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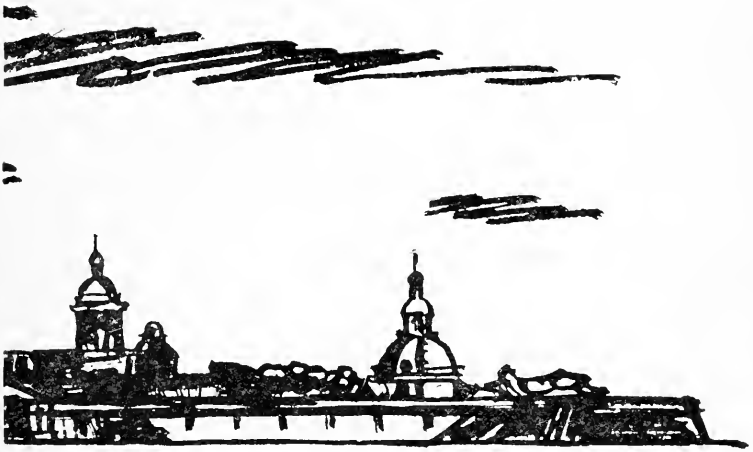

PALACE *and* PRISON

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CHAPTER I

The Has-Been

On the 12th of March, 1923, I, Sergei Rusanin, became 83 years old. Something happened that day that erased every last vestige I ever had of a nobleman's monarchist feeling. At the same time, a seal fell from my lips, enabling me to make public a matter I had kept secret all my life. But I shall speak of this later.

I was born in 1840, survived four emperors and four great wars, the last of which was without precedent and world-wide. I was a cavalry officer, received a citation for bravery in the Caucasian campaign, and had a good career ahead of me, but an event which took place in '87 knocked me completely off balance; I never really recovered.

I resigned my commission and took up a hermit's life at my estate where I stayed until it was burned down during the Revolution. Ugorye, our family estate in *N.* Gubernia, bordered on Lagutin's former estate.

Our grandfathers had purchased their land at the same time and our grandmothers had planned the future marriage of their grandchildren that would join the two

estates. With this in mind, and taking local topography into consideration, our families kept adding to their land.

Yes, Vera Lagutina and I grew up, played, and studied together. At seventeen we listened to the nightingale's song and pledged our love for ever. All would have gone smoothly, and with our mutual consent, just as our grandparents had foreseen it, but for my own stupidity. As it were, I dug my own grave.

I brought my friend Mikhail home for our last school holidays. He had joined our third form in '59, coming straight from the Vladimir Cadet Corps in Kiev, but we St. Petersburg cadets had a very poor opinion of the provinces. Besides, he kept to himself and spent his time reading. He was handsome and resembled an Italian, with burning eyes and brows joined at the bridge of his nose. He was from Bessarabia; his father had been either a Rumanian or a Moldavian.

It is no wonder that his photograph was not in the archives, for such things are to be found only in the prison files of persons eventually slated to be released—in case they are arrested again. Mikhail's destiny was different: for twenty years on the first of every month the Emperor was informed that such and such a person was in such and such a prison, and each time it was the Emperor's will that his order, dated November 2, 1861, and stating that Mikhail was to be left in solitary confinement *pending special decree*, was to be continued in force.

The printer should always italicize these words, in order that their appearance, so conspicuous beside the monotonous type of the pages, might in some way startle the complacent reader, completely absorbed in his own joys and sorrows.

Attention, dear reader! The special decree was *never* issued!

A wonderful youth was imprisoned without trial or jury, on the basis of his own words alone, and spent his remaining years in solitary confinement in the Alexeyev Ravelin.

Chief of Police Pleve acquainted the next Tsar, Alexander III, with the previous tsar's order and made note of His Majesty's new decree: if the prisoner so desired, he was to be released and permanently exiled to the far-off wilds of Siberia.

One can assume that, according to a general system of the foulest hypocrisy, the chief warden read the decree to a totally insane man who had long since forgotten his own name. In response to the solemn reading, and to the general delight of the prison guards, Mikhail probably darted under his cot and crouched trembling in a corner, as he did years later whenever anyone entered his solitary cell at the insane asylum at Kazan.

The only time he did not do this was during my last visit, and only because he evidently had no strength left to dart under his cot. It was his last hour on earth. The frantic terror in his eyes at the sight of people approaching him and the death agony of a tortured soul yearning to flee from its tormentors have haunted me every day and every hour of my life.

It could not have been otherwise, for I am the one really responsible for this unprecedented, unbearable, solitary, and unnecessary death.

After reading my notes some readers may say that the nature of my crime was, so to speak, psychological, and that the most exacting court of law would find me innocent. But has the reader never heard of any case in which a completely innocent man, unanimously acquitted by the jury, has taken his own life, having been condemned by his own conscience?

Mikhail's strange story has long intrigued researchers. One even advertised in the papers as far back as 1905, in an attempt to solve the mystery of this Russian "Man in the Iron Mask," and requested information on the subject. I suffered a nervous breakdown, but did not offer any information.

At the time I was not yet prepared; I was not then the man I am now. I could not come out and say, "I, Sergei Rusanin, a Konstantinov Academy classmate of Mikhail Beideman, who was imprisoned without trial or jury in the Alexeyev Ravelin, was the one who betrayed him."

Quite recently the original documents on the Tsar's most important and hitherto secret prisoners were classified and published.

Ivan Potapich, my employer, sometimes brings home books; he also brought these pages, which he read and then gave to me, saying, "See how these poor souls lived. Even though they were criminals, it brings tears to your eyes."

I took the book and read it over many times. Oh, how cruel and revealing were the events described in the terse data on Mikhail! The room spun round, a mountain collapsed, crushing me. It was probably the same sensation as that felt by men in a mine-layer when they drop a mine to blow up the enemy and destroy themselves instead. I dropped my mine sixty-one years ago.

Why should an old man like me who had lived through the reigns of four emperors survive the Revolution unscathed? Why did I not die bravely on the field of battle, as my comrades had, or receive my death sentence from the Revolutionary Tribunal as an unreconciled but honest enemy? What will I be to posterity? How will they regard me?

Come what may, my hour has struck, and I shall tell all I know.

There are only two of us left from the class of '61: Goretsky Junior, an Infantry General, Cavalier of the First St. George Cross and Gold Sword, and I. Goretsky Junior now earns his bread as Savva Kostrov, a citizen of the city of Velizh, the men's room attendant in a theatre. He is pleased with his quiet job, after starving for a time, and boasts that his men's room shines and that he makes enough in tips to buy halvah. He squandered two fortunes in his day, but now a pound of halvah makes him as

happy as a child. The last time I saw him I said, "Remember the Gilkho attack, old man?" He perked up and waved the old mop he was pushing around the tile floor of his establishment as if it were a sword. He went into all the details but he got his generals mixed up. It was not Voinoransky, but himself, Goretsky Junior, who had captured the mountain village in a reckless sortie. The old man had left himself out of it, having forgotten his own name.

In his insanity, Mikhail Beideman, remembering a chance inscription on a wall, called himself Shevich. While I . . . could it be that my fortune, as told to me in Paris, would come true? But this is beside the point, although, as they say in China, having published my notes, I shall lose face. Sometimes a person is fated to die during his lifetime and then seem to live on, or, rather, he uses the last shreds of his remaining physical strength to drag his worn-out body around until it falls to dust.

Goretsky Junior, his sword raised, reviewing his troops —half a century ago there were such press photographs of him—and Kostrov-Goretsky, the men's room attendant. I gave him enough for a quarter of a pound of halvah when I recently kissed him good-bye. He is the only living person who knows me as Sergei Rusanin.

I hope I will no longer be alive when this manuscript is published and those who read it realize the kind of friend I was. The story of Mikhail's life lies here before me accusingly. I, too, shall add my bit to the Archives Committee. My contribution will deal with matters which no sources, save my lost soul, can bring to light.

The large house I live in has a famous past. Fashionable balls were once held in the main ballroom with the stucco ceiling, and it was here that I had my first social successes. Later, when the house was sold to a private party, I often came out the loser when playing billiards with Goretsky there, for he could shoot for the centre or corner pocket and never miss, and was famous for his klopf-

stosses. We would get dead drunk in the private boxes and the valets would finally bundle us up in our greatcoats and take us home at dawn.

Those drunken orgies were an attempt to forget my love for Vera—but I will speak of her later. I remember I was especially reckless the year Mikhail, coming straight from Garibaldi's army, disappeared after crossing the Finnish border; it only recently has become known that he was buried alive for ever behind the stone walls of the Ravelin.

But let us proceed with the agenda, as they say nowadays.

I live on the top floor of the third court of this house, so full of memories. Ivan Potapich, the former footman of the last owner, took me on as a boarder and nursemaid for his grandchildren. He is sixty and a widower, yet the old man is as strong as ever. His son and daughter-in-law died of typhus, and the two little girls found their way to their grandfather themselves, for whom else had they to turn to?

There is a hostel and a cafeteria in the house. Potapich helps with the dishes, and the cook gives him three portions of soup and two main dishes a day instead of a wage. A bowl of soup and a piece of black bread are enough for me; it's the young ones who need the food. I've become quite attached to the children, for they have been my only consolation during these past terrible years.

I have no time for them now, nor do they have any need of me since I took them to school for the first time; the very next day they went by themselves. Potapich spends his days washing dishes and says, "Everyone's getting rich nowadays—we're using both the small and the deep plates."

The room is empty until dusk, and when I'm not out on business, I have time to write. My business is begging. I keep to the shady side of Nevsky Prospekt from Police Bridge to Nikolayev Station, and back by tram, if possible. My legs have been troubling me. They're swelling badly.

While begging I see quite a few familiar faces; we're all in the same business now. They don't know me, but I recognize them. Although, as I've already said, I have been out of things for many years, whenever I chanced to be in the capital I was always interested in the latest news. Important people were pointed out to me and named. Ah, but they surely know each other well enough! Yet, whenever they meet with an outstretched hand, they pretend they are strangers. They find it easier that way.

There's the famous deputy minister selling papers, one of which is the currently popular *Atheist*. If his customer looks harmless and seems to be a man of the past, too, the newsman can't help remarking, "You should be ashamed of yourself for buying this, mister." And if the customer replies, "And aren't you ashamed to sell it?" he will blush, draw his beard into his old coat collar, and mumble, "I've no choice!"

There's no sense in my rambling on like this. Back to my story. I find it difficult to express my thoughts consecutively, for I spend so much time with the children that my speech has become childlike. However, this is my plan: I shall write my thoughts down as they come to me, and make no attempt to keep back the present when it enters the scene of its own accord; and before sending the manuscript to the Archives Committee, I shall try to put it in order and edit it with but one aim in mind: to reconstruct as faithfully as possible the tragic life of my friend.

I am saving up bonded white lined paper for the printer's copy, and to this end have doubled my walk along Nevsky, covering the sunny side as well. I have given up paying my fare in the tram, and if the conductor will not let me ride free-of-charge (I can never bring myself to say, "Please help an unemployed comrade," as is the custom currently), I get off at the nearest stop and trudge home slowly, as a dog to its kennel.

I am saving all my money for paper, pen and ink for the clean copy, and am using the reverse side of the for-

mer Central Bank's insurance forms for the rough copy. Our girls brought up armfuls of the blanks from the ground floor.

And now, dear reader, let me lead you step by step along the sorrowful path Mikhail trod from the very first day we met. First of all, let us stop near Obukhov Bridge, at the site of our military academy. We were both cadets there and upon graduation we were both commissioned to the Orden Regiment.

The building has not changed much since then. The noble façade and Alexandrian columns are intact, but the avenue has been renamed "International Avenue," as more befitting the revolutionary spirit of the times, and the large red lettering over the entrance now reads: "First Artillery School." However, the ground floor windows are still crowned by lions with rings in their mouths and a bit higher up are the plumed helmets. The two cannons at the entrance are not ours—they were set there after the academy became an artillery school. It was an infantry school in my day. We carried rifles and stood guard in the Palace, attended balls at the girls' finishing schools, and were regarded as Guards' school cadets. Mikhail's tragedy resulted from this proximity to Court life, from the reading of foreign books and the infernal *Kolokol*, published by the Messrs. Ogaryov and Herzen.* But all this in due time.

The entrance gates still bear the shields with the crossed poleaxes, and there is a shady garden behind the yellow stone wall where the once slender birches have become stately trees.

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* A. I. Herzen (1812-1870) was a Russian revolutionary democrat, materialist philosopher and writer. He emigrated to London in 1847 to escape prosecution by the tsarist government. There he founded the "Free Russian Printworks" where he published the *Polyarnaya Zvezda* (*Polar Star*) and the newspaper *Kolokol* (*Bell*) which called for the overthrowing of the existing regime. N. P. Ogaryov (1813-1877), an outstanding public figure and poet and close friend of Herzen, worked with him on these publications.

People of my generation must have been made of strong stuff for me to have gone through what I did and retained a clear mind and memory, for whatever I recall materializes instantly before my eyes. I remember the plan of the garden, and when I look closely I see them there: the two tall maples among the lindens, a symbol of our short-lived friendship. I remember reading Schiller with Mikhail and planting the two saplings in honour of Posa and Don Carlos, though in fact I had had the two of us in mind.

Oh, how portentous and significant one's emotions can be!

I swayed and felt giddy. There was a sharp pain in my heart. Leaning on my cane (fortunately, Potapich's girls put a rubber tip on it and it does not slide any more), I sat down on a bench opposite the fence. The coloured posters dazzled me: "Society of Friends of the Air Force"... "Red Instructors Go to the Red Villages"... "The Old Church Is Reformed." And above it all a poster with something like coloured snakes advertising: "The Synthetic Theatre." Kobchikov alone will show you everything from a trapeze to a tragedy.

How can he do all those things alone? My poor head is spinning and I feel that I'm going mad. Thoughts crowd my brain and it cannot encompass them all, for apart from my present surroundings, the past, which history has swept into its grave, arises more real than reality. It has been swept away, but not forgotten!

I remember our first meeting. I was on fatigue duty beneath the clock for having been late to chapel when Petya Karsky shouted as he ran past:

"They've brought some chaps up from Kiev, and I swear the Devil's there with them, too!"

They took the newcomers past me to the bath-house. There were four of them. Three had no distinguishing features to speak of, but the fourth was quite striking, tall and thin, with coal-black eyebrows. Besides, there was nothing in

his bearing that even remotely resembled our parade-ground stiffness. He carried his head thrown back slightly, his gait was graceful, and there was an expression of pensive sorrow in his eyes. The sharp line of his brows seemed drawn on his olive skin. I thought him quite handsome and took a liking to him at once.

That very evening we had our first memorable talk. Mikhail's cot was to be next to mine. After supper and chapel the cadets were left alone in the dormitory. This was the happiest time of the day. Although cards were strictly forbidden, every cadet naturally had a deck under his mattress, and taking advantage of the unsupervised hours, they played away. We had a whole stack of library books on the table as a blind and drew lots to see who was to read aloud. This time, however, the reading was not merely a means of camouflage, for the cadets had surrounded the reader; they sat on benches and tables and swallowed every word of the fascinating *Prince Serebryany.** The novel had not yet been published, and a friend of the author had given the cadets a rare manuscript copy.

"I wonder how you can enjoy chewing this sugared biscuit made with pink water," Mikhail said with annoyance as he made his way to his cot. Neither the reader nor his audience paid any attention to these words, but I took immediate notice of them.

Countess Kushina, my aunt, had told me that *Prince Serebryany*, which the author himself had read at the Empress' evening gatherings, had created a furor at Court. Upon completion of the readings, the Empress presented Tolstoi with a gold locket in the form of a book. "Maria" was engraved on one cover and "For *Prince Serebryany*" on the other, with the beautiful Court Ladies who had been present at the readings portrayed as Muses. True, Prince [illegible]sky had found the novel dull, but that, quite under-[illegible], was no more than the envy of one gentleman

*rical novel by A. K. Tolstoi (1817-75).

of society of the social success of another. However, neither his social position nor his tastes attracted Mikhail to Court life. What could he have against Count Alexei Tolstoi?

I lay down on my cot, and when I saw that Mikhail was not yet asleep, I asked him what he had meant. He explained quite readily and without a trace of the haughtiness I had expected:

"You see, Count Tolstoi himself, as I have been told by one of his close friends, said that while writing about a power-mad despot, he was often compelled to throw down his pen, and not so much at the thought that such a person as Ivan the Terrible could have existed, as that there could have existed a society which endured him and was subservient to him. But he did not carry these civic emotions over into his book; instead, he gilded them over. I have much greater hopes for the trilogy he's working on now."

"I've heard that this trilogy is the height of insolence and that it will hardly be approved by the censors."

"Quite possibly, for though indirectly and evasively, the autocracy is condemned in the trilogy," Mikhail said. "That's if the finished work is anything like the manuscript he read to a group of friends. Once again Ivan the Terrible is shown trampling all human rights to satisfy his own tyrannical nature, while the author refutes the idea of autocracy in the person of Tsar Fyodor, a man of high moral principles. Boris Godunov is the reformer, but the struggle for power destroys his will and drives him insane. One can only welcome such a book at a time like this, on the eve of reforms, and a civic-minded writer is in such great demand."

He added with great conviction:

"Don't you see, those higher up must be the first to realize that reforms and the autocracy are mutually exclusive. Once a policy of reforms is adopted, it follows that the autocracy—that foul lie—should be abolished!"

The moon was shining right on Mikhail's face which, with its fiery eyes and inspired pallor, seemed magnificent and terrible.

"That's outrageous!" I said. "I won't even permit myself to understand the full meaning of your words. They insult me."

"Oh? That's interesting!" Mikhail raised himself on his elbow and looked at me closely, as if seeing me for the first time.

It was a peculiarity of his never to notice a person when he was speaking. He had such a forceful personality that only if he were contradicted would he suddenly rear up like a wild stallion faced with a barrier, his flashing eyes seeking a sure footing. However, he was very gentle by nature and never wished to give personal affront.

"Why do you find my opinions insulting?"

"Because my own are the exact opposite," I said. "My aunt, Countess Kushina, was like a mother to me and brought me up as a loyal subject, firmly convinced of His Majesty's sacred right to the throne."

"Do Slavophiles visit your aunt's house?" Mikhail interrupted.

"Not really, but writers of kindred opinions do. Would you care to come along with me this Sunday?"

I still cannot understand how I ever could have invited him, though the next moment I realized that his insolent remarks might easily cause unpleasantness, and hastened to add:

"I want to warn you that my aunt is against the immediate emancipation of the serfs, and you may find quite a few things there unacceptable to you."

"That doesn't bother me in the least," he said. "In order to defeat the enemy one has to see him at close range!" His small white teeth flashed as he smiled.

His nature knew no gradual changes of mood. Everything about him, his sharp and sudden movements, his black eyebrows on a pale face, and the unexpected changes

in tone from threatening to childlike in its trustfulness and artlessness were unmistakable signs of what is currently referred to as emotional instability. But, perhaps, just because I had been brought up so strictly, I found these qualities so fascinating. The suddenness with which I brought him into the family and then introduced him to Lagutin, Vera's father, recommending him so highly that he was invited to come to the Lagutin estate for the holidays practically the first time they met, seemed the doing of some evil spirit governing our two fates.

CHAPTER II

Auntie's Salon

Countess Kushina's Sunday gatherings were held in her library, a room that spoke of its owner's passion for occultism. It would have been a good place for Count Saint-Germain to preach or for Caliostro to have his first great successes. Above the velvet corner divan were a row of paintings in weird frames which Auntie said symbolized Dante's nine circles of Hell. She considered Dante a disciple of the same secret society of which she hinted at having been a member since her youth. That is why she would say, pointing to a diagram she had done, and perhaps designed, too, which hung on the wall opposite:

"My inspiration is exactly like Dante's, and if he did not agree with me, why then did he confirm it by rapping on the table thrice?"

That winter table-turning and séances were in great vogue, and it was common knowledge that not only poetic souls like Fyodor Tyutchev were great adherents of it but people much more important, too.

At first glance Auntie's diagram which took up all of the wall and was called "Ptolemy's System, as Applied to the Russian Empire," seemed to be an enormous target, like those in shooting galleries.

The light-blue satin background represented the firmament; on it was a great white circle, the largest of several concentric circles spaced at small intervals. Auntie had appliquéd each circle on the light-blue firmament. I remember that the truly magnificent bright-yellow circle within the Divine White one represented the autocracy, and the grass-green circle—the symbol of hope—was the nobility, immediately followed by a black circle, symbolizing the tiller's labour. The circles were of the finest materials, done in excellent tambour stitching, and were placed one within the other like Easter eggs. The result was both attractive and intriguing. As Auntie explained the meaning of the diagram to some believer in immediate emancipation of the serfs, she would point to it with her small ring-bedecked hand and say:

"But, my dear sir, how can you even think of disrupting the balance of the Russian Sphere? If you take off one circle, all the rest will rip off, too. That's what tambour stitching is: each loop is part of the next, and you must either not touch it at all, or else, if you rip one loop, the rest must go, too."

The writer Dostoyevsky was an occasional visitor at Auntie's gatherings. No one considered him a first-class writer at that time, and if I compare his literary value to one of military rank, this being more natural to my conception, I will not be far from wrong if I say he corresponded to a Major. As compared to him Grigorovich was a Colonel, and Ivan Turgenev, as Auntie stated quite firmly, was a General.

Auntie's soirées were usually divided into two parts, the first of which—the so-called talking part—took place in the library and ended with a light tea, while the second was a supper in the grand dining-room in a family atmosphere.

People of various backgrounds took part in the library discussions, but only the family and a few close friends remained for supper. The library guests knew they had been invited for tea only and took their leave of the hostess soon afterwards.

Having risked bringing Mikhail along, I reminded him on the way to tone down his remarks, or better still, to keep them to himself entirely.

"Don't worry," he said, "a future public figure must learn also to observe."

Ever since the morning after our discussion of *Prince Serebryany* Mikhail and I became good friends. As if by mutual consent, we did not discuss politics any more, subconsciously trying to keep intact those ties of sympathy which, regardless of human desire and for reasons unknown to science, both in love and friendship will often attract two totally dissimilar individuals.

Perhaps their paths cross in accordance with each one's horoscope, in order that each go through every trial he is fated to on our sad Earth? My story will prove that such was the case with us.

We entered the library. Mikhail kissed Auntie's hand with marked reverence, to which she responded benevolently and familiarly, as was her wont:

"Ah, Sergei's friend! You'll do well to listen to us old folk and mind what we say. Or aren't you big enough to understand?"

Auntie had bright eyes and grey curls, and always wore black silk dresses with heirloom lace collars. Her fingers were covered by a mass of amulet rings. She never changed her mode of dress and was a bit eccentric, standing out among the ladies of her circle and seeming a woman of mystery, as the others were victims of the ever-changing styles.

I was not acquainted with anyone there that evening except Vera's father, Erast Petrovich Lagutin, an impressive-looking old man. There were elegantly attired ladies, many

officers, and pale young "archives" men, concerning whom Pushkin had once wittily remarked, "One need only touch them to loose a flow of universal knowledge, for they have read everything and know everything."

As we entered, these youths were snapping like a pack of young and inexperienced borzois at a middle-aged man of medium stature who stood with his back to the window. His tone shocked me, for his answers were strangely curt and out of keeping with the manner of speech accepted in polite society.

"That's Dostoyevsky!" Auntie whispered with a mixture of pride and indulgence towards a man who did not know the customs of our circle.

"Yes, I stated in my article and will repeat again and again that we must believe the Russian nation occupies a unique position in the world!" Dostoyevsky shouted.

He put such emphasis on the words "in the world" that it seemed he wanted to imprint them for ver on his listeners' brains. I noticed that many winced, for any undue emphasis is considered bad taste in society, yet he himself seemed the embodiment of stress. His movements were angular, his voice hollow and unusually dramatic. In other words, there was not a trace of that expansive pleasantness about him which can endear a person to one forever, though actually he may not have helped one in any way.

"What did you say, sir? That we Russians are unique in the history of mankind?" a venerable and rather Europeanized old man flared up. "Not really? Consider the fact that we have just entered the family of civilized nations, and then, only because we were afraid of Peter's club."

"*À propos*," another old man and an ancient admirer of Auntie's interrupted, hastening in his role of experienced social helmsman to steer the conversation into safer waters, "*à propos*, does anyone recall the way in which Pogodin recently murdered a Slavophile Muse for censuring this very club of Peter's between the lines?"

The archives youths vied with each other in their eagerness to quote Pogodin: "Though the porridge Peter made was thick and salty," one began, while another snatched it up from there like a plate: "at least there is something to chew on and we have a good example to follow."

The situation was saved, and the social atmosphere of the salon would not have lost its light and airy tone, which excluded all the heavy subjects the seminary teachers preferred, if not for my cousin's thoughtlessness.

"Why is it that you give the Russians such preference over the English and the French?" she asked, focusing her tortoise-shell lorgnette on Dostoyevsky.

His reply at first seemed to be in jest: "Madame, to this very day no Englishman will ever credit a Frenchman with any sense, and vice versa. Both notice none but themselves in the whole wide world, considering everyone else a personal hindrance."

But a moment later Dostoyevsky forgot the lady and the salon and was like a hurricane, sweeping away the dam of social niceties as he was caught up by the current of his own inner thoughts. He boomed out at them without bothering to fit his voice to the size of the room:

"All Europeans are like that. The idea of the brotherhood of men is becoming lost among them. That is why they cannot understand us Russians and our outstanding character trait—that of loving all mankind—and consider it a sign of lack of individuality. It is especially imperative now, at a time when the Christian ties that unite the peoples are weakening. . . ."

Something quite unexpected in salon circles happened at that moment. Mikhail, who had not been able to tear his burning eyes away from the speaker, forgot his promise and his surroundings and, stepping to the centre of the room, shouted excitedly:

"If the former ties that united the peoples of Europe are weakening it is a sign that the time has come for new ties to replace the old ones—ties of socialism!"

It was a thunderclap. The ladies gasped, the archives youths whispered amongst themselves, and Auntie rose menacingly. Dostoyevsky paled slightly, looked at Mikhail with interest, and said:

"Our argument is a long one. Do come and see me."

There is no telling what the results of Mikhail's liberal speech would have been if an accident had not saved the situation. The valet had just brought in the tea service with a huge English teapot full of boiling hot water. He slipped as he headed towards Auntie, and if not for Mikhail he would have scalded Lagutin, who was sitting near her. Mikhail, who stood behind the old man, thrust himself forward, receiving thereby the full pot of boiling water on his right arm, which immediately turned lobster-red.

The ladies oh-ed and ah-ed, Auntie brought down salve and bandages, and turning Mikhail's sleeve up authoritatively began to dress his wound.

At this point I would like to mention a seemingly minor detail, which, however, is of extreme importance to my story: a little above his wrist Mikhail had a black birthmark which resembled a spider. Its thin legs seemed drawn in ink on his white skin, and it was said to be the result of his mother's fright during her pregnancy. A kind-hearted young lady screeched as she tried to shoo it off his arm with her lace hankie. He laughed merrily and explained its origin to her.

The guests were very solicitous and joked about the spider and the young lady. Mikhail was gay and pleaded with Auntie to forgive the valet who had scalded him.

Thus can an insignificant event change society's opinion of a person. A minute before Mikhail had been considered a most unpleasant and suspicious young man, but now he had suddenly come into everyone's good graces.

"Young man," Lagutin said to him as he took a pinch of snuff from his snuffbox with a gesture common only to

old nobles, "you saved more than my life. You saved me from the horrors of being *ridicule*. I have been invited to a rout at Mikhailovsky Palace this evening, but if my bald head resembled a great blister I would have been compelled to stay at home, with a kerchief around it, *à la* Moscow fish-wife."

Dostoyevsky took his leave and repeated meaningfully as he passed Mikhail, "I'm looking forward to continuing our argument."

Mikhail bowed silently.

It became gay in the library once again, the keen wits were taken up with calculating the possible flight of the teapot and making hilarious deductions as to who and what would have been scalded if not for Mikhail's brave intervention.

On parting, Auntie said to him, "Come with Sergei again; though you've a sharp tongue, my boy, at least you're not as mealy-mouthed as the archives lads. Give us time, we'll file down your teeth. Sergei said you were from the Kiev Academy. I know where you get your ideas. . . ."

Auntie was hinting at two famous Kiev pedagogues, one of whom was related to Herzen and the other a teacher of literature who had the most dangerous ideas.

To my great relief, Mikhail said nothing. Instead, he kissed Auntie's hand a second time.

Ah, yes, I must point out another most important factor: there was among the guests a person upon whom Mikhail's scalded arm had made no impression of a soothing or completely eradicating nature as far as his impudent phrase about socialism was concerned. This man was a successful young general—Count Pyotr Andreyevich Shuvalov, Chief of the Secret Police. He was tall and handsome, and the magnificent features of his aristocratic face were of such an immobile whiteness that they seemed part of a beautifully-tinted marble head. His movements were precise, a sign of an ability to act promptly in any emergency.

Shuvalov went out into the front hall at the same time we did. Auntie's old footman threw his coat lightly over his shoulders, and as he wrapped himself in it he said, peering into Mikhail's black eyes:

"Young man! Permit me to offer you some friendly advice and a word of warning: haste does not always end happily. And remember what Kuzma Prutkov had to say: 'Staidness is a reliable spring in society's mechanism.'"

Mikhail smiled and answered cockily, "Kuzma Prutkov has something that may be applied to you, Your Excellency: 'Don't mow down everything that grows.'"

Shuvalov smiled politely, as a gentleman should, indicating that in a private house he was not an official, and added prophetically:

"Good-bye! I'm sure we'll meet again."

Oh, how soon and how tragically his prophecy came true!

On the way home I said to Mikhail: "I'd advise you to be more careful with him. He's head of the Secret Police and a shrewd careerist who'll trip you up if you don't watch your step."

"A lot I care about him!" Mikhail flared up and, lowering his voice, said with such feeling that I shall not forget it to the day I die:

"Believe me, Sergei, I'm as certain as Ryleyev* that I shall perish, but not in vain. For, as that heroic poet said so convincingly, the strength and honour of the revolution lie in the words: 'Each one must be daring!'"

My phlegmatic nature and firm belief that the Hand of Destiny guides each of us along the path unknown, prevented me from acquainting Mikhail with the quite different views on the ways of the world accepted by our house-

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* K. F. Ryleyev (1795-1826), revolutionary poet and Decembrist. He took an active part in organizing the December 14, 1825, uprising in Petersburg against the autocracy. Was executed together with the other organizers of the uprising.

hold. Besides, after Auntie had mentioned the free-thinking Kiev pedagogues, I understood that Mikhail's revolutionary dreams and atheistic ideas were not due to his sinful nature, but were actually the result of some other person's influence.

I therefore decided to contradict him only on extremely important issues and keep up our friendship, inviting him more often to Auntie's house, where he would meet people who were as eager to help their country as the Messrs. Ogaryov and Herzen, but who approached this task in an entirely different manner.

Oh, how childish and futile were those dreams! Mikhail flatly refused to visit Auntie's salon again, saying glumly, "A good hunter never goes to the same swamp twice." However, he became so solicitous towards me that I resented it; he seemed to regard me as a plaything, finding relief from his gloomy thoughts in wrestling or playing leap-frog. At times he was wildly gay, or else quite sentimental; he would call me a shepherd from a Watteau painting and ask me to read Schiller with him. It was then that we became so impressed by the friendship between Marquis Posa and Don Carlos and planted the two trees in the Academy garden.

However, as I was soon to learn, I alone considered our friendship so all-important, for Mikhail had already concentrated all his thoughts and feelings, even the most sacred ones, on bringing him closer to the criminal plan that possessed him.

CHAPTER III

A Trip to Lake Como

I must now speak of the change in our relationship caused by an incident at a finishing school ball, a change which transformed him from a dear friend into a hated enemy—both personal and political.

But how can I speak of this now, when I myself have changed since the Revolution and no longer have any faith in my former convictions? Thus do repeated storms pull up a strong but unprotected tree.

As I entered the Palace Square on the above-mentioned 12th of March, I finally became convinced that not only was the foundation shaky, but that my whole inner structure had collapsed.

As always, I felt a certain agitation while crossing the square. There was the familiar Alexandrian Column that had been erected during the reign of Nicholas I, and there was the familiar angel on top of it. And there was the familiar chariot above the General Headquarters building, and the prancing steeds. I remember seeing those steeds

prancing and being held in check by warriors for seventy-two years now, ever since I was a boy of ten.

There are four tall masts on the square now. They are taller than the Headquarters building and there is a red flag fluttering on each mast. Both flaps of the main banner, as the ribbons of a gonfalon, curl in the wind like red snakes.

There's a man up there, fixing the banner, and from below he seems like a midget. The banner unfurled, flashing its clear silver lettering: "The Western Front Has Fallen." And the second and third and fourth masts are all decked in crimson with silver lettering: "The Eastern, Southern, Northern Fronts Have Fallen." These banners are there to commemorate the recent four fronts. They existed, but now they are no more.

We humans are strange creatures, indeed. How my old soldier's heart soared with pride! Then I stopped short and thought: What's this? These flags are in no way a concern of mine; in fact, quite the opposite. Was I not the Squadron Leader who heard his Emperor say to him, "I congratulate you on becoming a Cavalier of the St. George Cross," who firmly believed that the monarch was God's Anointed One? And when a worker came to see Potapich in 1917 and said, "Chkheidze thinks it's a great joke: the Anointed One's been greased for good," I actually hung myself. They cut me down and revived me, but what for? In order that I live to see days of bitter grief? To become both my own judge and my own executioner?

I am drawn to this square as an executioner is to the scaffold, but when I approach it, I die a thousand deaths. How can I ever forget the first time I passed here with my father, a sapper of the Household Troops? Father pointed to the Palace steps and said with great emotion:

"Sergei, on the unforgettable day of December 14, 1825, Emperor Nicholas, the Lord's Chosen One, led out his first-born son and heir. The Tsar commanded the first man

of every company to kiss the child. I was one of the fortunate ones."

There are Red troops here now. One warm day towards the end of winter I wandered here to the site of my execution block. The fog was so thick that the General Headquarters building seemed concealed by layers of fine-meshed veils. Someone, also concealed by the fog, was reviewing the troops from a high dais. The men seemed to be materializing from infinity, appearing for an instant and disappearing again in the all-consuming gloom.

First came the troops of the Baltic Fleet wearing peacoats, bell-bottom trousers, and fur hats; they were followed by shaggy white-caped ski troops who resembled white winter hares; then came the cavalry. The horses' heads emerged from the pearly-white fog, followed by the first rows of riders, but the animals' croups were still a part of the fog. The top half of the column, crowned by the huge black angel, rose above the horses as if appearing from the clouds. It was strange to hear the words of command which seemed to be coming from space. The men obeyed and continued onward, like the mechanical toys they used to be.

"They're much better than the old ones used to be," said a voice in the crowd. "Those were like a herd of sheep, devouring their commanders with their eyes, but these have their own brains. They're class-conscious, revolutionary troops."

I can't take it upon myself to determine just how class-conscious they are and whether or not that is a desired trait in an army man, but it's quite apparent that they are regular, disciplined troops and not the riff-raff the enemies of the Revolution say they are. And when a country has an army, it's a country once again.

I was so dizzy I don't know how I dragged myself back. "Look, he's soused!" the boys in the street shouted after me. I finally found my way home. Luckily, there was no one in the room, and I sat down and wept.

Civilians won't understand me, but an army man will! Could it really be possible? Though our former way of life is gone, there is still an army. And if you've got an army, all you need is a little time to show the world it is possible to revive the normal course of life. And what if the new way will prove even better? If there is an army, there is a nation.

Was Mikhail right then? I remember him once, leaning into the wind, his head thrown back, his eyes flashing, and Herzen's *Kolokol* clutched in his hand. He had rolled it up and was waving it right and left like a marshal's baton. Mikhail must have visualized a great throng of people, and he addressed his loud, angry words to them: "The complete annihilation of an idiotic autocracy will produce a new form of government and a new and wonderful life!"

And again I ask: What if Mikhail was right, having unhesitatingly given up his freedom and his clear mind for this cause, and what if the new way of life, as I have already been noticing, proves definitely more just than the former? If such be the case, then the Judas who doomed Mikhail, both as a personal rival and as a fighter for this freer and better life, deserves eternal damnation. But who cares about me! He alone matters as long as my mind serves me and my shaking hand can hold a pen.

As I said before, our estate was next to Lagutin's. Since Vera was of delicate health, at her father's insistence she was permitted to spend her summers at home, unlike the other finishing school girls. After spending our holidays together, we could hardly wait to meet again during the winter. We had many interests in common. We were both seniors: I at the Academy and she at the girls' school. There were many feminine traits in my character, and although I was not a bad soldier, I knew in my heart that I was only good in file. The rash independence, so much a part of Mikhail's nature, is completely alien to me. I had a passion for art and could spend hours admiring the effects

of light and colour. Since this enraptured contemplation played such a great role in my life, I surmise that I was born to be an artist. Yet, a nobleman and officer was not supposed to take up art seriously, and therefore my thwarted artistic inclination found its outlet in an oversensitive nature. Mikhail noticed this right away and called it "Poor Liza's sentiments."*

I adored Vera Lagutina from childhood, and she had always had the upper hand. Now that we were older this would have to change, but I did not quite know how to go about it. Would you believe the incredible? I talked Mikhail, whom I secretly envied and whose masculine ways I tried to copy, into going to the grand ball so that I might observe his behaviour with women and then adopt the same attitude myself. Oh, fool that I was! How could I fail to foresee that if I myself was so taken with his charms, a being which Nature had intended to be charmed by strength and courage would certainly fall under his spell? But my head was in the clouds, and I had no conception of reality.

Although this was Mikhail's first visit to the school, and I was a constant caller there, I was the more nervous of the two. I suddenly decided that my cologne was too strong, that my chin was not cleanly shaven, that I would certainly slip on the mirror-like floor of the grand ballroom and drag my partner down with me.

My deep reverence for outstanding works of art caused me always to experience a feeling of awe when driving up to Count Rastrelli's architectural wonder—the Smolny Monastery Cathedral. On that fateful day the white pilasters against a greyish-blue background seemed part of the frosty evening air, making the extremely light structure completely ethereal. The church towers and monastery structures brought to mind Italian architecture and legends of knights, fair damsels, monsters

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* *Poor Liza*, a sentimental novel by N. M. Karamzin (1766-1826)

and dragons. The lights flickered in suburban houses beyond the garden, across the blue ice of the Neva.

On a free Sunday in springtime I would rent the boatman's fast skiff, cut across the still water, and never cease to wonder at the magnificent proportions of the cathedral, smoky-grey in the rays of the setting sun. In my mind's eye I would erect Rastrelli's other structure, the cost of which was so fantastic, even for Elizabeth's extravagant age, that it was never realized.

Rastrelli's original plan was to erect a bell-tower 420 feet high on the bank of the Neva, one that would be covered with silver and gold and decorated with snow-white ornaments on a dazzling turquoise background. Special brick factories were built, whole villages were conscripted as labourers, and the iron roof shingles were being cast under the supervision of a foreign craftsman.

Oh, why wasn't I born during the Renaissance, when all three Parcae, at Fate's command, wove an awakening sense of the beautiful into the history of mankind! I would have had my say then.

But Fate mixes up the labels nowadays, to vex us mortals. Man is born out of his true place and century, into surroundings alien to him. However, Yakov Stepanovich, that wisest of old men whom I shall introduce into the story later on, explained my unruly and puzzling thoughts as follows:

"The wisdom of the way of the world is exactly opposite to the human concept of justice, and our greatest misfortune lies in the fact that we simply cannot fathom this. Could we but understand this, we would not wonder that a person who finds nothing more difficult than spilling his fellow-creature's blood is chosen to commit murder, and a blood-thirsty person is cast in the role of a benefactor. A man of great talent must fight an endless battle against hunger, while the rich possess the dullest wits. But then, does a person harness himself into a yoke or look deeply into another's life of his own free will? No, he is like an

arrow shot from a bow, flying in its own straight line. Yet, people are not lonely arrows, they are the tiny drops which make up the great ocean. In order that it may grow still broader it is necessary that we do not limit ourselves to our own little shells.

"However," he added, "you must understand this in its proper light, otherwise you will merely add to the general confusion of life."

I've gone off at such a tangent it may prove ruinous for the rough copy, for they've put an end to taking paper from the cellar. The girls each had an armload yesterday when the janitor came rushing up and made them take it back. Be that as it may, I'd still like to say a few words about the finishing school.

Auntie had told me that Empress Catherine had intended to create a school that would mould a "new type of person," as in France, under the close supervision of educated nuns.

To this end the Holy Synod sent the Moscow Metropolitan an order to personally select the most deserving candidates among the Mothers Superior and nuns; however, there proved to be so very few who were literate, or even those who could be of use in the infirmary, that only several were installed for the sake of decoration. In her search for a suitable influence for the "new type of person," Catherine soon turned to channels closer to her own personal tastes: namely, she called upon Voltaire and Diderot to assist in the undertaking.

Auntie Kushina, who despised the Encyclopaedists, said that although Voltaire had promised to write a well-mannered comedy for the young ladies of the school, he had become so used to blasphemy, that each time he sat down to this chaste assignment he would suddenly be taken ill with stomach trouble. Catherine complained to Diderot that the old man was no longer able to produce an elegant piece for the girls' theatrical exercises, to which Diderot, no less an atheist, was known to have answered, "I my-

self shall write comedies for the young ladies and, I trust, before old age has claimed me."

However, Diderot evoked the Empress' displeasure by his insistence that anatomy be the major subject of the school's curriculum; it was a science which, in Auntie Kushina's opinion, practically robbed a girl of her chastity.

The two trends Catherine had favoured at its inception were colourfully blended in Smolny's traditions to the very last: a breath of the nunnery combined with the enchanting liveliness of Voltairian society. The girls all wore their cumbersome green, light-blue, beige, or white camelot frocks, white capes, pinafores, and cuffs as religiously as the nuns wore their habits. Added to this were a devout appearance, a multitude of holy pictures, superstitions, and sacred amulets, plus the custom of keeping a piece of blessed wafer in the cheek during the most difficult exams and concealing a bit of cotton-wool especially brought from Iversky's in Moscow in the slit for the pen during written maths examinations. But there were also the most intricate arrangements for smuggling in and out love notes, and the ease with which romances with "window-still beaux" were begun and dropped was passed on from one graduating class to the next. These romances were never based on family or rank, a question of the utmost importance where marriage was concerned, for a girl could choose to marry a civilian or a plain officer not belonging to the Guards only if she were passionately, "fatally" in love, or for purely practical considerations.

The girls were separated from their families from childhood until graduation. A specially chosen staff supervised their studies and their dancing and needlework classes. In accordance with the founder's desire, they were also to develop "merry thoughts" and be entertained by "innocent amusements." That is why Levitsky's brilliant brush captured the coy charm of the young ladies Khovanskaya,

Khrushchova, and Levshina in masquerade costumes and evening dress.

From Catherine's time on the school remained close to the Court, and as the young ladies frequented the many social events held in the palaces and were patronized by royalty, their royalist feelings were idealized and somewhat exalted. But Vera, influenced by her uncle Linuchenko, of whom I shall write in detail later on, did not share her schoolmates' adoration of the royal family. She begged her father to take her home before she became a senior. However, old Lagutin, his Voltairianism notwithstanding, was flattered by the thought that the Empress herself would pin a merit badge to his daughter's left shoulder, thus giving her access to balls at Court and approximating her to a lady-in-waiting. The title had turned many an ambitious little head, and especially so now, when a pretty face and graceful carriage would certainly attract the Tsar's attention and bring about a marked display of favouritism towards the chosen young lady and her entire family as well. This last circumstance often stirred up a lowly passion for procuration among the girl's closest relatives. Thus, in the case I shall speak of, the interested party was none other than the father of the titled and wealthy young lady who had been tempted by the glitter of Court life.

We drove up to the school. It was only Quarenghi's sensitive talent and noble style that could have created a façade over 700 feet long yet neither dull nor barn-like in appearance, though its only decoration were the thrice repeated half-columns crowned by magnificent capitals. The school building was worthy of standing beside the breathtaking splendour of Rastrelli's cathedral. Thus, great architects were able to pass on the torch of beauty, unhampered by petty rivalry. I still derive pleasure from the memory of Quarenghi removing his hat in front of Smolny Cathedral in all weather and bowing low to express his great admiration for Rastrelli.

