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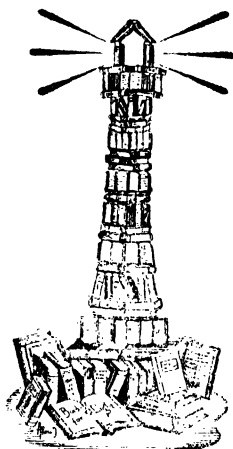
*by*

MAURICE HINDUS

Author of "Mother Russia"

*with a Preface by*

CYRIL MODAK



KITAB MAHAL

ALLAHABAD

1945

## PREFACE TO THE INDIAN EDITION

In India it is our supreme misfortune to be fed on garbage from Reuter's garbage-can. As an attempt to counteract this evil our publicists and columnists, soap-box orators and radio commentators give us enthusiastic exaggerations of things foreign, when it suits their purpose. It is refreshing, therefore, to come upon a sensitive and accomplished writer like Mr. Maurice Hindus whose eye is like the lens of a first-rate camera and whose style of writing is like the strains of a spontaneous song. We get the truth clothed in the beauty of art.

He is not out to propagandize. He is not out to rationalize. He is not out to win converts. He is merely recording with the photographer's accurate detail and the artist's colour-blending what absorbed his attention when he visited Russia during "that extraordinary period when the avalanche of new ideas first swept over the many-millioned Russian peasantry." In our age when we have got into the habit of judging first and observing afterwards, only if we are forced to, and when we are constantly annoyed at being judged without being observed or understood, it is healthy to keep company with a man who takes a positive delight in observing, understanding and recording—leaving the judgment to us.

Moreover, we in India can find many points of resemblance between our own conditions and those described in this book. Just after the Revolution Russia was not the mighty Russia of today. It was then in the throes of transition even as we are. It was shabby and even unsightly. It was quite common to see men and women walking barefooted even on the main avenues of Moscow. The ravages of the civil war could be seen everywhere. The shortage of manufactured goods was incredibly acute, much worse than in our own days of mismanaged rationing. In the villages the peasants cried for salt as they did in India during the salt-satyagraha, and for kerosene oil as tens of thousands do today in our towns. The Russian peasants had been promised a host of luxuries when the Bolsheviks needed their support. They clamoured for these new commodities.

At that time village girls in Russia like their sisters in our rural areas had not heard of the marvel of kiss-proof



lip-stick or *rugoe*. The peasants in Russia like Indian peasants still associated collars and ties with the specially privileged city folk and the collegiate sons of wealthy landlords. The word "collectivisation" was to the *muzhiks* as alien as "justice" is to our *zamindars*. Everywhere in Russia there was a sense of sullen disappointment much the same as prevailed in our country at the close of the Kaiserean War. The Russians wished more than anything else to be left alone so that they might drift along in undisturbed comfort on the wave of time-honoured tradition and usage.

Yet, despite outward manifestations, there was no denying the fact that Russia had become the battle-ground of conflicting thoughts and feelings. As Mr. Hindus says "Everywhere, especially in the villages, people argued, quarrelled, laughed, teased, cried, cursed and hoped. Nobody, not even the communists, knew definitely what the next step in the Revolution would be. Yet all felt its terrific impact. Attacks on God and the church were violent, but defences of both were no less so. Protestant missionaries trudged around the bazars of the villages preaching a new Christian gospel. Like them, youthful revolutionaries had embarked on a mission of social evangelism. They preached against alcoholism, against stealing, against bribe-giving and bribe-taking, against beating children, against self-abasement before officials, against race-prejudice and against a host of other old usages. They campaigned for education, for co-operation, for social tolerance and for class intolerance, for interest in science and all that it made possible, from disinfectants to tractors. It was, in short, a period of universal heart-searching and of romantic adventuring."

A book by Mr. Hindus dealing with one of the most exciting periods in the history of the Russian village, with comedy and tragely, hope and dismay, rapture and anguish stalking about arm-in-arm, cannot but grip the Indian reader of today, regardless of his party or class, community or caste.

CYRIL MODAK.

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## CHAPTER I

### APOLOGIA

I WENT to Russia not to interview the outstanding leaders of the Revolution. Too much had already been written about them, and they are not Russia. They are only in the limelight. To-morrow they may vanish, leaving an imprint more or less deep, more or less colourful, on the story of Russia and the world. But vanish they must if only by death. Leaders are like ships on the ocean—they come and they go; but peoples are like the ocean itself—they always remain.

I went to Russia not to study theories or problems. That would have been to follow in the footsteps of other men—many other men. Besides, since the days of the Armistice the world has had such a surfeit of theories and problems, Russian and other, that it would, I imagine, be grateful for a respite from both.

I went to Russia not to hunt for atrocities. That would have been too simple. A revolution implies atrocities, and its victims or their kin have pathetic stories to tell, none more pathetic. I need never have crossed the boundaries of the Soviet Republic to fill a tome as bulky as the Webster Dictionary with tales of horror that would have stirred the imagination of a Poe. In the capitals of Europe, particularly in Germany and the Scandinavian countries, in the cafes, club-houses, libraries and salons, I met estimable men and women, members of the former Russian nobility, the intelligentsia, the merchant classes, and also non-Russians, who never tired of narrating such tales. But the catalogue of Russian horrors had, I thought, been exhausted long before I started on my journey, so that the very theme appeared to me too hackneyed to make either interesting or valuable reading. . . .

I went to Russia not to delve into the plans and plots of the Third International to wreck the established governments of the world. An important subject, that; too important perhaps for an American journalist to ignore, especially in these days when so much is being said, in the press and in official circles, of Communist efforts to

inflare the world with revolt. But that is a job for a sleuth, and I am no sleuth, either by talent or inclination.

I went to Russia not to unearth a story, or *the* story, of the back-stage machinations of leaders and officials, men who are lusting for prestige, for grandeur, for power, intriguing against one another, seeking to manœuvre this or that adversary out of the way, so as to render their own position secure. A dramatic story that would make, and many a man has ventured to unfold it to the world, only to find himself embroiled in controversies, denials, denunciations, with the facts challenged, the truth obscured, and the reader confused and often disgusted.

I went to Russia with only one purpose in view—to hear the people talk. I use the word people not in the English, but in the Russian sense, meaning the dark masses; that is, the muzhik, the peasant. In the last analysis he is Russia; not the Russia that writes notes, issues ultimatums, signs treaties, entertains ambassadors, grants interviews to foreign correspondents, and gets into the newspaper headlines, but the Russia that toils, produces, fights, and dies.

And this Russia has hardly been heard from. This Russia of more than one hundred million souls, the largest unit of white people on earth, a population almost as large as that of the whole United States, has somehow been ignored by the outside world, by the common man as well as by the statesman and politician. Just why I do not know. Surely not because it has no story to tell. It has, and as vital and significant a story as has come out of that distracted land. And what is more, this Russia is not afraid to speak its mind. This Russia speaks as it never has spoken in all its history. Of course this Russia lies off the main roads, away from the bustle and glitter of the large cities. It offers the outsider no Hotel Savoy, with room and bath and with a luxurious dining-room and waiters who speak French, German and English as does Moscow. This Russia is outwardly coarse, un-kempt, unsightly, and for one not accustomed to it, fearfully lonely.

Certain it is that the fortunes of the Revolution are inextricably interwoven with the fortunes of this Russia. The present Soviet rulers realise it even if the outside

world does not. At present, it is true, the muzhik is easy of control. He is unorganised. He is not politically-minded. He shrinks from an encounter with authority. But will he remain so in the future? And if he ever slips out of Communist control, he will fall into the hands of—whom? No one knows. No one can tell. But the Bolshevik leaders will take no chances. The slogan of 'facing the village' is but an expression of the conviction that to succeed, the Revolution must have the support of the peasant. Hence this feverish concern about him, this study and discussion and wrangling over his problems, his needs, his sympathies, his powers, his future . . . this desperate effort to keep him contented.

I knew the Russia of the peasant in the pre-war days. I was once part of it, and I wanted to see it again after the years of internecine conflict. I wanted to know what the muzhik thought of the Revolution, the Bolsheviks, the Soviets, the entire new social structure that had sprung into being before his very eyes. I wanted to know what the Revolution had done to him—had it battered down his old mode of living, his old ideas of government, society, man, life, morality, religion? Had it inspired him with a new courage, a new hope, a new ambition? Had it made him more happy, more proud, more knowing? Or had it dragged him to a new bondage, a new darkness, a new woe? I wanted to see how the Revolution had etched itself on his heart and mind.

I speak the language of the Muzhik and went to him directly. I went wherever I pleased. My American passport, properly visaed and endorsed by the Moscow authorities, opened all doors and all roads for me. No one ever stopped me. No one ever molested me. Down the Volga, through the Tartar Republic, the Ukraine, Great Russia, White Russia, Central Russia, the Cossack *stanitsas* (settlements), I went from village to village, on trains wherever I could, on horse and on foot when there was no train. I stayed with peasants in their homes, went with them to their fields, their churches, their dances, their festivals, their weddings, their funerals, their mass-meetings.

Then I went to the village of my birth, a small village of about one hundred and eighty families tucked away in the mudlands of Central Russia, about half a day's

journey from the railroad, when the road is dry, and when it is not—well, people get there sometime. I visited the old home, old friends, old playmates ; that is, those who have survived the onslaught of war, revolution, and plague, and many of them have not—alas, how many ! I talked to every person of consequence and inconsequence, old men, old women, young people, boys and girls, children, Communists, non-Communists. I visited the priest, the deacon, the psalm-reader of the parish church. I went to the Soviet offices, the Soviet courts, the Soviet schools, the Soviet playgrounds, the Soviet children's homes ; and all that I heard, observed, and sometimes what I felt, I have set down in the following pages, and I assure the reader that the story of the muzhik in my old village is essentially the story of the muzhik throughout Russia. That is my only excuse for recording it in print.

However, I wish to warn the reader that this is no tale of stirring adventure. Nor is it a work of literary art. Rather is it a document of a simple people in the travail of a great agony and a great ecstasy.

## CHAPTER II

### A PEASANT TRAIN

THE night was dark and it was raining heavily. A cold wind blew blasts of rain into my face as the *drozhky* (cab) clattered along the cobbles of the unlighted, deserted streets of the city of M—. The *izvoshtchik* (cabman) continually clucked his tongue and flicked his whip as Russians do when they urge a horse to an increased pace. Several times he turned and apologised profusely for the tattered top and the cushionless seat. He was sorry an American gentleman had to ride in such a wreck of a cab. But what could he do ? Bread for himself and hay for the old mare was the most he could now hope for.....This plagued Revolution..... It was crushing the *izvoshtchik* worse than any one else..... It had driven away all of his best friends, the landlord, the army-officer, the official, the gay maiden, the sport, the clubman, everybody.....There were only pigs left in Russia now, and they needed no tops, no cushions, no rugs....No, a stall they needed, those dirty beasts.....who always

bargained down their fares to a mere pittance, as though an *izvoshtchik* had no right to white bread and tea and sugar, yes, and a new pair of boots.....

The wailing of the *izvoshtchik* was an old story to me now. I had heard it so many times in Russian cities since the day of my arrival, and not only from the lips of cabman. Every foreigner hears it, for Rudin has not died yet. He probably never will. Now as in the days of Turgenev's pathetic hero the Russian loves to unburden himself of his agonies, and who in the world can lament as eloquently as the Russian? Listening to him in his hour of woe, painful as it may be, is as stirring an experience as reading *Faust* or *Crime and Punishment* or listening to a Tchaikovsky sonata.

When I first arrived in Leningrad and the porter and the chambermaid and the tailor at my hotel began to un-load to me the story of their privations, adding a fresh bit of woe at every visit, I suspected them, naturally enough, of a covert motive of their own, of a wish to exploit my sympathies and excite me into slipping into their hands a coveted American dollar bill. No doubt such was the motive of many of the complainants. Of many, but not of all. For there was that hunch-backed old woman in Leningrad in large felt boots and with a huge black shawl on her head, from whom I bought my morning papers. She never ceased to chant the doleful refrain: "There is no hope for us Russians, none whatever, and no consolation, either." Yet she would run after me and insist that I take all the change that was coming to me, all of it, to the last greasy copeck. And there was Tanya, the beautiful blue-eyed waitress in one of Moscow's dingiest tea-shops. She just wanted to talk to an *inostranetz* (foreigner), she would say. It did her good to talk herself out. But as for gratuities—she was not that kind—oh, no, *Bozhe moy* (my God) no.....She was no servant, not a real one.....even though she was wearing felt boots instead of stylish leather shoes.....Once she had servants of her own.....and a French governess, too.....

Then there was that strange young man who still haunts me. I was in a restaurant waiting for my food to be brought to me, when he came in and asked for permission to sit at my table. Tall, broad-shouldered, handsome, with a

pale face, finely twirled moustaches and large, hunted grey eyes, he had the air of a well-bred person, a former nobleman, a writer, an artist. He leaned back in his chair, lighted a cigarette and through the veil of smoke that circled round his head peered at me, so intently that I wondered if he was not a secret agent out to shadow my movements. Then leaning forward he asked timidly and apologetically whether I was a foreigner, and if so whether an Englishman or an American? 'Happy man,' he whispered after I made my reply. I yearned to draw him into conversation but somehow dared not, lest I pry open a wound that had better remain untouched. Soon he turned to me again and whispered sorrowfully: 'Happy man, yes, happiest of men! Do you understand?' After a brief pause during which he eyed me with tragic enviousness, he added: 'That's all I'll say to you—happiest of men.' Thereupon he rose, donned his hat, put out his cigarette, bade me farewell and walked briskly out. I never saw him again.

So the plaint of the *izvoshtchik*, impressive and characteristic enough, was an old song to me now. In my heart I wished that he would talk less and drive more carefully, for the cab shook and reeled and wobbled. Every time it turned a corner I expected it to come apart, and every time it bumped into an obstacle I bounded out of my seat and then fell with a bone-cracking crash on to the cushionless seat. I held fast with both hands to the disrobed hoops of the top, which squeaked and rattled like some monstrous skeleton. But then—who can stop a Russian with a troubled heart from talking?

It was a dismal evening. Not a light anywhere; not a soul out; not even a dog barking. Peace and darkness brooded over the rows of cottages which we were passing. Only the wind howled and the shade-trees shivered. The rain crawled with a chill over my skin, and the wheels hurled lumps of mud at my face and clothes.

Yet I was of good cheer. I did not mind the weather nor the discomforts. My mind was teeming with happy and thrilling thoughts. I was as full of zest and expectation as a hunter who after much joyless marching catches view of the coveted game. I was on the threshold of a stirring adventure. In another day I should be in the old village, in the place of my birth. I was now on the way to



the railroad station for the final lap of my railroad journey.

Soaked in rain and plastered with mud I finally arrived at the station. Once it was a towering and magnificent brick structure with a buffet with long counters groaning under the weight of steaming samovars, breads and cakes, baskets of fish and meats, and displays of all manner of liquors. Now it was a wreck with only the front part rescued from ruin and held together none too securely by stalwart logs and manifold scaffoldings. 'The Poles blew it up,' moaned the *izvoshtchik*, 'the plagued Po'as.....'

I grabbed my suit-case and typewriter and rushed inside. There were no first and second and third classes as in former times. It was all first now, or was it third? In the waiting-room at any rate there were no distinctions between rich and poor. The floor was littered with papers, mud and bits of plaster that had fallen from the ceiling. The air was raw, damp, smelly. Scores of men, women, children, peasants, and tramps lay huddled together on the floor, sound asleep. They were all in their clothes and had no bedding except their bundles, some of them using blocks of wood for pillows.

A common sight they were, though, at all Russian railroad stations, these sleeping hordes, as common as the big kettles of hot water for the use of passengers to make tea, or the flamboyant Soviet posters plastered on the walls, doors, and fences. Only the previous night, accompanied by a young American congressman, I had made the rounds of the waiting-rooms in the city of Borisov. To him these crowds of peasants sleeping in their clothes on the bare floor made a pathetic spectacle. Yet where shall the peasant or vagabond in Russia seek shelter for the night? Neither can afford the price of a bed in a hostelry. In America or Germany, if he dared fall asleep in the railroad station, a policeman would jerk him into wakefulness and drag him perhaps into the street. He would be regarded as a nuisance, or a potential menace to public health and safety. Shall I forget that night in Berlin when I was passing the *Friedrichstrasse* depôt and saw several Slav families, war refugees, cooped up with their furniture and bundles and sleeping children and crying babies on the pavement with a January sleet and rain beating down on them? They had just been

driven from the waiting-room where they had tried to settle for the night. Such things could not happen in Russia. For Russia is still too primitive to place hygiene and public safety above charity.

Though it was half an hour before my train was due to leave, I decided to get in and make myself comfortable. A man with an enormous moustache, wearing a sheepskin coat, muddy boots and the Soviet insignia of mallet and sickle on top of his black cap, punched my ticket and directed me lazily to my train by simply nodding in the direction of the tracks outside. There were no lights on any of the tracks or platforms, and no signs explaining train directions. All I could see were endless lines of unlighted cars jutting out of the darkness like a range of hills. Where my train was and how to find it I did not know.

Presently an old woman in *lapti* (bast sandals) came out, with two heavy bundles suspended from her shoulders. She peered into the dark, sighed, muttered something to herself, and inquired for the very train for which I was searching. I shrugged my shoulders. Instantly she fell to scolding and swearing at herself, the weather, the Soviets, and particularly her husband, Stepan. What a fool she had been to mind him! His idea had been that if she had driven the black nag to town she might have got mired or broken the eggs, or spilled the berries she was taking to market! The dirty scoundrel! She would settle it with him when she got home! By Jove she would!

Luckily two men appeared, also in *lapti* and with bundles. (Has any one ever seen a Russian peasant starting on a railroad trip without looking like a camel going off on a journey in the desert all weighted down with packs and bundles?) They said they knew where our train was. They, too, were going to take it; so the old woman and I followed them. We crossed several tracks, came to a long row of cars, and halted abruptly. The men looked baffled and disappointed. There was no train in sight. They sighed, looked around, and sighed again.

'Since the Poles have been here,' remarked one of them with disgust, 'everything has been upset.'

The wind wheezed and whistled. The rain stung our faces. We trudged back to our starting-point and followed the track in the opposite direction. Other passengers joined

us, and all the while the woman was muttering curses upon her Stepan, and one of the men, talkative and impetuous, continued his tirade against the Poles. The beasts—they ruined everything.....burned houses, barns, haystacks.....blew up bridges, trains.....And the Reds were not much better.....Why did not they stop orating and start doing things ?.....Akh, if only the Germans had not left when peace came.....There was a clever people.....Taxes would not be so high.....salt would not be so costly.....rye would not be so cheap.....and trains would be where they ought to be. .....That was the luck of the peasant.....He was like an apple-tree at the roadside.....Everyone who passed could shake its fruit or throw rocks at it.....Everyone had been against him, the Czar, the landlords, the priests, the Reds.....even God.....else why had not He kept the Germans in Russia ?.....

Harsh words these were! A Russian wishing the Germans had not abandoned the conquered territory in his country, particularly his own village! No national spirit, no national pride, no devotion to clan or race. Yet what else shall we expect of the peasant? What does he know of Russia? Who ever taught him to glory in the achievements of his people? He knows not even what these achievements are and cares less. It matters not to him who rules over him, a Russian, a German, an Abyssinian, as long as he is allowed to do as he pleases in his own village, and can sell dear and buy cheap.

At last we stumbled on an interminably long row of cars, and inquiry disclosed that the very end coach was bound for my destination. I rejoiced, but alas, too soon! A mob had gathered at the entrance, peasants returning from a fair, men, women, boys and girls, with their inevitable bundles and big straw baskets resting on their heads, backs and shoulders. They were waiting their turn to pass by the conductor who was standing at the gateway, smoky lantern in hand, laboriously examining tickets and admitting passengers one by one. I had never seen such clumsy procedure. It seemed so needlessly provoking, so outrageously neglectful of the health and comfort of the public. Why, I thought, could not the tickets be examined, punched and marked inside the coach, and the passengers saved the agony of a cold drenching? I did not know, but I was soon to learn.

'We'll be so heavy,' said an old man, shaking the drops of rain out of his long beard, 'that the plagued locomotive won't be able to pull us. As it is, it crawls along no faster than a worm.'

'Cheer up, *dedushka* (grandfather),' remarked a nearby youth, 'you'll soon have so much rain on you, you won't need to go on the train. You'll be able to swim home.'

Then something happened. Someone in the back started to push. The crowd veered forward like one man, knocked the lantern from the conductor's hand, pushed him against the back railing, and started joyously in a noiseless jam, for the car. But the conductor was soon on his feet again, wildly flourishing his arms like a man chasing a flock of chickens, shouting hysterically, '*Nelzia, grazhdane, nelzia*' (don't, citizens, don't), and pushing us back with chest, shoulders, head. A young fellow leaped somewhere out of the dark to help him, a sturdy youth with a massive back, a large head, and the strength of a Hercules. He wore *lapti*. Soon the two pushed us off the platform into the cold drizzle.

Then followed enlightenment—as always happens in Russia when a mob thinks itself superior to the law. It was Elihu root, I think, who said once that Russia's chief trouble was the fact that she had so many orators, one hundred and sixty millions of them. That may be her chief trouble. It most certainly is her chief charm. The Russian loves to talk and he can talk—even the peasant, or rather especially the peasant. He has the rare faculty of never being dull. His vocabulary averages only eight hundred words, and no man has ever used such a meagre fund of words with more graceful effectiveness. His speech is a classic example of simplicity and frankness and it drips with warmth, like his songs and stories.

It was not the conductor, but the strange young man in *lapti* who rose to the occasion.

'Citizens,' he began in a vigorous voice, 'why do you suppose the conductor is so strict in examining your tickets before you board the train? Do you imagine it gives him pleasure to keep himself and you out in the rain? Do you suppose that in our new Russia the government has no higher consideration for your comfort and welfare? Remember, citizens, the Soviets are not the Czar and the

*pomieshtchiks* (landlords). But what else shall they do? So many of us, muzhiks, are thieves, and do everything we can to beat the government out of railway fares, and if the Soviets would let us enter the train without first examining and marking our tickets, thieves that we are, so many of us, we'd sneak in under the seats or squeeze in somewhere between the baggage and steal the ride. We all have to suffer on account of those of our dark muzhiks who are base enough to cheat the Soviets of what is their due.'

Silence and attention. No one made reply. 'Who could or would? There were logic and justice in the speaker's argument and a spirit of comradely appeal that was disarming. He did not scold. He did not supplicate. He merely explained, a wise leader, whoever he was, and the crowd listened with upturned faces. He would have continued for another hour and held his audience despite the rain and the cold, for if the Russian loves to talk, he loves to listen no less—to a good speaker.

Finally I scrambled inside. It was a regular enough coach I entered, with large windows, doorless compartments, and the usual double tier of bunks. But what a jam, what disorder! Except for a burning candle in one of the compartments, which a passenger must have brought along, there was no light anywhere. Peasants with their eternal bundles lay packed like herring on the bare bunks and on the floor. Others sat or stood around in the aisles, smoking *machorka*—the vilest tobacco in the world—rolled into coarse wrapping-paper. Still others crouched on the window-sills, or on the baggage shelves, where no passengers were supposed to ride lest the supports give way and they crash with all the baggage on the people below. I had a reservation for a bunk, and when I finally jolted through the crowd, stepping on legs, toes, and arms, and located the right number, I discovered an old woman in mud-soaked bast sandals, stretched comfortably on it, with her arms about a small girl, and both snoring heavily.

It was just as well. I could not have lain there anyway. The smoke, the garlic of the *kolbasa* (home-made sausage), the smell of steaming bodies, were unbearable. I could feel the air beating on my face in hot waves. I grew dizzy. I thought I should faint, though I had never fainted

in all my life. I made my way to one of the windows and tried to open it, but it would not come down. It was nailed up at the top. I pried the nails loose with a jack-knife, scratching my fingers until they bled. Then I pushed the window down and put my head out. It felt so good to breathe deep the pure moist air and to feel the chilly drizzle on my hot face.

Soon I felt someone rubbing me gently on the shoulder. It was a peasant with a massive black beard and in a tall sheepskin hat, peering down from the narrow baggage shelf directly over my head.

'Citizen,' said he softly, 'shut the window, please.'

There is an indefinable charm, at least to me, in the word 'citizen,' which is in such universal use in Russia now. There is romance in it and no little historic meaning. It is the symbol of a new epoch. In the old days *gospodin* (master or mister) was the correct form of salutation between strangers. Now, of course, no one uses the word, except the recalcitrant *izvoshchiks* who yearn for the old days, the old 'gentlemen,' and the old tips. With the coming of the Revolution, Russia pounced on *tovarishtsh* (comrade)—a leap from frigid formality to affectionate intimacy. Everybody was *tovarishtsh*, everybody but the bourzhui, and he was Cain and Judas rolled into one. Then the Revolution scurried into a corner. The *Nep* (New Economic Policy) emerged, with its legalisation of private property and private trade, and *tovarishtsh*, save among the members of the inner circle, gave way to the respectable *grazhdanin* (citizen). There is a smack of middle-class smugness in the word, and the pious Communist loathes it, and with reason; for to him it marks compromise and retreat.

I paid no heed to the request of the bearded muzhik. He repeated it again and again, and for the fourth time. There was no use ignoring it further.

'But the air is so foul here,' I protested.

'Never mind foul air, citizen,' retorted the muzhik with dilatory good-nature. 'As long as it is warm, it will do no one harm'; and after a thoughtful pause he added philosophically, 'You see, stranger, there are two enemies man must guard against—thieves and draughts, and the best way to keep both out is to hold doors and windows shut tight.'

Hardly had he finished when another voice, shrill and angry, fell on my ears.

'Hey, there, citizen, what in the devil do you mean by letting in such a draught? Shut that window. I cannot sleep.'

It was a woman's voice from one of the upper bunks directly across the aisle. I could not see her face in the dark, but I could hear her vigorously scratching herself.

'There is such a frightful smell here, *baba* (old woman),' I objected.

'A bourzhui apparently,' someone near by sneered. 'Proletarian air sets against his stomach.'

That was a slam! A bourzhui, a tenderfoot, a poor sport, was I? I'd show them--and I did. Immediately I shut the window with a bang which made the panes rattle. Sooner or later I should have had to yield anyway, or else rise in arms against the entire mob in the car. Talk about bigger and better wars! Someone should have written to the judges of the contest on the subject which *Life* had once conducted, to suggest that the Russian be compelled to hold open his windows thirteen minutes every day. That would stir the mightiest uprising in history! Is there a right more sacred to the Russian, especially to the peasant, than the right to breathe foul air? He would fight for it to the last hair in his shaggy beard.

I propped my suit-case against the wall and slouched down on it with my head against the moist and chilly windows. The train had begun to move, slowly, with a roaring tremble. The passengers had settled down for the journey. In the corner was a group of young people, boys and girls, returning from a convention of the *Komso-moltsi* (Young Communists). They were singing, laughing, flinging hats and papers at each other in the manner of a crowd of American college youths returning from a football victory. A baby squalled, and the mother slapped it viciously. Down the aisle, seated on their bundles with a straw basket for a table and burning candle pasted at the edge, was a party of men playing cards. Farther down was a group of older peasants chatting quietly, smoking pipes and cigarettes, eating black bread and sausage; and in the opposite corner, shrouded in darkness, someone was softly

playing an accordion and several men were humming a melody. No one seemed to mind the crowding, the darkness, the fetid air, the lack of seats, the fearful jerking of the train. No one grumbled at the accommodations—such is the preposterous indifference of the peasant to physical discomfort. One does not know whether to admire or deplore his capacity for privation. It speaks of amazing physical vitality, and of still more amazing physical adaptability.

I heard a familiar voice calling. It was the peasant with the black beard. Would I jump up and join him? He would stack up his bundles and make room for me. Wouldn't I, please?

I did. In another instant I was comfortably ensconced in the midst of smelly bundles on a high hanging bunk, my head touching the ceiling of the coach.

'A stranger here?' asked my companion. He had long black hair, a lofty forehead, and prominent cheek-bones. His small eyes were kind and calm.

'Yes, a stranger,' I replied.

'A foreigner?'

'A foreigner.'

'A German?'

'No.'

'A Pole?'

'No.'

'Ah!'

A pause. I made no haste to volunteer the information he was seeking. I knew he would continue his questions, for there is nothing a peasant loves more than to ply a stranger with personal queries. He would as soon ask a man (or a woman for that matter) his name as his age, and whether he is married, and if not why not, and when would he be, and to whom, and where? In fairness, however, it must be stated that he answers such questions as readily as he asks them. Privacy is the last thing he holds sacred or necessary.

After a lengthy pause he remarked: 'We've had no other kind of foreigners in these here parts.'

'And have you ever heard of any other kind?' I inquired.

He shrugged his shoulders.



'The Lord knows. Maybe I have, but I don't remember. Of course there are the Turks.'

'And the Gipsies,' I added.

'They are no foreigners, brother,' he protested seriously. 'They are just wanderers, like birds.'

Again an interval of silence followed.

'And what countryman are you ? ' he finally asked.

'I am from America, uncle.'

'An American !' he exclaimed with surprise. 'Ah ! Welcome, most welcome.'

Of course he had heard of America. Who had not in these days when nearly everyone had friends and relatives there ? Several boys from his village had gone there years ago in the days before the war. Perhaps I had seen them there—Grigor, Vassil, Lukyan, Matvey ? Fine boys, all of them, all except Vassil, and he had committed a terrible wrong. Yes, he had. He wooed a girl before he left, and promised to marry her, and she believed him. Who would not ? He always had been so kind and upright. But never a word had she received from him since he left, and she had got into trouble, too, had given birth to a baby, and she had written to him, asking him to come home or send for her, and he never so much as acknowledged her letters. . . . Maybe he died or got killed somewhere . . . who knew ? And one of the boys, Havrillo, sent a wedding gift to his sister who got married last fall, a pair of lacquered boots, with pretty blue felt on the inside, and also a roll of silk, pretty silk. All the women from the villages around came to see and feel and admire these gifts, and what did I suppose she did with them ? She never wore them for fear they would get soiled, and she still kept them locked up in a trunk. A rich country this America must be, eh ? Wonderfully rich when a plain muzhik could send such expensive gifts home. Surely that was why none of the boys had come back, and some had been gone a long, long time, more than ten years.....lucky boys.....

'And that reminds me of something,' he continued, 'which I am sure you can explain. When we had the famine in our unfortunate Russia, a nephew of mine who is in the American city Detroit sent me a parcel, and there was white flour in it and pork and sugar and several sealed cans. I

opened one of the cans, and there was something brownish in it. I dipped my tongue in and tasted it. It was like boiled milk, only it was too thick and too sweet for milk. I thought maybe it was cream and dipped my tongue in again. But it was too sweet even for cream. So I called over my old woman, showed the open can to her. "What is it?" she asked. "That's what I want to know," I said; "taste it." She did and smacked her lips again and again. "Milk?" she suggested. "Isn't it too thick and too sweet for milk?" said I. "Ay, it is," said she, "and for cream too." We wondered and wondered what it could be, and couldn't decide. But we liked it and ate it on our bread. And then one night my brother came and we let him sample it, and what do you suppose he said? Why, it was milk, he said, and if it was not like ours, it was because there were special cows in America that gave that brand of milk.'

I felt it my bounden duty to initiate him into the mysteries of American condensed milk, and when I finished he asked apologetically if I would be obliging enough to reveal to him the secret of making it?

He proposed that I share supper with him; that is, if I did not mind eating the coarse home-raised fare of a *kozshik*. He had sausage, black bread, and a sack of cucumbers which he had bought in the bazaar in exchange for a rooster. I told him I had had my supper. But wouldn't I have a bite anyway? he pleaded. Surely I wouldn't refuse? No man must ever refuse an invitation to eat, and any man could always eat something, whether he had had his meal or not, couldn't he? *He* always could. Thereupon he unwound a little sack and spread it before me—sausage, apples, bread, a cucumber. Then he leaned his head down over the shelf with mouse-like caution and timidity and looked around as though to make sure that no one was within hearing and seeing distance.

'And how about a drink of *samogon* (home-brew),' he whispered. 'Made it myself several months ago, glorious stuff, brother, better than any spirits of the old days.'

He fumbled in one of his bundles, pulled out a bottle wrapped in a piece of linen, drew out the rag stopper and offered it to me. I tasted its contents and my tongue and lips burned. Swiftly I handed him back the bottle. Wouldn't I really have any more? I hadn't even wet my lips, and he

thought Americans were a sturdy people! Why, a Russian would think nothing of emptying a tea-glass of home-brew at one drinking. He was so surprised! *Na*, to my health anyway and to the health of all Americans! We shook hands. Then he drew back into the corner, dropped back his head, stuck the throat of the bottle into his mouth and gurgled down the fiery stuff as though it were sweet' birch-sap.

'Do many peasants make home-brew?' I asked.

'Many? Ay, brother, there is hardly one who doesn't.'

'In all the villages around here?'

'In all Russia, so they say, those who have been about the world more than I have. And why shouldn't people make it? They've got to have it to give them strength, to stir them up, and it is cheap, too, much cheaper than the government *vodka*.'

'And have you all stills?'

'Stills? The devil with stills! It's dangerous to have them. The cursed militia is all the time sneaking round, and some of those chaps have such a keen scent for a still that no matter whether you hide it in a haymow or in the ground in a cellar, they find it, and then, haw, haw, haw, how strict they are! It's ten or twenty gold roubles for a fine and months in jail, too. You see the Soviets don't want us to drink home-brew. But—there's lot of things they don't want us to do, yet we do them.'

'And where have you muzhiks learnt to make it?'

'The Lord only knows. All I know is that we are all making it.'

Here was a curious phenomenon. In the old days the peasant bought his vodka in the government shops in sealed bottles. He seldom made drinks of his own, that is, nothing stronger than *kvas*, a ferment of stale bread and water. But now he had become one of the most proficient makers of spirits in the world, and the Soviets, despite all their vigilance, seemed unable to stem the flood of peasant boot-legging. That, doubtless, was one reason why they have abolished prohibition.

Meanwhile my over-generous companion lifted the bottle out of the bundle once more and insisted that I take at least

another swallow. He would listen to no excuses. Homebrew, he insisted, was the muzhik's pride and glory, and how could I refuse to share it with him? Wouldn't I quaff at least enough to be able to tell friends on my return to America what a rejuvenating drink it was, and how freely the Russian was offering it to strangers?

The air was making my head swirl. I jumped down and went out on the platform for an airing. It was wet and dark there, and rain was dripping in from the sides and from the top. Gusts of wind blew playfully in and out. I was standing with the door somewhat ajar so as to keep the rain off, expecting any moment to hear someone yell at me to shut it, and when I saw the conductor coming toward me, I was sure he would tell me either to get in or get out and shut the door. However, I knew the weakness of Russians for American cigarettes, and quickly I slipped a package of Camels into the conductor's hand. He was so overcome with surprise and joy he hardly knew what to say. Genuine American cigarettes—the best in the world—ah, what good fortune! He would remember me—always. Would I be on the train the day after to-morrow, or somewhere at any of the stations on the way? He would bring me a real *gostinets* (present)—a sackful of freshly dried pumpkin and sunflower seeds! American cigarettes, a whole package! That was good luck. By Jove! Meanwhile I had my way and held the door open.

Presently two youths came over and introduced themselves—clean-cut boys of about seventeen or eighteen with ruddy faces and sparkling eyes. Would I pardon them for intruding? They had heard I was from America, and they so wanted to know many things about this most bourgeois country in the world. Would I tell them how the revolutionary movement was progressing there? Not very well? Indeed? Why not? Ah, of course they knew. Comrade So-and-So had explained it to them at one of the sessions of the convention of the Young Communists from which they were now returning. It was all on account of the grafters and traitors in the American labour movement who were selling out the American proletariat to the bourgeoisie. But *nichevo!* Other men would come, real revolutionaries, like Ilyitch (Lenin), who would be brave and daring and honest enough

to tell the American capitalists what is what. They were not worried about the lack of revolutionary spirit in the American proletariat. It would come. It had to.

And would I tell them whether it was easy to get into America? It was not, especially for Russians? Well, nobody would have to know *they* were Communists, would they? How could the American government ever find it out, anyway? They would love to go there, and they would like a job in a mine. No, they cared for no work on a farm. Farmers were hopelessly bourgeois. But miners—they were proletarians of proletarians! Ahh, how wonderful it would be to get into an American mining camp, to enlighten the miners, to awaken their class-consciousness, to prepare them for the big final struggle, which never could be won without the support of the miners, yes, and of the railroad workers! Lenin himself had said that, and it was so true."

But then—well, they must not talk only of politics. There were so many other things about America that they hungered to know, and wouldn't I come in and meet the other young people in their delegation and talk to all of them?

I readily agreed, and word spread rapidly that there was an American aboard, and I was surrounded by an eager, curious, questioning mob.

Here is a strange paradox. By all the laws of logic America should be the country most despised in Russia, especially in Bolshevik circles. Is not she, when measured by the Bolshevik social yard-stick, the most reactionary nation in the world, the most powerful and most desperate foe of radical labour organisations? Are not her Fords and her chambers of commerce the most crushing brakes on the American revolutionary movement? Was not her Hughes the most implacable foe of the Soviets? And are not her capitalists the most stiff-necked, the most exasperatingly cool concession-seekers they had ever encountered?

And yet not even in Czecho-Slovakia, Poland, and the Baltic States, is America so earnestly and so universally idolised as in Russia. An American is a superior being, accurate, punctual, daring, persistent, a worker of prodigious miracles, a modern and unconquerable Don Quixote. 'As

ingenious as a Yankee' is a phrase one frequently encounters in Bolshevik writings. Wherever I went in village and city, as soon as my American origin became known, friendly and curious mobs would surround me and swamp me with all manner of queries about life and work in America. Again and again Soviet officials would say to me that Russia's salvation lay in her ability to learn to do things in the American way, which is the best way. Often I had to laugh at the exaggerated notions of peasants as to America's power of achievement, as when a bearded muzhik from the province of Tula asked me once whether it was true that an American had invented a machine which could either start or stop rains. Had Soviet finances permitted and had the American government approved, hundreds of Russian college youths would be sent there annually to perfect themselves in the universities and workshops for their lifework at home. 'Even your money is so different from ours or from any other in Europe,' the editor of a provincial daily remarked. 'Your bills are such a delight to the eye, really pretty to look at, and so convenient to carry around, all of the same size and of such excellent paper that neither tears nor wrinkles nor fades like ours, or the German, or even the French paper moneys.' Without any effort of her own, and in spite of her stern political attitude, America is the most esteemed and the best advertised country in Russia, with a fund of goodwill on the part of all classes of Russians, which may in the future have far-reaching consequences for both nations and possibly for the whole world.

I was answering questions hurled at me from all directions by men, women, and principally the Young Communists, when a red-bearded peasant with a large head, a broad face, a heavy nose and lofty forehead, one of those Tolstoyan type of muzhiks one sees at every step in the Russian villages, suddenly burst in with a remark which shattered the good-humour and the hilarity of the crowd.

'You'd better tell us, citizen,' he said, 'whether your peasants in America are as ragged as we are and wear such tattered *khalats* (jackets) as mine is. See? That's our great misfortune, brother, the poor muzhik can buy

nothing.' There was anger, pathos and earnestness in his voice, and his eyes gleamed with suppressed fury.

'A *koolack* (wealthy peasant),' whispered one of the youths who was standing at my right. 'He lives in our village, and he hates the Soviets because last year they made him give his three horses for several days to some of the poor people, so they could draw in their hay from the fields.'

The peasant overheard these words and roared out: 'And why should I give my horses to other people?'

'Because,' the youth replied, 'you should help your poor neighbour like a brother. All peasants and proletarians should live like brothers.'

The peasant was unimpressed. 'And who ever gave me anything, when I had no horse?' he shouted. 'I bled and sweated and saved copeck on copeck and bought a mare and raised my own horses. Let others do the same. It's all right though. They'll never again play such a trick on me. By Jove, they won't! If they want me to give my horses to other people, let them give me something, too, a pair of boots, an overcoat, something. They won't again make me do all the giving. If they try, well, I'll slash the throat of every horse I have. I won't allow them to cheat me like that again.'

The Young Communists only laughed. They did not seem to be in the mood for an argument with the infuriated peasant. 'No use talking to him,' remarked one of them. 'He is the darkest of the dark, a beast'; and they resumed the interrupted discussion of America, while the red-bearded man gathered about him a small group of passengers and launched into a renewed attack on the existing scheme of things. Then a priest approached us, a middle-aged man, beardless, with long grey hair falling loose over his back. He had a broad bony face, flushed at the cheek-bones, and large despairing eyes.

'Pardon me, citizen,' he broke in, 'can you tell me if the American government has stopped supporting the Church like the Russian Soviets?'

'In America the government never did support the Church,' explained one of the Young Communists triumphantly.

'But they don't put the priests out of their houses as they do here, do they?' challenged the priest.

'And whose houses are they throwing you out of, *batiushka* (little father)?' questioned the Communist sharply. 'Aren't they the property of the government? You say nothing about that.'

'Government!' repeated the priest bitterly. 'Your Lenin never dreamed of Soviets or a Soviet government when my house was built,' and as though realising the futility of further efforts at conversation with me in the presence of the Young Communists, he walked off chuckling, but not with joy.

'A fountain of beastly darkness,' muttered someone.

'The Soviets have been too kind to his breed. They ought not only to kick them all out of their houses, but to clap them in jail, where they'd fester away in their own darkness.'

I glanced at the last speaker. He was not more than nineteen—a short, stocky, wiry youth with cool eyes, the rugged face, the broad nose, the soft brown hair, the placid features and the wistful look of a peasant. Had I seen him at a village festival leading a chorus in song, or whirling round in a waltz or polka, I should have thought him a jolly lad, humble, warm-hearted, of no outstanding quality or achievement, respectful to elders and incapable of the thrusts of which he had just delivered himself. In the old days he would have bowed to the little father, kissed him on the hand, spoken to him softly, reverently, submissively, for was not the *batiushka* as mighty as the Czar, yes, and God, and with power to invoke aid in punishment of the rude and the unruly? And now this unprepossessing peasant youth saw in the little father a mean and ugly creature worthy only of contempt and annihilation.

I felt sorry for the priest, for in spite of possible past errors and misdeeds, here he was a stooping, bedraggled old man with the heels of his boots worn off, with agony peering out of his eyes, seemingly too weak and helpless to be capable of further harm or interference. But the young Communists would not have it so. They laughed at my words of sympathy for the man. A revolution, remarked one of them, is no jest, and real revolution-



aries cannot bother to be ceremonious or sentimental about their foes.

When I was alone the priest approached me again, this time accompanied by a tall, handsome woman with greyish hair, a glowing face, and large, tragic eyes. He introduced her as his wife.

'For thirty years,' he began, 'ever since we have been married, we had known no sorrow. The good Lord our Father had spared us tribulation. And now our lives have been shattered. Everything we possessed has been taken away from us, our money, our land, our orchard, and now the Soviets are driving us from the house, and did you hear these young brigands—these wicked Young Communists—how they scoffed at me?'

'What hurts me most,' said his wife with that ringing animation and appealing pathos which are so nobly distinctive of the Russian woman, is the orchard. *Milenky* (dear), the labour, the care, the tenderness, the love, we have lavished on it! It was like a dear child to both of us. The little father and I planted it with our own hands just after we got married, and from year to year we enlarged and improved it and watched it grow and mature and took such joy and pride in it, and when our first fruit came we were so rejoiced we dared not eat it. We kept it on the table in our sitting-room, fondled it, showed it to our friends and thrilled with happiness at their words of praise . . . and now it has been taken away from us, and the Soviets have rented it to some lazy vagabond who knows as much about an orchard as a cow, and, *milenky*, how he has neglected it—how he has let it overgrow and droop and break. . . . A murderer he is, slaughtering that lovely child of ours before our own eyes. That is what hurts the most—we have to see it everyday, see it butchered, this lovely orchard of ours. *Bozhe moy*, if we could only flee away from here, anywhere across the sea, into the mountains, the desert, anywhere, where we could forget our past and start life anew, and not see these ghastly people and hear their insolent words! ' *Bozhe moy*. . . . '

She bowed her head and her deep bosom heaved with sobs.

'Nu, nu, that will do,' the priest patted her gently. 'You've cried enough, Tanyechka. Stop, little mother,

please. We'd better ask this American if he can help us get over to his country. People believe in God there, don't they? They go to church, don't they? If we could only find a parish there, let it be the smallest in the world, we won't mind, if we only had a hut of our own and a piece of ground for a garden and orchard.'

