Behind the Curtain

A Novel by

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HUTCHINSON

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Behind the Curtain

I

It was on the last day of the war when a column of Russian armoured cars in the army of General Zhukov arrived at a British prisoners-of-war camp south-east of Berlin.

A small flag fluttered in front of the foremost car. Inside were a Russian colonel and three other officers. The youngest of them was Vladimir Michaelovitch Rogov. The Colonel spoke to him in a rasping voice which carried above the thump of the engine and the heavy rumbling drone of the other cars.

"I shall need you as interpreter with these English prisoners. Do you speak their damned language well enough?"

"It was my mother's language," answered Vladimir.

One of the officers sitting behind—he wore the green badge of the military police—leaned forward and spoke in the young man's right ear.

"No fraternization. We have strict orders."

Vladimir nodded. He had already been told by this officer that when they came in touch with the British or Americans there was to be no intermingling, no demonstrations of comradeship, nothing beyond cold civility. These people had been fighting against the Germans, but victory was due to Russia alone, and the Allies still remained ideological enemies in defence of the last crumbling bulwarks of Capitalism and Pluto-Democracy. Between them and the Russian Army there must be an iron curtain to prevent a possible contamination of the Russian soul.

At the entrance to the camp a great crowd of English prisoners were shouting and cheering at the approach of the Russians. Vladimir felt his heart give a queer lurch as he saw them. He felt excited and emotional. His blue eyes were alight because of an inner and irresistible sense of comradeship with

those who had been fighting the common enemy. He wanted to laugh in answer to these cheering men, the English. He wanted to leap out of his car and embrace them. There was a smile on his lips and for a moment his eyes were wet.

It was a momentary weakness, taking him off his guard, and due to an overwhelming sense of brotherhood with these English soldiers. It was the first time he had ever seen an English crowd, though now in a dream-like way, by some atavism in his own blood and soul, they seemed familiar to him, those Cockney faces, those thin, sharp-featured, English types. Their clean-shaven jaws and lean bodies and finely cut faces were lighter and more delicate than the Slav structure of the flesh. In that first intense observation of them he seemed to have seen them all before. He seemed to know them as though he had belonged to them in some former life. He had their blood in his own body. That no doubt accounted for this sensation of familiarity and brotherhood, which for a little while extinguished political and ideological differences.

The armoured cars had halted inside the camp, beyond the barbed wire and close to the watch-towers. When Vladimir followed his Colonel out of the armoured car with the two other officers he was surrounded by the English prisoners of war, still laughing and cheering. One young man—a sergeant by the stripes on his sleeve—grasped his hand and was pump-handling it.

"Glad to see you, Russki. *Sprechen sie Deutsch? Parlez-vous?* My languages don't go as far as Russian."

"I speak English," said Vladimir; "my mother was an English lady."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed the sergeant. "Well, that's a bit of luck, and this is a great day for all of us. Nice of you to help us win the war! We couldn't have done without you."

Vladimir laughed. It was wonderful being able to understand this English soldier in spite of his accent.

"The Soviet armies have done much to win the war," he said proudly and gladly. "The English and Americans helped on the other side. We acknowledge that."

The sergeant was pushed on one side by the pressure of the crowd. Several men thrust their way forward to get near this English-speaking Russian.

"You Russkies have beaten the band," said one of them. "We've heard all about it on our secret wireless. Good old Zhukov!"

"I've been three years in this lousy cage," said another. "Welcome to our camp, brother, and get us home as soon as you can. I want to see my wife and kids."

"Shake hands, Russki," shouted another English soldier. "I'd like to kiss you on both cheeks and shed tears on your beautiful epaulettes."

One man put his arm round Vladimir's shoulder. "What's the Russian

word for comrade?" he asked. "I'd like to learn it."

Vladimir laughed, and answered him: "Tavarish. We call all our friends that. But I like the English word comrade. It gives me great pleasure to speak English again. Do any of you know Clapham Common?"

There was a roar of laughter. "Cripes, yes!"

"My mother——" said Vladimir.

Suddenly he was interrupted by his Colonel who thrust his way through the Englishmen and spoke harshly to Vladimir.

"You are forgetting yourself, Lieutenant. I shall report you to headquarters. You are disobeying instructions."

"Excuse me," said Vladimir. "These English soldiers are eager for a little demonstration of comradeship. Perhaps for a short time——"

"Our orders are precise," said the Colonel sharply. "Fraternization is strictly forbidden, even for a few minutes. Tell these men that I wish to speak to their senior officer. Tell them that no one must leave the camp. Anyone who disobeys will be shot."

Vladimir was no longer smiling. He translated the Colonel's words into English in a loud clear voice. The effect upon the English prisoners, he noticed, was disconcerting. It was as though he had thrown ice-cold water over them. He was sorry the rules were so rigid. Weren't they inhuman and abominable? No, he must crush down thoughts like that. Since boyhood he had had to crush down little devils of doubt which had tempted him constantly to betray his faith in the pure gospel of the Soviet State with all its severities, terrible sometimes, and its call for sacrifice and obedience. It was because of his English blood that he had been so tempted by the little whispering demons of doubt. They came out of his mother's milk. They came out of English books he had read as a boy. He had thrust them back with a kind of horror lest he should be disloyal to the Soviet State. Sometimes he thought he had killed them, but lately they had surged up again and threatened to overwhelm him.

II

Vladimir Michaelovitch Rogov, lieutenant in the victorious Russian Army, owed his life to his knowledge of English, which had kept him out of the front line as a fighting soldier and placed him on General Zhukov's staff as a junior Intelligence Officer.

From babyhood to boyhood he had always spoken English at home with his mother and sister, though he spoke Russian with his friends at school. There was a time also, though now it was a dim memory of childhood, when he spoke English and did English lessons with Miss Smith who had been his governess, until she died of typhus during the bad days of the Civil War.

His mother never spoke good Russian. He and his sister Olga used to laugh at her for that.

"Mother, your Russian is terrible!" he said to her many times.

"I wish I didn't know a word of it," she answered once. "I wish I had never seen a Russian, or ever come to Russia."

"Then you wouldn't have met Papa," he told her, "and Olga and I wouldn't have been born."

"Perhaps that would have been better for everyone," she said, and that answer shocked him so that he always remembered it; and he remembered how, when she spoke those words, she burst into tears and her face was wet when he flung his arms about her and kissed her many times. That was when he was a boy of seven or eight living at Kazan on the Volga where his father was stationed in the barracks there. It was the time of the Famine.

He had vivid recollections of his childhood, and always they were dominated by his mother's character and humour, and all the stories she told him and the books she read out to him. Olga, who was two years younger, missed some of that, and could not even remember Miss Smith, nor the time when their father was fighting against Denikin's army, nor the days when they took to the roads and travelled in farm carts, and were very hungry.

His mother had funny little ways, and funny ideas. She had a private name for him when they were alone together. She never called him Vladimir, but always David. For a long time he thought it meant the same thing as darling or some other pet English word, but he realized it was a proper English name when she read out some chapters of *David Copperfield*—young David in the

boot factory and his long walk to find his aunt.

"Is that why you call me David?" he asked. "After David Copperfield?"

"I expect so," she answered. "I wanted to call you that when you were born but your father insisted on Vladimir. It would be ridiculous if I called you Vladdy."

"It's a perfectly good Russian name," he said. "It's a pity you hate everything Russian. Sometimes I think you hate Papa. I've heard you quarrelling with him."

She gave him a queer startled look.

"Little pitchers have long ears," she said. "When have you ever heard me quarrelling with your daddy, you little limb of Satan?"

"Last night," he told her. "I was lying awake looking at the moon. Then you and Papa started talking in bed. You said you would never have married Papa if you had known that he would be an officer in the Red Army. You said he was serving the Devil. Papa laughed and said he was a soldier of the new Russia. Then you said that the Reds were all murderers and that the Soviet State was another name for hell. Then Papa got angry, and then I fell asleep."

He couldn't have been more than seven when that conversation happened and he remembered that his mother's face became very white and her eyes looked frightened.

"David!" she said in a kind of whisper. "Don't say such things to anybody else, will you? Promise me you will never tell anybody else what you think you heard last night. It was a dream really. You were dreaming, David. But if you told anybody your dream they would come and take me away from you. You wouldn't like to lose your mother, would you? You couldn't do without her, could you? David darling, don't tell anybody what you were dreaming last night. Promise me! Promise me, David!"

"It wasn't a dream," he told her. "But I won't tell anybody."

"It's one of our little secrets," she went on. "You and I have lots of silly little secrets together, David. Like the fairy-tales I tell you. Like the funny games we have together. They belong to you and me, my sweet. Nobody else must share them, do you understand?"

He understood perfectly. Even then, in some way which he couldn't put into words, he knew that it was dangerous to tell people about his mother, or about the things they did together, like reading English books. Life was dangerous, he knew, long before he was seven. Fire burnt one's fingers. Children were lost in the snow and died like birds. Grown-up people were sometimes dangerous. If one said the wrong thing they killed one. Bugs and lice and fleas were dangerous. It was Miss Smith who told him that. They gave people dreadful diseases, she said. It was dangerous—though he didn't know this until he was past babyhood—to be called by certain names in Russia,

names of the old families who used to be rich in the days before the Revolution. They had to hide because of their names, and their hiding-places were nearly always found. Then they were shot by the Cheka. The Cheka had something to do with the police. People never spoke about it out loud. They whispered the word "Cheka," looking over their shoulders, first one way and then the other. An uncle of his was shot because he had the wrong name, a young man he called Uncle Sacha, though he wasn't really an uncle. It was when they were living for a time in Novgorod, before the Civil War had flowed that way. Uncle Sacha used to come and play games. He was very good at hide and seek in the garden and he used to throw up little Olga like a ball and catch her again. He was frightfully good pretending to be a bear or an elephant, or an ogre, so that Vladimir was sometimes afraid, even though he knew it was only Uncle Sacha. He was very fond of Vladimir's mother, and always kissed her hand when he came and when he went. They used to laugh a lot together, except once when Vladimir found them weeping. That was when he said good-bye for a long time. Then he turned up again in Moscow a year afterwards, and played more games. He could speak English very well, unlike most Russians, and liked talking English to Vladimir's mother who was always glad to see him, so that her eyes lighted up and a little rose-like colour came into her white face, as Vladimir noticed, small boy though he was. Then he disappeared and never came again.

"Where is Uncle Sacha?" asked Vladimir one day. "He never finished drawing me that picture of knights in armour."

His mother cried out in a terrible voice.

"They've killed him! Those devils have killed him!"

"What devils?" asked Vladimir.

She lowered her voice and put her hands to her breast.

"The Cheka," she whispered.

"Did he have a bad name?" asked Vladimir.

"Hush!" said his mother. "We mustn't speak about it. It's dangerous. I ought not to have told you, David. Promise me not to speak about it."

She made the sign of the cross over his lips. She had always done that when she wanted him to keep a secret.

Looking back upon those days afterwards Vladimir was certain that his mother was always frightened. Yet she hid her fear quite a lot and made him believe that she was gay and happy, except now and then. She was always playful with him and Olga. She had wonderful hands. She could make shadow pictures on the walls when the kerosene-lamps were lit before bedtime—rabbits and dogs and crocodiles and birds, and funny old men who opened and shut their mouths. She used to shock Miss Smith, who was very prim, by being boisterous and giving pick-a-backs to a six-year-old son, or hiding from him

and little Olga in cupboards and cubby-holes. Once they had a piano, but that must have been in the very early days of his remembrance, before pianos were looked upon for a time as *bourgeois* luxuries, and anyhow they hadn't one. But he remembered watching her fingers running about the black and white notes and making beautiful noises. That must have been when he learnt a lot of old English songs—children's songs and some others which afterwards he tried to forget because they came from a country rotten and corrupt with bourgeois ideology, according to what he learnt in school. But they remained in his subconscious mind. *Sing a Song of Sixpence. Ba Ba Black Sheep, Have You Any Wool? Oh Dear, What Can the Matter Be?* She loved one song called *Annie Laurie*, and when there was no longer a piano she sang it to herself while she was doing household work, keeping the rooms clean. It had a haunting air. It floated into his mind afterwards in places of ruin, stinking of death on the way to Berlin. Once when he was delirious from fever—that was in Kiev—he was aware of singing the old nursery rhymes which he had learnt as a child in English.

Ba ba, black sheep, have you any wool?
Yes sir, yes sir, three bags full.

The doctor told him that he had been singing in English, the same song over and over again.

"Ba ba something. What was that queer stuff in English?"

He looked suspiciously at Vladimir as though doubtful whether this song in English were in accordance with Soviet ideology.

III

It was when they were at Kazan on the Volga, during the time of the great hunger, that the boy asked his mother, by ceaseless questioning, about her English life and relations. It opened up a new realm of imagination, just like a fairy-tale in real life, or like the bits in *David Copperfield* and *Nicholas Nickleby* which she read out to him, or which at eight years old he could read himself.

"Tell me about when you were a little girl, Mother. It must have been a long time ago."

She laughed at this small fair-haired son, so English-looking, who thought she must be very, very old. Sometimes she felt very, very old in this Russia after revolution and civil war, but she was not more than thirty then, and sometimes when she caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror she thought she did not look as old as that, in spite of living for several years with fear as her bed-fellow.

"I lived in a place near London called Clapham. It has a good common—a big open field with nice houses round it. I used to play on the common with my brothers and sisters. There was a pond at one end of it, and in the winter it used to get frozen over and we went skating and sliding. But once, when the ice was melting, I went through, and was wet to the skin in ice-cold water. I screamed like Billy o, and my brother Dick—the eldest, you know—rushed and dragged me out. He thought it a great joke, but I might have caught my death of cold."

"I don't see why he should have laughed at you," said the boy. "That was cruel of him."

"Oh no, he couldn't be cruel. He was the dearest and kindest boy. I told you that he was killed in the war, on the Somme. I wept my heart out for him."

There were tears in her eyes now when she thought of that dead brother.

"I suppose I shall be killed in another war," said the boy carelessly. "When boys grow up they have to be killed, fighting for their country. Or else they get killed in a civil war."

"Don't talk such nonsense!" cried his mother. "Oh, David my dear, what terrible things you say sometimes!"

"It's what happens, isn't it? But go on telling me about when you were a

little girl, Mother."

She told him about her own father and mother. Her father was a clergyman and rather strict. They weren't allowed to play games on Sunday except on the sly. They had to go to church twice on that day, and when she was a little girl she used to fall asleep during his sermon with her head on one of her brother's shoulders.

"Your father must have been a very stupid and unpleasant man," said Vladimir after some further stories about his English grandfather's strictness. "He reminds me of Mr. Murdstone in *David Copperfield*."

"Oh, not such an old brute as that!" cried his mother, laughing. "He was narrow-minded, but not cruel. Even my mother was a little afraid of him, poor dear. She was a saint, and I can't think how she brought us all up. She was always sewing and mending because we didn't have much money. But she played the piano and sang like an angel."

"Not as well as you do, I bet!" said Vladimir loyally. "But tell me about Uncle George. I like to hear about him. He is very amusing."

"Yes," said his mother with a laugh. "He could imitate almost any bird or animal and he made funny faces which kept one laughing. When he did his codfish face I used to scream with laughter. He was wonderful at a children's party, and could do all sorts of conjuring tricks. One day he went to a children's party and told the maid not to announce him before opening the door to the room where the guests were assembled. Then he did a catherine-wheel into the room. But unfortunately he had gone to the wrong house and inside the room was a party of old ladies and gentlemen listening to an address by a Bishop. It must have been funny!"

Vladimir laughed very much at this story of Uncle George who was a lawyer and a Conservative member of Parliament so his mother had told him, though he could not understand what those words meant, except something very important in England.

"England must be a very funny country," remarked the small boy. "It must be full of funny people. It can't be a bit like Russia. Sometimes I wonder if it's one of your fairy-tales, Mother. Like Cinderella and Puss in Boots. Word of honour, is it all true?"

"Word of honour!" said his mother, laughing at him.

"Do you mean to say there is never any famine in England?"

"Good gracious, no! Everybody has enough to eat. Even the poorest of the poor. No one is allowed to die of starvation."

"Don't people get shot if they say things against the Government?"

"They can say what they like against the Government, David. In Parliament there are two parties. One is the Government and the other criticizes the Government. They're called His Majesty's Opposition. It's their

duty to criticize."

"I can't understand that," said Vladimir who tried to understand. "But it's not very interesting. Tell me about the waxworks at Madame Tussaud's, and the toys in Gamages, and the motor-cars in Piccadilly. But don't tell me any lies, Mummy. I mean, do keep it away from fairy-tales."

He had found out some time before then that his mother had come to Russia as a governess like Miss Smith. She had just turned twenty, and had suddenly been seized by a desire to escape like a bird from a narrow cage. Her father still treated her as a child. He ordered her about and expected her to obey. He was grumpy if she went out to dances like other girls, and one night there had been a family row when she arrived home at two in the morning with her brother Richard. They had been to a theatre and a night club with some young friends, and Richard had drunk too much and clung to her arm, laughing in a silly way because his legs did the wrong things when he walked. They had to get in through a window which unfortunately was their father's study, and Richard overturned a table with an inkpot on it, spilling the ink on the carpet. It went down with an awful crash.

"Oh, my goodness!" cried Lucy—that was the name of Vladimir's mother. "What shall we do about that, Dick?"

"That's perfectly all right," said Dick. "Everything is perfectly all right. We had a wonderful time. I feel very jolly with myself."

He sat down heavily in one of his father's arm-chairs, stretched out his legs and laughed. But the laugh left his face, and he didn't feel so jolly when the door opened and his father came into the room. He was wearing a dressing-gown over his pyjamas, and had forgotten to put in his false teeth, so that he spoke in a funny way.

But he didn't say funny things. He was a Man of Wrath.

Lucy could never decide whether the ink on the carpet or Richard's state of intoxication made him more wrathful, but he said very harsh things.

"Oh, he was very waxy, David!"

"Tell me everything he said, Mummy," implored young Vladimir, listening to this story with excitement.

"He threatened to turn us both out of the house. He said we had behaved disgracefully. As a clergyman of the Church of England he was deeply shocked by this abominable conduct of his own son and daughter. Richard began to argue with him, and that made matters worse because he could not pronounce his words properly."

"Why not?" asked Vladimir.

"When a man drinks too much wine," said Lucy, "he finds it hard to pronounce difficult words. He makes them sound all silly."

"Oh!" said Vladimir. "It's the first time I've heard of that. But go on,

Mother. Don't stop."

" 'You're drunk Richard,' said Father. 'You're in a disgusting condition.' 'Sir,' said Richard, 'I feel very jolly and I don't care a damn.' That's a dreadful word to use before a clergyman, David!"

"What happened then?"

"Then I became angry and told Father we were sick of being treated like babies. We were old enough to have a little liberty. That put all the fat in the fire, my little one."

"How do you mean, Mother? Is that a proverb, or did someone really throw fat on the fire?"

"It means that Father became furious. 'If you want liberty,' he cried, 'leave my house and do not expect me to keep you in idleness and luxury.' That put the lid on."

"What lid? Put it on what?"

"I mean it made my blood boil. I said, 'I'll keep myself, thank you, Father.' And I meant it, though I was sorry for mother. I searched the newspaper advertisements in the Public Library. I found one advertising for a governess to go to Russia with a German Baron and his wife and two little girls. I answered the advertisement, and the German Baroness asked me to take charge of the two little girls. So that's how I came to Russia as an English governess."

"Not like Miss Smith," said Vladimir called David. "You were too pretty to be a governess, Mother."

She smiled at that compliment and put her fingers through his fair hair—her long thin fingers.

"I thought I was going for a year. But the war came in 1914, and my German Baron and Baroness fled with their children, leaving me behind."

"Then you married Papa."

"Yes, then I married Papa. He was fighting on the same side as England under the Czar. His mother was very kind to me when the Baron and Baroness left me behind. Your father thought I was pretty."

"Now he's a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Red Army," said Vladimir with pride.

"Yes," said his mother. "Now he's a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Red Army, I never thought that would happen."

"It's a very great honour," said Vladimir. "It's higher than a Lieutenant or a Captain. It's higher even than a Major. The next step is to be a General. Because my father is a Lieutenant-Colonel we get more food, Mother, when others are hungry. That's excellent! But I'm sorry that you don't love Papa because he's a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Red Army."

He saw the look of fear creep into his mother's eyes—that look that he knew so well even as a boy of seven or eight.

“I’ve been talking too much,” she said in a low voice. “I tell you too much about England, David. If you tell anyone else——”

“Don’t be afraid, little mother,” he told her. “I won’t let anybody kill you. The Cheka will never get me to tell them the secret talks we have. Honour bright!”

She repeated his words “the Cheka” in a whisper, and put her hand up to her throat. Her face had gone dead white.

“David!” she said in that whispering voice. “Don’t speak that word. Oh, what a fool I am to talk like this before a child! But I can’t help it. You are half English, David, and I’m your English mother, and all my English life is in my heart.”

“I won’t tell, Mother,” he said sturdily.

But perhaps that was the beginning of a conflict within himself, a conflict of divided loyalties. He was half English, but also half Russian, and Russia was his fatherland. He was proud of being the son of a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Soviet Army.

IV

Vladimir was born in 1915, a year after the beginning of the first world war. His father's people must have been well-to-do before the war because they had a house in Moscow and a villa in the Crimea. They were not aristocrats like some of the "White" Russians who were shot in the time of the Revolution unless they escaped first to foreign countries. They belonged to the merchant class as Vladimir was told by his mother when he was old enough to understand things like that. But when their son was fighting against the Germans with an occasional time on leave, from 1915 onwards, they provided his mother with a nursery governess for Vladimir and Olga who had been born in 1917. That was Miss Smith. Perhaps they engaged her partly out of pity because she had been stranded in Russia like Vladimir's mother when the war began.

"I used to hate her," said Vladimir when they talked about her afterwards.

"No, no, David! She was a very good sort, but a little too prim. She was devoted to you and Olga."

"She used to smack me when she said I was naughty."

"I expect you jolly well deserved it."

"She used to make me wash behind the ears in ice-cold water. She told me that little English gentlemen washed behind the ears and kept their nails clean and never had lice on their bodies."

"Poor Miss Smith!" cried Lucy with a laugh. "She was a bit of a snob. She had been in service with English lords and ladies looking after their brats before she came out here with a Russian Princess and her children. That is to say she had married a Russian Prince but was a French actress and fled as soon as the war started, leaving poor Miss Smith in the lurch. Just like my German Baroness."

"I can't think why you liked Miss Smith," said Vladimir. "I can't remember her very well but I know I hated her. She had a red nose."

"She had a heart of gold, David, and she was English and very brave. She was a great comfort to me when we were caught between the fires during the Civil War, and had to take to the roads, with villages burning behind us and Reds and Whites killing each other in the snow, or the sun."

"I remember that," said Vladimir. "I remember lying under the straw in a

farm cart. I remember the creaking of the wheels which wanted grease. I remember Miss Smith nursing Olga who was a tiny girl, and I remember the long trail of refugees crawling along the roads with farm carts and wheelbarrows. I remember being hungry."

"Yes," said Lucy. "I wonder we didn't all die. We very nearly did several times. Once when the Red Army stormed a village where we had taken shelter, not thinking the war was near us."

"Tell me," said Vladimir.

His mother warmed her hands against the stove and listened for a moment to footsteps passing on frozen snow outside this house on the outskirts of Kazan. She could hear children's voices. It was another group of hungry and abandoned children coming into Kazan from villages down the Volga where there was no food for them. Some of them were like young wolves, fierce and wild. Others were like Hansel and Gretel, holding hands as they trudged through the snow until many of them dropped and died.

"Those poor little ones!" said Lucy in a low voice.

"Tell me about the escape we had," said Vladimir, not worrying about the hordes of hungry children outside. As a son of a Lieutenant-Colonel of the Red Army he and Olga and his mother had enough to eat, or almost enough.

"The village where we took refuge that night had been in the hands of the White Russians for several months. It had been Denikin's headquarters, and they had hanged a number of men who sympathized with the Red Army. Denikin had left behind about forty men and six officers. The officers were billeted in the inn where we took shelter. They were very nice to us and one of them played with you and Olga until Miss Smith put you to bed in the hay-loft. They invited me to join them at table although I told them that my husband was a soldier in the Red Army. There were two ladies with them—not very nice ladies, I think—and while we were waiting for dinner we drank some vodka out of mugs. Suddenly there was the sound of firing in the village and a shot came through one of the walls. It killed one of the ladies—well, I call them ladies. She fell without a cry with her head on the table and her arms flopping, and the glasses of vodka fell to the floor and splintered into little bits. The officers sprang up and ran for their revolvers. They weren't in uniform of course. One of them wore a woman's jacket over his suit and patent-leather shoes. That was the one who had played with you and Olga. His name was Tereschenko. There was heavy firing close to the house and a lot of hoarse shouting. A bullet came through one of the windows, splintering the glass, and I heard it whiz past my ear before it buried itself in the opposite wall."

"Were you frightened, Mother?" asked Vladimir with excited eyes.

"No! It's a funny thing. I wasn't frightened. I just thought now we're all going to be killed. Perhaps that would be a good thing. Tereschenko—he was

very good-looking—smiled at me as our eyes met. ‘This is the end’, he said. ‘I’m glad to have met you, dear lady. I love those charming children of yours.’

“A bullet went through his head and he fell like a log. Just then the door opened and Miss Smith came in carrying baby Olga like a bundle under one arm and you over her other shoulder.”

“I don’t remember it,” said Vladimir. “Except like a dream that I’ve forgotten. What happened then?”

“Miss Smith spoke to me. She was quite calm and brave, but her nose seemed redder than usual. She looked at the body of the dead lady—I’ve told you about her—and that of Tereschenko, but didn’t seem shocked. ‘If there’s a cellar here,’ she said, ‘I suggest we go down to it. I don’t like these bullets. They might hurt the children.’ But it was too late to go into a cellar, if there was a cellar. The door of the room was smashed open by the end of a rifle and a crowd of Red soldiers rushed in. Their naked bayonets gleamed in the light. They were filthy in mud and snow. Their eyes were like those of hungry wolves. They bayoneted the other officers and one of them put his bayonet to my stomach and shouted a nasty name at me.”

“What name?” asked Vladimir, greedy for all details.

“Nothing nice, David! Not for your young ears.”

Vladimir grinned. “I know a lot of bad words from the other boys. But it doesn’t matter. What happened next? He couldn’t have killed you with his bayonet or you couldn’t be here telling me about it.”

Lucy smiled in a queer way.

“That’s true! Here I am still alive in Russia and talking to my son David. No, he didn’t shove his bayonet into me. He stared at me as though he had gone mad, and then suddenly called out my name—Lucy! It was your Papa, David. What novelists call ‘the long arm of coincidence’, and not to be believed except in Russia, where anything could happen in the Civil War.

“Why haven’t you told me that before?” asked Vladimir. “It’s your best story, Mother. It’s like a fairy-tale. Are you sure it’s true?”

Lucy smiled again with that queer look in her eyes.

“It’s true, David. Sometimes I dream of it at night—the death of Tereschenko who was so good-looking, the look of that pretty lady who was not very nice, when her head flopped on to the table, and the gleam of light on the sharp long bayonets, and . . .” She spoke some words to herself very softly but not too softly for Vladimir’s sharp ears.

“The stench of blood—sickening.”

“I call it a good story,” said Vladimir. “I would like to hear it all over again.”

“I’m sorry I told it to you,” said Lucy. “Why do I tell you all these horrors, David? Aren’t there horrors enough all round us now?”

She went to the window and put her hands on each side of her head so that she could look out into the darkness. There was a moon at three quarters shining on the frozen snow. Across the snow came a line of little black figures. They were the hungry children stumbling their way forward to the city of Kazan from villages down the Volga where there was no food for them, and where their parents lay dead or dying in the little wooden houses.

It was during the Civil War—Vladimir's memory confused times and places in those early days—that Miss Smith died.

He remembered as in a dream a period of wandering in farm carts and covered wagons with crowds of people who were mostly peasants, women and young girls, old people and children, trying to escape from the Reds or the Whites, all mixed up and not sure which way to go lest they should be trapped in villages which sometimes burned behind them.

He remembered this time as being in summer, very hot and scorching. He remembered being thirsty and crying for water, and he remembered the gritty taste of white dust in his mouth and the dust and flies and sweat making his eyes smart as he clutched his mother's hand or frock while they trudged down long endless roads behind the farm carts. Some of the women moaned and wept in a silly way. They were peasant women who had left their farms. Some of their husbands had been killed by Whites or Reds—it didn't seem to make much difference whether they were Whites or Reds. Some of their men were swinging by their necks from trees or signboards in villages and small towns. He remembered very well those dead bodies with clouds of flies about them. He had stared at them curiously and without surprise. It happened like that, he knew, in time of civil war. His memory of those days was not one of horror or fear but of an open-air gypsy-like existence with troops of other children, dirty, ragged and verminous like himself, but happy on the whole if his dream of all this were true. They fought with each other, tore one another's hair, scratched each other's faces and then played on the roadsides in the dust or burnt grass. They slept in cow-sheds and barns. That, no doubt, was how they became verminous—even Miss Smith, who shuddered at the thought of lice, and tried to keep Vladimir and Olga free of them. Her shoes wore out and she walked barefoot. Her black frock was often white with dust, and her hands and face were dirty. But she kept a little comb in her pocket and was always combing the children's hair and then her own.