Matvei Ivanovich, the towering elder doorman who car-

ried a bronze mace and whose crimson livery was adorned with eagles, received us at the main entrance with a bow, as he did the other guests. A second doorman opened the door and a third took our greatcoats. We drew on our white suède gloves and ascended the red-carpeted marble stairway. The strains of a waltz went to my head like champagne as I entered the ballroom behind Mikhail, apprehensive that I would not be able to find Vera.

There were two rows of graceful columns on each side of the huge white ballroom. Green garlands were strung from the standing chandeliers along the walls. The magnificently iridescent silks and gems and the dazzling ermine mantillas of the full-length portraits of royal personages could not rival the modest loveliness of the young girls. They were dressed alike, their arms and necks bare, and had on chiffon capelets with large pink bows. These fresh young beings were like delicate apple-blossom petals blowing in the breeze as they flitted and danced across the room. The headmistress, a tall, imposing woman in a sky-blue regulation gown, surrounded by a whole retinue of equally bright-coloured schoolmistresses known as "blues," nodded pompously in response to our reverent bows.

Each time I found myself in this kingdom of women I became confused and would mistakenly take one or the other for Vera, while from every corner the girls would shout, "Serge, Serge Rusanin!"

"There she is by the column," said Mikhail, indicating Vera Lagutina. I was amazed.

"How did you recognize her, if you've never seen her?"

"There's nothing supernatural about it," Mikhail laughed. "Her father's miraculously unscalded bald head was my compass. Look, the chandelier is reflected in it as in a mirror. The old man's the image of a bemedalled gobbler, but his daughter is quite charming."

He crossed the ballroom with quick, light steps, bowed low to Lagutin, was immediately introduced to Vera, and

waltzed off with her a moment later. When I came up to ask for the next dance she had already promised it to Mikhail. The only choice left to me was to invite one of Vera's friends. I listened absent-mindedly as my partner chattered on:

"Just imagine, the 'tadpoles' weren't allowed to come to the ball, they did something terrible—they used bergamot soap to perfume themselves!"

"How could they use soap?"

"They scraped some off with a knife, rubbed it on themselves and blossomed forth like a shopful of the foulest perfume. Only the older girls are allowed to use scent, and bergamot has an abominable smell."

"Which scent do you consider acceptable?" I asked to keep up my partner's chatter and make it easier for me to observe the pair opposite us.

Vera and Mikhail did not have party faces at all. They would occasionally seem to realize this and would then smile and exchange a few polite words. Yet I could see at once that from the very beginning their conversation had been most serious. And how could it have been otherwise? Vera was a regular bookworm, and she had always had dangerous ideas. She was a Decembrist's granddaughter who took all kinds of liberal nonsense to heart; she even had a little volume of Ryleyev's works locked up in her desk in the village.

"Oh, he is really worthy of his name," I heard her say rapturously in reply to something Mikhail had said in a low voice. "I do not know a nobler heart."

As she emphasized the word "heart," I gathered the whole to-do was about Herzen. I had always worried about Vera's outlook on life, but now I felt glad. I said to myself, "No, romances never begin like this. Perhaps Mikhail will be able to 'propagandize' her, as the new word was then used, but he will hardly be able to awaken a feeling of love in her heart." As for his dangerous ideas, I would be

able to fight them with the help of Auntie Kushina's salon. Auntie loved Vera dearly and the feeling was mutual.

However, an extraordinary event swept away all the cunning moves of my little game of chess, like the hand of the giant Gulliver in the land of the Lilliputians.

There was a sudden commotion among the young ladies. The dancing ceased, and they all rushed to the windows, shouting:

"There's a carriage at the main entrance!"

The central entrance was always locked, and was opened only for royalty. The schoolmistress, crimson with excitement, led off a group of the prettiest girls who soon reappeared in the wigs and costumes of marquises and marchionesses. The other girls formed a semi-circle, concealing the ones dressed as in the times of Catherine. When the Tsar appeared, accompanied by the headmistress, they all dipped in a low curtsey to appropriate strains from the orchestra. There followed a traditional minuet. The marquises and their marchionesses burst forth from their hiding-place and, forming a column, advanced toward the Tsar.

Alexander II was wearing a hussar's uniform. As depicted by Court painters, he was very imposing in a sleigh or on horseback at a parade, but was much less impressive when deprived of the necessary military background. He was magnificent in the forefront of a painting, towering above his troops, the great herculean chest he had inherited from his father thrust forward, his bearing truly royal. Yet he seemed merely pompous when surrounded by blossoming youth, where intimate charm was more appropriate than monumentality. Besides, his no longer youthful face was shockingly yellow, and his eyes belied his delighted smile and his pleasant manner of trilling his r's—they remained dull, leaden, and motionless.

A very pretty senior recited several stanzas in greeting, and blushing deeply at his invitation to sit by him, sank into an armchair. The Tsar motioned to the musicians, and

the ball was resumed. The sovereign, accompanied by his aide, soon departed to have tea in the headmistress' suite. During the intermission, when Vera, Mikhail and I, her two pages in attendance, were having lemonade and sweets in a pleasant corner, surrounded by hyacinths and potted palms, Kitty Tarutina, Vera's friend, and her law-student escort joined us.

Kitty, a merry, snub-nosed blonde, said, "Would you like to come along on a trip to Lake Como?"

Vera and I knew what this meant and laughingly agreed, having first shared the secret with Mikhail. One of the schoolmistresses was an extremely popular young Italian woman who had nothing in common with the priggishness of the other "blues." She gladly let the young ladies receive their brothers and cousins in her room. She was young and gay herself and sympathized with her young charges' pranks; however, in order that she be not held responsible in case they were found out, by mutual agreement the door to her room was kept shut, but by no means locked. In case those in the room were caught by the inspectress, they were to say they had entered without permission.

Concealed behind a dozen camelot skirts (for all of Kitty's friends were very keen on naughty adventures) we slipped out of the ballroom unnoticed by the wary eye of the inspectress on duty. A trail of endless corridors led to the Italian teacher's room, where a large painting of beautiful Lake Como hung on the wall; thence the name of the merry journey.

"Do you know that Zemphira disappeared as soon as His Majesty left? She's madly in love with him," Kitty's young man said, referring to the girl who had recited the stanzas in greeting. She had been nicknamed Zemphira because of her Oriental looks.

"Yes, she is. And everyone has noticed how much attention His Majesty's been paying her, but she'll never be the Empress' lady-in-waiting," Kitty remarked in an an-

noyed tone. "She's poor at her studies, and the headmistress hates her and will not recommend her favourably."

"Does His Majesty visit you often?" Mikhail asked.

Flattered by the attention of the handsome, until now silent cadet, Kitty began to chatter away, telling him how the adored monarch loved to make unannounced visits to the school.

"He appears mostly in the evenings, during the hours set aside for dancing lessons for the upper classes. Sometimes he comes to the dining-room, sits down at the table, and drinks tea with us from a plain school cup. Naturally, after he leaves we break it and divide up the little pieces. Many of the girls carry their piece in a small bag and wear it round their necks as an amulet. One girl even ate her piece."

"She must be related to a goose," Mikhail smiled.

"Oh no!" Kitty objected naively to our general amusement and continued her chatter, which, as I noted from Mikhail's furrowed eyebrows, annoyed him not a little. But Kitty was not embarrassed:

"During dinner His Majesty sits down at one table, and then at another, in order not to offend anyone. But he usually goes to the seniors now and sits beside Zemphira and she purposely takes the last seat on the bench. Last year at Lent, His Majesty joined us at Vespers and kneeled in prayer with us."

"That's a good way to prepare for the reforms!" Mikhail noted sarcastically, causing Kitty to stop in confusion and her escort to look him over with icy disbelief.

Vera blushed, but quickly changed the subject.

"Hurry, let's run, or someone will get there before us!" she cried, grabbing Mikhail and me by the hand and dashing off down the long corridors which crossed and recrossed like a labyrinth. Kitty and her law-student followed us. We finally reached the Italian teacher's room. The door was closed, but it opened at a slight tug. We tip-toed in quickly as the sound of voices came from just round the corner. Like a flock of birds familiar with the bark of the

hunter's rifle, we perched warily on the edge of the large couch, ready to take off or hide at the slightest sound. Danger lurked behind the doors of an adjoining room, which belonged to the same teacher but was connected with the inspectress' room by a small passage. The inspectress, under the guise of friendly patronage, liked to drop in on her neighbour unexpectedly, to check on the pretty and light-hearted teacher. Kitty stole out into the corridor like a little mouse and came back to tell us she had made sure the inspectress wasn't in and that we were safe. Suddenly, we heard voices coming from the next room which was also locked on the inside: a woman was weeping and a man was consoling her. They were speaking in French.

"I did not go to all the trouble of trying to get away from the headmistress in order to drown in your tears, my charming Zemphira. As concerns your father, rest assured that my tender feelings towards you have long since received his paternal blessing, and his joy at seeing you a lady-in-waiting. . . ."

We had no difficulty in recognizing the voice which spoke words of love with the same trilling of the r's as in the familiar public addresses and at parades.

"And so, until our next decisive rendezvous. And it will not be too far off, will it? I'm not against mythology, and admire the mischievous Zeus."

These words were met with a forced laugh, followed by the sound of kisses. We jumped to our feet, frightened at our involuntary eavesdropping, and rushed towards the exit. But Mikhail's face was terrible as he rose and stalked to the door leading to the adjoining room.

"It'll be your undoing," I whispered to him, as I grasped his arm tightly. "His Majesty may come out this way any minute."

"I won't let him ruin . . ." his eyes burned with such fury that it seemed they were capable in themselves of causing a person harm.

I rushed out into the corridor. Kitty and her escort had already disappeared and Vera stood alone in an alcove like a ghost, her face and shoulders a pale white in the gloom. I came up to her and gently took her hand. It was inconceivable that the teacher's door had remained unguarded, but two figures at the far end of the corridor soon explained the riddle: the young teacher and the Tsar's aide, carried away by their own flirtation, had abandoned their responsible post. Apparently, the Tsar had left the headmistress to return to the ballroom and had gone to the room adjoining "Lake Como," where, by previous arrangement, Zemphira was to await him for a final decision.

The minutes dragged on like hours. Then the door of the locked room opened and someone walked out. At that very moment Mikhail said in a hollow voice choking with anger:

"That was ... despicable!"

We gasped. For some reason or other I expected to hear a shot. But there was none. His Majesty walked away with scurrying steps, his head drawn into his shoulders in a manner quite unlike him, as if not wishing to be recognized. In another second he had turned the corner. The frightened aide and teacher rushed up to him.

"Was that her brother?" the Tsar demanded furiously, apparently recalling the unpleasant Shevich incident.

"She has no brother, Your Majesty," the deathly-pale teacher said.

"No one was supposed to be there."

The enraged sovereign did not appear at the ball again; he left, accompanied by his aide. From my hiding place in the deep alcove I watched the Italian teacher run into her room to see who had been there, but Mikhail had opened the opposite door to the passageway and had safely disappeared. Vera and I dashed back to the ballroom.

On a winter's day in 1918, after a lapse of over half a century, I somehow found myself at Smolny once again. I

had been wandering about the capital, sick and idle, seeking refuge with former friends and acquaintances. Many had died, others were no longer at their former addresses. Drawn by the ties of the past and an artist's undying attraction, I finally made my way to the school where Mikhail and I had attended a ball.

As on that day, the immense façade was ablaze with lights, and people were streaming into the huge building just as they had been then. But this was not a long string of carriages with footmen on the boards. There were no thoroughbreds, expensive lap-rugs, or drivers crowning the boxes like idols.

An endless procession of people with passes was filing through the central entrance, once reserved exclusively for royalty, and now guarded by armed Red Army men. Automobiles, motor-cycles, grey armoured cars, all of them flying red flags, sirens screaming, horns blowing, dashed back and forth through the gates guarded by two rows of sentries. There were machine-guns everywhere. Motors roared, people with brief cases scurried about.

The shaggy fur caps made the faces seem stern. Many were in khaki, their greatcoats bearing the traces of hastily ripped off tsarist insignia buttons and shoulder-straps. The peasants had bast shoes on over their cloth-wrapped feet. Their rifles were slung on strings over their shoulders. Everyone was shouting and arguing. When two civilians came out of the doorway and clambered on to a large crate to speak, they were unable to finish. Their words were drowned out by the *Internationale*, coming from every corner of the square.

"What's going on here?" I asked a heavily-armed man with a rosy and strangely familiar face.

"A special meeting of the Petrograd Soviet, Grandpa," he answered readily, and then jumped up on the crate and, raising his voice to a shout, addressed the crowd:

"Comrades! Socialism is now the only means by which our country can escape the horrors of war and famine!"

A picket lighted a bonfire and the blaze suddenly illuminated the speaker. When he had finished and jumped down I suddenly cried out, "Why, I know you!" and named him. His father had been a good friend of mine and it had not been long since I had seen the young boy in a gymnasium student's uniform; I remembered him for his extremely leftist anti-war speeches. Speeches which brought Mikhail to mind.

The young man was now a fervent Communist. He, too, recognized me. It was he who gave me some money and helped me find lodgings at Ivan Potapich's place. He said he was rushing to the "Red front," where he soon fell bravely, one of the first casualties. I read his name in the *Izvestia* which Goretsky Junior brought me. We both drank to the memory of the brave youth and also of his father and grandfather who had died just as bravely among the first casualties in their own time, but on other fronts.

CHAPTER IV

The Witch's Eye

It was an early Easter that year. The forest was a mass of light-green fluff and the old pines seemed a sinister black against the opening buds. That is how I always remembered the journey to Lagutino—as sinister.

It was 1860. Serfdom was living out its last days. Among the many trends and circles, both for and against freeing the serfs, there were quite a few individuals, well-educated, Voltairian nobles, who accepted neither God's will nor human decrees and were governed, first, last, and always, by their own wilfulness.

Such was Vera's father, Erast Petrovich Lagutin, one of the most intelligent men of his time, who, to quote his own words, believed neither in dreams, nor in black cats, nor in any other superstitious omens. He regarded civilization as world piggery, which fact did not, however, prevent him from having an admirable collection of paintings in his Lagutino estate. He viewed the freeing of the serfs as the termination of his own power and habits, and towards the end he let himself go with a bang, as they say.

Erast Petrovich was a widower and a ladies' man. His muzhiks did not complain about the corvée, but because he could never let a pretty wench or wife pass by, their hatred of him was great, indeed.

His daughter Vera had been brought up by a succession of French women who were treated as the mistresses of the house one day and demoted to the position of governess the next, all depending upon the master's fancy. None of the governesses ever stayed for any length of time. Vera learned to be independent and sought comfort in man's most reliable and modest friends—the numerous books of her father's library.

Though our estate was next to theirs, Vera never did feel close to my mother, a wonderful and ever bustling housewife. Vera was rather shy and uncommunicative and my mother never understood her. Perhaps the relationship would have improved in time, but my mother soon died and Auntie Kushina was appointed guardian of the estate. I was Vera's only companion. We used to gather mushrooms and berries all summer long and learned French and dancing together. Vera liked the drawings and stories I dedicated to her. Although we were of the same age, I felt that she was more mature than I. I never shared her doubts about the purpose of life or her grief at the Decembrists' fate. I considered the Decembrists to have been ordinary insurgents who had sinned all the more for being of noble birth and well-educated. But they were Vera's heroes.

Both during my mother's lifetime and later, when Auntie was my guardian, life flowed along serenely at our estate, as was the case with other comfortably well-to-do landowners. A host of common interests, relationships, and mutual likings bound generations of Ugorye owners to their peasants.

Vera's closest friends were a couple whom I found extremely unpleasant and who were to play an important part in her strange life. They were Linuchenko, an artist, and his wife, Kaleria Petrovna, who lived about three

miles away from Lagutino. He had studied with the famous painter Ivanov, the very same one who had spent nearly thirty years working on "The Appearance of Christ before the People." When the painting was put on exhibition it was placed next to a battle scene by someone named Ivon, and, to tell the truth, Ivon's excellent portrayal of horseflesh made a greater impression upon the viewers. Everyone was repeating the witty poet Fyodor Tyutchev's epigram that Ivanov's enormous canvas looked more like a family portrait of the Rothschilds than a portrayal of the Apostles.

Linuchenko was Vera's uncle. I would like to add that just as our family had always been sedate and had unquestioningly fulfilled its duties as loyal gentry, so had the Lagutin family been unsettled. They were notorious for the extraordinary adventures of their forefathers, for kidnapping other men's wives, for routs and duels and, during the reign of Alexander Blagoslovenny,* for occultism and other ungodly acts.

The Lagutins were tall, broad-shouldered and curly-haired, they had straight noses with attractive nostrils, and keen, light hawk's eyes beneath arched brows.

Vera's grandfather had taken a liking to one of his Ukrainian peasant girls and had fathered her son, Kiril Linuchenko, whom he had sent to study with an artist. He had given Kiril's mother a dowry of a hundred and eighty-five acres adjoining the village, but had not given her the deed to the land. Instead, he had said, "It's yours as long as I'm alive." His son, Erast Petrovich, had reaffirmed his words.

And so this middle-aged painter and uncle was also Vera's bosom friend. He was a peasant on his mother's side and had a swarm of relatives in the village whom he, far from being ashamed of, stood up for in every possible way, continuously setting Vera against her father. Be-

* Alexander I (1777-1825), called the "Benefactor."

sides, he gave her free-thinking books and never ceased talking of the rights of man and other atheistic ideas of the French Revolution, of which he was an ardent supporter.

He succeeded in distorting in Vera all the inborn, natural feelings characteristic of a noblewoman. No wonder then that the dangerous seeds sown by Mikhail's hand flowered so abundantly in her restless and noble soul. Yet it was not until later that I realized the full extent of his pernicious influence on her.

After the incident at Smolny, Mikhail and I had such a terrible row that we lost all desire to continue our friendship. He heaped abuse on the Tsar for a human failing that was understandable in one so handsome. I defended my sovereign, saying that half of his alleged love affairs were no more than slander, while the other half were his acceptance of the challenge flung at him by the flighty though fair sex that secretly considered their "ruin" in the monarch's embraces a great joy. The particular case we had witnessed resulted from the wealthy, titled girl's father acting as a panderer and her own ambitious desire to become a lady-in-waiting.

As usual, Mikhail interrupted me with a seditious outburst against the autocracy, saying, "I'd pull them up by the roots like nettles, and all the nobles, too. Give us time and we'll do it!"

I told him not to try my patience any longer, for as a loyal subject I should then consider it my duty to challenge him to a duel, since I considered it beneath my dignity to denounce him and was duty-bound to stop his slanderous words. Mikhail suddenly burst out laughing amiably and said:

"Well, bloom on in innocence, I shan't infuriate you any longer. If you make out in life, with God's help, you may even live to hang me!"

From then on we spoke only of trivialities; however I was not in a position to prevent his visit to Lagutino. The

old man himself had invited him, pleased with his graceful dancing. He felt kindly towards him since the fateful evening at Auntie's when Mikhail had saved him from being scalded. The old man had no idea that Mikhail was seeing Vera at the school, having been presented there as her cousin. Vera had been permitted, by way of exception to go home for the holidays, in view of her frail health and anemia, and it seemed that her father had finally yielded and agreed not to send her back again.

We rode on in silence most of the ten miles from the post station to Lagutino. I was admiring the sunset, the wide sweep of the fields, and, as always, the heart-warming scene made me feel sentimental. In veiled terms I tried to tell Mikhail of my love for Vera. I mentioned Plato's myth about the two halves of a person which, when they met, must either join or perish. Mikhail understood me and said, "Such love is not worthy of Man. One must never die *from* something, but only *for* something. A person who believes himself to be a man should have appropriately high ideas." Then he added, "However, this is our privilege. The fair sex is usually doomed to perish in the flame like a butterfly."

"Does that mean you believe woman is incapable of facing death at the stake as Jan Hus and others like him did?" I asked, unable to conceal my joy. I decided that Mikhail was vexed at Vera for the small effect his rebellious speeches had had on her.

"A woman is capable of anything," he objected, "but rarely of her own accord. Most often she will follow the one she loves."

How happy I was. Once again I could hope! In Vera's meetings with Mikhail I had never once noticed those telltale clues of young love, a sudden blush, or eyes that were downcast one moment and burning with passion the next. Of course, I knew that when Mikhail attended the dances at the school and handed Vera a box of French bonbons with a courteous bow, there was always some kind of liberal

book inside the box. Their conversation was always serious and, I thought, extremely dull. I waited impatiently for Vera to become bored with this schooling and seek diversion in arts as more natural to poetic youth. In order to become completely versed in my field, and thus counteract his influence, I spent all my time at the Imperial Hermitage and read many foreign books on outstanding collections of paintings.

Old Lagutin met us on the steps decked with fresh fir boughs. The many feathery-tipped branches were attached to tall poles in a very unusual manner. It seemed as if a grove of date palms had suddenly sprung up in *N.* Gubernia. A sizeable hillock before the house was covered with young grass and about twenty of the prettiest girls in attractive *sarafans* and youths in scarlet shirts were rolling coloured Easter eggs. There were many wooden grooves set in rows from the top of the hill to the bottom, and it was fun to watch the blue, red, green, and yellow eggs roll down like precious stones into the emerald-green grass. Afterwards there was a traditional round-dance and all the girls and women went to the master to proclaim "Christ has risen" and exchange kisses. He gave some women a ruble, others a kerchief.

"This custom of kissing is what I like best in all of Christian religion," the old sinner Lagutin said and laughed loudly, flashing his large, strong teeth. He was a big, handsome man, but his completely bald head and fleshy Adam's apple, as Mikhail had pointed out, made him resemble a gobbler.

I looked at Vera. Her pale face wore an expression of anxiety, and her eyes did not leave Moseich. This ugly man, with his large head and child's body, was Erast Petrovich's evil genius. He was a descendant of French noblemen, well-educated and cruel, and was engaged by Lagutin for a salary. His name was Charles Delmasse, but the peasants had nicknamed him "Moseich." All the perversity of an intelligent devil was embodied in this creature. Hav-

ing learned to speak Russian, he combined in his person all the cynicism and refinement of his godless nation with the cruelty and coarseness of our ways. Erast Petrovich could not have found a better confidant and advisor as far as immoral and sadistic pleasures were concerned. That is why, in his uneventful country life, he valued Moseich so greatly, respecting him also for his perfect French.

When it was beautiful Martha's turn to kiss the master —she was the young wife of the groom Pyotr, an excellent fellow—Moseich whispered something to Erast Petrovich. The latter smirked and pretended he had not noticed her hide behind her neighbour and then dart into the crowd of girls to escape her master's kiss. However, when they had all thanked him and set out for home singing, Erast Petrovich turned to the Elder, a foul, snivelling man, and said carelessly:

"Pyotr will have cause to remember this!"

Vera blushed and, stepping up to her father, said boldly:

"No, Father, you won't harm Pyotr!"

Erast Petrovich's brows twitched, his keen, light eyes seemed to become lighter still, and his nostrils dilated. Yet, he controlled himself and, turning to his daughter, spoke in French:

"It is my wish that your youthful dreams be confined to your library walls."

"And now," he said, addressing us, "please dine without me. I'll see you again in the evening. Make yourselves at home. There are excellent riding horses, a boat, and carriages. But no matter where you may be, return the minute you see three rockets go up over the manor house. I've arranged for a play and a surprise—the last, I hope, will be equally unexpected to all three of you!" Erast Petrovich looked at us in turn, and his gaze made me feel very uncomfortable.

Dinner, meticulously served by butlers, was very formal and stiff. Old Arkhipovna, Vera's nurse, sat at the head

of the table—such was the master's whim after the last of the French women had been banished.

"Let's go to the village and visit the Linuchenkos. Perhaps they've come already!" Vera said after dinner.

Each of us was lost in his own turbulent thoughts as we walked slowly through the village. At the very edge we turned into a lane as narrow as a pipe: two carts would never pass there. Iron bars hung at the sides of the shutters like dogs' tails, and although it was a great Feast Day, the yard was littered with troughs, rags, and bits of clay shingles.

"What ignorance!" Vera cried. "The village has burnt down so many times, yet each time they rebuild it the same old way, though Father has a whole shelf-ful of books on improved methods of building wooden structures. No one cares about the poor peasants at all."

"Give them time," Mikhail objected, "and they'll see the light. It is we who must be on our toes."

Naturally, I did not care for their conversation. We were passing through lovely meadows strewn with bluebells and honey-coloured dandelions that nodded their golden heads. I picked the largest one and handed it to Vera, saying:

"This is just like a daisy, all you have to say is: 'Deacon, deacon, let your dogs go!' and little black bugs will creep out."

Vera stared at me with eyes as light as her father's and said with an ironic smile:

"Serge, you were born too late. Really, you should have been a little shepherd on a Watteau canvas."

This was the first time she had spoken to me so sarcastically. I felt it was Mikhail's influence and did not reply.

Our path now wound through ravines and now got lost in the wide stretches of sand. I watched Vera clutch her wind-blown chiffon scarf and could not tear my eyes away from her face. It was truly amazing. It seemed there were two faces, though not blended together; rather, two in one. Her thin body leaning against the wind and narrow, slop-

ing shoulders, as on ancient paintings, reflected an almost sugary, docile femininity. Her too-white complexion and unnaturally pink cheeks made her face look like a doll's face. When she walked with bowed head, as now, her golden braids hanging down her back, she called to mind a faithful wife of the Middle Ages. I imagined her holding her knight's stirrup or sitting at her needlework, waiting for her master, out late carousing. But suddenly Vera raised her eyes as she answered Mikhail's question. Her other self was in her eyes. They were grey and firm and had her father's hawk-like expression; she might die, but still would never reveal against her will their hidden thought.

Our visit to the farmstead was in vain. The watchman told us Linuchenko had sent a letter saying he could not come, and then he handed Vera a note. She turned pale as she read it.

"Kaleria has consumption, and they've gone to the Crimea for a year. Oh, how terrible my life will be here without them!" she cried out suddenly. Without noticing it, she had taken Mikhail's arm. He squeezed hers, as if promising his protection.

Apparently, Watteau's little shepherd no longer counted as far as she was concerned.

"We've lots of time until evening. Let's go to the lake," Vera suggested.

And so we did. There was a strange place not far from the farmstead, along the old road to town. Several steep hills covered with broad-leaved coltsfoot and some kind of fragrant bushes stood side by side, encircling a small round lake with a flat shimmering surface. Its origin was a mystery, but legend had it that an old nobleman's wife had cursed her unruly daughter who had run off with a passing hussar. The mother's evil thoughts had caught up with the runaways at the spot, causing the horses to sink in the quag and springs to bubble up over it. By morning there was a lake there as round as a cup. At this point in her story Vera's nurse, Arkhipovna, would add, "The old woman

was a witch, you know. She had been drinking tea at the time. Then she frowned, turned her full cup around on the saucer, and said, 'Let the fate of the disobedient one be the same!' That's why the lake is as round as a cup of tea. Just like a witch's eye."

Vera told Mikhail the familiar legend as we walked along and when she finished she looked at him significantly and said, "I like the lake because of the daughter's unruliness."

Mikhail laughed. They certainly had something up their sleeve and I'd have to be on my guard. Vera sat down on a large stone and Mikhail beside her, while I sat on the ground at her feet. The sun had set and the sky was a delicate green.

"Look, there's the first star," Vera pointed. "See how clean it is, as if it's been scrubbed. We should hurry home, for they'll send the rockets up soon, but to tell you the truth, I wish I could stay here all night."

"There's only one star I like," Mikhail said. "It's Hesperus, the herald of dawn, the one the poets love. Do you know why I like it? When I was a boy I read somewhere that the alchemists believed Venus gives the earth a third of the energy it receives itself from the sun, and it receives much more than the earth does. That's why the spirit of the earth is subordinated to the spirit of Venus, that full-blooded vital spirit of experienced knowledge. The fable is charming and quite to my taste, but I'm sure Sergei must prefer the poem: 'Come, mourn with me, O Moon, friend of the sorrowful!'"

"I don't understand you," I said. "What do you mean by experienced knowledge?"

"I mean that if a daring fellow of old felt something strongly, he did not suppress it in the name of earthly virtue and some kind of heavenly reward. He gave himself up to this feeling and accomplished what he had to. Only an experiment which has been brought to its logical conclusion can cast off all that is detrimental to growth. And

when real, free people finally create a wonderful life for the future generations, it will not have been accomplished by cowardly side-stepping, but only by an attempt to overthrow the useless forms and replace them by better ones, even if it has to be done by force. And so in the name of Life one must be the master of Life!"

Vera listened to Mikhail as if he were a prophet, but his high-handed tone disgusted me, and I said:

"But who in the world appointed you master over the others, and who can prove that you are wiser and better than the others?"

I shall never forget Mikhail's face: he first flushed and then threw his head back as he always did, and said with great feeling and not at all high-handedly:

"Sometimes a person can find no happiness in life as long as others suffer. Even if such a person does bind himself by some tie other than the happiness of mankind, he will never get much satisfaction from it and will only succeed in losing his vital and precious freedom. Yes, it is so. In other words, there always have been people and there will be more and more of them who will not demand personal happiness, but will joyfully seek a way and means of helping to liberate and bring happiness to all mankind!"

Mikhail bent down and put his hand on my shoulder, a thing he had not done in a long time.

"Dear Serge!" he cried. "You find pleasure in every sunset, in the moon, and in poetry. But have you ever stopped to think why you should have a right to this when all around you people—perhaps better and wiser than you—are born, live, and die slaves?"

"Mikhail..." Vera began, but for some reason said no more.

I felt a stab in my heart. Had she stopped from excitement, or because she was used to addressing him thus and had unconsciously disclosed their tender relationship?

Suddenly we heard a moan. Someone was sobbing at a grave—there was an old cemetery close by the lake.

"I think it's Martha at her mother's grave!" Vera exclaimed, and flying easily over the ditch that separated us from the cemetery, she ran up to the young woman. Martha fell prostrate at Vera's feet and wailed:

"Oh, please put in a word for Pyotr, or the master will send him away to the army for life!"

Vera seemed downcast and pale.

"Father never listens to me," she said.

"What shall I do then—kill myself? They'll send Pyotr away and he'll take me into the house instead of Palashka, you know he will. I'd sooner drown myself."

"Listen, Martha!" Vera cried. Her eyes were hard and glittered as her father's did when he would softly say, "Whip him in the stable." "Wait for me in the dovecote at dawn tomorrow. That's the best place. And I'll tell you what I've decided. You must believe me when I say I shan't let you suffer. Be patient till tomorrow."

When Martha had calmed down and went home, Vera told Mikhail, "We'll include her in our circle. We've no choice."

"Very well," he said. "She seems to be all right."

The two of them had quite frankly forgotten all about my existence and really did believe I belonged in Watteau's era.

Three rockets shot up in quick succession. We rose and hurried back to the manor house. It was illuminated by multi-coloured lanterns which were strung like gleaming garlands from the top floor balcony to the ones below. The house, built by Auguste de Monferrand, the designer of Isaakiyevsky Cathedral, was magnificent with its main front portico adorned by snow-white columns and framed by arches.

Mikhail and I washed in our rooms, put on new uniforms and patent-leather ballroom boots, and, trying to step lightly and with dignity, we appeared among the guests.

A grotto with a lovely fountain had been erected in the centre of the hall and there, sitting on the rocks beneath flowering oleanders camouflaged to conceal their wooden

tubs and giving the appearance of growing right from the rocks, sat the Graces, shepherds, and nymphs. Guests in costume peeked mischievously through the slits in their black silk masks. Immense wall mirrors reflected the splendour of the scene, repeating it to infinity. There was a raised stage at the far end of the hall, and when the master clapped his hands the nymphs, shepherds, and Graces suddenly flitted off towards it, to the accompaniment of a chorus, hidden among the verdure.

Erast Petrovich was wearing his grandfather's velvet coat, complete with shoulder sash and regalia—the old man had been a courtier in Catherine's time—and now, appropriately wearing a powdered wig, Lagutin seemed an important arrival from another world. The only other guest besides Mikhail and myself who was not in costume was Prince Nelsky, a wealthy neighbour and an extremely well-educated and humane man of about forty, whose face reflected the wonderful qualities of his soul. Erast Petrovich insisted that we dress as marquises. The Prince donned a velvet jacket and we put on identical light-blue coats and wigs. Mikhail and I were of the same height, and once we had put on our masks, we could easily have passed for each other. This fact proved to be but another link in the terrible chain which Fate had forged so capriciously to join us.

Just before supper Vera, looking lovely dressed as a pompadour, whispered in my ear:

"Hurry to the arbour!"

I asked foolishly, "Will you be there?"

Vera started at the sound of my voice and replied:

"No, I won't, Sergei. I was just teasing." And she flew off as lightly as a piece of fluff.

I realized the invitation had been intended for Mikhail and became as one possessed. A piercing hatred towards the friend whom I myself had brought here to destroy me devoured my soul. What truth there was in the words of an old wise man Auntie Kushina liked to quote: "Evil spirits are not stronger than man, but when he lowers himself to

their level he becomes one of them and cannot rid himself of them for they are legion."

A legion of base passions awoke in my soul. Alas! It did not turn out to be a great ocean, but a miserable little swamp covered over on the surface by a pleasant screen of emerald duckweed. Revenge, hatred, insulted love, and the petty pride which Mikhail had offended drove me down the steep path to the pond and the arbour. I hid among the bushes.

The fireworks display was set off. Hundreds of fiery balls soared in the dark sky and, bursting from within, they exploded on high, raining down as multi-coloured sparks. The great watery mirror of the lake reflected the lights. My artist's heart was so enchanted that for a moment everything hateful seemed to leave me. Then I heard two familiar voices coming from the arbour. Oh, they were not at all concerned with the beauty of the world, nor with my life they were ruining! We Rusanins all love but once in life. Two of my aunts had become nuns because of unrequited love, and my uncle Pyotr had shot himself for the same reason.

"My darling!" Mikhail cried with a passion of which I thought him incapable. "Then it's not a dream, and you have decided to unite your heart with mine?"

Her gentle voice answered, "Do you still doubt it?"

For a moment there was silence: they kissed.

I felt sick, and the rockets that were falling into the water seemed to be falling into my own heart and burning it.

"But I must warn you," Mikhail's voice had suddenly become abominably harsh, "that if necessary I will sacrifice my love for my cause. A woman once tried to turn me into her possession and I came near to murdering her. That was in the Crimea. Shall I tell you about it?"

"I don't want to know your past. I'm joining you for the future," Vera answered with dignity.

"But, my dear, nothing but hardship awaits you with me. And that is the most favourable outcome. My decision

is final. I shall dedicate my life to bringing about an uprising of an enslaved nation against its despot. Failure will mean not only penal servitude, but the gallows."

She interrupted him with words as ancient as the world, as ancient as love itself. "Then I shall follow you to the executioner's block!"

Again there followed an agonizing silence. They were kissing again. Then, laughing like a child, she said:

"Father will announce my engagement to Prince Nelsky at supper. He just spoke to me quite seriously and was amazed that I did not object as I usually do when we speak of less serious matters. Imagine, that was to be the surprise he had promised the three of us! Father mentioned both of you: 'Your beaux,' he said significantly, 'will not take this as calmly as you.' And I said, 'So what! I gave no one false hopes, and although I do not love the prince either, I can't very well marry one of those boys!' Father does not suspect that I'll run off with one of those boys tomorrow."

Mikhail laughed. "You're a regular Machiavelli, my darling! But when will you do it?"

"I'll tell Martha everything in the morning and she'll tell Pyotr. If we can't get to your mother's place within the short time we planned, then I'll send you a letter with Serge—he's reliable."

"He does seem to be a trustworthy chap though he's not very bright," Mikhail said condescendingly.

Wretch! Those words sealed his doom. They rooted out the last vestiges of magnanimity of which I was still capable. So, I was to renounce all the joys of life, aid in the happiness of my rival, and for all this receive the hardly complimentary definition of being a none-too-clever fellow!

The sounds of a gong and bugles summoned the guests to supper. Erast Petrovich rose, surrounded by the sparkling dinnerware and fragrant flowers which had been brought in from the hothouse for the gala occasion. He was

still wearing the velvet frock-coat of bygone days and seemed especially solemn, like a French Court Marshal, as he held his glass of champagne on high.

"My dear guests, I consider it a great honour to announce the engagement of my daughter, Vera Erastovna, to Prince Nelsky."

There was a flourish from the orchestra, followed by toasts and congratulations in honour of the couple. Unable to stand the sight of Mikhail and Vera's perfidious faces, I fled. This seemed a natural expression of my great disappointment, for everyone knew I had been Vera's long-standing admirer. Thus, I was left holding the bag once again, for I had involuntarily aided them in their plan.

CHAPTER V

Pigeon Necks

The sky was grey and drizzling. This greyness of nature suited my tortured nerves. Towards dawn I entered the arbour where Mikhail and Vera had met the evening before. There was something white beneath the bench. Bending down, I saw that it was several pages of the *Kolokol*, which Mikhail had probably dropped. I picked them up with disgust. These pages were the loop-hole of a hungry wolf, through which he, a murderer and conspirator, was able to rob me of my peace and joy. At the sight of those two-columned sheets I felt as Prince Oleg had once felt upon seeing the snake of Death crawling out of a skull. Mad rage was getting hold of me as I recognized Mikhail's speeches practically word for word in the printed text, and thus I did not notice Moseich enter the arbour.

"I never expected to see you interested in such seditious ideas, sir," he said in French, his big mouth pulled in a grin.

"You're right, my dear Monsieur Delmasse," I answered, as always calling him by his real name, a fact which had earned me his friendship. "Noblemen like you and I should not be traitors to our class. The owner of such poison can only be one who is infected with it."

"Such as your friend Beideman?"

"I did not name him."

"But I have my own opinion. Give me this cursed magazine," Moseich said. "I consider it my sacred duty to fight an enemy of my class. In this case it is also a question of shielding a young girl's soul from evil influence. Do you not see that Beideman has bewitched Vera Erastovna? When her engagement was announced yesterday I noticed something quite peculiar: they winked to each other with the look of conspirators. They have plotted something which must be stopped, though perhaps the fate of an innocent victim does not concern you," the dwarf added craftily.

"I will die before I see her ruined!" I cried passionately.

"Then give me the magazine."

I cannot say, as I have told myself all my life, that I did not fully realize what I was doing when I placed the sheets in Moseich's long, monkey-like, grasping hand. Of course, I had no way of knowing the form which that first treachery of mine would take, but, naturally, I was aware that Mikhail would get into trouble as a disseminator of forbidden literature, especially since I was giving the magazine to such a villain as Moseich.

I have now reached an age when a person does not wish to escape his conscience any longer and when no excuses will reassure him. There is but one comfort left to me, inglorious, but proud: I am to be my own severe judge. A moment after I handed Moseich the *Kolokol* in a rage, I ran after him to take it back. Experienced villain that he was, and knowing all the turns of a weak nature, he slipped into the cellar of the house before I had had a chance to change my mind. He had a workshop there which had gained him ill fame and where, in the labyrinth of the pas-

sageways, I could never have found him anyway. I felt flushed and feverish. My thoughts were jumbled and the one uppermost in my mind was to be near Vera and not to surrender her to Mikhail.

In my mind's eye I kept seeing the executioner's block on Red Square and the executioner himself with Vera's golden braids twisted round his fist. Her white neck was on the block, then the axe flashed through the air. I was ill and these were hallucinations. Suddenly, my brain re-created the conversation I had overheard the night before. Vera's fate would now be linked to Martha and Pyotr, and she had promised to meet Martha in the dovecote.

The first faint rays of the sun touched the tops of the birch groves and the little birches fluttered their greeting to the sun. I stole to the dovecote and hid behind a heap of rubbish dumped in a corner. I shan't lie and say I felt ashamed, though I knew my actions were contemptible; however, at that moment I had no mercenary motives. I no longer thought of my own happiness. I had to save Vera, deluded by the rebellious spirit of a person who was possibly not sound of mind. Mikhail had told me that there had been insanity in his family. This striving towards a single goal and the fire that was ever consuming him might well have been the first symptoms of the disease. I was horrified when I overheard him confess he had nearly murdered the woman he loved. And then, his telling Vera that in joining her life with his she would not only have to share the horrors of Siberia, but the hangman's noose as well, revealed the unbounded pride of a heartless villain. Those words burnt my heart, for if Vera were to follow him she would never stop half-way! I would not have her suffering deprivations in prison or in exile. I had to save her. She did not love Mikhail, it was all an evil spell. Besides, as a loyal subject, knowing of the dangerous intentions of a cadet who, as I, was soon to become an officer, I felt duty-bound to stop him. There was no telling where his

evil will would lead him. Had he not repeated time and again, "If he who holds supreme power will not relinquish it, he can be made to do so"?

I heard a rustling sound, like that made by a cat. Peeping through a chink I saw Moseich. "What has he come for?" I wondered and suddenly felt frightened. Moseich walked up to the cages with young pigeons, pulled one out, and wrung its neck; then another, and a third. The expression on his face was horrible, like the sorcerer's in Gogol's *Terrible Vengeance*. Moseich's nose, too, seemed larger than normal. A yellow incisor protruded from his half-open blood-thirsty mouth. The bony fingers of his over-long hands would suddenly grip the fluttering bird's beak and head like a steel vice. He would twist the grey neck once, and again, like a cork-opener in a bottle, making the bones crack. The old pigeons flapped their wings and cooed plaintively.

My indignation was so great that I was ready to grab the scoundrel by the scruff of his neck when he suddenly snatched up the dead birds and scampered to a far corner. Vera and Martha were coming up the stairs.

"Oh, dear!" Martha cried, rushing to the open door of the cage Moseich had not had time to close. "That hunchbacked devil has carried off three little pigeons again!"

"Whom are you scolding?" Vera asked.

"The dwarf Moseich wrings their necks and eats them. He says they're tastier than chickens. There's no one worse than that devil in the whole world, Miss. It's he who puts those ideas in the master's head."

"What a low person!" Vera blushed. "But let him be, time is precious. Leave the pigeons and come sit here by me."

Despite my anguish, I could not but appreciate and remember for ever the magnificent scene. A golden ray of sunshine coming through the little window pierced the gloom as in a Rembrandt painting and fell upon their heads. I can still see Vera's delicate features and adamant

eyes, which, in her excitement, made her resemble the angel of justice. Her small, girlish hand lay lightly upon the golden mass of Martha's lovely hair; the woman was a true Russian beauty in a white embroidered blouse and deep blue *sarafan* so popular in those parts.

They agreed to run away that very night. Pyotr, being one of the head grooms, was to steal a pair of black horses, harness up a light carriage, and wait for them at night beyond the village. Towards evening Martha was to bring old Lagutin's customary decanter of wine to his room, but with a sleeping powder in it to prevent her having to dance for him as usual. Vera said little and was calm. She had already planned everything.

"But, dear Miss, where will we go then?"

"Then we'll go to Lesnoye near Petersburg. We'll be sheltered there until Linuchenko comes. We can't delay. Let the pigeons out and hurry to my room. Oh, to be free! We'll make out all right."

"I'd go through fire and water with you, Miss!" Martha cried.

Vera rose and walked over to the steps. When she bent to go down, her light chiffon scarf brushed against my face. Martha followed her, and the pigeons, now freed, pushed off from the wooden cages with their little red feet and soared above the birch-trees.

I sat there stunned by all I had heard. What great power Mikhail had over Vera! Two months ago they were not even acquainted, yet now he was forcing her to renounce her old father and home for ever and run off with the servants, aided by a series of treacherous lies. And I, the friend of her tender childhood, had flown out of her mind as the fluff from a dandelion after the first breeze.

"*A la bonne heur*," I suddenly heard Moseich say. "That was quite a catch!" Then he added with as much cordiality as his own ugliness could suffer, "I will not ask, sir, how you happen to be here. I hope we are both of the same mind as concerns the young ladies' plot. They have not

even forgotten the sleeping powder—just like in a melodrama—and it's all the innocent result of her father's French library. For their own good we must not let our heroines act out the comedy in real life. However, this will also be 'in character.' I beg your pardon, but my Gallic appreciation of wit never deserts me."