Young Communists passed by us several times, smiled and winked at me, and made contemptuous faces at the priest.

'If you can help us, citizen,' pleaded the woman, 'we'd never forget you, would we, little father?'

'Ay, indeed, we wouldn't,' he reiterated touchingly.

'Write to us, please,' she begged, smiling sadly, as I left them.

The Young Communists invited me to join them in their compartment, but I was too weary for further conversation, and instead I climbed up the 'baggage shelf' where the kindly black-bearded muzhik had made a place for me. He was sound asleep now, leaning backward on his bundles, his feet doubled under him, his face upturned, his heavy beard poised in the air like a dagger, and his mouth half-open. He did not hear me move about, and quietly I readjusted my suit-case and rested my back against it. I was in full view of the coach below. Most of the compartments that formerly had candles burning were now dark. The defiant red-bearded peasant was sleeping in a sitting posture on the floor. The group of card-players had disbanded. Silent was the accordion, and silent were the voices that had been humming folk-tunes. The priest and his wife had climbed to their bunk and were lost in darkness. All around I could hear the rough snoring of the men, women, and children who lay huddled close together on the floor, on the bunks and on the baggage shelves. They were sunk in heavy slumber. Only the Young Communists were wide awake, and the conductor who was sitting in the corner, checking up his accounts by the dusky light of a smoky lantern.

All was quiet now; yet beneath this outward calm I could hear the ceaseless roar of the Revolution. The words of the peasant, the priest, the Communists, swearing, shouting, clenching their fists at one another, with no

regard for each other's feelings and woes, dinned in my ears. What a burning ever-present fact this Revolution was everywhere in Russia, even here in the depth of the peasant country! Like an invisible and omnipotent power it hovered all about, stirring every soul it touched into new questionings, new passions, and driving it with pitiless fury from its age-old shelter into the storm of new and bewildering ideas, in search of a fresh place of refuge! What chaos it had created, what hate, what grief, what exultation! And I asked myself what was the meaning of it all! Where was this mighty Revolutionary torrent driving Russia? What would become of these multitudes of floundering souls? What would come out of all this pain and wrath and ecstasy?

## CHAPTER III

## THE OPEN ROAD

IT was broad daylight when I opened my eyes. My companion was already awake, busy at the Russian's and especially the peasant's favourite diversion—eating. Who in the world can eat as abundantly and as ecstatically as a muzhik? To him eating is more than a pastime. It is a rite, a ceremonial, to be observed and executed with solemn deliberateness. Black bread and onion; black bread and pickle; black bread and sausage; black bread and pork; black bread and apple; black bread and potato; always black bread, lump after lump, pound after pound. Watching the Russian peasant eat one cannot help wondering if there is any truth in the warning of modern dietitians that overeating impairs a person's health. If that were so then the muzhik, instead of being the robust man that he is, should have been the champion invalid of the world.

The train rattled along slowly, haltingly, like a feeble man uncertain of his steps and cautiously treading the ground he traverses. It was the slowest train I had ever travelled on in Russia or anywhere else. We were still forty miles from our destination, which meant that during the night we had covered only eighty miles. Eighty miles in ten hours! But my muzhik neighbour chukled at my irritation. I should have been in Russia, he reprimanded

me gently, three years previous, when trains, ran about once a month and at a speed that not only a horse but an old woman could beat. *Nu*, train service was improving rapidly enough, was already as good as it ever had been on that neglected branch-line. If only prices of produce would improve as fast . . . then there might still be hope for Russia, and the muzhik would cease to grumble.

Grumble indeed! I had just been in Moscow and Leningrad, where I had met men and women, many of them, of rank, riches, influence in the old days, cultured folk who were now living under the strain of constant terror. They spoke in whispers, and whenever they saw me jotting down notes they hastened to beg me not to write down their names and addresses and never under any circumstances to quote them in speech or in writing. Some of their friends, they advised me, were incautious in their remarks and were paying the penalty in exile or in jail. Yet here on this wobbly train were muzhiks yelling themselves hoarse with denunciation and complaint, cursing the new regime with the frenzied gusto of citizens in a free land. I did not know whether there were any secret service men on the train. I was rather fearful that there might be and that some of the muzhiks would be taken to task for their audacious words. But *they* never gave the matter a thought. Agents or no agents, they would have their say anyway.

An anomalous situation it was. The man of culture and importance in the old days, the Revolution had driven into himself; but the muzhik it had pushed out into the open world to roar his heart out as violently as he chose. Was it because the revolutionaries regarded the city man as the greater danger? Or because they dared not molest the peasant? Or because they thought his fault-finding harmless? Whatever the reason, the fact was as startling as it was revealing. The Revolution had jolted the muzhik into a new self-consciousness, and had made him the most articulate person in Russia.

At last we reached our destination. The station, as usual, was built not in the town but miles away. It seems to have been the policy of the old government to run the railroads outside of towns for reasons which were best

known to itself, but which certainly were not grounded in a wish to save passengers time and inconvenience and to promote the material growth of the country.

I jotted down the names and addresses of the friends I made on the train and, promising to drop them a line now and then on my return to America, I sallied forth on the platform. An old boyhood friend was there to meet me and together we went to the market-place in search of a conveyance to the old village, which lay miles away and off the railroad. After prolonged inquiries we found a peasant from the old place, an old neighbour of ours. He had just arrived in town with his twelve-year-old son, who sat in the back of the wagon, huddled in a smelly old sheepskin coat. He agreed to drive me home, but he was not yet ready to leave. He had two roosters and a sack of cheese to sell, and nails and wagon-grease to purchase. But he'd hurry and be through soon. Ah, he'd be so honoured to take home a countryman from America!—and off he dashed with his flapping roosters to the curb where buyers had been congregating.

The sun was still high in the sky when he drove over to the place where I was to wait for him. He shoved the straw in the little springless cart to the back so as to make a soft seat for me, and himself rode crouched on his knees in front. He was a man of about forty with soft light-brown hair and a short sparse beard of a somewhat darker shade that grew only about the chin, leaving his cheeks as smooth as a child's. His boy sat huddled on the straw, his head sunk in the immense collar of his coat, staring at me with glazed eyes. Off we started.

The road was dry and rutted. The wagon squeaked and rattled, shaking me and the boy from side to side and bumping us now into one another and now into the driver. The black mare, her head lowered as if absorbed in thought, trotted leisurely along, now and then snorting. Every time she did so Zakhar (that was the driver's name) turned to her and said, peasant-fashion, 'To your health, little sister,' and forthwith pulled at the lines as though to remind her that she need not construe his friendly greeting into permission to slacken her pace. Presently he plunged his hand into the bottom of the wagon and pulled out a little linen sack with red embroidery, the

kind peasants use to carry their lunchés when they go away from home. He untied it and lifted out a huge lump of black bread that was sprinkled with dust and chaff. He blew on the bread several times, broke off a piece and offered it to me, and when I refused it, he passed it to the boy and shoved it into his hand. But the boy, as though taking offence, flung the bread on the straw.

'You ugly cholera,' snorted Zakhar, and turning to me he said: 'Sick ever since he was born, and the cholera knows what ails him. The *feldsher* (healer) gave him some medicine, but it did him no good. I guess he is going to die soon . . . he is always cold even in sheepskins. At home he lies all the time on the oven and hardly eats anything. Sugar he likes, sugar and bread. He could eat a ton of it a day. By Jove he could! But how in the devil can a muzhik afford sugar in these days of atrocious prices? Lucky he is if he has enough salt.'

He rubbed a piece of garlic on the hard side of the bread and proceeded to eat it with a handful of stout onion-tops—a favourite combination among the muzhiks in our parts. I had with me a bag of candy for the children of the village, and I offered a handful to the boy. He grabbed it violently, scratching my hand with his long finger-nails, and thrust it swiftly into his bosom, where peasant boys and girls deposit all their valuables.

'Say "thanks, uncle," ' commanded Zakhar sternly.

The boy paid no heed to the command, never so much as looked up at his father.

'You damned little devil,' scolded Zakhar, prodding him violently with his slender willow-rod which he was using for a whip. The boy broke into a screeching animal-like whine, turned his back to me, and drew himself together like a hedge-hog.

'Stubborn as a new-born calf,' grunted Zakhar, and once more prodded him with the willow-rod. He pulled at the lines and urged the mare into a swifter pace.

I could hardly believe that I was actually going back to the old home. Nineteen years had elapsed since the day of my departure. Nineteen years! How could it be so long! I remembered the old place vividly enough, the muddy street; the double row of log huts with the

drooping thatched roofs and the little windows; the tumbling fences; the open wells with the massive sweeps . . . everything. Yes, and the men and women, old friends, neighbours and others, and also the host of visitors who enlivened the old place with their periodic visits. There were the gipsies who travelled in hooded wagons with their wives and children; the beggars going on foot with a boy or girl or in a cart with their families; the insane people from the towns, unsightly creatures, talking to themselves, gesticulating wildly, cursing or roaring with laughter at nothing in particular, stopping long enough to fill their pockets and their bosoms with black bread and potatoes and then wandering on to the next village and to the next, until they completed their circle of travel and then began all over again, just like the gipsies and the beggars and the pedlars.....It was these visitors who brought us song and stories and tidings of the mysterious world outside. And our peasants never grudged them bread or potatoes, never refused them shelter, ay—yielded to them the best place in the house for the night, the spacious top of the warm brick oven.

And there were our local celebrities, unique personages, whose presence cast a glow of romance over the dark monotony that hung over the village. There was Sergei, blind in one eye, with a lofty forehead, coal-black hair, and a girlishly melodious voice. He could sit up all night and hold a crowd of peasants spell-bound with his thrilling ghost tales. He was also the scholar of the village, the official letter-writer, and was there anything he did not know? He could even prophesy when Russia would have another war with the pagan Turk, how long the war would last, and how many more Turks than Russians would be killed. The stars told him everything, so he averred. Often he would sit out late in the night surveying the star-drenched heavens in silent contemplation.

And there was Nastasia, the fool old maid, who lived all alone in a sunken hovel with a moss-grown roof and windows boarded up within and without. She never admitted visitors to her house, not even close neighbours, and it was great sport for us boys to sneak around the back of her home, peep through the large cracks in the wall, and watch her sitting on the floor, humming a wailing tune and sorting

those endless piles of rags which she had laboriously gathered for some mysterious purpose known only to herself. She had no land, not even a garden. Yet she never suffered for lack of food. She eked out her living partly by working out for neighbours, partly by stealing, and partly by going from house to house entertaining people—singing, dancing and attempting somersaults, which she never could execute without flopping to the ground, much to the uproarious delight of eye-witnesses. It was she who had once threatened to drown me like a mad dog, because in company with two other boys I had stolen a jar of birch-sap that she had left under a tree, while she went off to gather an armful of firewood.

And there was Nikifor, the notorious gangster. He did not live in our village, but he came there quite often. He stole horses and loads of rye, and set houses afire, and everyone was in terror of him. Once he choked a constable to death in a far-away village, buried him in a deep snow-bank in the woods, and drove off with his horse to a big fair and sold it there. The police never dared arrest him, so deep was their awe of him. Among themselves our peasants called him the Antichrist, and what weird tales they told of him when the rumour had spread that wolves had tried to dig his oldest son out of the grave!

And there was Hrupina the witch, from whom children ran as from a wolf. A shrunken, bony, freckled woman with hideously protruding teeth and a fat, pendulous lower lip, she was supposed to be possessed of an evil spirit, and often, so report had it, she would turn into a cat and go around neighbours' houses and lap up their milk and muss up their cheeses.

And there was Vassil the beggar. How well I knew him! Tall, erect, blind in both eyes, with a hideous red film over them, he was the wealthiest man in the village, only because of loss of eyesight he could not work and therefore, following peasant custom, went begging. Led by one of his two wives (he was legally married to only one of them, and they were sisters), or one of his numerous children, he would march from village to village, stop at every house, sing an old religious folk-tune to the accompaniment of an ancient instrument with strings, receive slices of bread, boiled eggs, bundles of flax, strips of linen, all of



which he would deposit in the two large sacks that he carried on his shoulders. When the sacks were full he would drive to town, sell their contents, always insisting on payment in silver and gold. And what did he do with his money? He saved it, of course. But where? In the thatch roof? Under a stump in the woods? In a hole in the ground behind the barn? Nobody knew. Often when he was away from home a group of us boys would sneak around his barn-yard and search and search, and dig and dig, but not a trace of his hidden treasure did we ever find.

There were many other famed personalities in our own and in neighbouring villages, and as I sat there in the straw-filled cart, bouncing violently from side to side, I saw them again, and heard them talk and laugh and sing—spirits of an ancient loving world, once so close to me and now so unbelievably and so hopelessly remote and alien!

I bombarded Zakhar with questions. How was the old place, anyway? During the nineteen years that I had been away the world had been uprooted, Russia more than any other country. How was it with the old village and the old friends and neighbours? Who and what had survived, who and what had succumbed to the terrific onslaught of wars and adversity?

In between big bites of garlicked bread Zakhar managed to answer my questions. Gipsies were no longer coming round every fall and winter as in old days. The Soviets had become strict with them, ordered them to stop vagabonding and living off other people's toil. Some of them had taken up land and settled down. Others, and they were in the majority, had moved away in disgust into far countries where the hand of the Soviets could not reach them. And beggars were not coming round as plentifully as in former times—muzhiks had grown too poor to give alms as freely as they once had, and the insane people—well—one hardly saw them any more. The old-timers had died off, and there seemed to be no new ones about, not even in the towns, which was as strange as it could be.....perhaps it was because people were dying so fast! God knew how many in the old village had passed away in the last few years! During the typhoid epidemic, two years previous, there was scarcely a house but had a death; hardly a day but there was a funeral, and often two or three. One seldom passed

a house but one heard wailing inside. It was the most fearful epidemic they had ever had, worse than any onslaught of small-pox that any of the old folks could remember. How did they combat it? Well, how could they? How could any one? One might as well try to fight a storm, mightn't he? It came, an epidemic did, worked its ruin, and swept on, like the floods in spring after the snow and ice melt. And in America they stopped epidemics, and people could actually protect themselves against typhoid and small-pox and diphtheria? How wonderful! If only Russia could be like America.

Yes, Sergei the scholar was dead, died before the war from longing for his wife who had passed away in childbirth. Anuprii, the miller, was dead, too, and so was Nastasia, the old maid, and Vassil, the beggar, but his two wives were still living, and both were as vigorous and active as they ever had been. . . . And Nikifor, the bandit? Oh, the police got him at last and put him in chains and sent him away to some far, far-away country, and nobody had ever heard of him again. And did I remember Amelko, the village wit, red-faced, bald-headed Amelko, whose roaring laughter made him as famous as his witty lies? And his daughter Khvedora, did I remember her? She was only a little tot when I went to America, but she had grown to be a pretty girl; ay, and a mischievous one, too. She had fallen in love with a man in a neighbouring village, and he demanded a big dowry, five hundred roubles in gold, and when Amelko had heard it, he burst into a rage and whipped Khvedora and threatened to choke her. But Khvedora had her mother on her side, and the two women kept nagging away at him, demanding the money. They said he had it hidden somewhere in the thatch roof of the house, though he swore he hadn't. Well, one night he grabbed an axe and threatened to kill them both, but didn't, and then something happened to him. He stopped eating and talking and noticing people, and never said 'good morning' to anybody nor answered a greeting; and one evening he didn't show up from the field, and his family and neighbours searched for him all night long in the woods and in the swamps, and they found him the next day right under the bridge—dead.

Fires? No, thank God, there had not been any in our village, though all the villages around had had them, and had

I heard that Ikerno and Igreko had both been completely burned down? It was a miracle, too, that our village had escaped, for when the Poles were withdrawing from the Reds, people expected they would set the village afire, as they had done in other places. They were a wicked people, weren't they, these Poles? God knew how wicked, not at all like the Germans, who never molested anybody and never stole anything and always paid for everything they wanted throughout the two years they stayed in our parts. But the Poles—the devil only knew what had got into them! They always had seemed as good as anybody else. But when their army occupied the old village, they just didn't know what to do with themselves. Their officers would strut around swishing little whips, and on the slightest provocation and often without the least cause they would just lash people over the back and over the face, too, tearing the flesh and letting blood. And what thieves they were—our people had to drive off far into the swamps with their horses and sheep and cows and pigs and other stock just to keep them from being fetched away by the Polish soldiers. The Reds were bad enough when they were around. But the Poles—ah—a plague on them! And should there ever be another war—well—even the women would take up arms against the Poles. That's what they were all saying. . . . Ah' did I remember old Malanya? There was a brave woman, none braver than she. She was the heroine of the village, and a real heroine, too. She made one Pole feel that not all Russians could be treated like dogs. It was like this. A Polish soldier broke into her house one day, whipped out a pistol, and demanded a loaf of bread and a jar of butter. Well, Malanya went to the cellar as if to fetch the bread and butter, and when she came back, she had a big earthen pot of sour milk in her hand, and she flung it violently at the cursed brigand and knocked the pistol from his hand, and he got scared and ran away and never showed up again. . . .

Thus we chattered on, leaping from subject to subject, until we found ourselves in the open fields. The scene about was thrillingly familiar. On either side of the winding road, as far as the eye could see, rolled narrow strips of land, sloping downward in the far distance and merging into

the sky. Only dead furrows or ridges separated one strip from the other. Not a fence anywhere. (Is there a country in the world where fields are as unfenced as in Russia?) Peasants were at work in the glowing sun, mowing hay with straight-handled scythes as in the old days, reaping oats with sickles, singing at their work, the clear wailing tones, so familiar to my ears, stirring up a host of old memories and filling me with an indefinable yearning. Whenever peasants were within hearing distance, we'd wave our hands and shout, 'God help you.' Invariably they'd face about, wave back, and respond with a loud 'Thank you,' their resonant voices spreading far and causing other muzhiks to turn from their work and gaze curiously after us. Herds of cattle, sheep, hogs, pastured separately, rambled around in the green pastures and cleared stubble-fields, followed by little boy and girl shepherds who chased after them, flicking their long whips to keep them from straying into near-by crops. Far away the cupolas of village churches sparkled in the sun and towering windmills broke the monotony of the endless flatlands.

But this joy at the recognition of old scenes and old hunts soon yielded to a feeling of disappointment, for there was now a big and ghastly void in the landscape. The forests were gone, hewn down—the birch, the pine, the oak. Now there stretched before my eyes vistas of stumps. . . . It all happened since the Revolution, Zakhar informed me. Muzhiks had cut down the forests. They did it quickly, too, for they were afraid the landlords might come back and stop them.

Gone, too, were the crosses from the branch-roads, all of them, those tall unpainted weather-smitten crosses with the statuettes of Jesus nailed firmly at the top, which marked every turn of the winding Russian highways, and which formed as distinctively solemn a feature of the Russian countryside as the glistening church steeples. In the old days whenever a muzhik chanced to pass one of them, he removed his hat, bowed low, made the sign of the cross over his body and offered a prayer. What had happened to them, I inquired? Muzhiks had cut them down, replied Zakhar calmly. Wood had grown scarce, so people pulled up the crosses and lugged them home to be burned. . . . A sin? Of course it was a sin. But what was

sin nowadays? Many people did not believe in sin any more anyway. Noting my surprise he added, 'Our people have changed, countryman, ah, how they have changed! Some of them no longer believe even in God.'

Strange words these were—for a peasant. What did they mean? What would the rhapsodic apostles of Holy Russia say now? What would the world think of the Revolution when it learned that it was blasting the peasant's notion of sin; yes, and his faith in God? Here was rich food for meditation.

Zakhar turned off the road into a narrow field and hailed a man who was cutting oats with a sickle by the side of two barefooted girls. The man came forward, a bearded peasant in white linen clothes, wet and sticking to his back and breast. His flushed face was carved into numberless wrinkles that were clogged with sweat and dirt, and his fine blue eyes shone with searching wistfulness. Zakhar handed him a bottle with a cloth stopper. It was kerosene which he had bought for him in town. He wanted to know who I was, and Zakhar told him. He shook his head, overcome with surprise. Come all the way from America just to visit the old home? How wonderful! And was not I really afraid of the sea? So many people got drowned in it all the time, didn't they? Only a short time ago his son had come home from the Red Army, and he told of a big shipwreck on the Black Sea where a lot of people went down. No, *he* would never go to sea, a hundred horses could not pull him there. Perish may the sea, this plagued sea, . . . And did I come by way of the Black Sea? No? I came by way of the Atlantic Ocean? And where was that? There were as many seas in the world as there were taxes in Russia, weren't there?—and how could a poor muzhik keep track of them all? And was this Atlantic Sea as big as the Black Sea? Bigger? Ah? And to whom did it belong, to the Reds or the Germans? Nobody? Indeed? Well, then, the Germans would own it some day. They would own everything, the Germans would. They would have owned all of Russia by this time, if Russia had not been so far away. Akh, how clever these Germans were!

*He* knew. He was a prisoner of war in Germany for nearly three years and had seen a lot of the people there. *Nu*, they understood everything. Nobody was as clever as the Germans. Nobody could outwork, outfight, or outwit them. On the poorest land they could raise cabbages as large as the head of an ox and cucumbers as big as pumpkins, and one of their cows gave more milk than a muzhik's three. Deuced clever, these Germans were . . . . The poor Russian never could be so clever.

We drove off. Several times I turned and looked back, and he and his two girl assistants were standing by the side of the road as fixed statues, gazing longingly after us, wondering, I suppose, what folly it was that possessed me to hazard a trip across the ocean for the mere sake of visiting the old home!

Presently, clouds were beginning to spread over the sky—huge, black, swift-rolling, shutting out the sun and casting a wave of darkness on earth. A chilly wind began to blow. Sure sign of rain, muttered Zakhar angrily. He grew furious and burst into a volley of curses. Such plagued weather. Everyday it rained! Oats rotting, hay rotting, potatoes rotting, and the rain would not cease! Such was the luck of the muzhik—cursed muzhik and cursed weather! Why had not a flood come and drowned him out like a rat? That would have been more merciful. Thrice-cursed muzhik!

He drew at the reins, whipped the mare with the willow-rod, and shrieked at her fiercely to speed ahead, a command she was stubbornly loath to heed. She trotted along slowly, kicking up showers of dust and lumps of dirt that flew all over us. The air throbbed with the reverberations of distant thunder, which like the roar of an approaching train was growing louder and louder. The wind gathered momentum, grew more violent and more chilly. Lightning flickered dazzlingly across the ever-blackening sky. It began to drizzle, and soon a cool shower splashed down. Thunder-claps in rapid succession rocked the earth. There was no top to our cart—peasants seldom have any—and we were at the mercy of the storm. Zakhar again whipped the mare and cursed her viciously. But she, panting and snorting and lashed furiously by the rain, refused to hurry. I

drew my cap over my ears, snugly buttoned up my supposedly rain-proof American gaberdine, and dug deep into the straw. But the rain beat mercilessly through my clothes and streaked down my flesh.

Yet I did not mind the discomfort—not much. The Russian countryside in a storm is not without charm. The road rapidly turned into a creek with the water swiftly gurgling down the river and softening the ground into deep mud in which the hubs sank easily. The herds of cattle in the pastures did not stop grazing, though the little shepherds and their dogs had buried themselves in near-by shocks of grain. The pigs, as if reinvigorated by the downpour, were pursuing their eternal task of grunting and digging up the ground with increased vehemence. Only the sheep drew together as if in prayer, with their heads up, a big grey patch on a big black canvas. And the peasants who had been working in the fields seemed as little discommoded as the beasts about them. True, they were going home, but they were not running except the small boys who had their trousers rolled up to their knees and were prancing along screaming with joy. The others, the men and women, seemed in no hurry to get under shelter. None of them had an umbrella or a raincoat. They protected themselves as best they could against the downpour. Here was a man barefooted with a sheaf of oats spread umbrella-like over his bare head. Here was a woman with a sickle on her shoulders and a big sack on her head, leisurely pulling at a cart with a top over it in which lay a baby, while a big black dog cowered against the cart and whined piteously at every streak of lightning. Here was an elderly woman, barefooted, with her skirt over her head, the wind violently flapping the loose end of her linen shirt against her bare muddy legs. Here was a group of girls, laughing and chattering gaily and greeting us with an outburst of hilarious acclaim. Only Zakhar sulked. He cursed the weather and the Soviets and the Bolsheviks and most amazing of all, not once while blinding lightning swept over us did he remove his hat or bow his head in prayer and make the sign of the cross over his body, as a devout Orthodox should when caught in a storm. Religion seemed to occupy no niche in his life.

At last we reached the blacksmith shop. We hitched the horse in an old shed and with a feeling of relief walked inside and waited until the storm had subsided.

#### CHAPTER IV

#### THE OLD HOME

DUSK had begun to thicken when we reached the outskirts of the village. Fields were deserted, save for a garden-patch by the roadside, where a woman was digging potatoes with a hoe, her white sleeves, as she raised her arms, fluttering in the air like the wings of a huge bird. With a thrill of joy not unmingled with sadness I recognised old scenes—the treacherous swamp where horses often got mired; the thick brushwood where blackberries flourished; the estate of the rich Polish landlord now barely visible through the shroud of darkness that was descending on it; the communal pasture as rolling as ever and as unfenced. Many a night had I spent there as a boy with Ahay, the village shepherd—grey-haired, blue-eyed, leisurely Ahay who never tired of telling harrowing ghost stories. Far away on a hillside was the village of K. —, where Yekim lived. I wondered what had become of him? Once he had been the pride of the countryside, the only peasant youth to have been admitted to the university. The peasants foretold that some day he would be a famous man, high in the councils of the Czar. I asked Zakhar about him, but—the story of Yekim, his past and his present, I shall narrate in a later chapter.

Several peasants drove by, their wagons and horses plastered with mud. Scythes and rakes and wooden pitchforks stuck out from the ends of their straw-loaded racks. They were evidently returning from the swamp, miles away, where, since time immemorial, our peasants have been cutting hay. A big black dog followed them, and as is usual with peasant dogs, he could not resist the temptation of venting his spleen on strangers. He pounced on our cart and horse, barking savagely, which, through some psychic repercussion, stirred Zakhar's speechless son into unexpected animation. He leaned over the side of the wagon and teased the dog by hissing at him and prodding him with a little



stick he had. Finally he jabbed the stick into the over-excited canine's mouth and let him snap it away.

We drove by the cemetery, its tall trees as dark and silent and awesome as ever, like the evil spirits that were supposed to lurk in their midst. Straight ahead lay the village, now a mass of gathering blackness with here and there a shimmering light. I gazed at the lights, yellow and inviting, and counted them, five in all, five, scattered about like sentinels on duty. Most of the houses, then, were in darkness. I wondered why. It could not be that the muzhiks had already retired for the night. I asked Zakhar. He lifted his eyes to the twinkling stars and shook his head. Oh, no, it was too early for bed—he could tell by the stars. Besides, did not I see the smoke, those little floating sparks in the air? The women were just cooking supper. And the reason so many houses were unlighted was because there was nothing to light them with—kerosene was too plagued high and faggots were nowhere to be got; there were no more woods in the neighbourhood. But then, muzhiks were not worried about being in the dark. They were like horses now—could see without lights. It was about other things that they were racking their brains, many other things. . . .

At last we stopped at the old home, a log hovel with a big mud-puddle before it and boasting the only shingled roof in the village. It was in darkness when I entered, and my cousin, its occupant now, hastened amid profuse apologies to light the small hanging lamp, suspended by a black wire from a beam in the ceiling. He did not say it, but it required no extraordinary imagination to surmise, from the network of cobwebs over its rusty tin shade and from the layer of dust and fly-specks on the chimney, now marked with fresh finger-prints, that the lamp had ceased to be an object of utility and had become merely an ornament or perhaps only an encumbrance. Did I have to ask for a reason, after Zakhar's nonchalant remark that 'kerosene was too plagued high'?

He had recently renovated the house, my cousin informed me. Yet save for the fresh coating of whitewash, which had already begun to peel and fade, it had remained as sordid and barren a domicile as we had left it when we emigrated to America. There was the same rectangular living-room

with its huge brick oven and dirt-crustcd floor, serving as of old the manifold purposes of kitchen, dining-room, parlour, bedroom, nursery and hen-coop ! There was the same old-fashioned furniture—the big bare table, the long heavy benches without backs, the enormous unpainted clothes-closets, and in the corner directly opposite the oven the ancient wooden pail of water on the ancient black water-soaked little bench with the ancient wooden dipper resting on its flaxen cord. Not a chair, not a mirror, not a wash-stand, not a dresser. Not a picture to break the ugly monotony of the dulled whitewash on the walls, and flies as thick, as vicious as ever. The floor was damp, slippery, littered ; the air hot, smoky, smelly. The dim swaying light accentuated the bleakness of the place. . . .

I felt sad, sad enough to weep. Nineteen years had galloped away since I left the old home. Nineteen eventful epochal years, and here it was this ancient home of ours in all its pristine sordidness. Time had left it sunk as of old in squalor, the sight of which made me shiver. I said nothing. I would not disturb the ecstatic joy that had come over my young cousin at the arrival of a close relative and former playmate from a far, far-away land. He seemed gloriously unconscious of the dross and barrenness about him. Or perhaps he was only feigning unconcern and deep in his heart he was as pained as I was. However, we never alluded to the subject.

He was a thick-set youth with a flushed, somewhat freckled face and boyish blue eyes, calm, wistful, subdued. He was not more than thirty, yet sorrow and anxiety had left a withering imprint on his features. His forehead was smooth enough, with a sharp furrow dividing his converging brows. Deep shadows lay under his eyes and a network of little wrinkles radiated from the corners of his mouth like the branches of a railroad on a map. He spoke in a bass voice, deep and resonant, with a melancholy throb in it, especially impressive when he laughed heartily. He was married now, the proud father of two boys, one aged four, a grouchy, dirty-faced lad, and the other still in swaddling-clothes. His wife was a pleasant woman, with large, deep-set grey eyes, a thin, care-worn face, and a withered skin. Like her husband she wore big boots and a light mack-inaw, soiled and tattered from wear. She was in the

barn when I arrived, milking the cow, and when she came to the house she immediately proceeded to make the bed for the children and put them to sleep, so she could be free for the evening. She made ready the samovar, and the three of us sat down at the table to drink tea and talk. A black kitten, perched on the window-sill directly in front of me with eyes shut and tail curled up, was purring incessantly, a symbol of blissful contentment.

My cousin did most of the talking. Calmly and eagerly he told me the story of their experiences since the war, punctuating his words now with a smile of self-satisfaction, now with a meaning nod or a sigh. Of course they had had their share of sorrows. Who in Russia had escaped them, with a colossal revolution following close on the heels of a catastrophic war? Many of their friends had a much grimmer load to bear, for they at least had been spared the agony of witnessing the murder of father, mother or some other relative. He had been severely wounded in the war. That was why he walked with a limp. But—that was nothing. It was worse when the Poles came to the village. *Nu*, they were fiends! Once they had lashed him nearly to death and for no reason other than that he happened to be on the road when they came along on their horses hilariously singing the national hymn. . . . Ah, how the peasants hated them. . . . Day and night they were heaping curses on them. Oh, well, I should hear a lot about the Poles from the peasants themselves. They would tell me everything.

And when the Poles left the bandits came, and for weeks and weeks they hibernated in cellars and barns, never knowing when they would be discovered and slaughtered. Still, thank God, the worst was now over; the Soviets had shot scores of the bandits, and Red garrisons were hunting for those who had fled into hiding. Now there was peace in the land and he was well enough to till his few *dessiatins* of ground and to engage in trade—small trade, of course; there was no other in the village. Taxes were too high, repressions too severe, and worst of all the peasant had lost his buying power. But—that mattered little. Bread and salt he had in abundance, and now he could eat his meals in

peace and calm. As for getting ahead, well, he didn't care for riches. Of what good was a fortune to a Jew in the old days, when he was imprisoned in the vile Pale, was forbidden to own land, was barred from schools and universities and was continually trodden and spat on? Now at any rate the Jew knew and felt that he was a man. He could lift his head high and look the world in the face without fear and without abasement. If a Jew was persecuted now it was for the same reason for which his Genile neighbour was persecuted, for being a member of the privileged class, for seeking to evade laws that curtailed his power of self-aggrandisement, never because he was a Jew. And that was a big thing, yes, the biggest thing that had ever happened to the Jew in Russia, and it rewarded him amply for the blood he had shed in the War and Revolution. The Jew was a free man—as free as any one could be in Russia. Oh, yes, now *he* had hopes, for his children especially. They would not have to live in a filthy hovel like him. They would go to school, to the university. They would be educated men. They would not be kept back, as he had been, because they were Jews.

Frequently his wife would interrupt him with loud 'nays' and little bursts of derisive laughter. She was sick of all the bewildering chaos that had come over Russia, sick of the Revolution, of the Soviets, of the eternal patter of new rights and a glorious future. She wanted peace and rest and quiet. How glad she would be to flee to America or to some other land where life was stable and secure.

But he only smiled at her wishes. Most certainly he would not leave Russia now. The deuce with material enjoyments! Now he, a Jew, was always and emphatically a man, the equal of everybody. Did she realise what it meant? God! What a glorious miracle, so unbelievably true! Who in his boyhood days would have dreamed that in Russia—in Cossack, hooligan, Black Hundred Russia, where the Jew trembled in the presence of the lowest brute of an official—the time would come when there would be no Pale, when the Jew could live in Moscow and Leningrad and Kiev and Kazan, and could own land, yes, get it free from the government, send his boys and

girls to the gymnasium and to the university and at government expense? How could any one ever forget that? God, how wonderful it all was! To have one's soul free from the terror and torment of persecution!

He leaned back against the wall, his face uplifted, a smile on his parted lips, his shadow swaying slowly on the opposite wall, like some mysterious spirit brooding over the fate of the world. As I looked into his face with the melancholy gleam in his eyes, and listened to his resonant voice, I wondered whence had come to him this gush of new ideas, this flood of fervour? It seemed as if some magic wand had stuck open in him a fount of new wisdom. He had spoken of the miracle of the liberation of the Jew. But to me he was the great miracle of the Revolution, he an uncouth, unread, brawny Jewish peasant, talking like a man inspired; so overcome with joy at the recovery of his dignity, his personality, that he disdained the very thought of earthly gifts and allurements. It was when I heard words like his in Russia that I ceased to think of the terror and agony of the Revolution and realised with a rush of exultation its transforming, sublimating powers. . . .

But his wife clung staunchly to her position.

'And if another war comes?' she asked with a pathos that betrayed an inner turbulence.

He chuckled good-humouredly and dismissed her query with a sweeping gesture of the hand.

'And the Poles are only within four or five days' march from here,' she added impressively. 'And you know what will happen when they come here. We shall be their first victims—Jews always are.'

'*Nu,*' he rejoined with emphasis, 'the Poles hardly have strength to breathe. It is ridiculous to think of them starting another war.'

'But do you remember what Abraham, the butcher, said when he was here last time?' she demanded with gloomy defiance.

'What?'

'That Poland won't start a war against us alone. Other nations are going to help her. Yes, even America is going to send her aid.'

'That's fairy-story,' he retorted with a touch of controlled irritation.

She shrugged her shoulders with a grimace of hopelessness, which moved him to draw close to her, pat her gently on the back, and murmur affectionately :

'Never mind, mother. There is going to be no war. In vain are you fretting and worrying about it.'

'You may be right, but,' she insisted grimly, 'Poland has friends, and Russia has not. Do you remember how fat and ruddy the Polish soldiers looked when they were here? And why? Because America and other countries were sending them uniforms and loads of canned foods. America is with them, and America is rich and powerful.'

He shook his head nervously, laughed aloud, and persisted in ridiculing the very notion of a country like America helping Poland in a war against Russia. But there was a quaver of uncertainty in his voice now, and the more he spoke, the louder he laughed, the more pronounced was this quaver. Was self-confidence slipping from him? Was he beginning to doubt his own words? He made me think of a man protesting self-possession, yet in his heart quaking at the prospect of passing a graveyard in the dark.

She shrugged her shoulders sceptically and eyeing him with despair, she exclaimed :

'God forbid that we should have to go through another Polish invasion', and with a shiver she dropped her arms on the table and hid her face in them.....

But he retained his composure and affected an air of self-confidence.

Presently the door opened and a man stuck in his head.

'Has he come?' inquired the man.

'Yes,' replied my cousin buoyantly. 'Come in, Vassil. He is right here, our American guest is.'

The man entered, a short broad-shouldered muzhik, one of the few in our village who shaved their beards, but with the inevitable overhanging moustaches spread over his mouth. He was barefooted with his white linen trousers rolled up to his knees, his feet ankle-deep in black mud. He embraced me and burst into a flood of

endearments, as peasants do when they are overcome with emotion.

'Ah, dearest, tell me, have you seen them there, my two sons, in your big and rich America? Have they sent a message to their old father, or have they forgotten him? Ah, beloved friend mine, it is ten years since they have written home. Ten years! Just think of it! If they were only alive!' He held my arms with his trembling hands and shook his head in dejection as at someone that is about to die. I asked him where his boys lived in America. He shrugged his shoulders.

'God only knows, little son,' he replied. 'I used to have their address on a green piece of paper, but I have searched and searched for it without avail. Maybe I have smoked it up, stupid old fool that I am.....If they were only alive.....that's what's gnawing at my heart, this fear that they are dead... The other day Ostap Yefremov from the village of K——got a letter that his son was killed in America in a mine explosion, and do you know Boris the Hawk, who lived at the very end of the village, just next to the shrine? Well, little son, he too got a letter that his boy, Yurko, lost his right arm and his left eye in an explosion in America. And maybe something like that's happened to my boys. Ah, if I only knew! Can't you tell me, can't you, my dear countryman?'

His anxiety was so affecting, I tried to comfort him with the assurance that had an accident happened to his boys he surely would have been apprised of the fact.

'Ah, little son,' he wept, 'it's so good of you to say that! It cheers me to hear such words from you, by Jove it does! Surely if anything had occurred to them, you'd have known, wouldn't you—now that you are a countryman of theirs, from the same village, ay, old neighbours, and such good neighbours... The oldest one, Grigor, has left a wife here, too. At first she cried and cried, the poor little soul, and then she went to a pilgrim who she heard could work miracles, and she gave him a sack of rye if he'd pray to the saints to soften my Grigor's cruel heart and make him remember her. But it has done no good, not a particle. And now the poor thing, she says that he must be dead or married to another woman in America, that's what she says,

the poor thing...And he's got a daughter, too, going on seventeen, a pretty girl, isn't she, Hanna?'—turning to my cousin's wife. 'Boys are coming round to see her already, fine boys, and, well, by autumn she may become a bride and her father not know anything about it....What a calamity, what a woe! If he'd at least send her a pair of boots and a piece of silk as a wedding gift! His own daughter, his own flesh and blood. The brute....'

I promised that on my return to America I should do my utmost to locate him, and he, buoyed by the promise, embraced me again and breezed on with pathetic effusiveness.

'How good of you, little son, how good of you! I shall never forget you, if you'll do that, I swear I shan't, nor will my daughter and grand-daughter. Find him, little son, find him and tell him everything. Tell him how we are all pining away for him, his wife and his daughter and I, and tell him to come back. Tell him, day and night we are praying for his return. Tell him we have, thank God sixteen *dessiatins* of land, as much as we can work and more too, and we have two horses and two cows and a new heifer calf and six pigs and ten sheep, and a few geese and hens, too, and we'd have had more, if the plagued Poles had not robbed us. But glory be to God, we have enough to live on, yes, and I may as well tell you the truth, I've got some gold too, buried somewhere, and the Reds never got their hands on it. Tell him he can have it all, if he'll only come back. I am old, you see, little son, and feeble, too. I have not many more years to live, and I don't want to die without there being an heir to inherit the place, otherwise the Soviets, you know, are liable to break it up, and give it away to strangers, all that I have got together through years and years of toil and sweat....'

He bade us farewell and departed, but soon he returned and smilingly apologised for having forgotten to give me the present he had brought me. He pulled his hands out of his pockets. In one he had ripe pears which he offered to me, and in the other three white eggs, which he gave to Hanna with the request that she fry them for me in lots of butter for breakfast. Then meekly and effusively he bowed his way out, a gentle, helpless, pathetic figure.



'Poor old Vassil,' lamented my cousin after he was gone, 'day and night he is worrying about his boys in America. He imagines they are dead, that's why they don't write. Often he comes here, props his elbows on the table and covers his face with his hands and weeps like a boy that's got a severe beating. Such a goodhearted man, too! What a pity! . . . You know there is something about America that I don't understand. There are about fifteen boys from this village in your country and with the exception of two, none of them writes home. They are as if sunk in the ocean, and they have not only fathers and mothers here, but wives and children. Why is it? Tell me. Does America make them so rich, so happy, so selfish, that they cease to have any feelings for their own flesh and blood?'

Why is it indeed? What is there in America that sterilises the young muzhik's devotion to his home-folks? He is aglow with it when he comes to her shores. He writes letters home, sends money, promises his dear ones that he will return as soon as he has saved up a competence. Then something gives him a jolt, shatters his filial sentiments, and they wilt away like a flower detached from the stem. Is America to blame for this debasement of an old love? There are those who would so proclaim, but not I. One might as well hold a torrent at fault for crashing through a fragile dam. The fact is that only persons of a rugged morality can face with safety the stress and blandishments of present-day American life, and the peasant's morality, alas! is of weak fibre, strong enough to maintain its balance in a primitive homogeneous village, but too feeble to withstand the strain of American tension. Yet whatever or whoever the cause, the resultant tragedy is no less poignant, with thousands of Vassils weeping themselves sick with longing after sons lost to them in the turmoil of American life almost as completely as within the portals of their tombs.

We sat up until late in the evening, my cousin, his wife, and I, talking over personal experiences and recalling old days, and then we retired, I on a bench set against the back wall and spread with straw and a rough hemp,

cloth. My cousin bade me good-night and blew out the lamp.

Weary as I was, the excitement of the arrival and, incidentally, the protruding straws scratching my flesh, kept sleep away from me. I lay awake, gazing out of the window before me into the garden and orchard by the side of the house, now basking in the hoary radiance of a full and solemn moon. Through a hole in the window a current of cool air was blowing on my face. My mind wandered aimlessly from subject to subject as the mind does when it is not centred on a specific topic. Crickets chirped, dogs barked, and from far away there floated to my ears snatches of songs, of the boy and girl shepherds who were staying out all night in the pasture with their horses—lonely throbbing tunes, soaring piteously in the air, like the wails of a lost animal, and dying so unnoticeably that the ear continued to hear them long after they melted into the silence of the night. A spirit of mystery, romance, and enchantment brooded over the earth. . . .

Then I heard muffled footsteps, so distinct in the profound stillness of the night that I looked up with a start, and there at the opposite end of the room was a ghost-like figure in white, slowly threading its way toward me on bare tiptoes. I was on the point of asking who it was, when I heard the words: 'Are you asleep?' I recognised my cousin's voice, and with a sigh of relief I replied that I was not and invited him to come over, filled with a premonition that he had an unpleasant message to communicate. He sat down beside me. Splotches of moonlight that filtered through the trees into the room fell on his face and imparted to it the sallowness of a corpse. He was bareheaded now, and his hair was unkempt, standing up in a crest like the fur of a sensitive animal sensing danger.

'You'll pardon me, cousin,' he began apologetically, 'for disturbing you. But I thought if you were awake, I'd come over and talk to you. I could not sleep anyway. You see a cruel thought has been preying on my mind for months, and I've been waiting for someone like yourself that's been around the world to talk it over. We are lost here, you know, cut off from the world, and though the district Soviet sends us a newspaper occasionally, we

know little of what is going on outside of our village, let alone countries outside of Russia.'

He paused as though to gather courage to broach the subject that was troubling him, like a man consulting a physician and fearing to disclose his complaint lest it prove a more serious ailment than he had imagined. I prompted him to speech, and he finally sighed, shook his head dolefully, and put it close to mine. His eyes were abnormally enlarged, and now, with the filtered light of the moon on them, they seemed of an unearthly dark hue. Then he spoke so low that I could barely hear him.

'Tell me, is there going to be another war?'

The question left me bereft of speech, I had not expected it from him, not after having heard him make a merry jest of his wife's apprehensions. Now I knew, what I had all the time been suspecting, that his optimism was mere pretence. I replied what any man under the circumstances would have done, regardless of his inner convictions—that there would be no war, that the world was too exhausted to break into another conflict.

'Ah, cousin,' he exclaimed, visibly cheered, 'if only you are right, if only you are right! Of course the Soviets keep on telling us there will be no war, they'll do anything to prevent it. They keep on assuring us that if Russia should have to take up arms, it will only be because the capitalist nations will strike at her first. But, of course, with them it is always the capitalists who are to blame for everything, and who knows whether or not they are right? Still, it cheers us to hear their reassurances, and yet we are always in doubt, we are living in constant fear and agony, lest another war should break out.'