One night she became delirious, as Vladimir's mother told him.

"I knew she had typhus because of the bright colour in her cheeks. We had no shelter that night and huddled between the farm carts. The stars were very bright above us, and far away three villages were burning, and we could see the leaping flames. It was when Denikin's army advanced again. But that doesn't matter now. It didn't matter then to poor Miss Smith. She lay on a

mattress from one of the carts. The farmer was a kind man and sorry for this English Miss. She kept talking and I listened with fear in my heart because I knew she had typhus, and I was afraid she might pass it on to you and baby Olga. She kept talking of English boys to whom she had been governess. There was one called Francis, and she kept on telling him not to be naughty. 'It's so wrong of you to behave like that,' she said. 'You'll get into trouble when you go to Eton. They have nice manners there. Young gentlemen at Eton never bite their nails or pick their noses.' "

"What else did she say?" asked Vladimir, much interested in the death of Miss Smith.

"She spoke about a young man named Lord Frederick Something—a funny name which I can't remember. She said, 'You mustn't come into the nursery so often. Her ladyship won't like it. No, I'm not going to give you a kiss. No, don't take my hand. Supposing her ladyship came in? It's silly to say you love me. I'm only a nursery governess, and you're a boy of eighteen. You're making me very unhappy. You make me afraid. I shall have to leave.' "

"She must have been in love with him," said Vladimir. "Like David Copperfield fell in love with Dora."

"Bless the child!" cried Lucy, laughing at this precocious knowledge. It was her fault. She had talked so much to him, and told him so many stories.

"What else did Miss Smith say before she died?"

"I couldn't hear all she said. I didn't want to. But once she called out 'My dear England! My dear, dear England!' and it was such a heart-rending cry that I wept because I too was English and loved England, and hate this Russia with all its horrors of war and revolution. She died soon afterwards, poor dear. Some of the peasants made a hole in the ground for her and buried her. That was the last of Miss Smith, and I was heart-broken because she and I had become good friends, and she was English, and I was alone now in Russia with two small children, between the Whites and the Reds."

"Russia is a very fine country," said Vladimir. "I don't see why you should hate Russia."

"I said I hated Russia, David, because of war and revolution. Of course I don't hate Russia now. Don't misunderstand me, for goodness' sake."

He could see that she was frightened again. He always knew when she was frightened.

"I'll tell everybody that you love Russia," he said laughingly, "and I shall be telling a big lie for your sake, Mother."

She had given her life into the hands of this young boy.

V

For a time during the war between the Whites and Reds Denikin's army thrust very near to Moscow. Vladimir's mother found rest and shelter for a time in a village named Zaratov, a hundred miles or so south of that old city which she had tried to reach. It was like thousands of other Russian villages, with wooden houses built inside a stockade, and a white wooden church with a pear-shaped dome of copper. Here, before the communal farm system had been enforced, most of the men were peasant farmers with strips of land beyond the village, and a cow or two which in winter-time they put into sheds next to their houses with the pigs and poultry. The church was used as a storehouse, and the priest had been killed in the first days of the Revolution. The man who killed him by strangulation was the local Kommissar who was proud of this deed and made no secret of it. His name was Igor Ivanovich and he was a petty tyrant in the village, carrying out orders from the Commune who received their own orders direct from Moscow. He was a heavily built, black-bearded man who had formerly been the village blacksmith but was now a State Official. He kept his eye on all the small farmers whom he called *kulaks*, meaning "fists," or graspers, and bullied them with dark threats of the Cheka if they failed to deliver the right quantity of produce levied for the use of the Red Army under Trotsky.

He kept his eye also on the village school, insisting upon the intensive teaching of Communist principles—the pure Gospel of Lenin and Karl Marx—by an elderly schoolmistress and a young master in charge of the boys. Their task was not easy as there was no fuel to heat the school-house, no books, paper or blackboards for the instruction of young minds, and a scarce attendance of youth who stayed away during winter months for lack of boots and shoes.

Vladimir and his mother were lodgers in the schoolmaster's house. This young man, Dmitri, was a hunchback who lived with his mother. He had black hair which fell over his forehead and a pale clean-shaven face. He was nothing but skin and bones, and Vladimir remembered in after years his long thin arms and bony wrists sticking out of a ragged jacket with sleeves too short for him. Although he was only a village schoolmaster he was an earnest student, and during the long winter evenings was always reading a book by the light of a

kerosene-lamp which made the room smell of oil. But sometimes his eyes left the printed words and rested on the face of Lucy who was on the other side of the table reading a tattered old book of her own—*Vanity Fair* or *The Mill on the Floss* or *Hans Andersen's Fairy Tales* which she used to read out to her small son. These English books and three or four others were her greatest treasures which she had saved through all the dangers and hardships of the Civil War, packed up with a few other belongings, mostly clothes, and taken with her on farm carts when they had been wanderers and fugitives. Vladimir remembered the look of them, the faded colour of their tattered covers, and some of the pictures in them, especially those of *Hans Andersen's Fairy Tales*. In this house of Dmitri the hunchbacked schoolmaster Vladimir slept over the stove with his mother and Olga. Outside in winter the snow lay thick and hard, glistening like crushed diamonds under the moonlight, as the boy could see through a little window just opposite the stove. But in the room it was warm and foggy with that smell of the lamp. Sometimes he lay awake before his mother came to bed, and from his high place he looked down on the figures in the room and watched them. Dmitri's mother was there, a woman like an old witch, he thought, though perhaps she was not really so old as he thought afterwards. But there were silver threads in her hair and little wrinkles round her eyes and mouth and some of her teeth had gone as he could see when she smiled at him. Sometimes his mother laughed over one of her English books or would look up at him and say, "Go to sleep, you monkey!" The small boy watching her thought she was beautiful. That thought came to him as a kind of surprise one night. "Mother is beautiful," he thought, "but not in a Russian way. She is very English of course. She has a fair skin with the colour of rose-petals in her cheeks, and she has little waves in her hair. Dmitri thinks her beautiful. Perhaps that is why he looks up from his book so often to stare at her. He looks queer down there with his hunchback making a funny shadow on the wall, and his black hair falling over his eyes."

He was kind to Vladimir and taught him Russian poetry and told him some of the old Russian fairy-tales quite different from the English, and drew pictures of Russian heroes in the old days before the Revolution. With his long bony fingers he could draw wonderfully and make things come alive. But these pictures and Lucy's English books were the cause of trouble one night—an exciting night—which the small boy never forgot though he could not remember a lot of other things.

He was lying awake up there on the stove when he heard footsteps coming over the hard snow outside, crunch, crunch, crunch. The other people in the room heard them. He saw his mother raise her head and listen. He saw Dmitri half rise from his chair so that the shadow of his humpback shifted on the whitewashed wall. Dmitri's mother put down some needlework and asked in a

frightened voice, “Who is that?”

There was a heavy clout at the door which was locked. Dmitri went across the room and called out in a thin high-pitched voice, “Who is there?” From outside in the snow came a harsh answer.

“It is Igor Ivanovich. Open the door.”

Dmitri turned the key in the lock, and his hand was shaking so that the key rattled. Cold air rushed in as the door opened and Vladimir sneezed up there on the stove where he sat up with a sense of excitement.

The tall black-bearded man strode into the room beating powdered snow from his chest. There was a crown of snow on his fur cap which he did not take off.

“Good evening, Igor Ivanovich,” said Dmitri’s mother in a soft voice. “You will take a cup of tea with us?”

Igor stared round at the three people in the room—Dmitri, Dmitri’s mother, and Lucy. His black eyes turned upwards to where young Vladimir was sitting up on the stove. Little Olga was just a sleeping bundle up there.

“I haven’t come for a cup of tea,” he answered roughly. “I have come to ask some questions of Dmitri Mihaelovich, who has been entrusted with the education of Russian youth in this village and is therefore an important servant of the State which relies upon his loyalty to the Revolution and the orders of Lenin to whom we owe everything.”

“My son is a faithful servant of the Revolution,” said Dmitri’s mother. “Take a chair, Igor Ivanovich. My son will answer all your questions with pleasure. He has nothing to fear.”

“Let him speak for himself, old mother!” answered Ivanovich harshly. “He has a tongue in his head, I suppose.”

Dmitri had a tongue in his head but seemed unable to use it. All colour had left his face and his lips seemed dry until he moistened them with his tongue.

Ivanovich sat down on one of the chairs and took off his fur cap on which the snow was melting.

“I have bad reports of you,” he said to Dmitri. “I have come here to warn you. Hunchback though you are, there will be no mercy from me if you continue to teach *bourjoi* filth to the boys of this village. I am Kommissar here. I am responsible for the morality and loyalty of this community. I do my duty as a son of the Revolution. I wish you to do yours.”

“You have certain complaints?” asked Dmitri in a frightened voice.

“I have, Dmitri Mihaelovich. Very serious complaints. Instead of teaching the boys to read and write you have been telling them stories which they repeat at home. They are not good stories, Dmitri Mihaelovich.”

Dmitri moistened his lips again.

“There is no paper in the school,” he said. “There is no blackboard. It is

difficult to teach the boys reading and writing without paper, though I do my best. Now and again I tell them stories to awaken their interest and teach them a little history."

"It's bad history," said Igor Ivanovich, once the blacksmith of the village, but able to read and write, having been taught by Dmitri's mother in the days before the Revolution.

"You have been telling them about the times of Imperial Russia. You've been telling them fairy-tales which are a pack of lies and *bourjoi* ideology. You've been telling them about princes and princesses and magic carpets and treasures of gold and silver and precious stones. All that is contrary to the teachings of Karl Marx and the doctrine of Lenin. It is against the orders I have received from Moscow. The Red Army isn't fighting for princes and princesses. The Cheka knows how to deal with them. What have you to say, Dmitri Mihaelovich?"

"They are old Russian folk-stories," said Dmitri. "They seemed to me harmless. The fairy princes and princesses exist only in the realm of imagination."

"Imagination is poisoned by them!" answered Ivanovich harshly. "I heard them in my own childhood. They were a deadly menace to my mind. I strangled them like once I strangled the priest of this village. So I will kill all superstition and *bourjoi* influence on the mind of Russian youth."

There was further talk. It went on and on as though for ever. Young Vladimir, sitting up on his bed above the stove, grew tired of it, but suddenly something else happened.

Igor Ivanovich's black eyes had roved towards the book which Lucy had been reading—*Hans Andersen's Fairy Tales*. His big hairy hand grabbed it and he turned over the pages and looked at the pictures. They were pictures of fairy princes and princesses and other characters of fairyland.

He gave several grunts of horror and disgust.

"This is a house of *bourjoi* ideology," he said. "It stinks of the pre-revolutionary cult. It's disgusting and abominable. These books must be destroyed."

"It's my book!" cried Lucy in a shrill voice. "Give it to me!"

Ivanovich took *Hans Andersen's Fairy Tales* in its tattered green cover and, grasping it with his big hairy blacksmith's hands, tore it in half.

At that moment Vladimir came into action. The sight of this book being torn in half enraged him. He flung himself off the top of the stove and made a rush at Igor.

"How dare you?" he cried. "That is Mamma's book. It's my favourite book. I love it. I won't let it be torn up."

He tried to get hold of the book, but Ivanovich held it beyond his reach and

gave the small boy a blow which sent him sprawling across the room. Then he tore the book to pieces.

"This is a serious affair," he said. "Here in this room is an example of the debauchery of the younger mind. Dmitri Mihaelovich, you and your companions are betraying the Revolution. You are the poisoners of Russian boyhood. I shall make a report about you, you dirty hunchback."

He picked up his fur cap and strode to the door, flung it open and went out into the frosty air which for a moment leapt into the room like a cold sword-blade. It was Dmitri's mother who shut the door. Vladimir was on the floor sobbing and picking up the torn leaves of *Hans Andersen*. Lucy stood looking at Dmitri with fear in her eyes. Dmitri spoke a few words in a low voice.

"I am lost!"

It was three days later in the early morning when two Red soldiers and an officer of the Cheka in civilian clothes came to Dmitri's house and arrested him. Before he was led away he went towards Lucy and took her hands and kissed them. He spoke to her in a strangled voice.

"You came with beauty into this house. You were kind and did not look with horror on my hunchback. Your laughter filled this room with glamour and delight. I thank you a million times."

Lucy put her arms about his, her hands on his hunched back. She was sobbing when the officer of the Cheka spoke a word and the two soldiers grabbed Dmitri by each arm and led him away. Dmitri's mother gave a piercing shriek and fell to the floor where Lucy knelt beside her. To Vladimir it was all very exciting.

VI

When they were in Kazan the Civil War was over and they were no longer refugees between two fires. Vladimir's father had joined them and was billeted in the Kremlin or fortress of Kazan while his family lived in a one-story house on the outskirts of the city, not far from the great River Volga frozen in the hardest months of winter so that not even barges could push their way through the ice. Lucy took her small boy for walks in the city on frosty mornings when the dome of the cathedral gleamed like burnished gold and the onion-shaped domes of fifty churches clustered in the blue sky high above the houses like floating balloons. The snow was crisp and hard to the feet and had drifted against the garden fences and the city walls. Men and women in ragged fur caps tied round the ears, heavily muffled in rags, and with straw in wooden shoes or round their bare feet, dragged along the roadways sledges piled high with household things. They were refugees from the villages down the Volga where in good years the black earth gave the richest harvest in Russia. But there had been two years when the seed grass was burnt in the soil by the intense heat of the sun in two springs and summers of drought. Not for the first time had it happened within living memory, and the peasant farmers had always kept stocks of grain for such a possibility. But this time their reserves of grain had been seized to supply the Red Armies and when the drought came they had no reserves, or very little, to keep them alive. Men, women and children were facing death by starvation and thousands were dying slowly in the villages. The children's stomachs were swollen as though filled with water though there was no flesh on their bones. Women carried babies with claw-like hands and faces like wizened monkeys. Food might have reached them from other parts of Russia by orders from Lenin. His brain was still working in the Kremlin of Moscow though he was a dying man himself, but the railroad system had broken down after the German war, revolution and civil war. There were few engines and few wagons. Rails needed repair over great lengths of line. Some stocks of potatoes came down the Volga by barge until the ice prevented all navigation and even that form of rescue did not reach out very far beyond the landing-stages because so many horses had died—their bleached bones were on the roadways—and men were too weak to drag the sledges.

"I can't bear to see these people," said Lucy. "My heart bleeds at the sight

of the children. Those poor little ones!"

With the callousness of youth, as though this were part of ordinary and normal life—in childhood one takes everything for granted—Vladimir watched the trails of children across the snow, or the huddled heaps of them where they lay exhausted. Typhus caught hold of them. Every morning in Kazan carts passed with the bodies of those who had died.

"I expect those are dead ones," said Vladimir, staring at one of these carts. "I expect typhus kills them more quickly than hunger."

Lucy answered in a low voice.

"There's no God in Russia."

"Father doesn't believe in God," said Vladimir. "He says it's a fairy-tale, this story of God. In any case we are not allowed to believe such things. Religion is the opium of the people. That's what we are taught in school."

"David!" cried Lucy. He was holding her hand as they walked in Kazan, and he felt her grip his hand so tightly that she hurt him. "It's because the Russians have given up their belief in God that so many terrible things are happening. You needn't tell anyone, David, but try to believe in God for my sake and your own and remember the little prayers I have taught you. If one doesn't believe in God one becomes a devil. One does devilish things. Without faith in God men become cruel and wicked and without mercy."

He answered with a vexed kind of laugh.

"Mother, you're always saying things which make it difficult for me. Of course I love you more than anybody in the world, but I'm a Russian boy and I can't stand out against what the others think, and what they're taught. This God stuff of yours is very dangerous. It's strictly forbidden. You know that."

"I know," she said to him. "But make it one of our secrets, David, like *Hans Andersen's Fairy Tales*. Do you remember how you fought with Igor Ivanovich when he tore up the book? That was brave of you."

"Oh, that was a long time ago," he answered. "I've grown up since then. I'm eight years old now. They were all nonsense, those tales. They belong to the *bourjoi* sentiment of the English people who are our enemies."

Lucy stopped and stared at him. He saw a look of anguish in her eyes, or a look of terror.

"Oh, David!" she cried. "My little David! Have I lost you too?"

"Here I am," he said, "holding your hand, Mother! What makes you think you've lost me?"

They were in the garden round the cathedral. The snow was frozen on the trees. Every branch and twig was like glittering ice. The ground was covered by an ermine mantle. High above the trees the dome of the cathedral dazzled in the brilliant sunshine which struck shafts of light from its metal. They were alone in this white world.

Suddenly Lucy began to weep and covered her face with her gloved hands, woollen gloves which she had knitted for herself. Her body was shaken by sobs. Vladimir was frightened.

"Mother!" he cried. "Little Mother! Why do you cry like that?"

He flung himself at her and put his face against her body.

Presently instead of crying she began to laugh.

"I'm absurd," she told him. "I suppose I didn't have enough for breakfast. Sorry, David, my dear! You have a very foolish mother, haven't you? Always saying ridiculous things. So silly of me!"

"Speak in Russian," he told her. "There are people coming. It's safer to speak Russian."

Some Tartars came by dragging a sledge. Kazan was once the capital of the Golden Horde of Mongols who invaded this part of Russia. Many of them still remained, Chinese-looking men with slant eyes and sparse hairs on their chins.

"Let's make a snow man," suggested Lucy, anxious to make her son forget her breakdown.

"Is it safe?" he asked. "Isn't it a bit *bourjoi*?"

"Let's risk it, David. Let's have a bit of fun."

She made with his help a very good snow man with bits of stick for his eyes and mouth and a crooked stick for a pipe. Vladimir laughed loudly at this caricature of humanity.

"A bit like old Igor Ivanovich!" he suggested.

But a police officer who came striding through the gardens was not amused. He stared at the snow man and spoke angrily to Lucy. All Vladimir heard was the word *bourjoi* before the officer gave the snow man a kick and made it fall in a heap.

"Never mind!" said Lucy when he had passed. "We had our little bit of fun. We've had a good laugh in time of famine and typhus and all horrors."

It may have been that night, or some other, that Vladimir was awakened from his sleep by footsteps coming down the front path of the little garden round the house and voices at the door. His mother opened the door and gave a little cry of surprise when seven or eight people—men and women—came in stamping their feet and talking rapidly. He heard disconnected words and sentences.

"We're dying of hunger. . . . No food but two sticks of chocolate. . . . I feel faint, my dear. . . . They call us the pampered pets of Soviet Russia! . . . This is a life of horror. . . . Lucy darling, I heard you were in Kazan. I have brought my friends here."

"Come in, dear Anna Kusanova," answered Lucy. "How white you look! How thin!"

"This is Zabotin—the famous, the only, Zabotin. Do you remember? You

met him with me in Moscow before the war. We were at the Academy together."

A handsome young man with straw-coloured hair and blue eyes took Lucy's hand and kissed it.

"Before hell was let loose in Russia," he said. "We were like happy children."

"Hush!" cried the young woman called Anna Kusanova. "Nothing was good before the Revolution. Aren't we asked to believe that?"

"We're all friends here," said the young man called Zabotin—the famous, the only, Zabotin. "We may talk freely. We may even tell the truth."

These people were in the ballet playing in Kazan. Vladimir had been taken there one day by his mother and had lost himself in an enchanted world. People were dying of hunger in Kazan, the refugees from famine were streaming into the streets around the theatre, but the ballet went on. It was in accordance with the cultural philosophy of the Soviet Government. Opera and ballet must be maintained though famine and typhus might take their toll and the white bones of dead horses lie along the roads, and barge-loads of potatoes rot at the landing-stages. Vladimir had seen the ballet with his mother and not even the stench of unwashed lavatories which came in whiffs to the stalls where he sat could spoil his pleasure, though Lucy had to go out and be sick from time to time.

He had seen the great Zabotin now talking to his mother and had been thrilled to his young marrow-bones by his marvellous leaps and spirals and leopard-like grace. It was wonderful that he should be in this little house talking there like an ordinary human being. Vladimir had also seen Anna Kusanova. His mother had pointed her out. "That's Anna Kusanova. I used to know her in Moscow before the war, when she was a young girl of sixteen. Isn't she lovely, David?"

Yes, he had thought her lovely. She was like one of those fairies in *Hans Andersen*. She was like a beautiful bird. She seemed to fly. Her twinkling feet hardly touched the ground. Perhaps she was more like a flower when she stood now and then with her little head above a white neck, drooping like a tired flower in the sun. Now she was down there talking to his mother and the others. He could look down upon her from the top of the stove. But she didn't look so beautiful as when she was dancing. She wore a ragged fur coat tucked up at the neck and an old fur cap tied round the ears, until presently she took off these outer clothes because of the warmth of the room and was there again in her dancing-frock with bare neck and shoulders looking like white marble.

They were all talking together, these people of the ballet. Vladimir listened to them drowsily and could only make out bits here and there. Zabotin talked all the time. He talked with body and hands as well as with his lips. He flung

himself against the wall. He raised his arms or clasped his hands high over his head, and then with one clenched fist beat his breast. What was he saying? Something about the Famine. Something about the wandering children.

"The sight of them makes my heart drip blood. . . . They take them into empty houses where there is no fuel. They strip them of their verminous clothes and there they are huddled together for warmth like a crowd of little monkeys. . . . The nurses are starving of course. They die of typhus like so many of these little ones. There are no blankets. There is no medicine. It is all horrible. Horrible! This Russia is like Dante's *Inferno*. We are all in hell. That is the result of the Revolution. That is what Lenin has brought to Russia."

"Hush, dear Zabotin!" said Anna Kusanova. "Your voice is penetrating. If it were heard outside. . . ."

"Let them shoot me!" cried Zabotin in his clear bell-like voice. "Let them torture me. I would rather be dead. The only happy ones in this Russia are the dead."

Vladimir went to sleep for a while. The warmth of the room and the chorus of those voices made him sleepy again. Then some time later he was awake again. There was a new smell in the room. It was a nice smell of food. Fried fat and onions and black coffee. The people of the ballet were still down there. They were all talking together as when he had fallen asleep. They were eating at the table. He saw his mother come out of the kitchen. She was holding a frying-pan which was all sizzling. Zabotin leapt to his feet and rushed to her, taking the frying-pan.

"It is unbelievable!" he cried. "You work miracles, dear lady. That omelette is divine! But we are eating all your own food. We are ravening wolves. We are without conscience because of empty stomachs. You will have to starve, dear lady, because we devour your reserves. Tomorrow all of us will starve again but tonight we gorge ourselves. Perhaps after all there is a God. He has answered our prayers. Perhaps He has worked this miracle."

There was the sound of laughter from the voices of these young men and women. One of the men with a shock of black hair and greenish-coloured eyes raised his voice above the others.

"I used to believe in God. I still think He may exist elsewhere. But not in Russia. Only the Devil takes command in Russia."

"That's true," said one of the young women. "God has abandoned Russia because of its crimes. Nevertheless I feel happy for an hour because my stomach has some food in it. It's astonishing that one's soul—if there is a soul—is so dependent upon one's stomach. It's a little humiliating perhaps, that thought!"

"We are dual creatures," said one of the young men. He was smoking a cigarette and sipping a cup of coffee. The boy Vladimir on top of the stove

could smell the fumes of the hot coffee. They made a pleasant sensation in his nostrils.

"We are animals," said the young man. "We have animal instincts. But I believe in the immortality of the soul. I believe that we have a spirit as well as a body. Otherwise I could not dance. Otherwise I should kill myself."

"Zabotin," said Lucy, "you're not eating. Have you no more appetite?"

"I'm still hungry," said Zabotin in that bell-like voice which rose above the general conversation. "I'm a ravening wolf, but now the sight of this food makes me sick. I want to go out and vomit. How can we sit here eating when there's famine in all the villages along the Volga, when tonight, now, at this hour, millions are dying of hunger in their little houses? I think of those naked little creatures in Kazan half a mile away from where we sit. Like little monkeys, like little monkeys! I think of the peasant farmers and their wives lying above their stoves with their swollen-bellied children waiting for death drowsily. Their cupboards are empty. The Red Armies seized their grain before the drought came. No food comes down the Volga. No hope of rescue comes to them. O God! O God! How can I eat, how can any of us eat, with that creeping death so close to us? I feel sick. I feel very ill."

He rose from the table as though going out to vomit but flung himself against the wall again with his hands clasped above his head.

"O Christ!" he cried in a loud voice. "O Christ, come back to Russia! O Christ, have mercy on us!"

It was Lucy who went to him holding out her hands, her long lovely hands which were so good at making shadow pictures.

"Dear Zabotin," she cried, "the name of Christ is not liked in Russia. Speak it in your heart but do not cry out so loud. Dear Zabotin I wish I could comfort you a little. Perhaps one day Christ will come back to Russia."

Lucy looked very English among these Russians. She spoke Russian with an English accent.

Zabotin turned from the wall and took her hands and his head dropped upon her breast and he wept like a hurt boy.

On top of the stove Vladimir was thinking strange things in his young mind. He thought that these people down there were saying terrible things. "If I were to tell my masters about them, if I were to tell my professor, who is very angry if he hears a word about God, they would all be shot. It would be a pity if Zabotin were shot. He is very good in ballet. And Anna Kusanova is very pretty. She wouldn't look so pretty if she were shot. All the same they shouldn't talk like that. It's against Lenin. My father says Lenin is the greatest man on earth and that we must all be loyal to him. If I were to tell Father——"

The boy fell asleep again. Once again he was awakened by excited voices. Zabotin was talking again. Zabotin was always talking.

“The Revolution has resulted in nothing but human misery. After all that blood, after all that death, after all those hangings and murders among brother Russians, what has come out of it except the downfall of our civilization, such as it was? The aristocrats have been liquidated or have fled. The middle classes have been wiped out. But what about the proletariat and the peasants? Have they gained anything? What are their gains? Hordes of them are driven into Siberia to the mines or the forests. In the factories they toil for long hours. They are given coupons for the government stores. Coupons for food, coupons for clothes. A wonderful system! But there is nothing in the government stores. They are given paper money—millions of roubles—but there is nothing to buy in the markets and the paper is worthless. Now they are going to force the peasants into the communal farm system. They’re going to take away the farmer’s cows and his strip of earth. Is that going to bring them happiness? Lenin promises a golden future for Russia by way of Communism. Lunacharsky—that hum-bugging orator—talks about the education of the proletariat and the cultural glory of Russian genius. It was better under the Czars. There was more happiness in Imperial Russia. This Revolution is a fraud. There’s more iron tyranny under Lenin than under the Emperor Nicholas. He was not a tyrant. He had a kind heart. He desired the well-being of his people. Lenin is an autocrat without pity or mercy or human compassion.”

“You talk dangerously, Zabotin,” said Anna Kusanova.

Vladimir had sat up in his bed on top of the stove. He felt angry and bad-tempered. These people would not let him sleep. They were talking bad things about Russia and about Lenin who was the greatest man in the world. His father had told him so. All his school-fellows believed that. His schoolmasters spoke the name of Lenin as his mother spoke of God, who did not exist they said.

Vladimir flung back the bed-clothes and sprang to the floor. The voice of a small boy rang through the room.

“You’re talking wicked things. I’ve been listening. If I told my professors you would all be shot. My father is a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Red Army. If I told my father——”

The people in the room seemed to be turned to ice by the apparition of this small boy among them and by his shrill words. They stayed there just as they had been sitting and standing, quite motionless, as though dead. One of the young women of the ballet had been using a lipstick. Her hand remained three inches from her mouth. Zabotin had been taking a cigarette from its packet and his hand too was poised motionless on the way to his lips. Anna Kusanova who sat at the table with her chin in cupped hands stared at the boy Vladimir with terror in her eyes.

It was Lucy who cried out to break this spell of silence.

“David, darling, what are you doing? Why aren’t you asleep? You’ve been dreaming.”

“I kept waking up,” he told her. “I heard what you were all saying.”

“No! no!” cried Lucy, laughing at him. “It was all a dream, David. You were dreaming that you heard us talking. You didn’t hear a word. It’s like that in dreams.”

She spoke gaily but the boy knew she was afraid. He knew that look of fear in her eyes. He saw that her face had gone white as though made of snow.

“It wasn’t a dream,” he said. “They were saying bad things about Lenin and about Russia.”

Anna Kusanova spoke in a faint voice.

“We’re all lost!”

Zabotin went towards Vladimir and lifted him high above his head.

“You’re a fine little fellow!” he said. “How would you like to be a ballet dancer? I would teach you.”

He too spoke gaily but he was white to the lips.

“I would like that,” said Vladimir, excited at the thought of being a ballet dancer.

“Come and give me a kiss, dear boy,” cried Anna Kusanova. “If you’ll give me a kiss I’ll take you behind the scenes of the ballet. Would you like that?”

Her lips were ice cold when he kissed them.

She knew, they all knew that their lives were in the hands of this small boy with tousled hair. They made a fuss of him. He was given a chair at the table and fed with the remains of an omelette. They all laughed and joked around him. Anna Kusanova put her fingers through his tousled hair until he thrust her away with a shake of his head. He didn’t like being petted like this. He wasn’t a baby. He was eight years old or thereabouts.

Then they all went out into the snow again after embracing Lucy.

Anna Kusanova whispered a question. “Will he blab? If so we’re doomed.”

Lucy shook her head.

“I can trust him. He and I are comrades.”

Zabotin bent over her hand as he kissed it.

“It has been a happy night,” he said. “What does it matter if tomorrow we die? It’s best to be dead.”