This Quasimodo repulsed me, yet I found myself agreeing with his desire to interfere with their flight. The idea that Vera would go off to Mikhail for ever dimmed my thoughts and robbed me of all chivalrous impulses.

"Not a word, my friend," the hunchback whispered. "Leave everything to me. Let the evil abductor leave with hopes of a speedy reunion, and let the heroine and her golden-haired accomplice prepare everything for their flight from her father's home. They can try, but at the edge of the village we'll snatch them up like mice in a mousetrap. We'll let them get into the carriage with their bundles and souvenirs, *mon ami*, and the moment Pyotr cracks his whip, trustworthy guards will block their way with shouting and lanterns. We can even set off a rocket or two that were left over from the engagement party! Ha-ha! The bride-to-be will naturally faint and be dispatched off to her room and locked in. Pyotr, according to local tradition, will be sent to the stable to be whipped, and golden-haired Martha—" Moseich's face looked like a filthy baboon's— "will get what's coming to her! That leaves you alone, as before, to console the heroine."

"You wretch!" I cried, shaking with rage. "I'll be no part to your filthy plans."

"Oh-ho!" Moseich backed away towards the little window, and, to be on the safe side, thrust his feet out on to the top step outside. "You, sir, are a participant in absolutely everything, for you were the one to begin the family drama. It was you who betrayed Beideman by handing over the *Kolokol*."

I rushed to the stairs and shouted, "What have you done with the magazine?"

"Nothing to worry about. I merely handed it over to the most trustworthy of libraries—Erast Petrovich's enraged paternal hands."

"Oh, what have you got me mixed up in!"

"Now, now, *mon cher*, you're not a baby." Moseich no longer tried to conceal his contempt. "As the Russian proverb goes—you don't want to have feathers on your snout, but I, sir, have the courage to kill my own pigeons for my dinner. It's still not too late," the devil said, and once again he spoke the truth. "Go on and warn Vera Erastovna!"

He never doubted my baseness.

When I came down the attic stairway the daylight blinded me. The grey sky was now a bright enamel-blue. I wandered towards the manor house, and when I reached a bench which offered a distant view of Vera's vine-covered bedroom window, I collapsed from exhaustion. The events had been nerve-shattering and I had not slept all night. If Mikhail had suddenly appeared beside me and asked me what was wrong, I would have told him everything, regardless of the consequences.

Ducks were making clucking sounds as they fished for worms in the stream beyond the bush; a herd of cows clumped by heavily on their way to the watering place. There was a faint jangle of bells as a troika rolled up to the porch. I realized it was for Mikhail, since he had bid everyone farewell the previous evening, wishing to reach the city and catch the train to Lesnoye to spend the last day of the holidays with his mother.

Suddenly Mikhail, wearing his cap and greatcoat, popped up from among the dense box bushes which grew beneath Vera's window. He rapped on the window lightly with a willow-branch. His tap had obviously been expected: the window was thrown open and a beaming and radiant Vera in a light-pink dressing-gown, reflecting the sunshine that streamed down from the clear, cloudless sky, stretched her thin arms towards him. Mikhail jumped lightly on to the window-sill. They embraced.

Fate was certainly mocking me, making me see with my own eyes what I had merely guessed at during the night. Vera whispered to Mikhail for quite some time: she was apparently telling him her plan. He hurried her and kept glancing about, anxious lest someone see them, and looked in my direction twice. The lilac-covered arbour concealed me, though I could observe them through a small gap in the bushes. They took leave of each other so joyfully, and were so full of wonderful hopes, that I did not notice the slightest shadow of pain, that constant companion of lovers' parting, no matter how brief.

Mikhail jumped off the window-still and turned round. She waved the branch he had left her and stood gazing at the road until the last cloud of dust stirred up by the troika had settled again. I watched her as she turned, the same triumphant and radiant smile still on her lips, and then disappeared into the recesses of her room. If she had only known that glorious morning that she had seen Mikhail for the last time! However, this is not entirely correct, as she did see him once again. But then it was no longer he.

My holidays were to end in several days, but I could no longer stand the torture. There was a tenseness in the house, as before a storm. Old Lagutin said he was ill and kept to his room; Moseich never left his side, and they were apparently plotting the trap together. Vera would occasionally appear with an absent-minded look, her thoughts obviously somewhere else. She spent most of the time locked in her room with Martha, and it later turned out that they were putting aside all her valuables to be taken along. Finding a convenient moment, I approached Vera.

"Farewell! I'm going hunting and will probably not have a chance to say good-bye tomorrow, since you usually sleep late. I have to leave at dawn, as Mikhail did today."

Purposely emphasizing the last phrase, I looked at her defiantly, inwardly begging her to become apprehensive at my tone, to question me and demand an answer. Who knows but that if she had paid the slightest personal at-

tention to me, I would perhaps have told her about Moseich. There would have been no end to my gallantry, I would have thought of a new plan of escape, and I myself would have aided her! What person really knows the depth of baseness and the height of selflessness of his own mysterious soul?

Vera started at the mention of Mikhail's name, but then, probably remembering my simple-mindedness and disgusting "nobility," decided that the emphasis had been unintentional and said absent-mindedly, "Oh! Well, good-bye," and then returned to her room, for Martha was calling her.

I grabbed my gun and stumbled out. I wandered about all day long, shot nothing, and cared less. As a fatally wounded animal seeks a place to hide and lick its wounds, I tramped groaning through underbrush all night. At dawn, possessed by an unbearable concern over Vera's fate and feeling guilty towards her and despising myself, I approached the Lagutin estate.

As I was passing the stable, I heard a terrible moaning coming from within. I listened closely: the crack of a whip, followed by a grunt after each lash, as if a great weight were being lifted, spoke only too clearly of the abominable punishment taking place inside.

"Wait!" I heard Moseich say. "He's stopped breathing. Douse him with water!"

I yanked at the door with all my strength, tearing it from its hinges, and entered. Pyotr, deathly pale and bound tightly, lay on a bench. He was unconscious. His strong, naked body was covered with purple welts and blood.

"You dogs, you flogged him to death!"

"That was the last of it," a huge muzhik said calmly. "Let him sleep it off." And he began wiping the three-pronged whip clean of blood.

Moseich squinted his poisonous eyes and lit his pipe. "The little escapade is over," he said. "We wrung all three pigeons' necks!"

"Where is Vera?" I shouted.

"The princess is under lock and key, and though she's not in a round tower, she'll hardly escape. The old king revived the birth of Aphrodite from the sea foam famously last night—with the aid of golden-haired Martha."

"What has he decided to do about Vera Erastovna?"

"Something you'll like. She is to be married to Prince Nelsky immediately, and as he is twice her age, a young man to console her will be most welcome."

I slapped the old devil, knocking him off his feet, and then ran towards the house. It was still very early, the doors and shutters were locked. I pulled myself up by my hands, as Mikhail had done the day before, and rapped on the shutter of Vera's window. After a while old Arkhipovna opened it a crack. She waved her hands at me frantically, hissing, "You'll get us into trouble! Go away! They're guarding the place!"

I heard Vera's voice, asking who it was. Arkhipovna stuck her head out again and looking round, whispered, "Wait in the bushes."

I jumped into the thick acacia like a hare, and just in the nick of time. Gypsy Grishka, Moseich's aide, sprang up from beyond the corner, club in hand, shouting, "Who's there?" I remained in hiding for a whole hour, until Grishka was called to the servants' quarters and Kondrat, a nice young fellow with whom I often spent a night in the meadows, looking after the horses, took his place under the window. He was devoted to me, and I wanted to buy him from Lagutin.

"Kondrat," I called.

"Oh, go away, sir," he said. "They'll flog me if I let you in."

Arkhipovna's wrinkled hand, with a bit of red woollen yarn tied round the wrist to cure her rheumatism, stuck an envelope out of the window.

"Hurry, Kondrat, give me the letter."

Kondrat looked round warily, took the envelope from the

old nurse, and handed it to me. I hid it on my breast. The shutter banged close.

"Kondrat, quickly, tell me what happened."

Kondrat said that towards evening Martha had brought Lagutin some wine which the young mistress had drugged, and since Moseich had already told the Master everything, he substituted the decanter with one he had prepared beforehand. He told Martha to dance for him and pretended to fall asleep. As soon as Martha felt certain he was sleeping, she rushed to the young mistress. The two of them snatched up their bundles and ran to the edge of the village. Pyotr was waiting for them there with the carriage. No sooner had they got in than Erast Petrovich blocked their way, waving his revolver. Although he was shooting into the air, both women fainted from fright. Pyotr lashed the horses; but he stood no chance against a posse. They dragged him down, poor soul, bound hand and foot, and turned him over to Moseich, a past master at dealing with such things. The young mistress was carried to her room and locked in with her nurse, and Martha was made to dance all night.

"Dance!" the master had cried. "They won't whip Pyotr as long as you dance, but the minute you stop they'll go to work on him! They'll be cheering him up till morning. Well, let's see you shorten his sentence!"

And Martha had danced like mad all night until she had finally collapsed as a sheaf under the scythe, and was now ill.

"You'd better go, sir, or there'll be more trouble."

Kondrat spied the watchman and darted away, while I set out to order my horses.

Vera's letter was not sealed. She must have hardly considered me a person at all, to care so little whether or not I witnessed her innermost feelings, and apparently felt she could rely completely on my devotion and magnanimity. How insulting and dangerous at times is a quality called respect, which in reality is often no more than the

greatest indifference and a convenient acknowledgement of an exalted nature. This callous acknowledgement makes a person immediately lose all these qualities, sad proof of the fact that complete selflessness in the name of a noble deed is the lot of but a very few chosen ones.

In her letter to Mikhail Vera described her unsuccessful flight and the reasons that had prompted her to decide not to undertake any new steps without first consulting him. Her father had come to her with the sheets of the *Kolokol*, saying that he would take the matter up with Mikhail's superiors and tell them that his daughter was being politically led astray. Vera was concerned lest Mikhail impulsively reveal his beliefs and thus immediately lose his freedom and with it a chance to really work for the cause of the Revolution.

"However," she concluded, "if you think it necessary to disclose your views at this point and be apprehended as the one responsible for everything, then I beg you not to forget to take me with you, for we are united for ever...." There followed a confession of her love in words which I would never have dared to say to Vera even in my thoughts. And she had no doubt at all that I would give him the letter! Well, she should have known better!

CHAPTER VI

The Round Room

It has been raining so much this summer! I can't seem to get warm after the cold winter. I had the bright idea of sewing linoleum soles on my felt boots to make them waterproof, for I can't afford a pair of rubbers. The girls thought it was very funny, but they helped anyway. Their little hands brought me luck: I collected more these days than ever before. The passers-by felt sorry for an old man in the rain with felt boots and checkered linoleum soles. People are really greater artists than they think. They are not bothered by poverty, but rather by its new and colourful manifestations. Before, when I splashed through the puddles in my wet boots, I felt much worse, but I got less. Yet now, when this ingenious substitute for rubbers has improved my health, I find that people are touched and give me twice as much.

I bought half a pound of bones at the butcher's, some bread, and a caramel each for the girls; then I remembered that the boys who hawk sweets always lick them to

make them shiny. But that's all right, I'll scald them as if by accident. The girls will really like them.

I came home by trolley today. As I sat in a corner I saw an ad about a visiting professor of psychology who was to expose the fortune-tellers and hypnotists' swindle. Then I suddenly recalled Paris and a fortune-teller named Madame de Tebbe. There was a plaster cast of a hand in her waiting-room which I definitely associated with playing cards. I looked at it closely and said, "Why, this is General D.'s hand!" Madam de Tebbe was startled.

"How did you recognize it? Let me have your hand." And suddenly she became very sad and close to tears. "You have a terrible future."

"Tell me," I insisted.

"A great artist has died in you. Once a person has killed the artist in him, a villain will come to take his place: such are the laws of the spirit. But that is your past."

She finally yielded to my pleas and in answer to my question: "How will I meet my death?" turned pale and said:

"You will die from exhaustion, sir, after twenty years of inhuman suffering in solitary confinement and an insane asylum."

I'm eighty-three now. Even if I am arrested today, it is highly unlikely that I shall live another twenty years—even in a state of complete insanity—to die at the age of a hundred and three. Well, as they used to say at the Academy, Madame de Tebbe sat down in a puddle as far as her prophecy was concerned. Who'd ever bother an old beggar?

I have not been able to write these past few days. The rain brought on an attack of rheumatism, and I kept looking at the grey sky, waiting for the sun, as a sick animal looks up from its lair.

Today is the first of May, a day I shall always remember as the one on which I took the second step towards dooming Mikhail. The reader will recall that the first step was taken in the arbour when I handed the *Kolokol* to

Moseich. I shall speak of the consequences in this chapter, but I must first note down more recent events for my own use: I mean the May Day festivities in the sixth year of the Revolution.

It rained buckets yesterday, and our girls cried because they would not have a good holiday on the 1st of May. However, today the sun suddenly broke through and was as hot and glorious as on the nicest day in July. The girls chattered happily, pinning red bows on each other. Old Potapich adjusted a Communist badge on his jacket: it was a hammer and sickle on a red star; then he stuck a pin with a portrait of Comrade Lenin in his red tie. I watched him shave and put on these new badges, a sign of the new government's strength.

Everyone left, and I was home alone. The girls rode off with their schoolmates on a truck adorned with fir-branches and huge banners proclaiming the advantages of literacy over ignorance. Old Potapich is also keeping in step with the "educational workers"—he's a watchman at the District Educational Centre. He said proudly as he left:

"We have our own banner, and the embroidery is excellent. Just imagine—ears of wheat on crimson velvet, and there's a slogan, too."

I was not alone for long. Goretsky came in, panting from the many flights of stairs. He's a strange old man who likes spectacles, and there's a bird's-eye view of Nevsky Prospekt from our windows. Goretsky is now in his second childhood. He has completely forgotten the past and lives only in the present. He immediately asked if I had any sugar and said it would not be a bad idea to have some tea. We sucked our tea through the lumps of sugar in our mouths—such is the luxury of contemporary living. However, this is the sugar I've been saving for the girls.

Goretsky was very enthusiastic in his description of the floats and the intended order of the procession. His clients often leave him their newspapers and chat with the talkative old fellow. Considering Goretsky's excellent state of

health, as compared to mine, I made him promise me that in case of my death he would take my notes to the addressee. He was reluctant to undertake this mission, saying that he never had any free time, but after I promised him a pound of cheap tobacco, he in turn promised that if anything happened he would personally take my notes to the publisher.

Suddenly there was a blare of bugles: we looked out and saw the procession stretched out along Nevsky Prospekt from Nikolayevsky Station. There were workers, troops, and children. They were just common people celebrating their holiday. In the middle was a truck carrying a huge globe. The countries where the Revolution was either an accomplished fact or else shortly awaited were marked off in red among the light-blue seas and oceans. There was a moving belt with the slogan: "Workers of the World, Unite!" around the equator. And when a chorus of clear girls' voices chanted from all sides of the huge globe the same appeal that Mikhail used to whisper to me with such firm belief in the future, I thought that, unseen, he was here. I must confess it was inspiring and wonderful. Another truck carried a huge galosh with the merry rich of the world sitting inside. They exchanged witty remarks with the onlookers, to the enjoyment of all.

The troops followed in orderly procession. They were wearing well-made uniforms with multi-coloured insignia, and they all had helmets, like Vikings. Where had so many tall, strong fellows come from? Russia's strength was not becoming drained! How recently had the battlefields been strewn with the best of her warriors, yet she, like virgin soil drenched with sun, never tiring of pushing up strong new shoots, had swelled the ranks again. The sound of an army band playing martial music made poor Goretsky suddenly remember the past.

"Sergei, sometimes in a fit of old-age spleen I lie. I'm only a watchman now. But it was I, I, who captured Gilkho!" He looked ready to sob, but then he said suddenly

with an expression of triumph, as if he, too, were a participant in the May Day celebration:

"Aha, you see, it's all right now. Now the red banners are all right. But what about before?" His irresponsibility enraged me.

"Fool!" I cried as only an old friend can. "Why were they not all right before, blockhead? Because of people like you and me. Did you ever protest when they hung terrorists, or sent people to prison? No, sir, you were all in favour of it."

"Well, *mon cher*," he answered blandly, "that's something else again. Terrorists wanted to use force."

I dropped the subject. The old man was obviously going out of his mind. To top it all, he was extremely pleased that the militiamen now had new well-made black uniforms with red collars.

"*Mon cher*, we have a new police force and it is so much more respectable-looking than the previous one. *Ma foi*—it's European. Oh, if I had only known it would be like this, I would never have been a saboteur! And between you and me, they were in too much of a hurry to exterminate us. They should have immediately taken us into their confidence. However, I can't complain. I have a quiet place, an au-toc-ra-cy, actually. I'm my own boss, and there's no, ha, ha, and there's no ledgers and things."

Goretsky had tired me, and I was glad when he decided to leave. However, I immediately felt ashamed that this last, dear, close friend annoyed me, and offered to see him home.

On my way back I fell in with the general stream of people and found myself on fateful Uritsky Square. A crowd of thousands listened in perfect silence to the orators standing on a high grandstand. When the red banner was raised and unfurled thousands of voices burst forth in song. They sang the *Internationale*.

What did I actually see and what was a hallucination? Was it not on this very square that another anthem had thundered mightily, for ever inseparable, it had seemed,

from the word "Russia"? How long ago had that been? In time but a fleeting five years, yet in all that had transpired since then it seemed centuries. And now the *Internationale* had become just as inseparable from the nation.

The girls came home happy, they had sweets and favours, and Ivan Potapich had obviously had a drop too much.

"The co-operators treated me to some beer and it wouldn't have been comradely to refuse," he explained.

Then he removed his new badges, and, desiring to make May Day a family tradition, shouted as loudly as he had in the streets, "Long Live the Red Proletariat!" He then put on his dressing-gown, yawned, and asked the girls quite seriously:

"How long will the Tsar's holidays last?"

Sashenka, the younger one, answered with annoyance, "Ha! La-a-st! Lessons begin tomorrow."

The Revolution had certainly become a part of everyday life. And how fast this had taken place! It takes longer for a rooted-out old forest to push up young trees. The new forms have held their ground and are becoming popular. Why, oh why then did Mikhail die in obscurity, while I survived? For it was he, not I, who so desired to see this new way of life.

Perhaps it was the sunny day, the music, or the high spirits of those around me that soothed my rheumatism. When everyone left the next morning I sat down to write, keeping to my schedule. Where did I leave off my story of Mikhail? Oh, yes, I wrote of the letter Vera had given me with such assurance of its being transmitted. I never gave him that letter. I still have it. This letter is my evidence, my treasure, my shame, and my excuse. May it enter the grave with me as it is, faded with the years, with traces of bitter tears on it.

Why did I not give Mikhail a letter so important for his and Vera's future? As is always the case in such circumstances, my ill-will seemed to create conditions favour-

able to my actions. I returned from my holidays on time, but Mikhail had not yet arrived. He came a day late and submitted a doctor's note in his defence. Naturally, no one believed him, but it was the accepted thing to do. To my great surprise, I suddenly felt so ill from all I had experienced that I fainted during Vespers and was taken to the infirmary. It was an attack of nervous fever. I kept Vera's letter in my breast pocket and was just able to drop it into the drawer of the night table while the attendant undressed me. I was unconscious for three days.

The first thing I did upon coming to my senses was to see whether the letter was still there and hide it deeper in the drawer beneath various toilet articles. I was allowed visitors a week later. Mikhail was among them. I will always remember that day, the first of May. When we remained alone he asked what had happened at Lagutino and whether there was a letter for him. I was silent, as if too weak to speak, yet the thought flashed through my mind: if I tell him Vera's flight failed, he will certainly find a way to make her do something rash while I am still lying flat on my back, unable to protect her. Thus, pretending to be more ill than I actually was, I said:

"I'll tell you all the details later. Nothing very special happened. Vera is still at Lagutino and should write to you soon. She had no time to give me a letter for you, as I left quite unexpectedly at my aunt's summons."

Mikhail, having once fitted me into a niche, took so little notice of me as an individual, that he did not find it necessary to take a closer look at me.

"I have no letter," I had said.

But here, I still have it, a light-blue envelope within a large bonded linen one. Both Mikhail and Vera have turned to dust, and even Mikhail's clothing, which, with him, was imprisoned for twenty-one years, became threadbare. According to the warden's report, he ordered it burned in the presence of two gendarme officers. But I still have the letter.

I made up my mind not to tell him the whole truth. I was evasive the only time Mikhail deigned to speak with me after I left the infirmary, saying that I had spent my time at Lagutino hunting and knew very little.

It was the end of May and Commencement was drawing near, a glorious day in the life of every cadet, a day never to be repeated in his career. In later life many days might be happier or more festive, as, for instance, the day on which an officer was awarded the St. George Cross for bravery; but never again would the great psychological impression of stepping from one social level to another be repeated. Receiving our commissions was like being knighted. When yesterday's cadet received his officer's shoulder-straps he had to suddenly swallow and digest an extensive code of tactics, master the laws of honour, the rights and duties of an officer. This complicated code was rather peculiar and often in direct contradiction to the accepted human code of living. Many writers have described our strange way of life, and the only reason I mention it now is that for many years it was to me as a chick's shell, encompassing everything necessary for nourishment and growth. However, the moment a chick pecks through its shell, it's firmly on its feet, while I know not where to put mine, having emerged from among the broken pieces.

The Tsar attended our Commencement Exercises. He congratulated us and kissed the Sergeant Major and the corporal-cadets. I noticed Mikhail was deathly pale. His burning gaze never once left the Tsar's face, for he, too, was a corporal. While the Tsar listened to the Sergeant Major's report, his eyes met Mikhail's. I saw his face twitch: he had recognized him. The Tsar turned and spoke to Adlerberg. Adlerberg's nephew, a fellow cadet, later told me the Tsar had asked, "Who is that cadet?" When he was told his name, he repeated it twice, the better to remember it, "Beideman, Beideman." Then he added, "A most unpleasant face!"

Mikhail pulled out his handkerchief. Pressing it to his face, as if to hold back a sudden nose-bleed, he left. He did not wish to be kissed.

When we headed towards the dining-room for a festive dinner, I could not resist saying to Mikhail:

"Why are you like Melmoth the Wanderer, concealing an ominous secret amid our general joy?"

"Don't worry, it won't always be a secret, but it will always be ominous for some!"

Suddenly he bent closer and asked:

"Were you telling me the truth when you said there was no letter from Vera?"

Lowering my eyes, I lied shamefully again:

"Oh, yes, there were a few lines in pencil, and it wasn't even sealed. Forgive me, I misplaced it during my illness and did not have the strength to confess. But I told you all I knew, and if you wished to, you could have done something."

"With my hands tied?" he seethed. "Remember, if you haven't lost the letter and lied to me, hindering our cause, I'll kill you!"

"If you want to duel, I'm ready. Tomorrow, if you wish," I replied.

We could not tear away from each other. Mikhail was the first to come to his senses:

"Forgive me," he said. "At times I feel that you will cause me great misfortune. I won't fight a duel with you, because I owe my life to the cause."

I was nearly completely happy. Mikhail had begun to take notice of me. Those who have an artistic nature are made very strangely, indeed! I realized that I was probably as fond of Mikhail as I was of Vera. I grew bold and asked:

"Will you shy away from a duel if your officer's honour is at stake too?"

"My honour is the honour of a human being and not of an officer," he answered thoughtfully.

"You'll never last a month in the regiment!"

"Whoever told you I intended to stay there?"

Towards evening an orderly summoned me from the dining hall where we were drinking down our new commissions. He said a strange private was waiting outside with a letter for me. I went out to the foyer and was amazed to find Pyotr there. Although he looked very fit and was standing smartly at attention, I could not but remember his deathly-white face in the stable and his terrible back, all purple and bloody. My first question quite naturally was:

"How do you feel?"

"Well, sir, I lay around for about a week and then they signed me up and sent me here to the Guards. There's two letters from the young Miss—one for you and one for Lieutenant Beideman."

Mikhail was standing in the doorway. When he heard his name mentioned he walked over, looked at Pyotr, and immediately recognized him. He blushed, paled, and silently stretched forth his hand for Vera's letter.

"When Lieutenant Rusanin dismisses you, come find me in the library," he said as he hurried out.

Pyotr told me Vera had married Prince Nelsky. She had induced her father to give her Martha as part of her dowry and now the woman had sent word that the newlyweds were preparing to journey abroad and were taking her along. I couldn't believe my ears and kept questioning Pyotr, but he could tell me no more. He had been dispatched to the regiment, but insisted that Vera was not upset. He said that the Prince visited her often before the wedding and that she willingly spent long hours walking along the shady paths of the orchard with him, always deep in discussion.

Vera begged me to take Pyotr on as my orderly. She mentioned in passing that she had married Prince Nelsky because he had proven to be an invaluable friend. They were to go abroad soon and would pass through Petersburg, where she hoped to see me. Words of endearment

which I had not heard in a long time followed, then she repeated her request concerning Pyotr. I promised him I'd take the matter up immediately and showed him to the library. Soon they both came out, and Mikhail looked as elated as if he, and not Prince Nelsky, had married Vera.

"Good-bye, Rusanin!" he cried. "I won't be at the party tonight, for I'm in a terrible rush. I have to leave for Lesnoye today, my mother's expecting me. I'd like to say a few words to you before I leave, though." He looked at me closely. "You lied. There *was* a letter for me. And not just a few lines, either. But all's well that ends well. As concerns the cause, things have turned out better than I could ever have hoped for."

"The cause," I began and stopped short before I said that Vera as a person was obviously of no use to him. However, the thought made me feel good. This fanatic was apparently capable of loving only momentarily. Had he not confessed to Vera that a woman would never rule his life? Had he not hinted at a tragic event when he had nearly killed the woman he loved for becoming too possessive? Then again, he might have been boasting and invented it all. However, I reasoned that he did not seem a liar at all, and the amazing way in which our lives were intertwined caused me to later verify his statement.

Mikhail strode swiftly towards the gate along the immense drill grounds drenched in the rays of the setting sun. The glass panes of the brick buildings were aflame. He was so brilliantly illuminated by the flaming colours, that when the Officer of the Day, much the worse for drink, looked out the window, he yelled, "Help! Fire!" But no one bothered to look, and someone replied, "Then pour some liquid down your throat!" and they all burst forth with a drinking song.

I suddenly felt very sad at the sight of Mikhail's tall figure rushing off all alone through the dazzling blood-red light of the sunset reflected from the windows. Following

an irresistible desire to warn him against something, I grabbed up my cap and dashed out after him.

"Let me see you to the post carriage. I feel like taking a walk," I said when I caught up with him.

"Fine," he answered amiably.

We walked along in silence. I felt as light-hearted then as I had during the first days of our friendship, and as I had not felt for a very long time. We reached Police Bridge, where Mikhail had to buy something. At that moment a middle-aged bearded man in nonedescript clothing came abreast of us. He seemed familiar, but I could not place him. The man looked at Mikhail closely and said:

"Good evening! Why didn't you come to see me? I thought you would."

It was Dostoyevsky. At first he did not notice me, but in answer to my greeting he said with exaggerated cordiality, "I believe you were at the Countess' salon that evening, too?"

"Countess Kushina is my aunt," I answered stupidly, as if I had been snubbed.

Mikhail was excited by the encounter, but said nothing.

"I live nearby, so let's go up to my place, gentlemen, without putting it off again," Dostoyevsky suggested.

Mikhail still had a few hours before his carriage left for Lesnoye, and as a night of drinking awaited me, it mattered little whether I arrived an hour earlier or later. We both followed Dostoyevsky.

Whenever I later chanced to read a description of the writer's personality, or recollections of Dostoyevsky, the man, I was always amazed at the lack of perception and the meagre impressions left on the authors. They are taken in by the mask every intelligent person wears for the sake of convenience when mingling with other human beings. They regard this mask as his true self.

I had grown up among people whose outward appearance was extremely deceiving, where the crassest of all, who knew nothing of the arts or sciences, had learned the

art of small talk and could hold forth on any subject, making each statement seem full of hidden meaning, whereas it was actually no more than an effectively done stage set with a distant perspective—all on a small piece of cardboard cleverly made to deceive the eye.

Thus, in judging a person, I came to disregard completely the means he used to impress the world.

I must confess that at the time I had read nothing by Dostoyevsky, and perhaps that is why my impressions were so spontaneous and unprejudiced. I have always laughed at those slobbering half-wits who fancy themselves to be "like Dostoyevsky." Quite the opposite qualities impressed me when I studied the man closely.

He had an outstanding character trait, peculiar to very few society women who are far from beautiful but who possess something greater than mere beauty. They have a winning, captivating charm. Once you have met such a woman, all your impressions of life not connected with her become bleak and shabby. Her presence exhilarates you, it doubles your strength and goes to your head like champagne, enriching your whole being. Some day scientists will discover that the secret of this charm lies in the fact that the spark of life is much more forceful in some than in others.

Due to this concentrated elixir of life, the impression Dostoyevsky made upon one was swift and disarming, as the beam of a floodlight which flashes on suddenly, drenching an object in light.

Perhaps strong-willed, strong-minded people who are not artistically-minded are immune to such personalities; I, however, followed Dostoyevsky in a state of agitation comparable to that loss of all feeling I experienced in the Imperial Hermitage as I stood before one of my favourite paintings.

I glanced at Mikhail and noticed that he, too, had been affected, but in a different way. His manly face became harsher, he straightened up, fixed his bandolier, threw

back his shoulders, as if on parade, and stepped more firmly and distinctly.

"I see you're officers now," Dostoyevsky said, smiling, "but you were still cadets then. This calls for a drink. By the way, I have some very good wine which I'll serve you in a wonderful room. It's mine while my friend is abroad and my own place is being painted."

We climbed four flights and found our way through dark, sinister passages to a rickety door. Dostoyevsky went into a closet beside it and pulled a door-knob out by a string, just like a fish. He inserted it in a hole in the door and turned it. We entered a dark foyer cluttered with firewood and subframes. Our entrance frightened two rats who squeaked and dashed into a corner.

Dostoyevsky pushed a door and we found ourselves in an amazing room. It was tremendous and completely circular. Three large bay windows faced on Nevsky Prospekt and the yellow-green waters of the canal. One window was wide open, the window-sill a mass of fragrant sweet peas, and I still remember that they were all different shades of violet. This foreground was in perfect harmony with the panorama of the city. Another of Rastrelli's wonders—the red Stroganov Palace—seemed a mirage beyond the haze of soft violet petals. The palace front was adorned by two rampant foxes which seemed alive in the changing light of the sunset. Though I knew the streets and the houses, too, the sudden view from the fourth floor of a great expanse of golden-purple sky, when all the buildings seemed afloat, made me feel more keenly, as it always does, the genius of those that built the city, and then I fancied that Petersburg was somewhere in Italy.

Oh, the hour of sunset is a time of magic! Thus, I once felt as joyous at the sight of the Bois de Boulogne in Paris as I do when I see the little ravines of our own modest Smolensk Gubernia. Perhaps the many homesick Russian emigrants strolling there brought on this feeling.

Dostoyevsky seemed to have guessed my thoughts. He

pointed to the first lights flickering on the dark waves of the canal and to a long boat beneath the bridge, saying, "Look, is it not Venice? You know, reality is not one bit worse than fancy. This boat came from Cherepovets stacked high with earthenware. It's all been sold, but yesterday our own crocks sparkled in the bright sun no worse than the mosaics of St. Mark's. Well, gentlemen, be seated and we'll celebrate your commissions."

We retired to one of several tremendously long divans that circled the walls and were interspersed with bookcases. There was no other furniture in the room. The clean, dull parquet floor was in need of polish, and it seemed to have scattered its beautiful diamonds for some fairy-tale game. The Bysantine chandelier was also round and had coloured icon-lamps instead of candles. Dostoyevsky filled our glasses with excellent Marsala.

"I'm as happy as a child to have this fantastic room, if even for a short while," he began, when Mikhail suddenly interrupted him, saying with unusual feeling:

"I recall that in the first chapter of *Insulted and Humiliated* you say that you wish for a very special self-contained apartment, and that if it is only one room, it should be very large. You also note that your thoughts are cramped in a small room and that when you are planning your stories you like to walk up and down."

"How do you know all this? The book has not yet come out."

"Our Professor Selin had your manuscript for safekeeping, and as I was his secretary, he let me read it."

"Ah, yes, Selin. He's one of Herzen's in-laws. Yes, I remember him well. However, you have repeated it word for word. Have you read my book so thoroughly?" Dostoyevsky seemed surprised.

"We Russians cannot do things otherwise—we can't do things superficially. I heard that Strauss thought the painter Ivanov raving mad for having first learned his *Life*

of Christ by heart and then wearing him down with matters in it the author himself had long since forgotten."

"Is that your intention, too?" Dostoyevsky asked with a smile.

"Yes," Mikhail replied without a trace of a smile. He became very grave. "I read your works very carefully and was troubled by several things concerning you, personally. However, I have discovered the answer in one 'however'."

"This sounds very interesting."

"There is a phrase that goes like this: 'However, I always found more enjoyment in planning my works and dreaming of them being written than in actually writing them.' And you follow this by a question: 'I wonder why?' "

"I see. And you have decided to answer the question?"

"God forbid. Let your conscience be the one to answer it."

I looked at Mikhail in surprise. His words had sounded rather rude and were completely out of place, I thought. What was wrong with someone preferring to dream rather than write? As far as I was concerned, it sounded romantic, for a dream was certainly the more impartial.

Yet Dostoyevsky was not surprised. He tilted his head and listened to Mikhail's words intently and with great respect, as if he were eager to learn something.

If Dostoyevsky had impressed me as being extremely awkward in Auntie's salon, I now found myself captivated by his charm and the great tact with which he tried to put Mikhail at his ease, as if he understood his emotions perfectly.

"Why did you not come to see me before? It was certainly no accident? Confess, you did not want to come, did you?"

Dostoyevsky's words had the effect of stripping off the superfluous barriers one by one, until he entered a person's heart as simply as one opens a gate and enters a garden.

"You are no stranger to me," Mikhail replied without raising his eyes, "but you are the most cruel and harmful person as far as... as far as my cause is concerned."

Mikhail's words were clear and precise. He was on his guard, as one is in an embrasure, surrounded by enemies, but unwilling to surrender. His perturbation, which I did not understand, as I did not understand any of their conversation, was passed on to me.

"That was my opinion of you," Dostoyevsky said with apparent approval.

"Your *Notes from the Dead House* ended everything and alienated me completely. Of course, each man is his own judge, and as I've already said—let your conscience be your guide. Here's a case in point: to the very same extent that you, as you have stated, find it much more pleasant to dream than to write, in other words, more pleasurable to retain your inner wealth instead of making it the property of others and sharing it with them, you.... Well, in other words, you have made the very same choice as concerns reality and life."

Suddenly Mikhail flushed and said with a deep hurt in his voice:

"You have chosen the easy way out! How could you, with all your knowledge and all that you have seen!"

He was too upset to speak and walked over to the window. I felt terribly embarrassed as I looked at Dostoyevsky. I shall never forget his face as it was that moment. Suddenly a beaming, joyous look burst through the deep, great and ancient sorrow that never left his face, even when he was smiling.

Dostoyevsky walked over to Mikhail, while I remained seated, my eyes drawn to the dark figures silhouetted against the still pink background of the sky.

Mikhail was in one of those moods when, burning with a wild fire, he no longer reacted to his immediate surroundings. He was like an arrow shot from a long bow which could only pierce something, but never waver from its course.

"When you were released from penal servitude," his deep voice thundered angrily, "when you said good-bye for ever to the blackened logs of the barracks where you had marked off the days of your imprisonment on the stockade posts with such agony, can it be that it was your literary genius alone that recorded that which you left behind as you were set free? I have memorized that part. This is what you wrote: 'How much youth had gone to waste within these walls. What energies had perished unused, for if the whole truth must be told, these men who were here were no ordinary men. Perhaps they were indeed the most highly gifted and the strongest of our people. But this mighty force had been lost—uselessly, unnaturally, irrevocably; and who was to blame?' And then you ask once more, this time you indent it, the better to impress the reader: 'That's just it: who is to blame?' "

"What do you think I should have done?" Dostoyevsky asked gently.

"I only know what we must do."

"Who are 'we'?"

"We, the youth! Young people will die rather than surrender to oppression. They are not fated to pass on their experience orally, they will use themselves up. They will sacrifice their lives! When the martyrs followed the path of Christ, I doubt that there was any great need in ecumenical councils. There always was, is, and will be but one choice in the battle against the dark forces of evil, and that is voluntary *death* for freedom's cause. Why then should I have come to see you? You are seeking a compromise, you are seeking a way out, while our cause calls for firmness and self-sacrifice. Good-bye."

As Mikhail headed towards the door, Dostoyevsky took his arm.

"Wait a minute. I'll light your way. It's very dark in the passage."

I felt utterly crushed and at a loss as I silently followed my friend. Dostoyevsky walked on ahead with a candle

which threw a flickering light on the nearby walls but was unable to dispel the shadows of night that had gathered in the many niches, dark corners, and branchings of the main passage. Just as Petersburg, seen from the window of the strange circular room, had so recently appeared as some Italian city, so now the dimly lit stairway and passages of the strange house evoked thoughts of catacombs, the early Christian martyrs, and the Inquisitors.

Now, when all the events have come to a close, I clearly see what a true premonition of reality my upset emotions gave me that evening. When many years later I tried to find out more about the unusual circular room I discovered that Dostoyevsky's friend had moved out shortly thereafter and that the new occupant, a Madame Florence, had had it until the Revolution, using it as a parlour for the young ladies of her disreputable but profitable establishment and their gentlemen callers.

CHAPTER VII

Flowering Lindens

Immediately set about trying to fulfil Vera's wish and was able to get Pyotr transferred to our unit and have him appointed my orderly. However, I was at a complete loss as concerned the other events.

Mikhail's apparent joy on discovering that Vera had married the Prince could only mean that the marriage was a fictitious one to some extent. Her emphasis on the fact that the Prince had turned out to be a priceless friend indicated that there was something unusual about their relationship. But what about the trip abroad? I did not for a moment think that Vera's love for Mikhail had cooled, yet how did the coming trip fit in? Mikhail would certainly be unable to accompany her. His commission compelled him to remain at his post for at least another three years.

The answer soon became apparent. Mikhail Beideman disappeared.

They waited for him in vain at the Orden Dragoon Regiment. He never showed up. He had told his mother that he

was going to Finland for a short while, but when she had had no word from him, she appealed to Grand Duke Mikhail Nikolayevich, head of all the military academies, to help locate her son.

Beideman was as cruel as all fanatics in that he never thought of those who surrounded him. He had not taken the trouble to put himself in his poor mother's place. Otherwise, how could he have failed to realize what any other person in his position would? His childish lie upon parting—and they were fated never to see each other again—would certainly be discovered within a few days, causing her terrible anxiety. It was in his power to spare her this unnecessary suffering, for she was an unusually strong, courageous woman. But he never thought of her, he simply took the easiest way out at the moment.

Mikhail did not go to Vera. He did not want to arouse any suspicion as far as she was concerned and thus hinder her departure for Italy, where they were to meet. The Governor of Kuopio reported the fact that Beideman had crossed the border to the Governor-General of Finland; I shall reconstruct the events on the basis of that document.

Late at night Mikhail arrived at an inn, where he exchanged clothes with the bar-keeper, saying that he intended to go hunting the next morning. He left quite early, and instead of returning to the inn, walked from Uleaborg to Torneo. This was all the authorities knew at that time.

I longed to see Vera and was about to apply for a short leave to tend to matters of my estate when I suddenly received a note from her, begging me to come immediately in connection with a matter of the utmost importance. I told Pyotr to start packing. Just then I was informed that a middle-aged lady wished to see me. It was Mikhail's mother.

I shall never forget that woman. Mikhail was her last, late child. She wore a black dress with snow-white cuffs, was rather prim, in the German fashion, and impressed me with her great poise, a quality one finds so rarely in women. It seemed as if her whole life flowed on somewhere deep in

the inner recesses of her soul, and but a few words and gestures, necessary to communicate with others, escaped to the surface. Withal, her beautiful, bright-blue eyes glowed with gentleness. This was not the polite, disinterested good-naturedness demanded by society, it was kindness that came from the heart, that could be relied upon. Perhaps that explained her grave manner of listening and observing so keenly.

I felt at once that Mikhail could have entrusted his plans to such a mother as she. As I looked at her, I also understood where he had got his deep, passionate nature.

Beideman's mother came right to the point, saying:

"I have come to ask you to see Vera Erastovna, as I believe she alone is in a position to shed some light on the whereabouts of my son."

I pointed to my packed bags and showed her Vera's note.

"Come straight to me when you return, I shall be waiting eagerly for you!"

Naturally, I promised that I would, and kissed her hand with true filial devotion.

I was in a state of great agitation as I got into the carriage that had come to take me to Prince Nelsky's estate and was relieved to think that I still had four hours in which to gather my thoughts. However, my conscience was clear, and I had persuaded myself that fate had so juggled my actions as to have made both instances "lucky" for Vera and Mikhail. The fact that the *Kolokol* had fallen into her father's hands through my doing and had provided him with a dangerous weapon caused Vera to enter into a fictitious marriage with the Prince, which had apparently limited neither her freedom of action nor affection. And then, my not giving her letter to Mikhail prevented him from doing something rash. They were now far from each other, and life itself would prove whether or not they were to unite their destinies.

I was touched by the grief of a wonderful woman—Mikhail's mother—and felt flattered by Vera's insistence that

I come immediately, and thus was in a romantically benevolent mood. I felt no jealously of the Prince.

The road lay through fields and birch copses. The white colonnade of Lagutin's mansion suddenly appeared from behind the ancient, mighty lindens heavy with honeyed blossoms. As I had no desire to visit the old man, I had warned the driver to muffle the horses' bell at the last stop, in order that it not tattle and cause Moseich to start investigating as to who had passed and not stopped off to pay his respects to Erast Petrovich.

A half-mile from the house I noticed charred rafters and trusses, the sad remains of a burned threshing-shed.

"Was there a fire?" I asked the driver.

"Lagutin's muzhiks burnt it down to pay him back for insulting their women," he answered.

I asked him to tell me what had happened.

"Well, when the Land Decree was announced and the surveyor and arbitrator started on their rounds, the muzhiks all shouted, 'We don't agree to it!' Before, each family had about nineteen or twenty acres, but the new decree gives the Krasnensky District peasants only about ten and a half acres each—that's why they felt cheated. The prince's peasants teased Lagutin's and said their lots were not big enough for a bull to stand on—the animal nibbled grass from another's field and fertilized the master's.

"Then the officials came, and they called the people together and began dividing up the land. They first drew the boundaries, then the surveyor checked the stakes; he had just set up his instrument when a woman with child suddenly appeared and flopped down on the boundary-line, belly up, and wouldn't let him mark off the corners! Howling at the top of her voice, she was.

"What a sight! Lagutin himself laughed the loudest. He winked to his dwarf and whispered something to him.

"Well, they finally got rid of the woman and measured the plot. The surveyor told the others when their turn would come up.

"Ah, what happened the next time! But Lagutin won't get away with it now, he'll soon stop amusing himself at the cost of the peasants' misery."

The angry driver fell silent, but I offered him a drink from my flask and he continued:

"That damned Moseich came to us with some good advice from the master, so he said. He wanted all the pregnant women to get together and keep the surveyor from fencing off the land. They were all to lie down, bellies up, like the other woman had, but this time they had to be naked. The only reason the other woman didn't get her way was because she had had her clothes on. No one poked her to see if she hadn't stuffed something under her clothes on purpose. But the law would be on the side of the big-bellied women. If they would all lie down in a line, who'd ever think of whipping them? They'd certainly make an exception and the women would save the plots. And what do you think? The women believed him. The wiser men tried to knock some sense into them, but the whole village was ready to stone those men. The sillier a thing is, the more people there are ready to believe it.

"The officials came back on the appointed day and wouldn't you know, there was nothing but big-bellied women all round. The master howled with laughter and told them all to go to the threshing-shed where he gave them some vodka to make them feel better.