Again I spoke words of reassurance, offering plausible enough reasons for the baselessness of his apprehensions.

'Ah, if only you are right,' he repeated with fervour, 'if only you are right! I'd be so happy, so blessedly happy! If only we have peace! I could then settle down and enjoy life, enjoy it like a free man. I have a few *dessiatins* of land now, and when the Soviets divide the landlord's big estate, I shall get a few more, and then I could send my boys to the

gymnasium and to the university and make something of them, something that my poor Hanna and I could in our coming years be proud of. All we are thinking of now is our children, our two darling little boys. What else should a man with a family think about? Ah, if we are only left in peace, if we are only left in peace! How grateful we *should all be, my Hanna and I, and all these muzhiks. . . . You have no idea how deeply we all hate war.'*

He paused and turned his eyes on the shimmering trees, while I once more reiterated my assurances. Then he turned to me again as if with a sudden flash of inspiration.

'What I don't understand is why the other nations should hate us so. Maybe the Soviets have done them an injury. Have they? You see, we don't know what's going on outside. We are cut off from the world. But somehow I don't see how our Soviets could do anybody an injury. They are so weak and so poor, while the others are so rich and so strong. And besides, if the other nations don't like the Soviets or the Bolsheviks, why should they vent their wrath on us, the people? We don't want to fight, none of us. Ask the muzhiks. They've had enough war to last them an eternity. Why then should we be blamed? Why should my brokenhearted Hanna be to blame, or I, or my two little children, or these muzhiks and their Hannas and their little children? For when the enemy comes here, an enemy as ferocious as the Poles, for example, it is us, our Hannas and our little boys, that he tortures. And how are we to blame? Tell me, what have we done to the other nations and to your rich and powerful America that she should help the Poles (oh, these unspeakable barbarians!) stab us with the bayonet! Do you suppose the Poles alone would ever dare rise against us? Indeed they would not. For they know how deeply the muzhik hates them and how desperately he'd fight to drive them back and destroy them. And listen, cousin, listen, if the Poles ever do start another war against us, it will be only because the other nations will give them help, and if they do, especially if America does, then, cousin, there'll be nobody left in our family to put a tombstone on our graves. Ah, America is so strong, so rich, she can crush the whole world, and we are so poor and so weak. . . .'

Presently he rose, apologised for intruding on me. He felt better, he said, after talking himself out, and in the morning when Hanna rose I must tell her what I had told him, that it was silly even to think of America offering help to Poland or any other country that might want to rise in arms against Russia. I must tell her that again and again, and it would do her more good than all the medicines that the doctors had been prescribing for her. Then he retired to the bed behind the enormous clothes-closet where his wife and two little boys were sound asleep, and I lay awake, thinking.

## CHAPTER V

## THE OLD VILLAGE

IN my boyhood days our village was sheltered on one side by a dark wood in the midst of which flowed a swift stream. In places the water was deep, and in places it was shallow with a bottom of yellow sand; and there the peasant women did their family washings. The wood was reputed to be inhabited by evil spirits, the combination of trees and water and the proximity to a village with its rich possibilities of human prey making it a favoured hunting-ground for them.

Many tales our muzhiks told of encounters with the Unclean One, of his clever disguises, now as a university student in grey uniform with glistening buttons, now as a priest with long hair and a black flowing robe, now as a horse or sheep standing in the middle of the road as if beginning to be led away, now as a close friend, now as a pretty woman with flowing locks and fiery eyes. None of us boys dared to go near this wood after sundown. We would not run the risk of falling into the clutch of an unclean spirit. . . . Whenever it was my lot to drive through there in the dark with father or some other grown-up person, I would shut my eyes tight, snuggle close to the driver, and pray incessantly. In winter, wolves and homeless dogs roamed and fought there, and at night we often heard their savage and dismal howling.

In summer the wood was a favourite playground of children. There we would spend our days, build tents from

freshly cut brush, make fires, bake potatoes, hold picnics. There we would go fishing and swimming, climb trees and hunt for birds' nests. There was not a bird whose nest, once discovered, we left unmolested. The eggs we always stole and gave away to freckle-faced girls, who rubbed the yolk into their faces in the hope of wiping out freckles. The fledglings we usually carried away with us, played with them until they died in our hands, then threw them to the dogs or into the river.

Only of the *booshly* were we afraid. Their nests we dared not approach. They were reputed to be terrible fighters with mammoth beaks capable of plucking out a man's eyes or cleaving his skull. Besides, a *booshel* was regarded as a magic bird. To touch its nest was to invite misfortune. We contented ourselves with merely watching from a safe distance the 'papa' bird come flying to the spacious nest of the family with a frog in his mouth and deposit it amid a loud and merry exchange of clacks with the 'mamma' bird and then soar off after another frog.

Crows we especially despised. They were our implacable foes. They stole chickens and ducklings and pulled rye and barley out of the ground. During their hatching season we climbed to the nests, which they built on the summits of the tallest trees, grabbed their offspring, and hurled them vengefully to the ground. The girls who played with us often joined in these depredations and enjoyed them no less than the boys.

During the fitful slumber of my first memorable night at the old home, I dreamed of this wood, and I saw myself running and and prancing around with other boys and girls, playing games and hunting for birds' nests. I waked after such a dream. Dawn was breaking through the thin fog. A heavy dew had fallen during the night, and I felt chilly. My cousin and his family were still asleep. But I rose, dressed, walked outside, and turned instinctively in the direction of the wood. Though Zakhar had told me the evening before that it had been cut down, I somehow expected to find it there as thick and as gorgeous as in the old days, just as a person who has lost a dear friend often imagines that on arrival at his home, he will find him alive. But there was not a tree in sight. Only a big stretch of cloudy sky greeted my eyes.

I strolled over there, and all I saw was rows of mouldy stumps and an occasional clump of brush, with the leaves and bark and the little twigs chewed off by pasturing cattle. Gone were the stately pines and maple and beech. Gone were the herons and the crows, the blackbirds and the woodpeckers, and, of course, the wolves and the evil spirits. The river was drying up, too ; had grown narrow and scummy, with many little islands chopping it up into stagnant pools, now choked with coarse weeds and green scum. Gone were the fishtraps. Gone were the diving mounds. Gone were the canoes. Even the 'devil's hole'—on the bottom of which was supposed to be the abode of the *rusalkas* (water-nymphs)—once so translucent that one could, standing on the bridge, see the big pike and perch gliding about in it, now lay still and black, ringed around by a mighty growth of green stalks and green slime, like a man choking beneath a load of vile rags. . . .

With the wood gone the village presented an ugly sight, like a man, nay, like a woman, with shaven head. There was the same lone, narrow, winding street, as in the old days, still unpaved, and now, after the heavy rain of the previous day and night, turned into a river of black slush, so deep in the hollows that not even the piles of brush kept wagons from sinking over the hubs. No sidewalks ; scarcely a shade-tree ; not a patch of lawn ; not a flower bush ; the little heaps of manure lying as of old at every house right by the open wells. The houses all alike, little log hovels with thatch roofs, touching one another, and with small unwashed windows. Not a dab of paint anywhere. Here and there a newly built hut, the roof yellow with the colour of sunburnt straw. Here and there one lichened with age, the walls bulging out or leaning forward, the roof showing patches of bare frame sticking out like the ribs in a body stripped of flesh. Here and there a window with a pane out, the hole stuffed with straw or the husks of flax.

Scarcely a yard I passed but a dog leaped after me, barking and growling vehemently. At times several of them flew at me at once, and I had to manipulate my American wild-cherry staff with no little speed to keep them at a safe distance. I tried to make friends with them, but unlike American dogs they were unresponsive to the comradely approach. The kind word, the soft snapping of

the finger, the merry whistle, the friendly smile, the inviting gesture, instead of placating only infuriated them. Indeed is there a place in the world where dogs are as ill-tempered as in the Russian village? And is it any wonder? Is there a place in the world where dogs are so poorly fed, so constantly abused, and so often, especially in winter, driven from the houses and yards? What sport it is for a peasant youth to fling a stone or a stick at a neighbour's dog or to tease it savagely by wielding a club before its eyes or jabbing it into its mouth! Once while visiting a peasant near Moscow I saw a group of boys lure a strange dog into a shed, and when it was there sniffing for food—peasant dogs are always hungry—one of them splashed a basin of hot water over its back. The poor creature bounded away humped up with pain and whining piteously, and the boys into a guffaw as at an especially clever just. . . .

The village was just beginning to waken to life. The fog was slowly rolling upward, and the sun was coming out. Roosters crowed; pigs squealed vehemently, and sheep bleated continuously in a mournful chorus. Kept in the barn all night without fodder, they were chafing to be let out to pasture. Now and then I could hear the creaking of a barn-door and a woman's voice yelling or swearing at a cow that she was milking or going to milk. Here and there a man, bare-headed, with hair sticking up or tangled, was out in the yard greasing a wagon or doing some other chore. Otherwise all was still, painfully still—no factory whistle, no roar of passing trains, no sight or sound of industrial life. . . . Smoke was rising out of the big black chimneys, rising straight up and standing in the calm air like coiled black pillars. . . .

Wrapped in cumbrous sheepskin coats, the boys and girls who go to pasture with their horses at night were now returning home on horseback, not in crowds, as when they ride out in the evening, but singly and in small groups, and at a fast pace, as though in a hurry to get home and embark on the day's duties. They turned and gazed questioningly after me as I was paddling in the deep slush. I must have been a strange sight to them and to the other peasants who saw me—a man in city clothes, up so early and trudging in the



mud, continually swinging a stick in all directions to fight off the leaping dogs. Now and then I spoke to them as they rode by, and they responded loudly and eagerly and often smiled, in recognition, perhaps, of the American of whose arrival they had heard.

Nearly every one of our peasants had a garden, and there is one vegetable that the muzhik in our parts has always regarded as a rare luxury. It is the cucumber. He'll make a meal of a lump of black bread and a cucumber or half of one, and whatever else he may or may not store away in his cellar for the winter, he'll be sure to have a barrel of large cucumbers pickled away there. But few were the peasants in our village in my boyhood days who were successful in raising cucumbers. Somehow either the seed failed to sprout, or the vines wilted, or insects devoured them. My mother had been successful in growing them, and neighbours would come to our garden and ask how to tend their cucumber beds, and she always gladly offered them all the suggestions she could, and yet only a few of them achieved success. The others, when autumn came, had to exchange a calf, a sheep or sacks of rye for their winter's supply of cucumbers. And now, after an absence of nineteen years, as I was passing the gardens I observed no improvement. Thriving cucumber-beds were as rare as in the old days. In most gardens there was not even a sign of a cucumber plant, and in others the vines lay shrivelled and wilted, pathetic witnesses of the muzhik's colossal agricultural backwardness. Man of the soil that he is, for countless generations knowing no other work and no other life but this on the land, nature still cheats him cruelly of the fruits of his labours. He is still a slave of her terrible caprices !

And what miserable cabbages he grew ! He set the plants close together, in the belief, I suppose, that the more plants he had, the more heads he would cut, but with the result that the plants choked one another and the heads were puny, soft, wormy, the outer leaves eaten off by insects, which he had not yet learned to combat. No more cheerful a sight were the orchards—trees overgrown, lopsided, untrimmed, gnarled, bearing little apples and little pears, spotted and wormy. . . .

I had now reached the end of the village. At one time there was a big wooden gate there and a shrine with icons inside draped in linen and with a wooden cross capping its little roof. Whenever a peasant passed it, he removed his hat, bowed, and muttered a prayer. On Sundays and holidays groups of peasants and beggars came there for prayer and meditation. Now the gate was gone, but the shrine was still there, only it was a mere wreck of its former self. The trim board fence around it was no longer there, and the patch of lawn that the fence had once encircled was now torn; it had evidently been rooted up by pigs, and black holes gaped in the green grass like gashes in a human body. The roof had tilted to one side as though blown backward by a gale; its shingles had rotted and were now weighted down with lumps of sticky moss. There was not a window left, and the sills were partly smashed and hung loose like mangled arms. Was it the weather that had wrought this profane damage? Only in part, if at all. Spiteful hands must have started it, and indifferent souls were giving no thought to restoring the little structure to its former glory. The neglect was even more apparent when I drew near and looked inside the shrine. The walls were wet and grimy. The floor was overgrown with weeds. Icons still hung there, but they were no longer draped in white linen. Frayed and faded and soaked in rain, with a woebegone expression in the once stiff upward-gazing eyes of the saints, as though conscious of the neglect visited upon them, and bewailing the sad fate that had befallen them, they were mute testimonials of the muzhik's waning faith.

Returning, I followed the road that circled the outside of the village directly behind the fences that separated the gardens from the outlying fields. Now there stretched before me the lands of our peasants, level and stoneless, fine soil, dark-brown loam mixed with sand. Fields were unfenced as in former times and were cut as of yore into narrow strips, narrower than in my boyhood days, which spoke of increased population of further subdivisions, and of consequent decreased land-holdings and enhanced want. Some of the strips by actual measuring were no more than two paces in width, or no more than about

nine turns of the plough, too small to grow enough bread even for mere man and wife. Yet there were families in the village that had to live off these puny holdings. . . . Crops had not yet been gathered, and dense flocks of crows hovered noisily about and joyously picked their living off the unharvested fields. Some of the strips of land had already been ploughed for the fall seeding, others had just been fertilised and awaited the hand of a woman to scatter the black heaps of manure. Far away on a rise of ground and drenched in sunlight towered a windmill and still farther, wrapped in a bluish haze, were other villages with the sky seeming to rest upon the roofs of the dark barns. . . .

Outwardly the old village had not undergone the slightest change in the years that I had been away. The same muddy street, the same dwarfed houses with the puny windows and thatch roofs, the same foul smells, the same surly dogs, the same wretched gardens, the same strips of land and the same bone-breaking methods of tillage; the same scene of poverty, desolation and helplessness in the face of an indulgent and bountiful nature.

Of a sudden I heard a piercing scream. I halted and listened. It grew louder and louder, a scream of terror and agony. I hurried in the direction from which it came, across a patch of potatoes, past a barn and orchard and into a garden, and there on the wet grass was a woman on her knees battering away furiously with both fists at a girl crouched at her feet.

'Auntie, dearest,' the girl screamed between loud gasps, 'I'll never again, never, never, may my feet fall off, if I ever come here again! Oh, my God!'

But the woman continued her battering with unabated ferocity. Two men suddenly darted forward from the orchard and pulled the woman away from the prostrate girl. One of the men was an elderly person with a beard that covered his face like a mat, all but the soft, bulbous nose, the small brilliant eyes, and the tops of the cheeks. The other was a young man.

'What's it all about, Matrena?' queried the older man in astonishment, as he hung on to the protesting hands of the infuriated woman.

'I should kill her', the woman thundered, gnashing her dark, decayed teeth. She made another dash for the girl, but the man held her back. She was no more than forty. Her drawn face quivered with wrath; her large grey eyes gleamed with ferocity.

'The vile carrion,' she shouted, 'the nasty shrimp, the ugly little thief! I'll show her! Never again will she set foot in my garden. Radishes she came to steal, radishes—the ugly cholera—may a plague strike her and her father and her mother!'

The girl soon jumped to her feet. There were big scratches under her right eye, and her nose was bleeding profusely. Her shirt was torn over the shoulder, and her skirt was almost stripped from her well-rounded hips. Swiftly she adjusted her skirt, brushed back her soft brown hair, now loosened and disarranged, wiped her nose and eyes with the sleeve of her linen shirt, and without bothering to pick up her red cap which lay twisted in the wet grass, she dashed away through the orchard whimpering. I called for her to stop so that I could give her a few pieces of candy. But my voice added to her terror, and she only hastened her steps, jumped over a fence, and disappeared in a neighbouring yard.

The woman glared at us, then turned round and started towards the house, continuing to shout imprecations on the girl.

It was no pleasant spectacle. It would have been a sad enough sight if it had been a man venting his wrath on a boy; but for a woman, a mother, like this Matrena, to turn demon and inflict atrocious punishment on a little girl who had stolen a radish from her garden, seemed an unwonted act of horror and depravity. And yet I knew that other women in our village or in other peasant villages might have acted likewise under similar provocation.

No, they are not void of kindness, these muzhik women. Let a hungry man beg for food, and they'll never refuse it to him. Let a neighbour call them to the bedside of a sick person, and they'll rise in the middle of the night and run to offer succour. But they are always fatigued, always worried, always toiling, in the field, in the

house, in the barn, and they are easily stirred to fury, and then their kindly impulses freeze up, and they become like beasts with no pity, bent on the mutilation of the object of their wrath.

• It may be unnatural for women to yield so easily to their brute instincts. But then, what shall we expect of persons, men or women, doomed to a life of squalor and toil as these muzhik women are, with the mind never stirred to bright visionings and the heart seldom warmed to kindly responsiveness by outside stimulus or associations?

As I looked again at the double rows of log huts in the village, the muddy street, the wretched gardens, the little heaps of manure piled against the houses, the dusky little windows crusted with dirt, seldom open and at best admitting but a scant amount of light; and as I thought of the interior of these houses with the one living-room shared with pigs and chickens, the dirt floor, the bare walls, the hard *polati* (sleeping platform) infested with vermin—as I looked at the village and thought of the grinding life of the muzhik, I ceased to wonder at the savage outburst of fury of that woman in the garden. I ceased to wonder at the coarseness, the selfishness, the cruelty, of the muzhik. What else could come out of such colossal poverty, such unmitigated uncleanness, such vast wretchedness? And I understood as I never had before the inevitableness of the Revolution, the irresistible human urge to pluck up by the roots a system so destructive of human welfare and so vitiating to human character. And I also understood as I never had before the violence, the hate, the terror, that the Revolution had loosed on the bourzhui, the capitalist, the *pomieshtchik* (landlord), the counter-revolutionary, and all the others, who to the proletarian even more than to the intellectual revolutionary, were the incarnation of the evil genius that had fathered the old civilisation with its agencies of blight to the dignity, the humanity, the decent impulses of the common man.

But the sudden burst of life in the village brought my meditations to a halt. The air buzzed with activity. Two little boy shepherds, wrapped in cumbrous coats, sizes too large for them, and with tall winter hats, each with his linen lunch-sack slung on his shoulder and with a long whip

in his hand, were driving the cows to pasture. Directly behind them was another little boy accompanied by two little girls, his sisters, gathering the sheep, and then came still another little boy yelling to the housewives to drive out the pigs. Peasants were starting for their fields—some in springless carts lurching through the mud, some on foot; barefooted most of them, with the inevitable white lunch-sacks and the visible lumps of black bread on their backs; some with scythes, some with hoes, some with sickles or spades. They walked singly and in groups, the young people by themselves, chatting, laughing, teasing one another, some of them singing. They walked fast, for it was a fine day, cool, sunny, bracing—one of those days that bring joy and hope and zest to the farmer—and they were in a hurry to get to their fields.

## CHAPTER VI

### AT THE VILLAGE MILL

IN a way I could not have chosen a more inopportune time for a visit to the old village. Eager as muzhiks are to entertain outsiders, especially people from far-away places, they had little time for me. They had little time for anything but work. Few of them even went to the fair, the big annual event of the countryside, though usually hardly any of them would think of missing it. The weather had been playing mean capers. Hardly a day but it rained not in continuous downpours but in fits, so to speak, with scarcely any warning. The morning might be bright with a clear sky and a hot sun, and of a sudden, no sooner had people got to work than clouds would drift along, and rain, as if for spite, would splash down and ruin the day. Meadows were knee-deep in water, and the grass had not been cut. Oats had lodged and were rapidly yielding to rust. The flax had likewise flattened out and was more than ripe for pulling. Never before, complained the muzhiks, had they had such a continuous spell of treacherous weather. Three crops to be harvested and no chance to do the work. Every hour's delay meant a loss, and they could afford no losses—every spear of hay and every ear of grain counted, alas! how it counted in such a poor year!

But it so happened that when I came to the village the weather had cleared. Every morning the sun came out and stayed out, full and hot, all day. Muzhiks rushed to the fields. From sunrise until dark they toiled strenuously, mowing grass, cutting oats, pulling flax, taking but little time<sup>1</sup> for rest and meals. During the day the village was deserted, save for the youngest children and a few stray pigs that somehow managed to escape being driven to pasture. Often I went out to the fields, but observing the feverish efforts of the people to get their work done, I made my visits short. In the evenings, neighbours and friends would drop in, but only for a brief chat. Once the *Amerikanci*—the women who had husbands in America—had foregathered in my cousin's house. They were sure that I had brought them not only news of their men but also gifts and money, and when they learned that I had not even seen them, they stayed long enough to relieve themselves of torrents of imprecations on their husbands, and for a good measure, as is the way of peasants, on themselves.

So I waited patiently for Sunday when the peasants would be at home and free to talk. Some of them had promised to call a mass-meeting at the public square or at some other suitable place and assured me that they would tell everything. They would conceal nothing, and they would tell the truth, too. They would not varnish it up like the revolutionaries who had their own axe to grind. Again I was impressed with their utter unmindfulness of possible interference with their right to speak freely. The question of spies did not disturb them. Not once did they mention the subject, and when I alluded to it, they laughed and protested that they had no fear of spies 'or even the devil.' Startling indeed was this contrast between the village and the city, where even the proletarian and the Communist did not escape the vigilant eye of the G. P. U. (secret service).

Meanwhile I discovered the village mill with its barn-like shack which served as a waiting place for peasants who came to have their rye ground and which was also a public gathering-place, the only one left in the village. The blacksmith's shop was closed, and so were the inn and the store. Heavy taxes and loss of trade, due to the diminished purchasing power of the peasants, had caused

their closing. But the mill flourished. Through some miracle it had escaped serious damage during the war, the only mill in the countryside to have been thus favoured by fate, and it drew customers from many of the surrounding villages. There were always groups of muzhiks in the mill or in the shack or on the grounds, waiting for their grist and ever ready for gossip and argument.

The miller himself was a unique personage. He was a little man with a long beard as white as the flour with which he was always covered. He was one of the oldest men in the village and of a philosophical turn of mind. In the presence of visitors he spoke little. But when alone he was only too glad to talk himself out. He had little affection for his fellow-men, none for women, whom he called 'unknowing animals,' creatures without wit or reason and addicted to silly practices. Politics did not interest him; he deemed it a futile pursuit, nay, an affliction to the world. He hated government, and regarded it as the source of all evil. Why, he asked, did government, and not outsiders leave the villages alone? Of what need was a national government to his village, to any village? The peasants could well enough take care of themselves, couldn't they? They could live, get married, raise families, work their lands, and die, without the guardianship of officials, courts, police; and then they wouldn't have to pay taxes, to perform military service, or go to wars. Yes, he once declared emphatically, every village ought to be independent of a *tsentr* (central government); it ought to govern itself and if the muzhiks had any brains they would have long ago demolished all *tsentrs* and once for all rid themselves of the demoniac loafers who loved only to torment and plague them with taxes, wars, revolutions. . . .

I asked him if he was an anarchist. An illiterate man, he never had heard of the word. In fact he thought I had said *Antichrist* and proceeded to tell me of a monk who had been to visit him once and offered to sell him a little icon which, when worn on the body, protected a man from evil spirits. But he did not buy it. He had no need of it. He feared no evil spirits, not even the *Antichrist* who, the monk had told him, was loose in the world, seeking to seduce innocent souls. . . . The worst the *Antichrist* could do was to kill a



person, and that was what Russians, and Poles, and Reds, and Whites, and bandits had been doing anyway. Perhaps they were all *Antichrists*. Who knew? . . . Oh, he needed no charms. He was old anyway; and death held no terrors for him. . . . Only, if someone would invent a charm against government! That would be a real blessing, would put an end to wars, revolutions, Bolsheviks, Soviets, Polish invasions, and mayhap even to epidemics of typhoid and small-pox. . . .

Having discovered this philosophical miller and his mill, I made it a point to go there in the afternoons and linger for hours, chatting with the men and women who were waiting for their grist, and when opportunity presented itself, also with the miller himself. Then late Friday afternoon a violent storm swept over the countryside. It came rather suddenly, and peasants from nearby fields as well as passing travellers rushed into the mills and into the shack for shelter. A surly crowd they were, bursting with rage. They cursed the weather, the Soviets, themselves, everything and everybody they could think of. . . . Such hellish weather!

They might have frittered away their time in growling, but for the arrival of a peasant whom they all knew and whose name was Fyodor. He was so drenched when he came in that water kept oozing out of him as from a secret spring. But hardly had he time to loosen his dangling woollen coat when several men asked eagerly how he had fared at the Soviet office.

'Five gold roubles,' he yelled in reply. 'They wanted ten, but I told them I couldn't pay it, didn't have it, and so they took five—the cheats!'

It seemed that he had been caught making home-brew and was summoned to the district Soviet for a hearing from which he was now returning. The interest of the crowd in the outcome of his case led to a discussion of men and affairs in the district Soviet, in the village in Russia. Though informed and rambling, as such discussions usually are, it was to me as precious as it was revealing—the kind of talk I had longed to hear. It told much, very much, of the muzhik and his reaction to the big events of the times.

'And I'll tell you what,' remarked another peasant with a pock-marked face, 'you ought to consider yourself lucky you didn't have to pay more. Ten roubles I paid when they had me up for a hearing, and they never gave me back the still—took it away somewhere.'

His words enraged Fyodor.

'Lucky nothing!' he shouted back in wrath. 'I need five roubles worse than they do, don't I now, what with a sick wife and a grown daughter on my hands and a horse so old and feeble it may drop dead any time and leave me with only my own hands to do my work.'

'The rascals,' chimed in another man, a quick-tempered taciturn muzhik of not more than forty, whose name was Demyan. 'Why in the devil don't they allow us to have a still and make home-brew? It doesn't cost *them* anything, and it doesn't hurt *them*, either.'

A typically peasant view this was. I had heard it expressed countless times in various parts of Russia. The average muzhik never did see an issue of health or morals in prohibition. Interference with his right to drink liquor was to him as cruel an injustice as would be the curtailment of his right to wear bast sandals or eat rye bread. Now that prohibition has been abolished he persists in making home-brew and sees no reason why the Soviets should stop him.

'Akh,' sighed another man, a little fellow with a huge moustache, 'if they'd only allow us to have stills! We'd pay them something. Poor as I am, I wouldn't mind giving them five roubles a year for the right to operate a still.' He spoke with a decisiveness and a vigour that commanded the closest attention. He was barefooted, with his trousers rolled up to the knees, and patches of dusky skin showing through his tattered woollen coat. There was something indefinably tragic about him, as though he were under the stress of a devastating sorrow.

A chorus of voices murmured approval. Then another peasant, a stranger, amazed the crowd by telling them that they were fools for bothering with stills, as anybody could make as strong vodka as he wanted without a still. That was what all the muzhiks in his parts had

been doing. Evidently our peasants had not yet heard of this new process of making home-brew, for they leaned forward with eyes fixed on the stranger, eager to hear further details.

'All you've got to have,' he continued with an air of expansive authoritativeness, 'is . . .' and he proceeded to describe the process. 'That's the way I've been making mine, and, brothers, you should taste the supply I made last Sunday. Whew! It is at least eighty per cent. strong, better than any vodka of the old days. You gulp down one swallow, and it spreads inside of you like a flame. That's how strong it is.'

An extraordinary bit of news this was—a process of making home-brew without the use of a still or any mechanical contrivance. It would have been extraordinary anywhere, possibly even in an American Pullman. . . .

An animated exchange of felicitations ensued and a festive mood spread among the crowd. But Fyodor brought to a halt the sudden outburst of joyousness.

'Nay, nay, brothers,' he protested. 'Don't fool yourselves that way. The Soviets don't want us to drink any kind of home-brew. Do you understand? What do you suppose I heard to-day? Why, I heard that a new order's come from Moscow to punish severely anyone caught not only making but drinking home-brew. You know what that means. More agents to sneak around our cellars and barns. I tell you beware. Beware!'

But the stranger laughed at Fyodor's warning.

'Let them come,' he burst out in cheerful defiance. 'Let them come. A lot of home-brew they'll find in my place! They might as well be hunting for last year's swallows' eggs. I keep mine in a place where the devil himself can't smell it out, and any one ought to have wits enough to do likewise. . . .' He emptied the ashes from his pipe on the palm of his hand and while doing so kept reiterating rebelliously, 'Let them come, let them come, the brigands!'

With what a sense of aloofness these muzhiks spoke of the Soviets! They made me think of college youths

away from the class-room discussing among themselves the whims and foibles of their teachers and speaking of things they would not dare mention to outsiders, and with the assurance that none of them would turn traitor and denounce the others to the authorities! That these peasants mistrusted the Soviet government was clear enough. After all it was a government, something that extracted obligations which they were loath to fulfil, just as the old government did. But—in the old days they accepted government as a matter of course, just as they did a flood, a storm, an epidemic, something that was not within their power to control. But now they did not hesitate to berate such governmental rulings as puzzled and incensed them, and even to question its right to exist.

They continued the discussion of making home-brew and of the restrictions of the Soviets and then the little man propounded a new riddle.

'What I'd like to know,' he asked, 'is what these Soviets do with all their money. Just think of the amounts they gather as fines alone, and then taxes. Oh, Lord, what riches pour into their coffers!'

'Haw, haw, haw what riches!' several voices broke in.

'Ay,' said Fyodor, 'if I had half of what they took in to-day as fines only, I could buy boots for everyone in my family.'

'And a barrel of salt, too,' added another man.

'And perhaps ten cans of kerosene to boot,' added still another.

'Yes,' resumed the little man, 'I *would* like to know what they do with all their money. Such enormous sums!'

'Don't you know?' questioned Demyan, almost with indignation. 'What would you expect them to do with it? They are spending it on themselves. That's why they all sport around in new boots, all of them, from the chairman of the Soviets to the lowest clerk.'

'We cannot even buy *lapti*,' moaned the little man, 'and they parade around in new boots. *Nu*, the sharpers!'

'Well, as I see it,' remarked the stranger, 'only the Communists have everything.'

'Right, right, you are!' burst out the little man. 'They have everything, everything. Well said, well said, brother!'

'And why shouldn't they?' queried another man who had all the time been merely smoking a pipe and listening to the conversation. Zakhar was his name. 'They are our rulers, aren't they? Well, rulers always do have everything. Think of the Czar and the landlords and the generals in the old days. They did not lack anything, did they? Indeed not, for they were our rulers.'

No one disputed the statement. The logic of it seemed self-evident to everybody.

'That is the truth you are telling, Zakhar,' agreed Demyan with enthusiasm. 'Rulers don't deny themselves anything, whoever they be, monarchists or Communists. Akh, if only the Lord had created us rulers!'

'Ah, nonsense you are talking about,' challenged the little man. 'The Lord creates us only muzhiks. He always has, and He always will. Muzhiks, fit only for toil and privation. . . . That's our lot, brothers. Yes, brothers, toil, pain, sorrow, plenty of all that we get. . . . Cursed muzhiks!'

Then a man rose, a tall man with a swarthy face and a squint in his fat-lidded eyes. He was a blacksmith in a neighbouring village.

'Now, brothers,' he declared in a solemn voice, 'I don't quite agree with you. I believe in the truth, and the truth is that the Communists are not any better off than the rest of us, and, I think, I know. I see them all, Communists and non-partisans and muzhiks, everybody. I see and hear them quite often.'

The little man burst into an uproarious laugh.

'Man, what are you talking about!' he protested vehemently, and he roared with mockery, which only spurred the blacksmith to exclaim:

'Quit your mockery!'

'How can I help it,' shouted the little man, 'when you say such silly things?'

'Silly, ah?' railed the blacksmith. 'Now, listen. I am telling you that the Communists are as poor as the rest of us.'

The little man interrupted him with another outburst of laughter. He seemed incensed at the very thought that the blacksmith, who did have a chance to hear all manner of people everyday, should give utterance to such sentiments.

'Don't talk nonsense, smithy,' he chided the blacksmith, 'or people will laugh at you. I've seen them, these Communist rulers of ours. You cannot tell me anything about them.'

'Whom have you seen? Whom?' demanded the blacksmith excitedly, drawing near to his antagonist as if for a fray.

'Whom? All of them at our district Soviet. They all have boots and shoes and blouses and hats, and we have nothing. Now isn't that so?'

But the blacksmith would not recognise defeat.

'Yes,' he replied, 'my son has boots and a blouse and a hat, and he is no more a Communist than I am. But where did he get his outfit? In the army, that's where he got it. Every soldier gets it when he goes home. Am I right or not, eh? And these Communists at the Soviet were all in the army. I believe in the truth, brothers, and, well, look at Yekim in the village of T—. Some of you know him, perhaps. He's as fiery a Communist as there is in these parts. He'd sooner argue about communism than eat stuffed roast pig. And he is an honest muzhik. You'll all allow that if you know him. And yesterday he came after his mended plough, and he begged me to wait for the rye he owes me until he had gathered his new crop. That's what he begged me to do. He said he hardly had enough rye left for bread until he'd thrashed his new harvest, and a leading Communist he is in these parts, a man of power in our district Soviet.'

'Then there is something wrong with him,' insisted the little man. 'Look at our own young Ostap, how he's

advanced himself since he's been in the Soviet. Last Sunday he came home, and what do you suppose he had ?

'What ?'

'A wrist-watch !' This in a tone of grave censure as though the mere possession of such an article by an official of the Soviet constituted an indictment of his honesty.

'Indeed,' queried several voices.

'Of course, I saw him, talked to him, and he flashed the watch before me to make sure I'd notice it.'

'The scoundrel !'

'The saphead !'

'Just the same,' persisted the blacksmith, 'the Communists are as poor as the rest of us.'

But the little man would not be persuaded.

'You can't tell me that,' he protested. 'Anybody that's in power's got lots of chances to grab things on the side. An official, smithy, is like a cat; 's got a keen smell; finds out quickly enough where the milk is.'

'Yes,' flashed back the blacksmith, 'and think what happens to them when they are caught. Did you ever stop to consider that ?'

'Meanwhile they are enjoying themselves.'

'Do you remember,' continued the blacksmith, 'what happened to the former chairman of the Soviet in the district of T——?'

'They've shut him up, but what of it? *Nichevo*, they'll let him out soon.'

The blacksmith chortled.

'The devil they will ! They'll send him to the cemetery in a coffin, that's what they'll do. If he was a non-partisan he might get off with a jail sentence. But being a Communist, a member of the party—just you wait and hear them whiz a bullet through his brain.'

'Nu,' muttered the little man incredulously.

'You don't believe it?' challenged the blacksmith hotly. 'And do you remember Lukyan, the former

treasurer of the county Soviet? And have you heard what he did and what happened to him? Listen. He'd bought a horse for the Soviet and said he'd paid two hundred roubles, and some Communists found out that he'd only paid a hundred roubles; and then they began to investigate him and found that he'd been regularly accepting bribes from peasants and merchants for favours he did for them, just like the magistrates of the old days. And you know what they've done to him? There is no more flesh sticking to his bones—worms have chewed it off long ago.'

Silence followed, the silence which comes from deep emotion or great terror and which temporarily paralyses one's thinking power. The blacksmith himself seemed so overcome with a sense of gravity that he gazed listlessly at his now cowed opponent. Only the cynical old miller seemed unperturbed. He winked at me from behind the heap of sacks where he was standing as though to say, 'That's what governments do—spoil people by giving them a chance to be dishonest, and then kill them.'

'They certainly are not afraid to shoot people,' broke in an elderly muzhik. 'I've got a grandson who's recently come back from the army and he's told me how they once shot an officer, and for a very small thing.'

'For what?'

'For getting drunk.'

'Ah!'

'The brutes!'

Again a pause ensued, tense with grave meditation. To them, simple folk, still in the habit of appraising men and events by their old standards and conventions, it seemed the acme of daring and barbarity to put to death so important a personage officially as an army officer and for so insignificant an act as getting drunk!

Finally someone asked rather timidly:

'Why do you suppose they shoot their own people so much?'

To the ordinary peasant such punishment by the Communists of their own kind was not only perversion of loyalty but a travesty on ordinary justice and decency. The blacksmith hastened with an explanation.



'Why? That's obvious enough, isn't it? They don't want their own men to be cheats and thieves. That's why they shoot them. Only the other day the manager of the government farm stopped at my shop to get his horse shod, and he said that a dishonest Communist is worse than a mad dog, and the only thing to do with him is to shoot him. That's what he said.'

'Nu,' sniggered someone in the crowd, 'they never can make a Russian honest. Never.'

'Indeed not,' added someone else, 'no more than they can make a muzhik stop drinking home-brew.'

'Right you are, brother,' snapped out the little man. 'Right you are. It is not in the Russian nature to be honest, and you cannot change a man's nature, no more than you can a cow's.' His voice rang with triumph, as though he were talking not of himself, of his own people, but of some alien clan or race, enemies of his, whom he had a special reason to disparage.

'That's the pity of it,' the blacksmith complained sullenly. 'That's what's caused the undoing of our Russia. For years and years we have all been accustomed to cheating and robbing. Just think of our old district clerks and constables and judges and the rest of them! All they did was steal from one another and from whomever else they could. And are we, muzhiks, any better? Tell me now, are we any better? Why, if any of us have a garden or orchard by the road, we have to stay in there with a mean dog and heap of rocks, else there won't be a thing left for us to pick. Isn't that so? And do you remember how it was in the army, those of you who were soldiers in the old days? I was a cavalryman, I was, and do you know what the bastard officers did? They pocketed the money that they were supposed to spend on fodder for our horses and would send us out nights to steal hay from muzhiks in the villages. I had to steal, so did every soldier in my company, and we stole from muzhiks, only from muzhiks, never from landlords, for landlords had many guards and dogs, and, besides, officers respected landlords and feared them, too. So we stole from muzhiks, from paupers like you and me....'

'Officers, eh,' mused the little man. 'There were thieves for you, real thieves....'

'And the rest of us are not better,' pursued the blacksmith with passion. 'The new manager of the government farm told me a lot of things, and I tell you, brothers, he is right, even if he is a Communist. All we learned in the old days was to cheat one another. . . .'

No one rose to dispute these terrible words. No one showed signs of the least indignation. Silence ensued, the silence of unquestioning acquiescence. . . .

I do not know whether to commend or condemn the tendency of the Russian to belittle and reproach himself, to regard himself as the lowliest of the lowly. Ask an American, for example, which in his opinion is the greatest country in the world, and is there any need to write out the answer? Put the same question to the Frenchman or the Englishman, and the reply is likewise obvious. To citizens of these lands there are no countries like their own. Put the question to a Russian, and he'll shake his head and shrug his shoulders and say: 'I know not which is the best country in the world. But I do know which is the worst. It is Russia.' And it makes no difference who this Russian is, whether a Turgenev, a Tolstoy, a Gorki, or an ordinary muzhik. . . .

The conversation continued.

'And what do you suppose they are trying to do now?' asked Zakhar.

'What?' queried several voices in unison.

'Well, it seemed funny to me, and it may seem so to you, too. The other day I was at the fair and as I was walking along the grounds I heard a commotion. An urchin had stolen a hat from a Jew pedlar, and the Jew caught him and thrashed him, pulled him around by the hair and scratched his face until it bled. Then a militiaman came along and arrested the Jew and said that in Soviet Russia nobody's got any right to whip children. That's the new law, he said, and anybody who was caught whipping children would be arrested and punished. Now what do you think of that?'

The little man frowned, and several muzhiks chortled with amusement. It was evident that to them the very notion that it was wrong to beat a child was utterly silly.

'That's just like them,' muttered Demyan. 'They are always trying to think of something foolish like that. Why the devil don't they try to do something that's really useful?'

'That's just what I say,' chimed in the little man.

Presently he caught my eye, greeted me with an effusive salutation, and asked me how things were in America.

'Are people honest there?' he queried, smiling.

The crowd turned their eyes on me. To the strangers the little man explained who I was, and they bombarded me with questions especially about American prices of different commodities such as salt, kerosene, iron, boots, ploughs. This led to a prolonged and heated discussion of the dearth of products in Russia, and then the little man broached a fresh complaint. I had felt all the time that something was disturbing him. Now he disclosed the nature of the disturbance.

'Ah, brothers,' he moaned, 'it is little things you are fretting about. Salt, sugar, boots, iron—*nu*, a muzhik can struggle through life somehow without some of these things. It's hard; I'll allow that. But he can struggle along. A muzhik's body is like a dog's, it can stand anything—cold, hunger, heat, storms, abuse—if only his heart remain unhurt. That's what counts, brothers, your heart, and when that's hurt, then you know what real suffering is. Ah, how you know it! Tell me, friends mine, what's a man to do when he has unmarried daughters on his hands? Tell me, what's he to do when every time he looks at his daughters, something stabs him as with a sharp knife?' He spoke slowly and in that wailing tone so characteristic of the peasant when he is in distress.

'They surely are the ruination of any man, daughters are,' agreed the blacksmith with sympathy, 'especially in these days when boys have grown to be as exacting about dowries as the Soviets about taxes.'

'Grasping, you say?' shouted the little man. 'Murderers, that's what they are, these boys of ours! They have no pity for a suffering father, no more than for the fox or the rabbit they trap. They joy in pumping blood out of him, ah, they do indeed! And the Soviets do nothing to stop them.'

That's what hurts the most. They could stop them if they tried, strong as they now are. They are only good at yelling all the time that the bourzhuis and the capitalists are ruining the world. But, brothers, citizens, I ask you, was there ever a bourzhui anywhere in the world who flayed the skin off a man more mercilessly than do our muzhik boys off us fathers whose daughters they wish to marry? Ah, a cholera upon them! And the Soviets say nothing and do nothing. They tell us to stop making homebrew and not to beat children and a lot of other things. But why don't they tell these suitors to cease choking us poor fathers? Why don't they? Ah, what a world, what a world!

He wagged his head in despair, and big veins bulged out on his dust-brown neck.

'In my days,' remarked an oldish man, 'if the girl's father gave a fellow a sheepskin coat he was more than satisfied.'

'And my father-in-law,' added another, 'only promised to give me one, and he never did, the scoundrel, not even when I threatened to send his daughter home and forbid her to come back until she brought the dowry I was promised.'

'But think of me,' lamented the little man again. 'Four daughters I have, four of them, brothers, the oldest twenty-two already. She should have been married long ago and cared for by a husband instead of hanging like a rock on the neck of her pauper father.'

'Is not Anton going to marry her?' queried someone. 'I heard that he was.'

'Would that it were true, but it is not. Do you know how much of a dowry he wants? A horse and wagon and one hundred poods of rye! Think of that, brothers! I have talked to him, and so has my wife, but it's done no good. He is as stubborn as an ox. He said if I won't give it to him, some other man will. And where can I get one hundred poods of rye? That's more than I'll harvest this year, and I have taxes to pay and bread to provide for the family for a whole year and seed for the fall's sowing. And what'll I do if I give away the only horse I have? What's a muzhik nowadays without a horse?'

No one made reply, for his position did seem hopeless, and the peasant, by no means void of sympathy for the man in distress and not hampered by conventionalities from withholding it, does not extend consolation for its own sake. After a pause the little man continued :

'Only the other day as we were sitting at the table in the dark and eating our supper, she burst into the house, my Varvara did, threw herself at my feet and cried like someone that's being lashed to death. "Father, dear," she cried, "get me the dowry for Anton. Please do. He won't marry me if you don't. He told me so just now, and he said he won't even come to see me any more. He wants to drop me, father, my dearest ; he said he does, and if he should, then, father, what'll I do ? I don't want to marry any one else, and nobody else'll want me anyway—I am getting so old now, and I love Anton, I love him, father, and I want him. Save me, dearest, save me, and I'll always love you !" That's what she said. And tell me, brothers, what could I do ? What could anybody do ?' He wiped his eyes with his fingers, shook his head, and sighed in dejection.

'Supposing you do give away your horse and wagon,' someone suggested. 'Won't the Soviets lend you a horse and wagon to work your land with ?'

But the little man only waved his hand and said nothing.

Presently the door of the shack opened, and a fresh arrival entered, a large man with a stooping back and a huge drooping moustache. I should never have taken him for a peasant and hardly for a Russian, despite his broad face, his shaggy brows, and the Mongolian squint in his eyes. He wore shoes instead of boots or the ordinary bast sandals, also a plush hat, old and faded, and an American outfit of overalls. He walked with a swagger and an air of insolent self-confidence not at all characteristic of the muzhik. The blacksmith introduced him to me as 'another American.'

