmata; wounds appearing on her hands and feet like those of Christ on the cross. A small but devout band of believers refuse to eat, among other things, since they hope that through the girl's ecstasy they can share the miraculous manifestations of the Messiah, who would seem to be revealing himself to the village through Lidia.

Father Peters, a priest at the height of his career, is sent by the archbishop to investigate. Are the stigmata a miracle, or a hoax? He finds himself up against the progressive Dr Wessels, an unbeliever who dismisses everything out of hand as hysteria.

Peters is an aesthete who feels at home in the city of Rome, a lover of art and literature, who does not shrink even from books on the Index: 'nothing is so agreeable as a crisply formulated fallacy'. He is a child of the nineteenth century, the century of Darwin, the century in which God is declared dead not only by Nietzsche but by many scientists, and the supposed historicity of the Bible is investigated for the first time. Peters realises that for the people flocking around Lidia, faith is no more than a straw to cling to, and yet he is deeply affected by Lidia's suffering.

As he attempts to solve the case his problems mount: Wessels wants Lidia to undergo an operation, his own housekeeper becomes increasingly meddlesome, and her son, the village idiot, seems Peters only ally in the hostile village community. When the villagers come to believe the idiot has tried to molest Lidia, the villagers exact a terrible vengeance on him, but as if they are actually taking revenge on Peters himself.

Delpout evokes naturally and realistically the atmosphere of a period that, despite being so recent, can feel medieval. At the end of the book when he hears a cock crow for the third time, the priest knows that ultimately he must face defeat. *The Forgotten Season* is a gripping, atmospheric novel about a time closer to our own than we should like to think.



photo Roeland Fossen

Peter Delpout (b. 1956) made the 1998 film *Felice... Felice...*, which opened that year's International Film Festival Rotterdam and was chosen as best Dutch feature film. In the same year, his first book was published, a novella of the same name. In 1999, to accompany the first screening of *Diva Dolorosa*, a compilation film about Italian film divas of 1913-20, he published the travel book *Diva Dolorosa. Journey to the End of the Century*. He has made several internationally released documentaries, including *In Loving Memory* (2001) about the British tendency to commemorate people's lives with public benches. Delpout is also an avid cyclist; he believes there is no travel experience comparable to seeing the landscape from a bicycle. In 2003 he published a book on the subject: *The Great Bend. A Brief Philosophy of Cycling*.

Delightful and horrifying. [...] The characters are developed consistently and with great acuity, the dialogue is sharp and funny and the descriptions of nature evocative. [...] Delpout's first-born is enchanting. DE VOLKSKRANT

Delpout excels at detailed descriptions of the still inhospitable nineteenth-century Dutch landscape and the simple souls who inhabit it. TROUW

Peters is portrayed convincingly and movingly as a man torn between knowledge and superstition, between delusion and the real world. Exactly as befits a nineteenth-century character.

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RIGHTS

Augustus
Herengracht 481
NL - 1017 BT Amsterdam
TEL.: +31 20 524 98 00
FAX: +31 20 627 68 51
E-MAIL: mnagtegaal@amsteluitgevers.nl
WEBSITE: www.augustus.nl



Foundation for the
Production and
Translation of
Dutch Literature
Singel 464
NL - 1017 AW Amsterdam
TEL.: +31 20 620 62 61
FAX: +31 20 620 71 79
E-MAIL: office@nlpvf.nl
WEBSITE: www.nlpvf.nl

Sample Translation

The Forgotten Season
(Het vergeten seizoen)
by Peter Delpout

(Amsterdam: Augustus, 2007)

Translated by Laura Vroomen

Thursday

The cock crowed a second time. Father Peters took no notice. The strips of newspaper were demanding his full attention. Someone was trying to demonstrate the benefits of a railway linking Arnhem and Zutphen. The exhaustive argument did not fit the confines of a regular newspaper article, let alone the jigsaw of roughly halved columns he was now trying to piece together. Here in Holland people wrote about railways the way medieval theologians wrote about proof for the existence of God. Every argument for or against was weighed, challenged, qualified, developed and what have you. He was against that railway. He was simply against all things faster than his own two feet.