"As soon as they got drunk he told them to get undressed and go to the surveyor, stark naked, mind you. By then two of the helpers had started measuring off the boundary, and you know how long a seventy-foot line is. No matter how the muzhik cheats and moves the stakes, the surveyor and the master always come out the winners.

"Well, they were pulling out the line when all the women suddenly flopped down on the ground and began to howl. No one whipped them, but the chief of police had them all thrown in the jug, just as they were. In all the commotion two lost their babies and one went out of her mind. They

became the laughing-stock of the village, and one woman was just too proud to stand it and committed suicide.

"Lagutin better watch out now. That woman was lame Potap's wife, and he's not even afraid of the Devil! Before you know it he'll have the whole village up!"

"How does the Prince treat his people?"

"Oh, no one will ever say a bad word about him, and since he married Lagutin's daughter, he's been just like a father to them. He freed all his serfs and gave the ones that didn't want to leave him such big plots that they're real landowners now."

I wanted to find out more about Vera, but we had come in sight of the out-buildings of the Prince's estate and were approaching the long house. It did not resemble the mansion of his neighbour, for it had been built by a serf-architect and was intended for a leisurely and comfortable existence.

Vera was standing on a vine-covered balcony surrounded by jasmine bushes. She wore a white organdy dress, and I thought she seemed taller and more beautiful than ever.

"Dearest Serge, how happy I am to see you!" she cried. "Gleb Fyodorovich has been awaiting you, too," she added, pointing to the Prince.

We embraced. Then he took my arm and led me to my room.

"You can wash here, and then please join us in the summer dining-room next door."

I would like to say a few words about the Prince.

I shall not debate the current assertion that we are all products of our environment, but I would like to say that there are people, and often men in high places, who live out their lives without ever being able to express their real selves. In my youth I knew men, long since forgotten, who were born fifty years too soon and were therefore forced to accept positions which in no way corresponded to their natures. Thus, my own father, a man of deep and serious

thought, who hated wars and the whole political life of his country, was fated to spend his life as an outstanding army general. Then there was my Uncle Yuri, a talented archaeologist, well known in Europe for his archaeological discoveries, who has for ever gone down in history as a conqueror of Eastern lands—all this because of a brilliant sortie which he led, as he later confessed, not as a military man, but, rather, as a born and avid chess-player.

Prince Gleb Fyodorovich belonged to this category of men. His inner self did not correspond to his title or his social position. Despite a refined European education, he was one of those Russians who never make any demands on life. They tread the earth lightly, accepting offerings with the right hand and distributing them with the left. Such people, if they are commoners, are truly pilgrims; they are not crass parasites, but the wise and simple souls which our writers Tolstoi and Turgenev were keen-sighted enough to see.

Had it not been for his calculating old aunts and grandmothers, Prince Gleb Fyodorovich would have long since given away his lands and gone off to beg his bread through the countryside. His deep mind and free, unbiased way of thinking added a strange charm to his conversation, making it convincing in its utter frankness. When he first met Vera he realized how proud and independent she was and, as I later found out, he had asked her to marry him long before, in order that she attain complete freedom and acquire considerable means as well. The Prince was highly cultured and had no desire to make tongues wag. Thus, he was always able to appear as a man of society without arousing any particular sympathies or enmities. However, his marriage to Vera and her passionate desire for immediate improvements in the existing state of affairs made him go about putting the land reform into action with great enthusiasm, thus earning the hatred of his father-in-law, Lagutin.

Vera and the Prince then went about correcting the

"Draft-bill"* as they saw fit—to the benefit of the peasants and to their own detriment, providing the best possible opportunities for each tiller. Old Lagutin stopped coming to see them. At this moment of family conflict, and actually in connection with it, I had been summoned from my regiment.

The terrace was covered with morning-glory vines and crimson Turkish creepers. A shining samovar that boiled beside a plate of golden-brown buns aroused my appetite. Vera had dismissed the maids and presided at the table herself.

That fresh, early-morning hour spent with the two best people in the world—and one of them the only love of my life—has become fixed in my memory as something perfect and of unmatched beauty.

May the reader forgive me this sentimentality. That hour was like a thread, spun of the apple blossoms of May, which the cruel Parcae let slip accidentally into the bloody cloth of our three lives. If fate had not granted me that hour, I would never have been able to accept as I do now the terrible events that were to follow.

I should like to say a few words about that morning hour. Why have I set it apart from the rest and remembered it as the happiest of my life? And then, what can we mortals look back on as happiness before we die? Is it not the time when one has been able, if only for a moment, to smash the chains that bind his own insignificant soul and suddenly leave the stifling confines of a ditch and enter a great, warm, sunlit sea?

Countless rivers feed the sea. The wiser one is, the shorter and purer his way. However, do not judge me too severely and believe me when I say that the filthy underground sewer leads there, too. One thing is all-important: that is to find yourself at least once, if only for a fleeting mo-

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* One of several draft proposals of an intended peasant reform which did not include freeing the serfs.

ment, in this boundless sea with a great expanse of clear blue sky above you. No matter where or how this happens, nothing in the world can make you ever forget what you have seen.

My blessed hour struck that morning, during a simple village breakfast.

The sun on the terrace was so bright that the tender young leaves of the vines formed an emerald background for the dazzling crimson flowers. Bees buzzed as they flew back and forth from the blossom-heavy, fragrant old lindens; a little river flowed on quietly below.

Prince Gleb Fyodorovich bent his head close to mine as he explained the purpose of the summons. His delicate complexion made him appear quite youthful, and his large kind eyes were shining.

"I must say that we have formed a natural triumvirate," he began, smiling paternally at Vera. "I represent the treasury and experience, Mikhail is a passionate will, and Vera Erastovna is a wise heart, as a poet once said. These three factors are indispensable in order to realize and make possible a new and better way of life. What's the use of book phrases—we only want to give the muzhik a decent chance in life after abusing him for centuries."

At this Vera took my hand and said gently:

"Serge, we have chosen you to be our intermediary between the old world and the new. To begin with, won't you go and visit my father and induce him to give Linuchenko the deed to his house and at least thirteen hundred acres? He never did give him the deed and that is a very important point for our cause. Linuchenko must be his own master on his land, and such a despicable person as Moseich should have no authority whatsoever over him."

"What does Linuchenko have to do with your cause—and what actually is your 'cause'?" I asked.

"I cannot go into all the details, for they might only confuse you. I know your heart can sense the beautiful, and do trust it now. We three—Prince Gleb Fyodorovich, Mikhail

and I—want our enslaved nation to be free and are ready to sacrifice our lives for this cause, if needs be."

Vera rose. Her white organdy gown made her seem ethereal as she quickly paced back and forth and then came to stand before me. The breeze played with the tiny curls that had escaped from the lovely golden braids wound round her head.

Her grey, wilful eyes shone as brightly as the Prince's while she looked deep into my soul. Taking both my hands in hers, Vera repeated, as one speaks words of love:

"We are prepared to die, if necessary. But Serge, you have your own life and your own aims. All we ask of you is that you believe us. Help us do our duty, and in no way shall you be forced into any danger."

"Vera, I would gladly give my life for you," I said.

"But I ask more of you than that," she replied gravely. She sat down beside me, still holding my hands. "I ask that, despite your own opinions, you help not me, but our cause, and help it on the strength of your trust in me."

I understood her. Yes, she was asking for more than life itself. Despising their political beliefs as I did, I was to help them solely on the basis of my love for her, never once doubting that a person such as she could do anything but good. Dear reader, it was then that I really understood the vague passage: "He loveth best who giveth his all." The text is usually interpreted as voluntarily sacrificing your life for something. Yet it is clearly "soul," and not "life" that is meant.

Oh, what perfidy it was: in order to attain complete freedom from myself I first had to betray myself!

But Vera gazed deep into my thoughts and her pale lips whispered once again, as the murmur of sweet love:

"We are doomed, Serge."

Nothing mattered now. I was swept up after her into her boundless, dazzling sea beneath a great expanse of bright blue sky.

"My life is yours!" I cried.

Vera kissed me. Then Prince Gleb Fyodorovich kissed me.

Later, over a cup of fragrant tea, fanned by the honeyed breeze from the lindens, we discussed practical matters. Mikhail was not there, for after he had been commissioned they had to be extremely cautious. Vera and the Prince had to settle the question of the peasants and see to it that Linuchenko got the deed to his land, after which they would leave for Italy, where they were to meet Mikhail. Linuchenko's place was to be the centre of the Russian group. I would receive letters from Vera there, too. They promised to tell me all the details that evening, and urged me to go to Lagutino before the old man found out that I had passed by and not stopped over.

I was supposed to appeal to Lagutin's sense of fraternal pity for Linuchenko, who had brought his ailing wife back from the Crimea. He wanted to take her straight to his cottage, but more than ever before he felt his dependent state and did not want Moseich to order him around. I was to implore Lagutin to give him the deed.

There was not a single contrary thought left in my mind. With all the passion of my twenty years, I was swept up by the romantic desire of young Werther to sacrifice my life not only for Vera, but for the Prince, for Mikhail, and for all the downtrodden of the world.

Though I have remembered this idyll the rest of my life, it lasted no longer than an hour.

Suddenly, a messenger galloped up to the porch, his horse covered with foam, and shouted from his saddle that Lagutin's muzhiks had rebelled and were about to set fire to the manor house.

"Where's my father?" Vera cried.

"The Master escaped on horseback and headed towards the mill. If there's no ambush there, he'll get away. The Elder and the dwarf Moseich are locked up in the warehouse with the fireworks and gunpowder. They'll be blown to bits the minute it's set on fire!"

"Saddle my horse!" the Prince ordered.

I asked him to let me have a horse, and Vera insisted he let her and Martha go in the gig. The Prince and I decided to take different roads: I was to ride to the mill, and he was to head for the manor house, where Vera would later catch up with him.

Oh, how flighty and illusory are the days of our lives! Many were the times in Naples when I would ride to the top of Vesuvius, which seemed covered by purple splinters of slate, and wonder at the childish irresponsibility of the villagers who tended their vineyards at the crater's mouth. They did not expect any great eruptions, and in case of trouble they hoped—as had their ancestors—to have time to escape.

But where is a man to run, if, as Buddha said, you pluck the flower and the wicked Prince Mara has already hidden a viper beneath it?

We three had just been sitting together on the terrace, and there I was, galloping towards the mill to avert a crime. Alas, I was too late!

The drunken mob, brandishing axes and long sharp stakes, had formed a close circle around the two red-headed youths administering the sentence. They held aloft an armless and legless mass. The mill had been started at top speed, and they stood at the edge of the foaming, churning yellow water, so terribly deep at that spot. I had no time to get a good look at the mass from afar, but I guessed it must be old Lagutin, bound hand and foot, and that they were about to toss him under the mill-wheel. I fired into the air, determined to halt the murder, and spurred my horse on. But he suddenly snorted and balked: a corpse lay on the road. I shot out of the saddle, fell on my head, and lost consciousness.

I later discovered that the body on the road had been Potap, killed by Erast Petrovich. Potap had made him white with rage by his angry speech in defence of the disgraced

women. When he threatened to avenge his wife's death, Lagutin had shot him dead on the spot.

This sparked the rebellion. Lagutin was bound with a pair of reins and then hurled into the millpond, while I lay unconscious from my fall.

I was disarmed and locked up in a storehouse. All night long I lay there in dreadful fear for Vera's life. A Cossack punitive expedition, which Lagutin had summoned from town the day before (having been told by Moseich that the peasants were going to rebel), rescued me the next morning. The Cossacks told me that Prince Gleb Fyodorovich had died in a fire, trying to save the old nurse Arkhipovna from the flames: in her terror she had sought escape in her little room. Neither hide nor hair was found of Moseich and the Elder—both were buried beneath the ruins of the caved-in roof. Vera was alive and safe at Arkhipovna's daughter's house.

Though I was not in a condition to think clearly, I nevertheless realized that fate had untangled all the knots in the lives of Vera and Mikhail, which in one way or another I had helped to tie.

Old Lagutin, the only enemy Mikhail had who was powerful enough to ruin him and interfere with his coming back from abroad and marrying Vera, was now dead, leaving his daughter an orphan. Thus, she was now in possession of a great fortune, and nothing stood in the way of their mutual cause any longer. But I, uprooted from my former way of thinking and not a party to theirs, wished I could die. The violent death of my accomplices to some extent restored my once clear conscience. As I fell into a deep coma from weakness, my last near-joyful thought was that this, finally, was the end. Had I only been right!

CHAPTER VIII

From Ancient Thebes in Egypt

When Vera regained her strength, I took her and Martha to the capital, straight to Beideman's mother, to whom I had previously written in great detail. The old woman greeted us warmly. She embraced Vera and showed her to her room, which, like its mistress, was rather prim. She was told of the impending meeting in Italy and of things one dared not whisper, let alone write of, in those days.

She was a most amazing woman. Though her love for her son knew no bounds, her respect and faith in him were greater still. She was not well versed in politics and, as any woman of the upper classes, had been brought up a loyal monarchist. However, she was somehow able to retain her own principles and not be frightened by nor interfere with her son's convictions. She refrained from asking many questions and waited impatiently for word of him. It was not long in coming.

Linuchenko returned north with his wife and brought a letter from Mikhail, passed on by some mysterious inter-

mediary. Beideman wrote enthusiastically of Garibaldi and said he was with his "Thousand" when they had taken Naples. He added that Garibaldi thought he should serve his own country, and not another, and had urged him to go to Herzen in London, which he had decided to do.

Soon Vera received a letter through the same mysterious channels. Mikhail wrote that he had read of the terrible events in Lagutino and instead of waiting to meet Vera in Italy would soon join her in Russia, since it was also in the interests of the cause that he return. In the succeeding days, while Vera awaited his arrival, she became happier and visibly stronger.

Linuchenko, whom I so detested, seemed to spend all his days at her place. A high-strung man who could never sit still, he seemed to be constantly peering at something through his narrow green eyes. He was broad-shouldered and squat, with a mass of black hair, a high forehead, slanted eyes, and a large nose. However, when he spoke, his face was intelligent and grave.

At his studio on Vasilyevsky Island I met the person who was to become my only support in the terrible years that followed. If that person were alive, I would go to ask his advice, rather than a priest's, in solving the last problem I have in this world.

But he is no more. Yakov Stepanich, that great wise man, has died. He was a palace footman who had earned himself a pension which he distributed to the last copper among the many poor. He was known as a clairvoyant and was famous on Vasilyevsky Island. As he had many connections and some influence, Linuchenko found him useful in some of his undertakings. The old man loved him dearly and often visited him at his studio. Once, as I was taking Vera to the Island, she persuaded me to come up to the studio where Yakov Stepanich was posing for Linuchenko.

It was a great room, criss-crossed by a system of ropes, like the communal attic of a cheap apartment house. These ropes were Linuchenko's invention for better observing the

anatomy of the human body. Some ropes hung down as swings, others were pulled so tight that they hummed if one touched them. A heavy rope tied to the lamp hook in the ceiling hung down to the floor and, like a snake, disappeared in the far dark corner of the room.

"This reminds me of the Inquisition," I said to Linuchenko jokingly.

"The janitors never heard of the Inquisition, but they are quite frightened, too," he answered. "However, they all manage to leave here alive. We can turn your arms inside out so that every muscle appears clearly," he said, pointing to the lamp hook, "but we're not torturing Yakov Stepanich. He's comfortable enough."

"I'm sitting here, looking at him, and wondering why he's so sad," the old man replied, pointing to me. Yakov Stepanich was a little fluffy white man, neatly dressed, his face a mass of kindly fine wrinkles. I was surprised he had guessed how wretched I was, for I thought my appearance did not disclose my inner feelings. I had just been laughing gaily, though I felt as dead tired as one does before fainting or falling seriously ill. There was an emptiness within and heavy weights on my arms that seemed to drag me down. My one desire was to lie down and never get up.

I was completely confused. My love for Vera had drawn me into alien friendships and I could not, as Mikhail's mother had, blindly combine the incombinable. Each new day brought me new torment, and I was afraid that I would lose control of myself; Vera would then discover my true emotions, and I would have to leave her. However, this would have been equal to death, and thus I forced myself to assume the role of a good-natured fellow.

Old Yakov Stepanich seized a moment when Linuchenko, telling him to rest for a while, had turned to speak to another artist. He trotted over to me, wrinkled up his face in a smile, and said:

"Don't be sad. You must keep your chin up! A man is born without a name and knows not whether he has a soul.

He tries this way and that to overstep it until he finds its limits. And once he has suffered many moments of spiritual death and has come out the victor, he receives a name and at his own risk joins the great work that is man's hard lot on earth. After all, brick is baked in flame."

"But what if the brick cracks in the fire?" I asked in the same tone of voice and smiled.

"If you can't stand the smell of burning, if you go back on yourself and say: anyone who wants to can rule me as long as I am left in peace, you'll be a traitor to yourself, my boy. Though you'll look like everyone else, you'll really live in vain, like an empty shell tossing on the waves. Don't you know the saying: you can't bury talent? Did you think it could be otherwise?"

"I don't think about such things at all," I laughed.

"Well, be proud while you can," the old man smiled, "but remember my address all the same. It's the third house on 17th Line."

He repeated the house number twice with such insistence that I could not but remember it. And when my hour struck, I came to this address, although this was much, much later. Then, however, I brushed the old man aside and looked round at the other artists. There were five or six of them and two young girls, all students at the Academy and Linuchenko's friends.

"Why aren't we painting?" a very tall one asked.

"We're waiting for three others," Linuchenko answered. "They've stopped by at the Professor's place to see a Giorgione."

To all intents and purposes the session was over, for no sooner had they sat down, with Yakov Stepanich posing for them, than there was a knock at the door. Shaggy-haired Bikaryuk, Linuchenko's friend, entered, shivering in his too-small coat. He was followed by Mashenka, his wife, and another artist of short stature. Mashenka's eyes were red with crying.

"Were you disappointed?" Linuchenko asked. "Was it a fake?"

"No, it was a genuine Giorgione," Bikaryuk answered glumly. "The Professor found it in a pawn-shop. If a person is lucky he'll find pearls in a dung-heap. Oh, to hell with him. I'm concerned about Krivtsov."

"Krivtsov?" Linuchenko turned pale, walked over to Yakov Stepanich, and said, "We won't paint any more today."

"Krivtsov hanged himself." Bikaryuk's words were like a bark.

Everyone was silent. Vera's eyes seemed to beg them to say it was not true. Mashenka and the two other young girls began to cry.

"He got a letter from his village saying that his father had been flogged to death. They are serfs from Kazan Gubernia, you know. He had been paid for and freed two years ago. His father was sentenced to a thousand lashes, but his heart was weak, and the old man died. They found a letter from the sexton in Krivtsov's pocket. He only got it today. He did it in a fit of temper. He tacked a note to his last painting: 'Cursed be the despot and cursed be this land of slaves!' Here it is, I took it off. If they found it, they would have arrested his sister. She doesn't know yet. We were the first ones there."

Linuchenko paced back and forth heavily. Everyone seemed to have shrunken in the stillness. It was dark, but they had forgotten to light the lamp. The large, strangely flat moon descended from the light northern sky and seemed to be hanging somewhere right beyond the window. Shaggy Bikaryuk crouched on the window-sill, his tangled beard jutting sharply forward and his long hair a black mass against the delicate lacework of branches.

His voice rasped, as he said with great emotion:

"You know what picture Krivtsov was working on? It was our Ukrainian 'hopak'.* Oh, it wasn't just a white

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* A Ukrainian national dance.

hut with some sunflowers and a lout dancing—it was the real Ukraine! Ah, what a great artist they have destroyed!"

"It's we who have destroyed him! Do you hear me, we are responsible for it!" Linuchenko thundered. "Until we have pledged all our strength and our lives to the last drop of blood to the fight against tyranny, we are on the same side as the murderers!"

"Are we to go to battle armed with our paint-brushes and palettes?"

"There are times when a country needs not artists, but citizens, and a citizen will always find a weapon. You've all read the *Kolokol* of April 15th, and do you not all agree with it? The Tsar has duped the people! Serfdom has not been truly abolished. The struggle against a dishonest government that has used bloody executions to drown the just demands of the unfortunate peasants is a matter of honour and duty to every honest person. Our comrade was a young genius, but he could not accept the slave-like way in which his father died. He took his own life, cursing this land of slaves. You must accept these curses as long as you yourselves are slaves. Who is with me?" Linuchenko shouted. "Atayev's group appealed to us to join forces. Together we're twice as strong. Friends, may Krivtsov's untimely death take us at least one step forward!"

Bikaryuk jumped to his feet and whispered something to Linuchenko.

"I'm not afraid!" Linuchenko said brusquely. "In fact, I'll give you away, too."

"Gentlemen!" he said, walking over to me. I stood next to Yakov Stepanich, who, though calm, had turned very pale. "My comrade said that there are outsiders among us. I've known you for many years, Yakov Stepanich, and respect you as a father," he bowed to the old man, "and though you are an officer, Serge, you're Vera's childhood friend and. . . ."

"I vouch for Sergei," Vera said walking up to us.

I was shaken by the unfortunate event, for I had known the talented youth well; however, it was quite another matter to be drawn into a political group for which I had no sympathy. I was taken aback and could not immediately collect my thoughts and find the right words to make it clear once and for all that I was not one of them. I walked to the middle of the room and was about to speak, when a loud knock at the door drew everyone's attention.

When the newcomer turned down the collar of his overcoat and took off his cap, of a kind worn by junior clerks, I was dumbfounded, for the man was my orderly, dressed in civilian clothes. My amazement grew when Pyotr, who had not yet noticed me in his obvious agitation, approached Linuchenko as a friend and equal and began talking with him. Then suddenly he saw me, started violently, and automatically snapped to attention.

"Your Grace. . . ."

The blood rushed to my head and the officer in me won out over all my other feelings.

"How dare you!"

Vera grabbed both my hands and shouted angrily:

"Do not say another word, or I shall never speak to you again! There are neither soldiers nor officers here. Pyotr is our devoted comrade. He suffered at the hands of my father, and his enemies are my enemies."

Linuchenko led Vera aside, saying:

"Calm down, I shall explain everything to him." He walked over to me and said:

"Pyotr is a member of our group, the one we are asking you to join. It is up to you to accept or reject our offer, but I know you will never be a traitor. If you, as an officer, cannot accept this breach of discipline, there's a simple way out: hand in a request to have Pyotr transferred, although that will undoubtedly harm our cause. One of

Pyotr's in-laws is a watchman at the Third Department* and through Pyotr he passes on the most valuable information about political prisoners that enables us to aid them. I'm telling you this as I know you are a person whose honour is impeccable. Now, Pyotr, tell us what brought you here in such haste?"

I was enraged: how dare he speak so insistently of my honour? I was too agitated to collect my thoughts and decided that very same day to put down in writing my refusal to have anything to do with Linuchenko's group. However, I forgot everything in the world when Pyotr began to speak. This is what he said:

"At five p.m. on the 18th of August Captain Zarubin, the Gendarme Adjutant, took custody of Mikhail Beideman aboard the ship that had arrived from Viborg and placed him in the Third Department prison!"

Vera fainted. We laid her on the couch and tried to revive her. Meanwhile, Linuchenko was asking where Beideman had been brought from and what else was known about his arrest.

All Pyotr had been able to find out from his in-law was that Mikhail had been arrested in Finland while crossing the border into Russia. He carried a broken pistol, a pocket-knife, and a comb in a case. He had been brought to Viborg from Uleaborg and from there he was taken by boat to Petersburg.

I would like to quote an excerpt from the little book of archives findings that I always carry with me: "On July 18, 1861, the Royal Police Sergeant Kokk noticed a stranger at the Korvo Station of the Northern Finnish parish of Rovaniemi, Uleaborg Gubernia. When the sergeant asked him who he was and what he was doing there,

* The "Third Department," created by Tsar Nicholas I in July 1826, was a section of the Russian Emperor's private bureau, empowered to sound out trends of thought in the country and the tsarist government's chief tool in suppressing all progressive thought and the revolutionary movement.

the stranger answered that he was Stepan Goryun, a blacksmith from Olonets Gubernia, and that he had gone to look for work in Finland, but not having found a job, was returning home through Arkhangelsk Gubernia. However, Stepan Goryun could not produce his passport and so the sergeant arrested him and ordered the parish watchman to take him to the governor in Uleaborg. He was put in jail and repeated his story when questioned on the 26th of July. Four days later Stepan Goryun requested a new hearing. He stated that he had lied and was actually Lieutenant Mikhail Beideman and had crossed the border into Sweden at Torneo in July 1860. From there he had gone to Germany and was now returning to Russia.

The Grand Duke was informed of Beideman's arrest, and he ordered the prisoner immediately transferred to the Third Department prison.

Vera became delirious. The Linuchenkos put her to bed and sent for the doctor. I looked round for Pyotr, but he had disappeared. I left the studio, accompanied by a down-hearted and silent Yakov Stepanich. As we parted he said:

"Remember my address, sir. You're an orphan and orphans need advice!" He said this very matter-of-factly, bowed, and walked off. I remember watching him and wondering at his youthful gait: he stepped lightly and firmly, his straight back unbent, as if he did not feel the heavy weight of his years.

It was late. The same great disc of a moon hung in the twilight sky, and the heavens above St. Isaac's seemed a void. The Sphinxes gazed at one another like weary tigresses, and for the thousandth time I read the inscription beneath them: "Sphinxes from ancient Thebes, Egypt. Brought to the city of St. Peter in 1832."

That moment has never been forgotten. The heavy, mercury-like waters of the Neva rolled on beyond the granite embankment. The barges loomed black. A few lights flickered like eyes among the empty hollows of the

countless windows across the river. The hulking Academy of Arts loomed up behind me, so much closer than in the daylight; there was no statue of Minerva on its roof then—it was erected many years later.

I stood there in dismay, having lost the light that had guided my actions and my life. My sense of honour and duty as a nobleman and officer and all my familiar moral and civic concepts reared up in protest against my human attachments—my boundless love for Vera and my faithfulness to her friends—as against a bitter foe. And then, what was I to do about Pyotr? How would we meet at home? Every fibre of my body told me he should be shot for treason. And what was to become of Mikhail? It was not too difficult to guess that I would be the one asked to appeal to Auntie's connections and to beg Shuvalov and Dolgorukov, in the name of our family ties and mutual affection, to intervene on his behalf. And what was I to demand of them? That they set free the Tsar's worst enemy! And why was he to be set free? In order to be able to develop better and more cunning means of force and violence.

No, that was asking too much. If they had any respect for me at all, they should spare me, and, if necessary, use the cunning so much a part of all their actions to shield me from the unbearable torture of leading a double life.

But they considered me no more than a useful tool. Thus, as one throws coal into a steam engine to make it work, they were appealing to my well-known sense of honour to make me fulfil their wishes.

I walked down the stone steps. It was cold near the water, and the heavy waves gleamed dully. Should I lie down upon them, I wondered. Let them carry me along beneath the grey heavens until they tire, then let me sink slowly to the bottom. And these two, who have been brought from ancient Thebes, will not once turn their tiaraed stone heads. Then I thought of Vera and turned towards home,

shivering with the cold. I knew that she would need me all her life.

At the same hour of dawn on that very spot in 1918 I once again experienced the same emotions. I wandered about the city day and night, dressed in rags, for I had already become a beggar, my age alone barring me from all suspicion. At this very hour, when the large flat moon gleamed in the same dull way, I saw a man drown himself in the Neva.

In the twilight I could see a large ugly scar that extended from his right ear to his nostril. I knew that scar. How could I not know it! He had received it from a Turkish sword when he and I were galloping ahead wildly, breaking through the enemy lines. Our men followed and captured the Turkish advance guard. Captain Alfyorov received the St. George Cross for that scar.

He was now an old, unbending man, and once again he was putting himself in Death's hands, simply and courageously as befitted a military man. I watched him bow to all four corners, according to the Russian custom, then undress slowly, enter the water, swim off a bit, and disappear beneath the waves. I did not call to him. He was right in his own way. I, too, walked down the steps. The leaden waves lapped hungrily at the granite, drawing me down to the black depths.

But the thought of Vera stopped me once again. Though she had long since passed away, I was honour-bound to make known the truth of Mikhail's great suffering; then only would I be free to leave this earth.

I mounted the stairway. The great Academy building loomed up as it had years before, once again devoid of Minerva, who had come crashing down through the ceiling in the nineties. Yet, the Sphinxes still gazed at each other mysteriously and wearily, and the same inscription of the ages was there beneath them: "From ancient Thebes, Egypt."

CHAPTER IX

Under a Glass Bell

I stopped short before Auntie's mansion. A carriage had just drawn up at the curb, and Count Pyotr Andreyevich Shuvalov, attired in a magnificent beaver coat, jumped lightly down and headed towards the door. I suddenly became intensely absorbed in the display of the flower shop adjoining the last half-column of Auntie's house, and peered into the great glass pane. The Count's quick, all-seeing eye noticed my manoeuvre and he walked up to me, an unexplainable smile of complete satisfaction on his face.

"Let us go in together. Why bother old Kalina unnecessarily?" he said.

Kalina was Auntie's old and respected footman who just wouldn't relinquish his right to preside at the main entrance. "Great personages" were frequent visitors at Auntie's home, and Kalina considered the matter of greeting them part of Court etiquette, somewhat akin to the duty of the Court Master of Ceremonies.

The Count's manner was completely natural. He seemed to be in an exceptionally good mood, and the usual sharp glitter of his eyes was dulled by the polished manners of a strikingly handsome man who does not realize the power he wields.

Though I chatted on amiably, I shuddered inwardly. A sudden thought occurred to me which made me feel certain the Count had come to Auntie solely on my behalf and had been afraid he might not find me there.

As one who has dipped his hand into the lottery urn and come up with the first prize, he could not, despite his perfect self-control, hold back the wave of purely animal good-will that came over him, the kind one experiences at a great success that has come effortlessly. I once saw a cat pounce on a mouse and then amiably let a dog eat a piece of fat that had been thrown to it. Since I do not know the scientific limits of an animal's reasoning, I cannot decide whether it was merely a coincidence, or the feeling I have described. Unfortunately, I have positive proof that Count Shuvalov's behaviour that unforgettable evening was akin to that of a kindly tiger pleased at a successful kill.

It is regrettable that we were taught to trust facts and logic implicitly and scorn the warning signals of our hearts as romantic rubbish inherited from our ancestors. Had I been wiser, I would have heeded that inner voice of woe upon being confronted with the marble-white face with its glittering eyes and would have turned round and gone home. But I was not wise, and so I followed Shuvalov in.

Auntie's salon was livelier than usual. Instead of the great personage which she was wont to serve up as a maître d'hôtel serves up the *pièce de résistance*, the room was filled with noisy young people of both sexes. Since there was no salon "lion" present, the guests had drifted into groups, each discussing the topic it found to be of greatest interest.

Auntie, seated in an armchair, presided at the round table, surrounded by her "cronies." They were mostly high officials and the topics of conversation were quite fashionable: the proposed closing down of workers' Sunday schools, the unrest in the universities, and the notorious "woman question."

"I stand solidly behind Count Stroganov," Auntie was saying, "for I feel he is the only one who is speaking the truth when he says that a higher education must solely be the privilege of wealthy noblemen. Can you imagine some commoner getting an education and strutting about in front of his uneducated father! Or another might get a headful of education and then hang himself from hunger, as the one in the papers yesterday. So there it is, we must all live as God intended it."

"What do you think of Baron Korf?" an old man asked. "He proposes that we abolish classroom study at the University."

"Rubbish! We haven't reached the parliamentary stage yet, my friend. If we go to the watering-hole without a switch, we'll trample the field, just like cattle!" Auntie snapped.

"Kovalevsky's note is rather interesting," Shuvalov said casually in his usual questioning tone, intended to keep his own opinion in the shadows, while baiting the others on, like a sparrow with a crumb, to draw out their views.

"Pay a fine! A fine!" everyone cried, holding out a Saxon vase with silver coins to him.

"There's a fine for mentioning Kovalevsky now," Auntie said. "We've been having a regular battle over him for the past hour. I saw that it was a burning question and decided I might as well shear the lamb for the sake of the poor little orphans. Pay your fine, dear Pyotr Andreyevich, and see that you don't mention him again; he's stuck in our teeth like Turkish delight!"

"What's the use of talking since his case has been decided! Stroganov, Dolgorukov, and Panin have been

appointed," the old man shouted excitedly and added, "Kovalevsky's—out!" as he sliced through the air in the direction of another old man, as if cutting off the top of a dandelion.

"Pay a fine!" Auntie held the vase out to him as everyone laughed.

The artist in me always enjoyed a game, and I marvelled, as one does at the way skilled skaters skim along deep chasms, at this delicate salon art of touching on everything without going deeply into anything, creating, as on the clear surface of the ice, a series of the most intricate word combinations and figures.

Yet today, this social flightiness disgusted me. Perhaps I felt that way because Mikhail was in the Third Department prison, at the complete mercy of the self-possessed man sitting opposite me.

"Well, we've collected quite a sum on Kovalevsky. It's your turn now, Maria Ivanovna. Saddle your favourite horse, as the saying goes, but bear in mind that if you're still talking by Augustine, you'll have to pay a double fine," Auntie warned, alluding to her antique German clock which chimed the first bars of "Mein lieber Augustine" on the half-hour.

"I don't want to 'saddle my horse,'" Maria Ivanovna replied with a smile. "I prefer the old-fashioned troika with all its comforts and me giving all the orders. I see no harm in being a woman. My mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother before me were all the mistresses of their homes, and I am perfectly content to be the mistress of mine."

"You're a clever woman, no one will deny that, but tell us about your daughter," Auntie said. She considered Maria Ivanovna a girl as compared to herself, though the woman was well past forty.

"Oh, Lubinka is causing me no end of worry. Fancy, she's an artist." Maria Ivanovna turned pink, as if she had said something impolite. "Why, I wouldn't mind if she

painted for an hour or two, but just imagine, she's at it all day long! The other day she burst into tears. Her drawing master said, 'You're very talented. What a pity you're not a young man.' And truly, he didn't mean to hurt her feelings. She flew into a rage. 'Why, you'd never tell the Chinese ambassador he was a clever man, and too bad he was slanty-eyed, but yet you dare say such things to a woman! Get out of my room!' And then she says to me, 'Mamma, I don't feel like a young lady at all. I want to live like a man.' "

"Bring your Lubinka round tomorrow," Auntie said. "I'll tell her about a nice young man I know, for it's high time she got married."

"It's a feminist rebellion!" a little old man cried. "If women had any sense, they wouldn't carry on so. Why, science has proved that on the average their brains weigh much less than a man's brain. And has anyone ever heard of a woman genius? Even in literature? No one will ever make such a splash as George Sand, and even she was called a cow by Baudelaire."

"What about Jeanne d'Arc?" the eldest of the unmarried ladies present asked, and blushed.

"Joan of Arc was born before her time. And then, Madame, Voltaire has made her completely harmless. Her heroism and unusual gift for military strategy resulted from... ah, how can I put it more delicately?"

"Don't even try. Just be still," Auntie shook her finger at her favourite old man, a great one for telling risqué French stories.

"In a word, *Jeanne d'Arc* is no example of an outstanding woman, as she was not a woman at all," Shuvalov added casually.

"Why, is such a thing possible?" the old maid asked.

Everyone laughed heartily. Auntie was in the best of spirits and shouted:

"Another fine, Pyotr Andreyevich, for making a maiden blush!"

Soon, however, the conversation took a serious turn. Someone mentioned Leskov's article in *Russkaya Rech*, and though the clock had struck long ago and chimed "Augustine" twice, the guests were still on the same subject. The beginning of a feminist movement was of great concern to the parents of young girls, and instances of the new ideas taking root had caused many family tragedies.

I walked over to the window, trying to conceal my emotions, for the fashionable "woman question" was close to my heart, too. It alone was responsible for the fact that I would never know happiness in life and that Vera had been charmed by Mikhail.

Fate was kind to me: a well-known conversationalist and society painter suddenly attracted everyone's attention by his witty remarks. I found his pompous manner of speech somewhat unpleasant, though what he said seemed to make sense.

The reader may be amazed at my recording minute details of foolish conversations while writing of a decisive moment in my life—a fact he has undoubtedly guessed from the beginning of this chapter. And then he may begin to wonder whether I really did remember all this or, having used a convenient blind, am fooling myself and indulging in a flair for writing which has awaked in me so late in life, concocting a description of a social gathering.

I shall answer the question with a question. Has the reader never noticed how a person who has had a terrible loss that has ruined his whole life tells his story to another, going off into the minutest details? He must appeal for help to the familiar things of everyday life in order to withstand a blow beyond all human resistance.

As for my memory which has imprinted like a photograph everything that happened fifty years ago, why, this old-age memory of mine is like the sun: it doesn't distinguish big things from little. However, I will permit myself a few more details, as impressions that flash through the mind of a person being led to the gallows.

The above-mentioned talkative artist wore a velvet coat and gesticulated as he spoke.

"Permit me to open your eyes to the secret of art which, above all others, is able to delve into the mystery of Man and Woman," he said to Auntie.

"Please do," she replied with her usual sense of humour, "but remember: it is improper even for a statue to be completely nude. At any rate, speak in French when you tread on dangerous ground."

"I hope to skirt between Scylla and Charybdis in Russian. But let us return to the subject. Suppose I decide to draw Hermes. As I trace his strong, sleek muscles, I feel that I am forging a treasure. When I have noted a muscle and transferred it to paper correctly, I feel, if I may say so, that something akin to cold planning and logic was moving my pencil. It is like walking along the brink of a chasm and forcing yourself to move ahead by sheer will power."

"Who is he? What is his name?" people whispered.

"A talented parvenu, the Countess' protégé."

The artist continued:

"In other words, *Mesdames*, these emotions are the joy of good aim, of a bullet streaking to its target."

"Never mind lecturing us on the art of shooting," Auntie interrupted.

"Patience, Countess, I was just about to speak of Venus. In painting her, I sense the godly forms in the shadows, rather than in the lines. I seem submerged up to my neck in a warm blue sea beneath a glorious blue sky. I feel gay and hear the Easter bells ringing. *Mesdames*, I am floating in Venus!"

"*Est-ce que c'est convenable*?" Maria Ivanovna asked.

Everyone laughed.

"Pay a fine," Auntie said. "You've let your tongue run away with you."

"Countess, permit me to finish. Perhaps society's sentence will not be as cruel as yours."

The artist, like an improviser, continued with a theatrical gesture:

"If there is such a difference of feeling in creating the male and female torso, it can only mean that there exists a well-founded law, and one cannot confuse or mix the two in life. I hope the ladies will forgive me, but art is our field, not theirs. A man created both Venus of Milo and the Medici Venus. Naturally, they were not figments of his imagination, but the result of his passionate love for some Cleo or Aglaya. And there it is that we have woman's place: arouse our love, *Mesdames*! Inspire us to create beautiful works and a beautiful life!"

The men and women applauded him, but Auntie said:

"Bravo! But you'll still pay a fine for floating in Venus."

I was bored. Unwittingly, I compared their empty talk with the deep thoughts expressed in the unpleasant company of Vera's circle, not in favour of high society. But where was I to find my place? Was I now doomed to eternal indecision, having been equally poisoned by two opposing groups?

Shuvalov, who had been glancing in my direction now and again as if he were watching me, joined me.

"I see that you're thinking of leaving," he said. "I'm of the same mind. Let's disappear *à l'anglaise*, without taking leave of anyone."

As we were putting on our coats in the hall, I suddenly thought: he'll ask me to ride home with him. And sure enough, when his carriage rolled up, he said:

"Won't you join me? I'd like to talk to you."

I was afraid to say the wrong thing and so said nothing. The Count looked at me kindly:

"Why, you're ill. However, it's no wonder, you've had such a blow. But I think I can be of great help, if only you'll let me."

Still, I said nothing. I realized it was a foolish thing to do, but I was trying desperately to guess the correct attitude for me to assume. What was he hinting at? Could

it be that he wanted me to feel at ease and then give myself away by saying that I knew where Mikhail was? No, that was too crude and simple a trap.

We drove up to one of the most fashionable mansions in St. Petersburg. The Count told the doorman he had urgent business and was not at home to any callers. We bypassed the main stairway and walked down a corridor to a corner room at the back with small, deep windows overlooking the Neva. Directly opposite was Petropavlovsky Fortress with its tall spire, its Trubetskoi Bastion, and the sharp triangle of the Ravelin.

There was no furniture in the room, save a deep upholstered bench with a summery print calico slip-cover running the length of the walls. There were several crates of dishes packed in straw and broken oddments in a corner. It appeared to be a storeroom.

"Pardon the disorder," the Count said, "but at least we can be sure that no one will disturb us here. And you are quite aware that what we are about to discuss is of the utmost importance."

In order to appear natural, I should have long since exclaimed that I did not know what he was talking about, but that I was eager to find out. However, I had missed my cue and now stood by the window like a fool. I felt paralyzed, as a rabbit confronted by the beady eye of the boa-constrictor.

My attention was suddenly drawn to a large glass bell of the kind used for covering a plate of cheese; it stood empty on the yellowed marble of the window-sill, and a large blue fly was buzzing around inside, frantically hitting against the sides.

"We'll let it go," Shuvalov said, lifting the bell. His slender, graceful finger flicked the stunned fly to the floor. Then he took my arm and said with a faint smile, "My dear Lieutenant, I am ready to bet that a certain comparison has now occurred to you. Aha, I see I'm right!"

I started and attempted a laugh. "I shan't deny what's

true. But won't you be as merciful to me as you were to the poor fly and free my mind from that idiotic bell. I'm at a loss as to the subject we are to discuss."

"Mikhail Beideman," Shuvalov answered simply. "As you already know, I have him in the Third Department prison."

I made myself express surprise, but spread my arms out too far, like a very poor actor. Shuvalov did not let me say a word. Instead, he added condescendingly:

"Oh, I understand that you must try to look surprised, but dear Sergei, do let us stop acting!"

He took my hand and gazed deep into my eyes with a look that was both serious and kind and reflected no cunning at all. The Shuvalovs were my distant relatives, the Count had known me all my life, but as he was always busy, he had rarely paid any attention to me.

This sudden family closeness of his tone was so unexpected that it swept away the last shreds of any official relationship between us, one that I had intended to use for protection.

"Come, let's sit down. Smoke?"

The Count offered me his cigarette-case. We both lit our cigarettes.

I haven't betrayed anyone yet, I thought. My mind was a blank, all my strength was concentrated on a single desire: not to be a traitor.

"Mikhail Beideman was caught at the Finnish border while trying to cross into Russia under a false name. His Majesty is greatly annoyed, and the worst possible fate awaits the young man unless I am able to prove there are extenuating circumstances."

The Count's tone was serious and frank, with the faint trace of emotion permissible to his high position. The slightest hint of falseness would have immediately set me on my guard, but his tact made me believe his words reflected the usual and natural kindness of a decent person. Though I knew he was a careerist, the idea that Mikhail's

case could add another laurel to his service record seemed absurd. However, that is exactly what happened, though I discovered it only some fifty-odd years later. Having gone through a great deal in my lifetime and seeing things in historical perspective, I have now come to realize how Mikhail's case fitted into the general pattern.

Do not forget that those were the sixties, the first years after the long-awaited peasant reform which turned out to be such a fraud. Revolutionary ideas were spreading among the youth, the universities became centres of unrest, proclamations appeared everywhere, and the Chief of the Gendarmes had received the *Velikoross* through the mails a few days before Mikhail's ill-fated arrest. Then, in August and September, the famous appeal "To the Youth" was being read in ever greater circles.

Count Shuvalov, an ambitious young general, was naturally intent on proving himself a capable defender of the throne, but in order to accomplish this, he first had to create important enemies. Mikhail turned out to be just what he was looking for.

The Count paused and added significantly:

"So you see, if you are unable to help me establish these extenuating circumstances, Beideman faces the gravest possible consequences, and not he alone."

He waited for me to answer, but I dug my nails into my palms and was silent. Then he continued in the same warm, concerned tone of one speaking to a relative and friend:

"I shall be forced to arrest and cross-examine Lagutin's daughter, Vera Erastovna."

"No, you cannot do that!" I cried passionately, jumping to my feet. "Vera Erastovna has nothing to do with it! She's been duped!"