'You from America !' he exclaimed joyously in English. 'I been in America tvelv year. Yes, sir, tvelv year. I been all ober, New York, Boston, Meetchigan, Ansonia, Connecticut—ever been dat place ? I work all ober, in mine, lumber camp, section on railroad . . . an' I make gut moneys

... you betcha .... boss he pay me tree dollar day and vork eight hour only. Vilson, he still president? A smart man, Vilson, ha? ... smarter dan Roosfelt. Vilson he all de time stick up for vorkmans, Roosfelt he all de time stick up for capitalists. .... Sure, I know. I been in de union.'

I asked him why he came back.

'My vife he make me come back. He sick all de time in America an' doctor he say he go back ol' country or he die. So I come. ... But I go back, sure. ... Bolsheviki he never get my moneys like of dem oder muzhiks dat come from America. He never find dem. ... By 'em by, vife maybe he die, an' I go back. Gut country America. Better dan Russia. Make lots o' moneys dere. No got chance make moneys here. Bolsheviki dey crazy in de head. Him no got much sense. ... But I go back America. I like him, America. 'N' you know vat I do by 'em by ven I go back? No sirree, I no vork no shop, no section gang. I do sometin else. I got it all in de head. I sell Russian home-brew. Gut stuff, better'n dam' American bootleg. .... Lots moneys in home-brew. .... I know. I make him myself 'n' sell cheap. You betcha.'

The other peasants listened, silent, intent, amused. Then someone turned and began to complain that this 'American' had been telling them a lot of stories, which only provoked the latter's ire and caused him to launch into a spirited defence of himself, this time in Russian.

'That's right, that's right,' he said, 'ask this countryman of yours if I am a liar. Now you have a chance to find out who is a liar, you are I. ... I've been telling them that in America everybody's got nice clothes and shoes and even common labourers eat meat everyday and drink tea and coffee with lots of sugar and eat lots of cake and pie all the time. Isn't that so? ... There now, you unbelieving creatures! And I've also been telling them that one American working with a machine can do more work in one day than twenty muzhiks. Isn't that so? There now! .....

His face was flushed, and his eyes glowed with self-importance. 'They slave and slave,' he continued vehemently, 'these muzhiks here, day and night, and live like their cattle. Don't they now? Fie on such a life! I'll run away from here as soon as I can, and it won't be long before I do.

Look at them—no boots, no clothes, no sugar, no coffee, nothing, nothing. . . . You know what the Soviets ought to do ? They say they want to help the muzhiks, and if they mean it they ought to bring over a lot of American machines and start these people working right ; then they'd get somewhere. That's what the Soviets ought to do.'

He paused, his eyes shining with triumph. He drew a pipe from his hip-pocket. It was filled, not with the *mahorka* which the peasant universally uses, but with the fine factory prepared tobacco that the city people smoke. The others looked at him silent, envious, no one daring or caring to take issue with him.

Again he started talking to me in English, reiterating with zest his hopes of making heaps of money in America by selling Russian home-brew. All he was impatiently waiting for was for his wife to die.

The storm had subsided, and the muzhiks began to depart one by one. The sky was still dark, and lightnings flickered playfully over its endless expanse. The miller bade me follow him into the granary. He was silent until he lighted a smudgy lantern.

'Talk, talk, talk, all the time,' he finally remarked with impatience. 'As though rehashing the same subjects day in and day out is going to do them any good, bring down taxes, or lower the price of kerosene and salt. . . . Think of it, ten eggs for one pound of kerosene ! Ten eggs ! *Nu*, this business with governments. . . .'

## CHAPTER VII

### A PEASANT FAIR

READER, if you ever go to Russia you will, of course, want to visit Moscow and Leningrad. Everybody does. Everybody should. There are no cities quite like them anywhere in the world. New York, Paris, London, Berlin, Vienna, are overgrown and overpampered Main Streets. They are products and servants of the machine, with a standardisation in dress, physical surroundings social customs, that disappoints and saddens the seeker of adventure. They remind one of a man at the zenith of

his career, with settled habits and convictions, bristling with self-confidence and scorning the ways of others.

Moscow and Leningrad are still in the process of growth. They have not yet reached the age of sophistication. The machine has not yet conquered them. It may do so in the future, perhaps the near future, and then they will vie with other cities for supremacy in regularity, comfort, respectability. At present they are still non-conformist; still dare, so to speak, to be themselves. Slovenly and bedraggled, they are yet resplendent with youth, folly, chaos, defiance.

When you are in Leningrad, reader, you will not want to miss taking a trip to *Tzarskoye Syelo*, now known as *Dyetskoye Syelo* (Childtown), and visit the palaces of the departed emperors. They have been preserved in all their pristine elegance and are kept exactly as they were left by their former occupants with the old guards and caretakers on duty to prevent damage. You will marvel at the exotic luxuries in which the old Russian rulers revelled, and you will laugh at the sight of bathtubs far removed from bedrooms, with beds shunted off into obscure corners away from windows and with running water beyond convenient reach.

And you will want to visit the Ermitage Museum, one of the great art palaces of the world, its manifold collections grandly enriched by the art treasures requisitioned from private salons. And if you think of it, reader, try to coax the keeper into showing you the collections of imperial jewels. Yes, they are there, hidden in massive vaults, strings and clusters of them, gathered from all corners of the world—mounted on canes, parasol-handles, pocket-knives, cigarette-holders, shoe-clasps. A memorable sight they are and an instructive one, telling much of the whims and frailties and childish vanities of the once mighty Romanovs; ay, of all of us.

And you will likewise want to dash across the river and visit the fortress of Peter and Paul, the ancient palace of torture, where Russia's noblest minds spent years in anguished isolation. The guard will point out to you the casements of Peter Kropotkin, Veraigner, and the other illustrious spirits of the Revolution, and



then will perhaps lead you as he did me through the back way to a side alley overgrown with weeds and stretching along the swift-flowing Neva, and pause to tell you that in the old days prisoners condemned to die might be taken out here as if for airing and were then shot from the rear by a brazen-faced Chinaman, whom even the guards despised for his lack of 'principles.' If you should stare at him with incredulity and inform him that you have your doubts as to the veracity of his tale, he will cross himself and swear by all that is holy and unholy that he has spoken the truth and only the truth.

There are other places you will want to visit: the historic Winter Garden, once the scene of the gayest revelry on the Continent and now a mere museum; the Cathedral of Kazan; the Cathedral of St. Isaac with its glistening colonnades, so massive that the entire structure is continually sinking into the ground; the famous ballet school with its scores of comely girls, the comeliest in Russia, selected annually from thousands of applicants from all over the land. Formerly only sons and daughters of the rich and elite were welcomed to its halls, and now the child of the muzhik and the proletarian, if endowed with the required qualifications, is not only welcomed but given the preference. . . .

Then there is the world-renowned conservatory of music, where scores of celebrities have prepared for their illustrious careers, with the great Glazunov still presiding over its destinies—baby-eyed, soft-voiced, slow-moving, handsome Glazunov, who never fails to bow and shake hands with every student he meets. Last of all there is the Balaganchik, on a side street, within five minutes' walk from the renowned Nevsky; a unique little theatre, built on the devotion and self-denial of a group of young artists, writers, actors, who are joyously toiling away day and night to create something new in the art of the stage, and who pack more wit, more novelty, more intelligence, into one of their weekly bills than ever the genial Balieff dreamed of infusing into all his colourfully mediocre Chauve-Souris.

And when you are in Moscow, reader, well, there are the Kremlin, the Art Theatres, the Opera House, the Soukharevsky market, and most impressive of all, those

hundreds and hundreds of churches and chapels, now neglected, with doors loosening from hinges, windows often broken, paint peeling off, roofs sinking, stairs cracking, with only the gilded cupolas proudly gleaming in the sun, like a fallen man holding his head high in defiance of a mocking world. And you will be stirred and awed by the sight of the multitudinous temples of worship, and you'll say: 'Here must be the city of God,' and you'll err grievously like the Slavophiles and the gullible Stephen Grahams, for in reality all these edifices and all that is and was within their walls, the gold, the jewels, the icons, the drapes, are symbols not of Christian saintliness and heroic self-denial, but of riotous self-indulgence. They were built largely by Czars, noblemen, landlords, merchants, men and women who stalked through life in sin and lust, and who on scenting the approach of death grew so terror-struck at the punishment awaiting them in the beyond that they poured out their treasures on temples and icons; setting them in gold frames, adorning them with precious stones, all in the pagan belief that such gifts of shekels will so please the spirits of the departed saints that they will lift the curse of sin from their givers and save them from a purgatorial ordeal.

And yet, reader, if you would see Russia in her barest self, then by all means leave Moscow and Leningrad and hie to a village fair. There the pre-steam age and the pre-industrial era still stalk the avenue. Nothing and nobody are masked. The processes of trade are as open as the hearts of the people who come there. There Russia, peasant Russia, lies revealed in all her shabby and majestic nakedness—shrewd, wasteful, profane, good-humoured, garrulous and unafraid.

I had come to the old village just at the time when the annual fair in the town of S——, the trading centre in the peasant belt which embraced our district, was in full swing. My cousin had already been there for his annual trading, but he volunteered to go again if I cared to come with him. Of course I did, and one morning at dawn we drove off to the town of S——.

I remembered the place well—streets, buildings, people. I had attended school there in the old days. Once it was a gay and prosperous community with glittering residences

and landlords, noblemen, officials. Now its old glory was gone ; it seemed to have fled with the departure of the old masters. Street after street was desolate and battered. Building after building seemed on the verge of collapse. The sight of broken windows, crumbling sidewalks, littered pavements, made me think of an old man too decrepit or too indolent to wash his face. People might be poor, I thought, ruined by war and revolution, but why were they so indifferent to the grime and desolation about them ?

My cousin and the old school-friend who joined us laughed at my queries. How little I had learned of Russia in the few months I had been there ! Didn't I know that people in the towns were afraid to show a prosperous face even to the extent of painting a house or wearing their best clothes ? Taxes and school fees might shoot up. In Russia everybody feigned poverty, even the extortionate shopkeepers. Had I observed how empty their shops seemed to be, shelves only gathering dust and cobwebs ? Yet I need only step in and ask for anything I wished and they'd fetch it out with little delay. They had their goods, like their gold and their other valuables, buried somewhere, so as to create the appearance of indigence and escape the heavy tax. . . . Oh, Russians were tricky ! They knew how to evade the hated law, and why shouldn't they, after the years and years of tutelage under the old régime ? Why, men of substance even had banks of their own. Hadn't I heard of that ? Yes, safe banks, too, the safest in the world—holes in the ground somewhere in the cellar ! . . .

My cousin left us, and my school-friend and I sauntered leisurely about the town until we finally found ourselves at the fair-grounds, as spacious as in the old days and as littered, with the old-time glamour hovering over it. Life roared. Peasants from surrounding villages had come in crowds. Cart stood upon cart, thills raised high in the air and the horses tied to the dash-boards. Men and women in groups and rows surged to and fro, slowly, meditatively ; barefooted, many of them, and in sheepskin coats and hats, though the sun was hot. Team after team clattered along the rough cobbles. Calves bleated, pigs squealed, colts neighed, men shouted, some

with joy, some with anger and hate. Everything and everybody seemed loudvoiced and on the whole kindly disposed toward the world. Barefoot urchins sprinted by, yelling with glee. Boys and girls strolled along, arm in arm, chatting gaily, laughing uproariously. Beggars, blind and lame, leaning on stout crutches and led by children, were droning ancient chants to the accompaniment of ancient instruments. Hawkers were perched on platforms, insistently dangling their wares before pedestrians and proclaiming their bargains in brassy voices; and men and women—walking department-stores, I used to call them—laden with all manner of goods, from sheepskin coats hanging on their shoulders to glittering trinkets suspended from their wrists, were stalking up and down, clamorously soliciting trade. Gay crowds they were, unmindful for the moment of their trials and vexations.

On the outer fringe of the market-place were the newly arrived peasants with their produce. They were standing by their wagons or sauntering up and down the curb, some with a live rooster, a chicken, a goose; some with a sack of cottage cheese, a roll of butter, a pail of eggs packed away in layers of chaff; some with a sack of potatoes and apples, untied and with the contents exposed to view to attract a buyer; some with a live calf, a sheep, a pig inside a sack, squealing vociferously. Town-dwellers gathered about these muzhiks, examined their wares, dipped a finger now into the butter, now into the cheese or honey, tasted samples with a loud smack of the lips and made wry faces, as though displeased with the quality of the goods. They took the chickens, the geese, into their hands, weighed them, felt of their sides and their breasts to see how fat they were; they lifted the calves and the sheep and felt of their backs and breasts to see how fat they were. They asked prices, made offers, bargained, shouted, swore, cursed, called the peasants names, went away, were called back or returned of their own accord, re-examined the goods, shook their heads dubiously, again made faces, named new figures, shouted and swore more vehemently than before. Often buyer and seller were so carried away by a passion to abuse one another that they forgot the immediate object of their wrangle, shook their fists, and threatened to come to blows. But in the end they came to earth, agreed on a price, and shook hands for good luck!

Such, reader, is the universal manner of trading at a Russian village fair. Tons of conversation must precede every transaction, however small. And what conversation! Mostly choice epithets and heroic oaths hurled at each other with equal candour and volubility by men and women. The hours squandered in such futile wrangling would, if put into creative effort, build hundreds of miles of highway, drain millions of acres of swamp, irrigate endless stretches of desert. But—what is time to a Russian? Why bother about it, anyway? It takes from one to two hours to get an order in a Russian restaurant, and heaven help the man who has to buy a railroad ticket in any large city! As for keeping appointments, who outside of a few outstanding leaders deems it proper or necessary to be on time? I at any rate can think of no one, and I ought to know. Have not I fretted away countless hours waiting for the valiant *tovarishshi* (comrades), commissars in the capital, clerks in in village Soviets, who would agree to meet me at a certain hour and then fail to put in an appearance? Of course one must be charitable with the peasant. What shall we expect of a man who knows no clocks and no watches and who has hardly more conception of the passage of time than the horse he drives or the cow he milks?

Still it was a colourful fair. Of course the Revolution had left its shattering imprint upon it. The buildings and the booths and the cobbles cried for repair. The heaps of trash offered to the peasant, scrappy things, looking as if they had been dug out of refuse piles, made an amusing and painful sight. So stripped had Russia been of manufactured goods and so slow was the government in replenishing the market with new stocks that the people clung tenderly and passionately to every scrap of iron and every faded rag.

And yet, though the Revolution had battered the physical layout of the fair and had jangled its economic framework, it had, to my utter astonishment, lifted singularly high its moral tone. There were no gamblers about as in the old days, no card and water-chain tricksters and no fortune-tellers with all manner of schemes to coax copecks out of credulous muzhiks. And though the peasants are addicted to the use of home-brew, there was none of the ancient drunkenness. Nor were there any bloody affrays as in the

old days. It was a ragged but clean and peaceful fair. We strolled along leisurely, my companion and I, observing men, women, crowds.

We sauntered into an alley, squeezed in between two rows of booths, and stopped with a crowd that had gathered about a man who was leaning on a broken wooden box with a muscular hound resting his head in his master's hands and surveying with good-humoured indifference the scene about him. The man was ragged, unshaven, with hairy breast, flashing eyes, and a dusky face. He was in the midst of a story which he was recounting with the zest of one living through an exciting experience, bringing into play modulation of voice, facial expression, gestures of hand and head to convey his galloping emotions.

'And the rabbit, citizens, scooted off into the brush with my Yermolai dashing wildly after him. *Nu*, thought I, everything is lost, the rabbit had saved himself. Yermolai had been outwitted. I whistled for him to come back. But he was sniffing around in the brush and barking that excited bark which says that he is sure of his game. Then the rabbit crept out of the brush and darted away toward his hole, and Yermolai, citizens, just gave a leap in the air, stuck his mouth into the hole, snapped the rabbit by his hind legs, and brought him over to me. He never yet had a rabbit get away from him, did you, Yermolai?'—on which the dog pressed his head close to his master's and ecstatically licked his face with his tongue.

'Can he hunt foxes?' asked someone in the crowd.

'Foxes? Haw, haw, haw! One morning, citizens, I was still in bed, when I heard Yermolai barking violently. I got up, citizens, and went to the door, and what do you suppose I saw? Why, citizens, a big fox lying at the door. He had brought it from the field, got it himself. That's the kind of a dog he is, citizens, this Yermolai of mine.'

'Aren't you lying—just a little bit?' asked someone with that blunt frankness which constitutes one of the chief charms of the muzhik.

'Lying?' answered the man neither offended nor ruffled. 'Why should I be lying? What's the good of lying, citizens? Only thieves lie and murderers and old women

who steal rye from their husbands to buy sugar and ginger cakes for themselves. And I am an honest muzhik, citizens. I come from the village of K——, and everybody knows me there. I only have the misfortune of being the father of a girl who is going to be married soon, and I have to give her a dowry, and I am poor, I haven't even a cow and only one horse, an old blind creature, that's how poor I am. It's this dog of mine, the most valuable thing I possess, that I must dispose of to obtain the dowry for my daughter. But what can I do, citizens, with these evil times on us, with our muzhiks so poor and with bridegrooms seeking to bleed to death the fathers of their brides? No, citizens, I am no liar.'

We passed on. Farther along another crowd had assembled round a dashing youth in a blouse with a shiny belt round his waist and with ecstatic self-confidence shining from his mobile features.

'We had to replace him,' he thundered, addressing a burly, bearded peasant who sat on a sack of rye that he had brought to the fair to sell and who held a huge lump of black bread in one hand and a stout cucumber in the other and was calmly eating from both. 'He was a crook, that's what he was, this Nikolai in your village. He was corrupting his office, his subordinates, and everybody who came in contact with him. Every time a muzhik wanted to do something that was not in accord with the law, he'd bring Nikolai a pot of butter or a sack of potatoes, and it was good-bye law. Such a man has no business being chairman of a village Soviet. Such a man is a scoundrel and a traitor!'

'Yes,' protested the bearded muzhik, 'but the people in our village elected him, which shows that they had faith in him.'

The youth broke into a merry guffaw.

'And supposing the people in your town elect to the chairmanship one of the beastly bloodhounds, those grand dukes of the house of Romanov?'

'Nu, that's different,' retorted the peasant, slowly raising the hand with the cucumber to give point to his thought.

'Different, you say?' the youth flashed back. 'The devil it is! There are lots of things the people would like to do. They have been accustomed to bribing officials. Must we

allow them to continue to do so? The people have been accustomed to telling lies to government investigators. Shall we shut our eyes to that? The people would like to cheat the government out of railroad fares. Shall we permit them to have their way? The people would rather make home-brew than work their land. Shall we let them do so? The people would like to stop paying taxes. The people, the people! They are dark-minded and spoiled. They think they know what is good for them. But they don't. We have got to teach them how to live, how to think, how to work, how to get on with their neighbours, how to respect a proletarian government like that of the Soviets.'

What a speech! How much it told of Russia, of the peasantry, of the Bolsheviks! There was no doubt as to the man's earnestness or his competence. He was a peasant from a neighbouring village, so my companion informed me; a Communist, a school teacher, who came to the fair quite often just to engage in discussion. He did not spare his auditors: no Russian ever does, when his auditors happen to be countrymen of his. Yet he spoke without hate, without condescension. He stated bluntly enough that the people do not deserve to be trusted, which is exactly what every Communist piously believes and incidentally what every monarchist no less piously professes. He offered concrete and stern enough evidence in support of his opinion. Terrible were his facts. Yet I confess that, listening to him, I thought not so much of his arguments as of his personality, his boyish enthusiasm, his overflowing spirituality. His very presence at the fair was something significant in Russian life, in the Russian village especially. It robbed the fair of its purely commercial status and lent it the colour of a people's college, of a vast open forum, as delightfully intimate, as joyously chaotic as the scores of peasant vendors strutting around with live roosters, geese, pots of sour milk, sacks of cottage cheese.

And he was not the only discussionist abroad. There were others holding forth no less fervently on a variety of subjects as broad as Russian life. Only a few rods away was another crowd listening to an altogether different message, one that in these days is seldom heard in Russia. A young man was preaching the Christian gospel, in a manner all his own, which probably wouldn't



meet with the approval of stout-hearted Fundamentalists, but which would have drawn tumultuous applause from Leo Tolstoy. He was a giant of a man, with a downy reddish beard that seemed never to have felt the touch of a razor or a pair of scissors. He had a bony, ascetic face, which only accentuated the flaming brilliance of his large blue eyes.

'No parasites for us, citizens,' he declared; 'we Evangelicans eschew form. God does not need form, He does not need icons or candles and He does not need priests either or even churches. Christ did not build temples, did He? He preached in the wilderness, in the fields, in the streets. God, citizens, hears everywhere. He needs no men in cassocks and long hair to deliver your prayers to Him. He can hear you Himself. He always does. He loves to, just as a mother loves to hear the voice of her own child. Read the Bible, citizens; all that counts is the Bible, it came from Him, from Christ and the great prophets. Christ gave His life for us, citizens, for you and me and all those who have died and all those that are yet to come into this sinful world of ours, and we ought to follow Him, His words, and not these long-haired Orthodox priests of ours, who live off our toil and are mortal sinners just like you and I. There is nothing mysterious about God or Christ, His prophet. The Bible alone can save us, citizens, the Bible, God's word, Christ's message, and remember that He died for us, and He said that every man must earn his own bread and help his fellow-men, and never hate his enemies, and never use violence, and never take up arms, and never kill any human being. That's what Christ said, citizens, Christ Himself, God's own Son.'

Who was he? Where had he come from? What had moved him to preach the gospel in a land where not a bookshop had a Bible for sale, and where the young generation in city and village was boisterously atheistic? My companion shrugged his shoulders. He knew little about him. He was a new person in the town. He had come from somewhere in the South. He was wandering from village to village, covering as many fairs as he could and always repeating the same speech. Some

thought he was just an ordinary maniac. Some said he was the son of a Jew, butchered by White soldiers during the invasion of his native village, and that he had plunged into Christian evangelism merely to drown the spirit of revenge that had seized him. Whoever he was, his voice, lusty, earnest, dramatic, added a new and rich tone to the symphonic hubbub that rose in a mighty swell over the crowded market-place.

We walked on. Crowds everywhere, grouped about some object of attraction—here about a high-headed horse that a low-spirited priest in a faded gaberdine and worn boots was offering for sale; here about a man and woman quarrelling furiously and pouring rich abuse on one another, all over a five-copek piece which she claimed she had overpaid him when she bought a rooster from him; here about a ragged barefoot youth with an unwashed face, caught stealing apples from one of the peasant pedlars; here about another youth hotly denouncing gamblers, speculators, grafters, and insisting that such offenders be turned over to a firing-squad; and here about a scene that only a Gogol, a man who could perceive the aching heart in the smiling countenance, could do justice in describing.

A young man had come to the market-place in search of a bride; that is, to buy one. And what a man! He was young enough, not over twenty-five, with broad and immobile features, and with a fixed gaze, as though he were eternally absorbed in reflection. The day was hot; yet he wore a hat made of white sheepskin, big boots, a woollen home-made coat with loose dangling corners; and as though that were not enough to keep his body warm, he had three sheepskin coats slung over his shoulders, one on top of the other, with the long sleeves hanging loose at the sides. In one hand he held a knotty birch staff and in the other a large wooden ring festooned with gorgeous ribbons. He might have passed for an eccentric itinerant pedlar with his stock of goods displayed on his person, had it not been for the mass of feminine adornments with which he had decorated himself. Imagine a man with a cluster of sparkling beads, red, purple, and green, hung over his spacious breast, with heavy gold ear-rings in both ears, with bracelets on his wrists and

shiny rings on all the fingers of his right hand. Not a peasant who passed him but paused to stare and wonder and laugh. He had brought this display of wealth to impress the prospective bride and her mother.

As he wandered about the market-place he was attracted to a girl who was helping her mother sell cucumbers that lay spread on an old blanket on the cobbles. She was barefooted, the girl was, in a short skirt; one of those deep-bosomed, fine-eyed, sober-faced girls one sees at every step in the Russian towns and villages. She had long locks braided and hanging down her back. He approached her mother and bluntly asked if he could marry the girl. Intrigued by the humour of the inquiry, the mother pretended to be interested and made an evasively playful reply, which he interpreted as willingness on her part to negotiate a deal. Growing enthusiastic, he offered her two sheepskin coats, four rings, and all his beads in exchange for the girl.

'Now listen, auntie,' said he, 'you cannot expect me to give you everything, can you? I've got to have something left for your daughter when she becomes my wife'—whereupon the girl rudely interrupted him by flinging a handful of cucumber peelings in his face. The crowd roared with delight, but he remained unperturbed and only wiped the moisture off his face and drew a step nearer to the girl's mother, a large, sunburned, kind-faced woman.

'Listen, auntie,' he persisted, 'why are you so stubborn? I'll give you another ring, five rings, and will throw in a ribbon, several ribbons, into the bargain. *Nu*, what do you say?'

The mother made no reply. She was gathering into a heap the cucumbers that had dropped off the blanket.

'Your daughter loves me, by Jove she does!' he continued earnestly. He removed his hat and pointed to his hair. 'Look, I have curly hair, too, dark curly hair, see? Feel of it, *baba* (old woman).' And he stuck his head almost into her face. Again the crowd burst into rollicking laughter.

'What do you say?' he yelled out. 'Shall we strike hands?'

'Why don't you offer her your boots, you simpleton?' someone remarked. 'Don't you see hers have no soles left any more?'

He looked at the woman's shoes with the bare feet sticking out of the soles and then at his own freshly greased boots and exclaimed, '*Nu*, the devil, the boots, too! By Jove, that is more than any merchant would offer you! And if you want me to I'll slip them off right now. Shall I?'

This was more than the girl could tolerate. She jumped to her feet, violently flung a large cucumber at his hat and knocked it off, and as he bent over to pick it up, she flung another cucumber at his head. The crowd roared with hilarious approval.

'Go on home, you crazy loon,' she shouted in a piercing voice. 'I don't want to marry you. Do you understand, you dirty beast? I'll kill you,' and she made ready to throw more cucumbers at him, when her mother grabbed her hand and reminded her that the cucumbers could be put to better use.

There is no telling how the affair would have ended if the girl's mother had not summoned a red-capped militiaman to order the persistent suitor away and to disperse the crowd.

Several hours later I saw him again, leering over the back of a wagon at another girl, who was sitting on a near-by pile of timber, playfully dangling her bare legs and eating black bread and sausage.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE VOICE OF THE CROWD

AT last Sunday came. I rose early. The sky was clear, and the sun was bright. The night before it had rained again, but not heavily, and the hollows which never dried out had turned into pools of mud. When I started on my round of calls, the sheep and cows and horses and pigs had already been driven to pasture, and all was now

quiet, all but the dogs, who had not yet become reconciled to my presence. Not a house did I pass but they dashed after me as on the first day of my arrival, murder in their eyes and teeth.

Several peasants from our own and neighbouring villages drove by leisurely, their little carts filled with straw and in front of them a sack or two of grain, which they were taking to town to exchange for things they needed. Rye had become the money of our peasants—everything they bought, everything they sold, the taxes they paid, the dowries they gave their daughters, everything, they computed in terms of rye even more often than of gold.

As I was walking along I could not help wondering why so few people were going to church. Again I asked myself what had become of the once pious, prayer-loving muzhik? In my boyhood days he rushed to church every Sunday. Neither rain nor blizzard stopped him. And hardly a spring but one or more persons would start on a long pilgrimage to the Pechorsky Lavra in Kiev or to some other famous monastery. Once, I remembered, the archbishop of the province was to pass through the village and for weeks preceding his visit our peasants were in a state of feverish agitation preparing for his reception—baking fresh bread, obtaining fresh salt, the whitest in the market, scrubbing the tables on which to set out the salt and bread, washing the linen cloth with which to cover the table, and sewing new clothes for the babies that the 'holy one' was to bless so as to render them immune from plague and ill-luck. The mere mention of the word archbishop filled them in old days with reverence and awe.

And now these muzhiks were not even going to church!

Anton came out to meet me, an old friend, he who was nicknamed 'The Rabbit.' What an enormous moustache he had grown and how it hung like a muzzle over his mouth! He was barefooted and bareheaded, in linen trousers with a short sheepskin coat, ripped in places and showing lumps of yellowish wool. His soft blond hair had hardly thinned and was turning only

slightly grey at the roots in the centre of the head. A multitude of little lines had formed under his eyes, which had not lost their old-time sparkle, while his face, broad and full, had retained its early glow. He drew out of his pocket a handful of pumpkin seeds and offered them to me. Pumpkin seeds! The candy and popcorn of the Russian peasant! I had already gathered a sack of these, and how like old times it seemed, when I made the rounds of kindly neighbours in search of the precious seeds, which I always deposited in the bosom of my blouse!

He invited me into the house. Perhaps the richest man in the village—Soviet officials called him a *koolack*, literally a fist, to designate a man who has much and holds all tight in his hand—his manner of living varied but little from that of the average muzhik. Hens strutted about the house. In the corner under the sleeping platform lay a little brown pig, stretched out at full length and snoring hoarsely. The rough board floor was crusted with mud and littered with potato skins and bits of manure tracked in from outdoors. The little windows were dim with dust and fly-specks, and cobwebs hung in the corner directly over an icon.

‘Tell me, Anton,’ I asked after we had exchanged some personal remarks interjected with reminiscences of old days, ‘why are not our people going to church to-day?’

Before he had time to reply there came a shrill voice from the other end of the room. It was his wife who had just entered, unheard, with an armful of wood which she dropped with a loud clap on the floor by the oven.

‘They’ve become wicked. That’s why they’ve ceased going to church,’ she burst out wrathfully. I turned and greeted her, but she seemed too busy thinking or sulking at her husband, for she did not respond to my bow. She was a large muscular woman with a bony face and thick, cracked lips.

‘Ekh, *baba* (old woman), don’t talk nonsense,’ Anton rebuked her. ‘People work hard, feel tired, sleep late, and——’

She interrupted him with a grunt of disapproval.

'You ought to be ashamed to lie like that,' she shouted gruffly, advancing towards us. 'Didn't people work hard in former times? Yet they seldom missed a Sunday in church, and then only when they were sick or went to town.'

She was right, of course, alas, how right! I, too, could only marvel at Anton's audacity in offering such a flimsy explanation of the religious laxity in the village. He said nothing and turned away his face with a grimace of disgust, as though eager to drop the discussion of an unpleasant subject. But his wife would not have it so.

'Is it not the truth I am telling?' she thundered in her high-pitched voice, staring him straight in the eyes as though daring him to deny her words. Her big hands, red and chapped and spotted with dirt, with long black finger-nails, she had intertwined defiantly on her breast.

'Why, my dear,'—she turned to me—'the other day I was in the market-place in town and I heard a muzhik say that we ought to tear up our icons and throw them out on the manure heap. Think of it, a muzhik saying that! The beast! May the Unclean One tear his heart out of him!'

Anton only shrugged his shoulders, but she, as if provoked by his indifference, drew close and shook at him a threatening fist, which he gently pushed aside.

Suddenly a boyish titter burst on our ears. It was Anton's young son, who lay on the oven, sick with a cold. I had not previously noticed him, and now as I looked at him and our eyes met he shook his head and grinned as if enjoying the altercation of his elders.

'Quiet, you little beast,' Anton shouted and turning to his wife, he said sharply, 'if you are such a pious soul, why don't you go to church?'

'Because,' she flared back, 'I am no better than the rest of you. We are all wicked. That's why we are getting so much rain and our crops are rotting. That's why prices are high and we go barefooted and in rags. And wait, if we don't change soon, we'll have famine yet, like what they had in Samara where people ate one another; and we'll have the small-pox and typhoid like what we had two years ago and the cholera and other plagues.'

Wait, you devilish sinners! God sees and hears everything, and He'll avenge our wickedness.'

The boy giggled again. Anton yelled at him once more, and turning to me he laughed as if amused.

'The devil only knows where he's learned it all! A regular Young Communist. He is not thirteen yet, and he says there is no God.'

'Of course there is not,' the boy broke in triumphantly. 'If there is why don't He strike me dumb when I call Him names?'

I gazed at Anton and marvelled. In the old days, had a son of his delivered himself of such profane sentiments, he would have leaped on him with the fury of an enraged animal and battered him mercilessly with fists and feet. And now he contented himself by murmuring:

'Hear him, hear him! He is all the time like that.'

But his wife was of no mind to dismiss the matter so lightly.

'You think it is funny,' she shouted. Then turning round she snatched a heavy stick and rushed towards the boy.

'If you say another word, you bastard atheist,' she shrieked, 'I'll break every bone in your body! ...You ugly cholera! ...'

The boy shrank into a corner, drew an old sheepskin coat over his head, and tittered spasmodically....

Grumbling and cursing and prophesying evil and ruin on her own household, the village, all of Russia, Anton's wife proceeded to set the table for breakfast. Anton, glad of the lull in the controversy, proceeded to ply me with personal questions. Was I married? Why not? When would I be? Did I have a sweetheart? How was that possible—a man with such nice clothes! And what was I doing? And how much was I earning?—an endless volley of personal queries.

Breakfast was ready, and we sat down to eat. There was no cloth on the table, no knives, no forks, no napkins. A modest, wholesome repast it was—potatoes with the skins on, sour milk served in a big earthen dish



out of which we all ate with large wooden spoons, and black bread cut into heavy slices. Anton had a little heap of unrefined salt near him, and he dipped his bread into it every time he bit off a mouthful. For a last course we had bacon, served in the frying-pan, the meat floating in grease that sputtered with heat. We ate not so much the bacon as the grease, each of us in turn soaking his bread in it.

While we were thus eating and gossiping the door opened and a man bowed his way in, removed his hat, and greeted us. A tall man he was, with the blackest beard I had ever seen. He shook hands with me and asked if I recognised him. There was something distinctive and dignified about his bearing, his speech, and even the cut of his beard, which was trimmed round and fluffed out in a bulge in the centre, resembling an earthen pot that peasants use. He had grey eyes, very large and luminous, and beautiful white teeth, and there was a pleasant mellowness in his voice.

‘And I was your teacher once,’ he remarked, when I looked at him in uncertainty. Before I had a chance to speak his name the boy on the oven yelled it out. So this was Yeship of the family nicknamed, ‘The Potato’! He had once been a studious youth, read books, delved in algebra, knew by heart the names of the capitals of Turkey, Germany, Bulgaria, could explain the cause of rain and lightning, and did not believe in ghosts. How old his beard made him look!

He had heard, he said, that I was at Anton’s and had come to invite me to his house. Shortly afterwards I bade Anton and his family au revoir and went with Yeship.

He had only recently built a new house, and it was the largest and finest in the village, with a shingled roof and broad windows freshly washed and sparkling in the sun. It was the only house in the village boasting a separate bedroom, furnished with twin beds, instead of a sleeping-platform. He and his two grown sons had built the house with their own hands and had likewise made all their own furniture, including the beds. Of course he was proud of it, very proud, but not so much as of his

orchard. I must see that and tell him how it compared with the orchards of American peasants.

As we entered the orchard I saw two women sitting on the grass under an old elm. One, with her hair undone, rested her head in the lap of the other, and this one was engaged in the ancient peasant pastime of hunting with a fine-toothed comb in her companion's hair for lice! Yeship took no notice of them and plunged at once into an ecstatic recital of the history of the orchard—how he had obtained the trees, set them out, cared for them, trimmed and sprayed them, and hoed the ground about them. Here were apples, pears, cherries; yonder were plums and berries, the best kinds grown in Russia. Yes, one pear-tree—*Americanka*—was of American origin, growing large sweet juicy pears, all white without the faintest trace of flush on the skin. Had I ever seen such pears in America?

It was, indeed, a magnificent orchard, comparing favourably with some of the best I had seen in this country. I was surprised that I had not come on it in my many rambles through the village during the few days I had been there. It was such a contrast to the scrubby trees of the other peasants, a living proof, too, that a muzhik had the capacity to be modern and scientific if he were only offered proper guidance. I asked him where he had learned so much about fruit-growing. Oh, he did not know. Some of the ideas he picked up in stray books he had read while in the army, and others just came to him. Then of a sudden the light of triumph faded from his eyes, and he said sadly:

‘And do you know I may have to cut it all down soon, the entire orchard.’

I stared at him. It seemed such an imbecile remark. Had he stated that he would soon cut his throat I could not have been more dumbfounded.

‘You see, down in the district Soviet they think of me as a bourzhui, because I have built a decent house and have cultivated this fine orchard. I have been told that they are planning to lay a special tax on the orchard, twenty gold roubles. Think of it, twenty gold roubles when I have not yet realised a copeck on it and don't expect to for several

years, until the trees begin to bear well. That's what Russia is coming to, my friend. A man cannot even work his head off to improve himself a bit without being called a *bourzhui* or a *koolack* and burdened with taxes that break his back. . . . You have seen the kind of fruit-trees our peasants have—stumpy, gnarled, diseased. This orchard might serve as a model to them, and I'd be glad to share what little knowledge I have with any of my neighbours and help them cultivate an orchard like mine or even a better one. But if the Soviets are going to stick a knife into my throat, well, I'll put an axe to every tree. By Jove, I will, and then let them come and collect taxes from the stumps !

His eyes gleamed with defiance and determination. But forthwith he smiled and apologised for his violent speech. After all, he explained in a tone of repentance, I was a guest and it was wrong of him to bother me with his personal troubles. I must forgive him—a stupid indiscretion it was on his part. Only at times, as he thought of the injustices of the local Soviet, he forgot himself and lost his temper. . . . However, I must go to the house and meet his wife and sons.

His wife was a little woman, surprisingly well mannered and speaking not the dialect of the locality but a literary Russian. It was evident enough that she did not belong to our parts. She was from a far-away province on the Volga, the daughter not of a muzhik but of an officer in the army. She was quite lettered, too, had attended school as a girl, and had travelled much about the country. She met Yeship when he was a soldier in the army and married him against the wishes of her father, who hated muzhiks and was frantic at the very idea of his daughter becoming the spouse of one. An effusive woman, of an inquiring mind, with a flair of worldliness of which the muzhik women are void, she plied me with questions about America. Of course she had heard a lot of the country, had read American books, Captain Maine Read and Cooper and Jack London and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Ah, what a terribly sad book *that* was ! It was not true, though, was it ? Americans were not really as heartless in their treatment of the black man, were they ? *Bozhe moy*, how brutally they behaved toward

poor old Tom—worse than the Russian landlords toward the muzhik. . . . And how did people live in America? What did they eat? What did they wear? How did they amuse themselves? And—would I mind telling whether the American men were engaging . . . that is, chivalrous . . . never, never had she met one in all her life, though she had always yearned to. . . . And were American women beautiful? Were they as beautiful as Russian women? Really? And were they large or small, blondes mostly or brunettes? They dressed gorgeously though, didn't they? How she'd love to get an idea of the latest styles in America! Couldn't I send her a book of fashions? She had even heard that America was supplanting France as the dictator of women's styles. What a marvellous country it must be . . . not like dirty Russia, now . . . where people had already forgotten that there were such things as styles and fashions in the world. . . .

Presently she served refreshments. It was of no use protesting that I had just eaten; it never is any use arguing with a Russian about food. He'll insist that you must eat anyway. . . . Being gently bred she had plates and forks and napkins and served delicacies of which the average muzhik knows nothing—preserved cherries, cakes, and, of course, tea right out of a samovar and in glasses, just like city folks. . . .

Yeship's younger son came in from the street, panting and sweating. He was a lad of about seventeen, slightly effeminate, and he talked with a lisp. He blushed easily, especially when he laughed. He wore a black blouse with a shiny leather belt and freshly polished boots with the tops reaching over the knees, the creases gleaming with little pools of oil. He, too, was interested in America, and would I please tell him whether Americans danced the polka, the quadrille, the *krokovyak*, the mazurka, or any other Russian dances? And what sort of music did they have there—an accordion and a tambourine as in Russia? And what sort of girls were there in America? Were they as pretty as peasant girls, and did they braid their hair and wear shawls or caps on their heads? And could they sing well? Ah, American girls cut their hair, just like Russian girls in the cities? Indeed? Whew! He would not like such girls, nor would any of the other boys in the village. . . . And did

I like music ? Did I dance ? Perhaps I'd care to come to the dance in the afternoon ? The boys and girls had been wondering if I would . . . they so wanted me to show them how Americans danced. Would I, please ? . . .

Then Yeship took an accordion off a shelf and began to play a rollicking tune. His wife burst into song, and so did the boy, and soon the three of them were singing to the soft accompaniment of the instrument, song after song, simple and stirring and full of meaning, and mostly in a minor key. Their voices were untrained, but they sang with a warmth, an intimacy, that soothed and disturbed at the same time.

Then a little man entered and put an end to the entertainment. He was barefooted and ragged, his linen trousers, spotted yellow from sweat and rain, were rolled up to his knees, and his feet were brown with dried mud. He was a hairy muzhik with a tangled beard that zig-zagged to a sharp point, and the back of his hand, his neck, his ears, were covered with black bristles. Muzhiks, he informed me, were gathering in a neighbouring yard, and they wanted me to come over. The mass-meeting would start soon. Loath as I was to leave my kindly host and his wife, I bade them farewell and went with the little man.

At last I was to have the opportunity to hear the muzhiks express themselves in a body. I had talked to individuals during my brief visits in their homes and in the fields. But the opinions of individuals, I felt, might be coloured by personal grievances. In a crowd, I thought, men were likely to be more objective and more cautious in their remarks, for fear lest someone dispute their words or point out the personal bias back of them. Besides, I wondered if anything would really, happen when the muzhiks began to tell 'everything,' as they had promised. . . .

When we entered the yard the peasants who had already assembled there rose from the pile of timber on which they were sitting, tipped their hats, and shook hands with me. They began to question me, and again about America, a subject of unending interest to all classes of Russians, in the city no less than in the village. But they did not touch on the matters which interested

Yeship's wife and son. Weightier problems occupied their minds. Did America have a Soviet government like Russia? No? Not yet? When will she have it? Never? Was that really possible? But then, it was only the Communists who were prophesying a world revolution followed by the establishment of Soviet governments, and Communists knew so little anyway, even less than ignorant muzhiks... they were only expert in one thing—in bragging. Ah, how they could brag—worse than the mother of any crippled bride who ever lived! Well, what sort of government *did* America have? A president? And what was a president, and who was he, a proletarian or a bourzhui? And how were taxes in America, as high as in Russia? And prices? How many poods of rye for a pood of salt and how many eggs for a pound of kerosene? And what about boots?... Questions without end....

'I suppose, though,' remarked the little man who had called for me, 'that you have a pretty good government in America and people live well under it.'

'What a silly question you are asking!' snapped out an old hunchback with a straw hat the top of which was gone. He was leaning on a knotty staff and puffing a cigarette that was rolled in a piece of brown wrapping-paper. 'Would our boys who have gone to America remain there if people didn't live well in that country?'

'That's the truth, all right, there is no gainsaying that,' broke in another muzhik with a broad brown beard that spread majestically over his breast.

'At any rate they live better than we do,' continued the little man. 'They send parcels to us and not we to them.'

'Ay, brothers, not all of them,' remarked the tragic Vassil, the same who had called to inquire after his two sons on the evening I arrived. 'Some of them have forgotten they ever lived in our poor Russia. They've forgotten their fathers, mothers, wives, and children. They never send anything to them, not even a letter—too busy enjoying themselves. Not a minute to spare to think of us unfortunates here....'

The yard was filling up with people. They came from all parts of the village and from neighbouring villages—a steady stream of them, nearly all men. The seats on the pile of timber were taken. Men were now standing, row on row, barefooted, in boots, or in *lapti* plastered with mud. Rugged men and sullen, as though smarting under a crushing burden, men who never had known what it was to rule or command, and on whose flesh and bones the Romanovs had reared their vast and unwieldy empire. Outwardly they seemed meek, yet one felt that if ever they were awakened to their importance in the world, and had grown conscious of the power at their command, they might make the earth shake with their wrath.

By way of staring the discussion I remarked rather casually :

‘Well, things are not so very bad in Russia now . . . . You all look as though you have enough bread and potatoes anyway.’

At my right stood a big man, stolid and taciturn. Strangely enough he wore a high silk hat, which was in ludicrous contrast to his tattered coat with its large holes which showed patches of a dirty shirt. A relative of his who had been a prisoner of war in Germany had bought this hat for him. Erect, immovable, hands tucked inside of his frayed coat-sleeves, eyes almost concealed by heavy brows, he was an impressive and ominous figure.

‘Russia is perishing,’ he drawled dolefully. ‘Perishing, I say, perishing.’

His tremulous voice sounded as though it came from a far-away place, and together with his spectral appearance lent his words a sinister meaning, like the pronouncement of an evil spirit.