Father Peters thought about asking the housekeeper to tear the newspaper into neat column-sized ribbons from now on. Then before wiping his behind with them he wouldn't have to rack his brains over what 'the present writer' thought of 'the great question of rail links'. The request would never pass his lips of course, any more than asking for the wooden seat of the convenience to be sanded. He was loath to make even the smallest movement, afraid a splinter might lodge in his buttocks. His soft white skin would have to manage a couple of weeks on this uncomfortable privy.

The door of the kitchen that gave out onto the back garden was opened. That would be the housekeeper. Father Peters tried to think of her name. Last night, by the dim light of the oil lamp, he had hardly taken any notice of her and could not even recall her face. He always prided himself on his powers of observation, but preferred to reserve that quality for the contours of a landscape rather than the lines in a face. Now he had to work out a way of learning her name. Day one, problem one, and the sun had only just risen. The woman's weary gait came closer. Would she realise he was here? He cleared his throat. The housekeeper paused. You could hear the leaves rustling in the treetops. In one of the farmyards, a cock mounted its first hen of the day. He cleared his throat again, producing little more than a feeble cough this time. The housekeeper headed back

to the kitchen, the lid on the pot, which she'd obviously wanted to empty, rattling like a leper's clapper.

Father Peters could have used his chamber pot and relieved himself in peace within the sanctuary of his bedroom. But he preferred the outhouse. He did not want the stench of his rotting excrement indoors. A pot was embarrassing, he thought, some things were better left unseen. Upon arrival, he had immediately acquainted himself with the privy's location. At the back of the garden, presumably directly above the cesspit – easy for its builder, not quite so pleasant for its user. While the Indian summer lasted it would not be too cold for his morning ritual, but since the small wooden structure was fairly exposed any kind of wintry shower would sweep right through. He could not stay here long, his constipation would not allow it.

He rubbed his abdomen with the flat of his hand. The unexpected appearance of the housekeeper had paralysed things in there. Perhaps he should have eaten something last night. The journey may have invigorated him, but his restless soul dreaded arriving. Not that he could have travelled any more slowly – he had been expected a week ago. With great care he had studied the timetables of tow barges and stage coaches and traced an impressive labyrinth through the provinces of Holland, Utrecht and Gelderland, stringing together the most curious combinations of roads and waterways. He had even visited the odd village or hamlet on foot – ah, his passion for walking! He had carefully avoided the Rhine Railway, which would have brought him to Arnhem within half a day. Haste is a sin. An idea he thought the Holy Mother Church had been wrong not to adopt.

The housekeeper was lurking at the back of the house again. If the contents of his bowels were not to congeal into some fossilised dumpling over the next few weeks, from tomorrow he would have to get up an hour earlier. Father Peters put the pile of newspaper down beside him and abandoned the Zutphen-Arnhem railway. Everything was congested today. He would have an extra portion of dried prunes, or perhaps try that syrup again. If only the housekeeper would hurry back inside so he could leave the privy. He listened carefully to the few sounds,

trying to detect some kind of visual pattern. Footsteps on the narrow porch, the gravel, the sandy path, a squeaky gate (was she leaving?), the kitchen door again (but who was at the gate then?), more footsteps on the gravel, and the gentle plop-plop of soles treading the path's dewy soil.

'Jan!' The housekeeper's voice clearly emanated from the kitchen door. There was a second person in the garden, heading for the privy. Surely this was not a public convenience? The footsteps halted. Again, he could hear the leaves rustling, and his own breathing. Jan turned back. Footsteps, gravel, gate (the hinges could do with a bit of oil), the knob of the kitchen door. Father Peters relaxed his abdomen, drew his head back, stretched a little and then in one fluent, liberating movement his bowels emptied.

ON THE WALL hung a painted panel no bigger than a small tray (which the wood may well have been used for once). From his place in heaven, Christ delivered the wounds of his crucifixion to Saint Francis. The artist – if the term were appropriate here – had wrapped the naked Jesus in a billowing, pink romper suit, the kind used to restrain lunatics. Attached to the flannel shirt were two wings that would not keep even a sparrow airborne. The Son of God, arms open wide and feet crossed, beamed rays of light to the hands and feet of the kneeling monk. It was hard to tell whether Francis received the stigmata gladly. The saint stared straight ahead, as if it were not the Crucified appearing before him on the firmament, but the demon of his mortal fears. An interesting idea in itself, Father Peters thought to himself, but perhaps a bit too unorthodox. He would ask the housekeeper to remove the piece; there was no excuse for ugliness, certainly not in matters pertaining to the faith.