"But you both attended Beideman's circle!" Shuvalov did not raise his eyes; it was as if he were afraid they would reveal the hard glitter so out of keeping with his soft tone.

"There is no circle," I replied firmly. "There is only Mikhail Beideman, who has been led astray into free-thinking."

"Listen to me very carefully: you alone can prevent Vera Erastovna's inevitable arrest if you help me throw some light on a certain document."

Shuvalov took a sheet of paper from his wallet, put it on the table, and placed over it a large, marble-white hand that was whiter even than his face. When he raised his bright, keen eyes to mine he said:

"Everything we discuss here is to be kept in absolute secrecy. If you so much as breathe a word of this to anyone, you, Vera Erastovna, and several others will be put in jail. I keep a check on all of Beideman's friends."

"What do you want of me?" I asked.

"A sheet of paper torn to shreds was found on Beideman on the bottom of a cigarette-box. It has been fitted together, and despite a few missing pieces, the text is clear enough. Here it is."

Shuvalov handed me a copy of the document.

"By God's grace, We, Konstantin I, Emperor of all Russia," the false manifesto began solemnly, in the name of the non-existent son of Konstantin Pavlovich. The imaginary pretender stated further that his uncle, Nicholas I, had seized the throne from his father, Konstantin, and that he himself had been imprisoned since childhood. The manifesto ended in a call to overthrow the illegal rulers who were robbing the people and it promised the distribution of all the land among the peasants, the abolishment of conscription, and everything else all the anonymous leaflets called for.

Shuvalov's eyes never left my face, but I no longer cared. I completely lost the feeling that we two were enemies and was indignant at the crudeness of the counterfeit document and the insolent assurance of the perjurer. Such were my feelings at the moment, and they must have been reflected on my face.

"Dear Sergei, how happy I am that I was not mistaken in you!" Shuvalov shook my hand and said in a business-like manner, as if addressing an ally and no longer needing to affect trustfulness:

"Help me keep Vera Erastovna out of this. I want you to tell me all you know about Beideman."

And now, judging myself on the threshold of death, I look back on the events calmly and cannot honestly condemn myself as I was then for my conversation with Shuvalov, except on two points involving an unnecessary and fatal disclosure.

Since my one desire was to shield Vera, I described Mikhail as a proud and obstinate person who wished to see his revolutionary ideas realized without taking anyone into his confidence but merely by using people as he saw fit. Shuvalov made things much easier for me by saying that Beideman had confessed he intended to do no more and no less than assassinate the Tsar, and further explained that he would have had no trouble doing this, since he was a former cadet and thus knew all the Emperor's habits and ways. Shuvalov quoted Beideman's words, brought to mind once again by the archives report on the case. When cross-examined, Mikhail had said after admitting that the purpose of his trip to Russia was to assassinate the Tsar:

"Since I do not fear for my life, which I have dedicated to this cause, I had no intention of fleeing and hiding from justice after the shooting."

I was furious. How dared he, with the boundless egoism of a rebellious demon, have no concern for his life if he had already pledged it to Vera? If he had had a single drop of knightly honour he should have fled from her love instead of sweeping away her gentle youth in passing, as a heavy hand sweeps away a butterfly that has flown up to a flame, destroying for ever its delicate wings.

I was angered at these words of his, which could destroy the one I loved in the prime of youth. Shuvalov did not have to goad me on, for I was possessed by a truly animal

hate. I began thinking out loud, seeking the worst meaning in Mikhail's fiendishly arrogant statement.

"He wanted to arouse the people against the nobility!" I cried. "If a nobleman assassinated the Tsar it could be interpreted as the nobility's revenge for granting the serfs their freedom. Beideman hated his class. I remember his saying it should be rooted out like nettles."

"Sergei, my friend, calm down," Shuvalov put his arm around me paternally. "Perhaps Beideman is no more than a wretched madman?"

"He's no madman, he's a cruel fanatic! And if his official confession is so brief now, it is because he despises the government and is waiting for his chance to publicly proclaim his murderous convictions at his trial, to satisfy his insatiable pride and become a martyr in the eyes of all the other revolutionaries."

I looked at Shuvalov and stopped short. He was beaming, like one who has received a token of royal gratitude. Yes, his cunning game of an experienced cat with a foolish mouse had brought him excellent results, for he was soon promoted ahead of many others. As for me, he arranged that I get a medal out of turn, to reward me for my foolish hatred and betrayal.

Oh, how cheaply we sold Mikhail's mighty spirit and lofty mind!

But it is only now, in the eighty-third year of my life, having died before my death, that I fully understand the matter. But what about then? Then I simply became instinctively frightened at the look of triumph in the Count's eyes and my anger at my recent friend suddenly cooled, leaving me to wonder whether I had betrayed him or not.

No, I found I had not. At that I became generous, and, imagining I could help Mikhail, I suddenly grasped at the Count's idea that he might be mentally unbalanced. I now recalled the many instances that would prove this theory correct, but Count Shuvalov was no longer interested. He was once again a cold and excellently-made mechanism,

encased in a beautiful marble shell. Apparently, my first remarks, made in a moment of blind hatred, were more to his taste.

He rose and with a regal gesture, as if bringing an audience to an end, said pleasantly:

"Excuse me, but I have urgent matters to attend to. Fear no more for Vera Erastovna and yourself."

"But what about Beideman?"

"He will get his due."

This last phrase was said in the voice of one who will stand for no interference in his affairs. The Count saw me out to the hall, said, "The Lieutenant's coat!" to the doorman, and walked lightly up the stairs.

Once outside I wandered aimlessly up one street and down another, with the strange feeling that everything that was *me* had been extracted, and now the empty shell was set free to wander about. Michelangelo's *Devil* holding up a sinner's skin was ever before my eyes. I was like one possessed as I tramped about the islands until, finally, at dawn I once again found myself outside the Count's mansion. I wanted to go in, but the windows were dark. I suddenly felt terribly wretched and fell unconscious where I stood.

Had I then fully realized the outcome of our talk, I certainly would not have been able to live out my days in peace. However, I had but a vague feeling that I had done something irreparable to Mikhail, or, rather, that I was instrumental in doing it, and this lay as a great weight upon my heart. It was this feeling of guilt, which became unbearable, that made me later risk my life in a fantastic attempt to free Mikhail. An attempt which dulled my guilt-feelings to the present day.

But now, reading through the truthful lines of the archives findings, I can no longer deny that I was the chief villain, the one responsible for Mikhail's twenty years of solitary torture. Count Shuvalov, in whose hands rested his life and fate, had originally formed a very different opinion and decision than the one resulting from our talk that evening.

Shuvalov's report to Grand Duke Mikhail Nikolayevich suggested handing Mikhail over to the military authorities for a court-martial. At worst, he would have been sentenced to death. And was that not what he later pleaded for, as for mercy, in a heart-rending note which was miraculously delivered to us by a stranger one lovely evening at tea-time? It was like a summons from another world. But I shall write of this later.

My conversation with Shuvalov resulted in his changing his mind about the matter and taking a decision fatal to the prisoner. My assertion that Beideman was not insane, as they had thought, convinced them that it was easiest to break one who is unbending.

The very night of our conversation Shuvalov reported to the Tsar in Livadia Palace, repeating word for word what I had told him. He said that Beideman's silence and his stubborn refusal to reveal any information was based upon his determination to speak up loudly "at his trial in the hopes of making public his intentions, and thus becoming a political martyr."

In order to prevent the dangerous prisoner from making a public appeal he was thrown into Cell No. 2 in the Alexeyev Ravelin without trial or jury.

CHAPTER X

Encased in Stone During the Reign of Catherine II

It was a lovely July day when I finally mustered my strength and set out for Petropavlovsky Fortress in order to re-create in my mind's eye the Alexeyev Ravelin, where Mikhail had spent twenty years in solitary confinement.

Many were the times that I had crossed the Stock Exchange Bridge, passing by the fertile kitchen-gardens the fortress garrison had planted beside the broad wooden estrade leading to the entrance gate. I once tried to pass inside together with an excursion group, but everything went black, my knees gave way, and I had no choice but to sink down upon a large rock by the roadside and stare vacantly at a huge revolutionary poster attached over the entrance. The artist had portrayed two large black-muzzled cannons against the background of the sky; above the cannons was a red star with a hammer and sickle in the centre, and over that was an impossible combination of consonants: Petrogrukrepraion HQ. I repeated the word absent-mindedly

all the way back to our attic, trying not to think of my miserable weakness, which, I knew, come what may, I would have to conquer.

Luck was with me.

I was crossing Mars Field one day, where they're planting beautiful flower beds this summer, and admiring the adornment of the city, on my way to Chain Bridge to find the former Third Department building where Mikhail had first been arrested and had behaved so proudly and courageously during the cross-examinations.

I was dressed better than usual; I still have a very old dark-green suit of officer's cloth which I keep for special occasions. The last time I wore it was when I registered the girls at school.

When I wear it everyone addresses me as "Grandpa," a fact which pleases me no end. But most important of all is that people speak to me as an equal, and that day I had to have an answer to my question: where is the former Third Department building?

I was unable to locate the house, however, but a chance occurrence brought me much closer to my goal.

There's a place at the Fontanka where they rent boats by the hour. The street was deserted. The blond head of the boy clerking in the office at this late hour protruded from the window, and the boatman sat smoking his pipe, dangling his bare feet in the water.

A blonde and merry-looking young girl in a short dress that revealed her thick calves was whispering something to her escort, a Red Army man. She walked up to me suddenly and said:

"Would you like to come rowing with us, Citizen? You probably know how to steer, my brother will row, and I'll ride along like a parasite. We'll circle the fortress and come back. It shouldn't take more than an hour."

I thanked her and entered the boat in a state of great excitement. This trip was heaven-sent, if I were to resurrect the past.

We rowed along the Fontanka, past the former Law School, and under the strange bridge where Vera and I spent hours on end like maniacs, possessed by one idea alone, and racking our brains for an answer: how to realize our plan.

That was the spring of '62, soon after Pyotr had found out from his relative that Mikhail had been transferred to the fortress, but was not on the list of those in the Trubetskoi Bastion. There remained but one clue: that he was in the Alexeyev Ravelin.

Vera sold everything she had inherited from her father and husband, and when she had amassed a considerable sum of money she insistently demanded that we help her plan Mikhail's escape. All Linuchenko's arguments that the Ravelin, encircled by a high wall, was inaccessible, that the fortress swarmed with guards, and that the prisoners were kept in unheard-of isolation, were in vain. Vera was deaf to all his pleas. She was prepared to sacrifice all her worldly possessions and was finally able to persuade Linuchenko to try.

Pyotr was to bribe all the guards in Trubetskoi Bastion and the Ravelin through his devoted relative. A whole month passed in futile hope, but if a drop of water with time bores through a rock, then gold, too, in a never-ending stream, will always wear away the resistance of hirelings.

Finally, Pyotr reported that he had found the right person. His name was Tulmasov, and he was one of the assistant wardens of the Ravelin. He demanded fifty thousand rubles for bribing the guards and other personnel. Linuchenko insisted on seeing the man himself. The meeting was arranged and Linuchenko then told us of Tulmasov's plan.

Two men were to row up to the Ravelin wall from Stock Exchange Bridge on a dark and moonless night; they were to strike a match for an instant as a signal. No one would be able to see it except two guards, who would then throw down a rope-ladder. Pyotr was to climb up with the neces-

sary instruments for filing the bars on the window. In case it would not be possible to escape through the gate, they were then to leave by the same rope-ladder.

Linuchenko warned us that Tulmasov had made a very bad impression upon him, that the whole plan was something he might have read in a cheap novel, and that it promised nothing but unnecessary risk. But Vera, blinded by love, begged us to chance it. Pyotr and I volunteered. That is why I know every stream and rivulet that flows into the Neva. Vera and I sailed up and down for days on end, seeking the safest approach to the menacing fortress and the safest way back with Mikhail.

She found such consolation in these preparations! Yet, with each passing day, this made it so much harder for me to explain, as Linuchenko had already, that there could be no hope whatsoever, but that the risk was immeasurable. If we aroused the slightest suspicion, we would be killed on the spot. However, as far as I was concerned, a heroic, though senseless death was my only way out, the best I could ever hope for. At that time I already had faint guilt pangs about being responsible for Mikhail's imprisonment. Besides, my life was wrecked, and I was unable to find my place in society. No matter how I tried to convince myself that my conversation with Shuvalov could not have had any undesirable after-effects, I felt instinctively that this was not so.

Now, as we glided into the wide current of the Neva through a little stream, every detail of that unforgettable night when we insanely attempted to free Mikhail rose before my eyes. The rays of the setting sun now seemed to have spilled their molten gold on the deep blue satin of the cold and heavy waves, but then....

Then it had been pouring all day long. By nightfall the rain had turned into a regular torrent, and the fortress cannon kept firing ominously, warning of an impending flood.

I was carried back fifty years. Yes, the night was black, the storm was churning up the waters of the Neva, and

very few boats were on the river. The sunken barges loomed up black and ugly.

"Watch out, Grandpa! Turn right, we're heading into the cutter!" the blonde girl shouted. I had become completely absorbed in the past and had forgotten to steer.

We touched shore near the fortress. Petropavlovsky Fortress and its six bastions are like a weird spider, the joints of its legs jutting up and the ends in the water. I suddenly felt that its legs did not end there, under the water, but branched out into a thousand threads, entangling the city in an invisible web. I was recently at the Museum of the Revolution, where I saw a map of the Tsar's secret police, with coloured dots indicating the activities of his secret agents, and I realized then the connection between the net thrown over the city and the mysterious underwater activities of the monstrous spider of Petropavlovsky Fortress.

"Look, isn't the fortress just like a spider?" the young girl cried, to which her escort replied with some importance:

"Yes it is, because the spiders of the Tsar's regime sucked the blood of the revolutionary proletariat here."

A spider! The little birthmark on Mikhail's right arm had been so prophetic! In this same manner the subjects of a feudal lord had, in times gone by, worn his coat-of-arms.

The following large inscription was carved into the ancient, moss-covered walls of the Trubetskoi Bastion: "Encased in stone in the reign of Catherine II."

Encased in stone....

Mikhail, too, imprisoned for twenty years within four walls, his tiny window covered by three sets of bars and facing on another impenetrable wall, was encased in stone from 1861.

And he was not the only one.

If you tilt your head back you can see the cannons on the bastion wall. There's the main one, which has been fired every day at noon since the times of Peter the Great—and never off a minute—until the abdication of the last Tsar, and since then to the present day, this sixth year of the Rev-

olution. There's a tower above the cannons with a flag-pole and flag. It's a red flag nowadays.

Beyond the Trubetskoi Bastion, where the great trees are, was an inner wall, at the back of which, separated by a moat, was the Alexeyev Ravelin. It was on a small island, and people were never let out of there: they were either carried out to be buried under a false name, or were transferred to an insane asylum. There was another wall beyond the Ravelin, and the Neva was beyond that wall.

It was on this last wall that, sixty-one years ago, according to our agreement with Tulmasov, two guards he had bribed were to appear with a rope-ladder. However, the moment we rowed up to it and flashed the signal light, two shots rang out from the bushes on both sides. One bullet had been intended for me, but I had just leaned back in the boat, and they must have both hit Pyotr. He slid noiselessly into the water, nearly overturning the boat, and disappeared beneath the waves. I was compelled to row back to shore on the double, to where Vera and poor Martha awaited me in the bushes, petrified.

How peaceful these waves were, stirred up by a scurrying steamboat! What bursts of merry laughter came from the banks and the bushes where bribed villains once fired upon us!

Red Army men were swimming there and bathing a little tame bear. The funny cub scrambled on one man's back and sat there like a wet puppy while the man swam around. My companions laughed heartily and then reluctantly headed towards the pier.

"What a gay, lovely trip!" the girl kept saying happily, but I could not refrain from remarking:

"May I remind you that the place we have just circled is a far from happy one! Are you aware, Miss, that the best and wisest men spent up to twenty years of their lives there?"

"Citizen," the Red Army man interrupted glumly, "you have an old-fashioned habit of speaking about individual

cases and referring to them as the 'best and most honoured.' The basis and the backbone of the Revolution are not a few individuals, but the class-consciousness of the masses."

This soldier in a shiny new uniform with pink insignia on his lapels was very young and confident. I pretended I was deaf, mumbled something in reply, and fell silent.

Back on the pier, we parted friends. They both shook my hand. Then the blonde girl bought a bun and two pieces of sugar-candy from a peddler and blushed as she handed them to me, saying:

"Merci for steering, Citizen."

I did not sleep a wink that night. Everything that had been buried sixty years ago kept coming back to me.

The morning after Pyotr's terrible death I handed in a report to my superior officer, stating that my orderly had disappeared. They searched for him everywhere, but as their efforts were unsuccessful, it was agreed that he had got drunk and drowned. To remove all doubt, I testified that he had been a heavy drinker. We were concerned lest Martha, in her inconsolable grief, should give us away, for any experienced sleuth would have found much to ponder over from her incoherent talk of the vain attempt at escape. Fearing that she might return to the place where Pyotr was killed, we kept her locked up in her room and then decided to get her out of the city temporarily—and as soon as possible.

Vera was turned to stone, all life seemed to have gone out of her enormous eyes. She would stare vacantly into space for hours on end, but came suddenly to life again when Mikhail's sister Victoria arrived from Bessarabia to see whether her influential relatives could help him in any way.

The day after I rowed by the fortress with the Red Army man and the young girl, I could no longer keep from going inside on foot. By three o'clock I had reached Troitskaya

Square. I then crossed the bridge and found myself at the fortress gates. A guide was calling the roll of his group.

They were young factory girls who had come straight from work without stopping off at home to rest. They had paid for the free-lance guide out of their own pockets in the hope, as they said, that he would give them a "free-lance tour." I noticed that most of the girls were wearing the fringed, striped scarfs that are so popular nowadays. Someone asked them, "How come you all have the same kind?" and they answered, "We got them wholesale at the Pepo."*

As the guide led them towards the entrance gate he said:

"Notice the main bas-relief, comrades. The figure seems more like a person stuck in mid-air, dangling head-down, than one flying. The boy's hand pointing to him is so long, that if he let his arm down, it would reach the ground. The former Tsar Peter wanted to honour his patron saint, the Apostle Peter, and ordered his priests to hunt up some miracle he had performed. They discovered this man, the one flying around so indecently—he's the disgraced sorcerer, Simon. Of course, it's more than a legend, a fable to please the weak-minded and illiterate."

"Religion is opium for the people," two of the girls in scarfs said.

The guide pointed to two niches in the gates.

"The statues there are a pagan god named Mars and his wife, Venus." Then he added with a note of irony, "Mars was quite in place here, since this was a military establishment, but Venus was added because, under the former bourgeois system, a man's wife was like a chain and ball, even if they were both of stone."

"According to mythology, Hephaestus was Venus' husband, and Mars was simply her abductor," a student who had joined the excursion somewhere said with a smile. "And that means that Tsar Peter encouraged free love, not legal matrimony."

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* *Abbr.*—Petrograd Consumers' Union.

The girls all laughed, but the guide was annoyed.

"That's a moot point," he replied with dignity. "And anyone who's tagging along can leave right now!"

The student walked off whistling, but the girls gathered close to conceal me and told me to be quiet.

We entered the cathedral. I never did like its foreign splendour. The low altar was a mass of baroque curlicues, the pulpit hung over a gold stairway, the Tsar's Chair stood beneath a heavy canopy, and the Metropolitan's was in the centre, upholstered in red. The columns were hung from top to bottom with silver funeral wreaths of past tsars, making them seem like something from a winter fairy-tale. All the sarcophagi were of grey marble, but that of Alexander II was symbolically red.*

Many tsars had played the same trick here. Town and village Elders who had journeyed to Petersburg for the coronation would be ushered in for High Mass. The great crystal chandelier would be ablaze, reflected in every silver leaf of the countless wreaths, the diamonds of Court ladies, and the gold filigree of the iconostasis. Invisible choirs sang from the heavens and clouds of incense enveloped the Elders as they fell to their knees.

Each successive Tsar and Tsarina would ask them how they had liked the service and each time, from one coronation to the next, the Elders would repeat, "It was like being in Heaven, Your Majesty!" so that the question-and-answer became an almost indispensable part of the coronation ceremony.

The cathedral had changed greatly since then. All the wreaths and the best icons had been removed and placed in a Moscow museum. The monotonous marble sarcophagi looked more forsaken than the graves of the poor in a village cemetery. However, there was a strangely large crowd at Emperor Pavel's coffin. A blanket of live flowers

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* Alexander II was assassinated by members of the "Narodnaya Volya" ("People's Will") Organization on March 1, 1881.

covered the marble top; there were wreaths of daisies, corn-flowers, and marigolds, and the icon-lamp burned brightly, lighting the many pilgrims, young and old. Before the Revolution people believed that Pavel was a saint; some said he could help in any trouble, others thought he only cured toothaches.

I was lost in thought and suddenly saw I was alone. The tour had rushed right through the chamber. I noticed that the men were hatless, but I realized they had removed their hats at the entrance gates in order not to appear bound by their previous respect for the church. Yet, they were apparently still unable to remain there with their heads covered.

I rejoined my group beneath a huge tree. They were all sitting on the grass, and the guide was saying that in Peter's time this very spot was called the "dancing place," as it was a place of torture and punishment. They would set a man on an iron horse with a spiked back or make him walk on sharpened stakes.

Finally, the guide passed to the subject that had brought me there. He took us over the way prisoners had been brought in the black carriages with drawn green curtains. Two gendarmes and an officer had guarded every prisoner.

This was the same route young Mikhail Beideman had followed in 1861, to be buried alive for ever.

I no longer discerned the girls' faces and heard only as much of what the guide was saying as I needed to supplement my imagination in re-creating the days of Mikhail's imprisonment.

I don't know which road they took: the one along the Catherine curtain, as Polivanov did in later years, or the one on the other side, past the sunken Anna Ioannovna barracks.

However, the procedure was the same in both instances. The carriage would come to a halt at the low cottage of the Chief Warden, where the officer in charge would jump down and enter the house to report, while the gendarmes

and the prisoner proceeded to the grey gate which has since disappeared and been replaced by a street light, now broken. To the right, then as now, the many brown stacks of the Government Mint rose high into the sky.

Here one can sense the nearness of the damp underground cells, the complete blackness of the penalty cell, the double walls, and slow, solitary, lawless death. And perhaps because the sky and buildings are pushed so close together, the sky does not seem at all like a boundless expanse, reaching up out of sight, but rather like a low, oppressing covering.

At this spot a good guide should have put an end to the jokes and laughter of frivolous young people eager to see the scabrous drawings left on the walls by former guards and now in such vogue.

I said to the girls, "People were buried alive here for life, in order that you should be able to come here and giggle after an eight-hour working day."

But they, like vain goslings, understood nothing and replied:

"Don't worry, Citizen! That will never happen again, because we've overthrown the Tsar!"

I wanted to tell the guide that before he showed them a solitary cell, a solitary bath and, as he said, "every other solitary thing," he should first find the right words to make them understand with their hearts the full meaning of "solitary, lifetime confinement."

Yet, I said nothing. I could not speak. Holding on to the wall for support and overcome with emotion, my strength gave way. I could no longer keep up with the merry excursion.

I sat on the window-sill for about ten minutes and found myself in new company. Four old ladies who had come from the provinces had engaged the services of a veteran guard, an old-timer who had been around practically from the reign of Nicholas I. I asked their permission to join

them, and, with due respect for our age, we proceeded at a snail's pace.

I was pleased at this unhurriedness, for it gave me time to accustom myself to a life that had passed here. No, as the Good Book says of the martyrs: a Life.

Before a prisoner was brought in, he was detained outside the last iron gate. The officer purposely took his time at the warden's office to increase the prisoner's anxiety. Then, in the guards' room, he was divested of his clothes and issued a prison robe.

The old guard was very pious-looking, with a certain unctuousness about his small features. His voice rang with the pride of a professional as he said:

"I guarded the prisoners under two Alexanders, the last Nicholas, and Kerensky, too. That should give you an idea of my long years of service. And why was I able to last here so long? Because I never did anyone harm and always fulfilled my duty. If I was told, 'Look in the peephole!' I looked. The prisoner would get angry and move into a corner, but I wouldn't annoy him, I'd walk away. Then I'd take another look. To keep Figner* from tapping to her neighbours, we transferred her to a cell between two empty storerooms. Here, would you like to see it? She'd stamp her foot, but there was no one above or below!"

He sounded like a kindly grandfather describing the antics of his grandchildren. Thus, too, does the experienced guide in the Roman Forum speak with quiet dignity and pride, telling the visiting foreigners anecdotes of ancient times. And just as the tourists there are impatient to discover all the gory details, these ladies, not in the least embarrassed by the presence of such an old man as I, perspired with curiosity as they demanded of the guide:

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* Vera Figner (1852-1942), a Russian revolutionary. She was sentenced to death in 1884, but her sentence was commuted to lifetime imprisonment. She was confined in the Petropavlovsky Fortress for twenty years.

"Is it true that the prisoners were beaten? What did you beat them with, and where did you hit them?"

The guard was displeased and denied the beatings; he tried to call the ladies' attention to the wardens' concern with the well-being of their prisoners.

"Now we'll go down this stairway, into the garden, and I'd like you to note that there's a high, solid barrier attached to the railing. I wonder if you can guess what it's there for?"

He was pleased at their bewilderment and added with a wrinkled smile:

"It's quite simple. It was put there to keep the political prisoners from killing themselves. Oh, there were cases, yes sir, they're a clever bunch! Why, a chap who's supposed to spend years here tries to shorten his term by plunging head-first down the shaft."

There was a little bath-house and several trees in the tiny garden. The overgrown paths were barely visible.

"They used to be sprinkled with sand in the old days," the guard said, with disapproval directed at the present state of things. "During the Civil War we had the Tsar's generals strolling round here and the admirals, too. Of course, they weren't in cells—they had two rooms apiece —a study and a bedroom—and full-course meals at their own expense. They were allowed to have their wives visit them. Look, there on Purishkevich's wall is a long poem he wrote and his signature: 'Vladimir Mitrofanovich, wretched Purishkevich, the pride and glory of the counter-revolution.' "

I remembered the last two lines: "The seeds of madness shall bring you crops of slavery."

The ladies made a dash for the walls of the popular guard's room, covered with large pictures copied from *Niva* magazine. There was a saucy young lady in a jersey with a cupid's bow mouth shown looking through the win-

dow, and a huge mural of Lucerne, as detailed as a street map, with the windows of the distant houses drawn in clearly. Beneath the view was a stanza:

If we but could return
To where we once were happy...

Vasilyevsky Gate is a few steps to the left of the Trubetskoi Bastion. You pass through it and along a tunnel into a place much lower down. Across a drawbridge over a canal was the triangular Alexeyev Ravelin, a one-storey building with fourteen small cells. These were reserved for the most notorious prisoners. A warden was in charge of the Ravelin, aided by security guards. He had the keys to the cells, and no one could enter them without him. The guards on duty kept a twenty-four-hour watch through the narrow slit in the cell door. No one had ever escaped from the inaccessible, invincible Ravelin.

It was so damp there, that on October 2, 1873, two prisoners, Mikhail and another, named Nechayev, were transferred separately by warden Bobkov and the Ravelin guards to the Trubetskoi Bastion to escape flood danger. They remained under guard in the Bastion until dawn of the following day.

The ladies held a whispered conference with the old guard and put some bills in his hand. He nodded. Then one of the ladies turned to me and said:

"Do come along with us, for we women will feel frightened there all by ourselves."

I did not ask where we were going, but followed silently. We returned to the lower floor of the Trubetskoi Bastion and entered a cell. The guard slammed the door shut.

"Keep an eye on your watch and see that it's not for more than ten minutes!" cried one of the ladies.

"Certainly," another said. "It's unhealthy to stay here longer, and we don't need more than ten minutes to get an idea of what they felt."

"*Mesdames*, close your eyes and then suddenly open them.... Ah, how thrilling it is to experience what they did!"

I measured the cell. It was ten paces long and five paces across. The only colours were the dirty white ceiling and the grey walls. Beyond the triple iron bars on the window was a square of a dirty wall outside. The cot was screwed to the floor, the table was screwed to the floor, and the lamp was screwed to the wall in a barred niche in order that the prisoner could not set fire to himself. The prison clothes were made of sacking with a skimpy robe worn over them. The blanket was threadbare, lacking any warmth.

This is exactly what Mikhail had in Cell No. 2 and later in Cell No. 13, the only difference being that his cells were much damper.

However, according to accounts of former prisoners, the sounds heard in that part of the Ravelin were more varied and louder, making the torture of solitude all the more unbearable; at times the wind brought in snatches of music from the Summer Garden.

What were Mikhail's thoughts and feelings when the passing years kept mounting, turning the youth who had entered there into a mature and then middle-aged man, and all within these walls—twenty feet long and ten feet wide?

And withal, the knowledge that just beyond these two thick walls flowed a deep and beautiful river, that boats travelled along it to the Baltic Sea and from there to all four corners of the earth, that new buildings were constantly going up along the banks, that people were ever gaining knowledge through wars, education, and simply through everyday living!

Not he, but I, his former friend and betrayer, was the one to witness this rich and colourful life. Yes, his betrayer, for a person is only what he himself knows himself to be. And may a just Nemesis claim me!

The reader versed in psychology can classify my further revelations as he wishes. I shall not argue whether it is the nervous instability of old age or a fundamental shake-up of my whole system, for I am convinced of my own knowledge.

At the whim of curiosity-seekers I spent ten minutes in a solitary cell. But the anguish of a man imprisoned therein and the centuries-old creeping dampness went through and through me, from the hair of my head to the soles of my swollen feet. The torture of those walls encased me in stone. And I cannot exist outside of them.

I know that no matter whether I spend the next twenty years in this invisible prison, or only the two or three years left to me on earth, I shall accept fully Mikhail's entombment, I shall bear his inhuman sufferings, and they will go down in full in my black book of Fate, as they did in his.

Dear reader, the prophecy of Madame de Tebbe, the crystal-gazer, has come true.

Encased in stone as Mikhail was in 1861, I now take his place in 1923.

PART TWO

CHAPTER I

Black Vrubel

Sergei Rusanin and Mikhail Beideman are one and the same person. It was only gradually that I found out about the permeability of bodies and the possibility of taking possession of another person's personality. It came about after I had become the son of Mikhail's mother, the lover of his mistress. And the third event—no, I shall not disclose it. It sometimes happens that my desire to assume his personality and fate is so strong that I cannot recall my own name and give his instead.

Thus, only last week, when I had gone out to the market to buy five pounds of potatoes, I suddenly felt dizzy and had to sit down on the steps of the large church, where in 1917 they discovered a machine-gun in the bell-tower and hung out a red flag instead. I have no recollection of what followed, but those who took me to the psychiatric infirmary told Ivan Potapich that I sat by the church motionlessly with my sack till evening, arousing the sympathy of all the traders. It is a known fact that Russians are as kind

as they are hard. The women traders gave me some food and wanted to take me home, but I insisted I had no home, as I had just been released from the Alexeyev Ravelin of Petropavlovsky Fortress that very morning. I said I had been imprisoned in the Ravelin since the times of Crown Prince Alexei Petrovich,* and had spent my time catching the mice that were scampering over the feet of Princess Tarakanova.** Despite the danger that threatened her life, she had retained her gentle, naive femininity, and was more frightened of the mice swarming over the red velvet of her beautiful gown than of the water rising so rapidly in her cell.

I remember the psychiatric ward quite well. When the head doctor asked me who I was, I immediately recalled an impressive moment in Mikhail's life, and, shoulders erect, I walked lightly to the far corner, as if inviting Vera Lagutina to dance with me. I bowed with dignity and said from my corner:

"Mikhail Beideman, Third Corps Cadet of the Konstantinov Academy." And added: "*Vaut mieux tard que jamais!*"

This last was to signify that I desired to redeem all my faults from the very start, beginning with my envy of his good looks.

No doubt about it, the doctor and his assistants are useful citizens, but they are merely the working ants, fulfilling their duty. They wrote: "Insane" in my case history and said I was to be given a bath. But the other so-called patients understood me perfectly and were on my side.

My favourite painter, Vrubel, who had taken on the ap-

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* Crown Prince Alexei Petrovich (1690-1718).

** "Princess" Tarakanova, whose real name is unknown, was a political adventurist who claimed to be the daughter of Tsarina Elizabeth I. She died in Petropavlovsky Fortress in 1775. The legend that she died during a flood in St. Petersburg (which was wholly unfounded) served as the theme of a famous painting by K. Flavitsky "Princess Tarakanova" (1864).

pearance of a tall, lanky person with a black beard, came up to me and said:

"On the basis of my final liberation, which I discovered from my latest work—a portrait of Valery Bryusov—I now look like this. But I see that you have recognized me all the same, and therefore are worthy of hearing my analysis of a certain painting. We can talk alone this evening."

I am very pleased at having spent a week with the insane. I had suspected before that here, as in everything else in the world, the labels had all been confused, and that these insane people were actually the freest men on earth. They had discarded their masks. It is all a matter of overcoming space. People in masks move forward along straight lines, while we are like crabs... however, I dare not disclose this, but can only hint at it.

The permeability of a body, the possession of another person's personality, is achieved in the following manner: bend your elbow at an angle of 45°, like a dagger, and immediately put your heels in his, your head in his. That is how I always do it to become Mikhail. The result is a slight feeling of nausea.

Vrubel and the black-bearded man had apparently done the same thing. He told me about it that very same evening, disclosing the reason he had taken on a different appearance. But I shall speak of this later. Now I must continue forward along a straight line, and to make things clear to the reader, I must proceed in the usual manner of main clauses separated from auxiliary ones by modest commas.

However, apart from the lengthy conversations I had with the artist, the topics of which were clear to both of us, but which brought a smile to the lips of the head doctor, they found nothing unusual in my behaviour. Besides, on the third day I assumed my mask once again, expressed concern at having inconvenienced the staff, and politely asked to be let out, as I supposed Ivan Potapich and the sweet girls were no little worried at my sudden disappearance. I answered all their questions and gave them Ivan

Potapich's telephone. He's a watchman at Tsentrosoyuz now, and according to the general line of universal equality which we presently enjoy, he has the same opportunity to speak with organizations over the phone as his chief. Ivan Potapich came right over. He was delighted to see me and gave me an apple, saying in his practical way that apples were cheaper than cucumbers this year.

The head doctor released me in Potapich's care, telling him not to let me out of the house at all.

"He may have another brain haemorrhage, and then the old fellow might easily get run over."

I wanted to object and tell the doctor I could remove my mask at will, and that there was no basis for calling this means of broadening my outlook a brain haemorrhage. But I said nothing. They stubbornly apply their meagre knowledge and would probably have put me back in the tub for another bath. And then, I was impatient to be home, to have some tea with my apple and record Vrubel's most unusual discovery, so important for each and every one of us.

However, let us proceed in a logical fashion in order that the reader may comprehend how one ceases to be "encased in stone."

I first experienced the fact that there is a communion of souls through the mind which knows no barriers of time or space—something that will eventually be classified as part of mathematics and will become more popular than rhythmics—when I accompanied Beideman's mother to the Crimea in 1863.

After our unsuccessful, childish attempt to free Mikhail which resulted in Pyotr's death, Mother Beideman suddenly fell ill, though her spirit was unbroken. She felt that her illness (a severe heart disorder) was steadily progressing and told us she must make haste to use the last means of appeal: that of personally begging the Tsar to pardon Mikhail. I felt a true filial attachment for this woman and

could not let her make the journey alone. Thus, I requested a short leave and accompanied her.

Mikhail's mother took ill on the way. We were forced to stop over at the inn of a horrible little town.

That is where it happened....

We can learn so much from a dying person, if that person has something to say. After all, everything that serves to compare one person with another, that gives one an advantage over another in education, *savoir vivre*, or the other so-called "cultural treasures," all this is as nothing in the face of death, the greatest of all mysteries, no matter which way you look at it.

When all is said and done, man carries to his very end only his own soul; and there was a great and passionate world in the soul of this dying woman.

After an especially severe attack she realized that she would never reach the Crimea and was torn by inhuman suffering. Yet, she was able to muster her remaining strength in solitude and control her emotions. She did not share the usual religious fervour of her sex, which looked always towards the priest for aid, but her faith in the power of reason and goodness towards which the world was advancing in spite of the sorrows of life was so great that it gave her strength and courage and inspired her with maternal love and comfort for all who came to her.

Mother Beideman was not a talkative person. She was reserved and extremely sensitive to the slightest troubles of another. In the rare moments of release from pain her simple questions, none of which was superfluous, caused me to re-evaluate everything I had felt and experienced until then. She had a rare gift of helping and giving of herself without ever becoming insistent.

Does not the experienced sceptic Faust find these very same qualities to be so charming in a being so innocent and so wise as Gretchen?

No matter how short women bob their hair, puff on cigarettes with their fists on their hips, or write essays as

well as any man, it is their special gift, their motherly love and protection, that makes the world go round. Thus it always has been, and thus it always will be!

This grief-stricken, dying old woman was like an actor who by day was forced to carry heavy stones, being free to pursue his calling only towards evening.

Musicality and harmony, two qualities which form the basis of an exalted nature, imparted deep tenderness to the flame of life flickering within her.

"Styosha," Mother Beideman said to the young serving girl shortly before she passed away, indicating the blue teapot the girl had brought into the room, "Styosha, put a clean piece of cotton-wool in the spout. When Sergei returns he'll find the tea cold, and I might die before then and won't be able to remind you to heat it."

Fortunately, I returned before then.

Oh, how her sombre face lit up with a last earthly joy when I entered! She hurriedly pulled a little key-chain from her neck, worried lest she be too late, and told me to give her a small walnut box. I unlocked it and she handed me a hard grey envelope addressed to "Larisa Polinova."

"This woman loved Mikhail, she will do what I have been unable to. She is well known in Yalta and close to Court circles."

Then Mother Beideman closed her eyes. With each passing minute her breathing was becoming more laboured, and her heart fluttered so violently it made her snow-white blouse tremble. She could not lie flat and raised her head high, opening her unexpectedly young, bright blue eyes towards the wide window.

The setting sun hung great and heavy, painting the sky a deep red. The sharp pain of remembrance suddenly gripped me as I recalled the unforgettable sunset on Commencement Day, when I ran the length of the Academy yard to catch up with Mikhail. The similarity was further

accentuated by the rows of dazzling window-panes of the large houses across the street.

"What is Mikhail doing now? Can he sense that his mother is dying?" I wondered.

At that moment Mother Beideman raised herself higher on the pillows and straining after the setting sun, she said softly but clearly:

"Sergei, come with me to Mikhail!"

She stretched her hands towards me and took mine firmly.

Next day I came to and found myself in my hotel room. The doctor who was taking my pulse warned me not to get up or worry and said I had been found unconscious after sundown, at about eight o'clock on the previous evening, sitting in a chair near old Mrs. Beideman. She was dead, but had not let go of my hands. They had freed me with great difficulty.

I did not ask for details. And I did not tell them the whole truth about myself. But I shall now.

No sooner had Mother Beideman taken my hands, than the sun went down, and the strange light seemed to have no source, as in a dream.

I imagined the two of us were in a boat, and I began to row frantically. In no time we had crossed the Neva and approached Petropavlovsky Fortress from the Neva Gate. I wondered why we had not gone through the Petropavlovsky Gate, as usual. But then Mother Beideman waved a frail hand in that direction and I saw great crowds along the embankment. We would never have been able to get through the crowds on shore. Novgorod, Olonets, and Petersburg peasants were working there, waist-deep in water. Lacking even the crudest tools and barrows, they were digging the earth with their bare hands and dragging it up on to the embankment in their up-turned shirts, as they had no sacks. They were all deathly pale, with eyes that were huge and white. Their long yellow teeth chattered with the cold. I felt terribly sorry for them, but then

I realized that though we could see everything clearly, Mother Beideman and I were both invisible; how else could I explain the fact that we had gone unnoticed by the two festive cortèges: to the left, in the Catherine Pavilion, was Catherine I with a retinue of ladies-in-waiting, to the right was Peter the Great himself, ascending the bell-tower with his aides to listen to the carillons.

I was not surprised at seeing people long since dead: had they not existed in time as I did—and what is time? Time is an illusion.

Tsar Peter and his courtiers descended and joined Catherine and her retinue at the "dancing place." He flirted with one of the pretty ladies-in-waiting and then headed with long strides toward the house of the firstling of the Russian fleet. As we approached the iron grille of Trubetskoi Bastion, Princess Tarakanova suddenly fell on her knees before Mother Beideman, her hands clasped above her pale face. Wisps of heirloom lace and shreds of ancient, threadbare velvet barely concealed her enchanting nakedness. Mother Beideman put her light hand on the Princess' head, as a Mother Superior might, absolving in passing the sins of a novice, and we continued on our way. Crown Prince Alexei did not approach us; he crept along stealthily off to one side. His long, narrow-browed head was drawn into his shoulders and his vicious eyes followed us. We passed between the Mint and Trubetskoi Bastion. There was an iron gate ahead. I don't know how we passed through it, as it was locked. To the left was the black outline of the gate leading to the Alexeyev Ravelin. It opened by itself and resembled a great, yawning mouth. We passed through the arch in the fortress wall and crossed a moat filled with black water. There was a light burning in the window of the triangular one-storey building.

Suddenly, two figures loomed up before the last gate. The taller one, dressed in the greatcoat of an army doctor, was muttering in a hollow voice:

"I'm an old man, I got grey in the service, but I never remember anyone leaving here except for the cemetery or the insane asylum!" He shouted the words again and cackled ominously.

Poor Mother Beideman covered her face in despair, but I tried to comfort her.

"Don't let the words of a crude man, unworthy of his humane profession, frighten you. He is Whilms, the prison doctor, and those are the cruel words he once said to the members of the 'Narodnaya Volya' movement."

It seemed that as in Dante's circles of Hell, each personage was frozen into immobility at the moment of his crime.

"Well, come in, since you've come!" another weird ghost shouted angrily. He raised his heavy hand as if to strike us, and then suddenly let it drop, moving his stub-like fingers quickly. His bulging, dull-green eyes peered at us unblinkingly, like the eyes of a reptile. Their expression was one of cold, stupid cruelty.

I recognized the jailer. "Sokolov, take us to Beideman!"

"If you have a pass, I'll let you in. If you haven't, I'll lock you up, too," he said, but suddenly the large, enamel-blue moon descended from the heavens.

The moon concealed us....

The moment my feet touched the floor of Mikhail's cell I turned round involuntarily to see if there was a way out. The window-panes were of frosted glass, criss-crossed by the black shadows cast by the iron bars. The walls were damp and dripping and seemed partially covered with black velvet. I touched the velvet, and my finger squashed the horrible green-black slime.

To the left was a huge tile stove with the fire-box outside in the corridor; a wooden bed stood at the opposite wall. Someone was lying unconscious on the floor by the bed.

It's Mikhail, I thought and was about to rush to his side, when Mother Beideman dragged me into the corner farthest from the door, and just in time. Someone lifted the top of

the peep-hole and looked in. The lock rattled, and the doctor entered, followed by Sokolov and two guards who lifted the body from the floor. The prisoner's face was purple, a towel was bound tightly round his neck and fastened to the head of the bed. The doctor removed the towel and applied artificial respiration. Blood gushed forth from the man's nose and mouth. His face changed colour and became as white as chalk.

I recognized Mikhail. He had become so thin that his cheek-bones protruded, and the skin stretched over his narrow, slightly hooked nose was yellow like that of a corpse. His eyes, no longer sparkling with proud strength but, rather, the eyes of a hunted, tortured man, now gazed up with timid hope.

"Did I die?" he asked. "Then I succeeded?"

"You succeeded in going crazy!" the doctor answered rudely. "Take his sheets and towel away, in case he decides to give it another try."

The guards yanked off the sheets. Mikhail rose, eyes flashing with rage; it seemed that he would do something drastic. At that moment Mother Beideman advanced towards him with outstretched arms.

"Mother, you've finally come!" Mikhail could not control his joy and despite the presence of the guards, he began to sob like a child.

"See, he's cooled off without a straight-jacket. Look at him cry," one of them said.