‘Perishing, indeed,’ repeated another man with tragic solemnity. ‘Great, very great, dear countryman, is the misfortune that has befallen us, and there is no way out for us poor muzhiks. When we sell, we get nothing for our goods. But when we buy anything, even if it be only a handful of nails, they strip the hide off our bodies and pump the blood out of our hearts. Who ever heard of twenty, thirty, and even forty poods of rye for one pair of

boots ? A man with only one *dessiatin* of land like me never harvests that much in a single crop.'

Then another :

'Why talk about boots? The devil with boots. We can wear *lapti* which we can make ourselves, or go bare-footed, as many of us are now doing. That's no evil. We are used to that. And we don't need city clothes, either. Our *babui* (old women) can make their own linen and sew it up into shirts and trousers. And we can go without kerosene, too. *Nichevo*. In summer we go to bed early anyway, and in winter—well—we can light our houses with faggots as in old, old days. As for food, it is hard for a muzhik to be deprived of herring. But we can stand it. *Nichevo*. We can live without herring and without sugar, too, and without cakes. We are no landlords and no bourzhuis. But salt, I say, how can we live without salt? How can our women bake bread without salt? How can we eat potatoes without salt? And think, ten poods of rye for one pood of salt, when before the war it was only one pood of rye! And grease for the wagon we must have, too, else our wagons will wear out and break. They are badly worn as it is, for none of us has been able to buy a new one since the beginning of the war. Yes, and nails. How can we repair broken tools without nails and without fresh iron? But prices are so high we can buy nothing—neither salt, nor grease, nor nails, nor iron—nothing, nothing....'

And still another :

'Things were bad enough in the old days. But somehow we could afford to buy salt and grease and kerosene and herring, too, and once in a while even a loaf of white bread for Sunday ; ay, and a few ginger-cakes. And if your horse died, he died ; the devil with him ! You dragged him to the woods, skinned him there, and left his carcass for wolves and dogs to fight over. You went home and began to search for means to buy a new horse. Your spare time you hired out to some landlord or somewhere to a lumberman, and you saved your earnings. You didn't buy the pair of boots you were going to get for Christmas or Easter. You wore *lapti* instead. You borrowed money from someone. You always could if you were honest and industrious. *Nichevo*, somehow you managed to scrape together enough for another



horse. But now, brother, akh ! if your horse dies, you might as well die.'

'Correct, correct,' chimed in a chorus of voices.

Then another :

'Talk about horses. In old times a muzhik in these parts never worried about them. They were too cheap for anyone to worry about, so cheap that many a time when autumn came and his hay crop was poor the muzhik lent him away for the winter, and if he had a colt, he could get nothing for it, no more than its hide was worth, and so he took it to the woods and killed it, and sold the hide ; and cows, too, were cheap, because hay was scarce, and it was no easy job for a muzhik to pull his cow through the winter. And now, brother, try to buy a cow or a horse, and you might as well sell yourself out as a slave to some bourzhui for years and years. That's how bad it is getting to be. And without a horse and cow how can a muzhik live ? Potato and bread are all right, but at times you want a little sour milk with it or a piece of cheese. . . .'

'There is no hope for the poor muzhik now. By Jove, there is not ! He might as well hang a stone round his neck and plunge into the river.'

'There is no way to earn an extra copeck any more.'

'Indeed not ! No more landlords and no more lumbermen.'

'They have driven them away, all those who gave us a chance to earn an extra copeck.'

'Haw, haw, haw, what they promised us !'

'Machinery', 'lectricity, new homes, schools, everything !'

'And land.'

'Land, land, land ! Haw, haw, haw !'

'Defeat the counter-revolutionaries, they said, and you'll get everything !'

'A plague they've given us !'

'Not one but half a dozen !'

'Now if we want a load of wood we have to travel forty, fifty versts and pay for every rotten stick we pick up.'

'If they'd at least divide the Polish landlord's estate ! To the devil with their machinery and 'lectricity. It's the land

we want, and they have turned it into a *Sovkhos* (government farm).'

'With a new landlord in charge, a Red landlord.'

'Who in damnation wants a *Sovkhos* ?'

'Who ? Ay, those lazy loafers who are running it.'

'Lazy and nasty.'

'God, how nasty !'

'Nastier than the old landlord. Then if your horse got into a hayfield and you were poor, you could go to the landlord and promise never to allow your horse to wander into his field again, and beg him to let it go free, and often he did, and you kissed his hand and rode home on your horse. And now, brother, if those scoundrels on the *Sovkhos* see your horse with one foot on their land, they fine you five poods of rye.'

'Ay, and ten.'

'Or else three days' labour.'

'And five, too.'

'Five plagues on them, the ugly beasts !'

'And the taxes they squeeze out of us for everything !'

'Soon they'll be taxing every drop of rain that falls on our land.'

'And every breath of air we breathe.'

'Ay, and every beetle that buzzes by our ears.'

'Russia is perishing, perishing.'

'Perishing indeed, perishing,' boomed a multitude of voices.

What dismay and disillusionment ! What wrath and despair ! And yet back of it all was no spirit of resignation, but a mood of protest and defiance, as of people who felt that they were being cheated out of something that was theirs by all the rights of man and nature, and that they would not calmly submit to the deprivation. And then from the outer edge of the crowd there rose a voice, loud and impassioned.

'Not only will Russia perish, but having such dark-minded people as you are, she ought to perish ; and if I were God I'd send a fire on her right now and turn her to ashes. By Jove I would—'

The mob howled at the speaker and would not permit him to continue. They seemed in no mood to tolerate opposition.

But the speaker pressed forward. A little man he was, stocky and not over thirty years of age, with flashing blue eyes, gleaming white teeth, and a wisp of sandy moustache stuck to his upper lip. I knew him well. Nikifor was his name. He was chairman of the village Soviet. His eyes flamed with wrath.

'By God, you shall hear me,' he thundered, 'whether you want to or not !'

'Hear him, hear him !' 'Away from here ! Away !' 'We've had enough of you, more than enough !' These and similar expressions floated into the air, one right after the other. But Nikifor only vigorously shook his head and persisted in thundering that he was going to be heard despite hisses and denunciations. Then the little man somehow clambered to the very top of the pile of timber and shouted at the top of his voice.

'Muzhiks, muzhiks ! Let him speak, or else our American friend will think that we are afraid of him. Show him that we are not afraid of him ! Show him ! Show him !'

The words had the desired effect. Protesting noises gradually subsided, and above them rose Nikifor's deep voice.

'You are always complaining, always whining about something or other. Now you are kicking about taxes. You don't want the Soviets to be collecting any from you. I suppose you'd want them to hand you a stuffed roast pig for breakfast every morning. Here is a man from America, a native son of our village. Ask him whether peasants in America pay taxes.'

'If they do,' interrupted an angry voice somewhere from the top of the pile of timber, 'they get something in return. And what do we get ?'

'A cholera we get !'

'Ay, not one but a dozen cholas, a fresh one every month.'

'They've promised us a school-house, and where is it ?'

'Yes, where is it ?'

'Our children run about the streets all winter and are growing wild.'

Nikifor wildly flourished with his arms, pleading for silence.

'Where is it, you demand?' he yelled. 'You dare ask that? You? Have not the Soviets offered you the private residence of the landlord from K——?'

'Yes,' interrupted someone, 'they might as well offer us gold—on the moon.'

Nikifor threw a meaning look at me and shook his head in anger and disgust.

'Hear them, hear them talk,' he said. 'Akh, you hopeless creatures, you dark-minded, unreasoning brutes! K——is only fifteen versts from here, and if you'd all get together you could move that magnificent home of the former landlord to our village in less than a week, and then you'd have one of the finest school-houses in Russia. And why haven't you done it? Why haven't you?'

'And why should we, I ask?' demanded the little hunch-back.

'Yes, why should we?' shouted a chorus of angry voices.

'Don't they bleed us enough as it is? Haw, haw, haw, what a jest! They tax and tax and tax us, and in return they cannot even move a school-house to our village. They want us to do it, when we have to work day and night to save our crops from rotting in the fields. Haw, haw, haw, what sharpers!'

Feeling ran high. Many voices shouting at once. Sneers. Oaths. Curses. Nikifor, however, soon regained the attention of the mob.

'You cannot expect the Soviets to do everything at once,' he flared, 'after those years and years and years of war and destruction. They are offering you a school-house as good as any you'll find anywhere around here, if you'll only take the trouble to move it to the right place, and you act as though you are afraid that if you put your hands to the job, they'll fall off or you'll drop dead. And what of the bath-house?' Nikifor turned to me again: 'I am not defending the Soviets. I have as much patience with their blunders as my neighbours. But listen. When the Red Army was here the soldiers rigged up a bath-house, and when they were ready to leave they offered us the kettles and all other equipment

if we'd build a real bath-house for the community. We called meeting after meeting and at last agreed to accept the offer. Meanwhile the Red soldiers allowed us to use their bath-house on certain days of the week. The women were scared to go near the place. They had never been inside a bath-house in all their lives. They thought there were devils inside who might choke them. Only a few of the men braved themselves to go, four of them, I believe, and one caught cold, and then the rumour spread that a bath-house was a dangerous place, it was easy to catch cold there, and the entire project was dropped. That's the kind of stupid and ignorant creatures these muzhiks here are.'

Several peasants burst into laughter.

'To the devil with the bath-house,' broke in one of them; 'it is land we want! We can live without a bath-house, but how can we live without land? And why don't they divide the landlord's estate as they promised?

'Do you suppose the land will jump up the sky?' Nikifor shot back hotly. 'Haven't you seen how the other estates around here have been given away to peasants? Have patience, our turn will come yet.'

'Patience, you say?' thundered a rasping voice. The speaker was Nikifor's own brother. He jumped to his feet and waved his arms violently as though ready to strike someone. 'To the devil with your patience. When we are carried to our graves you'll still be shouting patience. Some of us have not many more years to live. We have not got time to be patient much longer.'

The speech struck a responsive chord in the crowd, and several other men jumped to their feet, waved their hands violently, and shouted at the top of their voices. They denounced and cursed and swore at the Soviets and at Nikifor and shook their clenched fists at him. I thought they would come to blows and spoke to several of the more excited muzhiks to calm them down. But of no avail. Pandemonium broke loose. The flood of wrath that had risen within them had to have its outlet.

Nikifor's face flamed. His hat dropped to the ground; the collar of his shirt loosened; sweat shone in big drops on his forehead and under his blazing eyes. He, too, was waving his arms and shouting. He was no Bolshevik,

but he was a loyal revolutionary, devoted to the Soviets, and it hurt him to hear the peasants denounce them so vehemently, especially in my presence, in the presence of an American investigator. When the hubbub had simmered down, he was still shouting, his voice trailing off now into a squeak and now into a whisper.

'You never can get it through your dark heads what has taken place in this land of ours ! Tell me, what were the plagued Poles doing when they were here ? Were they cultivating your gardens, tilling your lands ? And what were they doing when they were retreating ? Were they sprinkling your roads with silver and gold ? Have you forgotten how they stole your horses, your cows, your pigs, your grain, your very bread ? Have you forgotten how they blew up bridges, railroads, flour-mills, how they set many villages afire ? Have you forgotten how you ran to the swamp with what stock you could save, and how you were praying day and night for the coming of the Reds to deliver you from the barbarities of the Poles ? Have you forgotten all that, you unreasoning and unreasonable creatures ? It happened such a short time ago, only a few years past, didn't it ? Oh, how cursedly short your memories have become ! And what do you suppose our other enemies were doing—the French, the English, the Italians ; yes, and the Americans ? And our own thrice-plagued Whites ? Everybody hated us, everybody poured fire on us, everybody sought to destroy us. We had not a friend in the world, not a friend, and we were so poor, so hungry, so ragged, so filthy . . . yet we marched on and faced our devilish enemy and smote hard at him and drove him out, all of them, the Poles and the others. Didn't we now, didn't we ? And weren't you saying then that you were glad the Reds had returned, and that no matter what happened you'd always support them, you'd never again grumble against them, because they had delivered you from the bloody Poles ? Have you forgotten all that ? But think of the ruin they have wrought, of the damage they have done us ! That's why there is still a shortage of everything. That's why everything is so high-priced. That's why you and I often go without kerosene. . . . But wait——'

Again his brother interrupted him, but he paid no heed and raced on.

'You are also complaining that you have to travel forty and fifty versts for your wood. And who's fault is that ? Tell me whose fault is it but your own ? Why did you cut down all the forests in the neighbourhood ? Why didn't you save some of them for to-morrow ? Akh, you dark-minded, unreasoning creatures ! Each of you wanted to grab all he could at once, and you fell on the forests like pigs on a potato field, and you hewed down every stick in sight. And what's been the result ? Don't you see what you've done ? Our river is drying up, and soon we won't even have a place to soak our flax and do our washing. And we have to go after a load of wood to a far, far-away place and spend two or three days on the road. Why, if the Soviets hadn't stepped in and stopped you from devouring the forests, you'd have had to go all the way to Siberia or to the moon for your firewood.'

Passion had now subsided. A low murmur arose, but no one made vehement reply. Only the little hunchback ventured to speak aloud.

'Russia is perishing, anyway,' he said. 'What is the good of talking ?'

Nikifor wiped the sweat from his brow and chuckled.

'What else can you expect from slaves ?' He turned to me after a pause. 'Of people who have no pride and no fight in them ? All they want is the Soviet to give them things. They are hopeless, this old crowd, and I keep telling them that, but it does no good. They'll die slaves, by Jove, they will !'

The peasants laughed at him and prophesied that a day of reckoning would come and they'd remind him of his words, ah, how they'd remind him !

Presently there came to us the sound of a tambourine and the singing of youthful voices. The children who had been standing in groups, listening to their wrangling elders, dashed joyously into the street. Nikifor hooked his arm into mine and bade me follow him. Soon there passed before us a procession of young people headed by the village band—an accordion and a tambourine—the girls following directly behind the players. They were in holiday attire, in white waists, neat little aprons ; some in big shoes, but most of them barefooted. They walked arm in arm, spread out over

the entire width of the street. The boys, also in Sunday clothes, trailed after them. They were all singing in lusty voices an age-old melody of a Cossack killing a gipsy who threatened to steal his sweetheart. . . .

To me it was a beautiful and thrilling sight, those boys and girls, some of them barefooted in old though freshly laundered clothes, walking briskly and in step, oblivious or unmindful of the cares that pressed with brutal agony on their elders, and giving themselves with joy to song and play. It made me forget the ugly mud, the dingy hovels, and that multitude of embittered souls wailing with sullen piteousness at the fate that had befallen them. After all despite privation and disappointment there were fun and joy and gaiety in the village.

Nikifor seemed like a changed man, too. Gone were the muscular tension from his face and the gleam of rage from his eyes. He was no longer the politician, the agitator, hurling hot censure on a tumultuous mob, but a boy with a beaming countenance, marking time and nodding his head to the tune of the choral singing—a glowing embodiment of the faculty of the Russian to leap at one bound from one mood to another, from despair to glee, from wrath to good-humour. He tossed a beckoning wink at me and jerked me by the arm. Then lifting his head high and throwing back his shoulders, he burst into song and led me off with the procession. . . .

## CHAPTER IX

### THE NEW YOUTH

WHAT tireless and dexterous dancers these muzhik youths were! All afternoon they danced, dance after dance, in a style all their own, unknown to the city or to the world outside, executing the entangling formations and violent steps with a grace, a verve, a precision, that were a joy to behold. They hopped and whirled and pranced and stamped the floor with their feet and shouted and screamed with joy. They did not hold one another close, but at arm's length, though during intermissions they did not disdain to hold hands and to embrace one another openly and without a trace of embarrassment. Most of the girls were barefooted, and most



of the boys wore boots with little horseshoes nailed into the bulging heels. Yet there were no collisions. Not once was a girl stepped on, or rather only once, and that when the *Americanetz* yielded to the coaxing of the boys and attempted to demonstrate an American waltz with the champion dancer of the village. . . .

During intermissions they broke up into groups, sang, wrestled, teased one another. Usually a crowd would gather about me and ply me with questions about foreign lands and people. Now and then someone would broach the question of Russian politics. Once Nikifor asked me how I had enjoyed the mass-meeting. I had to confess that it was rather a stormy affair. He chuckled heartily. It was not, he explained, as violent an encounter as others he had experienced. I should have been present at the time the muzhiks had gathered to discuss the moving of a school-house to the village. That was a battle which lasted late into the night, and afterward he was so hoarse for nearly a week that he could hardly whisper. Muzhiks loved to talk anyway, especially now when they had something to get excited about and someone on whom to vent their ancient wrath. It was all right, though, I need not take them too seriously. They were learning something, these stubborn muzhiks. . . .

Then someone suggested that I go on *nochleg* with them at night. They would provide a horse and a sheepskin coat. Only—would I sleep on the bare ground? If not—well—they'd be glad to fetch along a sack of straw and my 'bourzhui' American bones would have something soft and dry to rest on.

What is *nochleg*?

From time immemorial it has been the custom for the peasants in our part of Russia to take their horses out to pasture on spring and summer nights. In the evenings when chores are finished and supper eaten, a boy or girl from every household—usually an unmarried person—rides with the horses to a designated place in the village where the other boys and girls assemble, and from there all go together on horseback to the communal pasture, about three or four versts away. Staying out all night with the horses in the open is called *nochleg*.

During my sojourn in America my mind had often wandered back to my boyhood days in the old village, and more than once had I lived over in imagination the joy and excitement of going on *nochleg*. What a glorious adventure it is to the young—boys and girls riding to pasture singing, there breaking up into parties, some going after wood, others building a bonfire, and finally all gathering round the roaring blaze for hours and hours, telling stories, singing, dancing, playing games, running races, making love, and often chasing after wolves.

Of course I'd go on *nochleg*, I told the boys, and no need of fetching along a sack of straw. They laughed and warned me that it was August already, with nights damp and chilly, and the pasture as hard as wood. But then—perhaps I should not have much of a chance to sleep anyway. They wanted to talk things over with me and might keep me up all night. They had many things to tell me. Some of them had attended the mass-meeting. They had not said anything there, for it was of no use. *Nu*, the old people! They were hopeless. Niki-for was too optimistic. They were not learning anything except to shout their lungs out. Under the Czar they were flayed and bled and never said a word. And now, they shrieked that the world was coming to an end. They wanted everything at once. Perhaps it was because they were conscious of their age, were smelling the approach of death. . . . But the young people were different. They had their lives ahead of them. They could bide their time. It mattered little to them that advance was slow. Of course not all of them were cultivated and class-conscious. Some of them, perhaps even most of them, still clung to the old ideas and practices, drank home-brew, even helped to make it, and used vile language on the least provocation. But some of them had been in the Red Army, had read a few books, had listened to lectures, had taken part in discussions, had seen something of the world outside of their slimy village. They had ideas of their own . . . many ideas. . . . At *nochleg* the night would be ours. No old people would be there to disturb us, and we could talk things over at length. I must not carry away the impression that the young people were as dark-minded

as their elders. Some of them were, but others . . . well, I should find out about them.

The news of my going on *nochleg* spread rapidly in the village. Hardly a peasant I met but had a crisp remark to make about it. At the house where I was stopping several neighbours had gathered to see me leave for the pasture. A boy brought me a huge sheepskin coat with an immense collar, and when I crawled into it the onlookers burst into a merry laugh.

'Quite a respectable looking muzhik,' jested one of them.

'All he needs now is a pair of *lapti*,' remarked another.

'And a cross,' added an old woman.

'Leave the cross alone, *baba*. People are no longer afraid of the devil,' chimed in a bearded neighbour.

'I should say not!' the old woman shot back angrily. 'They are themselves rapidly turning devil.'

A little barefoot fellow rushed in, panting, and announced that he had a horse for me outside and that my party had sent word they would wait for me at a certain place. The party consisted of about a dozen youths most of whom had seen service in the Red Army. They were the leaders of the young generation. Among them were two who were especially prominent in the political life of the community. One, whose name was Antosh, was a Young Communist. He was a stocky youth, with a wad of frizzled hair sticking out from under his cap and spread umbrella-like over his forehead. The other was Vassil, a year or two younger, a mild-mannered youth, the best read person in the village and a gifted orator. Though a revolutionary, he was no Communist. He held that no amount of propaganda and no amount of coaxing or coercion would press the muzhik into an acceptance of communism. He and the Young Communist had often engaged in heated controversies on the subject of the ultimate communisation of the muzhik. But they were close friends and together with a number of other so-called enlightened youths were the main supporters of the Revolution in the village.

When I joined my party the Young Communist suggested that we start off at once and the rest of the crowd would catch up with us by the time we had reached the pasture.

It was a glorious night. The moon hung low, full and brilliant. Not a cloud in the star-swept skies; not a breeze stirring; the air damp, chilly, biting gently and pleasantly at the cheeks; hardly a light in any of the houses; peasants—in bed already or sitting in the dark—could afford no kerosene. Dogs barked continually, now singly, now in chorus, short, snappy yelps, as dogs do when they are content with the world. From the other end of the village there rose a song, girls' voices; low, wailing tones, growing louder and more distinct as the singers drew nearer and nearer. We rode along slowly on the bare backs of our horses, who stepped now and then with a splash into water-filled hollows, of which there were many on the way. An army of little fellows hastened to catch up with us, crowded close and leaned forward, bent, evidently, on catching every word of our conversation.

Interesting bits of information the boys imparted to me—very interesting and very significant. None of them, not even the little ones, any longer believed in ghosts or spirits of any kind, not even in *rusalkas* (water-nymphs). It seemed hardly credible in the light of my own boyhood experiences. How we *did* dread the *rusalka*, who was supposed to be always hunting for little fellows to take back with her to the bottom of the river where she lived. And there were so many *rusalkas* at large in summer. Our fathers and mothers saw them, said so, and we, too, caught glimpses of them, so we told one another, sitting on fences with hair loosened on shoulders and with fiery eyes seeking to entice the passer-by into giving himself to them. It was all nonsense, the story of the *rusalkas*, said the boys, and they laughed heartily. There were no *rusalkas* in the world and no *domovoys* (house-goblins) and no other kind of spirits. All such beliefs came from the priests who had served the Czar and kept the muzhiks in ignorance so that they could come now and then and sprinkle water in houses and drive out evil spirits and get a box of rye

or basket of eggs. Now not even children believed their dark stories of the Unclean One. I could convince myself easily enough of that by asking little boys if they cherished such beliefs. Superstition, they kept on repeating triumphantly, was dying in the village, was going the way of the landlords, the old generals and the other old forces of evil. . . .

And what, I asked, of the morality of the young people? Had there been any changes since the Revolution? None, they replied. Girls were as strict as ever their mothers and grandmothers had been. Of course a fellow could flirt with a girl, put his arm round her, hold her hand, kiss her—but only on the cheek or neck, never on the lips, unless she was his fiancée. Otherwise—well—our girls were quite strong, a blow of their fists might even draw blood, and, besides, the fellows knew better, respected the girls. Of course a boy and girl in love were together a good deal. The old practice of sweethearts sleeping in each other's arms at *nochleg* still prevailed, but lapses in conduct were as rare as in the old times, which was natural enough, for it was the worst thing for a girl to submit to a man. Her betrayer, even if he be her sweetheart, would be likely to abandon her; and no other man, excepting perhaps one old enough to be her grandfather, would have her as a wife. The girls knew that and took care of themselves. Only a few years ago a girl in a neighbouring village had given birth to a child, and so afraid was she of being found out, that she choked it with her hands and buried it behind the house. . . .

And did young people marry as young as in the old days? I questioned. Ay, they did, was the reply. A girl of twenty-two or older without a suitor was as worried and grief-stricken as ever, perhaps more so, for there were too many girls nowadays, or rather there were not so many boys as there had been once. The war had killed off many of them, and the Revolution and epidemics had carried off many more, so that now there was a preponderance of women over men, and that was having a bad effect on the boys, was making them independent and exacting. They were demanding exorbitant dowries with the girls—a horse and wagon;

two hundred poods of rye; a large sum of cash, two or even three hundred gold roubles. If a girl had no dowry to give she was in a wretched fix. Seldom could she marry the man of her love. She was lucky if she married at all. . . . Yes, it was true that an old maid was still regarded as a sort of outcast, except, of course, by the class-conscious revolutionaries who knew and sympathised with her position. Colossal still was the darkness of the muzhik. Of course dowries were vicious, a remnant of bourzhui savagery which appraised everything, even love, in terms of lucre. Something would have to be done to kill the custom. . . .

And what, I further inquired, of the Young Communists? Were they really as lax in their morality as the older muzhiks had charged? They laughed uproariously. Akh, the Young Communists! There were only two in our village and there were not many more in any of the villages around and some of them should retire to a monastery, for they were worse than any monk ever dreamed of being. Some of them were against kissing and dancing, said that all that was the invention of the capitalists to corrupt the peasant and the proletarian. The older muzhiks, especially the women, accused them of being immoral, because they were against the priests. . . . And why were there not more Young Communists in the villages? Well, there was too much prejudice against them, fathers and mothers kept the young people from joining, threatened to flog those who did . . . and besides it was too much responsibility to be a Young Communist, too many meetings to attend, too stern a discipline to submit to; and they were fearfully strict, expelled members for breach of discipline. . . .

Then I shifted the conversation to religion. I had heard the older people express themselves on the subject, and it was a good time now to hear what the young people had to say on this moot question. The young revolutionaries seemed only too eager to speak. The girls, they informed me, were quite loyal to the church, just like their mothers. Of course they no longer attended services as regularly as they had in former times, and were not so scrupulous in the observance of the numerous fasts. But then, hardly anyone was. Still they prayed and crossed themselves at all required occasions, and

when they married they insisted on a church wedding. They were afraid that if they were not married by a priest, ill luck would come to them; they would have no children, or they would give birth to cripples and freaks. The problem of church weddings was beginning to cause no little trouble in the villages. No real revolutionary, especially if he was a member of the Communist party, would have a priest marry him. To him a priest was the incarnation of all that was dark and brutal in the old days. Only a short time ago in a neighbouring village a Young Communist had got himself into a fearful mess. He was in love with a girl who was not especially cultivated. In her heart she was loyal to the church, and when she realised that her lover would under no circumstances consent to be married by a priest, she agreed to a secular, that is, a Soviet wedding. Then trouble began. The older women in the village started wagging their tongues, began prophesying misfortune for the young bride, and she became hysterical, ran away once and threw herself into the water... but friends happened to see her and pulled her out when she was half dead. Then she gave birth to a boy, a normal, healthy baby, the image of his father. Again the old women started spinning yarns, telling the young mother that she must have the baby baptised, else it might die from croup or the small-pox. So one day she secretly took the child to the priest and had it baptised... and when the Young Communist discovered it, he was frantic. He threatened to arrest the gossipy old hags. He went around to their houses, scolding and cursing them and their 'little father.' It was no small matter to him. It was not merely that he was the victim of a deception, that his wife had violated a cardinal principle of his faith and that the party would expel him from membership. He was the laughing-stock of the community. The priest had greater influence over his wife than he. He could not bear the thought of that, and resolved to seek his revenge. But—the very next day, as the priest was on his way to feed his horse, he dropped dead! God, how the revolutionaries laughed! If the Communist had died, all the pious muzhiks would have said that the Lord had punished him for his infidelity. But since it was the priest who dropped dead, they did

not know what to say. Some of the old women, however, started a yarn that someone had fed poison to the 'little father.'... *Nu*, girls were terribly unenlightened. It was so difficult to break them of their old superstitions. But the boys were different; the boys could understand things. Many of them had ceased attending church. And more and more of them were disposing of their crosses, throwing them away. In one village near by a group of boys had once assembled in the field, built a bonfire, and burned their crosses. Their fathers and mothers beat them terribly afterward and prophesied that the Unclean One would choke them. But they were still alive, these boys, and nothing had as yet happened to them.... Some of the older women in that village now no longer went bathing in the river, a cursed place the river was to them, because these boys had been swimming there.

And had I heard what the young revolutionaries had done in the village of K — in the adjoining county? Ah, that was a stirring affair! There was an old monastery in K —, in the yard of which was a shrine, dedicated to the memory of some saint. Muzhiks from all over the countryside had for years been making pilgrimages to this shrine in the belief that the saint was actually living in the ground below and could hear their petitions and grant them. A famous shrine it was, and the monks in charge were waxing fat on the fees for candles and special services. ... So the young revolutionaries decided to expose the fraud. They resolved to dig up the grave and prove to the muzhiks that there was no saint there. ... The countryside was alarmed. The older people and the priests prophesied dire punishment for the offenders and for all those who should take part in the blasphemous act, even to the extent of being present at the digging. But the young revolutionaries were undismayed. Some of them had been in the Red Army, had fought the Whites and were not easily frightened. Muzhiks came by the hundred to witness the affair... and nothing happened. The earth did not part and swallow anyone. No one dropped dead. Even the weather was fine, and the diggers found only bones in the graves, not human bones either, but of some best ... and now some of the



muzhiks were whispering that the saint had simply fled from his underground abode, and that some day he'd wreak vengeance on the Communist blasphemers.

We had now reached the limits of the village and took to the open road. The other riders soon caught up with us, a crowd of them singing in chorus an old folk-tune of a lover, a consumptive soon to die, bidding his sweetheart farewell. As if by mutual consent we ceased talking and listened to the singing. Some of my companions joined in the chorus, and I rode along silent, gazing at the moonlit fields ahead, memories of old days trooping into my mind, an immense emotion stirring in my heart. . . .

At last we reached the pasture, vast and rolling and bounded on one side by a circuitous stream out of which a grey fog was rising over the lowlands. We dismounted from our horses, tied their forefeet with the little ropes that hung round their necks, to keep them from straying into the ploughed fields, and then marched in a body to a rolling hillside, dotted with clusters of brushwood, where the boys and girls spent their nights. We squatted on the ground, now wet with fresh dew. I asked the boys why they built no bonfire as we did in my boyhood days. There was no need for one, was their reply. There were no more wolves to frighten away, and besides there was no more wood near; the forests had all been cut down, as indeed I saw when I looked round on the low brush which had replaced the mighty pine and oak of the old days.

The young revolutionaries gathered round me, and once more we plunged into talk. I was eager to hear them discourse further on the changes that were taking place in the village and especially in their own lives. Of a sudden our attention was distracted by an approaching rider on horseback. We looked up, and soon a young muzhik in a big coat and *lapti* jumped off a roan nag and greeted us. The boys recognised him as a friend and introduced him to me. Pavel was his name. He was a light-haired youth with twitching eyes and a morose face. He lived in a village about twenty versts away and had come to see me on a matter of pressing importance to him. There was a tremulousness in his voice that

bespoke anxiety as of a man caught in the toils of calamity and seeking deliverance. He asked me if I could take him to America. He had been there before the Revolution, and now he wished to get back. He had no money, and he was not a citizen of the United States, had not even taken out his first papers. . . .

He lay down on the ground beside me, and I asked him why he was so eager to go back. He was reluctant to speak. It was too long and too unpleasant a story to tell, he protested, and the telling of it would make things no better and no worse. But the revolutionary leaders encouraged him to speak, and speak freely. Evidently they had met him in combat before, and they were ready for another encounter. This must be said to the credit of Russian revolutionaries: they have more than the courage of their convictions. They never shrink from a battle, whether of word or sword. There never were more eager warriors than they.

So Pavel opened up his heart. He had been in America several years, worked in a dye factory. It was an atrocious job, chemicals just eating him up inside. His health was beginning to fail. He was losing his appetite and could not sleep much at nights. And he was fearfully lonely. He had but few friends, and they were Russians who worked in the same factory. He could not make friends with Americans; they would not mix with him, especially the girls. Perhaps if he could speak English well, it would be different. He tried to learn the new language, tried hard. He went to night school one winter, but in the evenings he was too tired to study, and gave up. He and his friends would go to the movies, burlesque shows, but that left them unsatisfied. So they played cards, drank, often beat up one another. An abnormal life he lived in America, and he was terribly dissatisfied. He craved excitement, the society of young people, especially girls, and there he was shut off from everything, an exile, an outcast. . . . Health failing, disposition ruined; disgusted with himself and the world.

Then the Revolution came. The Bolsheviks swept into power. At first he did not know what to make of them. He thought they were only brigands . . . that's what a Russian speaker had said once in a lecture he

had attended. But when he got a letter from home telling him that the new government would soon divide the landlord's large estate among the muzhiks, he made up his mind to return at once. On his arrival in Russia he had five hundred American dollars. At that time no one was allowed to have foreign moneys in Russia, and his was taken away from him. But that was nothing. Fie on money anyway! He wanted something more vital than money, a chance to live and be happy. He was full of enthusiasm and hope . . . he was home. He would get land, settle down, marry, live in peace and comfort. But ah, what a fool he had been, what a credulous fool! He did get land—the estate of the landlord in his village was divided among the muzhiks—but to his share fell only two *dessiatins* (about five acres), and how could he live off such a puny allotment? It would not have been so bad if there had been a chance to earn an extra rouble from outside labour. But there was no such chance any longer. There were no factories and no cities near, no employment of any kind. The deuce had possessed him to come back to the old village. . . . Why hadn't a storm wrecked the ship on which he was returning and left him in the ocean for the fish to feed on? Ah, there in America he had nice clothes, shoes, shirts, collars, ties . . . the evenings he had to himself. True, he was without friends, but in time he'd have learned English and made friends. He had such a nice room, all to himself, with two large windows, and lighted by electricity; and a bed with clean sheet. And now—in *lapti* again, in sheepskins, in rags, living with pigs and chickens, eternally toiling, and all for what? He did not know. No one could tell him. He had no hope of ever rising out of the slough in which he was wallowing . . . not in Russia . . . none whatever. Ah, if he could only get back to America. He would spit on Russia . . . a million times . . . he would work in a dye factory, a mine, an ammunition shop, anywhere and he would never grumble, never, not a word, not even when he felt desperately lonely. If only he were able to feel clean and free and have hope of a better future. . . .

I had met few men in my wanderings in Russia and in other lands who were so disillusioned and heart-broken. Despite the wretched job she had given him,

her aloofness from the alien, her disregard of his personal cravings, America had implanted a body of thoughts and wishes in him that would not be subdued. I had no words of consolation for him. Who would have? Who except a Russian revolutionary, to whom nothing matters but the cause of the Revolution? And surely enough, Vassil and Antosh and the other youths rose to the occasion. They reminded Pavel of Russia's horrid past, of the Czar, the priests, the officials, who had all but wrecked the country. But Pavel would listen to no explanations. Maybe, he protested, it was wrong to make comparisons between Russia and America. But how could *he* help it? People lived in America, he argued. They did things, useful things, improved themselves all the time, their homes, their machinery, everything, and without interference from man or government. But in Russia people knew only how to wreck and bungle and irritate. And with a burst of eloquence he proceeded to elaborate his charge. There was the tax-system, he complained. What a nightmare it once was! The average muzhik was so bewildered, he did not know how many taxes he had to pay nor when he had to pay them. Everything he had was taxed. One day an agent came and collected a land-tax. Soon afterwards he came again and demanded a cattle-tax. Then he reappeared and claimed a poll-tax. It got so that every time a muzhik stepped outdoors and saw a stranger on the road he thought it was the tax-collector. No wonder that at times he was so enraged that he flung an axe at the collector's head and killed him. True, the government had now established a single tax, but what a ruinous tax it was! It cut the very bottom out of a man's chance to succeed. ....

'Look,' he shouted, 'at the blacksmith in your own village. Isn't it a scandal the way he has been treated? True, he is no expert mechanic. But a bolt he could make. A plough he could mend. A sickle he could grind. He was of great use to the muzhiks around here. And now? Now his shop is closed, falling to ruins—bellows, anvil, hammers rusting and rotting; and if the people in the village have a job to be done they have to travel for miles and miles and waste precious hours of their own and their horse's time. And why? Because the wise tax-gatherers in Russia had slammed a tax on him which he could not possibly stand,

and now they are trying to do the same thing to the blacksmith in our village. Only yesterday he refused to mend my plough. He was closing up his place. He was not going to sweat day and night and pay the government all he earned. Now what sort of a system is that, which ruins not only a worker's chance of earning a living, but deprives a community of his much-needed service ?

The Young Communist was on the point of saying something, but Pavel brushed him aside.

‘Or take the case of Yefim in the village of C——,’ he continued. ‘And remember, Yefim is an intelligent muzhik, president of the local Soviet. Forty poods of rye they demanded of him for his windmill, which has not been running for nearly a year, because Yefim is too poor to buy the lumber he needs to repair it. He begged the Volost Soviet to cut the tax to ten poods, for he had not been getting any income from it ; and what's more, the people in the village called a mass-meeting and signed a petition, stating that the mill as not working and urging the Soviet to reduce the tax to a reasonable amount. But the Soviet paid no attention to the petition, and do you know what Yefim has done ? He has taken down his mill. What else could he do ? What would anyone have done in his place ? What would Lenin himself have done ? Now the president of your Soviet is all the time telling the muzhiks that the reason goods are high priced here is because there has been so much destructiveness during the war and the Revolution. Well and good ! But is that any reason why his destructiveness should continue now when there is no more war, and what is it but destruction when a man has to take down a windmill or lock up a blacksmith's shop which the community needs ? And that is not all. Look at the crazy way in which the Soviet is renting meadows to us. Haw, haw, haw, what a jest, what a jest ! In America anyone managing an affair wit stupidly would go to the insane asylum, but ehre——

‘Listen. In former times a muzhik paid the landlord seven or eight roubles for a piece of meadow swamp and he cut the hay on it and if there was any wood there, he cut that, too. Now the wood he must not touch, and he must pay at least as much as he formerly did. And then the landlord always had a good man to keep the swamp

in good condition, hold the ditches open, sow new grass-seed where it was needed. And now ditches are clogged, and not a kernel of grass-seed is being sown. No one gives a damn what happens as long as the muzhiks pay, pay, pay, not only in money but in blood. They have a manager in charge of the swamp, and he knows no more about meadows than I do about astronomy, but he is a member of the party, he is a Communist, and we have got to tolerate him.... And look at something else,' he breezed on, heedless of all efforts to interrupt him, 'look at the way they are selling wood to us! Formerly a man paid five copecks for a load of stove-wood, as big a load as his team would draw. And now a muzhik has to pay eighteen copecks a load. And formerly he could go after wood whenever he cared, summer or winter. But now he cannot get a stick in summer. They won't sell it, and in winter only on certain days and not to individuals but to *artels* (labour guilds). We must all belong to woodcutting *artels*. But supposing my horse is sick at the time my partners are ready to go? Then what? Must I remain without wood, freeze to death, eh? No wonder peasants are turning thieves and are stealing wood at every chance they get.'

'But all that is being looked into!' thundered the Young Communist. 'Give us time ——'

But Pavel would not permit him to continue.

'And meanwhile,' he shot back, 'we are being bled. Bled, I say! Do you understand? And think of the time it takes to get a child registered! My brother wasted two days getting his child registered, and it was haying-time, too, and the weather was good. Oh, this Russian red tape, this love of putting off! And the stamps that they require on every piece of paper they give you, every document they send you; the devil only knows what they are thinking of....'

He settled back, lighted a cigarette and began to puff violently without, it seemed, being conscious of what he was doing. The revolutionaries burst into speech, several at once, interrupting, correcting one another. They admitted Soviet officials were bunglers. Some of them were even drunkards and grafters. But was not the party striving desperately to rid the Soviets of them?

Let an official be caught accepting a bribe or giving one, and his freedom is not worth a copeck. If he is a Communist he is often shot. Who were officials nowadays? Peasants and proletarians, men of little education, with no training for their positions, and, of course, they bungled and often ruined things. But what else could the party do? What else could the Soviets do? And as for high taxes, well, the government had to live somehow! If the Poles and the Whites and the Czecho-Slovaks had not destroyed and robbed Russia so mercilessly, times would have been better for everybody. And besides, somebody had to make a sacrifice... no improvements in Russia were possible without sacrifice... but the people would reap their reward in time. A rich reward it would be, the richest they had ever had, and Russians must be patient....

Pavel made no reply to these defences. He was too full of ire to speak. He lay on the grass, stretched out at full length, staring at the sky and puffing a cigarette. Only once did he speak, very briefly, just to say that the very explanations the revolutionary youths were making bore out his indictment, proved only too clearly that Russia was hopelessly foul and that there was no hope for the country or the people.... A real peasant, accustomed to appraise the world in terms of material values, of personal enjoyments, he was impatient of oratorical argument, of abstract idealisation. His American experience had only intensified this impatience. A man like him, who had absorbed into his blood the American idea of 'going ahead,' of raising his standard of living, could not possibly be happy in Soviet Russia with its disdain of purely material values and its disregard of individual cravings. No wonder that so many American immigrants, especially peasants, find themselves on their return to Russia not in a homeland but in an alien country, whose ways and ideas of living bring swift disillusionment and disgust. Those who can, hurry back; those who cannot, remain to fume, curse, and endure. I met scores of Pavels in Russia....

The young revolutionaries were not at all disposed to call a halt to the discussion. Both Antosh and Vassil

sought to dispel the gloomy picture Pavel had drawn. They flooded me with explanations, apologies, excuses. After all, they concluded, it was hard to rule the muzhik anyway. The most efficient and earnest officials in the world would be continually balked and harassed by him. He was so dishonest, so cruel, too. But there were many things that the Soviets had achieved; only Pavel chose to ignore them. Wasn't it something that the proletarian worked only eight hours a day? Even in America proletarians worked longer hours, didn't they? That's what a lecturer had told them at a recent conference. And what was more, the proletarian in Russia was receiving free medical aid for his entire family. And the muzhik had at least land enough now to raise bread.

'And who ever saw a newspaper in this village in the old days?' continued Vassil in his soft, finely modulated voice. 'But now the Soviet is sending one over quite often, and pamphlets and books, too, so that the people here have chance to know what is going on in the outside world where there are railroads, factories, and machines. And think of the change in the army! A miracle that is! In former times what was a soldier? A slave, a dog, to be kicked by drunken officers. In former times when a muzhik went to the army his mother and sisters and relatives gathered and wept and wailed, for he would go off for a long time, for three, four, and even seven years. And how was a soldier treated in the old army? It makes my blood boil every time I hear my father tell of his experiences in the service. Under the Czar, if a soldier was in a railroad station and wanted to smoke he first had to look round and see if there was an officer there, and if there was he had to go to him like a little boy to his father and ask for permission to smoke. And he had no right to wear a collar or goloshes. Why? Because officers wore these, and a soldier had no right to think himself in any way the equal of an officer and was enjoined from doing anything that an officer was privileged to do. He had no right to go to the theatre except by special permission and then could sit only in the gallery, where no officer could see him. And if he ever rode in a street-car he had to stand outside on the platform. Why? Because an officer might be inside the car. A soldier,



*tovarishtsh* American, always had to think of himself as the inferior of everybody. Everybody, do you understand, a thief, a drunkard, a murderer, could ride inside a street-car and sit anywhere he pleased in the theatre, if he had the money to buy a high-priced ticket. But for a soldier always the back door, always, like a slave, a dog. That's what the soldier was in old times. But now? A soldier is a man, a free man. No officer dare insult him, and let one lay a hand on a soldier and out of the ranks he goes, to jail. And there is no more standing at attention until your feet sink under you and your bones crack, and there is no more "your highness" or "your excellency." It is all *tovarishtsh* now. The common soldier is as high and excellent as the highest commander. Now, when a muzhik boy goes to the army, nobody weeps. He goes away for only a short time, and during his service his family enjoy certain privileges, get a reduction in the amount of their taxes for one thing, and when he comes back he is a cultured man. He can read and write. He knows who Marx was and what he taught. He understands the class struggle. He believes in the Revolution. He hates the bourzhuis, and he is against the priests, and he knows that workmen or peasants, be they Russians or Americans or Chinamen, are brothers and should never go to war and shoot one another.'

'And what other things has the Revolution done for the muzhik, for the peasants, say, in our own village?' I asked.

'Well,' replied Vassil with enthusiasm, 'you heard our people at the mass-meeting. They yelled and abused and cursed the Soviets, didn't they? And nobody stopped them. And in old times, haw, haw, haw!—no muzhik dared whisper a word of opposition.'

'Yes,' chimed in another youth, 'and a muzhik is now given the preference in the university, just like the proletarian, and he pays nothing for his studies there, and if he is poor he is given board and room free.'

'And he can advance himself in the army, too,' continued Vassil with undiminished fervour. 'You know, I suppose, that we no longer have colonels and generals in Russia. Now it is all commander—commander of a squad, of a regiment, of a division; commander of the entire army. And a

muzhik, *tovarishtsh*, can climb as high in rank as his ability will permit. That's something, isn't it ?

'It is, it is,' echoed several voices with enthusiasm. . . . I looked at Pavel, expecting a caustic comment on his outburst of approval. But he lay still, staring into space.

. . .