His predecessor, Father Kruysen, had left not just this picture. On the desk lay a neat bundle of papers. No covering letter, but they were clearly meant for Father Peters. His eyes skimmed the fly leaf. *Notes, etc.: on the life of Lidia Wijffels, stigmatised in B., last entry 17 September 1860, chronicled by H.M. Kruysen, Priest.* It had been written on the brown cover in a neat, but unsteady

hand. A beginning without legal pretensions, he established. He had not yet read a single word, but had already formed an opinion. A bad start for an advocate, even the devil's. From the corner of his eye he peered at Christ in his winged romper suit, looking down on Saint Francis and the desk. Kruysen had obviously found it a comfort. Oh, the false sentiment of a rural priest. He knew what they were like. They simply loved to wander down sandy paths, carrying cross and thurible in procession, surplices billowing amid golden fields. A picturesque image, he had to concede, but mere folklore.

He turned his chair away from the painting and put the bundle of papers on his lap. There was something odd about that date. According to the official documents, Kruysen had been transferred on 15 September, the day he was expected in his new parish in a hamlet in Groningen somewhere, the inescapable punishment for those defying episcopal authority. A Saturday, Father Peters worked out. But the notes ran until 17 September, a Monday. What was so special about that Monday? Had the pastor wanted to celebrate one last mass on Sunday? He picked up his almanac and leafed through the ecclesiastical calendar: *17 September, the Wounds of Saint Francis*. Kruysen was a fanatic, who had personally deferred his reassignment to celebrate the feast of Francis's stigmata. First he causes a blaze, Father Peters thought to himself, then adds fuel to the flames just before leaving. And now I get to quench the fire. He regretted his slow journey. Perhaps he had underestimated the situation.

He put the bundle of paper back on the desk. He would read the 'notes' at some later point. After all, nothing beats personal observation.

The doorbell rang in the hallway. The housekeeper knocked on his door.

'Dr Wessels is asking for you, Father.'

'Show him in.'

The woman froze. 'Are you sure?'

What was he supposed to be sure about? The housekeeper pursed her lips. Father Peters waited.

'He's a heathen.' She spit it out like a rotten fruit.

‘We cannot deny all heathens entry to this house, wouldn’t you agree? What if it’s the Messiah himself, in disguise?’

It was a well-worn argument he had often used as an excuse to meet unbelievers who interested him, but here, in civilisation’s hinterland, it sounded fresh again. He sat back, pleased.

‘But Father Kruysen says ...’

This woman was starting to ruin his day. He stood up.

Through the half-open front door, he saw a man his age, but stronger, robust, dressed plainly for a doctor, even in these parts.

‘Please do come in.’

His outstretched hand was practically dwarfed by that of the man. Rough and chapped, the hand of a butcher, although this would not occur to him until later.

‘That’s alright,’ Dr Wessels smiled, ‘it will only upset Stien.’

Stien, he must remember that.

The doctor leaned forward a little, as if scrutinising a patient. ‘You’re the new priest?’

Father Peters preferred not to think of himself as the new priest. ‘The supply priest, come to observe the situation,’ he said.

‘Excellent,’ he muttered.

Father Peters looked at him in surprise.

‘Observation. Observation, my dear father, the quintessence of what I do.’

That smile again, barely noticeable, but Father Peters detected a facetious bent and decided to be on guard. ‘I’m here as *promotor fidei*, if that means anything to you. In a certain case.’

Wessels nodded. ‘The Devil’s Advocate in a cassock. That black frock becomes the devil.’

‘Promoter of the Faith,’ Father Peters corrected him with a brusqueness he associated with insecurity. He liked his job. Champion of purity, as he liked to call himself. The counsel charged with protecting the faith from pseudo-saints – the best term he could think of.

‘You’re not from our Church, I gather?’

The doctor shook his head. ‘Lidia Wijffels is my patient.’

Straight to the point. Here was a man on business. Lidia Wijffels was his patient too, in a way. ‘I shall be her confessor in the weeks to come.’

Dr Wessels screwed up his eyes. ‘The girl is in great pain. I would like to perform surgery on her.’