"He's very weak now and won't cause any trouble tonight," the doctor said and left, followed by the guards carrying the sheets and towel.

The door clanged shut and was locked. The reeking oil-lamp emitted clouds of soot as it cast a faint light on the emaciated, feeble body stretched out on the filthy straw pallet.

His eyes burned insanely, tears streamed down the pale cheeks, and he repeated over and over, with the monotony of a metronome:

"Mother, get me out of here. Mother, I can't stand it any more...."

. . . . . .

"Sergei Petrovich, what's the matter? You look like you're writing in your sleep." Ivan Potapich shook my shoulder. "Here, let's have some tea."

I came to. It was very quiet. The girls were asleep. Potapich and I had some tea. Then Potapich sprawled out on the couch. I make my bed on the floor after everyone's asleep.

"Don't forget the light," Potapich warned. "You can see it from the street. Someone might report us to the superintendent, and then they'll shut off the electricity."

I tacked an old rug across the window, and then re-read what I had written. Some may wonder what actually happened and what was only my imagination. Well, let the curious reader first define the following: what is the truth? That which happens to a person and leaves not the slightest trace upon his soul, or that which he need but imagine for a moment for it to become imprinted for ever on his mind as the most vital and purest truth?

Or is truth merely that which we can touch and feel? If such be the case, then the large grey envelope Mikhail's mother had addressed to Larisa Polinova in the hope that she would follow up her petition to the Tsar was surely the truth.

The black-bearded lanky fellow who said he was Vrubel was probably a figment of my imagination. Yet, it is a known fact that imagination led to the discovery of America, and not only America.

CHAPTER II

The Goat God

I haven't written for a long time. I was doing penance for Mikhail's suffering and was encased in stone, like the Trubetskoi Bastion. There were cells within me and I myself was locked up in a cell, while Ivan Potapich kept yelling day and night:

"Don't you dare hide in the wardrobe, or I'll take you to the nut house!"

He was beginning to get on my nerves, and so today I again took my place in time, put on my mask, and sat down to write. People seem most frightened when time ceases to exist.

Ivan Potapich summoned the doctor today. He spoke to me, but I did not respond. The doctor told Ivan Potapich that there had been many new cases of insanity due to the change in time and the clocks having been moved forward. People suddenly became frightened, as if the last of the three whales of Antiquity supporting the world had been pulled out. A woman named Agafya Matveyevna was taken to the insane asylum. She refused to eat or drink.

"How do I know what will happen to the food and the drink? You can't believe anything now, not when the clocks are all wrong, too," she had said.

I've noticed something of late: when time becomes confused in my mind, when solid things apear transparent, and I leave Mikhail's cell, if only to stroll in the triangular Ravelin garden, I no longer walk like other mortals, but fly up a bit.

With each passing day I do it better and higher. I'm like a sparrow heavy with chaff and can already fly up to the stove.

I'm afraid of my flying.

Ivan Potapich is a class-conscious person now, he doesn't believe in anything the church has to say, but he won't stand for indecent behaviour. And there I am, perched on the stove at my age. What will his friends say? Then again, I can't leave the house before my hour has struck. The only solution is to accept the weight of the days and months and get down to the flat-bottomness of earth once more.

Ivan Potapich was right when he said that pen and ink are the nursemaids that steer me along the straight and narrow. But it's time I got back to my story.

It was not before early spring that I was able to carry out Mother Beideman's wish. Once more I applied for a short leave and rushed off to Yalta in quest of Larisa Polinova. The heavy grey envelope was secure in my breast-pocket. I had no trouble locating her summer house, for the whole city knew her. For some strange reason, I had expected to find a scholarly maiden with bobbed hair and no great personal charm, but I was greatly mistaken.

Patches of goldenrod and the deep rose blossoms of the Judas-tree blanketed the mountain sides, making the sunsets seem bleak. Every mystery of colour was brought to life by this turbulent blossoming of the earth. Dark, shiny ivy vines crept over the great boulders like snakes and delicate wistaria blossoms lay upon the stiff leaves. Everything was aflame with roses: they were pinkish-orange, as

the insides of large Mediterranean sea-shells, crimson, and white. They swayed proudly in the gardens, climbed up to the rooftops, framed the open windows, and formed the most delicate of tapestries against the white walls.

The whole city was a basket of roses. Along the main walks of the public parks they grew upon high trellices and at sunrise, with the dew drops sparkling brilliantly upon them, they filled the air with the aroma of freshly brewed tea. For two days and two nights I tramped about the mountains like a madman, until I finally realized it was foolish not to understand what had happened to me, and I accepted my fate.

From the moment I first set eyes upon Larisa, I fell in love with her. If she had had an affair with Mikhail, she would have one with me, too. If there had been only long talks and the moonlight between them, I would share the same with her now.

What connection was there between these terms I set? I cannot explain it, but I had guessed correctly.

One can fathom the deepest recesses of a person's soul only if one re-creates that person's relationship with his chosen one. This applies equally to men and to women.

Larisa would then reveal to me why Mikhail had fled from personal happiness. At which of Fate's anvils had his revolutionary will been forged? After all, even virtues and shortcomings that with time become the heritage of all mankind are formed from deeply personal relationships.

However, I was in no mood for philosophy. My short leave was all the time I had to come, see and conquer, as the Romans did. Although Larisa Polinova was a young widow with a reputation of being an accessible Yalta belle, I felt very shy and had little faith in myself. Her cottage was outside the city, near the Genoese fortress, at the very foot of the mountains. Larisa was wealthy, paid no attention to wagging tongues, and led an amazingly independent life for those times.

At first I took her for a servant. When I rode up to her

house (the first person on the street whom I asked had directed me to it) and dismounted, I did not know where to tie up my horse and addressed myself to a young girl with a Ukrainian kerchief tied round her head and wearing an embroidered white blouse and dark skirt. She was watering the vegetable beds in the garden.

"Where can I leave my horse, dearie, and where can I find your mistress, Madame Polinova?"

"You can tether your horse to the fence, for there are no thieves here, and I'm the very mistress you're seeking."

She laughed, and the smile that lit up her face showed it to be so unusual, that I could not quite understand whether it was beautiful or not.

"I'm Larisa Polinova. Won't you come in?"

The house was unlike the usual bauble-type of summer cottage. It was made of red brick to resemble an English cottage, and was both simple and comfortable. The bookshelves were heavy with books.

A chic maid brought me a cup of coffee. The mistress of the house did not change her attire; she merely washed her earth-stained hands, followed me in, and asked with disarming frankness:

"Have you come to me with a message from someone?"

"You've guessed correctly. I have a letter for you."

My pride was wounded, and I suddenly felt annoyed, as a man is apt to when he sees a beautiful woman completely at ease in his presence, continuing her life without the slightest ripple, which, he subconsciously feels, his appearance on the scene should certainly have caused. Such a woman passes through you as if you did not exist.

Larisa's grey slanted eyes observed me calmly. Her regular features were pleasant, her complexion was marble-white, and her chestnut hair, from which she had removed the kerchief, seemed shot through with sunrays reflecting the light. She wore her hair like a maiden, in a heavy braid that reached her knees. Her figure was equally amazing: she resembled Titian's Magdalene, tall and

robust, her every movement the epitome of freedom and grace.

I suddenly felt pleased at being able to shatter her serenity and blurted out as I handed her the letter:

"Here's a letter from Mikhail Beideman's deceased mother. She begs you to intervene on her unfortunate son's behalf. He's been incarcerated for nearly four years."

Not a muscle on her face moved. She remained as calm as before and waited for whatever else I had to tell her.

I decided that she had not understood the meaning of my words and cried:

"It's a letter from Beideman's mother! You must remember her son—for didn't you love him once?"

Her brows twitched and the colour spread slowly to her temples. She took the letter from me, rose serenely, and rang. The chic maid who had brought me the cup of coffee I had not yet touched, entered.

"Masha, untie the horse at the fence and show the Lieutenant the shortest way back to town."

Before I had a chance to say anything, she bowed her head slightly and retired to her room, leaving me foolishly to follow the maid out.

A SECOND CHAPTER II

I tramped about the mountains, moody and restless. Everything I had experienced until then—my hopeless love for Vera, my friendship and then hatred for Mikhail—seemed an interesting, but once-read book. For the first time I realized that I was young, that a life of unknown personal happiness and emotions had opened up before me. Why was I to live someone else's life and not my own, as if I were a withered old man?

I had fulfilled my promise to Mikhail's mother. I had delivered her letter. But she, who until then had been of interest to me only insofar as she could provide the answer

to my friend's way of thinking, so alien to my own, now suddenly fascinated me as a woman. My tactless mention of a former love-affair had spoiled my chances and had caused me to be banished from her house. And yet, perhaps this annoying action on her part had been the tinder, igniting all the intricate explosives that go into making a thing called passion.

All my walks, no matter which direction I took in the morning, would, by evening, bring me to the same spot—to the ruins of the Genoese fortress. For two days the windows were shuttered, as she was not at home.

Then they were thrown open; someone was playing a piece by Chopin. It was terrible, halting, and noisily passionate. I remember my joy at the thought: "If it is she playing so badly, I shall stop loving her this instant and shall be free once more." But it was not she. Once again I did not recognize her, though when she laughed and said, "Hello!" I noticed her standing close by on the rocks. She wore Tatar pants and a jacket and carried an alpenstock and a leather travelling case. She looked at me kindly, as if nothing unpleasant had ever passed between us.

"Where are you going?" I ventured to ask.

"I'm off to take these medicinal herbs to a friend of mine. He's an old shepherd. We have a long-standing agreement that I come to him every summer."

Before I realized it I said:

"May I go along with you?"

She thought it over, sized me up slowly, and answered:

"All right. But on one condition—that you'll be silent all the way. I can't stand climbing and chattering."

"I'll be deaf and dumb," I promised.

"It's sufficient that you be dumb until we reach the goat hut. You can talk there."

I took the suitcase from her and we set out.

At first the path was slightly inclined. To the right was the blue sea, to the left, the crooked branches of cornel scratched our legs, and primroses and traveller's joy were

in bloom. The grey crags were piled upon each other as if some giants had tossed them there from behind the main ridge of an enormous steep mountain that resembled a camel with its legs tucked under it. There were plants with sweet-smelling leaves, and the silvery flowers of the edelweiss family. The camel-like mountain was covered with crooked pines.

I still recall the strange way in which they wound around themselves, the bark all peeled off and the trunks purple-grey in hue. Some looked like inch-worms with their middles bent in an arch; their crowns were on the boulders, and the dark boughs and pine-cones were scattered over the crags. These sinewy, contorted pines filled me with poetic thoughts and brought to mind some stanzas by Dante, which Auntie Kushina had insisted I study thoroughly. I loved them, as they gave me food for thought. Forgetting my promise of silence, I suddenly exclaimed, pointing to the pines:

"These are the unrepentant cripples of the circle of Hell, and these are the souls of suicides, entombed in trees!"

"There you go," Larisa said with annoyance, as if awakening from a sweet dream. "Cleanse your mind of books, and of thoughts, too. You won't understand anything here if you keep on thinking. Or at least, don't bother me."

"I'm sorry. It won't happen again," I said. "I love nature, too."

I knew that I sounded foolish, but I didn't care. I suddenly ceased responding to Larisa so acutely. Her personality seemed less in focus, and I now felt that I had known her all my life, that we were kin, and that we were returning to our homeland together as children.

We kept on and on. The peaks of the highest ridge cut into the blueness of the sky like fortress turrets. Between the turrets were wondrous dragons and huge lizards turned to stone for ever. Swift bubbling streams rushed down the stones from the very mountain-top, as if they were little boys playing at riding. It was hot, yet refreshing. It seemed,

as we entered the deep emerald darkness of a canyon, that we were entering the earth's depths. We sat down on a crag. I was drunk with the smells of the grasses and said:

"Oh, that I could return to the dark recesses of Mother-Earth and no longer think, or know, or feel."

"That's the Goat God casting his spell on you," Larisa said. "Everything here is his. But be still, be still."

Larisa was motionless. Her face was fixed in a vacant smile and seemed like one of the ancient statues I always marvelled at in museums. The Goddess of the Earth herself sat there before me, and her strength, as calm and sure as the noonday heat, flowed into me.

"Let's go on," she said, rising, and set off in silence. I followed her.

I felt that no human foot had ever trod the earth here. The magnificence of the flowering grasses, the wild irises, and the carnations was not even disturbed by the slightest breeze. The sun was setting, and the mysterious exchange of colour between sky and pines was hastened. The trees absorbed the blue covering greedily and wrapped themselves in it as in a wedding veil.

"Here's the goat hut," said Larisa. "I permit you to speak again."

SECOND CHAPTER, CONTINUED

A Dozen and One

Now, a half-century later, when Black Vrubel has explained the essence of all Being, I have finally understood the absurdity of the events in the goat hut. There are always two possible decisions to take, and only two—all the rest are of secondary importance.

Here's an example: there is an ancient, small-cupolaed church near the insane asylum Black Vrubel was in, and it was in that church that he announced he was the master of the church, as he had decorated it. It was during High

Mass, and he pushed the Metropolitan off the pulpit, taking his place there. But it is God's truth that he did the fresco high above the choir transepts, and it is still there, plain for all to see. He taught me how to look at it correctly.

At sunset you must run up the winding stairs, looking down the shaft through the narrow window to make sure that you return in time. Then close your eyes tight and open them suddenly to look upon the beardless young Prophet, the one with the eyes of a demon. He is ready to fly, as the one who fell to earth dead, scattering his peacock feathers on the rocks.

The Twelve are above the Prophet. They sit close together, their bare feet firm upon the squares of the carpet. They sit on the wooden bench that circles the inner cupola. Their wrists are wondrously alive, be they pressed to the breast, slightly raised, or lying on the knees, as those of the old man to the right.

The arms and legs pin the bodies down. If not for their great strength, the bodies would be writhing on the checkered floor.

Black Vrubel showed me a large phototype of the painting and explained its hidden meaning to me while all around us the uninitiated howled with laughter. He acted out in turn the position of each of the twelve men's hands.

"People think they are not classified. But they are. There are twelve types. And each type is like the various branches of the army, and can also be classified: the Peters take up the sword, the Johns are silent, but knowing, and the Thomases never tire putting in the prodding finger. All that has been scattered by grains among us is crystallized in the Twelve. Find your patron and assume his position. Fold your arms lightly so as not to sense them, close your eyes, and concentrate all your energy in your command: stop, Sun!

"Its last ray will strike upon the painting, producing a blazing stream of light ... like two hundred thousand

candles. Ha, ha! Electrification of the centres. What did you think it was? An innocent fresco for the faithful? And that the work of an artist as great as Vrubel? To make you weep oceans and repent? The devil it is! It's camouflaged against the idiots.

"Did you see what it said in the paper? It was an excellent editorial, and I copied a piece out word for word:

" 'We are now at the threshold of solving the problem of transmitting energy without wires.'

"You see, a wireless form of energy can envelop anyone, as it did there on the wall, with a yellow ray widened at one end to resemble a silk-worm's cocoon. The naive wreaths around their heads are no more than fig leaves. For one can see, hear, and come to know things that few people know! Yet each must choose his own way: to scatter himself like the Twelve, or become compressed, as One."

We stood looking at the phototype until the sun began to set. It was time to begin. Suddenly, Black Vrubel looked out the window and whispered:

"Absorb the last ray and use it as a hook to latch on to the sun. Don't let the sun go down! We'll stop it for world e-lec-tri-fi-ca-tion! For everyone! Everyone! Everyone!"

The artist jumped on his cot and began to bark. I recall that I followed suit, taking this as a sign of invocation. But everyone around us howled with laughter. Alas! Once again the experiment had been premature. The sun set.

"The sun experiment is off!" the artist shouted as we were both dragged through the halls to the padded cell.

At that moment he decided upon something and turned to me:

"What is needed first is a singular example. We are both the chosen ones. Both of us!"

He raised two bony index fingers and shouted at the top of his voice:

"Two units!"

But there, in the goat hut, under the spell of the Goat God, I had become confused in my counting. I was One, but I wanted to live cheaply and be of the Twelve, to join the Twelve.

The Goat God is a great muddler.

HIS HEATHEN TEMPLE

Larisa said, "You like feelings out of a book, as when you spoke of the mangled trees. Come, I'll show you something better."

She took my hand and led me to some Cyclopes' dwelling. Great white boulders were piled upon each other. A high belt of rocks surrounded a blackened clearing. There were three casks in the centre; three shepherds sat upon the casks. Their wide *sharovary* hung down in close, leather-like folds. The calmness of their surroundings was reflected in the bronze faces of the men who lived in the mountains all summer. Then they began to chant, rocking gently from side to side. Their faces, as Larisa's, bore the same blank smile as had their carefree ancestors.

"It's a song to the Goat God, asking for a plentiful milking," she whispered.

A large flock of goats pushed and crowded before a narrow gate, impatient to be milked. Their large, maiden-like eyes were full of tears, their beards trembled from bleating, their great udders were strained and protruded sharply. The Tatar who was stringing sheepskins on a stout thread to dry suddenly whooped like a bandit and lifted the latch on the gate. The goats squeezed through, the shepherds jumped from their casks, each grabbed a goat by the tail, and spread its thin, pinkish legs. The men's black, tenacious fingers pulled at the teats, as if trying out an instrument, and then suddenly squeezed the udder, as is customary in the mountains, forcing all the milk out at once. The Tatar would slap a milked goat on its dusty rump, shoo it off, and get hold of another. The milk was

plentiful, all the goats were healthy, and the shepherds sang songs of praise to the Goat God.

The goats called to each other in almost human voices and had the timid eyes of young girls, while the men with smiles of ancient predecessors and blank eyes sang songs to the Goat God.

I rested my head on a rock. It felt like my mother's knee. The sky above me was a tender, starlit coverlet. The mountains were all around me, each with its own thoughts and stone castles, turrets and animals that watched over and guarded the meadows of the Goat God and the large flocks of sheep.

Then Larisa took my hand and led me behind the rocks to the very edge of a precipice.

"Toss down a stone!"

I did. It was a long moment until a dull sound told me it had reached bottom.

"Once a human sacrifice was nearly offered up to the Goat God at this very spot," she said. "But the Goat God does not like blood. The wise old shepherd came just in time: only he and the goats can walk along the ridge. It was my good fortune that he came just in time."

"Why was it your good fortune? Were you the sacrifice?"

"Yes. A person who was afraid to love me hurled me down here in a fit of insane pride."

"Mikhail Beideman!" I shouted wrathfully. I was suddenly filled with vengeance for Vera's lost love and now for his shadow that had passed between me and my new love. In a rage I cried:

"I want you to know what he's really like! On a starry evening like this he told another woman, one he was not afraid to love, all about it."

Larisa was silent. It had become very dark. I could not see her face, but I sensed her nearness, large and solid, her face a terrible stone mask.

When she spoke again her voice was as cool and even as ever.

"How on earth do you know what your friend says when he's alone with a lady? Were you eavesdropping?"

She could not see my face, and I don't know whether I answered her or spoke to myself. I felt drunk, as if I were dropping down a steep gorge. And my words were like an echo of that fall.

"Yes, I eavesdropped. I hopelessly loved the woman who loves him."

"Why do you use the past tense? Don't you love her any more?"

"Now I love only you. Only you."

"Ah," she said. "And you are ready to forget that you're his friend? And also your reason for coming here?"

"I gave you the message," I replied, "and what do I care.... I have my own life to live!"

"The Goat God rules here in this land of goats," Larisa laughed softly. "Mikhail once called our love 'goat-love.' And he said I was the High Priestess of the Goat God. Well, be that as it may. And you say he told her about me?"

"He did not name you. He only said it had happened in the Crimea."

"But if she had asked him, would he have told her my name?"

"They were to be joined for ever. Yes, he would have told her your name."

"Ah," Larisa said again. Silently she took my arm and led me off.

A strange old man stood before the goat hut which was made of rocks and covered with canvas. He was short, his face was hairless, and his only clothing were some rags around his middle. A striped hat was pushed down over his long, grey hair right to his eyebrows, and a pumpkin, the sign of a pilgrim, was slung over his shoulder. In all, he resembled a pagan priest. He smiled at Larisa. They did not speak, but slapped hands. She gave him the suitcase.

Then a Tatar boy ran up, shouted something, and was

followed by two shepherds who laid a sick ram at the old man's feet.

He crouched down and chanted a plaintive song as he produced a curved knife and held it up to the moon. The smoky crescent was just emerging from the clouds, and the dull, rolling eyes of the sick ram were like white cataracts. The old man squinted, gritted his teeth, and slashed the ram's side. Foul, black blood gushed forth. He grabbed the sides of the open wound in a hook-like grip, held them together a few moments, then yanked at the animal's horns and set him aright. The ram tottered over to the flock, but it scattered, as if frightened by something.

The shepherds whooped and yelled as they cracked their whips. The old man walked up to us, looked at me sharply, and touched me with his black hand. He spoke gently to Larisa, pointing to the hut.

Larisa seemed pale in the moonlight. Her face was strange and somehow younger as she said to me:

"The old man is taking the flock over to the other side, and he says we can have his hut."

The many-eyed heavens above, the horror-stricken flock, the dark power of the old man, and the silent, fertile land were all about us.

"Come, let us go to the goat hut, to the Goat God!"

And I replied:

"I shall go wherever you lead me."

It was stuffy and pitch-dark inside the large canvas-topped hut laid with turf. The ground was covered with fragrant mountain hay and goat-skins were spread on the hay and hung all over the walls. The air was pungent with the smell of sweat, goat milk, hides, cheese, and soured wine.

We sat down on the silky skins and seemed lost among a flock of goats.

And we kissed without seeing each other.

I must have fallen asleep at dawn. When I opened my eyes, I felt a sunray on my face, my mind cleared, and I shuddered at the thought of seeing Larisa.

But then I felt physically free, a feeling I always lost in her presence, and I realized she was no longer in the hut.

This thought unexpectedly made me anxious. I jumped to my feet, but she was not there. I ran out. The sun was just rising, and the mountains seemed freshly washed as they stood in the soft blue shadows.

The world was silent. The shepherd and his flock had left before dawn. I shouted, "Larisa!"

From somewhere far below, perhaps from the very gorge down which Mikhail had thrown her, a harsh, unpleasant parrot echo returned to me.

I sat down on a rock and wept. It seemed to me that I had lost myself for ever.

The old shepherd materialized from behind the bushes. He used sign language to explain that Larisa had left, and pointed out the way with his crooked staff.

I rushed along the path we had climbed the day before. I stumbled and crushed the huge pine cones full of clear, fragrant sap, and once again the silvery pines with their bare, mangled trunks flashed by at the edge of the precipice. Once again the flocks of sheep showed white in the velvety folds of green valleys lost among the mountains. I no longer saw their beauty—they were just landmarks along the way. I had but one thought in mind: to see her and force an answer from her.

A moment before I had trembled in her imagined presence, yet now I was enraged at the thought that she had dared run away from me. Her insidiousness was like mockery.

At the waterfall I heard voices and saw a young lady and a stocky gentleman with a gold chain who looked like an engineer. Waving his cane over the waterfall that had broken into many little streams he said gallantly:

"Don't you agree that this waterfall is passion itself: when free it rushes along with the bit in its mouth, but shattered, it pours itself out in rivers of tears."

I entered Larisa's house without hesitation, just as I

was—dusty, my clothes full of brambles and the white fluff of flowers, and unshaven.

"Madame is busy," the chic maid said and I thought there was an insolent smile on her lips.

"Ask her to make an exception this time. I am leaving this evening, and I must take her answer back to Petersburg."

The maid shrugged, but returned a moment later.

"Please wait in the study until Madame finishes her work."

I went into the study and sat down on the sofa. The door to the next room, apparently Larisa's bedroom, was ajar. I heard the sound of hammering and an impossible screeching.

"Madame is carving her mantelpiece," the maid said and vanished.

Sitting there, I saw Larisa's white peignoir. Her face was hidden from view. She certainly knew that I was there, but continued her unpleasant work. She was following the design on a strip of metal and used various-sized chisels to carve it.

The awful, screeching sound was nerve-racking.

I could stand it no longer, stalked through the open door, and grabbed the hand in which she held the mallet.

"You can finish this later. I have something important to discuss."

"Important?" She smiled ironically. "If you have any reproaches, keep them to yourself."

"I want to inquire about someone else."

I stopped short. My eyes had come to rest upon a large portrait on the wall. It was an enlargement of a familiar photograph of Mikhail in his cadet's uniform. His burning eyes questioned and reproached me.

I asked Larisa drily:

"What is the answer I am to take to Petersburg? When will you intervene on his behalf?"

"I do not intend to do so."

She was not hammering, but pretended to be choosing a design from among the pile heaped on the table.

"Didn't you say Beideman had a fiancée? Well, let her do what she can."

I felt nothing but loathing.

"That's the lowest form of female spite. But you alone can best succeed in this matter, if there's any truth to rumour."

She raised her eyes.

"You might as well quote the local rumour, since it's true anyway."

"Is it true then that you were the Grand Duke's mistress?"

"To the same extent as I am yours, if you can consider that being someone's mistress."

I loathed this woman, whose sightless, heavy, earthy power had bewitched me. There was but one face before me, that of my friend, and—alas!—it was with belated fervour that I pleaded with her to take up his cause. I do not recall my words, but I remember that I was able to paint the black picture of his hapless fate in contrast to her years of freedoom and idle fancies.

"Just think: he is in solitary confinement for *life*!"

There was no sign of shame or embarrassment on her face as she interrupted my feeble eloquence and said with a puzzling note of bitterness:

"Can anyone really judge time? Perhaps I'll die tomorrow and will never enjoy anything again. But I will not intervene on behalf of a person who despised the earthly existence I love."

I trembled with rage and hatred as I said, "I suppose you consider the goat hut the pinnacle of life's pleasures."

"Where I turn such as you into billy-goats?" she added scornfully.

I bowed and turned to leave.

"Wait!" she cried and straightened out. "Remember my words for the rest of your life, for we shall never meet

again. Remember that it was you who awoke my wounded feelings and the most evil powers within me. And I have no shining cause to make me fight them. The High Priestess obeys the Goat God. And remember, too, that it was in your power to unite our efforts for the cause of our friend. If you had been true to him, I, too, would have acted differently. But you betrayed Beideman. Well then, be as cursed as I am!"

I left Yalta and spent the last week of my leave in Sevastopol. At a seaside café I heard a captain of a newly-arrived steamer say that all of Yalta was talking of the tragic incident in the mountains.

"I always knew that Larisa Polinova would come to no good end!"

"Eccentric women are always killed if they don't commit suicide first," said a lady near by.

"I'm sure there's a love-affair with a Tatar mixed in somewhere," another added.

"Oh, no!" the captain objected. "True, the Tatars brought her down from the hills, but they are a simple, kindly folk. Everyone knows the shepherds; their old chief, who was a friend of Larisa's, cried like a baby. He said that when she brought him his usual bundle of medicinal herbs, she also gave him a watch. He produced the note she had left him. It stated that she was of sound mind and was presenting the watch to him as a token of their many years of friendship. The clever woman had planned everything: she sent her will to Father Gerasim by registered mail and asked that no one be blamed for her death. The Tatars said that she ran to the edge of a cliff and then shot herself. They risked their lives to climb down and get her and then carried her home. The Tatars have been arrested, but they'll certainly be freed after the inquest."

"Well, surely someone's to blame," said the woman sitting close-by and happened to look in my direction.

"Yes, I am to blame," I thought, but all I said was: "Waiter, give me the bill!"

I walked along the rocky shore to where it cut into the sea like a narrow hook. I remember that the huge disc of the moon seemed a paper cut-out and its reflection was abominable. Everything around me resembled a cheap banal moonlit landscape of a type one usually finds hanging over a red plush parlour set in the provinces. The great turmoil of my soul robbed Nature itself of its life and beauty. Suddenly and with renewed force I felt Cain's mark on me, separating me from all living things. Once again the shameful stamp of a traitor was on me.

Yes, the traitor in me—undiscovered, like a despicable, cunning reptile whose protective colouring conceals it among the grasses—was firmly lodged in the subconscious recesses of my soul.

I betrayed people without ever meaning to do so.

CHAPTER III

The Clay Cockerel

Before leaving for the Crimea I told Vera about Mother Beideman's letter to Larisa Polinova. She frowned and said:

"Such women can never help disinterestedly."

She no longer believed that Mikhail could be freed and had put all her energies and hopes into her revolutionary work, convinced that it alone would free the prisoners from their shackles.

Vera now lived at Linuchenko's house. His wife had died in the village and he had gone to bury her. Vera's flat was besieged by a crowd of young people who had come from God knows where. They would have meetings of Mutual Aid to Needy Students, or make up libraries of illegal books, or would drag in a hand printing press to hide. As always, she had no secrets from me, and I was beside myself with worry lest someone betray her and she, too, be doomed. Finally, when I pleaded with her to be more careful, she looked at me out of empty, reckless eyes (Larisa's had been the same when she had cursed me) and replied:

"Why should I worry about myself? Only my death can bring a small amount of good to the cause, and, therefore, to Mikhail, too. I am no more than a rank-and-file soldier without him, and it is only a matter of chance whether I perish at the beginning or at the end. The important thing at this stage is that the Government know of our will to die fighting."

I had used all my powers of persuasion to instil in her the hope that Larisa Polinova would help obtain his pardon, since, according to my information, the woman was truly a favourite of one of the Grand Dukes. I promised her I'd find words of entreaty capable of melting a heart of stone.

I succeeded in getting Vera to promise that she would not take part in any dangerous work until my return. In fact, she even decided to attend the courses in midwifery and devote all her time to her studies.

And now I was returning to Petersburg from Sevastopol as a villain who had been entrusted with a last treasure capable of saving a life and who had squandered it on a fancy of his own.

A new trial awaited me in Petersburg.

Just as in the novels of Dumas events are purposely crowded into the more important chapters, so did a series of unusual adventures take place in the epilogue to my life.

However, it is just such impossibilities that often prove truth to be stranger than fiction, as surely as a cloud-made monster seen against a weird-coloured sky will often compel one to exclaim, "If an artist drew such a picture, no one would ever believe him!"

From the station I went straight to Vera's small room on Vasilyevsky Island. As I was about to ring, a tall man with a hood draped around his neck reached out to ring also. He pulled back his hand in order that I might ring first. The room was blue with smoke, the floor was littered with butts, and a lot of strange people were sitting on the couch and the trunk. Linuchenko, who had recently returned from the

country, was chairing the meeting. The faces were all new and young.

The only person I recognized was a blond youth wedged morosely in a corner. He had an unusual face, and I had noticed him the first time I met him. For some reason or other, Vera refused to introduce him to me.

As I entered the room, she rushed up to me, grabbed my hand, and whispered:

"Did she give her consent?"

My mind was a blank as I replied, "She died suddenly. I arrived when it was all over."

Vera was still staring at me with uncomprehending eyes when the man who had come in with me walked over to Linuchenko and introduced himself. Linuchenko embraced him happily and announced:

"Comrades, congratulate the lucky fellow. He's just out of prison. Well, friend, what news do you bring? You can speak freely here."

"First of all, I have a message. One of our men was released from a worse place than I—from the Alexeyev Ravelin, and he gave me a note to Beideman's relatives and friends. He was in the adjoining cell for six months. Beideman tapped the message and made him swear he'd deliver it. I was told I would find someone here. . . ."

"Yes!" Vera cried. She stretched forth her hand and froze, as would a mother whose child was drowning before her very eyes.

Linuchenko read the note aloud.

"I implore you to plead for my release. Insanity is imminent. Let them conscript me for life, or send me to Siberia, or execute me. Anything, anything but this."

"During his first fit of insanity he tried to hang himself, but was unsuccessful. They took his towel and sheets away," the man said. "That was in the summer of sixty-three."

"Yes, on August 12, 1863!" I cried. "Yes, that was the day his mother died!"

It was as if a great force had overwhelmed me, and I fell senseless to the floor. Those present took this to be a natural sign of my grief at my friend's fate, but actually it was a relapse from the shock I had had the day I went along with Mother Beideman on my first aerial journey. The black artist had not yet taught me the substance of what he calls "electrification of the centre," and I as yet was unable to make use of the moment that demolished the limit of movement along a straight line without losing consciousness.

However, no later than this morning I set the time machine fifty years back, and when Ivan Potapich and the girls went visiting, I entered Mikhail's cell.

He had just finished eating his supper of horrible cabbage soup, from which he had extracted two live cockroaches. He was amusing himself by making a house for them out of a piece of black bread and was hunting around for a place to hide them from the sharp eye of that devil Sokolov, in order to tame them later on. Though his face was pale and wan, as after a grave illness, it was lighted up by a sly smile. He became frightened when he saw me, but as soon as he recognized me, he put his arm round me fondly.

As I sat beside him on the hard pallet of his beggarly abode, I did not tell him of what had happened in the mountains, but, instead, of the events that should have taken place.

I said that Larisa and Vera became as close as sisters, that they both loved him, and that on the morrow they were both to set out to plead for his release. Then I suggested that we both take a walk in the mountains.

Mikhail began to stroll about the cell, raising his feet high as he walked. He chased after a butterfly like a child, picked flowers, admired the sunrise to the left and the moon to the right. Time ceased to exist: everything the mind conjured up became reality. And after the old shepherd had offered him some warm milk, Larisa appeared. She embraced him and led him off to the goat hut. I felt no jealousy.

I was happy that our unfortunate friend had found a short moment of oblivion.

When Sokolov entered the cell that evening, accompanied by another guard, Mikhail was asleep with such a blissful smile on his lips that even that crude animal was touched and expressed uncommon concern—naturally, in a form that came most easily to him.

"Don't wake him. He was tramping about all day, so let him sleep it off!"

. . . . . .

Today Ivan Potapich said, "I'm very glad that you've stopped hopping around like a sparrow, flapping your elbows. Now really, get hold of yourself, and please stop your mumbling—you're scaring the girls. Here, you can scribble on this paper, that's a nice quiet occupation."

And the good man presented me with a pack of the whitest paper, saying as he handed it to me:

"I've cleaned out the office upstairs for your sake. It's government property anyway, so it's no sin."

I'll take advantage of it and use the white paper for my rough copy, too. Besides, let this office paper, stolen by Ivan Potapich—an act which fits so completely into our three dimensions—keep my recently-freed mind within the bounds acceptable to society. For I must now relate an extremely important event. The actual facts are common knowledge, but some of their aspects can be disclosed only by someone like me, to whom time has become meaningless.

However, I would first like to relate the events that followed after the note from the Alexeyev Ravelin had been miraculously delivered to Vera.

A courier was sent for Mikhail's sister Victoria, a tall, silent, strong-willed woman who resembled him greatly. We drew up the following document, now included in its entirety in the book on Mikhail, in her name:

"Mikhail Beideman, Lieutenant of the Military Order Dragoon Regiment, reported missing three years ago, was

found to be imprisoned in the St. Petersburg Fortress. His mother died in 1863, during her journey from Bessarabia to the Crimea to beg His Royal Majesty to pardon her son. Victoria, sister to the imprisoned Beideman, hereby appeals to the charity of Your Excellency's nature and begs that you grant her the sole favour of being permitted to visit Beideman in prison."

This note was given to an influential relative together with a letter from another famous general to a third, and thus reached Prince Dolgorukov, Chief of Gendarmes. The Prince wrote that the Emperor's reply at present and in case of any future attempt to establish contact with the prisoner was unchanged: the Government knew nothing of the whereabouts of one Mikhail Beideman.

Before this last shadow of a revived hope vanished, Vera forgot all her circles and even her sole consolation in life —her work in the wards—and again, as before, during our insane attempt to free Mikhail, was like a maniac with burning eyes, silent and tense to the breaking point. Her days were taken up with seeing that Victoria's note was delivered to the proper authorities. After the Imperial resolution became known, like an automaton that had been switched to another track, she again began working as silently and relentlessly for the revolutionary cause. She attended secret meetings, delivered information, hid people. She was not daunted by rain or darkness, or the danger of the deserted outskirts. It was not that she was merely getting thin, no, she was actually burning up before our very eyes. I told Linuchenko:

"If you don't stop her, she'll have galloping consumption by spring."

"Stop her if you can," he replied bitterly.

I was full of compassion and my love burned anew as I sought an opportunity to find Vera alone. Once I entered and found the apartment empty. The door to her room was slightly ajar. She was sitting in an armchair, lost in thought. Her bony hands lay pathetically on her knees, her fists

clenched in a childlike manner. The stillness in the room, as in the rest of the house, led me to believe that she was alone. I entered swiftly, and to my own surprise, I fell to my knees and covered her dear hands with kisses as I said:

"Vera, wake up! Vera, if you're not sorry for yourself, then at least take pity on me. I'm lost without you. Let's go to the Caucasus and try to start life anew. You will always have your freedom with me."

Someone coughed behind my back. I jumped to my feet in anger. We were not alone: the morose blond young man had been sitting in the room. He came up to me and looked at me in some confusion out of lovely blue eyes filled with ineffable kindness and murmured:

"I'm sorry, but please don't take me into account."

True, I felt no embarrassment from his presence there.

Vera rose, took his hand, and with an exalted look which reminded me of that day in the country on the terrace, when the lindens were in bloom and when for a moment she, Prince Gleb Fyodorovich, and I were so happy together, said:

"Serge, dear, this is my new fiancé, the only person to whom I can be betrothed without being unfaithful to Mikhail. But only betrothed."

"Well, you should be going," she said to him. "Remember that my every thought and breath and all the power of my will are with you! There are no more doubts. It is irrevocable."

He repeated in a voice that was both pleasant and hollow, as of one who is ailing: "Irrevocable."

Vera kissed him. He then bowed to me and left.

"Who is he?" I asked.

"You need not know his name," she answered evasively. "Soon all of Russia will know it. It will be written down in history. Serge, I belong to a revolutionary society called 'Hell,' the members of which are called 'mortis.' This may sound childish, and I don't know whether we shall be successful or not, but we will renew the Decembrists' attempt to bring freedom to our country. Fate has brought you here

at an unusual, decisive moment. Will it be in vain again? Will it but serve to split your soul again without making you take a final decision? Serge, you have not found your place in life anyway, so why not join us? We know where we're going, and why. There is no freedom now, one cannot live for himself alone any longer. Now is the time to die for the future. Come with us!"

"I'm not afraid of death, but I prefer to die alone, not for the sake of the crowd."

I left Vera in anger for the first time in my life and returned to my regiment. The new "fiancé" aroused my suspicion and the thought occurred to me that she, like so many other women, had created an air of mystery around the most ordinary attachment, and all from a sense of self-centred pride. For the first time, too, I compared her unfavourably with the proud, untamed Larisa.

The terrible events which followed were not long in revealing the faultiness of my reasoning. I had a miserable winter. Larisa's image seemed to be challenging my fondness for Vera. Suddenly, it loomed up with such irresistible force that it pushed me into a senseless affair, of the kind every man should fear like the plague. A chance likeness in the turn of a head, bringing back memories of the night at the goat hut, made me fall head over heels in love with one of the regimental ladies, without ever stopping to see if there were any similarity in mind and character as well. Actually, though, I was seeking the oblivion that cards and wine could not produce.

A regimental lady in a small town usually spends the days of her life flitting from one affair to another, and so my passion, far from encountering any resistance, soon became a weary obligation. The lady in question turned out to be shallow-minded, extremely wilful, and petty in her ways. She had fits of jealousy and carried on, and ever asserted her "rights." It is probably harmless for two people to form a purely physical attachment, with mind and reason completely absent, if they belong to the world of busi-

ness and their imaginations and sense of perception are dim and dull. However, if one is unusually emotional, due to an artistic nature or keen mind, he will be sorely punished by having to accept as a foreign body the crudest aspect of an alien soul. He shall either have to digest these character traits or be poisoned by them.

No matter how I tried to escape the influence of that woman, she nevertheless pulled me down into a mire of such petty thinking that if I had not finally found the strength to flee, I would have perished in the slime, as do so many young men. I submitted a request for permission to go to Petersburg in order to prepare for the entrance examinations to the General Headquarters Academy.

I found Vera as I had never before known her. Her hair was bobbed, she smoked vile cigarettes, and her whole manner had changed to suit that of the midwives, female assistant-doctors, and students of her circle. The greatest change was that she had lost the imperceptible characteristics peculiar to her former self. I was only able to recognize the other, special Vera I had loved, when in answer to my question as to why she had mutilated herself so, she replied with great conviction:

"I find it easier to live this way. The old Vera is gone for ever, and there remains but a screw in an intricate machine which works better when it is greased with the same oil as the surrounding screws."

Vera was now the brains and the soul of the circle. Linuchenko had for some reason become silent and introverted and was occupied somewhere with affairs about which I knew nothing. Once again there were new people in the house. From snatches of conversation, now more cautious and serious than in previous years, I gathered that the main centre was in Moscow, and that Vera's place was just the first link in the chain.

The revolutionary movement developed rapidly after the "Student Affair," but in the salons of Countess Kushina and her like they still thought there was no revolutionary

movement, but, as Auntie was wont to say, "Nothing but romances between those horrible blue-stockings and the seminary students." High society was mostly interested in foreign affairs. The old cosmopolitans were beside themselves with admiration at the mere mention of Bismarck's name, repeating over and over to all who cared to listen that the Chancellor had turned the Staatenbund into the Bundesstaat.*

There was a photograph of Baron Brunov, our ambassador, in an excellent walnut frame on Auntie's table. He had been elevated to this high position for his sensible support of his country's honour, as Auntie put it.

When the Prussian emissary at the London Conference once again brought forth the old French proposal that the border between Denmark and Germany in Schleswig be decided by popular referendum, Baron Brunov had said politely but firmly:

"It would be against the principles of Russian politics to have the subjects asked whether or not they wished to remain loyal to their sovereign."

And Auntie would add ironically:

"It's absurd to make the decisions of European governments subservient to the opinion of the Schleswig rabble!"

At the end of the fifth week of Lent, several days after I arrived in Petersburg, I again met the blond youth with the unusual face at Vera's place.

What unknown psychic forces stand guard over our beings that cause you to guess the fatal intersection of some person's destiny with your own and thus fill your heart with unexplainable terror? However, after meeting Black Vrubel and hearing his explanation of the chart of the Evolution of the World, I can see it all clearly.

A person whose fate is connected with the number Twelve will be terrified at meeting One.

I was one of many, while the man with the kind and

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* A union of states into a united state.

gentle eyes was One. At this meeting his emaciated appearance shocked me. His cheeks were hollow, there was a consumptive flush on them, and locks of blond, lack-lustre hair were pressed to his temples.

"Are you ill?" I asked.

"I'm just out of the hospital," he replied in a weak, hollow voice, "and I must say it didn't do me much good."

"Then shall we put it off?" Vera had overheard our conversation and looked up sharply.

"No, we can't put it off any longer," he said firmly. "My consumption won't wait. I'll just get progressively weaker." He spoke of himself as a mechanic would of his machine.

"The main problem is to have the leaflets printed within a month, Vera Erastovna. Can you do it on time?"

"I'll roll them off and bring them in. But promise you'll wait for me and that we'll see each other again."

He turned aside and mused. "All right. I promise. But it would be better for the cause if you stayed out in the country."

"I'll still be able to give the cause the rest of my days!" Vera said this so sharply, that I became convinced the feelings I thought she had pledged to Mikhail for ever had now been revived.

Life never changes. Each person can love only for himself, and the torture of losing his freedom causes him to make demands which know no bounds. I, who had always been jealous of Mikhail, now despised Vera for being unfaithful to him and conceiving an imagined new attachment. Blind and ensnared in the slime of provincial life, I was more unprepared than ever to fathom the strange flame that burned within these two people of a hostile world.

Vera left for the village to print the leaflets. I no longer feared that she would be arrested and sent to prison.

Vera, Larisa, and my mistress in the provinces were now all rolled into the humiliating embodiment of female lasciviousness which falsely took on this or that appearance.

I was caught up in a social whirl and by April there were

several salons to which I was constantly being invited to plays and dances. One of the more interesting events of the social season was to take place on the 4th of April at the home of the cosmopolitan gentleman of Auntie's acquaintance.

I decided to choose my clothes for the evening the day before. My head was light and empty, as a gambler's who has lost all his stakes and has decided to commit suicide after the last play.