“Never say die!” answered Lucy. “That’s an English proverb. You must go on dancing, Zabotin. For the sake of the world. For the sake of art.”

They went out into the snow at dawn in Kazan. Along the road came a party of abandoned children. Some of them lay in the snow like dead birds.

VII

Since his early childhood until this time in Kazan Vladimir had hardly known his father who was just a name to him. He had been fighting with the Red Armies against Denikin and afterwards against Wrangel in the Crimea, and had only made brief appearances at odd times and in odd places. Now as an officer in the Kremlin of Kazan he came home every day at least for a few hours, and seemed to take a delight in playing with his children and especially with Olga who was now nearly six years old and out of babyhood—a pretty slip of a thing like an English daffodil—devoted to a rag doll and a doll's perambulator with three wheels. She was a companion for Vladimir when he came home from school.

Lieutenant-Colonel Michael Petrovich Rogov of the Red Army was not at all ferocious-looking, though he had seen and perhaps done ferocious things. He had, thought his son, eyes like a deer's, brown and liquid and gentle. He was clean-shaven except when he forgot or had no time to shave, when his cheek was very bristly to kiss and as rough as a boot-brush. He had a good-natured laugh and could play bears very well with Olga. He was good with his hands and made toys out of wood, of which his masterpiece was a doll's house with windows which opened and shut and a front door painted green.

Sometimes he brought other officers to the house and they sat drinking coffee or vodka and talked a lot and laughed a lot. They were all very polite to Lucy and kissed her hand when they came and went, but she did not seem to like them much and sat very still and quiet until they had gone.

Vladimir sometimes listened to their talk but could not understand much of it. They talked about episodes in the war against Denikin and one of them—a big square-built man with a fat face and flat cheeks—roared with laughter so that the coffee-cups shook on the table and the samovar rattled. Sometimes he was checked by Vladimir's father who frowned and said: "That's not a nice story, Anton Nicolaevich. It isn't good in the presence of little ones."

"Your pardon, tavarish," said the fat man good-naturedly. "I'm a rough fellow. I'm not educated like you are. I'm just a Russian peasant smelling of the soil."

"You're a good soldier and a good friend," answered Vladimir's father, smiling at him. "We could do with more like you in the Red Army."

There was one name which they often spoke. Trotsky. He was the master brain behind the Red Armies. It was his genius which had led to victory. He was a born organizer, and a man of quick decision. He wanted things done in a hurry. When he gave an order it had to be obeyed. It was no use saying *seichas*, which means immediately, to Trotsky and then letting the grass grow under one's feet. He had shot more than one officer for disobedience and delay.

"He's made of quicksilver," said Vladimir's father, Michael Petrovich.

"He has fire in his belly," said Anton Nicolaevich.

"That's true," said another man, younger than the rest, hardly more than a boy with the first soft hair of youth on his chin. "One sees the fire in his eyes. It burns with passion. He was the sword of the Civil War. Lenin was the brain and Trotsky was the weapon. Isn't that so, Colonel?"

"I agree," said Michael Petrovich. "I've the greatest admiration for him. It's astonishing that a Jew should be such a brilliant man of action. It isn't the characteristic of their race."

Anton, the fat flat-faced man, laughed gruffly.

"I remember the time when I hated all Jews. It's a prejudice of the peasant mind. But we owe much to the Jewish race. There are many Jews at the top. Litvinov, Radek and others. Brainy fellows! They know how to read and write. They understand the mysteries of book knowledge. Doubtless they've all read Karl Marx."

Vladimir's father smiled in his gentle way. He knew that Anton Nicolaevich did not know how to read and write and regarded book learning with reverence and awe. And yet he was a shrewd-minded man with some wisdom of his own, the wisdom of the peasant close to the earth. He had also the brutality of the peasant insensitive to blood and dead bodies. With his own hand he had hanged some of the Whites and had laughed loudly at their twistings and contortions at the end of the rope. He preferred the bayonet to the rifle. There had been bloody scenes in some of the villages where the Whites had been trapped, and this fellow Anton, a good comrade, with the strength of an ox, had led the way. Yet here he sat, a fat good-natured man, playful with the children and a bit timid in the presence of Lucy whose manner was cold to him.

Lucy was difficult. It was, thought young Vladimir, because she was English. This Russia of evolution and famine was a horror to her. Nothing that her husband could say would convert her to the glorious ideals of the Revolution and the great experiment of Communism. When he had first joined the Red Army she had quarrelled with him and had jeered at his conviction that it was the right side to be on. She had called him an idiot and a fool in her blunt English way and then she had held on to him and wept, and he had wept

with her because of the tragic parting which was necessary, this parting with a young wife whom he adored and this young mother of his babes. Perhaps he would never have volunteered for the Red Army if he had known in advance the length of time he would be separated from his wife and family, and the frightful things he would have to endure—the filth, the vermin, the bloody business of civil war; the hangings of Russians by Russians; the dying agonies of young boys, some of them as young as fifteen and sixteen; hunger and thirst on long marches; days of exhaustion in scorching sun when his tongue became swollen and his eyes blinded by dust and flies; nights in winter when he was frozen stiff in his sleep; years of beast-like hardship; and always in his heart an agony of home-sickness and a hatred of war, threatening to break down his loyalties to Lenin and Trotsky and the ideals of Communism. A thousand times he was tempted to desert and go searching for Lucy and the children, as on both sides so many men deserted. His soul craved for the beauty of his wife, for her laughter, for her little jokes in English, for her tenderness, for the caress of her playful hands. It had been a boy-and-girl love just before the war. This English girl had seemed to him lovely beyond his knowledge of women, not because of physical beauty, though he thought her beautiful, but because of her gaiety—her frankness of speech, the laughter in her eyes, the courage of her spirit.

Some of these things became known to young Vladimir later in life when he found a kind of diary, with many gaps in the dates and entries, in an old satchel which his father had carried with spare socks and boots during his campaign with the Red Army. It was scribbled roughly in blue pencil and many words were illegible as the pages had become damp, perhaps in heavy rains, and had stuck together, blurring the writing. Many of the entries were just brief notes of military operations.

> "Entered Ivankovo, village burned as reprisal for murders of Red Army soldiers . . . reached Markavo. Three men hanged in market square. . . . Marched twenty versts. Cloud of dust. Many men fell out and deserted. We are all very verminous and I fear typhus which is raging in the villages hereabouts. Saw piles of dead bodies, mostly women and young girls, flung on floor of church which is used as a morgue. . . . Six men, just boys really, hanged for stealing Red Army stores. This civil war is horrible, but Denikin's troops are demoralized and we may soon have the greater part of Russia."

Some of the entries were very poignant and young Vladimir read them with emotion. They revealed his father's agony of home-sickness and his passionate love for his wife.

"As we marched I thought of Lucy. I seemed to see her in the white dust raised by the wagons ahead of us. She appeared to me as I first saw her when she came to see my mother. She came through the french window from the garden with the sun behind her, in a white bodice and blue frock. She looked like an English rose I thought, and I fell in love with her on the spot. Now today she seemed to walk ahead of me, turning now and then to look at me with a smile, in the white dust. It was an illusion, a mirage, but so real in appearance that once I called out to her, 'Lucy! Lucy!' and the man at my side—it was Anton Nicolaevich—thought I had gone mad, and turned his head to stare at me with a queer look. Perhaps I was a little mad. I think I have a touch of fever owing to the long march under a hot sun. I hope it isn't typhus. That thought often frightens me. I don't want to die of typhus before I see Lucy and the children again. We are of course covered with lice. I haven't had a bath for three months. Nor have my comrades. It is astonishing that not more of us have died of typhus. I suppose it establishes certain immunity."

Now and again he wrote down his faith in the ultimate victory of Communism and the Soviet State.

"Out of this misery and abomination a new Russia will arise. Out of this filth and agony and blood will come a new era for the Russian people with a new spirit of brotherhood, with social and political equality free from the old superstitions and the ravening injustice of capitalism and private profit-greedy enterprise. All loyal servants of the State will be rewarded by the precious gifts of life, among which I count first the gift of education, raising the general level of intelligence now so low in an illiterate nation.

"By this hope in Lenin's promises, in Lenin's vision and of all the revolutionary leaders who have gone before him, I am sustained in this long and fratricidal conflict. Yet sometimes I weaken. Sometimes I am a deserter in spirit, staggering on without faith. It is when I see the cruelties of my comrades and of the other side. It is when I myself have to give orders for the execution of old men and boys. It is when I march with my Company through burning villages which once were little Russian homes and farmsteads with happy children and sturdy young mothers and simple hard-working men, some of whom lie dead under the burning embers while others have fled in advance of the Red Army, as they fled from the advance of Denikin's men last year. Today a few hours ago before I write these

words in a rat-infested barn I stumbled over the body of a dead child lying with a battered head in the gutter of the market-place. It was a little girl. She was clasping a rag doll.

"At this sight I suddenly revoked all faith in the noble purpose of the Red Armies or in the hope of a new and nobler Russia. How is it possible, I thought, for good to come out of all this evil? I am lying to myself when I think so. Lenin has let loose all the devils of hell in the hearts of a debased and brutal race, uncivilized and incapable of being civilized, oriental in their savagery, in their callousness of death beast-like and ferocious, in their way of fighting and their disregard of human decency. Why did I become a soldier of the Red Army, and eager volunteer in Trotsky's legions? These thoughts shook me and tore at me as they have shaken and torn me before. But they are, of course, blasphemy due to weakness and black despair. I believe in the ideals of a Communistic world. I believe in Lenin. I believe that the Red Army is fighting a crusade for the down-trodden peoples of the earth. I'm a faithful disciple of Karl Marx. Forward to victory! Under the Red Star!"

Young Vladimir in his young manhood read these words written by his father with a sense of pity and admiration. Here was the soul of his father revealed by words scrawled with a blue pencil on damp paper still smelling damp. How he had suffered! How often he had been tempted to betray this faith! How strong had been his loyalty! It was a pity that he had such a fanatical allegiance to Trotsky who had turned traitor.

During those days in Kazan—long before he found these letters—he questioned his father sometimes on difficult subjects as a young boy does to the embarrassment of his parents. It was when Lucy had gone out. She was helping to nurse the refugee children in one of the big homes for them, and when his father came down from the Kremlin which was guarded by his regiment.

"Father, do you believe there is a God? Mother believes in God, though I wouldn't tell anybody but you."

He saw his father hesitate.

"The idea of God," he said after a pause, "has been mixed up with superstitions. Some people's Gods are very much like devils. In our Russian Church there was gross superstition and the priests upheld the Czars with all their oppression. They were never on the side of liberty, except a few who were sent off to Siberia in chains."

"Yes, Father, but do you believe in a God? Like Mother?"

He saw a faint colour creep into his father's face.

“I have departed from the old religion,” he said. “I don’t believe in the orthodox creed as preached by the black-bearded priests, many of whom were immoral and corrupt. But somewhere behind this strange universe of ours there may be a Master mind. Sometimes in the Steppes when I have been awake in the midst of sleeping men on the snow under the stars I have had a sensation of being in touch with some mystery of the spirit above and around us.”

“God?” asked Vladimir.

His father stared at him curiously for a moment and fear crept into his eyes. He answered with a pretence of impatience.

“This is dangerous talk,” he said. “Not suitable for small boys with wagging tongues. The name of God isn’t popular in Russia, not in accordance with State teaching. You will get into trouble, my son, if you talk about God to your school fellows or teachers.”

Vladimir knew that beneath his father’s touch of anger there was fear. He knew that look. He knew how people glanced over their shoulders to see if anyone were listening.

“Don’t be afraid, Father!” he said with a laugh. “Little Mother and I have our secrets. Now I can have secrets with you. I don’t tell them to others.”

He saw that his father looked relieved. The fear left his eyes and he smiled.

“You are wise for your age, my little one,” he said. “It’s best not to talk about these things except among ourselves, and even that is dangerous.”

Vladimir nodded.

“In case the cat hears!” he said with a grin.

His father laughed good-naturedly.

“That’s very good!” he exclaimed. “ ‘In case the cat hears!’ I quite agree. She might whisper it to the mice and the mice might whisper it to——”

He hesitated, not quite knowing how to carry this on.

“To an officer of the Cheka,” suggested Vladimir.

A shadow came into his father’s eyes. He stared at Vladimir with surprise and looked disconcerted.

“That’s a word we don’t mention,” he said. “Not even among ourselves. How do you know these things? Who tells you?”

“They can’t hide things,” explained Vladimir. “All the boys talk in whispers. Several fathers of the boys have been arrested and dragged off by the Cheka. They never come back. I expect they’ve been shot. Maybe they had the wrong ideas about things. Maybe they weren’t loyal to Lenin. Perhaps they deserved to be shot. Don’t you think so, Father?”

“Very likely,” answered his father hurriedly. “But let’s have a game of dominoes, I expect little Olga is awake by now.”

VIII

It was at this time that Lucy had the joy of meeting an Englishman who came from England. He came one day with two Americans. Vladimir opened the door to them. His father was in the Kremlin as usual at this time and his mother was putting little Olga to bed.

He saw the three men standing at the door and saw at once that they were not Russians. That was because of their clothes. Two of them looked like foreign soldiers in mud-coloured uniforms with riding breeches and long beautiful boots with a fine polish on them. He knew them afterwards to be the two Americans Colonel Heinckel and Major Hunt. The other wore a fawn-coloured felt hat and a raincoat of the same colour strapped round the waist. He had wonderful shoes with fat soles and brown shoe-laces not to be seen in Russia. He was an elderly man, at least in the eyes of the boy Vladimir. His hair was touched with silver grey at the sides. Perhaps, thought Vladimir, he was a bit older than his own father who was very old indeed—something like thirty. His name, as Vladimir knew afterwards, was Sir Timothy Petrie.

The three men seemed not to know quite what to say when the door was opened to them by the boy.

One of the Americans spoke in bad Russian.

"We want to see a young lady. English, they tell us."

Vladimir answered them in English.

"That's my mother perhaps. But she's not young. She's nearly thirty."

The Englishman laughed quietly.

"We're all older than that. Are you her son?"

"Yes," answered the boy. "That's why I speak English. But I'm Russian and my father is a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Red Army. My name is Vladimir Michaelovitch Rogov."

"Say, that's a mouthful!" exclaimed Colonel Heinckel the American with a good-natured laugh. "Well, sonny, tell your mother that a distinguished Englishman just from London, England, wishes to speak with her, and two less-distinguished Americans would also like the pleasure."

Vladimir was not quite sure about that distinguished stuff but he felt excited by this visit of three strange people.

"Come in, comrades," he said politely, "I will fetch my little mother."

He took them into the sitting-room and made them welcome.

“There are some quite good chairs if you don’t sit on that one with only three legs. Won’t you sit down, comrades, while I tell my Little Mother?”

“Fine little fellow!” said Major Hunt.

Vladimir made a bolt from the room and rushed to the bedroom where his mother was reading Olga a story.

“Little Mother!” he cried in a kind of whisper. “Little Mother!”

“What’s the matter, David?” she asked, looking up from her book.

“It’s very exciting. Downstairs are two Americans and one Englishman. The Englishman has come to Russia all the way from London. He wants to talk to you.”

He saw an unbelieving look in his mother’s eyes and then a look as though something wonderful had happened, something which seemed too good to be true. She rose from the chair where she had been sitting by Olga’s little bed. She touched her hair with the tips of her fingers as though to tidy it.

“An Englishman!” she exclaimed. “From dear old London? No, it can’t be true. It couldn’t happen. The English are not allowed into Russia.”

“He’s certainly English,” answered Vladimir. “He looks like an English gentleman—you know—the kind you used to tell me about in Hyde Park on a Sunday or walking down Bond Street buying pearls and diamonds for nursery governesses.”

“Good gracious!” cried his mother, laughing. “Did I really tell you stories like that?”

Her face had flushed a little with the excitement of this visit. Her eyes shone like candles in the dark.

“Are you sure, David? Did he say he was English?”

“One of the Americans said so.”

“Why has he come to see me? How does he know I am here?”

Her face lost its colour. A look of fear came into her eyes.

“Perhaps it’s a trap,” she said in a low voice. “Maybe he’s a secret agent or something.”

Vladimir felt frightened by these words.

He remembered now. The English were the enemies of Russia. They had sent soldiers to fight against the Red Army in the Caucasus.

“Perhaps he has come to kill us,” he suggested. “If only Father would come back!”

“I’ll go and see,” said Lucy. “Stay here with Olga, David.”

Olga set up a wail.

“Is there an ogre down there?” she asked. “Or a bad old witch?”

“No! No!” answered Lucy. “It’s all right, little Olga. Don’t be frightened.”

“I must be frightened,” said Olga. “David looks frightened.”

“I’m not frightened,” said David sturdily. “Father is a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Red Army. I am his son. I don’t get frightened. Russians aren’t frightened of the English. They just despise them.”

“Don’t talk nonsense,” said Lucy sharply. “No one can despise England or the English. And don’t forget I’m English, my son!”

“You’re the wife of a Russian,” said Vladimir. “You’re the mother of a Russian boy and girl. Don’t forget that, little Mother.”

Lucy thrust her fingers through his hair.

“What a brat you are!” she said, half angrily. “Stay here, you imp.”

“I’m coming with you,” said Vladimir. “I have to protect you, Little Mother.”

In the corner of the room his father had left a rusty bayonet. Vladimir grabbed it and followed his mother downstairs after speaking gruffly to Olga who set up another wail.

“Shut up, you little fool! You aren’t a baby any more, are you?”

He followed his mother downstairs. She had smoothed her dress—an old black frock creased and stained by hard wear.

She went into the front room and the three strangers rose as she entered.

One of them—it was the Englishman—spoke to her.

“We heard there was an English lady living here. The nurses in one of the children’s homes told us. I hope you don’t mind our calling on you?”

“It is kind of you,” said Lucy guardedly. She was not yet certain that this was not a trap. How did she know that he was not an agent of the Cheka? Yet he looked kind and honest, and her heart was beating at the sound of his English voice and the English look of him dressed in English clothes.

“My name is Sir Timothy Petrie,” he said, introducing himself with a smile. “I am here on a mission from the British Government to enquire into the famine. We get very little news out of Russia, and what comes through Riga is not always true. The British Government is not even sure that there is a famine.”

“There’s a dreadful famine!” Lucy told him. “Millions of people along the Volga are hungry and have no more food. The children are leaving the villages like rats. They swarm into Kazan in search of food.”

“Yes,” said Sir Timothy. “I’ve been to some of the children’s homes. They huddle together for warmth all naked like little monkeys. I’ve never seen anything so pitiable.”

“They have to burn their clothes,” said Lucy. “They’re all verminous, you know, and that causes typhus.”

Sir Timothy nodded.

“I know. It’s the very devil, this typhus in Russia.”

Lucy questioned him again.

“Why does the British Government want to know? What can they do?”

“We’ve a lot of stores left over from the war. We’re trying to help the stricken peoples of Europe.”

One of the Americans spoke. It was Colonel Heinckel.

“The same thing goes with the United States. The American folk will be glad to help the Russians and especially the children. Humanity cuts out political differences. We’re anti-Soviet—yes, sir!—but we’re keen to help the kiddies.”

“Oh, if you could only help!” cried Lucy. “It’s terrible here in Russia. It’s all beyond words.”

Her suspicions of these men faded from her mind. They had come to help. They had come to rescue the Russian children. They were messengers of mercy.

She had cried out in a tragic way, but now she turned to Sir Timothy Petrie, whose hair was touched with silver, and spoke to him emotionally with a light in her eyes.

“Have you come straight from England? How long is it since you have been in England?”

“Two weeks ago,” he told her. “I came by way of Berlin.”

“Two weeks?” She laughed with a sob in her throat.

“Only two weeks? How wonderful! I haven’t seen England for ten years, which is like a lifetime and like a nightmare. How’s dear old London? How does it look? Have the English people changed? Do the buses still roar along the Strand?”

“Not much change outwardly,” answered Sir Timothy. “But the war was very grim. We lost so many of our best young men. We still bleed from our wounds. But you wouldn’t notice it. There’s a lot of unemployment now—fellows who have lost their arms and legs playing bands at the street corners. But apart from that it all looks the same. It has been a long exile for you in war and revolution. Thank God England was spared a revolution. Tell us something about your own experiences.”

He smiled into her eyes and she saw pity and kindness in his smile.

“I couldn’t begin to tell you,” she said. “You would hardly believe it if I did. And anyhow it’s dangerous. One can’t speak freely in Russia.”

“You certainly can’t!” said one of the Americans, who was Major Hunt. “Maybe that’s always the case after revolution.”

Lucy turned to Sir Timothy again.

“Do you happen to know Clapham?” she asked with a nervous little laugh. “One of the suburbs, you know.”

Sir Timothy Petrie did not need to be told that.

“I have an aunt living in Clapham Park. I often go to see her and stroll on

the Common. She lives in Thornton Road."

Lucy's face flushed.

"How extraordinary! My home was there. My father had a house at the corner. How wonderful to think you know Thornton Road!"

She laughed excitedly.

"This is like a fairy-tale. I haven't seen an Englishman for ten years and he has an aunt living in Thornton Road, Clapham Park!"

Suddenly she realized that her guests were still standing.

"Oh, lord!" she cried. "I've lost all my manners. Do sit down. I'll make you some tea in the old samovar."

"Don't worry about that, lady," said Colonel Heinckel.

"We haven't come here to drink your tea or eat your rations. Who's that young fellow lurking behind the door?"

It was Vladimir who had been listening to all this talk still grasping the rusty bayonet but aware now that it would not be needed.

Lucy called to him.

"Come in, David! Come and talk your best English. Your hair looks as if you hadn't combed it for a week!"

David advanced selfconsciously. He had dropped the bayonet outside.

"Good afternoon," he said, politely but coldly.

"Your son?" asked Sir Timothy, turning to Lucy with a smile.

She nodded.

"My little Bolshevik!" she told him.

When Sir Timothy held out his hand young Vladimir did not take it and stood straight.

"England is the enemy of Russia," he said. "I don't shake hands with the enemies of Russia."

Lucy caught hold of his right ear and pulled it.

"You little jackanapes!" she cried. "Haven't I taught you good manners? Are you going to disgrace me before these kind gentlemen?"

Sir Timothy poured oil on the troubled waters.

"England is not the enemy of Russia, my dear boy," he said.

"You sent your soldiers to fight against the Red Army," said Vladimir. "We don't forget that. Also you and the Americans belong to the corrupt and degenerate pluto-democracies."

Colonel Heinckel laughed loudly.

"Well, I'll be darned!" he said. "This small boy has learnt some very long words."

Lucy was vexed and humiliated.

"Leave the room, David. Go up to bed. I'll give you a whipping when I come up. If you don't know how to behave——"

Vladimir strode out of the room with his chin up. He had, he thought, behaved nobly as the son of a Lieutenant-Colonel of the Red Army.

For an hour after he heard the voices of the three strangers deep and heavy and his mother's lighter musical voice now and then. His Little Mother spoke excitedly. Several times she laughed in answer to one of the Americans. A smell of cigarettes made his nostrils tingle. Then they left and he heard them saying good-bye. He was awake when his mother crept up to her room where Olga was asleep in the other bed. She laughed at him when she saw his eyes open.

"You little varmint!" she said in a low voice so as not to wake up Olga. "You and your Lieutenant-Colonel of the Red Army! What about your little English mother?"

He held out his arms to her.

"You can't help being English," he said. "But you know they were the enemies of Russia, even if they're not now."

"Stuff and nonsense!" she told him, snuggling down for a moment with her cheek upon his. "England is the best country in the world and you ought to be proud to have an English mother."

Suddenly she began to laugh quietly.

"Why are you laughing, Little Mother?" he asked.

"Fancy Sir Timothy having an aunt in Thornton Road, Clapham! It was where I was a little girl with my brothers and sisters before you were born, little David—before all this."

"Why are your eyes wet?" he asked. "Why do you cry when you laugh?"

IX

Rescue came to Russia just in time to save many millions of starving people in the towns and villages of the Volga region. Four millions of them died, but twenty million were saved by food sent in from England and America. Not only food was sent but supplies of medicine and clothing. At first only the children were fed and Vladimir remembered going with his mother to the first soup-kitchens which were opened in Kazan. It was like a fairy-tale when crowds of hungry children sat down at long wooden tables, and waited for a feast beyond all dreams, in their ragged furs and broken boots—they had not been stripped naked like those in the homes and clinics. They sat silently with big eyes smelling delectable odours from the kitchen. There was no laughter among them. They were little old men and women who had suffered much in life and to whom death was a familiar sight. Then soup was brought to them and rolls of bread and rice pudding, too much for weak little stomachs so that they could not eat it all.

Lucy was there helping to serve these little ones and Sir Timothy came up to her and spoke a few words.

"This is a grand sight! I feel that I have helped in one good deed. These little lives are worth saving."

"I would like to go down on my knees to you," said Lucy.

"No, no!" answered Sir Timothy, that delicate-looking man with silver threads in his hair. "I'm only a messenger boy of the gods. . . . These poor little ones! They make my heart bleed but I thank God we've come in time."

He had been to some of those villages on the Volga. He had seen Russian families waiting for death in their little houses, too weak to move, without any food at all. Above the stoves the children had lain in a kind of coma very near to death.

He said one thing to Lucy in a low voice which Vladimir, standing close to his mother, overheard, having quick ears.

"We shan't get any thanks for this from the Soviet officials. They seem to resent our rescue work. They think we have come for political motives."

Vladimir saw his mother glance quickly over her shoulder.

"Please don't talk of such things," she said. "It's very dangerous for me—even here."

She looked nervously across one of the tables where two men in black leather jackets stood watching the scene. They were, she knew, two men of the Secret Police keeping their eyes and ears open. One of them was looking at Lucy when she was talking to Sir Timothy. It was not good for Russians to talk to foreigners.

The policy of feeding the children only did not work. It was illogical to feed the children if their parents were allowed to die. Presently the Americans and English distributed food to millions of starving peasants in the Volga villages. It was an astonishing chapter of history which Vladimir read afterwards when he was grown up. The Americans fed eleven million Russians for a year with New York as their base. They had only sixty officers to organize this immense network of supplies forming local committees of Russian women, harnessing Russian peasants to sledges, because all the horses were dead and eaten, patching up railway engines to get the food down from Petrograd. The British co-operated with their war stocks, the Red Cross and the "Save the Children Fund" and the Pope reawakened the spirit of Christian charity in a world which had seemed hard and selfish after a terrible war, and everywhere funds were raised for the relief of the Russian famine. A spectre stood in the way and frightened many people who tightened their purse-strings. It was the spectre of Bolshevism with its terror against the *bourgeois*, its purges and executions, its fanatical faith in the doctrines of Karl Marx and Lenin—that little squint-eyed man in the Kremlin who had declared war against the Capitalistic system—against God and the Christian religion.

One night he heard a conversation between his father and mother which excited him a good deal. He was supposed to be asleep, but he awakened when his father came in late, taking off his belt and then his snow-boots.

"Lucy," he said, "my darling wife, I have great news for you."

She laughed in a queer way.

"Have you been made a General?" she asked. "That would please David who is already very proud of his Lieutenant-Colonel."

"Lucy," said her husband. "I have been ordered to Moscow."

Lucy was silent for a moment.

"Is that great news?" she asked coldly.

"I have an appointment on the Staff," he told her. "I shall work in the War Office. We shall live in the Kremlin."

Lucy laughed in a rather shrill way.

"I don't see any fun in that. It's only going from one horror to another."

"Moscow is a great city," said Michael. "There are pleasant people there. It's better than Kazan."

"The pleasant people have all been killed," cried Lucy. "Only the horrible people are alive."

“The opera is still magnificent,” said Michael. “The theatres are open. They’re even going to open the markets and a few shops, though you mustn’t tell anybody. Lenin is proclaiming a new economic policy. Life is not going to be so rigid. But that is a secret until it’s published!”

“I shan’t go to Moscow,” said Lucy in a stubborn voice.

Michael Petrovich Rogov stared at his English wife.

“You won’t go?” he asked incredulously. “What do you mean, Little Mother? We must all go in a few days.”

“No!” she said. “I shan’t go. I’m going somewhere else.”

“Somewhere else?”

“If God will have mercy on us,” she answered. “Or if I have any luck.”

“Lucy!” said Michael Rogov sharply. “What do you mean? You alarm me. You’re saying strange things.”

Lucy rose from the chair where she had been sitting with some needlework. She crossed the room, as Vladimir could see from his place on the stove. She seemed to fall against his father and caught hold of his tunic and raised her face to his.

“Michael!” she cried. “I want to get out of Russia. I want to get out with you and Vladimir and little Olga. I can’t bear it any longer—all this misery, all this fear—I live with fear. Fear sits on my pillow. We’re surrounded by horror. Russia is another name for hell. I want to escape.”

“We can’t escape,” answered Michael. “There’s no way out of Russia. Besides, the misery is passing. We’re getting towards better days. The famine on the Volga was accidental. Lenin’s new economic policy will produce good results. Life will be easier, and in Moscow you will be among distinguished people. I shall be working with my old chief and comrade Trotsky. There are great brains in the Kremlin. They will be kind to you. I will take you to the Opera and the Arts Theatre very often. Vladimir will go to the State School. Olga may learn dancing perhaps. We shall have a fine time. In any case what are you dreaming about? We can’t leave Russia. I am a Russian officer. No one is allowed to leave Russia, and I don’t want to leave it. I’m Russian. I believe in the future of Russia, I’m heart and soul with the Red Army.”