It was time to wipe that condescending smile from his face. ‘The Catholic Church sanctions the blessings of medical knowledge. But I don’t know where the ill are safer: in the hands of gentleman physicians or in the hands of God.’ They cannot even cure a simple constipation, he had wanted to add, but refrained.

Dr Wessels nodded. ‘You haven’t met the girl yet, I take it?’

Father Peters did not like this ‘I take it’. ‘No,’ he tried to sound as laconic as possible, but the man in front of him made him nervous. Wessels was several steps ahead of him, forcing him to rush, something he loathed. Something he was incapable of. But a healthy saint is not a saint, he thought to himself. This doctor might be useful after all and cure the girl of her ills, whatever they may be. It meant he could return to Rome before the start of winter and write his report there.

‘Tomorrow is Friday, she’ll be expecting you. You’ll be astonished.’

Dr Wessels turned round. Father Peters saw his shoulders stiffen underneath the thin summer coat. After a few paces, the doctor paused. ‘What do you reckon, Father, how just is needless suffering? What’s the Church’s official position on this matter?’ He screwed up his eyes again and looked Father Peters straight in the eye. ‘In your opinion.’

Father Peters resented people looking him straight in the eye, especially those with two cunning, half-open slits with barely visible whites. ‘As you know, our faith has a special bond with suffering. It has given us the mercy of our salvation.’ The answer pleased him. Debate was his arena, it was where he excelled. If the theory is sound, he firmly believed, reality will follow suit.

‘Listen.’ The doctor’s voice was surprisingly low. An idea seemed to be forming in his mind which, on reflection, he preferred not to share. ‘Listen,’ he said once more, ‘her bladder needs emptying, even on a Friday. She’ll have to see me. Ask her.’ Without looking back, he disappeared down the alleyway beside the church.

Father Peters turned and closed the door. Down the hallway, by the kitchen door, stood the housekeeper. She had heard the whole conversation.

‘Stien, fetch my coat,’ he barked. ‘I’m going out.’

IT HAD BEEN an impulse. He happened to think better on his feet. And in order to form a clear picture of this ‘certain case’, he had to know the land too. People resemble the landscape they inhabit and speak the language of the soil they farm.

Father Peters walked towards the river. The waterway enclosed the village in a serpentine loop. He crossed the lock gates to the other bank. Below him, grey-faced men were poling cargo boats upstream. The boats carried roof tiles stacked waist high. One of the skippers only just managed to keep his balance in the sluicing water. The man swore. Father Peters quietly absolved him. Without repentance, he decided, provided the sinner was a Catholic of course. At long last a smile appeared on his face again. The God of the Protestants would never tolerate such a thought. In that sense he had joined the better ranks of the faithful.

He followed the river’s meandering course. Trees were being felled along the edge of the field. Day labourers delimbed the logs with small hatchets. The other bank sported spring rye, the fresh crop swaying in the warm west wind. It would need cutting soon if they were to sow any winter rye. Floating like grey battleships in a sea of green, tall stacked clouds cast their shadow across the meadows, until the sun instantly wiped them off the face of the earth.

He climbed one of the low hills along a muddy path. A strong breeze pulled his clerical robes taut about his legs. He leaned over cautiously and tested the force of the wind. His eyes watered. He surveyed the land. Amid the gently rolling hills, small streams stretched in all directions. If the narrow river had its

way, it would flood its banks and spread right out. For now, the higher terrain continued to absorb all surplus water like a sponge. But in winter this is a swamp, Father Peters realised, not a good place to be.

It did not bother him up on the hill. He relished the view. The farmland yonder on the horizon, where it changed colour and turned to wasteland, the wooded banks effortlessly tracing the curves of the land. A distant farm in perfect tranquillity. Tufts of poppies and sorrel, subtly brightening the grey meadows with each caress of the sun.

He could not help it, to him every landscape was a picture, a set of proportions and lines balanced by a grove in the foreground or a church spire on the horizon. His passion was the picturesque. And if the panorama lacked balance, he would form a small frame with his hands and introduce the requisite harmony into his imaginary canvas himself.

Shouting shrill orders, the loggers were driving two oxen towards the river. A bundle of four stripped logs trailed behind the animals, too heavy for their pulling power. Even the whip failed to get them going. A small boy clambered onto the back of one of the oxen and spurred the animal on with bare spindly legs. The child kicked and prodded. The ox took a cautious step, but its leg sank into the sodden bank.