It was twilight. It was as if a milky liquid had been splashed across the sky and the whitish mist made the familiar buildings seem far away.

Two lamps were lit. I stood before a large mirror and viewed my new uniform with the aid of a small hand mirror.

My orderly announced that someone wished to see me.

"He didn't give his name. By the looks of him, I'd say he's a petitioner," he added.

"Ask him in," I said absent-mindedly, craning my neck to see one of the seams. Thus absorbed in my task, I did not turn when the caller entered and finally caught sight of him in the mirror.

The blood rushed to my face. I became as confused as a boy caught doing some mischief, and quickly hiding the mirror, said to the servant:

"Lock the door and don't let anyone in until my guest leaves."

My caller was Vera's strange "fiancé."

"I came," he said, without offering his hand and in a tone in which one does not begin, but rather continues a conversation one has begun long ago, "to ask you to tell Vera Erastovna. . . ."

He swayed, and I rushed to his side and helped him into an armchair.

"You're terribly ill. What happened?"

I thought he was out of his mind. His astonished eyes were a bright blue as they looked straight into the lamp,

and a faint smile played on his childish lips. His mind was vacant.

"You're ill, you're ill!" I repeated senselessly, not knowing what to do. I poured him a glass of wine, which he accepted gladly, and seemed the better after it.

"Yes, I'm very ill," he said, "but that's all for the best right now. I want you to tell Vera Erastovna that, due to my illness, I could not wait any longer. It's better for the cause and me personally that we have not seen each other again. And please tell her that I'm very thankful to her...."

He rose and walked towards the door.

"What do you intend to do? You're not in your right mind."

He looked at me firmly and said:

"I am in complete control of my senses and will prove it tomorrow. At five o'clock near the Summer Garden. Be there, in order to be able to tell her about it. I have one request: that you do not mention my name to anyone after what happens tomorrow."

"I don't know your name."

"There's no need to know it. The people's servant—that's who I am!"

"I know you won't tell me what you intend to do—kill yourself or someone else, and I really don't care!" I shouted, angry that Fate was again shoving me on to an alien track. "But I wish you would answer something that is of importance to every person—in the name of what are you acting? What is your goal?"

"Freedom."

"I've heard about it, but I can't believe in it. A freedom which you yourself will never live to see, because you'll be pushing up daisies—and you don't believe in the hereafter. I don't want to hear the usual clichés.... I want to know your own feelings. What you personally get out of fighting for others?"

I knew beforehand that he would answer as he did:

"Complete personal freedom is voluntary death."

"But why? Why?"

"For the cause each person embraces. You must find one. I have."

Then he became terribly embarrassed and blushed as he awkwardly stuck his thin hand into his pocket.

"Please give this to Vera Erastovna."

He had pulled out a little clay cockerel, of the kind they sell at fairs for five kopeks.

"It's a childhood souvenir my mother once gave me."

He turned round and left.

I don't know why I didn't try to detain him. Why were these people barging in on my life? I didn't ask them to. Conceding that I was a most average person, of average intellect, a failure as an artist and an officer like all the rest, still, I wanted to live my own life and not theirs.

I recall muttering over and over:

"Yes, my own life, even though it's a roach's life."

I got dead drunk and rolled over on the couch in my new uniform, still clutching the clay cockerel in my hand. The thought that kept bothering my foggy brain was to hold on to it and not let it fly away.

I awoke late the next morning. My head was splitting, and the first thing I did was to look at my watch: was I late or not? I could not remember where I was going: to dinner at Auntie Kushina's, or to five o'clock tea at one of two other houses. All I could remember was that I was to be there at five.

My man had been told once and for all never to waken me, no matter where I had fallen asleep or in what condition. He entered with my tea, set the tray down, and suddenly bent over to pick something up from the floor.

"I bet it'll whistle if you blow through the tail," he said.

"How dare you touch it! Get out!" I yelled and grabbed the cockerel. My orderly was not used to shouting and decided I was still drunk.

"Would you like a drink for your hangover, Your Grace?" he mumbled.

I told him to run my bath. The clay cockerel had set my mind clear. Moreover, I now realized how abominably I had acted. My caller yesterday had been gravely ill, he had taken a fatal decision during an attack, and though I was aware of his condition, I had not lifted a finger to dissuade him.

I should have put him to bed and not let him out of the house! At five o'clock he was going to do something desperate near the Summer Garden. To hell with him! He could do as he pleased. Was I a wet-nurse for the lot of them? Was I always supposed to save them at the last moment? They could end their lives as they wished. Larisa's statement that I had led her to her death embittered me. And now here was Vera's insane "fiancé" telling me the time and the place! No, I would not be there!

I dined and went to play billiards. I was lucky at the game and forgot all about time. But not subconsciously, it seemed. The clock solemnly struck the half-hour.

If it's only four-thirty, I'll still make it, I thought and glanced at my watch. Yes, it was. I said I had a business appointment and left for the Summer Garden.

I cannot write any more today. All the events of that day have come back to me, and I feel a heavy stone on my heart, as if a giant squeezed it and then let go, or as if a cat was playing with it like with a mouse. If only I could overcome this feeling. Perhaps I should fly about the room a bit? I'm afraid of Ivan Potapich, though. He's been grumbling of late, "Don't let me hear you talking to yourself, or I'll take you back to the asylum!"

I can't have him take me before my hour has struck, for I must finish writing first. Ivan Potapich is really a dear: since I've been to the asylum he considers that I'm a lost soul, that I've disgraced myself—as if I were an embezzler or something—and he talks to me in a familiar tone and grumbles a bit, as he would with a naughty boy.

CHAPTER IV

Five O'clock Sharp

When I turned the corner leading to the Summer Garden, an unusual sight met my eyes. A great crowd was screaming and shouting *hurrah!* as it pressed against the iron fence. The Tsar, his nephew and niece were in an open carriage. The coachman could not drive through the throng. Count Totleben and a nondescript man were in the second carriage. The ladies in the crowd were showering the strange man with money and waving their hankies, while merchants climbed into the carriage to embrace him. There was a terrible free-for-all a bit further off, where the police were either clubbing someone, or defending him from the mob that was beating him. I hailed a cab, and standing in the open carriage, I found myself well above the mob and able to see what was going on.

"Villain! He shot at the Tsar!"

The cabby pointed out a dark figure. The police were tying his hands behind his back. Other policemen had linked arms and were holding back the raving crowd, ready to pounce and tear its victim limb from limb.

I could not see the man's face, but his hat had been knocked off and I recognized the soft, flaxen, lack-lustre hair and the weak, rounded shoulders. Suddenly he turned in my direction. His lovely blue eyes shone as he said with great emotion:

"You fools, you fools! I did it for your sake!"

A few moments had passed since the attempted assassination, yet there was not a trace of cruelty in his expression.

"Assassin! Antichrist! Kill him!"

The policemen put him in a carriage and though he was bound and unresisting, they still held on to him from both sides. The carriage and the mounted escort headed towards Chain Bridge.

I wandered on aimlessly and don't remember where I went. It seemed to me then that I was in a boundless field with a grey sky overhead and dark, melting snow underfoot.

Perhaps I actually walked along streets flanked, as is customary, by two rows of houses, where there were lights in the windows and respectable families sitting around their samovars drinking tea. I was indifferent to everything. I kept on walking, clutching the cheap clay cockerel in my coat pocket. Then I remembered my orderly's words: "I bet it'll whistle if you blow through the tail." I took it out and blew. The cockerel didn't whistle; some dirt must have got in the pipe. I stuck it back in my pocket and gripped it tightly again, as if I were holding on to the only solid thing that existed. My thoughts were incoherent. Leering faces floated up and Petya Karsky was singing a dirty song in my ear:

Captain, I'm so glad I've found you,
Your officer has wronged my daughter.

My one thought was to walk in step to the words.

If I am said to be insane, as the head doctor assured Ivan Potapich, then my insanity began that memorable day.

Outwardly, until very recently, I was able to wear an impenetrable mask that fitted my surroundings of the moment.

Late in the evening of that day, the 4th of April, I found myself at Auntie Kushina's. I recall that I transferred the clay cockerel from my coat pocket to my trousers pocket and entered as usual.

Auntie had a full house, and I was thus able to find out all the details of the attempted assassination without taking part in the conversation. At five o'clock, as usual, the Tsar drove out of the Summer Garden with his nephew and niece. An unknown man had fired at him. They said that a peasant named Osip Komissarov struck the assassin's arm, causing the bullet to go astray.

Everyone in the salon was indignant. The gentlemen forgot their manners and cursed the villain soundly. The lovely ladies were vying with each other in thinking up tortures to make the criminal confess; they suggested that a list of these tortures be drawn up and sent to the Chief of Police. They were all extremely annoyed that the captive had not disclosed his name or rank and had said he was a peasant named Pyotr Alexeyev. Then, they added maliciously, since his rank was not known, he could be put in chains.

They said that Prince Suvorov, the Governor-General, was to blame for being so gentle with the revolutionaries. They even said that on the day of the attempted assassination he had received a letter of warning, but had filed it away in a drawer.

"They should call in Muravyov, he's the one to set things right."

I left. And got drunk. And slept like a log till late the next day. When I got up I went visiting again. I could be silent everywhere I went without arousing suspicion, as there were too many people eager to talk. For some reason or other I felt I had to hear everything that was being said about the person whose name I didn't even know. I could not focus my mind on anything, save him.

Vera had not returned from the village. In former days I would have gone flying to her, but now I was indifferent to everything except the event in which, I felt, I too had taken a part. Everything else had fallen out of me, as everything does which is not included in one's range of vision. At times I thought dully that if I had not let the man with the blue eyes leave my house, but had put him to bed instead, nothing would have happened. However, I did not feel conscience-stricken about it.

. . . . . .

In the White Hall Alexander II told his nobles:

"All the estates have expressed their sympathy, and this devotion sustains me in my trying service. I hope that my lords will gladly accept into their ranks yesterday's peasant who saved my life."

I myself saw the drunken cap-maker-turned-nobleman, struck dumb from all the handshaking and embraces, at Prince Gagarin's dinner table. He looked the perfect idiot as he guzzled the liquor in silence, and could think of nothing better to say in answer to all the long toasts proclaimed by the noble patriots than mumble, "Thank you kindly." They say his wife called herself "the saviour's wife."

Princesses and Countesses fought with each other for the honour of torturing the "saviour" with dinners and routs where he usually sat with all ten fingers spread out on his knees until he'd roll under the table in a drunken stupor.

Komissarov began to drink day and night, and rumour had it that during a fit of delirium tremens he hanged himself.

Karakozov was hanged.

When Black Vrubel explained his chart of the "electrification of the centre" he said that until the time was ripe, a blow struck would not disrupt the laws of physics, and the angle of incidence would remain equal to the angle of refraction.

The premature shot had gone astray, and the two who had been involved had been shattered by a reverse blow.

Karakozov was hanged. Komissarov hanged himself. But the hour struck—and the Tsar was no more.

The day the unknown man was put in chains, Alexander II accepted the congratulations of the Senate, which appeared at Court in its entirety, headed by the Minister of Justice. The diplomatic corps offered their congratulations on the following day. Metropolitan Filaret sent him an icon in commemoration of his deliverance.

Auntie's senator friend remarked:

"I do say, the Tsar had full reason to proclaim, 'The sympathy expressed by all the estates from every corner of this vast empire is a moving sign of the indivisible bond between me and my devoted subjects everywhere.'"

There was news from everywhere:

"Have you heard: Prince Suvorov left his post as Governor-General!"

"They say the post will be abolished."

"General Trepov will be put in charge of the capital police force."

"A rescript has been sent to Prince Gagarin with orders to 'protect the Empire.'"

"Thank God, they're finally calling on all the reliable forces!"

"Count Muravyov has been summoned. He'll make short shrift of Valuyev."

"And he'll get even with that liberal, Prince Suvorov, for his witticism at the hunt."

"What, don't you know about it? Well, His Majesty killed a bear with one shot, and Suvorov quipped that it would not be bad if the same thing happened to the two-legged Mishka.* The Tsar cut him short, though."

Another important piece of information was that Count Shuvalov had been recalled from the Baltic Territory and had been appointed Chief of Police.

Prince Dolgorukov confidentially informed Auntie's old

* This is a play of words, as the Russian for Teddy is Mishka, also the diminutive of Mikhail, Count Muravyov's first name.—*Tr.*

acquaintance that the criminal was being questioned night and day and not being permitted to sleep a wink, but that although he was completely exhausted, he would have to be "prodded" a bit more. In the city there was talk of other tortures besides not letting him have any sleep. As yet the criminal had not disclosed his name. It became known, however, from a note found in the Znamensky Hotel at which he had been staying, that his name was Karakozov and that he was a nobleman. His cousin, Ishutin, who was brought from Moscow, corroborated the fact. When I heard that the writer Khudyakov, the organizer of the "Hell" society, had also been arrested, I expected to hear Vera and Linuchenko's names, too.

Karakozov was transferred to the Alexeyev Ravelin, while the Supreme Criminal Court held its sessions in Commandant Sorokin's house. In order to bring greater pressure to bear upon Karakozov and make him confess and repent, he was put under the spiritual guidance of the well-known archpriest Palisadov. Once back in his cell, the captive, though utterly exhausted by continuous questioning, was unable to lie down, for he was obliged to remain standing while Father Palisadov said Mass and sermonized.

I could not stand that archpriest. He was a fashionable society clergyman and usually said Mass at Auntie's house twice a year. Palisadov was a lecturer at the University, and a jovial student I knew always kept up running commentary of jokes about the priest during a game of billiards. He loved to mimic the archpriest, his gestures, and his Novgorod "French" accent.

As proof that faith was nothing without deeds, the priest would say:

"Suppose we have a certain *flacon* containing two liquids: a blue and a yellow—two completely uninteresting colours; but then, shake them up, and you get a beautiful *vert de gris.*"

Father Palisadov had come to a no less coy conclusion as to God's benevolence. He appealed to his audience to

wonder at the fact that God, the great lover of Beauty, had not created a purely utilitarian human being, but had given him the means to enjoy the finer things in life.

"For what are our senses of taste and smell, if not the tools of enjoyment?" Father Palisadov would exclaim rapturously. "It would suffice to have a slit in the stomach, like a pocket, wherein the food from our plates could be dumped, in order to sustain our mortal bodies."

Palisadov was tall, his black locks were streaked with grey, and his manner was not at all priestly. He would often speak of a small volume of his sermons issued in French in Berlin, and had become so Frenchified in Paris that upon his return to Russia he sent a request to the Metropolitan, asking to be permitted to wear his hair short and dress in civilian clothes. This request nearly caused him to be banished to a monastery.

What solace could this playful, conceited man bring Karakozov? However, it is a known fact that the stylish pastor had asked to be put in charge of prisoners sentenced to death with the sole intention of promoting his career.

. . . . . .

Last night, by means of mental telepathy, I put myself back in the day, month, and year of which I wrote yesterday. I had been thinking intently of Mikhail. What had been his feelings when Karakozov was tortured close by and then taken out to be executed at dawn? I knew their cells did not communicate, and even though they might have been adjoining ones, it would have been impossible for them to tap out messages to each other. And yet, at the peak of all great suffering there is a way of perceiving more than is usually possible.

Thus, I visited Mikhail last night and discovered what had actually happened, and this through mental telepathy. I shall continue my story today as an eyewitness. We were able to slip into Karakozov's cell together. By then Mikhail had already learned through his own sufferings that which

I have but recently learned from Black Vrubel: the fact that matter becomes penetrable under the influence of a sufficiently strong will.

Last night, in April of 1866 to be exact, we entered Karakozov's cell. I believe it was about the middle of April.

The sleepless nights and endless questioning had caused him to lose control of his speech, and Muravyov himself was about to inform the Tsar that the doctors believed the prisoner should be given a rest.

We entered as Palisadov had just finished saying Vespers in the dark cell. He had taken off his robes and was folding them away carefully in the large kerchief he had laid out on a board screwed to the wall to serve as a table. Mikhail and I hid behind the stove. I did not recognize the man I had seen but a month before. He was more lifeless than we.

If he had been able to move on our plane, he would have found himself again. But he was still tied to his heavy skeleton, muscles, and blood, and the little strength he had left protected his shape until his time would be up. On the other hand, the part of his being that thought and felt was already beyond this shape, and it was therefore with the greatest of difficulty that he was able to respond in simple language.

Palisadov was displeased at having to do without the services of a deacon and a sexton, though he later submitted a note stating that this entitled him to a special fee. With his little bundle in one hand, he walked up to Karakozov, raised his other hand for the benediction, his expressive, lively face the embodiment of religious exaltation, and said in the smooth, sugary voice of a popular preacher:

"May there revive in you the true faith in the Unseen Judge of your life, and may He raise up and cleanse your soul to the state of an Angel's!"

He had to press his own plump white hand to Karakozov's blue lips, as the man just stood there, deathly-pale, his once beautiful eyes dull and vacant.

Palisadov was so impressed by his own eloquence, that he stopped at the cell door and raised his hand again:

"Yes, yes. May God grant you the state of an Angel!"

Karakozov slumped down on his bed in a state of stupor. Mikhail and I rushed to his side. Mikhail sat at the foot of the bed, while I kneeled and kissed his emaciated, waxen hand.

"Forgive me for not having stopped you when you were ill and called on me the day before the shooting. I know that if you had been in your right mind, you never would have risked such a thing."

Karakozov sat up like a bolt. The blood rushed to his sunken cheeks, his impossibly bright eyes were flaming, and he said in his former hollow voice:

"If I had a hundred lives to live I would sacrifice them all for the happiness of my people!"

These words are well known. Karakozov wrote them to the Tsar, as a manifestation of the principles by which he lived.

"Oh, how fortunate you are!" Mikhail cried. "Your death will raise up new heroes. Oh, why could not my unlucky fate have been like yours!"

Mikhail began to wail and dashed his head against the wall. The guards entered and put him in a straight-jacket, with the sleeves tied behind his back. I threw myself upon them in a rage and beat them viciously ... and everything vanished. I moaned and opened my eyes to see Ivan Potapich standing over me with a glass of water.

"Here, take a drink, you've been dreaming. And stop shouting, you'll scare the girls."

I said I was sorry and pretended to doze off. I realized I had disregarded Black Vrubel's teaching. One can only master the centre of animal electricity by being completely indifferent. My great pity for Mikhail had instantly thrown me, as a foreign body, out of the most delicate plane that retains an impression of all events.

Some time later I was able to pull my grief-shattered

will together and become like a surgeon: the more steeled his nerves, the better the outcome of the operation.

Once again I found myself in Mikhail's cell, where the walls were covered with black velvety slime and the thin straw pallet was devoid of sheets, removed to prevent him from trying to hang himself again. He was lying on his back like a white mummy with his arms bound tightly. Mikhail was in a deep, blissful slumber. His face, distorted with insane rage a moment before, was now calm, and a faint smile played on his pale lips. I remember him thus only in flitting, carefree moments, when we wrestled and tussled on the huge dormitory table, rolling over on the floor in a heap. I did not waken him, for I could not disturb my unfortunate friend's brief moment of respite. Then, too, I was worried lest my emotion cause me to lose the necessary self-control. Instead, I slipped into Karakozov's cell. The warden was there. On his orders the guards were dressing the captive to take him to the first session of the Supreme Criminal Court at the warden's house.

I don't recall how we were taken from the Alexeyev Ravelin to the fortress. It probably happened last night, for no one left the Ravelin during the day or evening.

The Supreme Criminal Court was in session in the long parlour, and its function was to present the main defendants with copies of the indictment and give them an opportunity to arrange for counsel.

One of the senators at Auntie's told us later that before Karakozov was brought in, Prince Gagarin, the Chief Justice, had had a tiff with the Secretary. The Prince insisted on using the familiar form of address to Karakozov, since he considered it scandalous to use the polite form to such a villain. The Secretary was finally able to convince the old man that it would be improper for a Justice to express his indignation in such a manner. Now, as I looked at Prince Gagarin, a greying man with a large nose and a shaggy beard who resembled a kind wolf, I recalled Auntie

Kushina's statement: if the villain is a nobleman, he should be hung politely, too!

Karakozov was the first defendant to be brought in. I immediately took my place beside him. We were flanked in front and in back by two soldiers with drawn sabres. Karakozov pulled at his moustache with a thin, bony hand. He seemed to be embarrassed and did not know where to sit or stand.

"Karakozov, come here!" said Prince Gagarin in a trembling voice. Actually, he was a kind person, and he found it very difficult to pronounce a death sentence.

Osip Komissarov, the supposed saviour (half the city was saying that Count Totleben had invented the entire incident and that Komissarov had merely been standing closest to the gates), was brought in as a witness. The drunken cap-maker was needed as a symbol of the people's desire to protect the Throne. The symbol had become an idol. No one really believed the fable about the rescue, but after Komissarov had given his testimony, the Chief Justice rose. The other members of the court rose, too, and then Prince Gagarin said:

"Osip Komissarov, all of Russia pays homage to you!"

Karakozov shuddered and looked round at each face with an expression of deep sorrow; for a second his eyes met Komissarov's frightened ones. The man stood there at attention, his chest expanded in the manner assumed by orderlies when posing for a photographer, and his low, blunt forehead was deeply furrowed as he tried to reason out why he was being honoured again.

I don't know whether I actually saw all this myself, or heard someone speak of it, or just recently read of it in one of the books Ivan Potapich brought me. I am not yet used to my new method of thinking and sensing and sometimes get confused. Everything that arouses my emotions has been equalized: it matters not whether I read about it, heard about it, or experienced it myself.

On the table of material evidence lay Karakozov's pistol

and a little box of poison he had intended to take immediately after the shooting. He had faltered, and then it had been too late.

Karakozov could not tear his eyes from the table. He could easily grab the poison and swallow it, thus ridding himself of the drawn-out horror of an execution. His eyes became pale. An inhuman battle was going on behind the heavy gaze, then it subsided. His eyes again became a dull blue, bloodshot from lack of sleep, and framed by blinking, reddened lids. Karakozov had decided not to commit suicide, but to accept his death sentence.

A moment later Count Panin whispered something to his neighbour and removed the poison and pistol.

I cannot write any more today. The inhuman battle that raged within Karakozov has shattered me, as if a great bolt of electricity was sent through my heart. It broke, but I kept on living.

Wherein lay this man's strength? What faith had he in his Cause, if he twice faced untold mental anguish and a death prolonged for months, and did not once attempt to bring it all to a painless end himself?

CHAPTER V

The Drums

I have been confined to my bed these past days; it is impossible to transgress time by will alone and not pay a penalty. Dear Ivan Potapich grumbled as he gave me the best food there was in the house, "You're an old man, so you might as well stay in bed. You're safer in bed. And if you learn how to knit socks, you'll really be a help. It's not hard to learn if you're an educated person. I'll bring you some cotton yarn and needles, and the girls will teach you how."

So I'm in bed now, just lying and resting. My thoughts are back in line again, and my memory has been refreshed. But I won't visit Mikhail tonight; instead, I'll recall what I myself saw on that terrible day, in the manner all mortals see things.

It was the end of August, 1866. Everyone in Auntie's salon was touched by what the Tsar had said to Shuvalov: that if Karakozov was not executed by the 26th of August, which was the anniversary of his coronation, he did not wish it to be done between the 26th and the 30th, the day

of the Tsar's patron saint and of the commemoration of Prince Alexander Nevsky.

This order, brought about by a desire not to darken the great holidays, was proof, in their opinion, that the Emperor was exceptionally kind-hearted and was not indifferent to the execution of the worst criminal. I recall Count Panin's *mot*:

"In my opinion it would have been better to execute two, rather than one, and three, rather than two. But, *faute de mieux*, at least we'll have the main culprit."

There were other salons of a liberal bent that found nothing humane in the Tsar's order; here everyone was enthralled by Prince Gagarin, who was so overcome at the trial that he could barely read the death sentence through his tears. He then said the prisoner had the right to appeal for Royal clemency. Ostryakov, counsel for the defence, drew up a short but moving appeal, and Karakozov, who had practically lost all concept of reality by then, signed it.

The Tsar refused to pardon him.

"Ah, but how he did it! How exquisitely he refused!" the ladies exclaimed rapturously.

Auntie's old European gentleman sacrificed his punctual daily routine and like a youth came rushing to her early in the morning in order to quote the Minister of Justice Zamyatin, who reported Karakozov's appeal to the Tsar in the railway carriage, while accompanying His Majesty from Petersburg to Tsarskoye Selo.

"There was an angelic expression on His Majesty's face," Zamyatin had told the old man, "when he said, 'As a Christian, I have long since forgiven the criminal, but I do not consider that I have the right to do so as an Emperor."

Kindly Prince Gagarin transmitted this verdict to Karakozov several days before the execution, in order that he have a chance to think about his soul.

When I heard this, I withdrew my application to the Academy and made inquiries as to the possibility of my being transferred to active service against the warring

mountain tribes. As there were not many volunteers, I soon received my commission. I became strangely calm, as if I had at last found my place in life. That very day I read in the papers that Karakozov was to be executed publicly at Smolensky Field at 7 a.m. on September 3rd.

That was the next morning.

On September 2nd there were posters on every street corner, announcing Karakozov's execution. I knew I would be there. I could not stay away. But I could not spend the remaining hours till dawn alone, and so set off to play billiards. My student friend was already there. The talk, as it had been the past few days, was solely about the correctness of the trial.

A thin-lipped man from the Ministry of Justice with a halting manner of speech that made one think he was carrying a load uphill was trying to prove that Khudyakov, the ideologist of the organization, and Ishutin, one of the instigators, deserved the same fate as Karakozov. He said that high government circles were dissatisfied with the sentimentality of the first public trial and that the Tsar had told Gagarin irritably:

"You have left nothing for my benevolence!"

However, he commuted Ishutin's death sentence, after it had been read to him on the scaffold with the shroud tied round him, to life imprisonment.

My student friend said that during his theology lecture that day Father Palisadov had been lost in thought for a long time and then had shaken his locks and said with fatherly anger:

"There, you see! First we have to teach you the principles of Christianity and then cart you off to be hanged."

However, all this talk of the trial was in the evening, when many hours still separated us from the event that was to take place at Smolensky Field at dawn. In the cosy atmosphere of the familiar hall, amid such jovial exclamations as: "Double in the middle hole!" the words "death sentence,"

though said quite naturally, as any other words might be, were horrible and alien to the senses.

The clock struck four, then five, and someone said:

"Gentlemen, we should be starting out if we want to get good places."

I started and suddenly realized that we were to set out for Smolensky Field to witness an event that was announced in heavy black letters on the white squares of paper posted all over the city:

The execution of Dimitry Karakozov, enemy of the State, will take place at 7 a.m. on Saturday, September 3, at Smolensky Field, St. Petersburg.

"They're meeting at the Minister of Justice's place," said the thin-lipped official.

"Who?" the student asked.

"The heads of departments, generals, members of the Indictment Commission, and Senate officials. And they will all be in their gold-braided dress uniforms," he added, apparently gaining pleasure from the mere mention of such a grand assembly.

I left the billiards room and set out alone for Smolensky Field. The day had not yet begun, but the janitors were already out sweeping the streets. Perhaps it was so easy to move along because the sidewalks were so clean, or because the cabs were not clattering along the cobblestones. It seemed as if all of yesterday's stale air had been let out of the blue cupola of the sky during the night and that new air had been pumped in. There was a feeling of tenseness in the bright, clear autumn sky. The sun was about to appear.

I suddenly thought of the clay cockerel. Yes, it was still there in my pocket. Then it was all true. I recall that I thought: If the sun rises in a cloudless sky and the day is bright, everything may still turn out well.

Cooks with market-baskets on their arms were emerging from the yards, the shawls tied round their heads and shoulders making them all seem plump. The sun rose in a bright,

cloudless sky. As I looked at a policeman's gleaming badge, rubbed to a high polish with soft bread for the occasion, I suddenly realized that nothing would turn out well, that nothing would help, neither the fact that the streets had been swept so early, nor that the cooks were off with their market-baskets, nor the clay cockerel.

The execution would take place anyway.

The streets filled rapidly. At Vasilyevsky Island the crowds were moving along the streets and pavements, and the police were having a hard time trying to keep a lane open down the middle. The black lacquered carriages gleamed and sparkled. Officers and civilians of rank passed by in a long succession of three-cornered plumed hats. At the sight of the first carriage the mob decided it was late and began to run. The faces were distorted with fright and greed. I took a short cut and made my way along the deserted side-streets, coming out at Smolensky Field at the same time as the carriages. They stopped before reaching the Field. A small house had been prepared for the Execution Commission. They entered, there to await the arrival of the condemned man. There was some conversation as they alighted, but no one smiled, and they were all pale. A couple of tarts were hurrying past me to the Field. They were speaking of their own affairs, and the older of the two was scolding the younger.

"You've been out with Vaska and with Sidor, but I can't see what's so special about Klim. Aren't the stars as bright without him? He's the same kind of merchandise as them."

"No, he's not," the other replied. Wisps of her silky hair had escaped from her kerchief, and her eyes had the same vacant expression as Vera's had of late. "Sure I've been out with them other two, but Klim's my fate. He's the only one who needs me. And he's the one I'll be brought to answer for."

"He's the one I'll be brought to answer for," I repeated and thought angrily of the day I'd have to give Vera the clay cockerel.

Police Commissioner Trepov rode by. The military and civilian men of rank left the house, entered their carriages, and drove off after him.

They reached the place on the Field where the troops were drawn up in square formation, alighted from their carriages again, and slowly ascended a high black wooden platform. I looked across and saw what I had expected to see, something I knew so well from pictures, and yet I did not really understand that this was it—the gallows. Naturally, if I were asked where the gallows was I would have pointed to those two black posts and the crossbar. However, it did not register on my subconscious mind, and perhaps that was because I did not feel the greatest terror from the gallows itself, as I had expected to, but rather from the high platform, freshly covered, as everything else, with a coat of black paint. This large platform, like some reservoir of black, non-human blood, gleamed menacingly in response to the first rays of the rising sun. The most horrible event took place on the platform.

"That's called a scaffold," one schoolboy said to another, pointing with his finger.

Perhaps the cart of ignominy rolled up silently; I really couldn't say, for there was a crashing noise in my ears. I thought the ugly cart with the high box and the two horses pulling it was making all the noise. Someone was chained to the box, sitting with his back to the horses.

I did not recognize Karakozov. And truly, it was not he. Not the one who had proudly written to the Tsar: "If I had a hundred lives to live I would sacrifice them all for the happiness of my people!" and not the one with the lovely young blue eyes so full of warm charm who had asked to give his last regards and a childhood toy to a person he perhaps had loved.

The man in the ugly cart had a blue face with whitish, seemingly dead eyes. They rested upon the gallows, and his head jerked back convulsively. Then he turned to stone. Just as in Rembrandt's *Crucifixion*, his numb body seemed limp for

a moment when the executioners unchained him from the cart, led him up the steps to the high black scaffold, and put him in the pillory towards the back.

"That's what they call a pillory," said a man in a Swiss cape, and another answered:

"Isn't it a disgrace.... What a disgrace! And they insist upon executing a person in the foulest possible manner."

The Chief of Police on horseback was at one side of the scaffold. At the opposite side were a group of North Americans from the squadron that was visiting Kronstadt. I made my way closer to the Chief's side and heard him say to the Court Secretary:

"You must mount the scaffold, or no one will hear the sentence. The people must be made to understand that everything is being done according to the law."

The Secretary mounted the steps. He wore a uniform and carried a general's plumed hat under his arm and a paper in his hand. He stood close to the railing. The paper shook in his hand, and his face was the same deathly blue as that of the condemned man.

"By decree of His Imperial Majesty...."

What an icy blast from the roll of the drums! I began to shake visibly, while the troops presented arms. Everyone removed his hat. The drums were silenced, but I continued to shiver and understood not a single word of what the Secretary was saying. He then returned to the platform where the ministers and the Commission were.

Archpriest Palisadov, in full regalia, now appeared before Karakozov. He held a gleaming gold cross in his firm, outstretched hands, as if he were either defending himself or attacking.

No one heard what he said to the prisoner. He then pressed the cross to the dead lips of the man in the pillory, turned round, and descended.

The executioners mounted the scaffold. Together they raised the white shroud above the dead, frozen blue face that lacked all signs of life. They were terribly clumsy

and for some reason first threw the hood over the head and face.

At that moment the sun went out for the prisoner, and perhaps he himself died then. I think the most terrible moment is when a living brain experiences its death.

But there then followed something which in its cruelty was worse than any crime or any punishment. The mind that had accepted death was for an instant made to live, only to bring it a new terror of death the very next moment.

The executioners, who had wrongly begun with the hood, obeyed the police chief's signal and did what is only done when a prisoner is to be pardoned. They removed the hood.

For a second the sun touched his face. For a second his eyes came to life and became crystal-clear. His childish lips turned red and twitched. Whoever he was, he was only twenty-four years old, and he wanted to live. And at that moment he believed he would live.

But the two executioners hastily forced his arms into tremendously long sleeves, like those of a masquerade Pierrot, and tied them behind his back in a tight knot. Then they threw the hood over his head a second time.

They gripped the large snow-white faceless and armless doll and slowly took it down a few steps and to the left, right under the gallows. Then the two executioners put the snow doll on a bench as carefully as if it were a precious vase.

The one who had just looked upon the world with clear eyes and whose mouth had twitched so childishly now stood shifting from one foot to another.

They put a rope round the snow-white doll's neck and the executioner kicked the bench from under it.

The drums rolled.

And they keep up the roll, they keep it up! Ivan Potapich, stop the drums!

CHAPTER VI

Pancakes Everywhere

I've not written for a very long time. Ivan Potapich made me lie flat on my back for a week and then spend the following week in bed knitting a sock. If I tried to disobey, he threatened to whisk me right off to the insane asylum. But I cannot see Black Vrubel before my time has come. The time will come, and we shall meet.

I decided not to re-read what I had written, for fear of crossing out all the wrong places. I have forgotten what it is that I alone understand and what is clear to everyone else. Let Comrade Petya do the editing for the clean copy. He's an excellent boy and comes from my Gubernia, and he's Goretsky's friend.

This is what happened two weeks ago. The last time I wrote the drums began to roll. I could stand the awful rolling no longer and began to scream. Then the mounted Chief of Police ordered me to swallow one of the drums. He signalled, the soldiers aimed at me, I became frightened, and swallowed it. I could not defend myself with my hands, as

they were in long white sleeves and tied securely behind my back. But the drum I had swallowed continued rolling inside me. I stuffed my ears with cotton from Ivan Potapich's winter coat, climbed under the bed, and hid behind the sacks of flour. Ivan Potapich is stocking up, like in 1918—just in case. I thought that by barricading myself I would be able to hide from the mounted Chief of Police and he would stop torturing me. I fell asleep behind the sacks. Ivan Potapich became very worried when he came home and was out looking for me far into the night, since he thought I had left without my coat, which he keeps locked up. When the girls were sweeping up next morning and found my feet sticking out from under the bed, they shrieked, but I didn't want to crawl out, as I foolishly thought it was the Chief of Police again.

Ivan Potapich fetched Goretsky Junior, and his lively chatter dispelled my nightmare and brought me back to reality. I crawled out, told them about the drum, and politely begged their pardon. But Ivan Potapich was firm. He wanted to send me back to Black Vrubel immediately, because, for some strange reason, he suddenly decided that I might begin to bite.

Thanks to Comrade Petya, Goretsky's young friend, Ivan Potapich gave me a last chance. He agreed to keep me till the November holidays, but on condition that I stay in bed, and to that end locked up my clothes and boots. He doesn't even suspect that he did not name the date of his own accord, but on my mental suggestion. That is the day Vrubel and I are to meet and conduct our first experiment.

THE GREAT EXPERIMENT

Ivan Potapich wants me out of the way, for he and the girls have so much to do these days; they are going to take part in a performance.

I obediently went to bed and let him lock my boots up in a large trunk. However, he gave me some paper, a pen and

ink, and said as he usually does, "I always feel more at ease when you're writing."

Goretsky Junior sat down on the trunk. When the light's on him, you can see how ancient he is. But now he's neatly dressed, his shoulders are thrown back again, and he shaves his chin as he did during the reign of Alexander II. I saw Comrade Petya Tulupov at his place before—he was taking French and German lessons. He became fond of the old man, and calls him Grandpa. Goretsky calls him "Petya Rostov* from the Commune, or Petya Tulupov-Rostov." He resembles a cavalry cadet and is an excellent horseman. He was just nineteen when he became a Communist and he was poured into the mould like the purest alloy, without a crack or dent. I am very fond of him and understand him well, for we were exactly the same in our youth, though perhaps in another way.

"Comrade Petya," I said to him, "you are the one person I must see two weeks from now, on the eve of the November celebration. I want you to come here, and I shall give you my manuscript of bygone and present days; I want you to censor it and publish whatever you can."

"Is it a book of memoirs?" Petya asked. "All right. But if the outlook is anti-Marxian, I won't do it."

"The outlook is most certainly a military one," Goretsky interceded on my behalf. "He's like me: adaptable. If it's a matter of discipline, there's no two ways about it. Yesterday Petya showed me around the stables, and let me tell you, it's spick-and-span there. The stalls of his Faltsfein Farms half-breeds are just like parlours."

Goretsky kissed his finger-tips, as he usually did at the mention of a lovely ballerina.

"Corsair has good blood. He may even be a thoroughbred," Petya said.

Goretsky raised his arms in horror.

"It means nothing if he doesn't have Faltsfein's pedigree!

---

* A youth in L. N. Tolstoi's novel *War and Peace*.

If he were from the Arapov stables, that would be something else entirely, but good points don't count without a pedigree from the Faltsfein Farms."

He began to shout so loudly that I had to cover my ears for fear that I'd hear the drums again. However, he turned round to look at me and said apologetically:

"You need a rest. Get well soon and come have tea with us. This is the last time I've come here, because my legs keep swelling. You'll soon be burying me!"

"You'll last till a hundred, Grandpa," Petya said.

"Imagine, *mon cher*, Petya is peeved at my social status, no matter how I try to make him understand that it's autocracy without bureaucracy. But you see, he writes a bit himself, and he's thought up a most piquant obituary for me when I die. And, *ma foi*, I now have but one desire: to end my days in my present position and then be laid to rest. And my last wish is . . . my friend, don't let me down!"

"Better let him sleep," Ivan Potapich said, but then he took one look at the excited Goretsky and shrugged: "They're both like children!"

Goretsky sat down on my bed and suddenly burst into tears.

"*Mon cher*, I've asked Petya to do me this favour, but he's refused."

"Come on, now, Grandpa," Petya said.

"*Mon bon ami*, wait a second and I'll explain it all. This is my last wish: let them put a crimson border round me instead of a halo, *c'est tout à fait simple à coller*, we used to make them when we were children. Gum arabic does it beautifully. And the quality of the paper is of no importance, it can even be cigarette paper. The main thing is the colour: the crimson of the Revolution! And I want a priest to conduct the funeral services, and not just any of those new and accommodating priests, but Father Yevgeny, that most honourable old gentleman."

Goretsky leaped on to the trunk. He was either delirious or else insane.

"*Mon bon vieux*," he continued, "I don't know whether my belief in God was deep enough, but I always observed the Twelve Feasts. As was the custom at home, I never even took a bite of apple before the approved time. I fasted at Lent and never touched a drop of liquor. And first, last, and always, I'm a military man. But they've done something to me and made it as difficult for me to attend church as to keep up a friendship with a fond, but defeated friend."

"Then where does the crimson border come in?" Comrade Petya asked.

"Where indeed!" Goretsky growled. "Why, didn't I cram Filaret's Catechism for nine whole years? Didn't I spend half a century adapting myself to the accepted way of life? Perhaps I suppressed the calling of my brain in order to become body and soul a part of our regimental chapel. I never went into battle without being blessed with Holy Water. Even though you're drunk, it's a hard thing to run a fellow through. Kerensky had nothing to say to the soldiers, to explain why they should go to their death, since they'd never see hide or hair of 'land and freedom.' All he could do was stamp his feet. Ah, but we were sent in in the name of God, there would be a 'halo' for each of us, and the priest blessed us for the bloodshed. We knew 'the gates of Hell would never overcome' the Church. Well, and whither shall I turn now? The stronghold has been blown up, the priest has been shorn. Everything I have believed in and loved for half a century has gone to the dogs! So let some higher authority judge the events. My brain is too small! I become confused and don't know who captured Gilkho Village, Voinoransky or me? And that's why I want to meet my Maker in a crimson border. You can like it or lump it!"

Like some third-rate King Lear, Goretsky Junior swept haughtily out of the room.

Suddenly his red face appeared in the doorway again. He was really in a fit and shouted:

"I've walked right-footed all my life, and now I suddenly switched to my left foot. But the powder's all used up! Your

time is up, old man! But I won't die at attention, my left foot will be up!"

Goretsky jerked his foot and crowed like a rooster to the delight of the girls. Then he left.

"Wait, Grandpa!" Comrade Petya shouted and came over to me to say, "You can rely on me, I'll certainly come for your manuscript."

After the time I swallowed the drum, I've lost confidence in myself. What if the thing Black Vrubel and I have planned for the 7th of November happens to me before then? I only have two weeks left. I must hurry and write down the most important aspects of Mikhail's story.

Well, as I have already said, on the September day that began so rosily, the day when a one-horsed wagon carted away the coffin with Karakozov's body, which had been left hanging until nightfall, the terrible roll of the drums began in my ears. I could think of no other way to drown it out than by drinking round the clock for a week. When I sobered up, I went unhesitatingly to a very attractive mansion. I felt exceedingly strong and was afraid neither of life nor of death, knowing that anyone I chose would be in my power.

Even he, the Chief of Gendarmes, would obey my will.

I did not choose him because I was concerned with the fate of my friend, but because the Chief of Gendarmes was made of stone. And I had to smash a stone. As far as my feeling of friendship, etc., was concerned, I had forgotten all about it. I myself was turning to stone.

I had just come up to inquire whether the master, Count Shuvalov, was at home, when he himself came out of the entrance.

It's fate, I thought, and this gave me added insolence.

"I must talk to you in private, Count," I said, and the words sounded like an order.

The Count's mask of a face became still more impenetrable and he said unhurriedly with a sweep of his hand towards the door:

"I had intended to see to a private matter, but it can wait. I am at your disposal."

We entered the foyer. At times history repeats itself horribly: he led me to the very same room in which we once had had our fateful conversation. The room was unchanged; I saw the crates, the dishes, and the same glass bell on the window-sill, and suddenly I wondered whether the blue fly might still be under it. It wasn't. Then I thought that the room was purposely there. I looked at Shuvalov and was amazed at the way he had aged. He was no longer a marble god, but an aging stone idol. What we term the soul, what can be read in his features, seemed to have left him completely. He was merely a mechanism now.

"What do you wish to tell me?" the Count asked. He remained standing, but offered me a chair.

Neither his forbidding appearance, nor the cold reception tendered by one of great power could intimidate me. The awful rolling of the drums filled my ears once again, and I shouted wrathfully to drown it out:

"I request that you give Mikhail Beideman an opportunity to be personally interrogated by the Tsar."

"You're ill," Shuvalov said, taken aback by my insolent tone. "The resolution sent down to all the department heads states once and for all that nothing is known of this prisoner."

"But you, personally, must be aware that this prisoner is close to insanity, and now, after the trial and the conviction of everyone connected with the attempted assassination, it becomes more apparent than ever that Beideman did not belong to any organization. Your Excellency, he has slandered himself. You were once inclined to think he was insane. Six long years have passed since then. Is it not possible to review the case?"

It was not a hint of human emotion that flitted across the Count's face; no, it was a calculating look. His eyes, as sharp and piercing as a pilot's must be before some difficult stunt, looked at me keenly, as he said:

"I'll do what I can."

But then he suddenly recollected and added, like the true bureaucrat he was:

"That is, if there is such a political prisoner in the books. Be at Countess Kushina's a week from today, and I'll give you my answer."

I bowed and we both left the house together.

. . . . . .

I could not return to my old way of life and continued drinking heavily all week. On Sunday I went to my aunt's house.

As I entered the salon, the European old man was just announcing that Count Shuvalov was expected at any moment with a most interesting letter from Father Palisadov, concerning Karakozov's last minutes on earth.