Lucy still held on to his tunic and her forehead drooped upon his chest.

“Michael,” she said. “Have pity on me.”

He put his arms about her and held her close.

“My dearest dear! My sweet wife! I know how you suffer because of your exile. I know all the agony you have had during the Civil War. I know how English you are, little English wife! But I know also how brave you are and how loyal.”

She raised her head again and laughed in a tragic way.

“I’m not brave. I’m afraid of everything. We’re not at the end of the

Terror. Frightful things are going to happen, Michael. I feel it in my bones. I want to escape before they happen. I want to escape! I want to escape!"

Three times she spoke those words in a kind of whisper.

"Escape where?" he asked in a bewildered voice.

"To England," she told him.

"England?"

He spoke the word as though that country might be in another world, in the world beyond life.

"Yes, to England," she answered. "To my England where one can breathe freely, where the children would be brought up decently in a little home with a garden and nice people next door. They could feed the ducks on Clapham Common. We could have muffins for tea. There would be a Christmas tree at Christmas. We could go shopping and choose what we want. I would take them to the pantomime and the Zoo and the National Gallery. The English bobbies would smile at the children and I shouldn't be afraid of them. It would be paradise!"

Michael Rogov was silent for a few moments. Then he answered her.

"Yes, it would be paradise for you, my dearest. I see that. But you are in Russia. People don't get out of Russia. If I tried to cross the frontier I should be shot as a traitor, and I should deserve to be shot. I'm an officer of the Red Army. I don't desert, and you're my wife and the mother of my children. You don't desert. You *still* remain brave and loyal."

"You're wrong!" cried Lucy with a kind of anger and despair.

"I can't go on being loyal. And now there's a chance of escape. If you won't come with me I shall go with the children. It's my last chance. If I don't go now I shall never see England again."

"What chance have you?" asked Michael. "What chance are you talking about?"

She did not answer for what seemed like a long time. Then she spoke in a low voice so that Vladimir could hardly hear her.

"There are these English people in Kazan with the Food Relief. Sir Timothy and his friends. They could arrange for me to go back with them—me and the children, they could say that I belonged to them. I've been working for them. Sir Timothy is very kind. He would arrange all the necessary papers."

"Have you spoken to him yet?" asked Michael boldly.

"Not yet. He's coming to see me tomorrow. I shall ask him."

"That's useless," said Michael. "Darling, put this idea out of your head. It's very dangerous. The Cheka—"

"Drat the Cheka!" answered Lucy.

Vladimir on his high perch above the stove heard his mother utter those words. It gave him a tremendous thrill of horror and delight. It was as though a

little mouse had said drat the cat when a fierce mouse-eating cat was just around the corner.

"Hush!" said his father nervously. "You know you're talking nonsense, my Lucy. Everybody in Russia is watched. You can't move a step without it being known. They know every time your English or American friends come here to call on you. It's all entered in the book—the exact time, the length of the conversation. I'm already nervous about it."

"That's your beautiful Russia!" exclaimed Lucy. "That's the system of which you approve! That's the liberty of the proletariat gained by your Red Army through rivers of blood."

Vladimir's father was silent for a few moments. Then he answered quietly:

"It's not long after the Revolution. These safeguards are necessary. There are many enemies of the Soviet State in Russia. In a few years this discipline will be relaxed."

"Never!" cried Lucy. "All dictatorships are frightened of the people. They surround themselves with secret police. They suppress all criticism. Your victory of the proletariat is a victory which puts us all in chains."

"Is Vladimir asleep?" asked Michael Rogov suddenly.

"An hour ago," answered Lucy. "He sleeps like a top."

She looked up over the stove and saw that her son's eyes were fast closed. He had just closed them hearing his father's question. He had enjoyed this conversation. It was terribly exciting. His mother was saying frightful things. She would be shot if he repeated anything of this. He would be saving her life if he kept his mouth shut. It gave him a sense of being grown up. He had his mother's life in his hands and of course would never tell.

"Lucy, my darling," said his father, "I beg of you to give up this idea of trying to get back to England. I implore you to put it out of your mind. It might lead to imprisonment or death for all of us."

"I can't put it out of my mind," answered Lucy. "It burns in my mind. Ever since I've thought of it I've been on fire with a new hope. To see England again! To be beyond the frontiers of this prison-house, this morgue, this country of filth and misery and hunger and disease. I'd risk anything."

"Your husband's life?" asked Michael. "Your children? Vladimir and little Olga?"

It was a nuisance, thought Vladimir afterwards, that he fell asleep at this moment. It was shutting his eyes again that did it. He simply couldn't keep awake to hear his mother's answer.

X

It was the next day or perhaps a few days later—he could not be sure of his dates—that Vladimir was called out of his classroom by his schoolmaster.

He heard his name called out.

"Vladimir Michaelovitch!"

"Yes," answered Vladimir.

"You're wanted," said the young schoolmaster. "Someone wishes to speak to you outside." He spoke as though something had scared him. There was fear in his eyes and his voice trembled.

A boy next to Vladimir nudged him and whispered.

"I expect it's the Cheka. You're for it, tavarish. You're going to be liquidated all right!"

"Shut up!" said Vladimir fiercely but in an undertone. "When I come back I'll twist your nose."

But there was a queer feeling at the pit of his stomach. He felt as though he wanted to be sick. His hands went suddenly cold. He had never felt like that before. Was it fear? he wondered. Did people feel like that when they were afraid? Was that why his mother turned white when she was frightened?

"Go into the door opposite," said the schoolmaster. "Don't be afraid, little tavarish."

"Why should I be afraid?" asked Vladimir, raising his head. "My father is a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Red Army."

He went out of the schoolroom. In the corridor opposite was a door leading into a little room where the school-books were kept—a few tattered old books which had to be handed round in lesson-time.

He opened the door and saw a tall young man standing inside. He had a pale face and hair as black as the leather jacket he wore over riding breeches and black boots.

"Good morning, little comrade," said the man in a pleasant voice.

"Good morning, comrade," answered Vladimir, staring at him.

"Come and sit down, little man. Sit on this wooden box. I wish to ask you a few questions. That is all. About your family and so on. Quite friendly questions, you know."

"My father," said Vladimir, still staring at him warily, "is a Lieutenant-

Colonel in the Red Army."

The man in the black jacket smiled, and Vladimir saw that three of his teeth were missing on the right side of his jaw.

"Yes, I know that. A fine officer, no doubt. A very fine war record. You ought to be proud at having such a distinguished father."

"That is true," said Vladimir.

He was quite certain that this man belonged to the terrible Cheka of which he had heard much in whispers from the other boys. He belonged to the Secret Police. People who were summoned by the Secret Police did not always come back. They disappeared for ever. He thought of his mother and father and little Olga. He didn't want to disappear from them for ever.

"Your mother is English, isn't she, little comrade?"

Vladimir felt his feet getting cold like his hands.

So he was going to be questioned about his little mother. He would have to shut his mouth tight. He would have to keep a lot of things secret.

"Yes," he answered, "my mother came from England a long time ago. She is now the wife of a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Red Army. They were married before I was born."

The man in the black jacket laughed loudly.

"That's an excellent answer, little comrade! It shows your mother was a wise young woman. Though of course she belongs to the English middle classes—the *bourjoi* whom we don't like here in Russia, the enemies of the Revolution have now been liquidated."

"My mother," said Vladimir, "no longer belongs to the middle classes. She is the wife of a——"

The man in the black jacket smiled and showed the gaps in his teeth again.

"Yes, I know that. The wife of a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Red Army. You needn't mention that again, little comrade!"

"Very good," said Vladimir.

"Very good," answered the man. "And now just a few questions to an intelligent boy—little friendly questions which I hope you will be able to answer."

He glanced at some notes on a bit of paper which he pulled out of his pocket.

"On Thursday the fifteenth of March, at four o'clock in the afternoon, three foreigners called at your father's house. Did you open the door to them?"

"Yes," said Vladimir.

"I have their names," said the man. "One was Sir Timothy Petrie, an Englishman. The two others were Americans."

"That's quite right," said Vladimir.

"Your mother came down to see them and talked with them for more than

an hour. Is that so?”

“That is so, comrade.”

“What did they talk about? You remember some of their conversation?”

“Not much,” answered Vladimir. “The Englishman spoke about the famine. He had come to help, he told my mother.”

“Did he discuss the cause of the famine?”

“I didn’t hear him do so.”

“Did he denounce the Red Army or the Soviet State?”

“Why should he?” asked Vladimir.

The man in the black jacket frowned at him, a frown which made a deep furrow across his forehead and narrowed his eyes.

“I’m asking you whether he did. Answer me, little comrade.”

“I’m not very old,” said Vladimir. “I don’t take any interest in political questions. I was more interested in the Englishman’s clothes.”

“But you must know if he talked any politics with your mother.”

“I don’t remember,” answered Vladimir.

The man in the black jacket put his face close to the boy’s and there was an ugly look in his eyes.

“Little boys who lie must be whipped,” he said harshly. “You lie when you say you don’t remember. Tell me at once. What did the Englishman talk about with your mother?”

Vladimir was frightened. That man’s eyes seemed to pierce into him and read the thoughts in his mind. He was afraid that he might read things about his mother—her hatred of Soviet Russia, those words in which she had denounced the Cheka, the things she had said that night when the ballet people came, and all the secrets he had promised to keep. It would be terrible if he gave her away to this man.

“I don’t remember,” he said again, with a trembling lip, on the verge of tears. “I didn’t listen. I know nothing.”

The man in the black jacket was staring with horrible eyes, glaring eyes with a red glint in them.

“We have ways of making boys remember,” he said. “If you don’t try and remember you’ll be sorry for it, little comrade.”

He took hold of Vladimir’s wrist and wrenched it round, hurting the boy abominably.

But it was not the pain, it was the fear in him which made Vladimir turn white and sick. He was sick over the man’s hand and felt very faint as though he would fall off the chair.

The man in the black jacket sprang away from him.

“Dirty little pig!” he shouted. “Go back to your class-room.”

Vladimir slipped off the chair and walked as though he were drunk towards

the door. The floor at his feet seemed to be going round and round. There was a swimming feeling in his head. When he entered the class-room he could not see the master or the boys. He couldn't see anything, but fell onto the floor in a dead faint. He heard afterwards that the master Anton Petrovich had rushed at him and undone his collars. The boys had stood up staring at the prostrate form of their small comrade, excited and scared.

Vladimir was sent home as soon as he felt better. His mother opened the door to him and was frightened by his look.

"Good gracious, David!" she cried. "Are you ill, my poor dear?"

He flung himself at her weeping.

"Little Mother, Little Mother. They are after you. They wanted me to tell. But I told them nothing."

He spoke of "they" and "them" as though the man in the black jacket had been a dozen men.

Lucy was frightened. She felt her heart give a lurch inside her, and she put her hand to her side. But she spoke bravely.

"What's all this about?" she asked. "Who has been trying to scare you?"

Vladimir wiped the tears away from his eyes with his sleeve.

"It was a man in a black jacket," he said. "He had terrible eyes and they pierced into me like gimlets. He asked me many questions about you."

"What did you tell him, little David? What did you tell this man in the black jacket? None of our little secrets, I hope."

Her eyes were smiling at Vladimir but her face had gone as white as chalk.

"It's all right, Mother," he said. "I didn't say anything. But they're watching you. They don't like the Englishman's visits."

He lowered his voice and spoke in a whisper.

"Little Mother! . . . The Cheka."

"No, no!" said Lucy. "Nothing like that. Don't speak that word, little David."

"I'm hungry," he told her. "I feel empty in my stomach."

She gave him some food, and he heard her singing in the little kitchen, but he knew that this was pretence. She was only singing to pretend that she wasn't frightened.

Sir Timothy came once again in the afternoon when Vladimir was writing a lesson on some scraps of paper which he had found on a rubbish heap. There was printing on one side but nothing on the other side so that they were good for homework.

Sir Timothy looked over the boy's shoulder.

"You write well," he said in a friendly way. "I wish my handwriting were as good as that!"

Vladimir felt his face flushing at this praise.

“My mother taught me,” he told the Englishman.

Lucy laughed and came over to where her son was writing and put her fingers through his tousled hair.

“I taught him to read and write. I’m rather proud of him.”

“You ought to be proud of yourself,” said Sir Timothy. “I admire your courage, my dear.”

Lucy answered in a low voice, but Vladimir heard what she said. She used an English word which he didn’t know.

“David,” she said. “Go and do your lessons with Olga.”

She wanted to get him out of the room so that she could speak privately with this Englishman. He guessed that at once, but gathered up his papers and went out of the room. But he left the door open so that he could hear bits of the talk between his mother and the Englishman.

She was talking to him about the chance of getting out of Russia with her two children.

“My husband won’t go,” she said. “But I’ve made up my mind to go without him if there’s any chance. Do you think that wicked?”

Vladimir heard those words, and felt vexed with his mother. It was very naughty of her to think of leaving his father like that. He would stay with his father anyhow. If his mother went she would have to go with Olga. If his mother went . . . That would be frightful. His Little Mother meant so much to him, almost everything. He would weep for her a thousand times.

They were talking in low voices, the Englishman and his mother. He missed a lot of what they were saying though he kept his ears open.

“I’m afraid it’s impossible,” said Sir Timothy presently. “It’s too risky. As a British official I daren’t falsify any papers.”

Presently his mother began to weep. He was almost sure of that. He was almost certain that she was sobbing.

“It’s all very tragic for you,” said Sir Timothy. “I understand perfectly. I hate leaving you here.”

“You leave me in misery,” she cried. “Won’t you take pity on me?”

Sir Timothy tried to comfort her but Vladimir, listening intently, could not hear his words.

It was at least half an hour afterwards when Lucy called to her son by his pet name.

“David! Come and say good-bye to Sir Timothy. He is going away.”

Vladimir put his papers straight and then went into his mother’s room.

The Englishman held out his hand and spoke in his soft voice.

“Take care of your mother, little man. Good luck to you all. God bless you.”

Vladimir stared at him gravely.

“So you’re not taking her away?” he asked.

Sir Timothy looked startled.

“No, no!” he said hurriedly. “What put that into your head?”

“You’ve been listening, David!” cried Lucy. “That’s mean. I didn’t think you were a little cad!”

“I didn’t listen on purpose,” answered Vladimir not very truthfully. “I just couldn’t help hearing you now and then.”

“I hope you won’t tell anyone what you heard,” said Sir Timothy nervously. “It might be very dangerous for your mother—for all of you.”

Vladimir raised his head proudly.

“I have already been questioned by one of the Secret Police. I didn’t tell him anything. I was a bit sick, that’s all.”

Lucy put her arms round him and held him tight.

“You’ll never give your Little Mother away,” she said. “You’ll never tell the secrets between us, all the silly things I say.”

“I wish you wouldn’t say them,” answered Vladimir. “It makes it very difficult for me, always having to hide things. You say terrible things sometimes, Little Mother. You make my hair feel funny. I get cold down the back. Sometimes I laugh at them inside myself but sometimes I get frightened.”

“What a funny boy you are!” cried Lucy, pretending to be gay. “But you’re a darling all the same!”

Sir Timothy said good-bye. Before he left he bent over Lucy’s hand and kissed it as though she were a princess.

“Courage!” he said in a low voice. “Courage, my dear!”

“Give my love to England,” she answered. Then she gave a little laugh with a kind of sob in it.

“Give my love to Thornton Road and to the ducks on the pond, and to the English sparrows hopping around.”

“I will,” said Sir Timothy.

For a moment there seemed to be a little moisture in his eyes when he took off his glasses and wiped them on his handkerchief.

Then he went away.

XI

Vladimir remembered his first sight of Moscow. He sat in a droschke with his father and mother and little Olga, and at the first sight of the walled city with its fan-shaped battlements, like one of those fairy castles of which his mother used to tell him, his father took Lucy's hand and cried out "Moscow!" with a smile in his eyes as though they were going into an earthly paradise. "It's like an ogre's city," said Lucy.

They drove through an archway and the droschke driver took off his old fur cap and crossed himself.

Vladimir's father called out to him jokingly.

"Why do you do that, old man? It's forbidden now. You know that."

The droschke driver turned in his seat and looked back in a frightened way.

"Pardon me, Comrade Colonel. An old habit! Even the Czar doffed his cap when he passed the shrine of the Iberian Virgin. I forgot for the moment that we've done with all that."

"Better remember it in future," said Michael Petrovich mildly. "It might get you into trouble one day."

Lucy spoke to the driver and Vladimir saw that her lips were tight as though she were not taking much pleasure in this coming to Moscow.

"Remember there's no God in Russia," she said. "Or rather there is a new God whose name is Lenin."

"Hush, my dear!" said Michael, very nervously. "I implore you. . . ."

They drove into Red Square and saw before them the high walls of the Kremlin, a city within a city—rose-red walls with fan-shaped battlements broken here and there by stairways leading to small turrets guarded by sentries whose long bayonets gleamed in the cloudless blue sky against which they were etched—a cloudless blue sky though snow outlined the battlements and had crowned the pear-shaped domes of churches and cathedrals and the roofs of palaces and government buildings.

Inside one of the gates the droschke was stopped by a sentry at one of the guardhouses and an officer came out and saluted. He was in his winter dress with hooded cap rising to a spike on top like the uniform of Vladimir's father.

"You have your pass, Comrade Colonel?" he asked politely. "Or rather your passes for the others."

“They are here,” said Vladimir’s father.

“It will be necessary to report at the next guardhouse,” said the officer. “The rules are strict of course.”

Three times they had to show their passes and the last time they were kept until the officer had telephoned to the police headquarters.

“We are prisoners,” said Lucy in a low voice when they had passed this last post. “We are going into prison. We shall never get out.”

Michael touched her hand and laughed.

“Nothing like that. But the Kremlin is well guarded. Lenin is here. There was an attempt against his life.”

He spoke the last words in a kind of whisper.

“Jolly good job,” said Lucy in English, and then she gave a little laugh, seeing the pained look in her husband’s eyes.

“Don’t look so worried, Michael. Don’t look as if I had been blasphemous.”

“You alarm me,” he said. “You will have me shot one day. For God’s sake control your tongue, my dear. Remember that we shall be in the Kremlin. There are police everywhere. In any case for the children’s sake. . . .”

“Mum’s the word,” answered Lucy, and Vladimir, who heard these words in English, smiled at her. He had often heard them before. They had amused him as a younger boy. There was something comical in the sound of them. “Mum’s the word.”

Lucy hated living in the Kremlin. They had two rooms in one of the government offices, and were luckier than some families who had only one. It was an overcrowded rabbit warren. Sanitary conditions were deplorable. The rationing was abominable, mostly herrings and black bread with a rare bit of meat. The only comfort was the constant supply of tea which Lucy made in a samovar in the room where she slept with Michael, which by day they used as a sitting-room. Down the long corridors there were many families behind the doors. When the doors opened, young women came out to empty their tea-pots into the garbage cans; there were glimpses of other women nursing babies, or of men in Russian shirts outside their trousers playing accordions or the balalaika. It was like a gypsy camp and very squalid. On the lower floor were the government offices where clerks worked and from which came an incessant click of typewriters mostly worked by short-haired women who were fanatical Communists and looked like it.

In the evenings, when the boy and girl were in bed, they had visits from some of Michael’s friends living in some other part of the Kremlin, or men who made courtesy calls on a Lieutenant-Colonel with staff appointment in the War Office. One of them was a man named Kapek, one of the old brigade of Russian revolutionaries. He had a flat round face rimmed by a reddish beard,

and brown humorous eyes which blinked through horn-rimmed glasses. He was an extraordinary type, at first repulsive but on acquaintance attractive because of his cynical humour and brilliant conversation. He was in charge of Propaganda and there seemed to be nothing that he did not know about the internal affairs of other countries—their political crises and personalities and their trends of public opinion.

During his first visit he seemed to take a fancy to Lucy because she was English.

"I know London," he told her, "as well as I do Moscow. I used to study in the British Museum and fall asleep after lunch because the Reading Room was completely airless. I was breathing the atmosphere of the past hundred years as expelled from the lungs of innumerable old scholars who dug deeply into the history of the past and knew nothing of their own time or had any vision of the future."

"Did you ever go to Clapham?" asked Lucy with a sudden pang of homesickness.

Kapek laughed behind his horn-rimmed glasses. He spoke English almost without an accent.

"Good heavens, yes! Many a time I took the tram there. I used to read the illustrated papers in the public library, and I remember going to sleep on the Common with the sun on my face when I couldn't afford a lunch. *Qui dort dine*. I walked back all the way to Soho that evening and had blistered feet next morning. I loved old London. I still have an affection for it."

"I would give my right arm to be there again," said Lucy.

Kapek, that strange personality, thrust his fat fingers through his fringe of red beard and smiled benignly at Lucy while Vladimir, that boy with quick eyes and ears, pretended to be reading a book in the corner of the room.

He thought Kapek looked like an ogre in one of his mother's fairy-tales, a kind sort of ogre who would eat small boys and girls with a smile.

"Don't you like our beautiful Soviet Russia?" he asked.

"I hate it," said Lucy. It was a good thing, thought Vladimir, that his father was not at home that afternoon. He was working hard at the War Office. He would have been much alarmed.

Kapek laughed good-naturedly.

"I daresay you find it rather trying. So do I from time to time, especially perhaps at the present time, when things have not been going too well in the economic sphere. Black bread and herrings! Oh dear! Oh dear! Then there's that famine on the Volga. Very distressing when one thinks of it. But later on things will improve. Lenin says so. He's a realist. He doesn't believe in fairy-tales. His New Economic Policy ought to help things forward though it's a reversal *pro tem* of the strict faith of Communism. He's allowing the markets

to open up and a few shops. He's re-establishing the wage system. The peasants have thwarted all our dreams. They hoard their supplies. They're as cunning as monkeys and as obstinate as mules."

"This country," said Lucy, "is still under the Terror. Nobody dares speak because of the Cheka."

Kapek made a comical grimace.

"I suppose all that is necessary for some time after a revolution. We have to safeguard ourselves against conspiracy and sabotage."

Lucy told him about the questioning of her son and asked if that were a sign of the beautiful brotherhood and liberty of the proletariat. Children frightened into accusing their own mothers.

Kapek shrugged his heavy shoulders and laughed uneasily.

"I have nothing to do with the police. They're a separate branch and have their own methods. I'm interested in other phases of this experiment. I am, as a matter of fact, most interested in the Russian Empire. We and Great Britain are the greatest oriental powers in the world. We ought to come to some arrangement but your Lord Curzon is a stiff-necked diplomat of the old school and won't play ball with us. Tchicherin has been having a long correspondence with him which will shortly be published. It's enough to make a cat laugh. Tchicherin, who is also an old-time diplomat, scores every point."

"All that's beyond me," said Lucy. "I only know that life in Russia is disgusting. Nobody laughs. Everybody is afraid. And now here I am a prisoner in the Kremlin."

Kapek grinned at her and played with his red fringe of beard again.

"My dear young lady," he said. "You are delightfully English! I daresay you think Clapham was a paradise compared to Russia, and that a little villa in England is more admirable than the Kremlin with all its churches and palaces."

"Yes, I do," answered Lucy, but she also laughed at the absurdity of the contrast. She could not help liking this flat-faced, heavily shouldered, plump-fingered man who had a kindly expression behind his glasses, and did not take offence at her denunciation of Soviet Russia. He was at least human. He was humorous. He spoke perfect English. He was in a way broad-minded.

He came several times to take tea and was friendly with Vladimir and Olga, putting Olga on his knee, stroking her fair hair, and calling her Alice in Wonderland. It was undoubtedly due to him that she was allowed to leave the Kremlin with her children and live in a private apartment—two rooms anyhow—on the other side of the river. Michael joined them later, astonished that Kapek had worked this arrangement and glad for Lucy's sake. She felt more free. She could walk about Moscow with Olga and go to the ballet and the opera from time to time when Kapek sent her tickets. But she still resented the inquisition and espionage which attended them in the apartment house. The

house Kommissar—a tall bearded man with cross-eyes which made him squint—kept a check on her comings and goings as he did on all the other inhabitants of the house. The front door was on a chain and bolt and he was always there rattling his keys when she came in or went out. Special permission was necessary to stay out late. He was always sulky and sullen and once when she put a bit of lace round her shoulders on an evening when she had seats for the ballet he grabbed at it as though about to tear it off her neck and said, "*bourjoi*" in a harsh voice.

"How dare you?" she cried.

His squint eyes hovered about her.

"You're an English woman," he said. "We don't like foreigners in Russia and we don't like *bourjoi* customs. In any case I am the house Kommissar responsible for order and good manners."

"I'll report you to friends of mine," she told him.

"What friends?" he asked. "I'd like to know."

"People in higher authority than you, Mr. House Kommissar."

He spat on the stone floor of the hall.

"I only take orders from the police," he said. "You'd better be careful, Englishwoman. The police might take a fancy to your pretty neck. They have funny ways with people's necks."

"In any case I'll tell my husband," she warned him. "He'll teach you better manners."

"And I'll report you to the police," he answered sullenly. "They already have a dossier about you. All your visits and all your friends. There's nothing they don't know."

The man's remark about her visits being known to the police worried her a little, not so much for her own sake as for her friends' safety. She had met two of them in the market which was now open under Lenin's New Economic Policy, or "Nep" as it was called. A number of women of the old régime had ventured to stand among the stalls offering little trinkets, or bits of clothing or babies' shoes. Here and there one of them had a fur tippet over her arm or an embroidered shawl. Old men who had once been gentlemen in green, and stained old overcoats with scraps of fur or astrakhan round the collars, stood in the slushy snow exhibiting pipes or signet rings or carpet slippers on small trays. Lucy had gone to the market with her boy and girl, and suddenly gave a cry at the sight of one woman.

"Anna Sergeyevna!"

She had known her as a rather pretty girl just before the war. They had been to parties together and Anna had been engaged to a young officer of the Imperial Hussars. She was no longer pretty, and hardly recognizable because of her sharp cheekbones and tightly drawn skin and deep sunken eyes.

She stared at Lucy, and then spoke her name in a whisper.

"Lucy! Oh my dear!"

"What has happened to you?" asked Lucy. "You look so ill, my poor Anna."

"I'm dying," said Anna in a faint voice. "I wish I were dead."

Heavy tears welled into her eyes and moistened her sharp cheekbones.

"Where are you living?" asked Lucy. "May I come and see you?"

"I have one room which I share with my mother and father."

She gave the address in Moscow.

Vladimir grabbed his mother's arm and whispered to her.

"Isn't this a bit dangerous?" he asked. "There's a policeman edging nearer."

"Yes," said Anna Sergeyevna who had overheard. "It's dangerous. Go away, my dear."

"I will come and see you," said Lucy.

The other she met was Lydia Novikova. She was at the far end of the market-place, selling sunflower seeds which Russians split between their teeth eating the little kernels for the same reason as Americans chew gum, a mere habit of mastication.

She wore a coat and skirt very stained and dirty, and she had dirty hands for lack of soap, but even now in her misery—and she looked miserable—had a touch of grace and elegance not to be mistaken among these peasant women who passed by fingering the trinkets on the trays, holding up the fur tippets and dropping them again, now and then buying some trivial thing.

"Lydia!" exclaimed Lucy. "Have you come down to this?"

She spoke in English and at the sound of it Lydia Novikova turned white and began to tremble.

"Why do you speak to me in English?" she asked. "Who are you?"

Then she recognized Lucy and put her thin hands to her face and began to weep.

"Hush!" said Lucy. "Don't cry, for God's sake, Lydia. We are being watched."

Out of the corner of her eye she saw one of the military police staring in their direction from one of the stalls near by.

"Where can I find you?" she asked.

Lydia Novikova whispered some address and Lucy passed on with her boy and girl.

"Little Mother," said Vladimir, "if I were you I wouldn't prowl about this market. There are too many police and you are always so rash."

Always he had this sense of responsibility for his mother's safety. Always he wanted to shield her, though as the son of a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Red

Army he had a sense of allegiance to Russia and its leaders, especially to Lenin who had made the Revolution and had promised to make a new and beautiful Russia.

Small boy as he was, he argued these things out in his own mind. It was, of course, sad that his mother's friends should be so miserable. She took him with her to see Anna Sergeyevna who was living in a basement room without a door but with a bit of ragged carpet nailed up to keep out the draughts. There was an old man with a white pointed beard who was Anna's father and an old lady with white hair and glasses looking as though a puff of wind might blow her away. She was so tiny, thin and frail. There was a lot of weeping which Vladimir found rather trying.

"Because of our family name we are persecuted," said Anna.

"We don't even get the ordinary rations. We starve to death. How can we help having one of the old names?"

"I thank God for my name," said the old man. "I am proud of it."

"Father dear," said the old lady. "Don't shout out for all the world to hear."

Lydia Novikova was in a worse place. It was an attic room with a leaky roof and no furniture except a few wooden boxes on which she had made a bed.

"Because of my husband's name," she said. "I am treated as a wild animal. I was in prison for five years. When they let me out I wept because I was still alive. This life is a torture. It's a living death."

She spoke in English to Lucy and together they wept, until Vladimir tugged at his mother's frock and said, "Let's go."

"After all," he said to his mother when they were walking home, "those ladies belong to the old régime. They have bad names in Russian history. They were aristocrats."

"They were beautiful women," cried Lucy. "They were living lovely lives. Is that a reason why they should be starved to death?"