'Only one thing we lack,' remarked the Young Communist dolefully ; 'we lack *technique* (technical development). Akh, if we only had American *technique* ! We'd have tractors, electricity, threshing machines, ay, and automobiles. At our last conference a speaker from Moscow told us that the heads of our party are now giving all their time to the study of *technique*, as without it the Soviets cannot hope to compete with the capitalist governments. And he told us that we'll have *technique* in time, as good as America has now. And he was right. If we could drive the Poles and the Whites and all the foreign armies out of our land, we can develop our own *technique*.'

Carried away by the fervour of their beliefs, the Young Communist and Vassil and several of the other youths proceeded to expatiate on the plans they had worked out to further the cause of the Revolution in the village. In the autumn they'd move from the village of K—, the building which the Soviet had offered them for a school-house. They'd do it even if the old people should persist in their opposition. A large house it was, with many spacious rooms, which they'd turn into a library, a theatre, class-rooms, an assembly hall, where they could hold meetings, lectures, discussions. The Soviet and the party had promised to send them speakers from the city, cultivated, enlightened revolutionaries, who could tell them of the new ideas that the big men in Moscow were continually working out. They'd stir up a real revolutionary spirit in the village even among the women, wean them from the church, the priest, and teach them science. All the good things in life came from science, didn't they ? Lenin had said that so many times, and at every conference and meeting speakers kept emphasising the great need of propagating science among the masses. . . . Wasn't it science that had made possible America's great *technique* ? And science, when spread among the masses, will make possible the development of Russia's *technique* . . . science, that was the great hope of the Soviets, the only salvation of Russia !

... Besides, when a man understood science he was no longer dark-minded; priests and monks and miracle-workers and charlatans could no longer prey on him. ... Yes, science would revolutionise Russia, would bring to the muzhiks good homes, machinery to work the land with, electricity for the house, for the barn, for the street, for the highway ... why, at the conference one of the speakers from Moscow had assured the audience that when Russia was properly electrified, women could bake bread and do their washing with electricity and the muzhiks could do their threshing and wood-cutting and also many other jobs on the farm with electric power! Akh, if only the big men in Moscow would hurry with the building of electric plants; Russia needed them so badly ... their very existence would be unanswerable proof of the success of the Revolution, and even the old muzhiks would cease to growl. And then—

With the shock of sudden thunder-clap and like the taunt of some evil god there burst on our ears a loud laugh. It was Pavel, and we all turned our eyes on him and waited in silence for an explanation of this sudden outburst of mirth or rather bitterness.

'Oh, you silly children, you silly children,' he sneered and laughed again. 'Science you talk about, and tractors and automobiles and electricity. ...'

'And why do you laugh?' questioned the Young Communist tartly.

'Because,' replied Pavel mockingly, 'it amuses me to hear you make fools of yourselves. *Technique, technique* ...' he repeated with a sneer.

'And why not?' questioned one of the girls. It was the first time that a girl had spoken throughout the evening. 'My own father, who curses the Revolution, said only yesterday that it would be a good thing if the Soviets actually did bring *technique* to the village.'

Both Vassil and the Young Communist were on the point of speaking, but Pavel silenced them with a motion of the hand. He rose to a half-sitting posture, turned down his sheepskin collar, and with the light of the moon full on his twitching face, he drew near to the girl and said:

'Because, *milaya* (my dear), we are a rotten people, the rottenest in the world. You who have not been outside of this village or even outside of Russia cannot perhaps realise it. But I have been about the world a bit. America is no angel. She kills cruelly, ah, how cruelly! But she builds, too, and wonderfully. But we Russians, we can only kill, and more savagely than any people on earth. We are a lazy, dishonest, beastly people, by Jove, we are! And there is only one hope for us, for our unfortunate land, only one, and that is for a flood to come and drown out every living thing, for everything that crawls or walks or flies over Russia is tainted, foul, capable only of spreading its terrible infection, and must therefore be destroyed, everything and everybody. . . . And then when there are no more living things left here, let the Americans come along with their *technique*, their honesty, their energy, their genius, and repopulate this land, and build new villages, cities, factories, railroads. Then there will be a new Russia, a healthy, happy Russia, but until then—Akh!' He sighed, motioned with his hand and dropped his head to the ground, as though too disgusted to eagage in further colloquy. . . .

The Young Communist laughed, but not with joy. He did not attempt to make a reply to Pavel's lament. Nor did anyone else. It would have been of no use anyway. No words of theirs could possibly heal Pavel's heartache or gloss over the implication of his speech. . . . Vassil, always good-natured and self-possessed, shook his fine round head several times, winked at me, and exclaimed amidst audible puffs at his cigarette, 'Yes, yes'—and smiled, as though merely amused at Pavel's outburst of self-condemnation . . . perhaps he had heard it before, many times. One hears them often in present-day Russia, ay, as often as in the old days, for the old Russian habit of underestimating and belittling oneself is not dead, not yet, and perhaps it never will be. Only the girls seemed disturbed and saddened. They stared at Pavel as at a doomed man.

'Take him back to America,' said Vassil, turning to me.

'A lost soul,' sighed the Young Communist. 'He will not see the light.'

One by one the boys and girls dropped off to sleep. But I lay awake. I was not accustomed to the bare damp ground as they were, and besides I was full of thought. There was truth enough in Pavel's stern indictment. Not even the revolutionary youths disputed his facts as to local incompetence, arbitrariness, inefficiency. But it was not merely local. That was the grim part of it. In village after village I had come on instances of mismanagement, brutality, corruption, more woeful and more destructive than the ones Pavel complained of. Nor do leaders deny or hide the facts. Their common lament, as I interviewed them in this and that place, was that the new regime suffered from a lack of competent men to do the work of governing. The old order had not developed them, and the new one had not yet had time to prepare them for their respective tasks. Not an issue of the Moscow *Pravda* but devotes columns to letters and articles depicting and denouncing the destructive tactics of men in authority in the village as well as in the city. Measures all the way from expulsion from the revolutionary ranks to the death penalty have been inaugurated to combat bureaucracy, officialdom, and abuse of power. But that does not help their victims, and there are so many of them. . . .

And yet. . . .

The words of the young peasant revolutionaries flitted through my mind. *Science, technique, tractors, atheism, education, culture, electricity!* New words these were in the village, totally unknown in my boyhood days. I couldn't help thinking of what boys talked about when they came together in those times. Of girls, of course, and of dances, of festivals, of horses, of trips to the woods and to town fairs, and of the stories they had heard from itinerant pedlars and gipsies and beggars. The world outside scarcely existed for them. Few, very few of them ever saw a newspaper, a book, a magazine. Few, very few of them, went to school, none to college. They lived like their fathers and grandfathers and great-grandfathers before them, in filth, poverty, darkness, with no ambition, no hope, no stimulus, shave their one immemorial dream

of some day coming into possession of the landlords' estates. Year after year, generation after generation, the same monotony, the same drudgery, the same dullness. But now? Their imagination had been stirred. They were naive enough in their faith in the miraculous power of the Revolution to rid the world for ever of want, inequality, sorrow—of all evil and all woe. They knew so little of the perversity of human nature. They gave no thought to forces which some day would bring them no little disillusionment. They were so young and so inexperienced in the ways of man and the world. But their minds teemed with new concepts, new ideas, new beliefs. They *were* aware of a world outside of their village. They *were* awake to the darkness about them and to the need of ushering in enlightenment. *Science. . . . Technique. . . . Tractors. . . . Atheism. . . . Education. . . . Culture. . . . Electricity. . . .* The words rang deafeningly in my ears. . . .

## CHAPTER X

### THE WOMEN HAVE THEIR SAY

SULLEN as were the men in the village, the women were even more so. I mean the older women. Was it because women are innately more acrimonious than men or more impatient of change or only more articulate? Of course, the muzhik women live in a world which, though more circumscribed than that of their men, is yet inwardly more complex, richer in personal content, and when under the onslaught of the Revolution this world began to wobble, they were perhaps more terrified than were the latter, and emitted louder cries of despair. At any rate they had burdens of disappointments all their own, and it was through an unexpected circumstance that I heard them in a body give utterance to these.

Perhaps I should not say unexpected. Nothing is unexpected in Russia, least of all personal confessions, especially in the village, where people are only too eager to unburden themselves of their tribulations.

In the old days one of our neighbours was a certain Ulyana, and I inquired of my cousin what had become

of her. He informed me that her husband had died some ten years ago and that she had moved to the village of Z——to live with her oldest daughter, who was married to a man there. Z——was about ten miles away from our village, and on Monday morning when I returned from *nochley* I walked over there. The place was deserted when I got to it, save for dogs, children, and a few stray geese that waddled pompously about from yard to yard and cackled boisterously. The older people had apparently all gone to the fields to work. Passing one of the houses, I saw a little girl, barefooted and bareheaded, sitting on a bundle of straw on the ground and singing to a crying baby. I stopped and asked her where Ulyana lived. My voice startled her, and she swiftly drew back, frightened, putting her arms around the baby as if afraid I would attempt to kidnap it. I spoke words of reassurance to her and offered her a handful of candy, the key to the heart of any youngster the world over. She smiled and immediately grew loquacious. She told me that Ulyana lived at the farther end of the village in a house with a new thatch roof and with a bent apple-tree in the yard. She warned me that there was a mean black dog on the premises and that I need not be afraid to hit him hard with a stick, for that was what she always did when she went there.

I found the house easily enough, an ordinary log hut with two little windows peering into the street. As it was a fine day I had no hope of finding anyone at home. Still, I tried the door. It was open, and I walked inside. No one was there. I called aloud for Ulyana, but there was no reply ; so I stayed long enough to survey the place. Icons hung in the corner directly over the table, and below them the walls were plastered with lurid Bolshevik posters, several of an atheistic slant. One often finds such posters in peasant homes these days. The table was strewn with pieces of bread and potato and dabs of sour milk round which swarms of flies buzzed continually. The sleeping platform was scattered with old clothes and soiled straw-ticks, and the floor of black dirt was worn into ruts and hollows like a much-travelled road and was spattered with all manner of debris. On a beam directly over the oven,

just where a patch of sunlight had shot in, a swarm of roaches were peacefully warming themselves. A neglected, smelly, desolate home, no better and no worse than that of the average muzhik in our parts.

I walked outside and started in the direction of the road that led to the outlying fields. When I came to the garden I saw an old woman on her knees cutting half-withered potato vines with a sickle and humming a lullaby. I knew it was Ulyana though I could not see her face. How vigorous she seemed, despite her seventy-odd years! She swung her sickle with a grace and vigour that would have done credit to a much younger person. She did not hear me approach, and I leaned over the tumbling brush fence and watched her. Good old Ulyana, how kind and affectionate she had been to me in the old days! With what heroic fortitude she took my part in any tussle I had with other boys or even with my brothers! Will I ever forget the day when I ran to her for protection from the evil-eyed Makar, the gipsy horse-thief, who chased after me snapping his leather whip and roaring curses and threats to kill me because I had snatched a bundle of poppies from the hand of his little girl? She made Makar feel so repentant that when he left her he kissed her hand and called her 'little mother.' When I left the old village for America I promised her that if ever I should return I would bring her the finest silk kerchief I could buy. I remembered the promise when I was preparing for the journey to the old home, and I had it with me.

I spoke to her. She turned her head and peered at me, shading her eyes against the sun with a loose-skinned, shaky hand. She was barefooted, dressed in the customary short, pleated skirt and a linen blouse with the loose collar rumpled like a shrivelled leaf. I told her who I was, and she instantly jumped to her feet, dropped the sickle, embraced me, and burst peasant fashion into a flood of endearments. . . . What a guest, what a guest! How unbelievable it seemed! All the way from America! And what could she do to entertain me? What would I have—an apple, a bear, a handful of pumpkin and sunflower seeds? Or did I remember how as a boy I used to sneak into the gardens of neigh-



hours and steal carrots, turnips, radishes? Well, if I still liked these things wouldn't I help myself to anything I saw in the garden? Wouldn't I, please? Ah, *Bozhe moy*, what a guest!

Good old Ulyana, as simple and kind as she always had been!

I gave her the shawl—glistening silk with the colours of the American flag. She unfolded it and burst into tears. What a pretty shawl, what a beautiful shawl! And she needed it, ah, how badly—she so old and growing feeble and nearing the day of her end! Now her burial wardrobe was complete, and she would look so beautiful in this shawl in her coffin. She embraced me once more and wiped her tears with her callous hand. . . .

Soon the women and girls working in the adjoining gardens called to Ulyana, inquiring who that citified-looking stranger was. 'An American, a countryman of ours,' Ulyana yelled back excitedly and invited them to come over. They did so, hurriedly enough, and surrounded me with the intent and joyous anticipation of boys closing round an outlandish street performer—women and girls in homespun skirts and fluffy shirts with long sleeves and broad collars, barefooted all of them, their big feet black with fresh dirt. Ulyana showed them the shawl and in a burst of happiness informed them that she would wear it only when she was laid out in her coffin.

They bombarded me with questions, these eager-eyed women and girls, as peasants always did on learning I was from America. They made playful comments on the things I told them and laughed boisterously when I passed around a handful of candy, a luxury of luxuries to the muzhik. Then a toothless old woman, her head and hands in a perpetual tremor, her double chin hanging down like a shrivelled sack, turned to me and asked: "Tell me, my dear, do they allow a daughter-in-law in America to drive her husband's old mother from the house?"

There was a quaver in her voice as though she were on the point of crying.

A hush fell over us. Gaiety fled at once. The older women shook their heads in pity, but said nothing. What was there to be said? It was the old story of the cruelty of the Russian peasant to his own flesh and blood, his own father and mother, when they have become incapacitated for labour.

'*Babushka* (little grandmother),' said one of the girls, 'why don't you go to town and complain to the Soviets?'

She stared at the girl with a dumb face and glazed eyes as though to say, 'What could the Soviets or anyone do to help me?' A lengthy pause ensued before she summoned sufficient energy to speak.

'How can I go empty-handed? I haven't even an egg or a piece of pork to give the Soviet man.'

How ancient, familiar, and pathetic these words sounded! How vividly they brought before my eyes old graft-festered Russia, whose motto was: give if thou wilt receive, and where even a peasant had become so accustomed to rewarding officials for doing their duty that this old woman could not conceive of invoking governmental aid in her behalf without offering the Soviet man a bribe.

'You don't have to give him anything', the girl enlightened her.

'You don't want to, anyway', interposed another, 'or the chairman of the Soviet will put you in jail. He's sentenced my uncle to ten days for offering him a pot of butter.'

'The ungodly scoundrel!' exclaimed a plump woman indignantly. To her, reared in the morality of the old days, it was sheer mendacity to punish a man for offering a bribe to an official.

'It is only the new chairman who is so strict', added another woman. 'A holy terror he is, they say—not at all like the fellow who preceded him and who'd take anything that was given him, hay, oats, a chicken, and even a flask of home-brew.'

'That's the way with them, these Soviets of ours,' mourned Ulyana. 'They always send away the men with whom

we can live in friendliness and put in their places chaps who can only roar and scold and impose fines.'

Presently the old woman opened her mouth wide, struggled to say something, but the words were as if stuck in her throat, and she turned round and walked off, coughing violently, her head bobbing up and down as though it were on springs. When she had disappeared behind the row of barns standing like a wall in front of us, we resumed our conversation, but it was no longer of trivialities or in the spirit of levity in which we began. We turned to the subject that is always uppermost in the minds of Russians; namely, the Revolution.

'How long have you been in Russia?' asked Ahapa, a short woman with a stiff neck, blind in one eye, with a red, furrowed face that had a dent in the right cheek, as though a lump of flesh were chewed off inside.

'Just a few months,' I replied.

'And how do you like it here now?' asked another woman, Axenya, large and stout, with a steady gaze and a face so heavily freckled that it seemed as if spread with a brown film.

'And if it was I,' broke in Ahapa again, 'who had moved to some other country to live, I never should want to return to cursed Russia. Fie on such a land!' and she spat violently on a near-by potato hill.

'And why do you speak like that?' I asked, wondering what was back of her words.

She motioned with her hand as though to say, 'What a superfluous query!'

Ulyana, however, did not think so, for she hastened to explain: 'You see, my dear, we are all mixed up here like a fish that's been taken out of the water and thrown in, taken out and thrown in, until the poor thing doesn't know whether it is in water or on land.'

I pressed for details, and they came from all sides in a flood.

'For every little thing they threaten to put you in jail nowadays.'

I wondered what the speaker meant by little thing, but did not have to wait long to learn.

'If you give someone in the Soviet a gift, no matter how small, maybe just to be nice to him, they put you in jail.'

'If you take a drink of home-brew they threaten to put you in jail.'

'If you whip your child they send an agent down to investigate you and threaten to lock you up.'

'If you go to the woods far, far away for a load of wood in summer, they put you in jail.'

'And when you go to the Soviet office and they begin to question you about something and if they don't like the way you speak, the words you use, plain muzhik words, they scold you and threaten to fine you.'

'And how should we dark muzhiks know the speech of gentlefolk, bred as we are among our own people who don't have as nice ways as landlords?'

'And take our fasts, beloved', said Ahapa gravely; 'formerly a fast was a fast. We knew that on Wednesdays and Fridays we weren't supposed to eat meat, eggs, milk-foods, and we didn't eat them. Never. And now the cursed Communists have been hammering into us that it is foolish to observe fasts, and some of us have quit and aren't afraid of punishment.'

'It is no better with holidays,' resumed Ulyana with despair. 'The old church tells us to celebrate holidays in the old style, the new church tells us to celebrate them in the new style, and some of the priests are for the old church, and some are for the new, and some don't know whom they are for, and some are for both. And muzhiks are as mixed up as priests, only worse, and some of them observe holidays in the old style, and some in the new, and some in both, and some in none at all. So what can we, muzhiks, do? We just shrug our shoulders and sigh and pray for mercy.'

'Pray!' interposed Ahapa in a tone of mockery. 'Pray! Some of our men haven't prayed so long that they have forgotten all their prayers.'

A vivid portrayal these words were of the religious chaos that has swept over even the faithful peasants

in those parts of the country where the Living Church has managed to gain a following. Instead of bringing understanding, it has filled the minds of the masses with confusion and doubt. Perhaps the laxity that I observed in my own village was in a large measure the result of the intrusion of the Living Church.

'And the young people,' continued Ahapa, 'laugh at the icons and the priests. That's how godless they've become.'

'The girls don't,' remonstrated a bright-eyed, light-haired girl.

'If you don't now,' prophesied Ahapa with a touch of of finality, 'you soon will, just like so many of the boys. The Young Communists will ruin your soul, too. They are ruining everything, the little devils.'

'And what of the fathers?' I asked, remembering only too well how in former times fathers enforced unreasoned obedience to established usage with fist and club if necessary.

Several women burst into an ironic guffaw.

Didn't I know any better than to ask such a question? Didn't I know that the Revolution was breaking up the old family unity and parental authority over children?

'A father is no father any more.'

'And a mother is no mother, either.'

'The young brats do as they please.'

'They have no fear of God or man and no respect either.'

'Ay, they are growing up like beasts in the woods.'

'And why hide the truth?' remonstrated Ahapa. 'The fathers are no better than the Young Communists.'

'Right you are, Ahapa. My man eats pork on fast days and has ceased going to church and says he isn't afraid of God.'

Here were confusion and despair. Unlike the men, these women grieved over things other than of the flash. They saw their old customs, their old morality, their old faith, attacked and slipping from under their feet. In the old days what muzhik would dare question the existence of God or mock at the priests and the icons,

even if in his heart he despised both? His own kin would be so appalled at the blasphemy that they might deliver him to the police if only to be rid of an unclean spirit that might bring evil on them. And now anyone who wished could denounce God and the icons and the priests, and no one bothered to reprove the culprits. And in the old days who ever heard of a muzhik being punished for taking a 'gift' to an official? And why should they be scolded for expressing themselves in their own way in a Soviet office? And why should they be forbidden to regale themselves with a drink of home-brew? What harm did that do to anyone? And why should they be threatened with punishment for whipping their own children? To them it was all so wicked and insane. They hated this new world and feared it even more. . . .

'And why don't you tell him something of taxes?' suggested Axenya with bitterness.

Now I expected an explosion, and I was not disappointed. It came instantly, loud and vehement.

'That's what keeps us so ragged, these taxes.'

'They devour everything like a plague.'

'We can buy no more shawls and must wear little caps like babies.'

'We can't buy anything any more.'

'Not even pins for our hair.'

'Nor beads.'

'And some of us will have to be buried in rags now and go to the other world like outcasts. . . .'

'That's what we've come to, not even a decent dress to be buried in.'

'The ruination of the muzhik, that's what they are, these infernal taxes!'

'And girls cannot buy ribbons any more either.'

'That's why they don't braid their hair any more, and aren't as beautiful as they used to be.'

'And don't get married so soon.'

'Don't get married at all, so many of them.'

A girl who had all the time been trying to speak but was shouted down by the others, now broke in saying: 'My brother said everything would get cheap again soon.'

The Soviets, he said, are going to set low prices on everything, and if merchants should overcharge, they'll go to jail.'

Ahapa burst into an ironic laugh.

'Your brother !' she mocked. 'A Communist !'

And they burst into a fresh volley of complaints and tirades.

• As I was listening to them, I could not help marveling at the equanimity of the girls. They showed no signs of exasperation. While their mothers were raging they were smiling, talking among themselves in whispers and casting furtive glances at me. They seemed not in the least interested in the complaints of their mothers. Was it because the recital of privations was an old story to them now, grown monotonous from ceaseless repetition ? Surely it was not because they did not miss the ornaments of which they were deprived. After all they were girls and their snug-fitting baby caps were atrocious to the eye, and their braids, fastened round the head and hidden from view instead of hanging down the back intertwined with gaudy ribbons, gave them a faded look, as of scorched flowers. Or was it because youth is naturally exuberant and joyous and soon forgets its troubles ? Or because the Revolution had filled them with the same glow of romance and adventure that it had the youth in the city, and they so gloried in the new excitement that they cared little for personal appearance ?

The clamour of the old woman had subsided, and now the girls grew talkative. A plump girl with a flushed face and teasing blue eyes ventured to ask : 'How much of a dowry must a girl have in America ?'

'How much of a dowry must a girl have here ?' I returned.

'As much,' Ulyana hastened to reply bitingly, 'as her suitor can squeeze out of her father.'

'And formerly,' remarked Ahapa, 'if you gave a man a cow he was more than satisfied.'

'A cow ? A yearling heifer was good enough.'

'Or a sheepskin coat.'

'My sister,' added a blonde girl, 'who married last year, gave her husband three hundred poods of rye.'

'Yes,' remarked Ahapa, 'that's why your father is so poor now that he can't marry you off.'

I felt sorry for the girl, for this personal thrust at her. But she showed no signs of perturbation. She held her head high and smiled, as though enjoying being talked about.

'Look at her,' continued Ulyana ; 'pretty, isn't she ? Such fine eyes, such lovely hair, such red cheeks, just like blood, and what a wonderful worker she is ! There is none better in this village or anywhere in the countryside. Formerly suitors would hang round her like flies round a milk-basin, and now hardly one comes near ; and when he does and finds out that her father is poor, too poor to give her a substantial dowry, he goes away.' Leaning close and lowering her voice as if to emphasise the gravity of her words, she added : 'And she is twenty already.' Her confiding tone was as touching as it was amusing and I couldn't restrain a laugh.

'Still young,' I said.

She shook her head in indignant protest.

'Not so young any more, countryman. At her age I was the mother of two children.'

'And at what age do girls marry in America ?' asked another girl.

I thought I'd spring a surprise on them, and I did.

'Some don't marry until thirty,' I replied.

A howl clove the air, the girls howling and roaring the loudest. Thirty ! A terribly old age to a peasant woman.

'And do the fathers keep them until they are that old ?'

'Most of them keep themselves,' I explained.

Ah ! Girls keeping themselves—that was something new and brave !

'Nu, in your country they can do it,' said the freckle-faced woman. 'People are rich there. That's why everybody wants to go to America. I'd go there myself if I had money enough for a ship ticket. But what's a peasant girl to do if



she isn't married ? Her own father will not hesitate to drive her from the house.'

'Ay,' added Ulyana with a mournful nod of the head.

'And neighbours'll think she is a kind of outcast and will make fun of her and shun her.'

True enough ! Tradition, which the Revolution is slowly undermining, saddles the girl with personal guilt for her state of celibacy. To her father and mother she is a burden *only* slightly less exasperating than to herself. No unhappier lot can befall any woman in a peasant village than to remain unmarried.

'You haven't told us yet,' said one of the girls, 'how much of a dowry a girl must have in America.'

'You see,' said I, 'in America most boys don't bother about a dowry.'

The girls glanced at each other, then at me, and giggled as if greatly pleased.

'That's where you ought to go, all of you,' advised Ahapa. 'Then instead of you paying the boys, they would be paying you a dowry.'

'They'd do that quickly enough, those spoiled mischief-makers !'

Again the girls giggled and winked at each other and cast half-abashed glances at me as if happy in the discovery that it was not everywhere a girl had to buy herself into wedlock !

We chattered on, the girls and I, of trivial things, of boys and girls in America, their foibles, amusements, flirtations. Now and then, as someone shot out a particularly apt jest, they burst into explosive laughter that floated back to us in ringing echoes from that wall of barns with the low-hanging thatch roofs that sprawled at our right like an ancient and sombre fortress. They were full of talk and curiosity and innocent mischief, these deep-bosomed, unlettered, joyous-hearted girls, who seemed as much out of place in that mud and poverty and ignorance and perpetual grumbling as a new-born babe in a prison-cell.

The older women listened, sullen, sad-eyed, with scarce a ripple of joy crossing their set countenances. Full of gall, they allowed no opportunity for caustic comment to escape.

*Gradually they snatched the conversation away from the girls and trailed off once more on a line of lamentations, new and old, with characteristic open-heartedness, more in a spirit of resignation now than in defiant acrimony.*

'I suppose,' began Ulyana apologetically, 'it is unpleasant for you, little son, to come back to the old place and hear your old neighbours continually grumbling. But what can we do? Old women we are and unlearned and helpless, and it does hurt, I tell you. See for yourself--what has this Soviet Revolution given us? Nothing is as it was, holidays are no holidays, fasts are no fasts, fathers are no fathers, sons are no sons. . . .'

'Ay, and weddings are no weddings.'

'Indeed not, not any more now that the Soviets won't allow us to take a sip of home-brew.'

'And what is a wedding or christening without home-brew?'

What is it, indeed, to a peasant? A poignant question. A wedding without home-brew--an unheard-of event! No clinking of glasses, no hearty embraces, no profuse exchanges of good-will between gups of the flaming drink. To these women it *was* a supreme tragedy, deliberately foisted on them. . . .

'The devil only knows why they won't let us drink home-brew,' protested Ahapa. I wondered what they thought was the reason and asked them to tell me.

'Because,' the girl who had a Communist brother hastened to reply, 'they don't want the men to get drunk and beat their wives.'

They roared with laughter. Such a silly explanation!

'Supposing the men beat their wives anyway?' the freckled-faced woman shot at the girl.

The latter made no reply. Again the women roared.

'I'll tell you why the Soviets don't want us to drink home-brew,' said Ahapa with unquestioned authority. 'My old man has guessed it right. He says that the Soviets don't want us to use up any rye in making it, so that they can collect bigger taxes from us.'

The sun was rising higher and higher and growing hotter and hotter. From the distance there came to us through the

still air the screams of children playing in the near-by bushes and the bleating of sheep on their way to the river for water. Peasants were now driving by from the fields, with loads of hay, oats, or flax, that had been soaked in the river and was spraying the road as with a sprinkler. They waved their hands and shouted loud greetings as they passed, and then turned and gazed back, wondering, no doubt, what caused these women to assemble and talk when they should be working. Ahapa raised her eyes to the sky and said: 'Thank God the sun is out, and we can get some of our work done.'

They dispersed and went back to their gardens. I bade Ulyana farewell and took to the road again, deep in thought.

Many a time during my stay in the old village and my wanderings in other villages, as I listened to the gloomy and angry outbursts of the peasants, I grew bitter against the Soviets their policies and methods—very many times. I thought them too inconsiderate, too brutal. Yet never before had I fully realised the immensity of the task they had undertaken—to build a new society in a land where not only the flail and the sickle were in universal use, but where the mass of the people were so elemental, so unenlightened, so woefully unmoral, that innocently enough their very age-old vices and perversities they exalted into rights and virtues as indispensable to their well-being as the bread they ate. Here was a people sodden in mediæval dross, and who, confronted with the task of retrieving them, would not commit ugly and cruel blunders? Surely the Soviets have committed more than their share. Who would be so foolhardy as to deny that?

However, what stirred me most as I was leisurely wending my way back to my old village was not the social and political but the human and dramatic significance of the words I had just heard, the fate of the muzhik women who has so touchingly unburdened themselves to me. Open-hearted, loquacious, wilted from incessant labour, they were caught in the waves of a tempest that was tossing them into a new, confusing, and terrifying world. It was bad enough that this Revolution had brought on

them economic privation. The luxuries they had once known and enjoyed they now had to dispense with. No shawls, no ribbons, no hairpins, no beads. No kerosene. Often no salt. No opportunity to provide for a suitable burial wardrobe. What could be sadder than that? Their men and children, especially the boys, turning against the icons and against God. Their authority over their children crumbling. A crime now to beat a child; a crime to sip home-brew; a crime to give an official a gift, even when appealing to him for a favour, a crime almost to speak in a Soviet office in their own old-fashioned profane way; a crime to do a multitude of things that had always given them satisfaction and pleasure.

And what was the object of it all? Why all these un-heard-of innovations, these stern restrictions? If the Soviets could not offer them help, why did not they leave them alone? Simple souls, they did not understand and did not care for this new talk of future happiness, of a finer race, of a nobler civilisation, of a more cultured peasantry, of a more modern Russia—language which inspired the revolutionary. Science, tractors, automobiles, power-plants, words which thrilled the new youth, had no meaning for them and scarcely any interest. They had always been accustomed to thinking only of themselves, their immediate needs and comforts. They never had bothered about the distant future. They never had thought of life in terms other than immediate satisfactions. They saw nothing base or ugly in their old ways and standards and nothing good or noble in the new ones imposed on them. They saw not a broadening but a wrecking of the very foundations of their old world.

So what joy had they left? What hope of a better tomorrow? None, really none. There was no place for them in the world that the Revolution was moulding. Through no fault of theirs, they were doomed to a life of disappointment, unless, alas! something was to check the march of the Revolution and its onslaught on their social fortifications.

And yet I could not forget the girls. They were such a contrast to their mothers—ruddy and radiant, fond of fun and laughter, of song and dance, in love with life and the world, jesting while their mothers were railing,

smiling while the latter were sobbing. A token, were they, of hope and faith in a to-morrow as joyous as their spirits today ?

## CHAPTER XI

## THE RED LANDLORD

• WHAT a big world our village and district were—not in geographic extent, of course, nor in material and cultural achievement. No locomotive and no automobile had yet crossed its gloomy lowlands. No factory whistle had yet riven its idyllic calm. No machine of any kind had yet cast its shadow athwart its boundaries. It was big only in the magnitude of its human experience. Here lived a people of a common ancestry, speaking a common tongue, bred in a common folk-tradition. Yet how varied were their grievances, their burdens, their longings, their search for solace and deliverance !

Here were men seeing only doom ahead, and women shaking with awe and wrath at the perceptible collapse of their old world. Here were girls oblivious to the ruin and sorrow about them and giving themselves with hilarious abandon to their daily round of joys and diversions—dances, festivals, song-fests, romance and love just like girls the world over. Here were boys brave, defiant, fanatical, seized with a new passion, a new purpose, eager to build new schools, new villages, a new Russia, a new humanity. Here were strife, hate, love, frivolity, hope, joy, dejection, wrath, ecstasy—the whole gamut of human sentiment and passion unleashed and aflame.

And here were the Red Landlord, Manka, Yekim, heroes and victims, with the peasants, of them, but with antecedents all their own, with burdens and anxieties alien to their elders, and yet even more than the latter forming a vital part of the drama enacted in those swampy plains. Who were they and what did they represent, these strangers within the gateway of their own people ?

Let their stories speak for themselves.

I had heard much of him before I went to see him. In fact I had heard so much of him that I felt my visit to the old village would be incomplete unless I did call on him. Muzhiks gnashed their teeth in anger whenever they mentioned his name. They called him the Red Landlord, an epithet of contempt, because he was manager of the experimental government farm that adjoined our village fields.

Formerly this farm belonged to a Polish nobleman, and for years the muzhiks had been yearning for the day when they could seize it and divide it among themselves. Be it remembered that from time immemorial the Russian peasant had denied the right of the landlord to the land he held, and there was not an estate in Russia but the peasants in adjoining villages impatiently awaited the hour when they could oust its legal owner and parcel it out among themselves. When the Revolution came, our peasants hastened to put into effect their age-old dream. Together with peasants from neighbouring villages they hewed down the landlord's birch wood, all of it, to the last sapling, and proceeded to plough up the land, in the belief that each would be allotted all that he had ploughed. Of a sudden the Soviets issued a decree ordering them off the landlord's estate for the reason that the government had decided to turn it into a *Sovhos* (a government farm).

Our muzhiks were enraged, especially those who were land-poor. Their hopes for an ampler and happier life were, they felt, shattered. The end of Czarism, of the rule of the *pomiestchiks*, the introduction of new civil liberties, the promise of a host of new reforms in their behalf, left them unmoved. Their one age-long desire had been blasted. They would get no land. That stung.

Again and again they told me with the affecting pathos of a child crying for a lost parent, that they had rather the Polish landlord had remained on the estate, for he was a kind man. He helped the poor, now with a sack of grain or load of straw, now with a supply of fuel or loan of five or ten gold roubles. In his own village he had built a school-house, and only the outbreak of the Revolution prevented him from putting up a bath-house for his peasant neighbours. But the *Sovhos* manager—ah, he was a tyrant! He never did favours to anyone. He only strove to squeeze fines out of muzhiks. God help the man whose cow, horse, pig strayed on govern-

ment land! He'd make the owner pay heavily for the damage, two or three days' labour with hoe or scythe or else with horse and plough. Never, never had such cruel penalties been imposed on muzhiks.

And of what earthly use was this plagued *Sovhos* anyway? they argued. It was not even working all of its lands; some of these were lying idle while peasants were choking on the puny strips they had inherited from their fathers. And besides, the *Sovhos* was not paying its own way. Every year it sustained a loss which the government made good with loads and loads of the rye that it was collecting in taxes. So that not only were the people deriving no benefit from the *Sovhos*, it was a heavy burden on them, eating up hundreds and hundreds of poods of their precious rye. No wonder muzhiks had taken to making home-brew. They might as well get some use out of their rye as let it go to waste supporting a parasitic *Sovhos*. Akh, what fools they had been not to have heeded the advice of the former manager of the estate and set all the buildings afire! Had they done that, the government would have been compelled to divide the land among them just as it had done in other places, for it could not afford to erect new buildings. Damned fools!

So persuasive were the peasants in their speech that I felt that they had been grievously wronged, and as I was on my way to see the *Sovhos* manager, I resolved to lay before him frankly and bluntly the facts that the peasants had communicated to me, and to hint to him in no uncertain words my disappointment at his harsh treatment of them. Some muzhiks had even requested me to reprimand him, in the belief that such a reprimand, coming from an outsider, an American writer, might bring him to reason.

He was sitting at the table when I entered the house in which he lived, slowly rolling a cigarette in a piece of coarse printed paper, the empty breakfast dishes still before him. A large man he was, with heavy legs, a broad chest, a big head. His face was smooth and ruddy, except the forehead, which looked sallow and was cleft by a deep, dust-filled wrinkle. Heavy black brows that shot out like tentacles overhung his limpid, dark-brown eyes, the lower lids of which were half raised into a squint, thereby accentuating the brilliant glow of the eyeballs. Mild, calm, appealing eyes his were, disarm-

ing the visitor of hostility. A beard of several weeks' growth, ashen-grey and bristly like his hair, swept over his expansive cheeks and broad bony chin. He looked neither stern nor kind, but tired, contemplative, like a man who might have suffered a great bereavement and coveted solitude and rest.

He invited me to sit down and with that expansive hospitality which is so nobly Russian, and without even asking me whether I was hungry, he ordered the cook to bring me breakfast. I protested that I had already eaten, but he waved my protest aside by remarking that, after a walk of three-verts on such a cool morning, a man should have no difficulty in disposing of another breakfast. Then I told him who I was and the purpose of my visit. To my surprise, instead of resentment he showed eager interest in my errand and begged me to tell him frankly all that I had heard the peasants complain of—his treatment of them, the Revolution, the Soviets—everything. He assured me with a disarming smile that, however harsh and uncomplimentary my words, he should feel no offence. It was too serious a subject, this bitterness of the peasants, to be ignored because of possible hurt to personal feelings. Besides, he was a Bolshevik, and Bolsheviks were hardened folk.

Meeting with such unexpectedly cordial willingness to listen to the charges against himself, sapped my resolution to inject into my narrative words of indignant reproof. After all, the peasants might have been too one-sided in their complaints. However, I laid their state of mind before him as frankly and earnestly as I could. He listened soberly, in silence, looking straight into my eyes, forgetting even to smoke his freshly lighted fat cigarette and betraying by neither movement of hand nor expression of face his reaction to my none too pleasing words. Not once did he interrupt me, not once did he speak, except when I paused, and then only to urge me to continue and to remind me that I was not to take any pains to spare his feelings or his person, that I was to forget he was beside me, listening. So I talked away until I had exhausted my subject. Then he rose, straightened his shoulders, soldier-like, threw out his chest, and bade me follow him.

We walked along a winding muddy road that led to an outlying village, he nervously puffing his cigarette and I



continually making comments on the changes I had been observing in the countryside. But he paid little heed to my words. He was deep in thought and seemed disturbed—was he pondering on the melancholy impression that the caustic words of the muzhiks had made on me, a foreigner, an American journalist, or on the tragic setbacks of the Revolution in the village, or on a reply that would affectively dispel misgivings that may have crept into my mind as to the benefits of the Revolution? He talked only when I put questions to him, which he answered briefly and indifferently, as if he loathed to be interrupted in his meditations.

Presently we came to a large ploughed field adjoining the neighbouring village and halted. He surveyed the scene about him, and pointing to the freshly made wagon tracks at the edge of the field, he said :

‘Now then—this big field belongs to the *Sovhos*, and to save the muzhiks in this village time in going to and from their outlying fields, I gave them permission to make a new road here on our land, but with the understanding that they were not to drive cattle or any other stock over this road, for animals would scatter over the fields and stamp them down, and we should have to work them up again before seeding. See for yourself how they have lived up to their agreement!’—and he pointed to a wide stretch of furrows trampled down by cattle. ‘Now I was doing these muzhiks a favour of my own free will without any of them ever asking for it, and in return they have ruined the whole of this and the upper end of the field. In fact it is much worse up above. But let’s go back, and I’ll show you something else.’

We retraced our steps toward the house.

‘See those hens strutting around there,’ he said, pointing to a flock of fowl in the dooryard, ‘and scratching up our lawn and our garden? They are not ours. They belong to the peasants in the village. And those pigs yonder digging up the grass at the rear of the barn? They don’t belong to us, either.’ Forthwith he excused himself, picked up a stout club, ran to the pigs and angrily drove them into the road. Then he joined me again, breathing hard, his cheeks flushed, his calm eyes stirred to wrath.

‘And how many times, do you suppose,’ he continued with indignation, ‘I have asked these muzhiks to keep their pigs

and hens at home ? *Nu—*’ and he checked himself as though afraid that he might lose control of himself and blurt out a tactless phrase.

Again he bade me follow, this time in the direction of my own village. We crossed a boggy swamp, the ground sinking with a gurgling sound under our feet, the tall wet grass rubbing harshly against our legs. We came to a little stream and paused again. With his arms akimbo, he stared with surprise at the banks of the stream as though observing an irregularity he never had before noted. Then he remarked with a melancholy nod of the head and a ring of subdued fury in his voice :

“There was a log bridge here. It was here two, three days ago, and now it is gone, and the water couldn’t have carried it off ; it is too low. I know what’s become of it—some muzhiks have stolen it for fire-wood, and now we’ll have to get logs and build another bridge so that we can cross with our teams, and that will take a gang of men away from the fields for at least one day. No wonder the government is running behind every year in operating this *Sovhos*. But—*nichevo, nichevo* !”

The stream was too wide to jump across, so I took off my shoes and socks, and we waded over, he in his big boots. We had now come to a wide pasture on which grazed a herd of sleek red and black cattle. All around peasants were at work, ploughing, mowing with scythes, scattering heaps of manure by hand, loading hay. We greeted them with a loud ‘God help you,’ to which they responded with a still louder ‘Thank you,’ and turned and looked after us. Then we descended a ravine and came to a large undulating clover-field with tall vigorous stalks and pretty pink heads still touched with dew and shimmering in the sun. We followed a narrow path around the field until we come to its upper end, where for a stretch of about half an acre the grass was badly trampled and showed up, as if a herd of cattle had been feeding in it.

‘This,’ he said, speaking of the damaged clover, ‘happened only last night, and my guards have reported that it was horses from your village, of your neighbours, perhaps, which have caused this damage. And I know that the horses did not stray here accidentally ; the communal pasture of your village is too far away. I have no doubt that the peasants

themselves brought their horses here for a rich feeding. We've caught them at it before. And now let's go and look at our oat-field.'

The outs had just been cut, and an army of women and girls, barefooted, with little caps on their heads, were setting up the sheaves, singing in a chorus while working. We stopped long enough for me to snap a picture of them, an act so amusing to them that they broke into volleys of thunderous laughter. Then they crowded about me, eager, excited, hilarious, begging me to show them their pictures. They were visibly disappointed when I told them that these were not ready and would not be until I got to Moscow and had a photographer develop them. I bade them farewell and marched on with my companion to the lower end of the field, where row after row of sheaves were scattered and pulled apart. This, too, he assured me, had happened the night before—at least two big loads of grain completely destroyed by horses from a near-by village.

'Now tell me,' he asked with an earnestness in which grief was mingled with anger, 'do you suppose for an instant that the muzhik would be taking up bridges from streams, letting loose his hens and pigs and horses and cattle into these fields, if the landlord were in control of this estate? Never! The landlord knew how to keep him in his place, used a cudgel, dogs, guards; fined, arrested, jailed him. But now that the government is operating the place, he thinks he can steal and plunder with impunity. Again and again muzhiks'll say to me, "Comrade manager, why are you so strict with us? It is not your land, is it? The Soviets'll pay you anyway; so why not let us, neighbours of yours, get some good out of it?" And do you know what they mean by "good"? A chance to grab everything they can, lumber tools, crops, everything. That's the kind of creatures they are. No respect for another man's labour, no wish to co-operate with us to make life more decent and tolerable. To tell you the truth, none of us realised what a destructive creature the muzhik was until the Revolution came, smashed his fetters and set him loose; and how to deal with him is a tortuous problem. . . . Ah, come along,' he exclaimed with a sudden flash of recollection, and seizing me firmly by the arm he led me out of the ravine, walking fast and in silence up a gently rolling

hillside. When we reached the top he paused, turned in the direction of the sun, and shading his eyes with his hands, he pointed dramatically to a large stretch of white stumps gleaming in the sun and merging far away into the horizon.

'Look yonder,' he said with sorrow and aggravation, 'what a lovely forest this was once, all birch, white birch. Surely you remember it, and perhaps you, too, came here as a boy to pick mushrooms and berries and draw sap. Now there are only stumps left; the muzhiks have cut it all down, to the last sapling. And look around the countryside here, how bare it looks. There is hardly a patch of woods left, and now when a peasant needs a load of stove-wood he must travel for more than a day to get it; and worst of all, our streams are drying up, and that is always ruinous to a country, a farming country like ours.'

The ground was dry where we were, and so we stretched out on the grass to rest. A cool breeze was blowing over us, while overhead a dense flock of crows was circling noisily about.

'When my predecessor and I first came here,' he pursued as gravely as if at a confessional, 'we had courage, faith, enthusiasm. Our sole aim was to enlighten and uplift the muzhik. We talked to him as to a brother. We knew his past. We knew how cruelly he had been treated in the old days. We overlooked his wrong-doing. We exacted no penalties. Never, God forbid! He was our muzhik brother, dark, unfortunate, uncultured. When we found his horse, cow or pig on our land, we drove it off, often led or drove it to his home and begged him to watch it in the future and keep it off our lands. We made trips to near-by villages, called meetings, held discussions, explained that the purpose of our *Sovhos* was to help him rise out of his poverty and squalor, that it was to be a school for all the muzhiks in the district, that here we'd have demonstrations and classes and conferences on all possible subjects touching their welfare. That's the way we talked, and we begged him to co-operate with us, to respect our labour and the fruits of our labour in the fields as much as he did his own. Ah, how patient and forgiving we were! How we begged and exhorted! But it did not help. Day after day horses

and cows and pigs would get into our fields and we'd catch muzhiks stealing this and that. We were in despair. We didn't know what to do. We could not make up our minds to use the club. That seemed so terrible—to use a club on our own suffering brother! I tell you we were heartbroken, and yet we had to save this *Sotkhs*. That's what the Soviets had put us here for. And in the end we saw that words alone would not achieve our aim, and so we had to adopt sterner methods; we had to resort to force and punishment. Else the muzhiks here would strip every shingle from our roofs and pull every building apart, and lug off every tool and every scrap of iron we have.'