The way he viewed the landscape was a luxury, Father Peters realised. How different it was for those having to work this land. To them their soil was poor and unforgiving. If theirs at all. Most of the people in this remote corner of the world lived off a meagre daily wage, scraped together in the odd sawmill or in the cultivation of the wasteland they had reluctantly embarked on. Poor soil won't ever yield an abundant harvest.

Tomorrow a small host of workers would be trudging across these fields to the village, as they had been doing every Friday over the past few months. They would simply down their tools, ignore the foresters' orders, abandon their own strip of land, refuse to shoe the horses, weave the baskets or cut the reeds. In the narrow street, not all that far from the church that was temporarily his, they

would flock together in front of the Wijffels' small home. And at three o'clock the news would come spreading through the crowd like a whisper: 'The wounds of Christ have appeared.' And with quiet godliness, everyone would kneel. Mothers would help children make the sign of the cross and hush bawling babies. Men, unshaven, their hair unkempt, eyes still bloodshot from last night's drink, would weep freely. 'Lidia has once more purged us of our sins this week,' someone would say. 'Indeed,' another said, 'she endures her suffering for us alone.' And yet another: 'Jesus loves her. Perhaps he'll love us too.' Some could contain themselves no longer and would peer through the small window, trying to see past the muslin curtains for a glimpse of Lidia in ecstasy, Lidia the crucified, Lidia the redeemer.

That, at any rate, was how Father Peters imagined it. If truth be told, he knew little more than what the archbishop had told him and he was not exactly a brilliant storyteller. Father Kruysen had written the bishop a letter about bloody blisters on the hands and feet of one of his parishioners, miraculous healings and mounting devotion among the day labourers and their families, who would sometimes walk half a day to catch a glimpse of the girl. A young girl, 'unwavering in her Holy Suffering', Kruysen had written, 'a Flaming Fire' (a pathetic hyperbole, Peters had thought to himself) for the assembled faithful. That man has to go, the bishop had promptly decided. He could not abide amateur saints, as he called them – he lacked the necessary imagination. He was also wary of public piety, particularly here in the young Dutch diocese. Less than a decade ago, this area had still carried official mission status, he reminded people at every occasion, creating the impression that only yesterday he had celebrated Holy Mass in a secret church. Don't provoke the Puritans governing the Netherlands, was his motto. If it were up to those orthodox Protestants you could not even ring the angelus, but a procession of vociferous pilgrims with crucifixes and papal standards does indeed verge on provocation, even Father Peters had to admit. He had been told to restore order before a new place of pilgrimage arose. No French scenes, the archbishop had told him. He had nodded, message understood.

Not that he could have refused (the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church does not work that way), but he was not exactly thrilled with this assignment. The miracle (so-called miracle, he corrected himself) would quickly lose its lustre under his watchful eyes and sound investigative methods, no doubt about it. But his new, temporary parish also included the Carmel, the small convent of the Carmelite sisters, who had sought their contemplative refuge in this God-forsaken hinterland just a few years ago. He knew the prioress.

Father Peters looked towards the village. New cargo boats emerged from the lock, downstream this time which, if anything, was proving even harder than upstream because of the enormous drop in the river. One of the skippers ended up crossways. Shouts rang out. Father Peters did not catch what the helmsmen were yelling at each other, but it was not hard to guess. He had plenty of imagination.

In the field below him, the oxen had been relieved of two logs. With result. There was already a small quantity of wood on the bank. The men drove the animals back for the remaining logs. Surplus brushwood was being burnt on the hill, thin wisps of smoke blowing about in the wind. If you ignored the yelling, closed your eyes to the whip and the men sinking deeper into the waterlogged soil with every step, then this was indeed a picture of perfect grace.

THE CARMEL WAS situated a few kilometres outside the village, just beyond the birch wood, Father Peters had been told by the lockkeeper. Head east along the sandy path connecting the main road with the village and you couldn't miss it. Anyone going too far would end up in Germany and be mistaken for a smuggler. But he'd be alright in his clerical robes, the man had said with a smile.

The convent looked like a manor farm and probably had been in the past. Unusually for this area, the outside walls had been whitewashed. Right next to it, in a small square, stood some young fruit trees. They did not seem to thrive in the poor sandy soil. The Carmelite sisters would not be having much jam this winter. Father Peters considered the option of gooseberries on the sunny side of those

whitewashed walls (perhaps he ought to recommend it to them), they'd even survive on bluestone.