"Perhaps they oughtn't to be alive," said Vladimir. "They were certainly enemies of the Revolution. I expect they hate Lenin."

"You heartless little Bolshevik!" cried Lucy. "If I weren't your mother I'd scrag you!"

She was very angry with him, and each of her cheeks had reddened, as he saw.

"I belong to Father's side of things," said Vladimir softly. "I can't help it, Mother. Of course I love you just the same."

He felt her hand tighten its grip of his own and she laughed in a vexed kind of way.

"Don't let's talk nonsense," she answered. "Don't let's get into a political argument, David. If you do that I shall go scranny."

“Scranny” was a new word to him. He made a mental note of it.

The boy Vladimir did not see much of his father at this time in Moscow. He worked early and late at the Commissariat of War. But occasionally he was at home in the evenings, and now and then received visitors when only tea was served after the family’s frugal supper.

Most of them were Michael’s fellow officers in the Red Army or on the staff of the Commissariat of War, and they laughed a lot and talked a lot, hours after Vladimir and Olga had gone to bed. The boy could hear their voices in the crowded little room next to where he slept, with gusts of laughter followed by quieter lulls when they were talking seriously, but mostly he fell asleep and did not hear them. But one night he kept awake with the consent of his mother and father. An important visitor was coming, and his father was quietly excited as he could see, and he felt excited himself because the man who was coming was a very great man.

It was his father who told him so.

“Tonight a very great man is coming to see us, Vladimir,” said his father. “It is my chief and comrade. My real hero. Lev Davidovich Trotsky. He organized the Red Armies. To his genius, his ardent spirit, his indefatigable brain, we owe our victories.”

“Well, I know all about that, Father,” said Vladimir. “But of course I shall be glad to have a look at him.”

Lucy did not seem so glad. She made a funny little grimace and wanted to know what all Trotsky’s glorious victories had done for Russia, beyond making it into a pest-house and a morgue.

Vladimir saw his father’s face colour up slightly and he answered with a vexed laugh:

“You are incurable, my darling. I can’t do anything to convert you. Perhaps one day you will realize the stupendous thing that has happened in Russia. The beginning of a new era. The triumph of the proletariat over their old tyrannies and serfdom—an example to the whole world. The old dream come true of the Brotherhood of Man.”

“You won’t convert me,” said Lucy. “It’s all stuff and nonsense. New tyrannies for old tyrannies. What’s the use of that? Serfs under a different name. All of them hungry and without any liberty. I think you’re mad, Michael. You’re daft.”

Vladimir remembered that argument because he took part in it and was on his father’s side.

“Little Mother, you’re very naughty,” he cried. “You ought not to call Father mad and daft. What he says is the truth. It is what I’m taught every day in school. Russia has had a glorious Revolution which one day will lead us to great happiness. Russia will be the most beautiful country on earth. Everyone

will have equal opportunities. You don't understand, Little Mother, because you're English."

He saw his mother tighten her lips. She gave him a strange look and then laughed in a shrill way.

"I'm outvoted," she said. "Two men against one woman. Of course they must be right. My own son turns against me."

Michael put his arm round her.

"Vladimir is a child of the Revolution," he said, "like all our young people. But he will never cease to love his English mother."

"No, Mother," said Vladimir. "I shall always love you, even if I take Father's side, when it comes to talk about Russia."

"Well, that's nice," said Lucy. "As long as I'm loved."

But she looked upset and went about arranging the tea-things for their visitor, humming one of her nursery rhymes. It was *Baa, Baa, Black Sheep, Have You Any Wool*? He had already noticed that she hummed this particular tune when she was a bit annoyed.

Trotsky came with a friend and Vladimir peeped at him through the door of the sitting-room which was also his parents' bedroom. He wore a big overcoat with an astrakhan collar and a fur cap which he took off when he entered the room. He had a little pointed beard and moustache, and his eyes, as the boy saw, seemed to shine with an inner light like two torches. He talked excitedly, smiling and laughing. On his arrival he put his arm round Michael's shoulder and called him "tavarish" and he was very friendly and informal.

"So this is your little English wife," he said in Russian, and then kissed Lucy's hand and spoke to her in English.

"Your husband and I are good friends. No soldier fought better in the war against Denikin and that rabble. Now he is doing excellent work in the Commissariat of War for me."

"You will take some tea?" asked Lucy.

"A little later. Give me leave to go on talking for a bit. I am one of the world's talkers. Talk to me in English, which I used to know pretty well. Once I could speak Cockney. I knew London from Limehouse to the Old Kent Road. I had good days there. I used to like riding on the top of a bus down the Strand. Many a time I've had a meal at a coffee stall, a cup of coffee and a baked potato. What could be better?"

"I would give a lot to be there now," answered Lucy, smiling at him in no hostile way, though she had made light of his glorious victories before he came.

"Yes," said Trotsky good-humouredly. "With all its faults England is a good place, and dear dirty old London takes hold of one. One day perhaps England will go Communist. Then we can be friends with her."

“Never!” cried Lucy. “England loathes Communism.”

Trotsky laughed.

“Never is a long time, dear lady. Even England must change and dig herself out of her old ruts. Even the English people, so deeply conservative as well I know, will watch what is happening here in Russia and will abolish the old titled aristocracy, the rich drones, and declare war upon the fatheaded *bourgeoisie* and press on to the dictatorship of the proletariat. It’s the writing on the wall. Communism is the new pattern of life. Here in Russia at the moment it’s all experimental and we have made many mistakes and many failures, but in the end you will see.”

“I shan’t live to see the end,” said Lucy. “And I don’t want to see it.”

Vladimir’s father coughed and looked uneasily at his wife but Trotsky had not taken offence. He laughed good-naturedly.

“You’re very young,” he said. “I hope you will live to see a happy Russia without any of the severities which are now inevitable after Revolution. I may not live to see the full fruits on the tree. I burn myself up too much. I talk too much and drink too much tea. I work too hard as though I were driven by some devil inside me. It’s hardly likely that I shall see our dream come true.”

Michael laughed nervously.

“My dear Lev Davidovich, you are a young man as age is counted nowadays.”

“Somebody will probably have a shot at me,” said Trotsky, laughing again. “There are still people in Russia who would like to plug me with a bullet. That fellow Stalin hates me like poison. He would like to get rid of me. Well, after all, I’ve done my job. I built up the Red Armies from nothing. I beat that fellow Dankin and all his crew. I drove Wrangel into the sea. Do you mind if I smoke a pipe, dear lady? I learnt the habit in England.”

“My father used to smoke a pipe,” said Lucy. “I like the smell of it. But now is the time for tea.”

That was all that Vladimir heard, listening at the door and peeping in at the great man. He felt proud that his father was such a friend of Lev Davidovich Trotsky. It was certainly an honour to have a visit from him, thought Vladimir called David.

XII

Lucy had a private life of her own in Moscow of which Vladimir only knew by what she told him. For a time she seemed happy with some new friends she had made. Some of them were English and employed, she said, by the British Trade Mission which had set up an office in Moscow. The head of it was an Englishman named Mr. Smithers. He was really a kind of Ambassador.

"What *is* an Ambassador?" asked Vladimir.

Lucy explained that he was a man who was sent out by any government to a foreign country from which he sent back reports about every old thing, such as trade and politics.

"A spy, do you mean, Mother?" asked Vladimir.

Lucy laughed at this question as she often laughed at Vladimir's questions, somewhat to his annoyance.

"Good heavens, no, my dear David! An Ambassador is a most honourable man. It's one of the best jobs a man can have in England. The King thinks a lot of his Ambassadors."

"Then why doesn't Mr. Smithers call himself an Ambassador, if it's so honourable?"

"Well, that's difficult to explain," said Lucy after a moment's hesitation. Perhaps she didn't know the right answer. "I daresay it's because England doesn't want to recognize Communist Russia."

"That seems very silly!" exclaimed Vladimir. "Anybody who came to see us would recognize us afterwards."

Lucy laughed again as though he had said something funny.

"Well, we'll leave it at that, David. Anyhow Mr. Smithers is a very nice gentleman and he has some charming young Englishmen serving under him. If I knew typewriting I might get a job there translating from English into Russian and the other way about."

"Thank goodness you can't do typewriting," said Vladimir. "You might get too much in with the English and then I should lose you."

"Some friends of mine have gone there," she told him. "They learnt English from their governesses before the war."

"Then they must be aristocrats or *bourjoi*," said Vladimir scornfully. "A

rotten crowd."

Lucy was vexed and even angry.

"If you say that I shall smack you, David. They're friends of mine, and they are the only nice people I know. Thank goodness these jobs have dragged them out of misery. They get something to eat. They're treated like human beings. They have quite a little fun sometimes."

"What kind of fun?" asked Vladimir curiously.

Lucy smiled a secret smile.

"Perhaps I had better not tell you," she said mysteriously.

But Lucy could not keep it back from David to whom she told most things.

"I've been dancing," she said one day.

"Dancing?" he asked, much astonished. "In the ballet?"

She laughed and shook her head.

"No, with some of the English gentlemen belonging to the Trade Mission. They're learning the new dances. They're very funny, especially when nobody knows how to dance them. One of the young men goes round with a chair and gives demonstrations. There's one dance called the Fox Trot. It's most amusing. I did pretty well at it with a nice young Englishman. He said I had a natural instinct for dancing."

She must have told Michael about this dancing, for one evening they had a quarrel about it.

"I don't like you dancing with that crowd," he said. "Some of them belong to the old aristocracy. It's dangerous to associate with them."

"They're my friends," said Lucy. "They were once your friends. Before you went Red. You used to know Nicolai Satchev, and young Korepanov and Serge Mazyrenko. I remember how you liked Nicolai Satchev."

"They will lead you into trouble," said Michael who looked deeply embarrassed at the mention of these names. "The police will keep a dossier about all the people who go to that dancing class or meet your English friends."

"I don't mind!" said Lucy carelessly. "I enjoy it now."

"It's very dangerous," said Michael anxiously. "It fills me with fear for you. Our Secret Police do not like anyone who associates with foreigners."

"They're not foreigners," answered Lucy hotly. "They're my countrymen and my Russian friends."

"I don't like it," said Michael. "I beg of you not to go among them again. I command you not to."

"You command me?" exclaimed Lucy. She gave a little peal of laughter. "I'm not a Russian serf, Michael. You're not a kommissar of police on morals."

Michael spoke with deep distress.

“I implore you to avoid those people. I am certain it may lead to very grave trouble for you.”

Lucy didn’t seem to mind about the trouble. Perhaps it was because she was lonely now that Vladimir went to school in the mornings and afternoons.

“I’m lonely without you, David,” she told him several times. “I must amuse myself somehow.”

Vladimir thought that over in his mind.

XIII

Under Lenin's New Economic Policy several little shops had opened in Moscow. They were restaurants and coffee shops where light meals were served, mostly to government officials who paid to go there. Lucy made a habit of slipping into one of these, as afterwards she told Vladimir. It had been opened by a member of the old Imperial ballet who had given up dancing because of rheumatism in his leg. He was an attractive-looking man but frightened of his own temerity in opening the coffee shop.

"It is very dangerous," he said several times to Lucy. "Of course I am watched by the police. They are always keeping a note of those who come here. It may cost me my life one day."

He was helped in the shop by his wife and daughters and his old mother remained in the background with two of his aunts who made the coffee and cooked some biscuits and buns. They surrounded Lucy when there was nobody else in the shop and chattered about their fears and hardships and terrible experiences during the Revolution and Civil War. Because Lucy was English they had an idea that she might help them to escape.

"Now that there's an English Mission in Moscow," said the former ballet dancer, Leonid Ivanovich Dmitiriev, "it might be possible for you to obtain some English pound notes. That would give us a chance of escape. English pound notes or American dollars can work miracles."

Lucy smiled at this dream.

"How am I to get English pound notes? Do you imagine that any Englishman will hand them to me for the sake of my beautiful eyes?"

"Hush!" said Leonid dramatically. "If you will go to them with some diamonds, they might buy them for English pound notes—diamond necklaces, diamond rings, precious stones belonging to my wife's family. I will show you. But we must keep an eye on the door. It's very dangerous. It's terribly dangerous."

There was no one in the shop. At this hour in the afternoon no one was likely to come.

Leonid whispered something to his wife. She went to the room behind the shop. The two aunts came out with her. They were carrying little boxes.

"We will show you," said Leonid. "They will draw the eyes out of your

head. Come here to this table. Bend over them."

The three women opened little boxes and the table was strewn with jewels—diamonds, pearls, emeralds and rubies.

"Aren't they wonderful, my dear?" whispered one of the aunts.

"Your English friends can have them all for a few banknotes," said Leonid in a low voice.

Lucy bent over the table and drew her breath, as afterwards when he was older she told her son Vladimir.

"It was like going into Aladdin's cave," she said. "The diamonds seemed alive. Light came out of them like flowing water all shining. They were like little stars on the tablecloth. They took my breath away."

The people in the coffee shop were all absorbed in the jewels on the table when the door swung open and a man in a black jacket and high black boots came in kicking the snow off his shoes on the doormat. They had seen him before. He was an officer of the police.

Leonid turned deadly white and seemed to lose the power of movement. It was one of the aunts who was quick-witted and rapid in action. She gathered up the tablecloth with all the jewels inside.

"This cloth is filthy!" she exclaimed. "It's really a disgrace!"

She carried it into the back kitchen.

The man in black stared at them suspiciously, but was tricked by this sleight-of-hand.

"It was an awful moment," said Lucy when she told this story to Vladimir.

"You were taking terrible risks, Little Mother!" exclaimed Vladimir, thrilled by this tale but shocked by his mother's carelessness.

It was in this little restaurant that she met Zabotin, the greatest dancer since Nijinsky, and the beautiful Kusanova who had come starving to the house in Kazan. They were now back in Moscow rehearsing a new ballet and getting better food—though not enough for Zabotin—than they had in Kazan.

"Zabotin is like a child!" said Lucy laughing at the memory of her meeting with him. "He flung his arms round my neck and kissed me as though I were his long-lost love. It was quite embarrassing."

"Cheek!" said Vladimir who knew that English word.

"Kusanova was as beautiful as ever," said Lucy. "She wore a little fur coat and fur-lined boots like a fairy princess."

"It doesn't seem right to me," said Vladimir. "I see the peasants going about with rags tied on their feet or straw in wooden shoes. Why should these dancers be spoilt like that?"

"Little Bolshevik!" cried his mother, vexed again. "How could Kusanova dance if her feet were tied up in rags?"

That seemed an unanswerable argument and Vladimir forgot his grudge

against dancers when Zabotin and Kusanova came to tea one day and stayed to supper and then half-way through the night, talking, talking, talking. Kusanova had come in the little fur jacket and fur-lined boots, and she had the grace of a kitten so that every movement she made was exquisite. Because of the heat of the room from the big porcelain stove she kicked off her boots and remained with bare feet, and Vladimir stared at her pretty toes. Zabotin did most of the talking, about the new ballet now in rehearsal and the terrific quarrels he had with the director whom he described as a torturer of souls and, what was worse, a man without taste.

Later in the evening, he became filled with self-pity and, as in Kakan one night, clasped his hands above his head and flung himself against the wall groaning and weeping.

"This life!" he cried. "It's terrible! There is no beauty in Russia and I cannot live without beauty. I live like a caged animal. I'm a dancing slave, led through the bars of this prison house. I suffocate, I cannot breathe, I die by inches, because I'm starved of liberty and starved of beauty."

"Hush, dear Zabotin!" said Kusanova. "You always speak so wildly and there are listening ears, everywhere."

She glanced toward Vladimir who was reading a book in his corner of the room. In Kazan they had been startled and frightened when this small boy had jumped down from the stove and denounced them.

"I'm not listening," said Vladimir, though he had heard every word. "At least I don't want to listen."

Zabotin came over from the wall and looked over the boy's shoulder.

"*The Glory of Lenin*," he read. "The Father of the Revolution."

He cried out in horror.

"O God! O God!"

"It's a good book," said Vladimir. "It gives some of Lenin's speeches. We have to learn them by heart."

"Jesu! Jesu!" cried Zabotin.

Kusanova spoke to him again.

"Be careful, Zabotin! Dance with me. Dancing is less dangerous. It's the one art in which there are no politics."

It took some persuasion to make Zabotin dance. He vowed that he had lead on his feet and in his heart.

"Dance, Zabotin!" pleaded Lucy. "When you dance life seems happy again."

Vladimir pushed his book away and watched them. Zabotin and Kusanova danced in an old-fashioned way—a minuet very stately and graceful, touching each other with the tips of their fingers. Then Zabotin went mad and danced like a faun, leaping up high with his head nearly touching the ceiling. He

seized Kusanova by the waist and lifted her up in spite of her pretended struggles. He had the strength of a young tiger and its grace, and in his eyes was a mad, wild look.

Lucy clapped her hands.

“That’s grand! You’re a genius, Zabotin!”

After that he did some conjuring tricks and juggling with the teacups and saucers to amuse Vladimir and Olga who had now come into the room after her afternoon sleep, looking like Alice in Wonderland with her hair in plaits.

Then they danced again and Olga was enraptured.

“I wish I could go into the ballet,” she cried.

Kusanova embraced the little girl.

“I will teach you your first steps. Later you will go on to the ballet school. That will be perfect. Now let us begin at once. Point your toes. Hold your arms up like this. Oh, that is adorable!”

They were all laughing at Olga’s first lesson when Michael came in. He smiled at them all good-naturedly.

“And yet people say there’s no happiness in Russia!” he remarked.

XIV

Several of Lucy's new English friends came to see her and a young Russian name Nikolai Petrovich Smirnov who was in touch with them.

Lucy was enchanted to meet her own countrymen again and to talk English to them. She asked a hundred questions about England after the war and was astonished by some of the answers. It was a young man named Robert Leslie who did most of the answering. He had had a Foreign Office training after Eton and Oxford and was an easy talker in a humorous half-comical way. Vladimir, watching and listening, was interested in his clothes as well as in his conversation, some of which was beyond his understanding. He wore the bottom button of his waistcoat undone and he had red silk socks which showed when he crossed his legs. He wore a soft collar to his shirt fastened beneath the tie by two little tapes. No one in Russia was dressed like this.

"He is no doubt an English aristocrat," thought Vladimir to himself. "He's pretty to look at but not strong like the Russians. He's more like a young lady. I wish mother's eyes didn't shine when she looked at him."

"We're having a social revolution in England," said Robert Leslie in one of these conversations. "It's quite bloodless, of course, but it's changing the character of England."

"Oh, I hope not!" cried Lucy. "I want England to remain the same."

Robert Leslie smiled at her.

"Nothing remains the same after a war lasting for four years. It has to be paid for and the rich are made to pay. Presently there will be no rich. The old landed gentry are already selling their estates and their pictures and their old houses to pay income tax and heavy death duties. My father's family portraits by Reynolds and Romney have been bought by rich Americans and now there are two ugly gaps on the walls where they used to hang."

"What a shame!" cried Lucy.

Leslie smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"We can't complain. We've had our innings. Somebody has got to pay and meanwhile there's a mass of unemployed among the working classes and millions of them are on the dole."

"What does that mean?" asked Lucy who was out of touch with English life.

Robert Leslie explained the meaning of the dole—weekly payments for unemployed men—enough to keep many of them almost as well as if they were earning wages.

"Very demoralizing of course. Lots of them don't want to work or get out of the habit of it. Others take to the streets, playing noisy instruments and holding up the passers-by to ransom."

"It's not a pretty picture of dear old England!" exclaimed Lucy, looking distressed.

"Dear old England," answered Robert Leslie, "is becoming shabby genteel. What can we expect after four years' war in which we spent most of our blood and treasure? The finest flower of our race went down on the Somme and most of our gold went down the drain or was blown up in high-explosives which were very costly. War is a silly business really. It proves nothing and it ruins everything."

"England still has her green fields and her flower gardens and her old villages and her cathedrals," said Lucy. "Don't spoil my dream of England."

Robert Leslie laughed in his quiet way.

"That's true. England is still beautiful. I went on a motor tour through England and Wales before coming out to Russia. I was staggered by the beauty away from the industrial cities. I was speechless in Canterbury Cathedral. I was spell-bound in Winchester."

"In any case," said Nikolai Petrovich Smirnov, "England has not fallen into the same misery as Russia."

"Oh, lord, no!" answered Leslie. "There's no comparison."

Nikolai came more often than the others. He stayed longer. Vladimir thought he looked like a picture of the Pied Piper he had seen in one of his mother's books before they were destroyed. He had slanting eyes which looked green in certain lights and a funny, smiling mouth and high cheek-bones. He was very thin so that his wristbones stuck out sharply below the short jacket which had become too small for him as though he had grown out of it during the war and Revolution. His father had been executed as one of the old aristocrats who had been enemies of the Revolution, and his mother had died in prison. Vladimir liked him because he could make up funny verses about almost anything and because he told nice stories to Olga. But he came too often and stayed too long. Lucy treated him roughly in her comical way.

"It's time you went, Nikolai," she would say. "I'm getting tired of you."

"No, no!" he would say. "Please let me stay a little longer. I like to sit and look at you. I like to see you doing your needlework. You are like pictures of the Madonna."

"Don't talk nonsense, Nikolai Petrovich," answered Lucy, laughing and blushing a little. "Off you go, young man!"

“I will lie on the hearthrug and go to sleep,” he answered one day. “Sing me little English songs and I will dream of you.”

Vladimir was doing his lessons intent upon some arithmetic and he wished Nikolai would go, but he didn’t go.

He pretended to be asleep, but as Vladimir noticed once or twice he opened his eyes and gazed at Lucy with a little smile about his funny comical mouth.

Sometimes he talked a long time with Lucy about books. He had read the works of Charles Dickens and was devoted to Mr. Pickwick. He had also read a lot of Shakespeare and could quote certain speeches in a dramatic way which amused Lucy but did not amuse Vladimir who was a little jealous of him. He thought it “cheek” that this young man should talk to his mother about Dickens. That was one of his own secrets with his mother. He didn’t like sharing it with anyone. Besides Nikolai Petrovich might not be careful. He might talk about it outside. He might not be willing, like Vladimir, to bite his tongue off before telling the Cheka—that had now changed into the Gepeou—anything if he were questioned.

He spoke to his mother about it angrily.

“Little Mother, why do you share our secrets with Nikolai? They’re between you and me.”

“Secrets?” she asked, quite astonished. “What secrets, David?”

“Charles Dickens and all that.”

She laughed in a high voice.

“Bless the child! Dickens isn’t a secret. Everybody reads ‘Mr. Pickwick’ and ‘David Copperfield.’ ”

“No,” said Vladimir. “It’s against the rules. Those books are very *bourjoi*. They are stories of a pluto-democracy.”

“Stuff and nonsense!” cried Lucy, laughing again.

“It’s not stuff and nonsense,” said Vladimir. “Don’t you remember that man in Kazan—Igor—who tore up my books? I fought with him but it was no use.”

There was somebody else who was jealous of Nikolai Petrovich Smirnov. It was Michael.

Vladimir heard his father talking about him one night.

“I don’t like that young man Nikolai coming here so often.”

He heard his mother’s answer.

“Why not, Michael? He lives in overcrowded rooms with squalling brats. It’s nice and quiet here. He just comes for a little peace.”

“He comes too often and stays too long,” said Michael. “Every time I come home Nikolai is lying on the rug or curled up in the corner.”

Lucy laughed lightheartedly.

“He shuts his eyes and thinks out new lines for his poetry. He’s a poet.”

“I don’t like poets,” said Michael. “At least not in my own home. They’re dangerous fellows. They fall in love too easily. Like Nikolai has fallen in love with you.”

Vladimir heard his mother laugh again.

“Stuff and nonsense, Michael! How can you be so ridiculous?”

“I see it in his eyes,” said Michael sulkily. “The other night when I came back he was looking at you with adoration as Dante looked at Beatrice.”

“Good gracious!” cried Lucy. “Do you mean to say you’re jealous of that boy? I’m old enough to be his mother.”

“You’re not old enough to be his mother,” answered Michael. “And you look much younger than you are. There’s another reason why I don’t like Nikolai coming here so much.”

“What’s on your mind now?” asked Lucy, a little irritably.

“His father and mother belonged to the old régime. His father was executed with other aristocrats. It’s a black mark against Nikolai Petrovich.”

Lucy spoke with some heat as though angry.

“That’s another reason why he should come here if it gives him any happiness. I pity him, poor boy. He has those black horrors in his memory.”

“Lucy,” said Michael gravely. “You’re running risks. I’ve told you so many times. You meet dangerous people. Those things do not go unnoticed. I may not be able to protect you always. You may cast suspicion upon yourself.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Lucy. “Nikolai is working for the British Mission. That gives him enough protection. As for you, there’s no fear. You’re a friend of Trotsky. Kapek admires you. You’ve a fine job in the Commissariat of War.”

Michael’s voice did not change its tone, which was grave.

“At the moment it is all right. But politicians in important positions sometimes fall out of favour. Lev Davidovich has his enemies. Stalin, who is becoming very powerful, is plotting against him. I’m known as a friend of Trotsky. Therefore I have my enemies too. Everything is uncertain. I would rather die than see you get into trouble, my darling.”

“Michael!” cried Lucy. “You’ve got the ‘jim-jams’.”

That was a new word to Vladimir who was listening to this talk between his father and mother though he was doing home lessons in the next room with Olga who was drawing flowers and birds with her tongue out. She was very good at drawing.

“ ‘Jim-jams’! That was a very funny English word,” he thought.

His father repeated it.

“Yes, I have the ‘jim-jams’ as you say. Not for my own sake, Lucy, but for yours.”

Lucy spoke bitterly for a moment.

“Don’t blame me if you have the ‘jim-jams’, Michael. You needn’t think that I don’t know all the terrors and tortures lurking behind the scenes of your beautiful Red Russia. Haven’t I been frightened often enough? Haven’t I slept with fear on my pillow? But I’m not worrying because Nikolai comes here to sit in the corner thinking out his poetry or playing with the children before they go to bed.”

“Very well, my dear,” said Michael quietly. “But don’t deceive yourself about Nikolai. He’s madly in love with you. He has a youthful passion for you. It doesn’t please me very much.”

Lucy laughed again in her high voice.

“How absurd you are! I should rather like to be loved again even by a boy young enough to be my son. It’s nice to be loved.”

“I love you, my darling,” said Michael tenderly. “Isn’t that enough? Are you tired of my love?”

“Oh, I take it for granted,” she said lightly. Then she began to sing a little song which Vladimir knew so well. It was “*Annie Laurie*,” in English spoken funnily. “For the sake of Annie Laurie I wad lay me doon and dee.”

He went on with his lessons.

XV

Time passed and in Vladimir's memory the next year or two was uneventful. Everything seemed to go on the same with his father at the Commissariat of War, and his mother's friends paying visits now and then, and Nikolai Petrovich lying on the rug or sitting against the wall with his hands clasped about his knees, and lectures at school and home lessons, and snowball fights with other boys, and Olga no longer a baby but a little long-legged yellow-haired girl—mad on dancing, and the daily noise of other people in the apartment house quarrelling, screaming, playing the balalaika and the concertina in three different rooms, and journeys with pails to the only tap from which they could get water. One stupendous event happened in this time. It was the death of Lenin, who had been very ill before he passed out—though that had been kept as a dark secret from the proletariat.

Vladimir remembered the funeral in the Red Square where he stood with his father. Guns firing; bands playing solemn dirges; red banners drooping; fur-capped men on platforms making long speeches; the massed crowds strangely silent; the tramping of soldiers' feet; the passing of guns. Lenin was dead. That little slant-eyed short-bearded man who had worked out a new theory of life for humanity and pursued it with ruthless zeal but also with a grim sense of humour, and a tongue which lashed his own followers when they made a mess of things. A little, squarely built, heavy-jawed man named Stalin, not very well known, who had remained in the background mostly, was his successor. It didn't seem to make any difference to daily life except that the markets and the few shops that had opened were shut again. In the agricultural districts the farmers, or *kulaks* as they were called, were forced into communal farms and some of them were shot for resisting this withdrawal of personal liberty and the right to make profit out of their own toil. They hoarded their food and bartered it with the city populations who had all been 'speculators' as it was called, adding to their scanty rations by country journeys from which they brought back potatoes and eggs and cheese. Now there were only the scanty rations and Vladimir's remembrance of boyhood was dominated by the sensation of being hungry or at least never having quite enough to eat when his appetite was enormous, and his growing body was demanding its due.

Not that he was unhappy. On the contrary he was happy in school because

he was always at the top of his class and very keen to learn, and because he was a favourite with his masters and fellow schoolboys. Once his head was patted by Lunacharsky, Director of Education and Cultural Philosophy in Soviet Russia—a thin, bearded man with kindly eyes behind his glasses like an old-time professor, though an ardent apostle of Communism. That was when Vladimir had to recite his own prize essay on Communism as the New Gospel of Youth.

"Extremely good, little comrade!" said Lunacharsky. "It is written with sincerity and eloquence. You have the gift of words, and you have the faith of Lenin. The whole school should be proud of you."

Fine words which made Vladimir blush to the roots of his hair. Little did Lunacharsky know that Vladimir's mother hated his prize essay and had jeered at him for his burning expressions of faith in the glory of Lenin and the splendour of the Revolution, and the superiority of the Soviet system to any other form of government. That had hurt him. She was sorry for what she had said when she saw the tears in his eyes.

"Sorry, David. But you know I don't believe all that stuff."