He paused, bit his lower lip with his perfect teeth and scrutinised me sharply as though in an effort to decide whether it was safe to be confidential. Then pursued.

'Yes, I may as well tell you the truth, first of all our peasant is a thief. Now don't be surprised or shocked. I know whereof I am talking, for I am only a muzhik myself, the son of the psalm-reader from the neighbouring village of T——. I have associated with our muzhik all over this big land, and, I repeat, he is a thief. He has to be watched when he goes into a store, or he is liable to steal a box of matches, a paper of sugar, a herring, a package of tobacco, or only a nail or a piece of wire. Muzhiks around here steal from each other all the time; small things, but they steal them. Only the other day in clear daylight I saw an old man sneak into his neighbour's barnyard, snatch a bundle of oats, and run back to his own place and feed the bundle to his scrawny horse. Things like that happen all the time. Wasn't I taught to steal when I was a boy? Hardly an evening but I'd row over in a canoe to the landlord's meadow, cut a heaping basketful of grass for our calf, and sneak back home; and father always praised me for it and encouraged me to do it again and again. Of course it was a matter of necessity with us. Without that stolen grass we couldn't raise our calf, just as other muzhiks couldn't keep their horses alive without stealing bundles of oats from their neighbours. Oh, I know it is poverty that's made our muzhik wayward. Poverty has impaired his feeling of respect for another person's possessions. Under-

stand me; I am not accusing him of being a degenerate. Oh, no, far from it! Poverty and squalor, *tovarishtsh*, will drive any man to stealing and worse things, too. But—that does not lessen our difficulty. We have to deal with this muzhik, who like an aged dog subornly clings to old tricks and habits. Akh, if I only knew how to rid him of his faults and vices without the need of saying a loud word. . . .’

Presently one of the assistant managers of the *Sovhos* came over, accompanied by a middle-aged peasant, barefooted, and with trousers rolled up to his knees.

‘What shall we do with his horse?’ asked the assistant manager, a broad-shouldered, rugged youth with a commanding manner. ‘We found it in the oats again, the third time.’

The peasant was a picture of despair and humility. Tears welled up in his eyes, and it seemed as though he would at any instant burst out crying. His low-hanging chin trembled visibly.

‘It’ll never happen again, my dearest,’ he promised abjectly.

‘That’s what you said last time we had your horse in the barn,’ protested the assistant manager vehemently.

‘I swear, my precious ones, it’ll never happen again. *Nu*, may my feet fall off, may I drop dead——’

The manager rudely interrupted him with a gesture of the hand.

‘Why do you swear like that, grandfather? Why do you wish so much evil on yourself? Don’t you know it is nasty to curse like that? We don’t want your feet to fall off. We don’t want you to drop dead. We don’t wish you any ill luck of any kind. Do you understand? We only want you to keep your horses off our premises, so they won’t damage our crops. How would you feel, little grandfather, if our horses had ruined your oat-field?’

The muzhik shook his head dolefully and said nothing—consciousness of guilt and pathetic helplessness written all over his flushed, sweating face.

‘Let him have his horse,’ the manager instructed the assistant, whereupon the muzhik bowed humbly and exclaimed joyously:

'Thanks, my lord !'

'What!' shouted the manager as if offended, 'my lord? Who is your lord? What sort of a lord am I to you, tell me? The muzhik stared at his interrogator with repentance.

'Don't you know,' continued the manager, 'that there are no more lords in Russia, that we are all brothers and comrades?'

The muzhik shrugged his shoulders in innocent and touching uncertainty.

'God knows,' he replied meekly, 'what kind of a new order we've got in Russia now. I am only an illiterate muzhik, and I talk and act like one. But if I have offended you, please forgive me.'

He went away, and we were alone again, lying on the grass with the sun on us and the breeze bringing to our nostrils the aroma of nectar and of freshly cut hay, and to our ears the pleasant sound of the scythe cutting into rough grass and the songs of peasants working.

'You saw this muzhik,' resumed my companion, 'such a picture of helplessness and humility. That's the way so many of them act when they appear before someone vested with authority. Akh, what serfs! He paused again, gazed meditatively into space, and bit absent-mindedly at a stalk of grass as if seeking to repress in silence his ire at the revolting subservience of the old muzhik.

'*Du,*' he presently continued, 'that is our muzhik, still servile, dishonest, brutal. Tell me, please, has a peasant a better friend in the world than his horse? Without one he is more helpless than without his hands; for then his wife and children can do the work in the field, but without a horse he is lost. Yet let him grow angry and he'll grab the nearest club and hammer away at the poor beast until he breaks the club over its bones. And let a strange dog enter his yard and he'll cast the nearest rock he can find at the poor creature, and his own dog he does not hesitate to kick with his heavy boots. No overpowering mercy for dumb beasts; no mercy at all for them. And hardly any for human beings. Steal a cucumber or a radish

from a muzhik, and he'll not hesitate to fling a rock at you. Get him angry, and in revenge he'll set your house afire at night and burn it and his house, too, and often everyone else's in the village.

'Oh, yes, did you hear what happened the other day in the village of L——, only twenty versts from here? A muzhik came home from the field for dinner. On his way back to work he saw his barn afire. He wrung his hands and cried and didn't know what to do. Then the village shepherd, a youth of about seventeen, ran into the yard with a pail of water to pour on the burning barn, and the muzhik at once suspected that it was he, the shepherd, who'd set the barn afire and had rushed in with the pail of water to cover up his deed; and without any questioning, he went to the house, grabbed a knife and plunged it into the shepherd's belly, killing him on the spot. . . . And do you see our Moscow papers like the *Pravda*? Not a day but you'll read there of trials of muzhiks who have killed people. Only yesterday I read of two trials, both of women, one accused of luring another woman to a near-by river and there killing her with an iron bar, and the other charged with murdering with an axe a friend of hers from a neighbouring village who'd stopped with her for the night. In both instances the murderesses confessed to their crimes and said that they committed them in the hope of finding money on the bodies of their victims. Think of it, women killing other women with an iron bar and with an axe—for money! . . . And now let's get up. There is something else that you must see before you leave this *Sovhos*.'

We marched back to the house, which in the old days was the residence of the Polish landlord who owned the estate. Now that it was drenched in sunlight its dilapidation was painfully manifest. Gone was the paint from porch and windows. The foundation was caving in and the smoke chimney was held in place by strands of wire. The surroundings were no less bleak. Grass and weeds had grown rank in the yard. The old flower-beds had disappeared. A stray daisy, buttercup or stalk of clover growing wild was all that was left of their former grandeur. Bones, egg-shells, rags, and other refuse lay scattered about the grounds.



We passed the artificial pond that the landlord had built when I was a boy. What tales the peasants told of the fish that the *ponieshtchik* had imported from foreign lands and introduced into the pond, fish for feasts, for healing the sick, for good luck ! Now the lake was a pool with a film of slime on the surface and with swarms of insects dancing gaily about in the sun. . . . I said nothing, but my companion divined my disappointment of the sad change of the once splendid estate, and he offered no apologies. He was sorry, he said ; sorrier than I was or ever could be. But what could anyone expect with a war and revolution sweeping over the country, and the government as yet too poor to rebuild the ruins ?

Presently we came to the loveliest spot on the *Sovhos*, indeed one of the loveliest spots I had seen in any of the scores of villages that I had visited. It was a grove, a mixture of white birch, elm, oak, fir, spread gorgeously over a rugged bit of land, a deep ravine and a gently sloping knoll separated from each other by about an acre of circular flatland. It was the only patch of woods left in the neighbourhood and happily showed none of the ravages of war or revolution. Once this grove was the private picnic-and-driving-ground of the landlord. Now the road was no longer in use and was overgrown with tall grass like a meadow and flanked on either side by long rows of slender evergreens, set close together as in a hedge. We followed the road until we came to a narrow cinder path concealed within the fold of two outbranching hedges, with the tops of the bushes merging into one another so that the space within was like a tunnel. Down the tunnel we went into a sinking ravine and then found ourselves face to face with a little chapel of red brick with a tin roof painted green and capped by a faded gilt cross. In the rear it was sheltered by a clump of overhanging trees. In the old days this chapel was the private place of worship of the landlord and his family. A priest from a neighbouring village used to come to conduct the services.

Now the chapel was a picture of desolation. The red brick fence, once topped with curved tiles, was gone ; and only the marks on the ground where it had rested remained to tell of its presence there. Not a brick was left. The doors, directly above which gleamed the

inscription, in Polish, 'O Lord, Thy Will Be Done,' were knocked out and so were the windows. The rainpipes had been lifted from the roof. Inside, the wreckage was even more complete. The floor was littered with fallen cement, whitewash, splinters, and mounds of leaves which the wind had blown in. The walls were turning black with dust. The woodwork in the altar was smashed. The marble tablets in the walls dedicated to the memory and love of the landlord's wife, who was a noted beauty in her day, and who died young, were criss-crossed with huge pencil-marks and lewd inscriptions in a coarse, shaky hand. The gallery in the back was battered loose from its fastenings, and the big iron bars by which it had been suspended had been knocked out, leaving ugly scars in the ceiling. Now the gallery hung low like the broken limb of a tree awaiting a gust of wind to carry it to the ground. Cobwebs gleamed over the altar and in the corners.

'Who did this?' I asked.

'Who do you suppose?' my companion countered solemnly, and from the shadow in his eyes I guessed the answer.

'But—that's impossible!'

'Wait, let's go outside and look at something else.'

We went around to the back of the chapel. Bees buzzed gaily in the unfolded blossoms of stray clover-stalks and rough weeds. Birds flitted twittering from tree to tree and limb to limb. Once a rabbit darted by into the bushes. My companion pointed to a heap of bricks and stones mixed with sod against the back wall of the chapel.

'This heap,' he said, 'tells an interesting tale. Here was the entrance to an underground vault where rested the remains of the landlord's parents and his wife. The landlord himself died heartbroken during the Revolution, and his body was also placed here by the side of his wife. Now listen.' He lowered his voice like a man who, narrating a ghost tale, is himself so overcome with terror that he drops his voice as if afraid of being over-heard by invisible spirits. 'When the first *Sovhos* manager came here he found the landlord's body nailed, feet up, to these two little trees. It was stripped of all clothes, and the fingers of the hands were chopped off and all the jewellery removed. Our manager quietly buried the body and covered it up with dirt and brick.'

He paused for a lengthy interval with his eyes fixed on the grave and then resumed:

'Now just imagine—the peasants round here praise the old landlord, don't they? A good man he was, they say, don't they? He had built a school-house for their children in this village. If a fire ever destroyed a poor muzhik's house, he allowed him free timber for a new one. They all say, don't they, that they wish he were here instead of me? Oh, no, don't shake your head in denial, just to be polite to me. I know them too well, comrade, these muzhiks, to deceive myself into thinking they have any affection for me. However, when the Revolution came and the landlord was dead and there was no one here to enforce order, do you see what they did? They needed bricks, iron, tin, lumber; so they came here, helped themselves to whatever they needed, and all but wrecked this chapel, and some of them didn't even hesitate to drag the old fellow from his grave, strip him of his clothes, chop the fingers off from his hands and nail him to a tree, crucify him! And religious people they are, too, or supposed to be, always in the old days running to church, in rain and blizzards, and getting down on their knees before the icons and praying and confessing their sins to the *batiushka*. Whew! It makes even an atheist like me shiver!' He smiled sardonically. 'People wonder why we revolutionaries have turned against the Orthodox Church. Ah have you heard what happened here before the Soviet gained their footing? Listen, listen! Why, right here, or only about fifteen versts from here, muzhiks, humble, simple-minded muzhiks, fathers of families, armed themselves with knives and axes and hammers, broke into the homes of their Jewish neighbours with whom they had been living on the best of terms, and slaughtered them, cut their throats, split their heads, disembowelled them, even the children, who cried and begged for mercy. Yet, are they to blame? Are they? A bandit, a Czarist general, an outcast, sent out propagandists to the villages to tell the peasants that it was their right and their duty to kill Communists and Jews and to divide among themselves the possessions of their victims. Ignorant people, ah, so cruelly ignorant; suffering people, with poorly developed ideas of right and wrong; weary and excited people, with nothing inside of them to resist the appeal of the fiendish message, they broke loose like beasts

released from a cage . . . and we caught them ; that is, our Soviets did, scores of them. They confessed and cried and looked so dumb, so lost, so hopeless. We shot them. We had to. How else could we stop these outrages ? And it was pathetic. It was heartbreaking. I was in the war, you know, all the time that it lasted, under the Czar and under the Bolsheviki. I saw men dying on all sides. I saw them hurled into the air in shreds. But never, never was I so moved and so pained as when I saw these muzhiks just before they were led away never to return.'

He drew the sleeve of his coat across his eyes, and with bowed head walked back, slowly and in silence, to the wide road in the centre of the grove, where the tall grass and the slender evergreens swayed in the breeze to the song of larks soaring invisible above. . . .

For a long interval we walked side by side, neither glancing at the other, both too full of emotion to speak. Then as though to drive away dejection he began to whistle a sprightly military tune, and it was good to hear it ; a balm it was to my own sunken spirits, making me forget that all was evil and sorrow in the world.

He paused, rolled a cigarette of home-grown tobacco in a piece of rough paper, and began to smoke.

'Don't you suppose,' he continued, 'that it hurts men when I have to scold a muzhik for lying or stealing, or fine him for feeding his horse on government land ? There are times, *tovarishtsh* American, when I feel so miserable that if I were a believer I'd go down on my knees before the icons and cry my heart out to God. I want to love my muzhik neighbour. I want to help him. I want to make him happy and understanding. I have tried kindness and comradeship. I have pleaded and exhorted. But,' he turned swiftly around and pointed feelingly in the direction of the grove we had just left, 'this is the only spot of beauty left in these mud-lands of ours. And do you realise that if we had not kept guards out there day and night, nothing would have been left of it by this time, not a stick of wood, not a spear of grass ? Again and again we have caught muzhiks pasturing their horses there. And you saw what they did to that chapel, ignorant fools that they are. Why, think !'—and his eyes sparkled—'we could turn this grove into a public park and in summer children

from all the villages could come here with competent instructors and play and study and hear stories, oh, not those stupid ghost-stories on which I was fed when I was a boy, but stories of the great heroes of the world, of Marx, Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg and our own Ilyitch (Lenin).

'Here our children could learn to understand nature, flowers, trees, birds; the sky, the stars, the seas, the mountains. Here they could be taught to love all the poor peoples in the world, all of them, white and black and red and the others, and all living things, too, and then they wouldn't be stealing birds' nests and killing birds with stones as peasant boys used to in my boyhood days. And Sundays we could all come here, with our families, have picnics, lectures, dances theatrical performances, concerts. And then we'd all be happy and learn to know each other and the world, and strive for the peace and the happiness of all poor mankind.' And after a thoughtful pause he added, 'We shall come to that yet. We shall. Only give us time.'

We rounded a bend in the road and came face to face with a little man with bare muddy feet, a sweaty shirt sticking to his back, and a tangled beard shielding his face like a mask. He was driving a scrawny roan horse which drew a steaming load of manure. He removed his hat and bowed. My companion turned and gazed intently after him.

'Look at this little man,' he said dramatically, 'who never takes a bath, who doesn't know what the sun is, what the stars and moon are, what makes rain and lightning. What hope is there for him? Tell me, you have been away from this country eighteen, nineteen years, and now that you are back, doesn't it make you sick to see the muzhiks living as in the old days in the same little huts with their pigs and hens and working their gardens and their fields in the same old back-breaking, unproductive manner? What hope is there for them? They are bitter because the Soviets haven't divided this estate. But supposing they had, and each muzhik got three, four, five, or more *dessiatins* of land. Then what? Supposing they persisted in their old methods of cultivation? In a few years they would be back where they are now,

as poor, as dirty, as bitter. They don't understand, these muzhiks of ours, that their salvation lies in their adoption of new methods of tillage and learning new and more wholesome ways of living; and that's what the Soviets want to teach them, that's why they have turned this estate into a *Sovhos*, a model farm, on which we can show the muzhik how to grow cucumbers and cabbage and barries and fruit, how to build modern houses, barns, cellars, and how to make cheese and butter without wasting milk and cream as he now does. We are planning to introduce thoroughbred breeds of horses, cattle, hens, geese, sheep. We have two Belgian stallions coming here in a few days, and we hope to get several thoroughbred bulls soon and put them at the service of the muzhiks in this neighbourhood. You see, then, what we are trying to do in this *Sovhos*? We are trying to teach the muzhik first how to work with profit and pleasure to himself, and then how to live in joy and happiness. Nobody ever taught him these things. Nobody ever treated him as an equal, neither the Orthodox priests nor the officials. That's why he is so dark and beastly. Nobody, for example, ever told him that if he had shrunken rye for seed it was useless to put it into the ground. Instead he was made to believe that if he went to the priest and had the seed sprinkled with holy water, he would have a good crop. Nobody ever taught him how to preserve moisture in the ground so that he would be protected against a drought. Instead he was made to believe that if he would parade around the fields with the priest and icons, rain would come on his parched land. But we are going to change all that. We are going to free him from the dominance of the priest and the Church and superstition. We are going to prove to him how ruinous religion has been to him. We are going to encourage him to build a new school-house, instead of a new church, to support another teacher or community nurse instead of a priest, to read Marx and Ilyitch and books on science, machinery, electricity, instead of the Bible and the prayer-books. That's what we are going to do.'

The dinner-bell was now ringing clear and loud, and from all the fields men and women started for their homes, boys and girls, exuberant with health and life, chasing one another, shouting, singing, a happy accompaniment to the hymn of hope which this Red Landlord was chanting.

'*Nichevo*,' he exclaimed, casting his eyes at the sky and at the far-stretching fields and at me, 'I believe in the muzhik. He has great gifts, and some day we shall be as great as America; nay, greater; for we shall have no rich and no poor in our country, no strong and no weak. Come to us, twenty, thirty years from now, *tova-rishtsh*. Come and bring some of your American friends with you. I shan't be here. I don't expect to live long. This life of worry and bustle and excitement is sapping my health. Look at my hair, how grey it is, and at my face, how worn; and I am still young in years, only twenty-nine. But no matter! When I am gone others will be around here, muzhiks like myself, only wiser than I am. They'll show you the country. You'll remember me then, and you'll say, "There was a peasant—they called him in contempt the Red Landlord—poor and unlearned he was, but he knew life, he knew Russia, and he was a true prophet."'

## CHAPTER XII

## A NEW WOMAN

As before saw her at that stormy mass-meeting in the village which forms the subject of a preceding chapter. She was leaning over a brush fence with her arms crossed on her ample bosom, listening intently to the vehement talk. Her manner and her dress had set her apart from the other girls. She wore a lavender dress of factory-made cloth, white stockings, low shoes, and she had a handkerchief with a blue border wrapped round her wrist. None of the other girls had handkerchiefs at all. She was short, plump, with a graceful head, a smooth face tanned but lacking the swarthy lustre of the peasant girl that works daily in the open field. It was evident that she was city-bred or else the daughter of a landlord, reared on a large estate in leisure and refinement. I wondered who she was and what she was doing in the village. She looked to be over twenty.

I saw her again on the day at the village dance, where she seemed a favourite with the "intellectual" boys. Again I was aware of the contrast between her and the other

girls. She did not hop and did not stamp the floor violently with her feet as she whirled round in a waltz or in a polka, and she neither giggled nor laughed boisterously like the other girls. Her speech was not the traditional dialect of our province but a pure Russian, and her voice rang with the melodious languor of the well-bred Russian woman.

In response to my inquiry, Nikifor, the chairman of our village Soviet, told me in a whisper bits of her history. Indeed she was no daughter of a former nobleman but of a muzhik, he said, from the village of M——, directly across the swamp from our village. But she was born in the city of Kiev and lived there until the Revolution came. Her father had been an officer in the army. When the Revolution broke out he lost his job, his property, his savings, his home, and fled with his family to the village of his birth, where he had two dessiatins of land which in his absence his brother had been cultivating. At first his brother protested his claim to the land, saying that he had forfeited his right to it by virtue of his long absence from the village and his long service in the army of the monarch and the bourzhuis. But neighbours interceded for him, and finally he settled on his old allotment. She, Manka, was a graduate of the gymnasium and was teaching school in winter. . . .

I became acquainted with her during a dance when there was a change of partners and I happened to be paired off with her. We at once fell into an animated conversation. With that charming frankness which is so characteristically Russian, she told me how she came to live in the village, her facts being substantially the same as those Nikifor had narrated to me. 'And now,' she remarked in the course of our conversation, 'we are real muzhiks.' I rather admired the spirit in which she spoke these words. There was no note of irony in her voice, no regret, no false pride—only good-natured resignation.

Subsequently I called at her home several times. They lived in a hut, no different from the others in the village. It was newly built, of logs, with a thatch roof, and was not yet painted either inside or outside. What distinguished it from the other huts were the windows, large and always clean, admitting ample light and sunshine, and the floor, which was not of sod but of boards. The furnishings were



nothing to boast of—a few chairs, two beds, a large mirror, a bureau, a few pictures in black frames on the front wall, all of which they had managed to rescue from the wreckage of the Revolution and bring with them to the new home. The table was of their own make, the usual peasant table, large, with a flat top and heavy bulging legs. It was standing in the corner directly beneath the icons, as in every muzhik household. Their house was always clean, which testified to the industriousness of the women, for it was no light task to preserve cleanliness with mud and squalor all about them on the outside and with a large family—eight of them—huddled in one living-room.

They represented an aspect of life in the village that had a quality all its own, different from that of the other peasants. After all, they had come from the city, where they had been accustomed to comforts and cultured associations. To have been thrust suddenly into the village with its mud and toil, its calm and monotony, must have been an upsetting experience. Still they were philosophers, all of them, even Mitya, who was only thirteen. He posed as a Communist, boasted of it loudly and joyously. He knew by heart all the Bolshevik songs and loved to sing them in the presence of strangers. With childish bravado he denounced the bourzhuis and the priests and proclaimed his disbelief in God and in the hereafter, all of which greatly amused the father, but seriously disturbed the mother, who was of Polish origin and a pious Roman Catholic.

The father was about forty-five years of age, square-shouldered, with a rugged face, sparkling blue eyes, and an aristocratic moustache with sharp needle-like points twirled upward. He was one of those rare souls who do not take adversity to heart and who can laugh at fate despite its lacerating blows. The shift from a life of ease and luxury in the city to one of toil and penury in the village seemed to affect neither his body nor his disposition. He was always jovial, always full of talk and warmth, always eager to listen to a good jest and still more eager to tell one, and when he laughed he threw his head back and his body shook.

In marked contrast was his wife, a tall, gaunt, haggard woman with abnormally wide eyes that told a story of grief. Born in the city, the village palled on her—the

houses, the work, the surroundings, the neighbours—every thing. Try as hard as she might, neither in body nor in mind could she acclimate herself to the new life. 'Yes,' he remarked to me once as we were sauntering in the meadow back of the barn, 'the little mother is low in health. I am afraid she won't be with us long.' She was failing noticeably all the time.

But Volodya, the son, a tall blond youth of seventeen, had the abandon and the vivacity of his father. His boots were tattered—soles worn threadbare, exposing the bare toes—and he had no means of repairing them or of acquiring a new pair. His grey blouse a relic of better times seemed as if made of coarse patches. Yet he uttered no word of complaint, as though clothes were as extraneous to his happiness as an automobile or an aeroplane. In the gymnasium he had cultivated a passion for astronomy and geography, and his dream was to be an explorer and spend his life in the far North, in lands and seas that no white man had yet traversed. There in the cold North, he poetised, lay the great adventure and the great romance of the world, and some day he hoped to quaff deep of both. As for other things—settling down, building a home, planning a future—a realist like himself just could not be bothered. He talked with the fervour, conviction, and purposefulness of a mature person. But then—in Russia boys and girls acquire at an early age the earnestness of maturity.

It was Manka, however, who stirred my deepest curiosity. She had the vivacity of her father and a dash of her mother's gloom. She was more sensitive and more cultured than either of her parents or than her brother, Volodya. She had a passion for books and music and an abundant life. An affectionate soul, she always spoke to her mother in endearing words, calling her *mamochka* (little mother), *milenskaya* (most beloved), and stroked her hands and kissed her. The sight of any act of cruelty filled her with revulsion. More than once I saw her go over to boys and girls who were amusing themselves by throwing sticks and stones at stray dogs and cats and reprimand them for their lack of feeling for dumb beasts. Once she and her mother had been dressing a little pig, and when she was through with her work and saw the spots of blood on her hands, she shook her head

with a grimace of terror and disgust and vowed that never again would she permit herself to smirch her hands with the blood of a living thing. . . .

There was the melancholy glamour of an autumn haze about her, lovely to behold as it rolls over the hills, yet holding within its fold the blight of frost. Outwardly she seemed cheerfully reconciled to her new life. At times she sparkled with gaiety, laughed and jested and sang merry ditties. Yet I wondered if it was not all assumed. After all, life had dealt unkindly with her, had torn her from the old joys, comforts, diversions, and flung her into the abysmal wretchedness of a far-away peasant village. Now she had to trudge in the mud, carry big pails of water to the house, bring in heavy armfuls of wood, drive the pigs to pasture, clean stalls, and do other heavy chores about the house and farm. Was she really as cheerfully resigned as she appeared to be? I never had heard her utter any complaints, yet I felt that her outward sprightliness was mere pretence, a mask over a deep, gnawing ache, which she was heroically struggling to subdue. . . . I had met many girls like her in other places, girls and women of culture and refinement, working in children's homes, in schools, in offices, outwardly reconciled to their new life, but inwardly smarting under their burden of repressions and pining for the opportunity to escape from Russia.

One day as I was returning from a distant village, I stepped in to see Manka. She was all alone at home, sitting by the window and embroidering a shawl. It was hot in the house and cool outdoors; so I suggested that we go for a stroll. She readily assented.

We followed a lane that dipped into the valley, where lay the river or what was once a river. Women with their skirts lifted above their knees were at work there, washing linen, soaking flax and cleaning wheat, and groups of children were scampering about, yelling and screaming with joy. We crossed the little tottering bridge with no railings and turned into another lane that crawled snake-like to the top of a knoll and led to the cemetery.

Like everything else in the countryside, the cemetery had not escaped the blasting hand of the war and the Revolution. The fence was gone, dragged away bit by bit for firewood, and stock often strayed in and browsed amidst the graves,

the pigs, energetically digging up the sod and giving it the melancholy look of a once lovely garment now soiled and tattered. In peasant cemeteries tall wooden crosses mark the graves, but here many of these were missing; they had been pulled up and burned. The fruit trees—cherry, apple, pear, plum—that flourished luxuriantly in my boyhood days, were now stunted and dried up. . . .

We sauntered leisurely about, commenting on the wreckage and desolation we were observing, and discussing the new conceptions of life and death and human destiny that the Revolution had wafted into the village, especially among the young people. She asked if I remembered the old peasant custom of taking eggs and gruel and loaves of freshly baked bread to the graves of departed relatives. Some folk were still practising the custom, but nowadays no sooner would they deposit their bundles of food on the graves than groups of boys would rush forward and grab them and run off to have a picnic. And in old days—ah! no boy would ever dare touch these gifts to the dead, for fear that the ghosts would come in the night and mete out vengeance. . . . And in old days no boy ever dared pick the fruit off the trees in the cemetery, and now, well—boys did not even wait for the fruit to ripen. . . . They feared nothing. They laughed at tales of ghosts and devils. . . .

We reached the summit of the knoll and sat down. Below us lay the fields of the village, now teeming with men, women, horses, immersed in heavy toil. A thrilling sight it was—these sturdy muzhiks taking advantage of the bright weather, so rare last summer, gathering hay, harvesting oats with sickles, ploughing for fall rye, scattering manure by hand, and singing with care-free abandon. It stirred in me a feeling of reverence for them, for their boundless patience, courage, heroism—the brute heroism of a race that has withstood the blight of autocracy, plague, poverty, ignorance, sloth, and possessed the strength to toil away at their daily tasks and the will to sing of hope and joy. What an unconquerable creature the Russian muzhik is!

Manka interrupted my meditations.

'I want to ask you something,' she said with a smile of wistful curiosity.

'Yes,' I returned, eager with anticipation.

'Tell me,' she said, 'don't you sort of—pity me ?'

'Why,' I stammered, trying to think of a tactful explanation.

'You do pity me, then ?' she insisted with charming positiveness, and after a pause she added, 'you really needn't. There is no reason why you should. If you knew me well, you never would.'

She averted her head and grew pensive, a playful smile on her parted lips. With her hands she was absent-mindedly plucking up bunches of grass and tossing them over her shoulders, spraying her hair and her dress with bits of green which added a mellowness to her features.

'*Mamochka* was saying the other day,' she pursued, without lifting her head and continuing to play with the grass, 'that she thought you were very, very sorry for me, and that you might write about me as of one who is very, very unhappy. . . .'

'Why—' I started to explain myself, but she interrupted me.

'I am quite happy now,' she said, looking at me with her big brown eyes ; 'at times I am more than happy. Of course I have my moments of dejection, but so has everyone. On the whole I am quite content.' She paused and began to hum.

'Still,' I ventured, 'it must have been quite a struggle for you to reconcile yourself to the new surroundings.'

'It was a struggle,' she rejoined, 'and I may as well tell you about it. You will understand me then perhaps a little better than you do now,' and she smiled as though to assure me that she did not mean to be facetious.

'When we first came here,' she began, '*mamochka* and I were heartbroken. We thought we should die. The dirt, the monotony, the muzhiks, how they palled on us ! Imagine us, a family of eight, coming from a lovely home and thrust into a log hut, into one room—to eat and sleep, and cook, and dress, all in one room, and what a room ! Bare walls, a bare ceiling, ugly windows, a horrible brick oven, and furniture such as our janitor in Kiev would laugh at. It was crushing. But there was no escape. *Mamochka* still feels

as though she were in a torture-chamber. The little angel ! She is fading so fast ! Poor, poor, *mamóchka* !

She averted her face and wiped her eyes, then looked up again, smiling as if in apology for having lost control of herself.

‘Let me start my story at the very beginning,’ she said, ‘so that you will know all the details. Though my father is a muzhik, born in this village, he is a very bright man. He became an officer in the army, and I was reared in the city, reared falsely, outrageously. I never did any work. I did not have to. We had two servants, and they did everything, even helped me with my toilet. We lived in a lovely apartment with rugs, curtains, mirrors, elegant furniture, and nice people were all the time coming to our house, going with us to dances, to theatres, to concerts, to skating-rinks. Life was one continuous holiday for me. But I was ignorant, fearfully ignorant. True, I was a distinguished student at the gymnasium, I read books, attended lectures, associated with people who had been in the gymnasium and the university, but I was ignorant, preposterously ignorant. What did I know of life, man, the world, ideals, purposes, outside of my own immediate vanities ? Nothing. I was a *barina* (gentlewoman), a *beloruchka* (lady of leisure). Labour was a disgrace in my silly old world. I was the daughter of a muzhik ; yet I never thought of that. I always thought of myself as the daughter of an officer in the army, a person of privilege. I disdained to associate with people below my station in life. It seems so funny to me now ; yet in the old days a maid, for example, a janitor, a chimney-sweep, a coachman, were not people to me ; that is, not real people, but only creatures, coarse, unclean, with no imagination, no sense of beauty ; creatures who merely lived, worked, slept, ate, got married, had children, and died.’

Presently an elderly muzhik passed by on foot with a sackful of hay on his shoulder and his face dripping with sweat. We hailed him with a ‘good-day,’ and he responded heartily and waved his hand.

‘In the old days,’ she said, following the muzhik with her eyes, ‘I should have thought a man like that with his bare feet, tousled hair, smelly clothes, just a dirty creature. He would have given me the creeps.’

‘And now ? ’ I ventured to ask.

‘Now,’ she replied, ‘I don’t notice his ragged clothes or his bare feet. Now he is just an unfortunate soul struggling to live as well as he can. My heart goes out in sympathy to him and to men like him. . . . But to return to my old life. You see I lived in a world that was hollow and silly. My girl friends and I always fretted over trivial things. . . . the glance or the smile of a man . . . the colour of our new ribbons . . . the shape of our shoes . . . our proficiency in the latest dance-steps . . . the newest popular romance . . . the latest society scandal . . . we had no higher things to think about, because we had no higher things to live for. We had no thought and no care for anything or anybody but ourselves, our round of daily pleasures. So at first when we were driven from our lovely home in Kiev and had to flee to this village for refuge, we were all broken up, especially *mamochka* and I. I didn’t think I could survive the first winter. Life was so hopeless, so tormenting. I had nothing to live for any more, absolutely nothing. None of my old aims and purposes could I hope to fulfil, and I had acquired no new ones. My education was at an end. I had no hope of continuing it. I couldn’t possibly go to the university. My social activities were at an end. I had no friends—none that I cared to associate with. I couldn’t endure the *muzhiks*, neither the old nor the young. I felt like running out of the house every time our neighbours came to visit us. They seemed not human beings but beasts, monsters, coarse, smelly, horrid. They never even wiped the mud off their feet when they entered the house, and they seemed so preposterously indiscreet, always prying into our most minute privacies. I never called on any of our neighbours. I couldn’t tolerate their filth—it was choking. Oh, how I yearned for the old days, the old friends, the old pastimes, the old comforts and the old frivolities . . . and—well—there was Petya, a cadet in the officers’ school. . . . I was young then, only seventeen, and Petya was so popular with all the girls. *Mamochka*, how I longed for him in the first days of our sojourn here ! Hardly a day but I would saunter out into the highway and walk and walk for *versts* and *versts* and gaze off toward the horizon, expecting him to leap out on his black horse—he was a cavalryman, you know—and in his gorgeous uniform. Night after night I lay awake thinking of him and of Kiev and of our walks and talks and plans. I grew

desperate . . . I hated myself, the village, life, everything. I didn't want to live. I didn't see any use or any joy in living in a village with not a single nice person for a neighbour, with mud and gloom all about us. So I resolved to escape, to run back to Kiev . . . to old friends, to Petya. . . . Of course it was a silly resolution. I didn't know what or whom I could find in Kiev after those months of revolution. But I didn't think of that. I felt I had to run away, and Kiev was the only place I could think of. So once when I went with father to the market-place in the town of S—, I escaped. I walked and walked until I came to a railroad station. I had no ticket, I had no money, I had no food. But I didn't care. I knew I could get black bread from muzhiks, and as for railroad fare, well, you know in Russia it is easy to steal rides on trains. And that was what I did. I hid among the baggage and rode along. But the conductor discovered me. An old man he was, with a kind face. I began to cry and begged him to let me go on. He asked where I wanted to go, and I told him. Then he sat down and talked to me in a fatherly way. He scolded me for running away from home. He told me how heartbroken *mamochka* would be. He made me cry. I realised how foolish I was and asked him to help me get back home. At the next station I got off. He procured a return ticket for me, and in less than two days I was back in the village. Of course everybody scolded me. *Mamochka*, Volodya, father, even Mitya, who fell on me with his fists and rained blows on me for being such a bad girl.

'I was happy to be back, indescribably happy. It seemed to me that I never should want to be separated from my family again, never. And somehow the old longings and old associations were fading away. I don't know just what it was that happened to me. Only I felt I was being reborn, remade inside. The attempt to run away had wakened a new being in me.

'I then became acquainted with some of the boys in the Soviet. They talked to me. They gave me books to read. They invited me to lectures, mass-meetings, parties. They offered me a position as teacher in a Soviet school. A new world was beginning to open to me. New ideas were filtering into my mind. I saw in life something beyond myself, my immediate wishes and pleasures. I read and



read, talked and talked, argued and argued, and nights I lay awake thinking and wondering. It was all so new to me, these new ideas, new friends, new interests. I was stirred. The village, the muzhiks, even the mud in the street, assumed a new colour and a new meaning for me. I began to perceive the why and wherefore of it all. I began to forget myself, to grow less and less self-conscious. I ceased to mind my old clothes. I ceased to worry about the lack of cosmetics. Going to a party was something more than making an impression on Petya and his friends. Well, under the spur of these new ideas and interests, I regained my composure. I grew cheerful again. I craved to be active. I helped in the house. I aided father and Volodya with their chores. I actually began to enjoy feeding pigs and milking cows and turning stock out to pasture. Getting my hands dirty was no longer an agony, not even an inconvenience. Oh, everything was changing, everything inside and outside of me.

‘And I liked the boys at the Soviet and the other youths who used to come to the meetings and the lectures. They were crude and unschooled, but they were so sincere, so strong-willed, so cheerful. They lived not for themselves but for a social purpose. In fact they never thought of their personal comforts—most of them didn’t—of how they looked, how they dressed, how much work they did, where they had to go, whom they had to face. Oh, of course, I couldn’t accept their communism. I cannot now. Maybe it is because at heart I am still bourzhui! They tell me I am. Perhaps they are right. I never expect to be a Communist, and there is something else about these boys that grieves me; they hate the bourzhuis too much. They think nothing of hurting their feelings. They look on them as on useless creatures. I have talked myself hoarse arguing on this point. I have told them that if they are real Marxists then they must consider man the product of his circumstances, his materialist environment, and the bourzhui is no more to blame for his state of mind, for his past deeds or misdeeds, than the proletarian is for his. Why, for example, was I to blame for thinking that a labourer, a maid, was a creature without a soul? But they laugh at me. They say I am a sentimentalist, at heart still an *ntelligent*, with perverted notions of sympathy. They

believe that a priest, for example, or a bourzhui, deserves no pity. Inconsistent, aren't they? Terribly so, and at times I grow furious with them for their lack of regard for the sensibilities of people they do not like. . . .

'Still, they are so courageous. They have ideas. They are all the time talking about building new schools and new playgrounds and organising new social centres and educating the muzhiks. So many of them are so strong and determined and so jolly and good-hearted. And they read books and arrange lectures and study all the time, and mingling with them has changed me, changed me so completely that I sometimes wonder if I am the same Manka that used to live in Kiev—that foolish, vain, sentimental, pathetic little girl who cared for nothing, nothing in the world except her own whims and pleasures. . . .'

She paused to adjust the kerchief on her head which the wind had tipped backward.

'Then,' she resumed, 'I began to draw close to our neighbours. I went to their homes. I didn't seem to mind their squalor. I hardly noticed the pigs rooting around the floor and grunting. I was no longer repulsed by the sight of a whole family eating with their hands from the same earthen dish. I became interested in their problems, in their worries and needs. I perceived how unenlightened and dark-minded they were, and yet how simple and kindly and hospitable, and I was seized with a sudden yearning to do something, to scrub the dirt and the squalor out of their homes, to teach them to read and write, and to explain to them the need of fresh air and sunshine in the home. Oh, I just wanted to make them clean and enlightened and happy. . . .

'Especially did I grow interested in the girls. To me it seems that theirs is the most tragic lot in the village—it certainly couldn't be more tragic. Look at them when they are young, how pretty and jolly they are! Gay, beautiful spirits they love to go to parties and festivals, to sing and dance, to laugh and play pranks on each other and on the boys! And then they marry and wilt like flowers in the dark. They marry so young, so fearfully young.' She broke off and laughed as though reminded of an amusing incident.

'It would divert you,' she pursued, smiling, 'if you ever heard our neighbours talk about me. You see I am twenty-two, and they think I am woefully old. They are all the time arranging matches for me. They have even got my poor mother worried. . . . Why, one of our neighbours said to me the other day that I should have had a family long ago. . . . It is amusing to hear them discuss me. Of course I pay no heed to them. . . . However, take the peasant girl. She marries young. She has never been outside the village, unless to visit another village in the neighbourhood.' She knows nothing of the world. She never reads anything. She knows nothing of love. She talks of it with a kind of light-hearted earnestness, but she has no conception of its meaning, its purpose, its power of exalting the individual. Unlettered, unread, inexperienced, she mistakes a flitting physical passion for love, and how flitting it is she finds out soon enough. After marriage her life becomes a deadly routine, an endless round of toil and worry and dullness. She ceases to go to the parties of the young people; she is not wanted there after she is married. That is the custom of our peasants. Occasionally she will join the older people in a spree on Sundays and holidays, and they, the older people, like nothing so much as getting drunk. For the rest, she drudges day and night. Evenings in winter her husband goes off to a gathering to talk, argue, sing, listen to stories. On Sundays he hitches up the horse and drives to town. He sees new fields, new faces, hears new voices, new words. But she has to choke in her filthy hovel, always washing, scrubbing, spinning, weaving, sewing, and—caring for the babies! And she has so many of them. Poor thing! Scarcely is one weaned than another is born. And she has to be up nights, too—the babies wake her. They never wake him, the husband. He sleeps in peace, and if he does wake it is only to curse the wife for not having quiet in the house. . . . And have you observed the way the muzhik woman tends her baby, binding it in rough linen so the poor thing can hardly breathe, and feeding it the disgusting chewings of bread or potato. When I first saw a woman here putting into the mouth of the baby bread that she had chewed up, I shivered; I almost vomited. It makes me shiver even to think of it. A baby is a delicate thing,

you know, has to be washed and cleaned and nursed with infinite care, else it falls ill and dies. . . . No wonder so many peasant babies die before they reach their first birthday. . . . Oh, these interminable rounds of epidemics that sweep our villages—the waste of it, the pity, the agony that follows in their wake . . . you have no idea how ghastly were the ravages of the recent typhoid epidemic . . . and it is all so needless. If only the muzhiks would learn to keep clean, to leave their deadly home-brew alone, and to eat and drink as men should !

‘Heavens ! Look at our women when they are thirty—beauty gone, gaiety gone—misshapen, shrivelled, flat-chested creatures, irritable, morbid, given to swearing and cursing their husbands, their neighbours, their children, and beating them, too, without mercy, with fists and feet and clubs, and often crippling them for life . . . women, mothers ! God, how terrible . . . *nu*, tell me, please, what sort of a life is that ? No rest, no pleasure, no diversion, no inspiration, no love, no sympathy—nothing but toil and quarrels and beatings . . . of course our men beat their wives with fists and whips . . . beastly creatures ! And the wives don’t hesitate to strike back and strike hard. Sometimes when our men scold their women they call them hags, and I have often thought that the word fits them well, that many of our peasant women are mere hags, drained of the beauty, sweetness, glory, with which they glowed when they were girls, and turned into coarse, callous, sharp-tongued creatures . . . yes, such is the lot of our peasant women. It is the lot of a slave, and it must be changed. The muzhik girl must be taught to understand herself and the world. Her *I* must be awakened, so that she can come to regard herself as somebody, not a mere drudge but a human being, a woman, with a life all her own and entitled to her share of joy and inspiration. Oh, it is a colossal task, I tell you, to redeem the muzhik woman . . .’

She sighed and grew silent. As she sat there on the grass, her hands playing with a daisy that she had freshly plucked, her smooth face flushed and twitching slightly with emotion, her limpid eyes sparkling with tenderness and mercy, she was to me a picture of perpetual loveliness, a symbol of something gentle and warm and eternally comforting.

'So you really think you have found your life-work in the village?' I asked.

'Yes, I have, I am sure of it now. I have found my life-work, and I have found myself too, and I am really quite happy. In winter during the day I teach school, and in the evenings I hold meetings with girls and women and sometimes with men, and we discuss everything we can think of. I read stories, poems, plays, newspapers, and make comments and invite remarks on the various happenings of the day. I have started a chorus and once a week we have rehearsals and sing new and old songs. I am especially eager to draw the older women into these diversions. They are the loneliest of the lonely! Day and night they toil, and they never see anything but this village and the muzhiks—nothing to freshen their minds and buoy their hearts. And next winter, with the help of one of the other teachers in this district, I hope to produce a play here with the muzhiks themselves taking the various parts—a real play, too, one of the very best in our literature, Ostrovsky's *The Tempest*. A stirring drama it is; perhaps you have read it? I have told the muzhiks what it is about, have even recited to them certain passages, and they like it and are quite excited about being in the cast. Oh, *tovarishstsh*, now I have something to think about, something to look forward to all the time, and—well—I am happy.'