He rang the bell outside the gate. It took a long time for the hatch to open. 'The new priest, Father Peters,' he volunteered. Not wanting to tempt the keeper of the keys to break her vow of silence, he gave her a friendly nod. She opened the gate and led him across the courtyard to a narrow door. The humid antechamber admitted hardly any light. He sat down on a stool in front of the fine grille that divided the room. The Carmelite sisters were not easily diverted from their spiritual duties. He would wait.

Perhaps he had dozed off a minute, but he suddenly thought he could make out a figure behind the panel dotted with tiny holes. Was there any sign of movement? The grille obstructed his view of the section of the reception area reserved for the nuns, but he knew he was being observed. Just the thing she'd do, he thought, and moved his stool towards the scant light. He had nothing to hide.

'Old habits never die,' the figure spoke from behind the panel.

Nor do voices, Father Peters thought, she has not changed a bit, the nun's habit has failed to tame her venom.

'How long did I sleep?'

'It gave me the chance to have a good look at you, this panel doesn't reveal much.'

She sounded merry, mischievous even. Interesting, it seemed intimacy never died. He had expected this to be worse, more embarrassing perhaps. He leaned to one side in the hope of catching a glimpse of the nun.

'Rome has sent you for a big spring-clean?'

He recoiled, as if caught out. She has already wrong-footed me twice, he noted irritably; if I'm not careful I'll end up a lame horse.

'You've heard about the case?'

For a moment, all was quiet behind the panel. Father Peters fancied he could see her eyes light up behind the holes, but perhaps it was just his imagination. A clearly audible sigh escaped her.

‘Our vow of silence doesn’t stop us from catching the odd bit of news from the outside world. I hope you won’t be too hard on her. Don’t forget, she believes in the same God as you, although she won’t be as eloquent. The people here may be a little rough, but that rough edge is honest and without frills. You ought to appreciate that. The mud on their work clothes hides more purity than you’ll find in any of your beloved worshippers of beauty.’

For someone who is not allowed to speak, she has certainly not lost the knack for it, Father Peters thought. ‘I’ll bear that in mind,’ he said meekly. Strictly speaking, she was his subordinate, since he was a priest, but maybe this was not the right moment to say so. She might raise it herself during confession – with good reason, he thought, surely she would recognise that – so he could impress her with his altruistic fairness.

‘The Carmel is part of my parish,’ he said. ‘I’m here to do perform my priestly duties. I’m sorry we have to meet again in this manner.’

He paused. If she wanted to respond, he would have to give her the chance. She was silent.

‘As you know,’ he continued after a while, ‘I admire the Carmelites’ rigour. It’s an honour to officiate here.’

There was lengthy deliberation behind the panel, followed by the words, carefully chosen yet decisive: ‘Father Kruysen was greatly loved by my fellow sisters. They asked the priest from Weerlo to be their confessor. He was a great comfort to Kruysen. I agreed to it.’

‘Weerlo? That’s at least an hour and a half on foot.’

‘Two hours.’

He heard a note of triumph, derision almost. She cannot help herself, she wants to torment me, he thought, she has still not forgiven me. But the blow still

to come, he would never have credited to her. It came from someone other than the woman he had known.

‘He’s a God-fearing priest. Not an inquisitor.’

The audacity. He felt his bowels contract and instantly increase pressure on his sphincter. One such conversation a day and that problem would be solved.

‘I’m not an inquisitor, you know that.’

‘You carry the sword. That’s how you’re perceived. The decision is final.’

‘Else, please.’ He had tried to say it without pathos, but he knew it came out sounding whiney.

‘I’m known as Sister Theresia now, even to you.’ The figure behind the panel got up. ‘Go with God,’ she said.

She has kept her stature, Father Peters thought. He heard the door fall to.

The keeper of the keys showed him out. He gave her another friendly nod. She lowered her eyes.

He estimated his distance from the birch wood. If he walked along steadily and did nothing to upset his bowels, he should be able to relieve himself under cover of the trees. Twice in one day, he could not let that slip. Having reached the trees, he squatted, lifted his cassock, pulled down his trousers and felt the dry grass gently caress his naked buttocks, but it was too late. His bowels were completely clogged up again and simply refused to budge.