"It's true, Mother," he cried. "It's only because you're English that you see things in a different way. England is your fairy-tale and it's all wrong, Little Mother! Even Mr. Leslie told you that England is in a bad way with millions of unemployed walking about the streets without wages and without hope. I remember him saying so. Here in Russia there are no unemployed."

"No," said Lucy. "They are driven like dumb beasts into the factories and fields. They're not allowed to own anything. They can't buy anything. An unemployed man in England is like a prince compared with a wage-earner in Russia. The only people in Russia who are well fed and well clothed are the secret police and the kommissars and the big men in the government offices."

"Mother," cried Vladimir. "You're incurable. I don't know what to do about it. I have to hide you in my mind. I have to hide you in my heart. If I didn't love you so much. . . ."

She asked a question with a queer smile in her eyes.

"What would you do, David, if you didn't love me so much?"

"I should denounce you to the Gepeou," he said gravely. The Ogpu, or Ge-pe-ou as it was called, had taken the place of the Cheka. It was the same thing with different letters.

He saw his mother's face go white but she kept the smile in her eyes, and on her lips.

"Then it's a good thing you love me so much," she said. "Otherwise it would be very awkward for me."

But Lunacharsky had patted him on the head.

XVI

One evening—perhaps it was a Sunday—the room used as a bed-sitting-room in the apartment house seemed to be filled with people. They were some Russian young men and women who had established friendly relations with members of the British Mission. Nikolai was among them and the Englishman Robert Leslie had come. The Russians all seemed to be frightened and tearful. They were all talking together. Two of the girls kept weeping. Robert Leslie seemed to be trying to comfort them and made light of their fears.

"Nothing will happen to you," he said, "because the British Mission is leaving Russia. We shall all be back before long."

"While you are away we shall be killed," said Nikolai.

"No, no!" cried Leslie. "You Russians always exaggerate. You exaggerate the joys of life and then fall into despair. I can't see any danger happening to you, just because you were in touch with members of the British Mission. The fact is that fear takes possession of you too easily."

"You are English," said one of the girls named Nadia, who came from the Caucasus of a noble family, and had jet-black hair looped over her ears.

"Even though you have been in Russia for a year you do not know what happens to people who are under suspicion."

"Why should you be under suspicion?" asked Leslie with a smile.

It was Nikolai who answered.

"Some of us have worked for a foreign office. We have learnt to dance the fox trot. That is very deeply suspicious to a Russian policeman."

He spoke with a smile, but there was an uneasy look in his eyes.

"In any case," said another girl, "we weep because our pleasant Sunday afternoons are at an end. I shall never have to lend my black frock and shoes to Nadia so that she could share the dancing every other week with me."

She wept again with her hands to her face.

"All the girls are in love with you," said Nikolai to Leslie. "Now that you're going they weep. I'm sorry for them."

"No, no!" exclaimed Leslie, laughing. "I'm not so attractive as all that. I'm not a Don Juan. I'm a respectable Civil Servant."

Presently he took his leave and kissed the ladies' hands before going.

"I hope to be back," he said. "I want to follow up the adventure in Russia."

When he had gone there was mournful silence, broken by Lucy who laughed.

"That young man leaves many broken hearts behind! Yet he hadn't really flirted with any of you and is as cold as ice."

"I shall never see him again!" cried Nadia. "I have a presentiment of dreadful things."

Presently the girls all went and Vladimir was glad of it, having another essay to write on the Happiness of Russian Youth under Lenin and Stalin. He retired into the next room. Olga was out to tea with Kusanova and Zabotin whom she adored.

Nikolai stayed on as usual. And he was not silent. Vladimir from the next room could hear him talking. Unless he shut his ears he could hear what Nikolai was saying. It was bad for Vladimir's essay on the Happiness of Russian Youth.

"Like Nadia," he said presently, "I have a presentiment."

"Don't tell me," said Lucy. "Don't try to scare me, Nikolai."

"The police have been watching us," said Nikolai. "Soon they will pounce."

"Oh, stop it!" said Lucy. "Read out your last poem to me."

"They are all written about you and for you," said Nikolai. "They breathe my love for you. Your spirit is in every line."

"Rubbish!" cried Lucy, laughing at him. "I can't be a butterfly, and an olive tree, and a swan on the lake, and a little cloud in a blue sky, and snow falling on the walls of the Kremlin. That's impossible."

"No!" said Nikolai. "You're all that. You are everything. I see you in every aspect of nature."

"Nikolai," cried Lucy. "Talk sensibly. Talk sincerely. Forget you're a poet. Just be simple and true."

"I have the simplicity of a man condemned to death," said Nikolai.

"With my name I know that I can't expect to live. Sentence is only deferred. It may come tomorrow or the next day. They won't forgive me for working in that office among foreigners."

"You make me feel mad!" cried Lucy. "It's only a Russian who would speak like that. In England we have a proverb, 'Never say die'!"

"In England," said Nikolai, "people do not die mysteriously. They're not taken away in the night. They don't disappear for ever."

"Nikolai," said Lucy after a long pause. "Are you really afraid?"

"Yes," he answered simply. "I am afraid. Death is nothing—but what happens before death in Russian prisons isn't nice."

"I'm afraid, too," said Lucy. "I'm afraid for my children. I've been silly. I've taken too many risks because I love you all so much—my only friends."

“Lucy,” said Nikolai. “You know I have always loved you since I first came to this room. You laugh when I tell you so. I don’t ask anything from you. I only ask you to believe that I love you as I have loved no woman but you.”

“I know,” said Lucy. “I know you love me, dear Nikolai.”

“I’m going now,” he said. “I’m happier now that you’ve said what you said. I may not see you again ever. Tomorrow they may come for me. I have been watched for many weeks now. They don’t waste their time. It means they want me. Good-bye, my beloved. If I have to die it will be with your name on my lips.”

“Nikolai!” cried Lucy. “Nikolai, my dearest dear!”

There was a long silence. Then the door was opened—Vladimir could feel the draught from it—and closed a moment later.

He went into the next room and found his mother weeping.

“Mother,” said Vladimir. “It will be safer for you if Nikolai doesn’t come again. He has a bad name. It’s no wonder that he’s being watched. His father belonged to the old régime. He was an enemy of the Revolution.”

“David,” said Lucy, staring at him, “have you been listening? Are you a little cad after all my teaching?”

“I’m not a little cad,” answered Vladimir. “But unless I stuff cotton wool in my ears I can’t help hearing things, and there’s no cotton wool. I know that Nikolai loves you. I knew that a long time ago.”

“Oh, you did, did you?” cried Lucy, with sudden spots of colour on her cheeks. “Why shouldn’t he, poor boy? There’s no harm in it, is there?”

“I suppose not,” said the boy. “We’re taught to believe in free love, which no doubt means loving anybody one likes. But I’m too young to know about that except in tales. One day I shall know.”

“God help the children of Russia!” cried Lucy. “They’re taught to be little pagans in a Godless state without morality.”

“Morality——” said Vladimir, but his mother put her hand over his mouth.

“Now, none of that or I’ll whip you, David!”

That was the night before Nikolai Petrovich Smirnov disappeared for ever. It was the night a stranger came to see Lucy.

Vladimir had come home from school and was settling down to homework while his mother was reading out a story to Olga in the next room. Upstairs a baby was howling and downstairs someone was playing the concertina, but Vladimir was able to shut his ears to these noises. Later he heard a knocking at the door. It was a sharp, urgent knocking unlike that of an ordinary visitor. His mother left off reading. The knock was repeated.

“Shall I go, Mother?” called out Vladimir.

“Yes, David, see who it is.”

He pushed away his lesson books and went to the door. Two men were standing there. One he recognized. He was the man in the black leather jacket who had questioned him in school about his mother's English visitors and conversation.

"Good afternoon, little comrade," said the man. "Is your mother at home?"

For a moment Vladimir hesitated. He felt frightened about his mother. Could he give her time to run away and hide herself? . . .

Before he could answer the man pushed past him followed by the other. They strode into the sitting-room.

Lucy was standing up with her arm round Olga. She was very white.

"What do you want?" she asked.

The man in the black jacket answered.

"We want you at police headquarters. We wish to ask you a good many questions."

"I can't come," said Lucy. "I have to cook the children's dinner. If you have any questions to ask please ask them here."

"We have orders to take you to the Liubyanka headquarters," said the man. "Kindly come at once!"

"Do you know who I am?" asked Lucy haughtily. "Do you know that my husband is on the staff of the Commissariat of War?"

"We know quite a lot about you," answered the man with an ugly smile. "We have quite a dossier about you and all your friends. Many of them are being arrested at this moment. Now come along, Little Mother. There's no time for chit-chat."

"I refuse to come," said Lucy. "I shall stay here with my children."

"Oh no, you won't," said the man in the black jacket.

He grabbed Lucy's arm and held her wrist with the other hand.

Vladimir sprang forward.

"Leave my mother alone!" he said. "My father will be very angry with you. He is a Lieutenant-Colonel——"

The man laughed harshly.

"We know all about that, little man. I think I've heard that before. Shut your beak or I'll clout you."

Vladimir made a rush at him and tried to unfasten his hand from his mother's arm.

"Stand away, you little reptile!" shouted the man in the black jacket. The other man seized hold of Vladimir and held him in an iron grip.

Lucy spoke quietly and her voice was brave though her face was still dead white.

"It's all right, David. I shall have to go, but I shan't be away long. Look after Olga until I come back."

“That’s better,” said the man in the black jacket. “We have a car outside. You needn’t put on your snow shoes.”

“Back soon, David!” cried Lucy with a smile in her eyes—a smile like that of a woman who smiles before death.

“Mummy!” cried Olga, bursting into tears. She had been watching and listening from the door.

The two children were left alone. Olga wept noisily and Vladimir wept also, but silently, until presently he went over to Olga and spoke to her roughly.

“Shut up howling. What’s the good of making that noise? Mother will be back soon. Perhaps in time for supper. They only want to ask her some questions.”

But in his heart there was a great fear. He had often been frightened about his mother. She had been his great secret. Now those men would drag things out of her, the terrible things she had said about Lenin and the Russian Revolution and the Russian way of life.

Lucy was not home in time for supper. At eight o’clock Olga, who had fallen asleep for a little while, woke up and stared round her.

“Where’s Mummy?” she asked.

“Not back yet,” said Vladimir.

“I’m hungry,” said Olga. “I want my supper.”

“Greedy guts!” said Vladimir. “Disgusting little pig! You can’t have supper until Mother comes back.”

But presently he went to the cupboard and found some bread and cheese which he put on the table.

“We’d better have a picnic,” he said. “I’ll make some tea. Get the samovar down, Olga. Make yourself useful and don’t behave like a little slut.”

“What’s a slut?” asked Olga.

“A bad woman,” said Vladimir, not quite sure about it.

“When’s Mummy coming back?” asked Olga for the twentieth time.

Their father came home at nine o’clock. He came into the passage whistling a little tune from the opera “Carmen” which he loved.

“Anything to eat, my darling?” he asked before he entered the room stamping the snow off his feet.

“Father!” cried Vladimir in a choking voice.

His father came into the room and stared round. Olga was curled up on the horsehair sofa and had wept herself to sleep. Vladimir made a rush at him and burst into a passion of tears.

“Where’s your mother?” asked Michael in a voice of terror.

“The man in the black jacket came with another,” cried Vladimir. “Father, they’ve taken her away! It’s the Ge-pe-ou. They were Ge-pe-ou men.”

Michael turned white and staggered back.

"No!" he said. "No! Don't tell me that, my son."

"They were Ge-pe-ou men," cried Vladimir. "We shall never see her again. People disappear when the Ge-pe-ou gets them. They never come back, Father. And Little Mother's guilty. She's an enemy of the Revolution. She has said terrible things about Russia. They were my secrets and I never told. But they will question her and she will tell them all. When one is questioned by the Ge-pe-ou one answers at last. One tells everything in one's mind. That is what I've been told by my school-fellows in whispers. Their fathers and mothers——"

"Don't talk like that," said his father harshly. "Your mother has nothing to fear. They will ask her a few questions. How long has she been gone?"

She had been gone five hours. She had not come back five hours later. Michael had carried Olga to her bed and she was sleeping. But Vladimir could not sleep. He heard his father in the next room walking up and down, up and down. Several times he cried out in a voice of anguish. Once there was a sound as though he had flung himself against the wall. Once he knocked over a chair. Then there was a long silence, until presently Vladimir heard the sound of weeping with harsh sobs. He got out of bed and went with bare feet into the next room and saw his father seated at the table with his head on his arms, weeping.

Vladimir crept up to his father and put an arm round his neck.

"Daddy," he cried, "we must try and save Little Mother. How can we save her?"

Michael started up and held the boy's hand.

"We mustn't despair," he said. "You are quite right, little son. We must think only of saving your mother. I have good friends. They will help me. It's too late tonight, but tomorrow I will get their help. After all, I am a friend of Lev Davidovich. I was his comrade. He won't forget that."

"Do you think he will be able to do anything with the Ge-pe-ou?" asked Vladimir. "They are very powerful."

Michael stared at this small boy. He had asked a dreadful question. The Ogpu was independent of everyone, even perhaps of Lev Davidovich Trotsky. It was a separate and secret department of the Soviet State.

"How do small boys know so much?" asked Michael, as though speaking to himself. "How is it possible?"

"We talk among ourselves, Daddy. We whisper things."

"Tomorrow," said Michael, "I will talk to Lev Davidovich and to Tchicherin. I will go and see Kapek. Your mother will be back in a few days."

"Are you sure, Daddy?" asked Vladimir.

"Quite sure."

"Then I'll go to sleep," said Vladimir. "I'm as sleepy as an owl."

His father kissed him on the forehead.

“Sleep well, sonny.”

“I wonder where Mother is sleeping tonight?” said Vladimir, and he saw his father give a kind of shudder. But the boy could hardly stand for sleep and groped his way to bed and slept almost before his head had touched the mattress.

XVII

Three months passed without Lucy coming back. Michael had been to see his important friends but they seemed powerless to do anything about a person in the hands of the police. Zabotin and Kusanova helped to look after Olga, and the people in the apartment house, with the exception of the house kommissar, were kind, coming into Michael's rooms with bits of food for Vladimir, and with whispered questions about Lucy. Did anyone know if she was still alive? Was she in prison?

From the gossip of these people, talking together in front of Vladimir, making too much noise when he wanted to do his lessons, he learnt that many of the young people who had been in touch with the British Mission had been arrested, and that Nikolai Petrovich and others had been shot.

"It was his name, poor boy," cried one woman who had come in to do some sweeping and dusting. "With a name like that one can't expect to live in Russia."

"He was of course a traitor," said a younger woman with hair cropped short. She was an ardent Communist and employed as a typist in one of the government offices. "There are still a lot of people in Moscow who ought to be shot. Most of those in the ballet are anti-Leninists but they're petted and pampered."

"It's best not to speak of these things," said another woman who had brought in a roll of bread and a small piece of cheese for Vladimir's supper. "It's best not even to think of them."

So Nikolai Petrovich had been shot. Vladimir heard that piece of news with a pang of grief. Nikolai had been playful with him and Olga. He had loved Vladimir's mother. He wrote wonderful poetry.

"They must have dragged out his secret thoughts," said Vladimir inside himself. "Even if one doesn't talk treason they discover what one is thinking. That's why Little Mother is in such danger if she is still alive. They'll drag it all out of her."

Several times he asked his father:

"Is Little Mother alive?"

"I've not heard for a month. She was then alive."

"Will they torture her?"

He never asked that question again. He saw his father's face go white and little blue veins appear on his forehead.

"No, no!" he shouted. "Why do you ask such a question? Who put that terrible idea into your head?"

"People say they use torture," said Vladimir.

"People? What people?"

"The people in this apartment house. I hear them whispering about it."

"They ought all to be shot," said his father in a terrible voice.

One day Vladimir was cooking some stew for Olga who had come back from dancing lessons with Kusanova. His father was at the Commissariat of War. He heard a little tap at the door and thought it was one of the women in the apartment house.

"Drat the woman!" he thought. "Why can't they leave us in peace?"

He heard the little tap again and with a sigh put down the stewing-pot and went to the door.

Lucy was standing there like a ghost. But she gave a cry and stretched out her arms.

"David! My darling David!"

She faltered forward and he flung himself at her with a cry louder than hers.

"Mother! Little Mother!"

She wept over him and he could feel the hot tears on his face.

"Where is Olga?" she asked. "Is she still alive?"

Olga heard her mother's voice and came into the passage.

"Mother!" she said in a vexed way. "What a long time you have been! Vladimir is often cross with me. Why didn't you come back before?"

Lucy was able to laugh a little at this. Vladimir was glad that she could still laugh a little.

She put her arms round Olga and hugged her.

"They wouldn't let me come, my darling. It wasn't my fault that I didn't come back. It's a wonder I'm alive."

Vladimir noticed that she looked a little bit dead, or like a person who had been dead and had come to life again. The skin of her face and hands was grey, and her eyes had sunk into her head. She was dirty, this Little Mother who had always been so clean and made such a fuss of being clean. Her hands were begrimed with dirt as though she hadn't washed for a very long time.

She saw Vladimir's eyes looking at them and answered his thought.

"There wasn't much chance of washing in the women's prison. No soap. Nothing. It was all filthy."

A shudder passed through her but then suddenly she was gay.

"I'm home again! Don't let's think of those dreadful three months. Tell me

about everything. Tell me about Daddy. Tell me what you've had to eat and what you've all been doing. . . . There's the little clock ticking just as though I hadn't been away! And somebody has cracked the water jug. . . . How did you get fuel for the stove? . . . How lovely it is in this room! There are no bars to the windows. It smells very sweet here—except that someone is cooking onions downstairs! . . . But first I must go and wash. I must burn my underclothing and put on fresh things. The prison wasn't a very nice place! It was crawling alive—you know what with!"

"Lice," said Vladimir. "It gives people typhus."

He knew that from his memories of the open road in time of Civil War when Miss Smith had been with them.

Lucy looked better when she had washed and changed her clothes. Her skin was not so grey and she was not so dead-looking. She put on a merry mood with the children as though she had never been in prison. But that evening when Michael came home Vladimir had tears in his own eyes because his mother and father were both crying at the sight of each other.

His father came into the sitting-room and saw Lucy there and gave a great cry of joy.

"My darling wife! At last they have let you go!"

He took her in his arms and held her head against his breast and then kissed her lips and cheeks and closed eyes and wept.

It was later that evening that she asked a question suddenly.

"Is there any news of Nikolai?"

Michael hesitated and she asked again.

"Nikolai! What has happened to him?"

Michael avoided her eyes.

"He's dead. They shot him. There were others—your friends."

Lucy's face went grey again. Vladimir saw it go grey.

"Oh, those devils!" she cried. "Those devils and murderers!"

"It was inevitable," said Michael. "They found his letters and writings. They were very incriminating, poor boy. He was very incautious."

"He was a poet," said Lucy. "He loved beauty and hated cruelty."

"He shouldn't have dabbled in politics," said Michael in a low voice. "He belonged to a secret group hostile to the Soviet State. But he was very young. I'm sorry for him. I'm deeply sorry."

"He loved me and I loved him," cried Lucy in a broken voice.

"Yes," said Michael. "I know. I knew it would be a tragic blow to you, my dear."

Lucy did not weep about Nikolai, not then at least. She only had pain in her eyes and for a little while tight lips as though keeping back words which she tried not to speak.

“Let’s have a game, Mummy,” cried Olga. “It’s called noughts and crosses. Zabotin taught me.”

Lucy played the game and laughed over it with Olga. But Vladimir knew that there was a pain her heart for Nikolai, as there was in his. Nikolai was, of course, a traitor. But he was very nice otherwise.

XVIII

Time passed uneventfully for Vladimir and Olga and Lucy. This period was blurred in the memory of Vladimir and nothing stuck out from it in his mind. He was unconscious of his own growth except that his appetite was always in excess of available food. He had a few fights with his fellow schoolboys, but he was diligent with his lessons and promoted to the committee of boys who had the right of regulating their own discipline and studies according to the new Russian system of education. He heard a lot about the Five Years' Plan which was to build a new Russia. Everybody was to work harder and to eat less. But it seemed to make no difference to home life or school life not even with regard to food, for there was always less rather than more of that, though enough to make Vladimir a strong boy with good fists.

He learnt a lot about the glory of the Soviet system, so noble in contrast to the demoralized and iniquitous conditions in Capitalistic countries which were beginning to rot and decay, according to the prophecies of Karl Marx. With one side of his mind he believed all this devoutly, as a religion. How could he avoid believing it when it was the faith of his father, and when it was crammed into his mind by intensive propaganda? Loudspeakers proclaimed it in the Red Square. It was taught in the government-made films which were shown in school. On the walls of Moscow it met the eyes of youth by coloured posters dramatizing the nobility of the Russian way of life under that great and good man Stalin who had succeeded Lenin. Lecturers came to talk to the trade union audiences—everybody had to belong to a trade union—in the great opera house, and their words hammered the truth of these things into the minds of those who were forced to listen. Besides, was it not proved by results? There were evening classes for the workers who were taught to read and write. For centuries under the Czars the common folk of Russia had been illiterate. Now even the peasants were becoming educated in an elementary way. One day Russia would be the greatest power in the world with the finest civilization and culture. That was also taught. The faith of Communism would capture the world, sweeping across the Capitalistic states, liberating their down-trodden wage-slaves, until they also seized the dictatorship of the proletariat. Christianity—that worn-out slave-religion, the opium of the people (those words were carved into the wall opposite the shrine of the Iberian Virgin at the

gate of Moscow)—would be replaced by the gospel according to Lenin, Karl Marx, Engels and all the prophets of the Revolution. Vladimir heard all this day by day in a thousand different forms, and his mind absorbed it all unquestioning as did all his school-fellows. Unquestioningly—except for a dream word, a fairy-tale which sometimes haunted his imagination and troubled him. It had to be kept very secret. He tried to hide it even from himself. It was like trying to forget fantastic dreams, very pleasant sometimes, but demoralizing and weakening. They were dreams of his mother's England with kings and queens and princes and princesses and knights and squires. They were dreams of Charles Dickens's England with roast turkeys at Christmas and country inns with bright fires and tables laden with good food, with friendly and laughing folk who seemed happy under Capitalism if they were not in workhouses and prisons. There were shops in England. People could go and buy what they wanted if they had the money, as many did.

There were motor-cars and taxi-cabs according to his mother. People went to dances in evening clothes. The landed gentry in their country houses lived in extraordinary comfort with fine pictures on the walls and horses to ride. There seemed to be a lot of food in England for everybody. The villagers had their little gardens with flowers and vegetables. Cattle and sheep and all good things came to the markets. Under the terrible system of Capitalism, exploiting the masses, there was—no, it couldn't be true!—a lot of laughter and a lot of happiness for ordinary folk. That was the fairy-tale, the dream world, which came to him sometimes like a temptation when he was listening to lectures on the Soviet State, or hearing words blared out of loudspeakers as he walked back home after school hours. Fairy-tales! He wished they wouldn't jump into his mind so often. It was his mother's fault, of course. She had fed him on fairy-tales, and he loved her so much that only now and again he was cross with her for putting these false ideas into his head. It was the fault of his mother and Charles Dickens. He wished he didn't love Mr. Pickwick so much. Mr. Pickwick couldn't possibly be a Communist. He was a pot-bellied little Capitalist but, oh, so funny, with Mr. Winkle and Mr. Snodgrass and that extraordinary man, Jingle. Absurd how these imaginary characters haunted him!

One of his father's friends, the great man Lev Davidovich Trotsky came in frequently. He had taken a fancy to Lucy and liked to talk English with her and chat about dear, dirty old London as he called it. He avoided politics with Lucy, but later in the evening when she put Olga to bed and helped Vladimir with his arithmetic they heard him talking with Michael in his florid, grandiose way.

Occasionally Lucy would put her head on one side and listen with a smile.

"Now they're talking hot air!" she said once.

“Oh, Mother!” said Vladimir reproachfully. “How can you say that about one of the greatest men in the world? It was he who organized the Red Army and won all the victories over Denikin and Kolchak and Wrangel.”

“Bless the man!” said Lucy. “He’s responsible for millions of dead. I wonder they don’t rise up at night and gibber at him. I expect they do.”

“I believe you like him!” said Vladimir.

Lucy laughed at him.

“Oh, you do, do you? Well, I try to forget all his murders, and if I can do that I find him pleasant enough. In a way I do like him. He’s amusing and has good manners and he talks a donkey’s hind leg off, rather brilliantly. There he goes now!”

Lev Davidovich talked of the world as though it were his playground. Everywhere, he said, his missionaries of Communism were stirring the hopes and imagination of the under-paid masses, in China, in India, in Poland, even in France and England.

“We make converts everywhere,” he said. “That fellow Stalin is too cautious and too narrow in his interests. He can’t think beyond the frontiers of Russia. He criticizes the idea of world revolution. That’s idiotic! The world is ripe for Communism. Capitalism is in its death throes. So is the old Liberalism which did well in its time but now is like a threadbare coat. Democracy of the English pattern. Parliamentarianism and the ballot box, are merely illusions promoted by those who hold authority and power and wealth and dupe the under-paid masses into the belief that they are governing themselves. It worked for a time, but its fraud has been found out. Communism is the new religion and the new pattern of life. It will replace Christianity, but it has some of the early qualities of Christianity in its appeal to the wage-slaves and the hopeless. I speak as a Jew, of course, with no great love for the Christian tradition, though with some admiration for its missionary spirit and its martyrs. We have our martyrs of Communism and many of my young men are ready to die for their faith. That’s where I differ from Stalin—that narrow-minded . . . He thinks only of his Five Years’ Plan. He will re-establish the wage system. He will drive his wage slaves hard. He’s just a Caucasian with an oriental mind and no far-reaching imagination, no flame in his spirit, no burning faith, no dynamic quality. Now I’m out for world revolution. I want to see the real brotherhood of man. I can foresee a world government, a United States of the World. All the old systems will totter and fall. I hope to live long enough to see the rising of all peoples against their oppressors, followed for a time, no doubt, by anarchy and chaos, but seething with the spirit of a new law and a new era, sharing the common wealth of the world, pooling all resources, not differentiating between white or black or yellow races, but embracing them all in the Federated States of mankind. A great dream, a magnificent hope, a

glorious presentiment!”

He laughed at this dream of his, but as a boy laughs at some chance of adventure and the thrill of an enchanging tomorrow.

“Stalin,” he said, “presents a frozen face to these ideals.”

He dared even to criticize Stalin, and accused him of plotting behind the scenes to overthrow Trotsky himself.

“He has established a ‘troika’ (a three-horse sledge) with Bukharen and Zinoviev, as a triumvirate opposed to me and my ideals. But Stalin is a complete egoist. He desires absolute power—for himself alone. In due time he will liquidate all competitors, even those who now work with him. He can’t tolerate any man who had independent authority or prestige with the masses. That is why he plots against me, with fair words and a dagger behind his back.”

Vladimir overheard these words with astonishment. He overheard his father’s answer, spoken with a laugh.

“My dear Lev Davidovich, you’re trying to make my flesh creep! But you always speak in terms of exaggeration—if you’ll permit me to say so. In any case your name is a household word in Russia. Nobody would dare to touch you. You are the hero of the Civil War as leader and organizer of our Red Army.”

“We shall see,” said Trotsky. “I’m not quite easy in my mind about the way things are shaping. But I admit all this is dangerous talk.”

“Very dangerous,” thought young Vladimir who overheard it. “Only Lev Davidovich would dare to say such things.”

Lev Davidovich spoke once of a man called Hitler in Germany.

“They tell me he is making headway. He has the spell binder’s power. Germans go into a trance-like state when he talks to them and promises to lift Germany out of the mud, to break its chains under the Versailles Treaty. He has a new gospel of his own called National Socialism, which is a kind of *bourjoi* revolution, more national than socialist. How utterly narrow to think in terms of nationalism at this time of day when an aeroplane crosses many frontiers in a few hours! He and Stalin would get on well together. They have blinkers on their eyes. They can’t see beyond their own furrow. Now my imagination reaches out. . . .”

His imagination reached out to the uttermost ends of the earth, lingered in the Latin Americas, crossed over to darkest Africa, dived into the subterranean world of European revolution working in little cells of missionary zeal.

He had dared to criticize Stalin. Those ideas of world revolution were repudiated by the small group of men ruling Russia from the Kremlin. Perhaps also as chief of the Red Army they found him too powerful and too truculent. His flamboyant character, his vast ambition, his lack of tolerance for men of

smaller minds, his intrigues with other men and other groups, his correspondence with foreigners, were not to their liking. Underneath the surface of Russian political life there were plots and conspiracies in a struggle for power, and in a conflict of ideals. The economic state of Russia, at a low ebb after the Famine, embittered many minds. In spite of all propaganda they knew that other countries under the Capitalistic régime were more prosperous, and that perhaps Russia needed their help and alliance to raise her standard of living. Some of the old Guard of revolutionaries were in touch with the Germans. They believed in the possibility of Germany using her industry for the equipment of Russia. Trotsky was marked down secretly as the man with dangerous ideas and suddenly they pounced. He was arrested and expelled from the Party and at first exiled to Turkestan before being deported from Russia itself.

The friends of Trotsky were under suspicion. Many of them were arrested. To be a Trotskyite became synonymous with the name of traitor. There was a purge of Trotskyites and one of them was Vladimir's father.