### CHAPTER XIII

### THE LAST OF THE HAMLETS

THE Revolution had crushed Manka, but it had also redeemed her, had thrown open to her the portals of a new world and a new joy. Whenever I think of her I unconsciously associate her with Turgenev's Liza and Yelena, women who could lose themselves in the passion of a great love or a great cause. Manka, even more than my cousin than Vassil and Antosh, the two youthful leaders in our village, is the symbol of the spiritual triumph of the Revolution, its power to elevate the individual to a life above self.

But what shall I say of Yekim, once so alert, so ambitious and now a self-exiled recluse, beaten down by the Revolution into hopeless apathy to man, nature, life?

Yekim was an *intelligent*, an intellectual, and——

Consider the Russian *intelligent* as he was before the Revolution. Of course he was opposed to the monarchy. He believed in free thought, in free speech, in popular education, in social and political equality. He may have cherished certain racial antipathies, but he was tactful enough to keep these to himself. A free thinker or agnostic, he prided himself on his belief in freedom of worship and defended the Jew, the Roman Catholic, the Protestant with equal ardour.

He loved life—comfort, society, artistic and intellectual diversions. He loved to entertain friends in lavish style, and to hold long converse with men and women of culture and taste on the big problems of the world, on music, art, literature. He loved concerts, the theatre, the ballet. Above all he loved his home. It was his sacred temple, and his wife and children were the divinities in this temple. With what hope and joy he followed the growth of his daughter Zhenya and his son Sasha! He helped his wife supervise their studies, their recreations, their associations. Of course he was broad-minded; he believed in social equality. Still, his son was his son, his daughter was his daughter, superior to the boy and girl whose parents were culturally or financially on a lower rung in the social ladder. He was insistent that his Zhenechka (little Zhenya) and his Sashenka (little Sasha) should play only with youths of their own station in life, most insistent on that.

He was a sentimentalist *par excellence*, loved to have his emotions stirred and played on. He was easily enraptured, easily moved to pity or sorrow by a book, a play, a song, the sight of human woe. He was kind to friends, generous to the poor, never refusing them favours or aid. Charity was as integral a part of his character as love of home.

He loved the masses, so he always proclaimed. He did not really know them intimately; he had no way of knowing them. He lived in the city, or on a large estate, and they dwelt in the villages and in the slums, and he seldom went to either place. Of course he saw them often enough, in the streets and on the roads, unkempt, bedraggled, smelly, muzhiks and proletarians. But he had heard and

read much of them. They were ignorant, oppressed, humble, kindly. So Turgenev said and Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky and Chernyshevsky and Gorky and Chirikov and the others who had written of 'the people' with compassion and understanding. He lamented their miseries and prayed for their liberation. Their darkness was to him the blackest blot on Russia's escutcheon. But—they were people to be pitied, uplifted, served—not to invite to one's home, to take into one's confidence. After all they were inferior, rough-spoken, dark-minded. . . .

He always did believe in revolution, talked about it, dreamed about it, yearned for its coming, for he believed in the liberation of 'the people,' not, however, at the expense of his position, his comforts, his social prestige, his pride, his dignity, certainly not at the expense of his Zhenechka and his Sashenka. Indeed not. They had to have their lovely home, their maids, janitors, tutors; their morning samovar, their evening samovar. They had to go to the gymnasium and the university and wear pretty uniforms. Of course uniforms smacked of autocracy, officialdom, and he loathed both. But then—Sashenka did look so handsome in his blue uniform with the silver buttons in front and in the back, and Zhenechka was the envy of the other girls in her white and blue frock and her hat with the green band about the crown. And when they walked in the streets people saw that they were students, looked up to them with respect and envy and paid them homage. . . .

An ideal and idyllic life his was, despite Czarism and autocracy, except, of course, when he manifested his humanitarianism too openly and provoked the suspicion of officials. Even then, unless he was an active revolutionary, he was not severely molested. He was warned, and he was cautious afterwards.

Then the Revolution came, swept on him with the fury of a hurricane. He had not expected such a revolution. He was unprepared for it. The revolution that he had dreamed of and hoped for was something like the visit of the legendary Jewish Messiah—a power or a spirit to bless the righteous and punish the wicked, and, of course, he held himself to be supremely righteous, entitled to a select position, to leadership, to trust. Had he not always loved the people and prayed for their deliverance? . . .

Instead, he was beaten into submission, cast into the gutter. He lost his business, his savings, his position, his home, often his library and his furniture. Gone were his safety and security now. Gone were tutors, janitors, maids. Gone were the pretty student uniforms, the elaborate dinners, the gatherings of genial friends, the theatre parties. His wife now had to go to market and carry her own bundles. She had to do her own cooking and scrubbing and mending, and his Zhenechka, whom he had hoped to save from the humility and disgrace of menial labour, Zhenechka who was so tender, so esthetic, who had her cocoa and her soft-boiled eggs served in bed every morning with mamma standing near and pleading as if with a little girl that she eat, eat all that the maid had brought her, lovely, gracious Zhenechka, now had to wear an apron and wield a paring-knife, a broom, a mop, like the lowliest of the lowly. And he himself was pushed into oblivion, trodden on like a doormat.

He hated the Revolution. To him it was the most beastly thing that happened in the world, in history. It was destroying him and others like him, the best people in Russia, the people who had the capacity, the energy, the wisdom, the training, the skill, to rescue the nation from its blighting chaos. He raged. He cursed. He wailed. Loudly he proclaimed to the world that Russia was being bled, choked. He hailed Denikin. He hailed Kolchak. No, he was no monarchist. He abjured autocracy. He clung to his faith in his own superior intelligence and in democracy. But he would welcome anybody who would smash the infernal Soviets—the French, the English, the Americans, anybody, except, of course, the ‘dastardly’ Poles, anybody who would restore order, regularity, and bring back the old income, the old home, the old comforts. . . .

But in vain. His cry remained unheeded. The past was beyond recall. He had to live in this mad Red world, with burly, uncultivated, rough-hewn and rough-spoken cobblers, janitors, longshoremen, directing the destiny of his beloved and ruined Russia, while he with his training, his wisdom, his humanitarianism, was brushed aside, mocked, scorned, hounded. . . .

Now he is seeking peace with the Revolution. His sabotage has only rebounded on his own head in the form



of fresh repressions. Now he has proclaimed his repentance and his willingness to put himself at the service of the Revolution. There is no other escape for him. But the powers of the Revolution are wary of him, are slow in admitting him into their fold, for they know that, however loyal he may be in his professions, in his heart he has only hate and curses for them. . . .

Yekim, however, was an *intelligent* of a somewhat different brand, not quite the aristocrat that the average *intelligent* was. After all, a man's heritage and antecedents count, and he was of peasant origin with no tradition of personal superiority. By dint of rare gifts and perseverance he rose above his peasant milieu. As a boy he had a passion for books and read omnivorously and understandingly. He graduated from a teachers' college, studied accountancy, higher mathematics, journalism, astronomy. He taught school, wrote essays, stories, plays. He married a well-to-do widow, bought a little estate in the Volga region and lived a leisurely life, spending his days in sports, reading, writing, and those interminable speculative conversations which constituted the soul of social life in intelligentsia circles in Russia.

The Revolution had sucked him into its swirl as relentlessly as it had the entire intelligentsia. The civil war and the famine, which raged most severely in the section in which he lived, fell on him with the desolation of a brutal doom. His wife succumbed to typhoid and died. His sister, who had been living with him on his estate, barely escaped death from a similar ailment. His stores of food were exhausted, and to save themselves from starvation he and his sister started for their native village, where their older brother lived. Trains were slow and uncertain, and besides, it was not always possible to get tickets. So they tramped over interminable steppes, and at last, after nearly half a year's agonised wandering, they reached the old home, ill, ragged, emaciated, embittered. Since then he had been living with his brother in the village of K.—, only ten versts from our village.

I knew Yekim well in my boyhood days. Alert, gallant, energetic, he was noted not only as a sportsman, but as the only peasant youth in the countryside who had the good

fortune to be admitted to the university. Frequently he would invite me to accompany him on fishing and hunting trips. Once he had accidentally shot a nightingale and was so overcome with grief that he cried as for the death of a close friend. He carried the corpse of the tiny bird to the cemetery, gave it a Christian burial, and stuck a neatly carved cross into its tomb. When I left for America he presented me with two books, Gogol's *Taras Bulba* and Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*. For a while we wrote to each other, long personal letters in the manner of somewhat sentimental Russian youths, and then we ceased to correspond.

On my return to the old home I made inquiries as to his fortunes since my departure to America, and my cousin narrated to me his story as outlined above. 'Of course you must call on him,' said my cousin, 'but he is not the man he once was—oh, no!' And with a gesture of sorrow he added, 'he lives like a recluse, and nobody understands him.'

As soon as I could arrange it, I went to see him. I found him in his brother's orchard, sitting on a half rotted birch log under the eaves of the thatched barn, with a large knife carving a stool from a block of wood. He had a beard now, short and matted, and it hung from his chin like a dirty rag. He was frail and bent, his head hanging loose over his chest, like a ripe apple that is on the verge of falling. His hands, bony like his face, and his shoulders that protruded through a worn brown blouse, trembled visibly and were tanned like his face and neck, which was overgrown with heavy dark hair like that of a horse's mane. He grinned in response to my greeting, but otherwise showed no sign of animation, not even when I talked to him of our old hunting trips in the days that seemed to belong to a far-away age, so far as to be unreal, as unreal as he himself with his horrid beard, his withered face, his depressing grin.

I asked him what he was doing. He shrugged his shoulders.

'Don't you see?' he replied after a pause, pointing to the knife and block of wood in his hands. 'I like to build things. Yesterday I finished a beehive. There it is, see?' and he indicated with a glance the tall barrel-like hive of the kind still in universal use in peasant Russia.

I thought he had taken to the hobby of bee-keeping, and being somewhat of a bee enthusiast myself, I asked him eagerly what breed of bees he had and how many swarms. But he only shook his head.

'I am not interested in bees. The fact is, old chum, I am not interested in anything. I just live from day to day. I made the hive for the mere sake of doing something. I had made nearly everything I could think of, and so I tried a beehive. Now I am carving a stool, and when I finish it I shall try something else, perhaps a drum or a violin.'

The word violin brought to my mind his old love for the instrument. He played it so well in his youth that he was always in demand at peasant weddings and festivals. I asked him if he still played it, and he shook his head. Music, he said, had ceased to charm him, and he cared for it no more than for the rattle of a wagon over a cobbled road. Hunting and fishing had likewise lost their lure for him, and as for reading he seldom glanced at a book, and writing was only a joke, 'a game of exaggeration, falsification, vanity, as futile as card-playing. . . .'

It was strange to hear him talk like that. His voice and his words sounded painfully unearthly. I could scarcely believe that I was in the presence of the Yekim I had once known and played with, the Yekim who had been brimming over with curiosity, joy, animation. He seemed completely emptied of ambition, of all interest in the world or even in himself—a mere living corpse, all the more pitiful because so resigned to his position.

'You surely don't propose always to remain with your brother?' I asked.

'That's what I shall do—remain here.'

'Not for ever?'

'For ever.' And after a prolonged pause he added, 'as long as I live, which won't be very long. You see, I have a weak heart. Often I have choking spells.'

I saw him often during my visit in the old village. Occasionally he would accompany me on trips to neighbouring settlements. He always wore his soiled brown rain-coat tied about the waist with a cracked leather strap and with the collar buttoned snugly, even when the sun was

hot. On his feet he had felt boots with the uppers cut apart at the ankles and fastened to the legs with coarse twine. He talked little, usually when only spoken to. He walked with his head down, his eyes fixed on the ground, like a man with failing vision seeking to avoid obstacles. Again and again I would attempt to draw him into a sustained discussion of the Revolution, the League of Nations, literature, astronomy, sports, or any of his other old hobbies. But he steadfastly refused to bite at my bait. *Yerunda* (nonsense) was his only word of response to all questions and comments. He would neither exult nor wax indignant over any subject, any issue, any person. He did like to listen to descriptions of life in America, and on several occasions he even expressed regret that he had not emigrated at the time I did.

Often I discussed his case with Manka. She knew Yekim well. So did her parents. Occasionally he came to visit them, but he never stayed long. He would sit at the table in silence, make curt replied to questions, then rise abruptly and leave. The Soviets, Manka said, would be only too eager to give him employment. They sorely needed the services of trained and talented men like him. But he refused all offers of work. Once he had been tendered the post of principal of a newly opened high school, and no amount of persuasion would induce him to accept the offer. Under no circumstances, he assured them, would he leave his brother's shelter. Bread and potatoes, and a cot to sleep on seemed his chief objectives in life. Art, music, science, romance, things that once stirred and thrilled him, roused not the slightest ripple of emotion.

Then something happened.

Manka gave a party at her home. She invited Yekim, and he came. About a score of youths, mainly revolutionary leaders from the surrounding villages, had assembled. Jovial, talkative, they sang, told stories played games, delivered speeches. Someone called on Yekim to say something. But he only grinned in reply. He had been sitting by himself at the head of the table, resting his head on his left hand and with the fingers of the other absent-mindedly drumming on the table. He seemed to be no more a part of the gathering than the pictures on the wall.

He sat and stared into space and looked bored. Again and again Manka entreated him to join in the frolic, but he begged to be left alone. However, his refusal to make a speech only spurred the crowd to the determination to break his obduracy. With that hilarious abandon which seizes a mob, they demanded that he make a speech or sing something. But he would not budge from his position. He grinned foolishly, dismally, and shook his head in refusal.

Then one of the youths, chairman of a neighbouring district Soviet, launched into a spirited attack on him. He lashed him unsparingly, called him a fool, a coward, a traitor, a barbarian. Manka attempted to halt this flow of fierce abuse, but the speaker brushed her aside and burst into a fresh torrent of vituperation. Was he bent on shaming Yekim into repentance, or was he in revenge giving vent to long-stifled rancour? Whatever his motive and purpose, he lashed away at Yekim with scorching words.

Strangely enough, Yekim, always so insensible to censure, now began to wince. He showed signs of discomfort. He ceased to grin. A frown contorted his brow. The flush in his face deepened, he shifted nervously from side to side, tightened his lips as if in anger, and now and then bit at his nails. It was evident he was chafing under the brutal attack. Then he raised his trembling hand and exclaimed feebly: '*Nu*, let me explain—'

'Explain nothing!' mocked his passionate adversary. 'You ought to be ashamed to look the sun in the face.'

'Good, good,' Yekim interrupted him. 'I understand you. Very well, very well.' He shook with nervousness and gathered his coat about him as though he were chilly and felt of the collar to make sure that it was buttoned. His eyes, wide open, gleamed with strange terror, or was it pain?

'Hear me, hear me, all of you,' he pleaded. 'I didn't mean to talk. Perhaps it were better if I remained silent. But there is a limit to everything. Do you understand? I am not entirely bereft of feeling, and I do get hurt—sometimes. Yes, I do, and it is not pleasant to be hurt.'

He paused as though to catch his breath and collect his thoughts, or perhaps only to swallow a rising lump in his throat.

'It is all right for you to denounce and abuse me,' he resumed with a slight hoarseness that disappeared as he continued talking. 'Go ahead, if it gives you any pleasure to do so. But I warn you, brothers, not to seek to change my mode of living. It is a futile task. You say I am a fool, a traitor, a coward. Very well. It matters not to me what you think of me. Do you understand? I don't want to do anything. I don't want to go anywhere, and, by Jove, I shan't either.' Half rising from his seat, he feebly pounded the table with his fist and stared at us, with the subdued rage and scorn of a trapped animal.

'Why is it so hard for you to leave me alone?' he continued amidst silence. 'You are all the time scolding and mocking and berating and seeking to reform me as though I were a scamp. Can't you leave me in peace? Why do you persist in tormenting me?'

He coughed, and once more fingered his collar to make sure it was buttoned. His face seemed hot enough to ignite a match, and his eyes burned, perhaps with resentment, perhaps with anxiety, perhaps with anguish; perhaps only with confusion and dismay.

'You say,' he resumed in a gentle, almost exhorting tone, 'that I ought to leave my brother. Very well, but where shall I go?'

'Our Soviet will give you a position to-morrow,' called out the Communist who had launched the attack on him.

Yekim grinned sardonically.

'Yes, I know, you'll give me a job. You know that I am a trained man, that I am an honest man, and that if I accepted a position, I should discharge my obligations loyally, even though I am no Communist and never hope to be one. Yes, you'll give me a job, to teach in some school in this or in some other district. But—how can I live on the few paltry gold roubles you are paying school-teachers?'

'How do the other teachers manage to live?' interrupted someone.

'Ah, I knew you were going to pop that question, I knew you were,' he returned with restrained bitterness; 'but I am not like other teachers. Do you understand? I am in feeble health. My heart is weak, and my lungs

are not any too strong. Physical exercise, however slight, if prolonged, makes me dizzy and shaky. Other teachers can live off the allotment of land that the Soviets give them as part of their salary. But I could not hold a spade in my hand. If you gave me a whole estate I should starve like a drone in the midst of a clover-field. I could not raise a single sack of potatoes. I can't work. Do you understand? Can't you see for yourselves? I should have to depend on my salary for a living, and you know I could not live on that. I have starved once and for a long time, and I do not propose to go through that agony again.'

Someone spoke up, but Yekim waved him aside swiftly. He leaned over the table and lifted a trembling forefinger at us, his shadow on the wall back of him twitching from side to side as he moved, like a ghost that sought to cow us into silence or shame.

'But supposing,' he resumed rather animatedly, 'that the questions of salary and livelihood do not enter into consideration at all. Supposing I do teach. How long do you suppose I could hold my position? Why, with the rigid control that the Communist Party exercises over teachers, I should be obliged to follow not the dictates of my own intelligence but the hackneyed and senseless formulas of the party in power. Right, am I not?'

'Of course, we should not expect you to stuff the minds of our youth with counter-revolutionary ideas,' broke in a muscular youth who was sitting beside Manka.

'Very well, very well,' Yekim pursued impatiently, 'you all know that I am no counter-revolutionary, even though I have my doubts as to whether the Marxian materialist conception of history has anything to do with an eclipse of the sun. Sometimes I have my doubts'—and they all laughed good-naturedly at his gentle sarcasm. 'I have always called myself a socialist. I have always defended the rights of the lowly. I have always hoped for the liberation of our dark masses. But I believe in the power of the human imagination and human emotion. Life to me is not merely the result of the interplay of materialist forces in the world, but of whims and fancies and passions of man, and you, of course, discount the influence of these, because your prophet Marx, to whom you bow as to another Peruna, has not recognised them as being of any consequence, or so you proclaim. You

would have me interpret Tolstoy, Turgenev, Pushkin, Gogol, Nekrassov and our other writers and foreign authors, and geography, and history, and mathematics—everything—in terms of Marxian formulas. To you Marx is the key to all wisdom and mystery, and to me he is a caustic and blundering philosopher. I am not at all convinced that world revolution is as indispensable to human happiness as, say, light, warmth, or heat. To you it is. World revolution is your daily dream. World revolution is your new religion, and to me it is stupid prattle ; and yet, I should have to be drumming Marx and Marx and more Marx and world revolution into the minds of my pupils, just as in the old days we had to be drumming into their minds the idea of the goodness of the Czar *batiushka* (little father). I just could not do it. I gave up teaching under the Czar because I could not be a lick-spittle. Do you understand ?

‘Then take the question of religion. I seldom went to church in the old days. I don’t know. I never could be friends with our old clergy, who were mere pawns in the hands of sinister men. But—I believe in God. I can’t kill this belief in me and I do not wish to. It is a source of joy and inspiration to me ; at least it was in the days when I searched for joy and inspiration. I can’t see how anyone who has ever studied, say, the chemistry of a flower or an ordinary weed like a thistle can deny the presence of a guiding super-intelligence in the world. No machine invented by men shows such delicate harmonisation of cause and effect as the internal mechanism of the raggedest weed. I never lift my eyes to the myriads of twinkling stars or watch the movement of the water in a river or gaze at the flight of a lark, but I am seized with a wish to chant a hymn of glory to this mysterious Intelligence which we call God. . . .

‘Well, perhaps I am too romantic. Perhaps I am a mystic. Perhaps I am a madman. It matters not what I am, I cannot and will not kill my faith in the existence of an all-ruling Intelligence. Laugh at me, if you wish. Call me a simpleton. Call me an idiot. You can’t hurt me, not any more, and you most assuredly can’t oust God from my heart. Well—I could not demonstrate the structure of a flower to my pupils without emphasising the existence of God. And supposing I did that, supposing I explained to children that back of all our chemistry, back of all our physics,



back of all our astronomy, back of all our geology is the power and spirit of God? I need not tell you what would happen to me. Why, in one town in the province of Tsaritsin where I lived there was a teacher who once narrated to his class the story of the exodus of the Jews from Egypt. Now, mind, he didn't say he believed it was a true story. He merely cited it as an illustration of a certain type of literature created in ancient days. Well, the old janitress of the school happened to overhear him, but she immediately reported to the Communist local that so-and-so was teaching religion to his classes. The teacher was arrested and held for a hearing. It happened that he was popular with the students, and they testified in his defence. The Communist Committee exonerated him. But think of the humility and the agony of going through such an atrocious and farcical experience! Imagine how that poor teacher felt afterward whenever he rose to address his student! Imagine his efforts so to couch his explanations as to make them void of the least suggestion of religion, of God, of romance, or of anything else that might bring offence to the atheistic taste of a janitress! Imagine that man deliberately stifling his own reason, his own conscience, and turning prevaricator, for some, perhaps most men, are too weak to cling to the truth as they see it if the price is anguish and privation. But I can't do it. I can't lie—not even to myself; for lying, as I see it, is worse than murder—it poisons and pollutes and in the end murders, only slowly and brutally. . . .

A buzz and murmur of protesting voices clove the air, for Yekim's words were sacrilege to the group of revolutionaries. Manka called for order and silence.

'Let Yekim Ignatyevitch finish,' she begged. 'We have all been wishing to hear him explain himself. Let us not stop him now that he is willing.'

Silence ensued, interrupted now and then by a subdued snigger.

'*Da, da* (yes, yes),' muttered Yekim, mechanically rubbing one hand over his bristly little beard. 'No, I couldn't teach atheism, I couldn't teach anything that was repugnant to my taste or intelligence. I couldn't stuff the minds of youth with notions that would make bullies and bigots out of them. No, I couldn't. And there is something else. Listen.' He half rose from his seat and leaned forward, eyeing us all

with a look of terror that was disturbing. 'I shall not leave my brother again. Never! For I am afraid of another famine. I should not be. There is no danger of a famine in our productive villages. I know there isn't—but,' and lifting his trembling hand to his forehead and gently tapping at it, he continued, 'it is there, though, this fear of another famine, and I know that as long as I am with my brother I am safe, I shall always have black bread and potatoes, all I shall want to eat; and if I leave my brother, feeble and shattered as I am, I am sure of nothing. Oh, how can I make you feel it, this dread of the agony of hunger? I can't. Nobody can. It is something that you have got to live through, like the loss of a beloved one. . . . Why, it is silly to talk of it, but since it is a fact I must mention it, and you will understand perhaps a little of just what I mean when I tell you that I am in worse dread of a famine when I am away from home than a dog is of a boy chasing after him with a rock in his hand.

'The other day I went to the town of S—to attend the fair, and when I arrived there it seemed to me that I was back in the land of famine. Of course there was no famine in the town of S—. There was no reason why I should have been obsessed with the dread of having to face a famine there, for I was only going to stay until evening, and at the market-place breads and meats and vegetables lay in heaps at the numerous booths. Yet as I was walking along the streets I felt as though I were back in the land of hunger, and I pictured myself lying awake on a straw mattress in the kitchen, feet numb, hands numb, a gnawing ache at the pit of my stomach, and dreaming of food, of feasts and banquets and rare delicacies. . . . And I had to flee home. I couldn't stay to see the fair. It is always like that. The moment I get away from home, the dread of hunger comes over me with the force of a violent blow on the head. I grow numb. I lose control of myself. My legs give way under me.

'Listen, you fanatical Communists! May the God whom you blaspheme save you from the ordeal and agony of hunger—hunger that racks and maddens and drains you of reason and decency and mercy. I once saw a dog, a little hungry dog, sniffing for food in the back of my yard. I laugh at the incident now whenever I think of it. But

it was no laughing matter to me then. I sneaked quietly around in back of the fence where the dog was standing, with a big iron bar ready to hurl at the poor creature and kill it so that I could eat its flesh. A neighbour of mine, a friend, an intimate friend, a comrade with whom I often went hunting and to parties and lectures, saw me, and he flung a pointed rock at me and struck me in the knee so hard that I had to lie down and nurse the wound. Had he hit me on the head he might have killed me. And do you know why he did it? So that he could have the dog for himself. Think of that! A former neighbour and comrade!

'And you should have been at the railroad stations and witnessed the scenes there—children dying, men dying, women dying, and no one near to offer succour, no one, and corpses scattered about the cobbles like dunghoops polluting the air and adding to the agony of the living. . . . And you should have been around when trains arrived. Every day a train passed through our town, and whenever a well-fed passenger alighted, men and women with hollow faces and leering eyes would gather about him and sniff dumbly of him like vultures, as though ready to sink their teeth into his fragrant flesh, and he, terror-struck, would run and hide. Once a crowd actually surrounded a man in a yard and drove him into a corner. They didn't say anything, not a word, but just crowded close and sniffed of him. He tried to escape by climbing a fence, but the fence gave way and he fell to the ground, and several men fell on top of him by accident. He thought they wanted to kill him; so he shrieked and screamed and cursed and shook them off and then pulled off one of his boots with a big horseshoe on the heel and like an enraged animal fought his way through to safety by battering away at their heads. They didn't fight back. They couldn't. They were so weak. And some of them got so badly hurt, they lay down in the mud and groaned. . . . *Nu*, you don't forget such sights.'

He paused, wiped the sweat from his brow, and continued: 'And, well, you all know my sister Paraska. She had been living with me on my estate. My wife passed away, and our food was almost gone. We had just one sack of oats left, and nothing else, and everyday Paraska made oat-soup and we drank it, several cups a day, steering the grain over and over so as to make it last long. That

was all we had to eat. One evening Paraska came and said that in another day she would have a real surprise for me—she would bring me real bread and sausage! A man had promised it to her, a railroad man who was passing through the town daily. I rejoiced and hoped that the man wouldn't disappoint her. She assured me that he wouldn't, for he was fond of her and wanted to see her and help her. I grew suspicious and finally drew from her the confession that she would have to pay for the food but not in money . . . do you understand? Well, perhaps I am old-fashioned, but I believe in honour, in self-respect. Weak as I was I seized a knife, and pointing it at my sister I told her that if she went to see that man, she need never come back to my place or show herself before my eyes, or I should plunge the knife into her heart. She burst into tears. Of course she was young, only sixteen, and other girls had been talking to her, telling her what they had been doing, how they had been obtaining food, and she thought it was quite proper to exchange honour for bread—when there was no other way of securing bread. She promised she would never go near that man, and she didn't. But other girls—well, you should have been there and seen them with your own eyes, little girls tortured to madness by hunger and forgetting everything, self-respect, decency, and paying whatever price was asked for crusts of black bread. . . . Once I saw a railroad man, a big fellow with a fat face and a bristly reddish beard, bargaining with a girl who couldn't have been more than fourteen, a barefoot girl in rags and with a face which had still retained a flush of radiance. . . . He was bargaining as openly and as impudently as with a hawker in the market-place over the price of a herring. . . . So much bread for so much pleasure. . . . Imagine the beast! . . . *Nu*, why talk of it further? Thank God, that horrid day is passed . . . the nightmare is gone. . . .'

He leaned back and breathed audibly, his chest rising and falling rapidly. He looked fatigued and yet stimulated. His face was flushed, but there was an expression of calm and repose on it, as though he were experiencing inward joy at the opportunity of unburdening himself. Manka's mother brought him a glass of water, and he drank it slowly in sips and then rose to leave.

'But, Yekim,' said Manka in a voice trembling with

compassion, 'it would strengthen you if you tried to forget yourself and take up some——'

He wouldn't let her finish the sentence.

'No, Manka,' he rejoined with that foolish grin of his which it was depressing to behold, 'I don't want a job. I don't want to get to work. That was what you wanted to say, wasn't it? I have nothing to work for, really; nothing. Nothing and nobody. . . . I want peace and solitude and forgetfulness. I shall remain with my brother as long as — live, for as long as I am with him I am sure of my bread and potato and of a bed to sleep in and of repose, and I can always do something to pass away the time—potter around the barns, build things—tables, chairs, closets, all manner of trinkets . . . and as for other things . . . *nu*, I want none of them.' He drew closer to her and fixed his eyes on her. 'Listen, listen! You feel sorry for me, don't you? I know you do. Don't deny it. You think I am if not mad then at least unbalanced; at any rate quite unfortunate, yes? And I tell you that you never could feel as sorry for me as I do for you, for you and for the others here, for all our fervid revolutionaries. . . . Tell me, of what avail is all your bustle and excitement? Communism, socialism, Soviets—*nu*, it's all nonsense, by Jove it is, it only stultifies and ruins, men and women alike. It perverts and destroys. Think of it—at one time I had hopes and dreams of a future, of an enlightened civilisation, of a happy world, and now, now I can see only the hollowness of such dreams and hopes.

'Why deceive ourselves, brothers? Don't you see the truth? The Czar killed, the Bolsheviks kill. Education kills, democracy kills, Revolution kills, Marx kills. All we seem to care for is killing the other fellow, and the more we achieve, the hungrier we seem to be for blood, and the more efficient we are in the pursuit of murder. So what is the good of striving and hoping and dreaming and sacrificing and conquering? Sooner or later all our imaginary structures topple to ruins.

'Listen.' He turned to all of us, his quivering lips curved into a bitter smile. 'I have often thought that all of you enthusiasts in this and other peasant sections of Russia, Communists and non-Communists, are foolish in attempting to uplift the muzhik. In my opinion it

were for wiser and safer for him and for the world if he were left as he is, with his poverty, his sloth, his ignorance. Schools, education, enlightenment, atheism, Marxism, will only stir his self-consciousness, his pride, his self-importance; yes, his haughtiness and his fighting passions. At present he is roused easily enough. But he has the faculty of forgetting and condoning. He is too simple, too elemental, and too busy to think of anything but his daily work, his meals, and his sleep. Oh, I know he worries over high prices of kerosene, salt, iron! He wails that he is being robbed and ruined. But that is a small matter. When evening comes and he has packed into his belly a huge lump of black bread and a pot of sour milk, he rolls on the oven or the *polati* and forgets everything until he wakes again the next morning. Worry will not spoil him. He has so little time for it, anyway. But education, enlightenment, pride, well—it has ruined other peoples, it will ruin him, too; yes, him worse than others, for he is weak, weaker than others, weak and base like you and me, like all Russian—a cursed race.'

He wiped his brow with a red handkerchief, fastened the buttons of his coat, bade us farewell, and without pausing to make reply to any of the youths who begged him to remain and argue with them, he strolled out of the room, a phantom so seemingly unreal that after he was gone, I wondered if it was really he who had been in the room talking. . . .

His words had evoked no sympathy in the youthful peasant revolutionaries. They could see neither value nor meaning in his laments. His finely spun logic, his romantic hankerings, were totally alien to them. They could not even sense the tragedy of his shattered life. They beheld in him not an anguished soul but a foolish and futile clown. They laughed when he was gone.

'A real *intelligent*,' remarked one of them contemptuously, 'a superfluous creature.'

'Superfluous indeed,' assented another gruffly, 'with his pack of bourzhui notions and sentiments.'

But Manka, always sensitive, kindly, spoke in defence of Yekim: 'Still, boys', she remarked solemnly, her eyes luminous with tears, 'he is a noble soul.'

'Noble,' snorted the Communist who had launched the attack on Yekim. 'A silly word, Manka, a bourzhui word, a meaningless word. What's the good of a man being noble when he is useless? Nobleness, Manka, will not build bridges, highways, school-houses. Russia needs no dreamers, but realists. Do you understand? Dreamers have been our curse and ruination. All they can do is talk and sob and pity themselves. Fie on such silly creatures! Russia needs no Kerenskys who can sputter romantic drivel for the edification of sentimental idlers, but men who can wield a spade and lift a hammer and shoulder a gun when necessary. . . .'

'Well said, well said!' echoed several voices in unison.

What kinship was there between Yekim and this rough-spoken youth, who was the symbol of the new leadership in Russia? They belonged to worlds that could not live in peace with one another. One had to destroy the other. Fundamentally Yekim was a Hamlet, like the heroes or rather the victims in the novels of Turgenev, Goncharov, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Pushkin, that galaxy of literary luminaries who have stirred humanity to pity and affection for the Russian intelligentsia. They had given themselves heroically and beautifully to brooding and romancing over their own and their nation's frailties, over the meaning of life, man, God, the universe. Poets, philosophers, egoists, they never had schooled themselves to stifle when necessary, sentiment and scruples, and to batter away with their own hands at the forces of evil they had perpetually and stirringly been lamenting. What can such men do in a revolutionary society with its cynical intolerance of doubt, of leisure, of romantic contemplation; its brazen denial of self and sentiment, and its roaring call for brute strife, rough labour, constant hazard to life? Nothing; nothing but sulk and sob and die. . . .

Yekim is the last of the Russian Hamlets staggering to his doom.

## CHAPTER XIV

### WHITHER MUZHIK ?

LATE that night I went home. It was to be my last night at the old village. In the morning I was to leave for Moscow.

A half-moon lolled lazily in a hazy sky. The air was cool, calm, raw with the balm of ripening weeds and withering meadows. A grey fog was rising out of the lowlands and billowing over the earth like a sea of down. I was following a familiar road—countless times had I traversed it on foot and on horse in my boyhood days—and the scene about was stirringly familiar to me : the windmills, the surrounding villages, the clumps of brush in the swamps looming out of the moving haze like schooners at anchor ; the rolling fields with the stubble of harvested grain touched with dew and glistening like icicles ; the rutted road, the sprawling graveyard, the shaky bridge still without railings—everything was as in the old days, as ungainly, as dilapidated, as depressingly uncivilised. All around were peace and calm with nowhere a hint of disturbance, nowhere a suggestion of conflict.

It is so all over Russia. However battered and unappealing the scene, life outwardly seems stable and tranquil. People may be shabbily clad, appear more care-worn than in other lands, but they go about their daily pursuits with no less zest. They bargain vociferously with shopkeepers ; attend parties, lectures ; go to the theatre, the ballet, the concert hall ; and children everywhere dash about the streets and parks singing and screaming. It is so in Moscow, in Leningrad. It is especially so in the village, where the brute urge to live and act has, if anything, been intensified by the events of the Revolution. It is only when one begins to talk with people that one realises the depth and the magnitude of their inner turbulence. Is there a man or woman in Russia, revolutionary or non-revolutionary, who is not in his heart and soul a vast laboratory, if not a battle-field, with the forces of wrath, hope, hate, ecstasy, despair, constantly clashing, fusing, exploding ?

It was almost dawn when I reached the old village. I went straight to the barn where my cousin and I had been



sleeping nights. It was cooler there than in the house, and no flies tormented us. The squeak of the door wakened him, and half-asleep, he inquired who was coming in. Beside him on the hay, stretched out at full length and covered with white tarp-cloths lay two other figures. Our exchange of remarks wakened them, too. They were Antosh, the young Communist, and Vassil, the other youthful revolutionary leader in the village. They said they wanted to see me before I left for Moscow and had come to spend the night with me in the barn. Without much preliminary talk Antosh asked what impression of the Soviet Revolution I would carry away to America.

What could I tell him ? I was tired, and I was still under the spell of Yekim's harrowing eloquence. I would say nothing to hurt his feelings. After all he was terribly sincere and too impassioned calmly to accept a frank opinion from which he might differ ; so I replied that I had not yet had time to draw any conclusions. My answer did not satisfy him. He suspected me of being unwilling to be frank, said so, and pleaded that I speak openly. After all, he argued, I was an out-sider, a foreigner, though born in the village, and I had nothing and nobody to fear, and my impressions, good or bad, did interest him and the other revolutionaries in the community.

Of a sudden there flitted before my eyes the towering figure of Fyodor Chaliapin, the Russian operatic singer. I happened to cross the ocean on the same boat with him, and one day I asked him what he thought of the Russian Revolution.

'You see,' he replied, 'I am no historian and no politician. I am an artist, and I have an artist's view of the Revolution. In the old days Russia was like a stagnant pool with frogs deeply embedded in the muddy bottom and fast asleep, when suddenly someone steals near with a stout stick and vigorously prods the mud. You know what happens then—the frogs waken with a start and leap helter-skelter into the air from one place to another. You see what I mean ? The Revolution is the stout stick that has prodded Russia from her age-long slumber in the muddy bottom of a stagnant social life, and the people are leaping frantically about, trying to find themselves and a new place of refuge.'

I narrated Chaliapin's reply. Antosh shook his head with displeasure, and asked rather indignantly: 'Is this Chaliapin a proletarian or a bourzhui?'

'Neither,' I said. 'He is an artist.'

'He talks like a bourzhui,' he remarked.

But Vassil, always the calmer and the more thoughtful of the two, had, as usual, an opinion of his own.

'Well, it makes no difference who this Chaliapin is,' he said. 'He is a wise man, and he understands our muzhiks and our Russia. He understands us well, very well. Of course he is right—frogs, that's exactly what we were in the old days; frogs sunk in the filthy mud of a stagnant pool, sunk and asleep, and the Revolution has prodded us out into the open air and has made us leap and scurry about from place to place. But this I must add, and I hope, *tovarishtsh*, that when you tell your friends in America about us muzhiks in this village or in any village, you will not forget to say that henceforth we shall be frogs no longer.'

## CHAPTER XV

### SEVEN YEARS LATER

SEVEN years have passed since I first wrote this book.

A new epoch has swept over Russia. The formula of the five-year plan and collectivisation of the land have put an end to uncertainty. Now the Revolution is briskly marching toward a definite goal and all the resources of the nation, both human and natural, have been mobilised for the attainment of this goal.

Life has become more complex, more exciting and more strenuous. Indeed there is no land in the world where life is so burdened for everybody with the multitude of responsibilities as it is in Russia. Relaxation has given place to exertion, good-humour to sternness, tolerance to impatience, persuasion often enough to coercion. Class war and class hate have gained a fresh impetus and have brought disaster and despair to hosts of real or imaginary foes of the Revolution. Gone now is the former spirit of social evangelism and romantic adventuring. A new language is violently reverberating over the land—from the Black Sea to the

Arctic regions and across the vastnesses of Siberia to the Pacific—a language of strife, of action, of conquest. The very face of the Russian village is being rapidly transformed. Whether they will or not the peasants have to submit to a new discipline and a new dispensation. They cry and protest with their wonted violence and volubility—but it is of no avail—the Revolution is storming them on and on to a new world and a new destiny.

The story of this tumultuous period I have set down elsewhere (in *Red Bread*). Here, to round out my chronicle, I only wish to tell the reader what has since happened to some of the characters he has met in the preceding pages.

My cousin has moved to another village to join a collective farm. Ambitious to give his children the best education to be obtained, he has sought out a community in which the school is superior to the one in the old home town. His departure brings to an end the age-old association of our family with this village.

Vassil, the young orator of the village, has matured beyond recognition. He is still suave and remarkably self-controlled, but he no longer engages in lengthy discussions and seldom mounts the speaker's platform in the public square. He is secretary of the *kolhoz* and his responsibilities leave him little time for diversion and even for visiting. He has made many enemies in the village, as an energetic secretary of a *kolhoz* would, but he pays no heed to the gossip that has spread about him. He is a plugging soldier of the Revolution.

Vassil's former chum, Antosh, the fiery Young Communist, has moved to other parts of the country. The Party had sent him to a special school to prepare him for a responsible administrative position in the Party or in the Soviets. On his graduation from this school he went to the Red Army and on completion of his period of service there he was sent around on various missions and finally he became the secretary of a distant Soviet.

On my last visit to the village I ran into him by sheer accident at a village dance. He had come home for a vacation, the first he had been granted in several years.

He was as impassioned in his revolutionary beliefs as he appears in the pages of this book, but age has made him more mellow, more patient and, I thought, more sad. He no longer flared with indignation when some muzhik expressed a thought which he deemed subversive. As earnest and as humourless as ever, he always sought to set an opponent at ease and to explain to him at length the error of his ways as he, of course, viewed them. There was something tragic and yet heroic in this fine youth never tiring of crusading for the cause of the Revolution and never seeing anything in life and in the world worthy of attention or recognition outside of the rigid formulas of this cause.

I made inquiries about Manka and learned that she was no longer in the village. She had married a school-teacher and moved to a place some forty miles away—a huge distance in these parts of Russia. She was now the mother of three children and was still active in social work, though not as energetically as in former times. A Party man from her native village in speaking of her referred to her as hopelessly 'middle class' in her ideology. When I pressed him for an explanation he replied that she was too 'soft.' What he meant of course was that she was too considerate of people. No doubt the collectivisation drive and the liquidation of the koolacks had upset her and had caused her intense agony. She still was outside of the ranks of the Party, and being 'soft,' there was, I thought, no likelihood of her ever joining it or rather being admitted to membership. Her husband was a well-known Communist in his native countryside.

I called on Manka's father. How completely he and his whole family had changed since their arrival from Kiev! They had lost all of their urban manner and had become quite rooted in the new condition of life. Volodya no longer thought of becoming a great explorer. He had married a buxom peasant girl and was soon expecting to become a father. In his outward appearance he had become completely peasantised—shaved rarely, wore his hair long, learned to roll deftly a cigarette in packing or newspaper and had even acquired the intonation and the vocabulary of his muzhik neighbours. . . . He was much worried about the collectivisation campaign, and was hoping that he might

find some way of escaping—a hope which his father did not share. . . .

The person of course who most interested me was Yekim, this once devoted chum of mine whom the Revolution had so completely crushed. From his brother I learned that he had left the village and had gone to a near-by town to teach school. He, too, had married and quite happily, so at least his sister-in-law had assured me. She begged me not to miss seeing him.

I lost no time in doing so. He was not at home when I called, but I found him sauntering around the bazaar, and on first sight I hardly recognised him. He was shaved, neatly dressed and his face was rounded out and sunburned. He looked like a man come to life again. When we shook hands and, Russian fashion, embraced, he laughed with that ancient heartiness which was so characteristic of him in his boyhood. It was exhilarating to see him in his new mood.

Arm in arm we strolled around and then we sat down on a pile of timber in the rear of the town court-house. We talked away at length and with zest and told each other all that had happened to us in the years that we had not seen each other. He admitted that he never had hoped to rise out of his former lethargy and despair. For five years, he confessed, he had lived the life of a hibernating animal on his brother's farm. He was afraid of everything and everybody, including himself. But now he was out in the sun again and glad of it . . . 'My chief trouble was,' he continued his narration, 'that I just could not get away from my own thoughts and emotions—a terrible state for any man to be in. Yes, old chum, I had been taking myself too seriously—myself, and, of course, the world. That was the plagued heritage of our Russian intelligentsia. Always we moaned eloquently over the world's injustice and always we found ourselves too powerless to do anything about it except to keep on moaning. I had it bad, this spirit of world-woe, and the Revolution had only deepened it. But I have snapped out of it, yes, I have. How? Well—you just cannot live in such a feverish atmosphere as is now upon us without doing some serious thinking. . . . You really cannot resist the storm of energy that is passing by you and over you and that almost swamps you in this land of ours. . . . You may hate the ideas of the Revolution—and in all

seriousness I do not love them—but you cannot stand still and keep happy. You are like a wild goose when the flock starts migrating to warmer parts—you don't want to, you simply cannot remain behind. The sheer tug of the thing pulls you along.

'It is amazing what a powerful thing it is, this revolution of ours. There has never been anything like it in all the history of our people or even in the whole history of the world. . . . There is little enough joy in our lives now. . . . The Party frankly says that this is not the time for joy or for any personal gratification. This is the time for work, for sacrifice, for conquest—alas, how backward we are, so dismally backward!—and everybody, whether he will or not, gets sucked into something—and, mind you, stays sucked. Yes, he does, he cannot help himself. . . . So here I am on my old job again teaching school. Now and then I do some social work. But inwardly, I don't think I have changed. . . . I can still stand aside and laugh or weep at the tragedy and travesty of it all. Intellectually I guess I am a hopeless cynic. I take nothing seriously. Communism, revolution, atheism—I really worry over none of these things. . . . But that is something better than the state I was in when you first came here. Then I worried over everything and everybody. . . . Now I just swim along with the tide of our ever swelling excitement. I must swim along—I cannot help myself, and anyway—there is no use resisting life, is there ?'



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