"This letter is the direct result of a misunderstanding. Have you heard what happened at the execution?" a senator asked Auntie. "The Count asked Palisadov whether the criminal had really repented, and the priest cut him short with an aura of dignity most uncommon to him, saying, 'That is the priest's secret!' But, alas, the popular pastor retained his dignity only until he discovered his mistake. He had taken Count Shuvalov for an ordinary mortal, but he soon became frightened and produced the flowery epistle you will now have the pleasure of hearing."

"My, aren't you bilious this evening," Auntie said. "Though I myself am displeased with Palisadov—it's not proper for a Russian priest to be so Frenchified. But be that as it may, he's a nightingale when it comes to sermons. You had better explain what's come over the Count, he's just like a statue."

The old Slavophile, who keenly disliked the European old man, quickly interjected:

"Countess, I've observed that all Russians who embrace Europe as their ideal and acquire a disdain for their native disorderliness go to the other extreme and squeeze each

year, month, and every day, divided up into half-hours, into their memo-books. True, the disorderliness vanishes, but it departs with the person himself, as well."

"Then my gardener Tishka is right," said Auntie, "when he says, 'If a berry ripens before its time, it'll be stunted.'"

"Count Shuvalov is stunted, too," they all chuckled.

However, their laughter immediately turned into the most genial smiles, as soon as the footman announced the Count. He entered, as always, the magnificent and impressive courtier.

Neither in his handshake, nor in the brief, arrogant look which grazed me for a moment, was there any hint of what he would tell me. I even imagined, from the familiar and elegant movement of his hand as he took a snow-white handkerchief from his pocket to wipe his moustache, filling the room with an aroma of strong, yet fashionable perfume, that he had forgotten our conversation and considered me part of Auntie's furniture.

At the request of the gathering, the Count began to read Palisadov's letter. It was full of vile banalities and false hypocrisy, but the ladies and gentlemen hung upon its every word with necks outstretched; their faces expressed such consuming curiosity as they absorbed this heartless exercise in eloquence on the last moments of a tortured soul, that I suddenly became filled with loathing. And I ceased to see their faces. I saw nothing but pancakes where the faces should have been. A pancake with a moustache, and one without. Neither faces nor personalities.

Now the one with the light-blue eyes appears before me and I hear his strong hollow voice, there, at the Summer Garden:

"Fools! I did it for your sake!"

And then the greedy curiosity of the street rabble, running to see an execution, and the greedy curiosity of society rabble, eager to hear something thrilling about the last moments of a condemned man. I am so frightened, so frightened!

I can't stand it! I'll hide under the cot.

Neither Ivan Potapich nor the girls are home yet, and I got safely back into bed again. I lay behind the flour sacks for a couple of hours, and I feel better now. In the semi-darkness behind the flour sacks I feel as light-hearted as if I had jumped on to another planet. If I could only tell of what I see there when my eyes are closed, or of what I hear!

But no, I shan't disclose a thing, it would only hinder the smooth running of the government machinery, for then each citizen would want to learn how to jump off instead of doing his work and fulfilling other suitable duties.

But then, at Auntie's, I was still concerned with my self-esteem; I thrust out my chest, assumed a fairly respectful attitude, and moved closer to the door in order to question the Count when he left. He was to read his letter in two other houses that evening and so was in a hurry. He kissed the ladies' hands and in passing, without even looking at me, he said:

"The request cannot be fulfilled, for he is not on any of the lists."

I recall that I looked at his vicious back, writhing gracefully in a series of bows, and thought: "The Chief of Gendarmes has lied!"

I left without taking leave of anyone. Whose hand was I to shake: a pancake's with a moustache, or a pancake's with curls? I started out for home with the intention of shooting myself. It was such an easy thing for me to do that evening, and so inevitable. The only thing that bothered me was the question of to whom I was to give the clay cockerel for Vera. Who had a face instead of a pancake? Who was a person?

Then Vera's face appeared before me, as it was that day on the verandah of Lagutin's home. Her light eyes flashed fire and once again she blushed and said:

"You won't do it, Father!"

Mikhail had a face, and the man with the light-blue eyes had one, too. Even when seen from the height of the black scaffold, in the pillory, and deathly blue, it was a face.

Then I recalled Dostoyevsky's face, so unique and unusual. If I had only known where he lived, I would have gone to him. Before I was to leave this earth for good, I had to look into a real person's face. What I saw at home, in my mirror, was only another pancake. But I did not know where Dostoyevsky lived.

Suddenly a certain address floated up from my subconscious. It was written in large black letters on a white square as were the posters announcing the execution, and it read: "17th Line, House No...." and a voice belonging to a silver-haired, rosy-cheeked young old man named Yakov Stepanich said:

"When your time comes, come to this address!"

Without further ado I set out.

CHAPTER VII

A Certain Address

Yes, the Chief of Gendarmes had lied.

But with each passing day it becomes more and more difficult for me to write. The November holidays are nearing and my body is becoming lighter and lighter. I am now certain that even though I am not doing the exercises Ivan Potapich has forbidden me to do, I shall fly when Black Vrubel gives the sign. In two weeks from now we will join forces for the "great experiment."

Comrade Petya-Rostov-Tulupov came up alone to fetch my notes. I told him to get the ladder in the closet and lean it against the iron stove, for I had hid my manuscript on top of it to preserve it from the mice. I gave Petya everything I wrote and made him promise to come in two weeks from now, on the eve of the Seventh. He'll come and get the last chapter, describing the last events.

I cannot write logically any more. My thoughts are all jumbled, as the flock of sheep there in the mountains: the moment the shepherd leaves them, they scatter. My thoughts,

too, have been left without a shepherd, and they all cram my head at once. And there's very little paper left. Ivan Potapich won't give me any more. He said, "Write on top of what you've already written, it can't matter much to you now." Well, I'll just write down the most important facts about myself and Mikhail.

The Chief of Gendarmes had lied, for the Tsar had seen him.

How was I able to find this out? Though it's not a fairy-tale, it seems like one. Yakov Stepanich told me all about it.

. . . . . .

He opened the door for me himself. The room was narrow, and there was a braided rug of coloured rags on the floor. Yakov Stepanich recognized me at once. He was not surprised, and actually seemed to have been expecting me.

"Sit here on the couch while I finish speaking to my callers. You'll have to excuse me, but they do keep coming."

He bowed to me and went into an adjoining room. However, he left the door ajar, and I thus heard the entire conversation. An icon-lamp flickered in the corner and the holy face above it was dark. For some reason or other I decided that Yakov Stepanich was an old-believer.

"He's started drinking again," an old man was saying in a tearful voice, apparently referring to his son. "I could kill him, I hate him so much. It would be easier for me to kill him than choke with rage like this."

"I want you to let the old woman take over the shop immediately, and you get out of the house. Out! Go back to work like you did a year ago. Carry those sacks for a while and get rid of your anger. You begot him. But if you kill him, you'll never be able to undo it. Your son will drink his fill—I'm concentrating on him—he'll be done with drinking, and he'll come to me himself as he did then. He'll remember the address. He didn't drink for a whole year; this time he won't drink for two. If he goes astray again, we'll cheer him on again. No one can break a bunch of twigs, but they snap in a wink one at a time."

"I believe you, Father, I believe you," the old man said ecstatically and bowed down to the ground. "I'll go and work for his soul and give all my earnings to the poor."

The old man left. He was tall, dressed in an overcoat, had a grey beard, and was apparently a small merchant. He bowed to me with these words:

"Don't worry, sir. Yakov Stepanich, our good Father, will put your mind at ease, too."

Yakov Stepanich saw his guest to the door, locked it, and returned. Once more he said, "Excuse me" in a pleasant voice.

He was now busy with an old woman.

"I weep day and night, and kneel at her feet, but she won't heed me!" the old woman lamented. "She's been sitting on the trunk for three days now without a bite to eat or a moment's sleep. Her eyes are like empty cups, and she keeps staring at the corner and won't talk. She must be thinking of hanging herself again. Her godparents are staying with her now, while I came straight to you. Do something for her, Father."

The old woman fell to her knees. Yakov Stepanich shouted at her angrily as he pulled her to her feet:

"You're lazy, Mother! You console yourself with your tears, but your tears are like steam in the bath to her, they'll be her undoing. What she needs is courage. Some don't have courage enough to live. They should be helped on by stern treatment, and not by your silly anger, but with true anger for a human soul. Ah, but you're stupid, Mother, and what's the use of scolding you! Even if you have to drag her here by force with her godparents to help you, bring your daughter to me. And if she just won't budge, tell me, and old man that I am, I'll come to her myself."

Yakov Stepanich saw the grateful old woman out, locked the door once more, and said like a kindly doctor:

"Please come in!"

I suddenly lost all desire to speak to him. "He's just a Vasilyevsky Island hypnotizer," I thought, "and he's prob-

ably even included me as one of his patients. I wonder how you pay him, by leaving the money on a table, or by putting it in his hand?"

The room was immaculate. The walls were whitewashed and unpapered. The bed, the table, and the two chairs we occupied were all white, yet it did not resemble a hospital room. There was a book-shelf over the table, and I was amazed to see a copy of Renan's *Life of Jesus* in French.

Yakov Stepanich noticed this immediately.

"Are you surprised to see Renan? Linuchenko gave it to me. He translated the book for me from cover to cover and left it here as a remembrance. When you go to the village tomorrow, do give him my very best regards. He's a very strong person."

The old man took my hand and looked at me out of clear and seemingly guileless eyes.

"I don't intend to go to the village at all. Why do you think I do?" I said, protecting myself from the unpleasant feeling of having someone's will forced upon me.

"You're sure to go. Most certainly," Yakov Stepanich answered gravely. "You'll see that you must. I've been thinking about you all week. I don't know your address, and then people have said that since the day of the execution you haven't slept at home."

"What are you, a detective?" I cried angrily.

"In a way, I probably am," he replied with a smile. "If you can't detect, you can't offer any help. But let's get down to business. I've an important matter to discuss, and that is why I've been concentrating on you day and night. It's luck, for the address did come back to you, you did remember it."

"Are you a witch-doctor or something?" I wanted to get furious at the old man's quackery, but inwardly I had trusted him from the very beginning.

"There's no such thing as witchcraft. You know it, and so do I," Yakov Stepanich said calmly. "Perhaps there is only man's immense will. In some it is turned to good, in

others to evil. In both cases, if one really learns to concentrate, one can achieve results that seem amazing, but actually, it is like the telegraph. In India any naked fakir can do it as a trick. And we have peasants who can do it, too. My grandfather taught me how. But the power is not within me. I must disclose a secret matter to you for Linuchenko. One cannot write about such things. In a word, I have recently seen the officer imprisoned in the Ravelin, the one of whom your orderly Pyotr spoke in my presence."

Yakov Stepanich, the icon-lamp, and the dark face of the Saviour were suddenly obscured by a blue haze. The haze began to drift, and then everything went black. I was exhausted by sleepless nights and horrid drinking and was unable to withstand the shock of his words. I came to my senses on Yakov Stepanich's white bed. There was a compress on my head and the room smelled of savory and mint. Yakov Stepanich was fussing over me in a kindly, womanly fashion, just like a grandmother, talking all the while:

"Forgive me, my dear, forgive me, my dove, I really smote you like the bear did the pilgrim! I miscalculated, old fool that I am. Ah, but you've worn yourself out, you have."

My mind cleared completely, and I sat up. He took both my hands in his. I no longer resisted and felt drawn to him with a childlike trust. It was just that suddenly I knew that whatever he would say would be the honest truth.

"Feeling better? Here, take these drops and lie back quietly while I tell you everything that happened. You must remember it all word for word. You'll understand what I mean when you hear it. You can't put such things in writing."

This is what I was to remember word for word.

Count Shuvalov had sent for Yakov Stepanich a week ago, had seen him in secret, and had ordered him to await him at one o'clock at night to the right of the Palace gate on the Neva side. This was not the first time the Count had called upon him. Yakov Stepanich had been the stoker at the Palace, recommended to the job by a relative who already

worked there. The Count took notice of him, went to see him at home and was convinced that he wasn't given to gossip or companions, but lived quietly by himself. According to Linuchenko, the Count's confidence in Yakov Stepanich was often of great service to them.

Thus, Yakov Stepanich was at the Palace gate at the appointed hour. Suddenly, he saw Shuvalov's carriage. The driver recognized him, and at a signal took him up on the box. The gates opened silently and they rode up to the Palace and stopped. The night was as black as pitch, there were guards in front of the Palace and two gendarmes came up to the carriage.

The Count alighted. Then the gendarmes carried someone out, but it was too dark to make out his features. He was tall and was shackled hand and foot. Once out of the carriage, he refused to move. The two gendarmes grabbed him up under the arms, a third appeared to lift him by the feet. His chains rattled as they swiftly carried him into the small hallway in the basement. Yakov Stepanich and the Count followed them in. Both doors slammed shut and were locked and chained. Then a large lantern was lit and they mounted the winding stairway leading to the Emperor's private residence on the floor above. The Count ordered the gendarmes with drawn revolvers to guard the door from the outside. He told Yakov Stepanich to remain on guard in the first room, near a bronze bust of Grand Duke Mikhail, and to be ready to rush in to the rescue in case the prisoner began to rave. Yakov Stepanich said that was the word the Count had used: "rave." The Count then took his revolver in his left hand, opened the next door, leading to the bedroom, and reported to the person sitting at the window:

"We are here, Your Majesty!"

The Count took the strangely obedient captive's arm and moved him up, and he shuffled along the carpet clanking his chains. Candles burned in the bronze candelabra on the table. The Tsar was sitting with his back to the window, the one that overlooks the Neva and the Admiralty.

There were heavy double curtains on the windows. Shuvalov steered the captive diagonally to the right of the Tsar; the light fell on both their faces.

Though a huge desk separated the prisoner from the Tsar and Shuvalov stood in the passage between the desk and the wall with his cocked revolver, though two armed gendarmes stood outside the door beside Yakov Stepanich, who was holding the rope he had been given in case the prisoner began to "rave," Alexander II was very pale and seemed frightened. However, the tall man standing before him would hardly have had the strength to do anything, had he so desired. He was shackled. His arms hung limply and his long, thin fingers were pressed flat to the sides of the soldier's greatcoat that had been put on over his prison clothes for the occasion.

He was unbelievably thin. His coal-black moustache and beard seemed pasted to the sallow, unhealthy skin that was drawn over his cheeks. His face was the epitome of all suffering, its large, bright eyes seemed crying for help, begging for consciousness. His high forehead was painfully furrowed, his long neck was stretched forward, and his whole body had frozen in an attitude of acute strain.

He was trying to remember something, but could not.

Perhaps the Count had not warned him that he was being taken to the Palace to see the Emperor; or he may have been told, but the strain may have been too much and had only served to unbalance him.

"I don't believe he realizes where he is," the Tsar said to Shuvalov. "I should like you to make this clear to him."

Shuvalov came up close to the chained man and spoke, as one would to one hard of hearing or a foreigner, enunciating each word:

"His Majesty, in all his kindness, has granted you an unprecedented favour by having you brought here to the Palace from prison. I hope that your six-year imprisonment has made you truly repent the villainous plans of your youth. By making a clean breast of it and naming all those

who involved you in this fatal delusion, you will lighten your own sentence. Is that clear? The Emperor himself is before you."

Suddenly, the captive straightened out and threw his head back. His eyes burned with a wondrous flame.

I recall that at this point in his story Yakov Stepanich pointed to an engraving of John the Baptist by Ivanov hanging on the wall. When inspired, Mikhail actually resembled him.

In a rasping, barking voice that had become unaccustomed to pronouncing human sounds, the prisoner cried:

"Impostor!"

He waved his arm, the chain clattered, and he shouted louder as he took a step in the Emperor's direction:

"Impostor! There has been no Tsar for a long time, because I bought the people's happiness with his death! I gave them a constitution! I order Chernishevsky returned!* Herzen and Ogaryov are to be made Ministers! Why are you standing there like a fool?" he shouted at Shuvalov. "Be off! Obey my order! As for this impostor," he turned to the ashen-faced Tsar; then he seemed suddenly to have recognized him. In a rage that shook his body he raised both fists above his head and cried:

"Murderer! Long live Poland! Long live a free Russia!"

Shuvalov clamped his hand over the prisoner's mouth and called to Yakov Stepanich:

"Here, hold his hands!"

Yakov Stepanich rushed in, but all there was for him to hold was a limp and senseless body, devoid of its last strength.

"Your Majesty," Shuvalov said, "you can see that he is utterly mad. Might you not order that he be transferred to the insane asylum at Kazan? It is a remote place, and he can be kept in solitary confinement there, too."

N. G. Chernishevsky (1828-1889), materialist philosopher, writer, leader of the revolutionary democratic movement of the sixties. In 1864 he was publicly denounced and then exiled to Siberia.

The Tsar rose, walked silently over to the limp form of the poor wretch on the floor, and looked at him intently. His ashen face shook with pent-up rage. He glanced at Shuvalov coldly and with displeasure and said:

"Let the prisoner be taken back to his cell." He paused and then added, "As an example to others."

Shuvalov let the gendarmes in. They lifted the unconscious body and carried it out. Yakov Stepanich noted that his shackled hands both hung down on the same side, as a corpse's do. His sharp, hawk-like nose protruded from his sunken cheeks and matted beard.

. . . . . .

That is what I remembered for the rest of my life—word for word.

CHAPTER VIII

Back Home Again

Apart from the occupied cells, the human brain consists of a mass of unoccupied ones, reserved for new sensations and impressions which have yet to enter the individual's mind. In a word, this is a storehouse of cells, unused and unoccupied, kept in readiness to accept future knowledge.

"To continue: according to Meinert*: there are from 600 to 1,200 million cells in the grey matter of our brain, but the amount of our knowledge is incomparably less. Besides, every day a human being uses his strength to send the impulses of the will along the conductor-rails, and one spends five times as much time on this as on forming new mental associations.

"Well, and what if one were to stop these impulses and concentrate all one's strength on a single point? Who can tell what new impressions and then what new discoveries will fill the unoccupied cells? Perhaps, man will once again discover...."

. . . . . .

* Thomas Meinert (1833-1892), German psychiatrist.

I found this excerpt on a sheet of blue paper written in a wispy, though not feminine hand, in an old illustrated copy of *Niva* which Ivan Potapich let me read. Yesterday he traded some crude tobacco left over from rationing days for it.

I'm astounded by the note. After the words "again discover" there is a drawing of the Wheel of Fortune: it has two wings and is airborne.

Why, that is exactly what Black Vrubel and I know all about! A wheel!

Our arrangements have all been made. The head doctor never noticed a thing. He should have put us in different wards instead of letting us whisper together. Ha, ha, we certainly whispered a lot!

I shall ask Ivan Potapich for the scissors. I have to cut something from newspaper, but he won't give me the scissors. He was shaving and turned to face me, one cheek covered with lather, cocked his eye beneath a shaggy brow and—it didn't sound like Ivan Potapich's voice at all, but rather like him... the black artist—said:

"Go on, slash your throat!"

That's it! I was so worried, for I had forgotten.

I must swallow the wheel the night before, in order that it have time to settle in my throat like a propeller. The next day, as soon as the crowds fill the Prospekt and the music blares forth under the windows, I must let the air in, to start the wheel turning. But I had forgotten what I had to do to let it in.

Tired by the whirring of the Wheel of Life, I have found the Keys, I have read the Book, I have understood the Symbols. And I have been permitted to pass on my knowledge. In order to transmit it, I need a universally understandable action.

The nerves are the intermediaries between the centres of movement and the senses. I have yet to create the transmission between the deeply concealed centre of flight and the first successful flap of my hand-wings!

But we have found the answer, and our good news will soon reach the others.

It is clear now that Ivan Potapich won't let me out on the street. I have no strength to run away, for my legs are like logs. I'll have to fly alone. I have already sent a sparrow with the news to Black Vrubel. We opened the window and a sparrow flew in. As soon as I told it the address, it flew out, and all Ivan Potapich's attempts to catch it with a butterfly net were in vain, for Vrubel means "sparrow" in Polish. Ha, ha.

The girls gave in to my pleading and tears and cut out two wheels. If one won't be enough, I'll swallow the second one, too. But until Ivan Potapich said, "Slash your throat!" I didn't know how to let the outside air in. However, I have already said that Ivan Potapich served to convey a message from *another* teacher.

There remains but one thing now: to steal the scissors by November 7th!

I became very upset. I was afraid to scream, but each time Ivan Potapich passed me, I would stretch out my neck and hiss like a snake. It was as delicate and clear a way as I could think of to tell him that by holding up a world-shattering discovery he was behaving like a reptile. But Ivan Potapich was too thick to understand any of it, and the girls were too young and innocent, and so they only giggled.

"Write your book!" Ivan Potapich yelled and put the pen into my hand, as he usually does nowadays.

As soon as I took up my pen, I saw Yakov Stepanich sitting on the stove. At first he was so very little he resembled an elf. He had to do it that way in order to be able to slide down the string attached to the stove. When he walked up to me he was his usual size, silvery and rosy, dressed in a shiny lustrine coat. He put his hands on my head.

"Calm down and don't scare people! Take the clay cockerel and tell Vera Erastovna everything you saw."

I picked up the clay cockerel and he transported me to Vera's room in Linuchenko's cottage.

No, no. It took me a long time to get there, first by rail and then in a troika past the charred ruins of Lagutin's manor house. However, how I got there is of no importance, the main thing is that I did.

The room was light from the first snow of the season, and the windows had just been washed. They looked out on some bushy young trees that did not want to surrender their stout leaves to the ground and remained insolently green through the film of snow upon them.

Vera was propped up on the pillows and was covered with a silk Spanish patchwork quilt. I remember the quilt from our childhood days. Whenever she was sick I would sit beside her and we'd play. We would stroll along, as through a park, or the bottom of the sea, or a crater on the moon, following the delicate shadings of the silk.

Vera was looking out of the window and did not see us enter. She had become so thin that I hardly recognized her. She seemed transparent, and her once golden braids now lay dull and flat on her shoulders.

"Vera," Linuchenko called. "Serge is here!"

She turned her head quickly. Her great, empty eyes looked at me with a glimmer of hope, as she tried to stretch her arms to me. I fell to my knees, took the pale, weak fingers in my hands, and pressed them to my lips. How could I have forgotten her? I loved Vera, simply because I could never stop loving her. I had only to see her to love her.

"Did you see him?" she asked without mentioning any name.

"He came the day before and asked me to tell you he could not wait any longer, for he felt very ill. He sent you something he treasured above all else, a souvenir of his childhood."

I gave Vera the clay cockerel. She took it, and great tears welled up in her eyes. I was in anguish. Spurred on by some involved and hardly kindly feeling, and not sparing her weakness at all, I said:

"You know, Yakov Stepanich saw Mikhail. He witnessed his audience with the Tsar. Mikhail was taken to the Palace in chains."

"What are you doing?" cried Linuchenko.

"Serge, go on. I'll die if you don't tell me."

She sat up and clutched the cockerel, as if finding support in it, as I had when I had wandered through the streets like one possessed after the attempted assassination at the Summer Garden.

I told her all I knew. She sat there without moving or breathing, until I suddenly thought she had died. I stopped speaking and wanted to put my arms round her, but she drew back and said firmly:

"I'm listening. I understand everything. Don't leave out a word."

When I had finished she turned to look long and silently at Linuchenko, and then pleaded:

"My friend, don't send anyone down the Volga except me! I'll remain in Kazan. After all, they're bound to take him there some day."

She lay back on the pillows and closed her eyes. I followed Linuchenko out of the room.

"Why did you tell her that?" he began and interrupted himself by saying, "Well, she's better off having been told. She is, not you."

He looked at me both searchingly and harshly. "However, I have no time to speak with you now. Come to see me late this evening. But be sure to come!"

I set off to wander through the familiar places of my childhood and take my leave of them for ever. I knew I would never return. This chapter of my life was over.

Each person lives several lives. He uses up one life and temporarily becomes a corpse; no, he becomes like the earth, whose dead grasses and dormant new seeds lie deep beneath the snow shroud. And as the earth awakens from the frost, so does the dead person awaken from the greatest sorrow. He gets back on his feet again and like everyone else he again

fills his every day. But the nights are no longer the same. At night, Death itself comes to him who has known deathly suffering, it holds his heart in its clutches and gives him no rest and no sleep.

But this is only at night.

I was to leave for the Caucasus in the morning, and I now headed towards the cottages to say good-bye to my milk-brothers, my god-children, and my god-parents. Everywhere they eagerly filled up my glass with home-made brandies "for the road," and so, before going to Linuchenko, I walked towards the round lake, towards the "Witch's Eye," to sober up.

There was the big rock we three had sat on seven years ago, each so full of his own worries and aspirations. Now one of us had become a madman, dead to the world, while Vera and I were broken creatures.

But the lake was just the same. All day long it was as still and as smooth as a mirror, but at night a wonderful change came over it. The thousand-eyed sky was reflected in the water, the stars above winked at the stars below and created unusual movement in the water, unseen in the daytime.

A slight ripple, like a shiver on excited flesh, passed from one star to another. A vague outline, large and dark, convulsed deep on the bottom, beneath the little ripples. It looked as if it were trying to escape, to come to the surface, but did not know how.

The moon emerged in the blue sky and the clouds floated by like white swans. The stars moved farther back in deference to the moon, who, like a ripe, indifferent beauty, brushed the clouds from the clear heavens and admired herself alone in her clear mirror—the lake.

Springs bubbled up from the bottom; that which lay captive among the binding slime, the weeds, and water plants shuddered as it made its way upwards. It emerged. It struck the mirrored surface and for an instant, only an instant, it shattered the confident, perfect circle of the moon into a

million glistening sparks. The lake seemed afire. For an instant, only for an instant.

The moon drifted on, the fires died down. And in triumph over the quelled insurrection, the stars above smiled down to the stars below, like some ancient augurs, their secret buried deep within them.

"As soon as you blow up all the boundary rocks, the earth will become light and you will fly!" Whose words were these? It doesn't really matter. He said it and I shall do it.

I'll fly. F-l-y.

. . . . . .

Half a century has passed since that conversation, yet I still hate Linuchenko. That man robbed me of all that was mine and left me to live. There are things that should never be said, but once said, the person to whom they are addressed must then be killed. However, very few people realize the power of words and very few know how to use words as weapons. People argue, love, betray, and even kill, but all this is somehow apart from their real selves. Each has placed a substitute in life instead of himself, while he remains completely concealed.

Linuchenko found out the real me, the one I alone knew existed. I alone in a rare moment had the courage to tell myself what this stocky, unpleasant man said to me without even raising his voice.

"I hear that you're leaving for the Caucasus?" Linuchenko said, locking the door to prevent anyone from interrupting us. "I hope you'll be gone long?"

"That is so. But why are you pleased to 'hope'?"

"Because I would otherwise be forced to ask you to stay away from us. We are now changing over to a type of work which cannot tolerate indifferent witnesses. This state of not being with or against us cannot continue. And I also wanted to tell you, for you obviously don't realize it yourself, and I feel I have the right to from a certain fondness I have for you, as I have known you since you were a child."

"Why, I thought you despised me," I blurted out.

"As yet, and as far as I know, there is nothing to despise you for," he said without a smile. That irked me. "But I would like to warn you about something. Will you permit me to?"

"By all means," I replied, hating the sight of the strong face with the high cheek-bones.

"You are not a boy any longer, yet you are still irresponsible. It is time you realized that thought, feeling, and will should all be in agreement. Speaking in military terms, it is high time you stood inspection for yourself, that you mobilized all your energies and set yourself some definite goal in life. Undisciplined people are the worst of all possible traitors."

Then he added, his narrow green eyes boring through me:

"Confess: did you attempt to change Mikhail's sentence? I'm certain that you spoke to Shuvalov."

"Is an attempt to improve a friend's lot, even though it failed, to be called treachery?"

I thought this person was insulting, but I felt no anger. He spoke dispassionately, like a mechanic concerned that all the parts of the machine be screwed together quickly and accurately.

"If, while intervening on Beideman's behalf, due to your weak-willed nature, you allowed the interference, as you did today while talking to Vera, of the least shadow of some other feeling capable of destroying your desire to help him, you have betrayed him, whether you wished to or not. Do you not know that a drop of dog's blood injected into a cat will kill it? If there is no unified will, it is better not to act at all. You do not possess such a will, yet I am certain that you have acted. I do not ask for the details, and, theoretically, you may be right. You have left your class, but you have not joined ours. We are all part of the same alloy. And so, goodbye!"

I thought that perhaps I should challenge him to a duel, but instead I bowed coldly and said:

"Good-bye then, if you so wish it. I am leaving tomorrow for good. But I want to see Vera alone."

"All right," Linuchenko agreed. "You certainly cannot make her more ill than you have already."

"To hell with your lecturing!" I shouted, losing my temper. "I'm at your disposal. We can do without seconds by drawing lots and having an American duel."

His gaze was level and swift, as one looks at another when calling him an idiot, but he did not say it. Instead, he shrugged, unlocked the door, and went out.

I did not sleep that night. I lay awake counting the times I had betrayed Mikhail. I counted four. Yes, thanks, to my intervention, the fate of this person had been changed four times. But my will was not of a pure, solid alloy. Therefore....

The first time was when I gave Moseich the *Kolokol*, thereby preventing Vera and Mikhail from joining their lives. The second time was when I convinced Shuvalov that the matter was not as the inquiry had led him to believe it was —which resulted in the Alexeyev Ravelin instead of an insane asylum, from which my friend could have escaped. The third time I was infatuated with Larisa and my awakening jealousy of my helpless friend deprived him of a powerful ally. The fourth and last time, not thinking of his release at all, but simply desirous of relieving my own aching heart, I had exposed him, though he was completely mad, to the everlasting wrath of Alexander II.

Perhaps a jury would acquit me. In my old age I simply state what I know.

Not merely your actions, but your evil thoughts, or your ill-will may be the one deciding factor that pulls down the bitter scale of another person's destiny.

CHAPTER IX

The Spider and the Hoopoe

I'm keeping an eye on the window. A terrible thing nearly happened today. Ivan Potapich wanted the girls to fill the cracks in the window with putty for the winter, but they protested and promised they'd do it on the 8th. Everything is shaping up for my last stand on the 7th. There remain but a few days.

I have had a Sign that my decision is correct. On the window-sill, between the double frames I saw....

I saw a Spider.

No sooner had I noticed it, than Ivan Potapich said of someone:

"He's a deserving friend."

What a word, what a word! This word, among all others, expresses the strong tie of friendship. Yes, yes, a friend is dear when he is deserving.

I have a deser-ted friend and:

The Spider.

. . . . . .

How strange. Vera was not about to be hanged, as was the other, with light-blue eyes. Then why had her face become as deathly-pale as his when I told her I was leaving for ever?

We were silent. I held her thin fingers and finally said, pointing to the Spanish quilt:

"See, Vera, here the girl and boy of long ago have once again journeyed across the coloured silks. Let others rent flats, buy parlour furniture, and raise children. We began and shall end here, among the coloured silks of a Spanish quilt. I don't know what your feelings were towards me, but no matter how many women I knew—you were my only love. It was as ineradicable as poor Werther's. Farewell, my love, for ever. I'm leaving for the Caucasus."

"For ever, Serge?"

She was so shocked at the words "for ever," that I suddenly realized she had come to consider me her private property. Besides, my departure meant the end of her personal ties with the past, as she had nothing to look forward to but her difficult service to the Revolution under the iron-willed guidance of Linuchenko.

Then, for an instant, only for an instant, a look that was not Vera's, but simply feminine, flashed across her face. And I understood it: she was frightened.

"For ever," I repeated firmly, and recalling to mind Linuchenko's sermon I added angrily, "How long do you expect me to be a hanger-on around here?"

"Serge!"

The unusual and first real tenderness she had ever displayed towards me had come too late. I was exhausted and my soul was empty. The expression in her eyes that I had longed for in vain so many years at that moment made me think morosely: she's wondering whether, after all, she and I could not rent a flat, buy a set of furniture, and have children. And, mainly, have the children. Desperate women always rush into having children just as desperate rabbits fly into the bushes.

"For ever, Serge?"

At that moment of insight, or rather, of self-induced anger, the last misfortune crashed down upon me.

I let her hands go and rose. I had stopped loving her.

Does it sound unlikely?

Well, that is exactly how things do happen.

However, it is only now that I realize that that was the moment I stopped loving her. But then I didn't know it. I simply felt terribly bored all of a sudden, and at the same time, I felt strangely light, as if I had become empty inside. If I could only leave the room and go far away.

And it was not I, but she who pleaded:

"If I write and tell you I must see you, will you come, no matter where you may be at the time? Promise. For the sake of our childhood memories, for the sake of the memories of our youth."

I stood silently at the window.

She had guessed the change that had come over me, but, as I, could not name it. She rose slightly and said:

"For Mikhail's sake, then?"

She had found the key. I walked over to her bed, gave her my hand, and said:

"And for the sake of the other one, who gave us the clay cockerel. My officer's word of honour that I'll come, no matter where I may be. I know that you won't summon me needlessly."

We did not kiss. I kissed her hand, as if she were a corpse, and left.

I remember I was a thorough scoundrel during the journey to the Caucasus. I drank heavily all the way, played cards incessantly, and kept telling everyone that the highly esteemed lady of my heart had demanded that I buy her a red plush parlour set. But I'd never get married, not me! Black Vrubel told me that every person must find expression for the artist within him. He must mature and find expression for himself. But in between being a person and an unexpressed artist, one is simply a scoundrel.

I was in between. Like the spider in between the window-frames. How quickly he spins his web. Work on, honest weaver! He's on someone's arm. Whose arm is lifted so high? And his sleeve is pushed back to his elbow. Ah, it is Auntie Kushina bandaging Mikhail's arm again. When Mikhail's mother was expecting him, she had been frightened.

The spider marked Mikhail for life.

"A man in the trolley was just sitting there like a pig, and I had to stand there in front of him with a heavy basket. He was a big, strong man," an old lady of Ivan Potapich's acquaintance was saying to him.

The sun shone in through the window. The fine thread of the web was like a golden spire. There's a spire on the fortress, too. He's there. A big, strong man has been sitting there for twenty-one years. There's a spider on the man's arm. And he is Mikhail, my deser-ted friend!

I purposely gave Vera my officer's word of honour, in order to stress the gulf between us. And, truly, I'm an officer. I'm a Cavalier of the Orders of St. George, Anna, Vladimir, the Persian Lion and Sun, and many others.... I have my service record here with me. It's typed on the inside of my head, to conceal it from the Government, as I have concealed my true name. There, too, is recorded my service against the rebellious mountain tribes.

Apart from the wars, there was a fine friendship with a red-headed Imam who proved a true friend, even after he was judged a criminal. He was tried for burning coals on his wife's breast until he had burned her heart through. But the wife had robbed him and run off with another man. He caught her and tortured her.

Vera robbed me and was never punished. When she realized that she was losing me for ever she thought up the parlour set. But I had replied: to hell with you!

However, when all is said and done, the man who fought the fierce tribes and had criminals for friends, the one who was wounded and decorated so many times, the one who

had love affairs with Tatar women and officers' wives was not I, but God knows who.

I always was and remained an unexpressed artist. That is why my mind stored up impressions of sunrises and sunsets, the smell of mountain air, the glitter of daggers in drunken orgies, and many other things of no use to anyone else. Of all human faces I hoarded three: Mikhail's face, the face of the one who was hanged, and Vera's, from whom my heart had turned away. Everyone else was merely a pancake to me. I was a pancake. I lived with pancakes, and when we ate pancakes, we washed them down with champagne.

But I liked to wear my medals and kept my officer's honour unsoiled. And when I received a letter from Vera, asking me to come to Kazan immediately, I went to her.

. . . . . .

The girls keep giggling and don't let me concentrate. I'll finish tonight, for it's the 5th already.

The girls are sewing big pockets for sweets, since the Komsomols are going to treat them. Let them stuff them full, it's one of childhood's pleasures.

CHAPTER X

Mirgil

I'm writing this at night. I swallowed the wheel. It's settling in my throat and feels slightly ticklish, but not too bad. I cannot speak and only mumble. But then, I've no need to speak. My actions tomorrow will be more conclusive than any speech. There's something buzzing around in my brain, working up steam. I'll finish writing, lay down my pen, press my palms to the top of my head, and go *flap! flap!* with my elbows till dawn.

Mikhail taught me how to do it. I've already said that Mikhail Beideman and Sergei Rusanin are one and the same person. It came about gradually: my heels in his heels, my forehead in his, and instead of the names Mikhail and Sergei, a new name—Mirgil. The name of the artist who exploded the boundary rocks! Mirgil will fly!

I said that Mikhail had been standing thus when Vera and I entered his solitary cell. Yes, I swear it was so. And not now, when all time has ceased to exist, but then, in the very real human days when clocks struck off the hours.

The clock in the corridor of the insane asylum had just struck six when a bribed assistant doctor named Gorlenko took Vera and me to the mysterious insane inmate, whose numbers were 14, 46, 36, 40, 66, 35, etc.

It has now become known that these were coded numbers that spelled out: Mikhail Beideman.

I shall try my best—for my poor brain is fast becoming part of the glorious mechanism for "Mirgil's" flight—to relate what took place in Kazan.

When I received Vera's letter I decided that she was on her death-bed and wished to see me before she died. I occasionally received mail from my aunt and knew therefore that Vera had long since moved to Kazan with her former serf, Martha, and I had read in the papers that Linuchenko had been exiled many years before to Siberia for taking part in the March 1st assassination.* Vera, too, had spent many years in prison, compromised by her unfortunate choice of friends, as Auntie wrote naively, and once released from prison, had come down with tuberculosis. I had received my last letter from Auntie in 1886. Now, towards the end of November, 1887, I was hurrying on my way to Kazan.

I had not seen Vera for twenty years. We were both forty-six. I did not feel any excitement and only wondered dispassionately at the reason for her summons. But when in Kazan the cabby pointed out her house from afar, I suddenly told him to stop. I got out and walked up and down a side street several times to calm the sudden pain in my heart. No matter how I tried to tell myself it was simply palpitating from the strain of the long journey, my mind would not be fooled and knew the palpitation had been brought on by deep emotion.

"She's forty-six," I kept saying to myself, "and I've stopped loving her long ago."

Finally, I rang. She opened the door to me herself.

Vera did not look middle-aged. Her cheeks burned with

* Of Alexander II.

bright colour as they never had before. Her eyes shined, and there was no grey hair visible from beneath her snow-white assistant-doctor's kerchief. In silence we embraced and wept. Though we had been apart, we had lived all our lives together.

"Serge, you're the only one left who knows Mikhail. Martha died of typhus last spring. I would not have dared summon you if she were still alive. But I need a witness."

Vera had a fit of coughing followed by a haemorrhage. The doctor put her to bed, and when I told him I was a relative, he said her days were numbered.

She was consumed with the same inhuman energy that had possessed her in bygone days, when she still hoped to help Mikhail. Thus, the very next day she had got control of herself and was able to tell me what had happened.

Martha had been working at the insane asylum as an assistant-doctor and had been able to find out that on July 1, 1881, two gendarmes had brought from Petersburg a mysterious prisoner who was put into a completely isolated room. No one of the junior staff except one assistant-doctor was allowed into this room.

Vera immediately decided the prisoner was Mikhail. The assistant-doctor would not accept a bribe, and no money in the world would make him arrange a visit.

"I was only able to induce him to do one thing." Suddenly Vera turned pale. "Serge, what if you don't remember? You are my last hope! Mikhail had a birthmark on his right arm. . . ."

"Which looked just like a spider," I said and calmed her by telling her of the incident in Auntie Kushina's parlour when he had been scalded. Her father had also told her about it.

"Now I can die in peace," she said. "There is a witness. Serge, the assistant-doctor said there was a spider-like birthmark on the patient's arm. That was just before Martha suddenly took ill. The doctor is being transferred to another town, and he has agreed, for a very large sum, to allow me

to visit Mikhail. I told him about you, and he was very impressed by your rank and title. Go to him tomorrow and arrange for the exact time and day of the visit. I know I shall not live long."

Everything came off well. The bribed doctor said we were to come at six o'clock on the 1st of December. He said the prisoner was very weak and would not live long.

On December 1st we were in the doctor's over-heated ground-floor room near the prisoner's isolated cell a full two hours before six. None of the staff were to see us. At six, when they had all gone down the corridor to supper, the doctor signalled to us, took some keys, and led us to the solitary cell.

"Wait a minute," Vera said, when he had turned the key in the lock. "Just one second."

She had difficulty in breathing. I, too, felt my knees buckling under. We were about to see Mikhail after a lapse of twenty-six years.

"Is he grey?" I asked.

I had to find out something, to prepare myself somehow, as one prepares to see the body of a dearly beloved person.

The doctor found the question to be irrelevant, and instead of answering he muttered:

"Not longer than ten minutes, as we agreed."

We entered.

A creature was sitting on a hospital cot in a room long in need of whitewashing. I didn't know who it was. There was not a single feature that resembled Mikhail's. His hair and beard were snow-white. His eyes were glassy, without a trace of intelligence. When he saw us approach, his face twitched in horror; he made as if to move and half rose to dart under the cot, but his swollen legs would not obey him. Then he made a pitiful attempt to fly away and escape his imaginary tormentors.

He stood up to his full height and placed his hands on top of his head, causing the wide sleeves to slide back and reveal his emaciated arms. A black spider with pencil-thin

legs stood out clearly on his right arm. Mikhail flapped his arms like wings. He thought he could take off.

But he did not know, as I now know, that he should first have slit his throat with a pair of scissors to let the outside air in. But this will take place tomorrow. Now I must speak of the change that had come over Mikhail.

Yes. Twenty years of solitary confinement in the Ravelin. He was then transferred to the Kazan insane asylum, where he spent another six years in solitary confinement. Twenty-six years in all. I counted them as I looked at the stranger who had not a single point of resemblance with the beautiful, inspired youth I had known. Just the black spider on the bent and flapping arm.

"Mikhail, I'm Vera. I have come. Vera . . . I'm Vera!"

She spoke in a voice that causes miracles to happen. She sunk to her knees and embraced his legs. She did not tire of calling to his darkened mind, as the Prophet called out to draw water from stone.

"I'm Vera!"

"Vera. . ." he repeated in a rasping voice unused to human speech, though it was still his voice, so deep and hollow: "Vera. . . ."

And he stretched out his hands. To Vera? No, not to her, who had performed the miracle, but to the image of Vera in her youth. He had glimpsed her in the past.

For a second his face lighted with a semblance of emotion, but the strain was too great and he collapsed on the bed.

She kissed his long, yellowed, corpse-like hands, while he stared ahead with dull, tormented eyes that reflected not a spark of thought.

"It's time to go. You'll get me in trouble, Madame! It's late, it's late!" Gorlenko repeated.

Mikhail recognized the doctor and uttered happy sounds, smacking his lips loudly and opening wide his toothless mouth.

"He wants to eat," Gorlenko said.

We left. The doctor and I took Vera home. The next day

she lay on a table, covered with a sheet, as much a stranger as Mikhail had been.

I did not recognize her when some women who had finished washing the body, said "All right," and let me in. I remember that the yellow waxen doll had two copper coins on her eyelids. A very white eyeball glistened from under one of the coppers.

"One eye didn't close. That means she has to find her enemy," an old woman said.

I am that enemy.

I did not fulfil Vera's last wish. I did not tell anyone how Mikhail died a slow death, neither then, nor in 1905, when an historian appealed to the public to shed some light on the matter.

They have found out about it from the archives without my help.

But I did not want any unpleasantness and lived quietly on my estate, and was often drunk. That is when Vera's hoopoe first entered my brain and began tapping day and night:

"No good here... no good here."

. . . . . .

Something in my brain is building up pressure of all the atmospheres. I'm putting down my pen, for I must hold my head and teach my arms to be wings—*flap! flap!*

At the first sound of the music tomorrow and the words *"'Tis the final conflict..."*

One! Slit my throat!

Two! Go through the window head-first! And to hell with the Spider!

And Mirgil will sail over the city.

The artist flies.

And years disappear....

Cavalier of the Orders of St. George, Anna, Vladimir.... R-r-ight shoulder first!

1923

TO THE READER

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