Vladimir noticed at this time that his father looked sad and perhaps ill. Before anything became known about the downfall of Trotsky he kept silent about it in his family, but Lucy, like her son, was aware that all was not right with him.

It was Lucy who questioned him one day.

"What's the matter, Michael? You look like a cat with a sick headache. Are you unwell?"

"No, no!" he said. "I'm quite well."

"Is anything worrying you? Are they going to put me in prison again?"

"God forbid!" answered Michael who, being a faithful citizen of the Soviet State, did not believe in God.

It was perhaps two months later—Vladimir could never be certain of these dates—that he overheard a conversation between his mother and father.

"Michael," said Lucy, "tell me, my dear—what's worrying you? You've something on your mind—something terrible. Last night you cried out in your sleep."

He paused quite a long time before answering. Then he spoke gravely.

"I'm in great danger. I can't hide it from you any more. It's right that you should know."

"What danger?" she asked. "You have great friends—Trotsky, old Kapek, Zinoviev, and others."

He was silent again for some time. Vladimir was listening from the other room with his door open. Then his father answered:

"I have a terrible secret to tell you. Lev. Davidovich has been expelled from the Party. They're sending him into exile. His friends are under

suspicion. Many of them have already been arrested. I was Trotsky's friend."

"God help us!" cried Lucy in a voice of anguish.

"I'm afraid for you and the children," said Michael. "If anything happens to me I could no longer protect you."

"Michael," said Lucy presently, "can't you escape? Can't you get out of Russia?"

"There's no chance," he answered. "I'm being watched."

Vladimir had listened to this talk between his father and mother as he lay in bed. Their voices in the next room had awakened him or perhaps the screams of a baby in the flat above. He lay there listening with dreadful bewilderment. His father was in danger. He caught hold of that. But how could his father be in danger. He had fought with the Red Army. He was one of the heroes of the Civil War. He was the friend of Trotsky, one of the greatest men in Russia, the organizer of victory. Something had happened to Lev Davidovich Trotsky. His father said that he had been expelled from the Party. That was impossible. There was nonsense in that.

Vladimir flung off the bedclothes and padded with bare feet into the next room where his father stood talking to his mother. He had his arms round her and his eyes were staring.

"Father!" cried Vladimir. "What's the matter? I think I must have been dreaming. I must have had a nightmare. I thought I heard you say that you're in danger and that Trotsky has been thrown out of the Party. That's absurd! I must have been dreaming—how silly!"

The boy laughed and then looked at his father and mother with grave eyes. There was no answering laughter from them. It was his mother who spoke first.

"Go back to bed, David. Can't I talk to your father without you listening? You're always listening."

She spoke crossly and then suddenly caught him in her arms and put a wet cheek against his.

"I'm old enough to know," said Vladimir. "If Father is in danger I want to know."

"We're all in danger!" cried Lucy. "There's nothing but horror around us. I wish I were dead!"

"Father," said Vladimir, "what does it all mean?"

Michael looked at his son with anguish.

"It's difficult to explain," he said. "It's difficult to understand. I don't understand it myself. But Lev Davidovich has many enemies in high places. The Party——"

He broke off and made a despairing gesture.

"One can't explain it, but they're arresting all his friends and I am one of

them, Vladimir. That's why I'm in danger. If it happens—if I'm taken away—look after your dear mother. You're a big boy now. Take care of Little Mother and Olga. Remember always that I fought for Russia and for the social revolution. I am not a traitor, though they may call me one. Never believe it, my son. I was a friend of Trotsky. Perhaps for that they will put me to death."

"Father!" cried Vladimir. "They won't do that. Our leaders are noble men. There must be a mistake."

Michael said something about a struggle for power, but Vladimir did not understand. He felt very cold and sleepy and frightened and bewildered. He was shivering in his night clothes.

"Go back to bed, darling David," said Lucy. "You will catch your death of cold."

"Yes," said Michael. "Bed is the best place for you, little son."

It was not that night but the next that Vladimir was awakened again from his sleep by a scream from his mother. It was when they came to take his father away. He saw only the end of that scene. He did not know how long the police had been there before his mother screamed, or what had gone on. He saw his father being led away down the passage.

"Cannot I say good-bye to my little ones?" asked Michael.

"You must come now," said one of the men.

Michael struggled a little but they dragged him down the passage and through the door which they kicked behind them so that it shut with a crash.

It had all happened so quickly since Vladimir had stood in his night-clothes at the bedroom door that he had had no time to call out to his father or try to defend him against those men. He had only been half awake in a nightmare state. Olga had been awakened too and had got out of bed. Together the two children went with bare feet into the next room to find their mother. Lucy looked dead. They thought she was dead. She lay on the floor white and still.

"Mother!" cried Vladimir. "Are you dead? Oh, don't be dead, Little Mother."

Olga began to scream, putting her hands over her eyes.

"Shut up," said Vladimir. "That's no good if Mother is dead."

Presently Lucy began to moan and turned her head a little on the floor.

"It's all right," said Vladimir. "She isn't dead."

He flung himself down on the floor and kissed his mother's face. She had only fainted but she was in a bad state when she managed to get up.

"David," she cried. "They've taken him away."

"He will come back like you did," said Vladimir. "It will only be for a little while."

But Michael was one of those who disappeared for ever in the great purge of Trotsky's friends.

XIX

Lucy had to give up her two rooms in the apartment house. That was a luxury only allowed to the wife of a Lieutenant-Colonel of the Red Army working in the Commissariat of War. Now that she was the widow of a Trotskyite with her own dossier in the hands of the police she was allotted one room in the basement of an overcrowded apartment house at the back of the Bolshoi Theatre. She was brave about that for the children's sake.

"It's not too bad," she told them. "We can rig up some curtains—a couple of old blankets—and get a little privacy when we want it. David can do his lessons in that corner near the window where a little light comes in."

Not much light came in that basement room. It was dark and damp and perhaps that was why Lucy began to cough a lot with bronchitis. Vladimir could hear her coughing her heart out at night though she tried to choke it back for his sake, not liking to keep him awake. She was out all day now in a factory working double shifts according to Stalin's Five Years' Plan and came back looking very tired and pale about an hour after Vladimir returned from school. Always he had some tea ready for her and that seemed to revive her wonderfully.

Looking back on those years in the basement room, Vladimir remembered his mother's courage and even now and then her gaiety, put on perhaps for his sake. She told amusing stories of her fellow workers in the factory. Some of them were queer characters, like a lot of children really she said, though some of the women were shrewd and cunning. But she found great kindness among them and they were always ready to help a fellow worker who might be ill or have an accident with one of the machines.

They were driven hard by the overseers and department managers, and government officials talked with loudspeakers to urge them forward to intensified production in accordance with the Five Years' Plan which was to bring increased prosperity to everyone.

"We're just slaves of the machine," said Lucy, "always being speeded up. The department managers are scared of being accused of slackness or sabotage if they don't turn out enough. And they nearly go mad with all the orders and papers which give them new instructions. Still, I find it amusing, David dear, and I really love my fellow workers. They have grand qualities of human

kindness. Of course there's a lot of grumbling when the overseers are out of hearing. They don't believe in this Five Years' Plan. It won't bring them any good, they say. After that there will be another Five Years' Plan or a Seven Years' Plan to keep their noses to the grindstones. I like the older women better than the young ones. They're not so immoral as the young hussies, poor dears."

"What does 'immoral' mean?" asked Vladimir.

"Free love and all that," said Lucy vaguely.

"It sounds all right to me," answered Vladimir, then aged twelve or thirteen.

Lucy's laughter at this answer—she had learnt to laugh again in that basement room—was interrupted by a spasm of coughing.

"I shall have to do something about this cough," she said presently. "It's the factory. The walls run with water in bad weather. In summer it's as hot as —well you know where!"

They did not see much of Olga at that time. She almost lived with Kusanova and Zabotin who were devoted to her and were training her for the ballet, convinced that she would be a great dancer. But they came with her often to the basement room and it was Zabotin who brought the news that Michael had been shot in prison. Vladimir was there when he told Lucy.

"It's better so," he said. "Death is better than a Russian prison."

Lucy took the news with only one spasm of weeping. "This is what they do to their heroes!" she said. "My poor Michael! My poor Michael!"

It was Vladimir who took it hardest.

"Why did they kill him?" he asked desperately. "He was a disciple of Lenin. He believed in the social revolution. They must have made a mistake. He must have got trapped somehow or denounced falsely by secret enemies. If they kill men like my father there's no use in growing up to serve Russia. It's best to be dead unless they were deceived about him."

It was not only his father's death which shocked him, though he had loved his father dearly and had been enormously proud of him, but the shock to his faith in the nobility of the social revolution and its leaders. He had jeered at his mother's denunciations of everything in Soviet Russia. She had shocked him a thousand times but that was all forgiven because she was English and therefore prejudiced. Of course he knew that everything was not perfect in the Soviet system. He disliked the Cheka which was now the Ogpu. There was too much spying and secret denunciation and terms of imprisonment for very small offences, but he had believed—his father had told him—that all this was unavoidable after such a big revolution. In the future the Russian people would enjoy the fruits of their labour and Russia would be the noblest civilization on earth, with a free and happy people all serving the State with devotion and

gratitude. He had read all this a hundred times. He had heard all that from loudspeakers in the Red Square and other places. He heard it from many lecturers who came to the school. He had believed it all—except for those dreams and doubts which had come to him because of his English blood and his mother's talk. Now they had killed his father. How could he go on believing that everything was good? Confused bewildering thoughts about all this came into the boy's mind though not so clearly nor in such words. But it flung him into an emotional state which surged up into his head and seemed to strangle him. He wept violently and beat his head against the wall of the basement room and beat the wall with his bare hands.

Zabotin held him and pressed the boy's body tightly against his chest.

"My poor lad, my poor, dear boy! How can we comfort you? What words can I say to staunch the wound in your heart? It's dreadful when the young have to suffer and be tortured. We older people who have been through many horrors and hardships have become deadened to them. We have been familiar with death. I have walked in the stench of death. I have seen many perish. Death now has no more terror for me. Often it comes as a friend and not an enemy. It's a blessed sleep and a liberation from cruelty and ugliness and all beastly things. No one can touch us when we're dead. No one can torture us. And perhaps, being dead, we are closer to those we love. I believe that. I believe in the immortal spirit. Your father may be close to you. Perhaps his hand is on your shoulder. Try to be brave, Vladimir Michaelovitch, because he is near you. Try to be worthy of his love for you. I have said these things to your dear mother. I say them now to you. And having said them I weep and I weep and I weep. How can God look down and suffer all these things—this human misery? Is it that God doesn't care? Or is God a man-made illusion and we are all helpless in this sea of agony and wickedness and cruelty and abomination?"

His voice rose almost to a scream until Kusanova rushed at him and put her hand over his mouth.

"You're a fool!" she whispered. "Why do you shout out such things for all to hear?"

"I am Zabotin!" he said when he tugged her hand away from his mouth. "They daren't touch me. I'm the greatest dancer in Russia."

"You're the greatest fool," said Kusanova.

XX

The wound in Vladimir's heart healed as all wounds of the heart seem to heal in youth. He was happy in his school life. He had many friends. Often they saw good shows in the Bolshoi Theatre. On winter days groups of them went laughing and shouting through the Red Square. They were made to feel important because so many orations were directed to Youth which was to build the New Russia. In summer there was a blue sky overhead and a warm sun. Young blood leapt up. And in Vladimir's case there was the pride of achievement. He was regarded with awe by the younger boys because he was always at the top of his class in mathematics and essay writing and the recitation of poetry and drama. When visitors came he was pointed out as the most promising pupil and nothing was said about his father having been shot as a Trotskyite. Perhaps Vladimir had saved his mother's life, or at least her liberty, by doing so well at school. Lunacharsky, the Chief Kommissar of Culture and Education, had read his report and written "Very good" across them in red ink. "Take care of this boy. He is very promising." Such recognition did not go to Vladimir's head or make him puffed up by self-pride but it was stimulating and pleasurable. Vladimir at fourteen years of age was not like Shakespeare's schoolboy, but walked with his head up and smiling eyes across the long stretch of Red Square. His hands were often dirty, from lack of soap. His underclothes were in rags in spite of his mother's mending. His boots were down at heel and broken across the toes. His fair hair was tousled, but sometimes he felt like a young god. Only when he thought of his father did he feel the prick of a wound that had healed, and a black-out of the spirit, and tormenting doubts. But mostly he was a laughing boy and happy.

Then one evening the ground at his feet seemed to open and he fell headlong into the dark pit of despair.

His mother was very ill. She was in bed when he came home from school and he heard her coughing in paroxysms behind the blanket which had been drawn across the room to make a curtain.

"Hullo, Mother!" he called. "Not at the factory today?"

He pulled the blanket on one side. It was damp to the touch though the day was warm.

She smiled at him and put her hand a little above the bedclothes and

waggled her fingers at him. But for a little while she couldn't speak for coughing. Then she spoke in a kind of whisper.

"I had to leave work early. The foreman sent me home. My cough is bad."

"Poor Little Mother! Shall I make you some tea?"

She did not answer, but Vladimir made some tea but she did not drink any and seemed to drowse off to sleep. He sat by her bedside holding her hand which was warm and moist. Presently she opened her eyes and smiled at him.

"Kiss me, David," she said.

He leaned over and kissed her forehead which was also warm.

She had another spasm of coughing and then lay quiet as though exhausted. It was quite a long time before she spoke again.

"Sing to me, David."

"What shall I sing, Mother?"

"Some of the nursery rhymes. The old English ones."

He laughed at this but sang some of the old tunes in a low voice.

"Sing a Song of Sixpence," "Oh Dear, What Can the Matter Be?" "Ba, Ba, Black Sheep."

His singing seemed to please her. She lay there with her head on the ragged pillow smiling.

"Sing 'Annie Laurie'," she asked.

He sang "Annie Laurie" and saw that Lucy had tears in her eyes as though the song made her sad.

"For the love of Annie Laurie I wad lay me doon and dee."

"Why does it make you cry, Little Mother?" he asked.

He bent down again and kissed her wet cheek and she put her hand out of the bedclothes and he felt her thin fingers through his hair.

"I must go and do my homework," he said presently. "I have to learn some of it by heart."

"Won't you sit by my side?" she asked. "Don't leave me, David."

He pushed a small deal table close to the bed and lit the kerosene lamp so that he could read his books.

It must have been an hour before he heard his mother speak his name after another spasm of coughing.

"David."

"Yes, Mother."

"Where's Olga?"

"With Zabotin and Kusanova as usual. She'll be back soon."

"Take care of little Olga," said Lucy.

Vladimir laughed.

"She'll take care of herself. She's very self-willed."

Presently his mother gave a little laugh—a queer merry little laugh though

in a weak voice.

"We had fun together, didn't we, David? All our little secrets!"

"Yes, Mother."

"The '*Pickwick Papers*.' . . . You used to laugh so much."

"Good old Pickwick," said David. "One of our secrets!"

"If you ever go to England give it my love, David. Clapham Common . . . the ducks on the pond. . . ."

"Oh, I shall never go to England," he said with a laugh.

"The ducks on the pond. . . ."

She was silent again and he turned to his books. Perhaps he read for another hour. His mother did not cough any more. He was surprised about that when he lifted his eyes from the book. She had fallen asleep no doubt. Suddenly he gave a cry. She was too quiet, his Little Mother. She was not breathing. She was dead.

He knew she was dead when he flung himself across her body and kissed her lips. They were stone cold. He kissed her as though he would kiss her back to life.

He found in her dead hand, still warm with the heat of her body before it became so cold, something which startled him profoundly, and frightened him. It was a small silver crucifix which she had been holding tightly. He stared at the figure of Christ on the cross. If anyone saw it there might be trouble. They might not bury her honourably. He took it from her dead hand and it was moist and warm. Because it was her warmth he kissed it and wept again. How could he hide it, this thing which was the symbol of a religion despised and ridiculed in Soviet Russia? It had a loop of silk attached to it. She had worn it round her neck, hiding it. He put it round his own neck, thrusting it below his shirt. No one would see it there. Then he went down on his knees beside his mother's bed with his face down on her body, a lonely and weeping boy.

XXI

As the son of a liquidated Trotskyite Vladimir Michaelovitch might have become one of the declassed persons deprived of all rights and privileges of Soviet citizenship and sent to some camp of slave labour as hundreds of thousands were at this time and afterwards.

It was to Lunacharsky, Soviet Director of Education and Culture, that he owed his escape from this fate. He had twice attracted the favourable attention of that great man. Soon after Lucy's death he was nominated by Lunacharsky himself as a student in the Institute of Moscow for the study of mathematics and higher education.

Zabotin and Kusanova adopted Olga with warm-hearted sympathy and kindness and would have done the same by Vladimir if it had not been for the father of one of Vladimir's school friends who offered him a home. This was Petrov Grigorievich Demchenko, chief engineer of a great factory in Moscow, and father of Vassily Petrovich who was Vladimir's closest school friend, and now a fellow student at the Institute.

It was, of course, Vassily who persuaded his father to make this offer. The boy—a dark-eyed broad-browed Ukranian—had an ardent admiration for Vladimir with that boyish hero worship which perhaps is the most beautiful friendship in life.

"It's too much," said Vladimir when Vassily said a room was waiting for him. "I don't even know your father. He's too generous, and of course it's all your doing, Vassily. I expect you've told him that I am a paragon of all the talent and virtues."

"I've told him that you are my greatest friend," answered Vassily. "I hope you won't be offended by my saying that. Perhaps it's a bit of impudence on my part."

Vladimir laughed. He was able to laugh again in spite of the wound in his heart for a dead mother and father, though whenever he thought of Lucy his soul was in mourning.

"I can't see the impudence. But have you really room for a fellow like me? And what about food?"

Vassily reassured him.

"My father is being paid a high salary as chief engineer. It's Stalin's idea.

Higher pay for better work. A bit inconsistent with the pure gospel of Communism. Class distinction again. Rich and poor again! All very wonderful."

"Yes," said Vladimir. "If it goes too far——"

The boys looked at each other and then were silent. That was an exchange of dangerous remarks. It amounted to criticism of the Soviet régime.

"I wouldn't say such a thing to anybody but you, Vladimir Michaelovitch," said Vassily. "Better forget it anyhow. But all I meant to say was that we live in rather good rooms and have enough food. In any case you will have your own rations. It will be an honour for us to have you."

"An honour?"

Vladimir grinned at this friendly exaggeration. It was impossible to refuse the invitation.

The Demchenko family lived in a good apartment house on the other side of the Moskva looking across to the Kremlin. They had four rooms and shared a bathroom with the other inhabitants who were respectable and friendly folk. There was a piano in the sitting-room with its polished boards and tiled stove. The silk curtains were tattered and the coverings of the chairs patched, but in Vladimir's eyes, after his basement room, everything looked elegant. He had one of the four rooms to himself, naturally the smallest one, in which there was just room for a bed and a small table and one chair. But here was his own private kingdom in which he could study and even receive one or more of his fellow students. Then it was necessary for one to sit on the chair and the others on the bed, but that was not too uncomfortable.

Vassily's mother Irina was a beautiful Ukranian with smooth black hair looped over the ears. She had a pale pearl-like skin and dark luminous eyes in which there was a little dancing humour sometimes, though often they looked sad. From the outset she was kind to Vladimir and tried to put him at his ease when he was shy with her at first.

"I hope you will be very happy here," she said. "Do just as you like. No one but Vassily will ever invade your little room except to clean it when you're at the Institute."

"I'm very grateful," said Vladimir shyly. "I can't think why you are so kind as to let me come here."

"Vassily worships you," answered Irina with a smile. "We are glad of your companionship for him as he was very lonely and inclined to brood and get melancholy. So you see it's selfishness on our part! We shall love having you here."

"I will try to live up to Vassily's good opinion of me," said Vladimir, laughing nervously and blushing deeply.

"There's one thing that may drive you mad," said Irina. "I play the piano a

good deal. It may disturb your studies."

"No, no!" cried Vladimir. "If necessary I can put cotton wool in my ears."

Irina laughed and Vladimir blushed again, thinking he may have said the wrong thing.

"I expect you'll have to!" she answered gaily.

He had to put cotton wool in his ears, not because she played badly but because she played with a magic touch interrupting mathematical problems or the study of Karl Marx. She was devoted to Chopin and played the work of that master with exquisite sympathy. Once or twice—more than that—he put his books on one side and came into her room, standing just inside the door listening. She looked beautiful there, at the piano with the light of a kerosene lamp touching her broad forehead and deepening the shadows under her eyes.

Once she turned her head and smiled at him.

"Go back to your books, little student," she said. "Have you lost your cotton wool?"

"It's too beautiful!" he told her. "It makes me want to weep."

Once he came in when he heard her playing something which he remembered. He came in quickly and cried out in a kind of anguish:

"Don't play that, Irina, I beg of you!"

"Why not?" she asked, much surprised. "It's an old English song."

"I know! It's 'Annie Laurie.' My Little Mother used to play it. It makes my heart bleed to hear it again."

He began to cry and Irina left the piano and came to put her arms about him.

"My poor boy! My poor boy!" she said tenderly.

"My mother meant so much to me," he sobbed. "We were good friends. I miss her terribly though sometimes I forget."

"The wound will heal," said Irina. "You are young and all life is before you. Your mother will want you to be happy as youth should be happy—even in Russia."

He was startled by that phrase, "even in Russia." Was Irina hostile to Communism as his mother had been? Didn't she believe that Stalin and the other leaders were working towards the greatest happiness of the greatest number? But he said nothing about that at this time. He was only glad to feel her arms about him and her kiss upon his forehead.

Peter, her husband, came home often very late at night and then looked tired and even exhausted. But now and then he came back earlier and of course had the public holidays on Lenin's birthday and other days of remembrance. He was very friendly with Vladimir and it was obvious that Vassily was the apple of his eye.

"You two boys," he said once, "will have a great chance to be leaders of

the new Russia."

"I'm not sure that I want to be," answered Vassily gloomily. "It would be too much of a responsibility and—a bit too dangerous."

"Dangerous?" asked his father. "Not if you're loyal to the Soviet State."

Vassily remained silent.

"How is the Five Years' Plan going?" asked Vladimir.

Peter Demchenko hesitated for a moment.

"It goes, but not easily. After this there will have to be a second Five Years' Plan."

Vassily laughed with a note of irony.

"After that perhaps a twenty-five years' plan while we still tighten our belts."

Peter looked at his son with a slight rebuke in his voice.

"I wouldn't talk like that, Vassily. Careless talk may be brought up against one. But it's not indiscreet to say that the present Five Years' Plan is working under a heavy handicap. We have to start from scratch, so to speak. We have to make a peasant population machine-minded. We have to make technical experts out of raw material. We lack highly trained and highly skilled men who can take direction and responsibility. That's why there's some talk—this is between you and me, my dear boy—of importing German and perhaps English technicians."

"It's a bit weak to go to our enemies in the pluto-democracies!" said Vassily who had an ironical mind, alarming his father.

"They had the start of us in mechanization," answered Peter Demchenko. "If we avoid their political errors and social injustice——"

"A mighty big 'if', Father!" said Vassily.

"The Soviet system prevents that social injustice," answered his father rather harshly. "There will, of course, be variations of payment for service to the State. That is already happening."

"And so goes the beautiful equality of Communism," said Vassily.

Peter Demchenko looked at him under heavy eyebrows.

"Vassily," he said in a low voice, "if you must have those thoughts, keep them to yourself. I'm grateful that you have a friend here who won't betray you."

Vassily laughed and agreed.

"Vladimir is about the only fellow in Moscow of whom I have no fear. To all the rest I shut up like an oyster. Now I must go and do some swotting at useless knowledge."

He sloped out of the room with a smile and a raised hand to Vladimir.

Demchenko waited until he heard his son's door shut, and then spoke to Vladimir in a low voice.

“Vassily makes me anxious sometimes. He says dangerous things. One cannot be too careful. If he were denounced by a fellow student. . . .”

Vladimir nodded.

“There have been several cases. Many! But Vassily only speaks like this before his family and me.”

He heard Demchenko draw a breath of relief.

“I’m glad to hear it.”

Presently he spoke again.

“Of course there are things to criticize. It would be unnatural otherwise. But we must stifle criticism in our own minds, crushing it as one stamps out sparks of fire. We’re still in a revolutionary period. Criticism cannot be tolerated.”

Vladimir hesitated for a moment and then blurted out an admission.

“I confess I have troublesome thoughts at times. I try to forget them but they’re always there at the back of my mind.”

Demchenko looked at him with surprise.

“My dear boy, you astonish me! You’re the model student at the Institute. Vassily tells me that you have won golden opinions from your instructors, not only for intelligence but for loyalty to our leaders and faith in Soviet Russia. Have you any doubts?”

Vladimir was silent for a moment and then spoke with an emotion which he tried to suppress but which burst out.

“Why did they kill my father? One of the heroes of the Civil War and utterly without reproach.”

Peter Demchenko raised his hands.

“He was a Trotskyite. Trotsky was the enemy of our beloved leader Stalin. He was a plotter and intriguer.”

“My father was a loyal supporter of the Soviet,” said Vladimir in a low and trembling voice.

Demchenko put a hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“Trotsky deceived him perhaps. I see the tragedy in your mind, my dear fellow. But do not let it poison your thoughts or wreck your faith in Soviet Russia. The innocent suffer for the guilty in many cases, no doubt. That’s one of life’s inevitabilities.”

“It’s very cruel, that inevitability!” said Vladimir.

Demchenko nodded.

“I agree. Life is a tragic busines. Doubtless after revolution there’s a great sum of human suffering, and here and there injustice and evil. We’re working out a new pattern of life. That’s not to be done without agony, perhaps not without cruelty. But I have faith in our leaders. They’re striving to promote the happiness of the people. They have to be ruthless against idlers, rebels and

traitors. Otherwise there would be chaos and anarchy!”

“Yes, I see that,” answered Vladimir. “But my father——”

Demchenko pressed his hand on the boy’s shoulder again.

“It’s natural for you to mourn your father. But don’t let that memory embitter you. Look forward rather than back. Train yourself to become one of the leaders of the New Russia with its glorious future. I rely upon you to counteract my son’s pessimism. That is why I welcomed you here and gave you the shelter of our home. Have I any reason to doubt this, comrade?”

He looked at Vladimir with a smile.

“No,” answered Vladimir. “At least I hope not. And I am deeply grateful to you.”

“That’s good!” said Peter Grigorievich Demchenko. “Now I must study some blue prints. I have to drive my factory hands hard, but not harder than I drive myself. The Five Years’ Plan must be fulfilled.”

He added a word of caution.

“This conversation is very much between ourselves. You understand?”

“I understand,” answered Vladimir.

He understood perfectly. To no other man but this would he have blurted out his doubts, for doubts if repeated or revealed would be regarded as treachery and criminal disloyalty. The fathers of some of his fellow students had been arrested by the Ogpu for careless and criminal conversation and were now in prison camps which was a sentence of living death.

XXII

Time passed on swift wings. Looking back upon this period in his life Vladimir admitted to himself that his boyhood advancing unconsciously to adolescence was not on the whole unhappy, apart from the deep wound in his heart caused by his mother's death. He kept company with young people—fellow students of both sexes, who were vital, keen and objective. They laughed a lot. They studied hard. They talked incessantly. They made love to each other. They went about in groups and bands to the theatre and ballet, on summer excursions and picnics. They had to subdue their appetites, always ravenous, with only just enough to eat. They had no luxuries because of the austerity of two Five Years' Plans, one following the other. But most of them believed utterly and without doubt that this adventure of life was worth while and was leading to the greatness and happiness of Russia. They believed—most of them—utterly and beyond doubt that the Soviet State was incomparably better than the condition of the pluto-democracies with their rotten liberalism, their social injustice, their exploitation of the proletariat. They believed utterly and without doubt—most of them—that their own social conditions were on a higher scale than those of most other peoples and that Russian education, culture and home life were in advance of anything known to the Capitalistic countries. How could they doubt that when they read it every day in *Pravda* and *Isvestia*, heard it proclaimed from loudspeakers, read it in their text books, heard it in all lectures and public orations? They had known no other way of life, these young people. They had no means of comparison, and anyhow they were young, ardent and inspired by the fanaticism of youth.

Vladimir was an earnest student, reading hard, achieving distinction, but he did not deny himself the pleasures of social life. He was always sure of a welcome from Zabotin and Kusanova who were the foster-parents of Olga. She had grown into a pretty and attractive girl, though brainless he thought. She was now in the *corps de ballet* and most of the people who crowded into Zabotin's apartment on Sunday afternoons were dancers or scene painters and opera singers—a crowd whom Vladimir found amusing but cut off from the actual life of the people, living in their own world, talking their own technical jargon, discussing art and music as though that were all that mattered in life.

Olga's young friends of the ballet chattered like a lot of birds, and Vladimir listened with a smile to their stories of quarrels and jealousies and love affairs but felt aloof from them.

"You're so cold, David," said Olga, using his old pet name. "Why don't you fall in love with Shura Kozlova who can't keep her eyes off you and thinks you're like a fairy prince?"

"Why should I?" asked Vladimir. "I don't believe in falling in love. It's a silly business and very interrupting to one's work."

"Then there's Natalia," said Olga. "She's panting to be loved by a nice boy, and you must admit she's adorable."

"I've talked with her now and then," answered Vladimir. "She has no more intelligence than a canary. Not so much!"

"Intelligence?" asked Olga with a laugh. "What's that got to do with it? She has a pretty body and rose-bud lips and a warm little heart. Does one want intelligence for love-making?"

"I'm not keen on love-making," answered Vladimir. "All you kids think of nothing but that. Anyhow I'm too young for that nonsense. Perhaps when I've finished my studies I may fall for some pretty slut, but if I do I shall want a girl with something resembling a brain."

Olga gave a tinkling laugh.

"Girls with brains are awful. They're like those short-haired creatures with hard faces whom we used to see in the Kremlin—the typists and secretaries above suspicion as fanatical Communists."

"I'm a fanatical Communist," said Vladimir sternly. But as he spoke the words he was conscious of the other part of his mind—his secret mind—which he tried to shut off in his subconsciousness as temptations and evil thoughts.

"I don't believe it!" cried Olga. "How can you be a fanatical Communist when you remember Papa and our dear Little Mother? Besides Zabotin detests it all and he takes the place of Papa and I love him intensely."

"It's a good thing Zabotin is a famous leader of the ballet," answered Vladimir darkly. "Dancers and artists and musicians have great privileges. The Soviet State treats them like spoilt children."

It was when Vladimir was about eighteen and felt himself to be grown up to manhood that certain things happened which disturbed and distressed his mind. One seemed harmless and pleasant enough at first. It was the arrival in Moscow of some English engineers who had come as technical experts and employees of an English engineering firm with a contract from the Soviet Commissariat of public works.

One of them named Mackenzie was appointed in some capacity in Demchenko's plant and became very friendly with the family. He spent many evenings with them and took great pleasure, it seemed, in listening to Irina's

playing the piano. There was never any political conversation and Vladimir could not get much out of this young man about the state of England and other Western countries, partly because Demchenko steered him away from that kind of talk.

Robert Mackenzie himself was quiet and reserved and, perhaps because he was a Scot, cautious of expressing any definite opinion on such subjects.

"What do you think of our Soviet system?" Vladimir asked him once.

Mackenzie smiled and answered politely:

"An extraordinarily interesting experiment. A great adventure for two hundred million people."

"Yes," said Vladimir. "We're proud of it. We're giving an example to the whole world. Don't you think the Soviet system is bound to extend over the whole of Europe and other parts of the world?"

Mackenzie smiled again as though wishing to be friendly with this boy who spoke such good English.

"It seems to appeal to elements in the working classes and to the younger intellectuals. Of course they know very little about Russia and its way of life."

He was a good-looking young man, thought Vladimir. He had reddish hair very close-cropped and a little sandy moustache. His eyes were vividly blue and he spoke English with a strong Scottish accent which Vladimir found amusing and interesting. He also spoke fairly good Russian and understood it perfectly, having learnt it, he said, in Edinburgh at the Berlitz school of languages with a view to this visit to Russia. It was in Russian of course that he spoke always to Peter and Irina and young Vassily. He even picked up Russian slang and the language of the proletariat from the factory workers.

Peter Demchenko sang his praises.

"That young man is worth his weight in gold. He is a fine engineer and gets on well with the men. I find him of very great assistance."

Irina also liked him. He was never tired of hearing her play Chopin and later revealed that he had a good tenor voice. Irina accompanied him to Schubert's songs and others and this broke down the formality between them and brought joy to Irina who was passionately devoted to music. There were evenings when he came without Peter, who as manager of the factory had no settled hours and worked late. Vladimir had his evening studies in his own room. Vassily was often out with friends at the opera or ballet or the Arts Theatre, of which he was a devotee whenever he could draw a ticket, but while Vladimir was studying he listened now and then to this singing and playing in the other room with the murmur of conversation in low voices. Once when Mackenzie was singing an English song in his charming tenor voice Vladimir pushed back his books, left his room and went quietly into the sitting-room.

Mackenzie had brought the music of the song and when he had finished

took it from the piano and laughed quietly.

"You played that marvellously well for the first time of seeing it."

"You sang it divinely," said Irina. "I wanted to weep at the last verse, though I don't understand the words."

"It's an old West country song of England," said Mackenzie. "It's rather sad, about a young wife for whom the bell tolls when she dies."

Suddenly Mackenzie took hold of Irina's hand and raised it to his lips.

"How kind you are to let me come here!" he said. "It's my little paradise in Russia. I was very lonely till I came."

"And I was very lonely too," answered Irina. "You have made me feel young again. You have brought a new joy into my life."

Vladimir, standing there silently, saw her turn her face up to Mackenzie as he stood there by the piano and her beautiful face, framed in black hair looped over her ears, reminded him of a picture of the Madonna he had seen in a book of reproductions. But there was a look in her eyes which he had never seen before. It was a kind of radiance and ecstasy and adoration.

"Irina is very much in love with this Scotsman," thought Vladimir, "and she is the wife of Peter Demchenko. It is very silly of her."

Some movement he made caused Irina to turn her head and see Vladimir standing there.

She called out to him gaily, but a very hot flush of colour swept below her ivory skin.

"Did you hear that lovely old English song?" she asked.

"Yes," said Vladimir. "I came to listen."

Mackenzie looked embarrassed and annoyed.

"I must be going," he said abruptly.

"No, no!" cried Irina. "Peter will be home before long. You must stay until he comes. Sit down Vladimir, and talk English to Mr. Mackenzie."

"I must go back to my studies," answered Vladimir.

A silly sense of jealousy had overcome him. Irina had been kind and loving to him and he had a boyish devotion to her which was partly the reason why he found Olga's bevy of girls so brainless and unintelligent. Sometimes he had even been jealous of Demchenko and had had to reproach himself about that. Irina's beauty and grace, the sadness in her eyes sometimes, and her loving-kindness to him touched some secret chords in his being which had made him almost ashamed sometimes, as when she kissed him good night or held his hand when they sat talking by the stove. She was old enough to be his mother. She was Vassily's mother and romantic love, of course, was out of the question and utterly absurd, but all the same he did not like that radiance and inner joy with which she had looked at Mackenzie.

He was angry with Vassily—that must have been some months later—

when he came into Vladimir's room one night with a queer smile in his eyes and a laugh as he sat down on the side of the bed.

"Women are essentially immoral!" he said. "My Mamma is passionately in love with that red-headed Scotsman."

"Shut up!" answered Vladimir. "You say the damnedest things, Vassily."

"I'm a truth-teller," said Vassily good humouredly. "I don't smudge over the truth by heavy layers of hypocrisy and fanaticism. That's why I don't see eye to eye with you, Vladimir Michaelovich, on the glory of the Soviet State and the benevolence of our Beloved Leader. I see miserable peasants with straw stuffed in their wooden shoes, dragging sledges through Moscow with hungry bellies, while young Kommissars and bureaucrats swagger about in fine boots and with full stomachs. Where is the dictatorship of the proletariat? Where's Freedom? Where's equality?"

"Shut up!" said Vladimir. "We've talked all this out until I'm sick of it, and I've warned you before that it's dangerous talk, Vassily. You'll get shot one day."

Vassily shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

"I wouldn't be surprised. It would save a lot of trouble. I find life disgusting. That girl Shura has jilted me for a long-nosed clerk in the Kremlin who feeds her on chocolate and buns which I can't afford to give her. But as I was saying my Mamma is madly in love with that ginger-coloured engineer. She almost swoons at the sight of him. Papa hasn't an idea about it of course, being a man of simple mind."

Vladimir laughed in a vexed way.

"Vassily, you're incorrigible! You have a morbid mind and a wicked tongue. It's lucky for you that I'm not one of the informers."

But he knew that Vassily was not deceived about Irina and Mackenzie. Vladimir had seen other signs of Irina's infatuation for the Scotsman. She had become nervous and if Mackenzie was absent for a long time—now and then for a week or two visiting plants in other cities, as technical adviser—she could not disguise her dejection. Once when he was away for three weeks it was noticeable to the quick eyes of youth that she had been weeping at night. The piano was silent. She hardly spoke to Vladimir. She pleaded headaches and ill-health. Then late one evening when he went into the sitting-room to find a book he had left there he saw something which embarrassed him very much. Irina was weeping in Mackenzie's arms and very clearly he heard some words she spoke.

"What can we do? . . . What can we do? . . ."

Mackenzie saw Vladimir come into the room and released Irina hurriedly from his arms and walked away whistling.

"Pardon me," said Vladimir.

“I’m not feeling very well,” said Irina. “I think I have the migrane.”

“Shall I make you a cup of tea?” asked Vladimir to cover up his confusion.

Perhaps Vassily had observed similar scenes. There was very little that Vassily did not see though in his casual way he did not seem to be noticing much. As Vladimir knew he was a tortured soul, unable to reconcile his ideas of life with its ugly realities. He was acutely sensitive to life’s cruelties and injustice and underneath his irony of speech there was a deep melancholy. He had a poet’s mind, searching for truth and beauty and a spiritual meaning and purpose beyond material appearances. To Vladimir alone in the world he had shown some of his scribblings of poetry and Vladimir had been startled by them, and frightened. They were very tragic and very dangerous because of a bitter criticism and scorn of Soviet life and ideals.

“For God’s sake destroy those bits of paper,” Vladimir had said more than once. “They would mean your death if they were found by the G.P.U.”

Vassily had shrugged his shoulders.

“No G.P.U. man would understand a word of them.”

Now Vassily blurted out his belief in his mother’s infatuation for Mackenzie.

One night Demchenko came home looking white and ill. Irina was playing the piano very softly, letting her fingers run about the keys as though improvising or dreaming. Vassily lay on a Turkish rug with his eyes shut and a frown on his forehead. Vladimir was at the table with his elbows each side of a book. He raised his eyes when Demchenko came in and saw then that he looked ill and frightened.

“Anything the matter?” asked Vladimir.

Peter Demchenko did not answer except by a heavy groan which startled Irina.

“What’s the matter, Peter?” she asked. She looked furtively at her husband as though wondering if he had found out her secret love for Mackenzie.

Demchenko put both his hands to his head.

“Something terrible has happened,” he said hoarsely. “Something very frightening.”

Irina stood up from the piano, her pearly-like skin whitening.

“What has happened?” she asked. “What is frightening?”

“It’s alarming to the very last degree,” said Peter. “I tremble all over.”

That was true. He was trembling as though in an ague, though beads of sweat stood on his forehead.

He told his story in a stuttering way. The English engineers who had come as technical experts to Russia had been arrested on charges of espionage and sabotage. Mackenzie was among them. They were all in the Liubyanka prison. Many Russian engineers had been arrested with them. They were accused of a

widespread plot to destroy the Five Years' Plan.

Demchenko was filled with fear. His face was a mask of terror.

"Look out!" cried Vladimir suddenly.

He had been watching Irina. She had gone deadly white at the mention of Mackenzie's name among the accused engineers. Suddenly she swayed, groping with her hands as though stricken blind. Vladimir rushed to her and was in time to save her fall.

That evening Demchenko himself was arrested and taken off to the Liubyanka headquarters for interrogation, but he was released the following morning. Mackenzie, several English engineers, and a number of Russian foremen of factories after long imprisonment were brought before the Supreme Court of the U.S.S.R. and charged with wrecking activities at power stations in the Soviet Union and with military espionage. For a long time, it was stated, and particularly in the period 1931-1933, a number of breakdowns of motors, boilers, conveyers and other machinery had occurred at the Zlatousi Metallurgical Works. There had been a breakdown at a recent date of the 1400-h.p. motor in the rolling shop at these works on April 16th, May 12th, and June 3rd, 1933.

Before the trial took place Demchenko was in a state of nervous anxiety which he did not conceal from his family. He had been examined many times and even now was not sure that at the last moment he might not be put in the dock for complicity in the alleged plot.

One night on the eve of the trial he spoke frankly to Vladimir.

"This trial is to be a public demonstration," he said. "It's for propaganda purposes. I can't even now believe that men like Mackenzie were spies and saboteurs. It is lucky for me that I had nothing to do with the Zlatousi works. Nothing happened in my own plant. But I am told that Mackenzie has confessed."

"Is that possible?" asked Vladimir with profound astonishment.

Demchenko shrugged his shoulders and answered in a low voice:

"The G.P.U. have their own methods for extracting confessions."

He said no more because Irina had entered the room. She had not been able to hide her distress at the arrest of Mackenzie, and Demchenko must have guessed that his wife had been emotionally attracted by the young Scotsman, but as far as Vladimir was aware he had not accused her of infidelity or folly, and indeed had shown her nothing but tenderness and affection since she had swooned that night when the news about Mackenzie had first come.

Now she spoke calmly.

"Are you talking about the trial?"

Demchenko nodded.

"The first public session takes place tomorrow."

“I should like to get into the public gallery,” she said.

“No, no!” cried Demchenko quickly. “It would upset you, my dear. It’s best to avoid these things. They’re always painful.”

“All the same I shall go,” she answered.

“I beg of you not to!” cried Demchenko earnestly.

His pleadings were useless, though she did not persist in saying she would go. But the next morning after Demchenko had left the apartment she tapped at Vladimir’s door. He opened it and saw Irina standing there in her fur cap and coat. She looked very pale.

“I’m going to the court,” she told him.

“Do you think it wise?” he asked gravely.

“Why not? I want to see Mackenzie again. I don’t believe that he confessed. Will you come with me?”

Vladimir was startled.

“I ought to be at the Institute in half an hour,” he answered after a moment’s hesitation.

“Take a morning off for once,” said Irina. “Tell them you had toothache. You’re the model student. They won’t disbelieve you. I should like you to come with me in case I don’t feel very well.”

Vladimir hesitated again. He owed so much to Irina. He loved her so much that he hated to refuse this favour she asked of him.

“Very well, I’ll come,” he said.

The public gallery of the court became crowded, but being early Vladimir and Irina were able to get front seats. Before the Judge took his place a number of lawyers were busy with their papers, and reporters were at the Press tables. The Public Prosecutor was a man named Vyshinsky, to be heard of later in history. He sat there opposite the Judge’s seat, hunched over his papers.

When the prisoners filed in Vladimir felt his hand grasped by Irina. She held his hand so tightly that she hurt him. It was then she saw Mackenzie. Vladimir also saw him and was shocked by his appearance. In a few months he had become thin and haggard. The ruddy colour of his skin had gone and it was grey and dirty-looking. His eyes were deeply sunken. For some time he sat motionless but presently his glance roved about the court and then looked up at the public gallery. His eyes must have met those of Irina, for suddenly he smiled and his lips moved as though sending her a message. Then he looked down again and listened to the indictment by the Public Prosecutor Vyshinsky. In the course of it he mentioned Mackenzie’s name many times. He had signed a confession, said the Public Prosecutor, that he had been guilty of military espionage with the wreckers and saboteurs of Russian industry. Afterwards, it is true, he had endeavoured to repudiate that confession, but the evidence to be brought before the court would prove that in substance the confession had been

correct.

Vladimir was absorbed in this opening address by Vyshinsky. It was spoken calmly, deliberately and without violence. The evidence it outlined seemed to prove the existence of a deliberate plot to frustrate Russia's Five Years' Plan, though as far as Mackenzie was concerned it seemed to be restricted to espionage. Suddenly Vladimir felt a hand grab at his arm. It was Irina.

"I feel faint," she said. "I must go out."

He led her out, treading on other people's feet. When they were outside the court she was a little sick.

"You ought not to have come, Irina," he said.

"He looked at me," she answered. "Our eyes met."

"Can you walk home?" asked Vladimir. "Take my arm, Irina."

"He looks like a tortured man," she said in a low voice. "In the end they will kill him. All accused people are killed in Russia."

"If he conspired against Russia he deserves to be killed," said Vladimir sternly. "What has he been doing here among all those traitors?"

He spoke angrily because of some conflict in his own mind. Was it possible—the ugly question crept into his mind—that they had inflicted some mental or physical torture on Mackenzie to extract a confession which afterwards he had withdrawn? Did Russian justice use such methods? He hated to think so. He refused to think so. But he had heard many whisperings about it by fellow students.

Irina did not go to the court again and it was in the newspaper *Pravda* that Vladimir read the daily proceedings of the trial. The evidence against the accused men seemed unanswerable and they hardly attempted to answer it, or if they did were tangled up in contradictions by the cross-examination of Vyshinsky. It was a fair trial, thought Vladimir. But there was something odd about it, something very odd in the leniency of the judge's summing-up and in the sentences he passed. Men condemned for deliberate wrecking of power plants were sentenced to no more than ten years' imprisonment. Why were they not sentenced to death like so many poor devils far less guilty? Had this trial been staged as a propaganda show for the outside world, showing how beautiful and merciful was Russian justice? Vladimir crushed down that little devil doubt which gibbered at him. He hated himself for allowing it to creep into his mind.

Mackenzie escaped all terms of imprisonment and was ordered to be expelled from Russia, the court taking into consideration his youth and lack of experience.

It was a pity that Irina gave up playing Chopin.

XXIII

Vladimir lost the companionship of Vassily for some months. At his father's bidding he went to visit his grandfather in a small town near Kiev in the Ukraine. It was the year 1933. The old man had been a prosperous farmer in a small way. That is to say he had a strip of land in the most fertile district around Kiev and six cows, but he had come under the charge of being a *kulak* when collectivization was partially enforced and, to escape imprisonment or deportation to Siberia, had become an overseer of a collective farm which had absorbed his own livestock and land. Perhaps he had done this also for his son's sake. As manager of an industrial plant it would have been a black mark against Peter Grigorievich if his father had been condemned by the local Communists who had been appointed to the district from Moscow.

Before leaving for the Ukraine Vassily took a cheerful farewell of Vladimir.

"I'm glad to be getting away from Moscow for a while," he said, "though I shall miss your company like hell."

"Don't get into trouble," said Vladimir. "Keep a guard on that tongue of yours. Comrade Vassily."

He spoke with a laugh but he meant it as a warning. Young Vassily was very unguarded in his conversation.

"I expect I shall see a bit of trouble down there," answered Vassily. "My father is very secretive, as you know, but he's worrying himself sick about the old man. Things don't seem to be going well in the Ukraine, though nothing gets through to the papers. Anyhow I shall enjoy a spell of country life and try to forget that girl Shura who has been the plague of my life—the dirty little slut. I shall try to get my soul clean in the woods and fields, away from this sink of iniquity called Moscow."

Vladimir laughed again.

"You'll probably fall in love with some girl down there. You're in a perpetual state of falling in love or falling out of it. A silly business, comrade!"

"Your turn will come," answered Vassily, "and when you get caught by some beautiful and immoral houri you'll be in deep waters. You take life seriously. You still believe in the illusions of life. You believe in the nobility of men and the virtue of women. There's no hope for you."

The two boys embraced warmly. Their friendship was strong and unalterable.

"Have a good time!" said Vladimir. "While you're away I shall do some intensive study."

Vassily was away for three months and during that time Vladimir, who had jeered at him for his amorous adventures, fell in love with Sofia Constantinovna Ozlova.

She was a fellow student at the Institute and training to be a school teacher. Vladimir had seen her in the classrooms and had been vaguely aware that he liked the look of her. She was of the Caucasian type with very fine delicate features and dark liquid eyes.

She was a little thing but moved with grace. He noticed that her hands were exquisitely modelled and were very much alive in their way of gesture when she recited Russian verse in class. Her voice had more music than most Moscow voices. But he had paid no more than a fleeting attention to her until one day they were alone together after working hours in the Institute examining some new books in the small library which had many gaps on the shelves.

He heard her give a little gasp of astonishment and then a laugh as she opened one of the books which she had taken from a shelf.

"Something good?" asked Vladimir, smiling at her.

"Something extraordinary," she answered. "A book in English. How did it get here? An English novel!"

"What's it called?" asked Vladimir.

She read the title in English.

"*The Sleeper Awakes*, by H. G. Wells."

Vladimir looked at her in astonishment.

"Do you read English? Do you speak it?"

"I had an American mother," she said. "My father was in the Russian Navy. He brought back my mother from Constantinople where she was a teacher in the American college. She died of typhus in the Crimea."

Vladimir spoke to her in English.

"I had an English mother. I was devoted to her. I miss her terribly. Are American mothers as nice as English mothers?"

Sofia laughed and he noticed again how musical was her voice.

"My mother was very nice! She came from New York and was half Italian, but of course she spoke perfectly in the American way."

"Yes," said Vladimir, "I suppose you have an American accent. It is in the intonation of the voice. It's the first time I've heard it."

The official who was in charge of the library spoke to them sharply from his desk.

“Students are not allowed to speak to each other in foreign languages. Don’t you know the rule?”

Sofia spoke to Vladimir in Russian again.

“We mustn’t break the rules. But one can’t learn them all. There are so many and some of them”—she lowered her voice to a whisper and smiled at Vladimir—“are so silly!”

“Let’s talk outside,” suggested Vladimir. “I’ll walk home with you if you’ll let me.”

“That would be nice,” answered Sofia, “only I hope you won’t have to walk in the opposite direction to your own house.”

“That wouldn’t matter,” said Vladimir promptly, and he was surprised at himself for saying this. He had never said such a thing to any other girl. It was the sort of thing Vassily would say.

He didn’t have to walk in the wrong direction. Most of the way was on his own line of route.

“Is your apartment house very crowded?” he asked.

“To suffocation,” she answered with a laugh. “It’s swarming with mothers and children. The children make a terrible noise and I’m driven nearly mad by a young man who plays the balalaika in the room next to mine.”

“I know!” said Vladimir who knew only too well. “It’s the curse of Moscow, this overcrowding, but it can’t be helped. After the Five Year’s Plan—the second instalment of it—we shall have more houses. Perhaps one day Russia will be the most prosperous country on earth with all the comforts of life.”

“I hope so!” answered Sofia, and he detected a note of doubt in her voice.

“Don’t you believe that?”

“It’s a long time coming,” she answered. “But of course I believe in the future of Communism. It will convert the whole world. It’s the new religion, taking the place of Christianity. My mother didn’t agree with that. She was a Catholic. I remember she used to tell me about her religion. She used to wear a little crucifix round her neck. When I was a baby girl I used to undo her bodice and play with it. Of course I don’t believe in Christianity now, but sometimes—don’t tell anybody, will you? I dream of Jesus Christ and His mother Mary. He was crucified, you know—nailed on a cross. Some of the things my mother told me come back sometimes.”

Vladimir understood her perfectly. This was exactly like his own experience. That bit about the crucifix! Involuntarily he put his hand up to his chest. He could feel the hardness of the little crucifix which he had taken from his mother’s dead hand. He still wore it day and night. Sometimes he felt it to be a kind of talisman against evil. That was superstition, of course. Sometimes he even kissed it because it had felt the warmth of his mother’s body. Like this

girl Sofia he was haunted by old stories told to him by his mother, and he was tugged by the English blood and spirit in him.

"My mother used to tell me about the United States and the wonders of New York," said Sofia. "She thought America the finest country on earth—God's own country, she called it. Now, of course. I know that it is the most materialistic of the pluto-democracies. Their negroes are still treated like slaves. The condition of the miners is terrible. New York is like a hell on earth, we're told, though sometimes I wonder if it's really quite as bad as that. Mother couldn't have lied to me about it so much. What do you think?"

"It's all very bewildering," answered Vladimir cautiously. This was the first time he had ever spoken to Sofia. Was it quite wise to talk to her so frankly? Supposing she betrayed him?

She must have read these thoughts in his mind.

"You can trust me," she said quickly. "I'm not one of the informers."

"I do trust you," he said impulsively. "We have so much in common—you with your American mother and I with my English mother. We both speak English. We must talk a lot together in English when other people are not within hearing. Let's talk English now."

He took her as far as her apartment house, four streets away from his own.

He had found out before he went as far that she was very fond of reading and especially of poetry, and that she was devoted to music and had a secret dream that she might become a singer instead of being a school-teacher. But that, of course, was impossible as she was training to be a teacher at the expense of the State.

"Thank goodness," she told him, "I love all small children, even if they do make a terrible noise in the apartment house. I would like to marry and have six children."

"Six!" exclaimed Vladimir. "That's an awful lot! But if you want to marry that will be quite easy."

She laughed and shook her head.

"I'm particular," she told him. "Most of the young men I know are very unattractive. And the attractive ones don't take any notice of me."

"I can't believe that!" exclaimed Vladimir incredulously.

"You have never taken any notice of me before today," said Sofia. "I get overlooked because I'm too tiny!"

She laughed at the thought of her own littleness.

"You're about the right size," Vladimir assured her. "Better than the big strapping wenches with arms like sledge-hammers and big broad bodies."

"It's kind of you to say so," she answered with a smile in her dark eyes. "Shall we talk to each other tomorrow?"

Vladimir thought quickly.

“One can’t talk at the Institute. And I want to talk to you in English. Could we have a walk in the evening, after supper?”

“That would be very pleasant,” said Sofia. “Where shall we meet?”

“At the corner of this street,” said Vladimir. “Would eight o’clock be all right for you?”

“Just right!” she told him. “Until then——”

She raised her little gloved hand and tugged at a bell chain. Vladimir waited until the house kommissar had opened the door with the rattle of a chain and closed it again when Sofia went in.

“Very odd!” said Vladimir to himself. “I wonder if it’s all right. I wonder if anything has happened to me. I feel different somehow. I feel excited somehow.”

It was the first time he had ever made an appointment like this with a girl. It was a good job Vassily had gone away. He would have jeered at his hero and comrade who had been so aloof from feminine attraction.

Irina was quick to notice something unusual in Vladimir’s time-table. As a rule he had gone to his studies immediately after the evening meal. Now he slipped out and did not come back until after nine o’clock, and once not until ten o’clock.

“Vladimir,” she said one evening, “I don’t want to be inquisitive, but why do you go out every evening now after supper? Are you working at the Institute?”

He hesitated for a moment and felt his colour rising.

“I feel in need of fresh air. These summer nights are cool after the heat of the day.”

“Do you wander about alone?” she asked.

For a moment he was annoyed and answered angrily:

“Why do you question me? Surely I’m free to do what I like?”

He saw that he had hurt her, and after a few moments he spoke again.

“The fact is I’ve made a friend. We go together. It’s a girl. Is there any reason why I should be ashamed of that?”

Irina’s eyes softened.

“I’m glad you told me. I was hoping it might be that. I ought not to have asked, but you know I love you very much. Now that Vassily is away you’re like a second son to me. I only want your happiness and I hope the girl is worthy of you.”

Vladimir laughed selfconsciously.

“That’s the wrong way of putting it. I’m not worthy of the girl. She is far beyond me in intelligence and understanding, Irina, she’s marvellous! She speaks English and Italian—her mother was half Italian and half American. She sings like a bird—little Italian songs which she learnt from her mother—

and she's a very good Communist."

Irina laughed a little.

"Oh, I take that for granted. All you young people are faithful to Communism. But is she kind? Does she know how to love?"

Vladimir flushed hotly and laughed again uneasily.

"That's a much abused word," he said. "These Moscow girls talk about love as though it were nothing but cheap kisses and huggings. I don't call that love. Love is higher than that, isn't it? Isn't there a love between souls as well as bodies—an ideal love beyond the senses though not denying them? I've been thinking about it."

Irina looked at him with tenderness.

"Young love ought to be like that," she said. "It ought to idealize the object of love and feel that passion is a divine fire changing and illuminating everything, as the sun permeates and penetrates everything, creating and sustaining life. Young love ought to be a transfiguration which makes everything beautiful, including passion and the flesh."

Vladimir looked at her with surprise.

"You have known love like that? Is that how you loved Peter Grigorievich when you knew him first?"

"I had other lovers before he came along," she answered. "I loved one of them like that. It was when we were students at Kiev. He became a political prisoner and died in Siberia. He had the face of an angel and his soul was as pure as a white flame."

"But you married Peter Grigorievich," said Vladimir.

She smiled faintly.

"Yes, I married Peter Grigorievich. He had been very good to me. Once, as you know, I was rather foolish about a friend who came here. I was mad about him. I loved him with a mad passion. It was perhaps because I have reached an age when women know that they have missed all the dreams of youth and have only one more chance of romantic and spiritual love. If it comes their way they lose all self-control and self-respect because of that mirage which blinds them and that irresistible passion which suddenly engulfs them. I know that you know the man who came here."

"Mackenzie," said Vladimir in a low voice.

Irina nodded.

"You were watching us with your sharp eyes of youth. I couldn't hide it from you. I gave myself away."

"I tried not to see," said Vladimir. "I hope you forget all that now. I was sorry about it. I was even jealous."

Irina gave a little laugh which was not unkind.

"I knew you were jealous, poor boy! I was glad of your pure young love

and sorry to hurt you. But I am not sorry about my love for Mackenzie. It was a madness but a lovely madness. I thought it would kill me but here I am alive and talking to you, and glad that you have found a nice girl, if she is nice."

"She is exquisite," cried Vladimir. "I will bring her here one evening if I may. Her name is Sofia Constantinovna."

"Bring her," said Irina. "I will be kind to her."

Presently she spoke about Vassily.

"I'm anxious about him, Vladimir. Bad things are happening in the Ukraine. Petrov has heard tragic stories. They are whispered about."

"I know," answered Vladimir. "There seems to be a famine down there. And there's a purge going on among the peasants who try to hoard their grain. I wish Vassily would come back. That's no place for him."

"He can't bear to see people suffer," said Irina. "He hates the cruelties of life. He's a sensitive plant, poor boy."

Those evening hours in Moscow were very pleasant. Vladimir and Sofia walked sometimes down to the Moskva and sat on the bank of the river watching the barges crawling down or being unloaded at the wharfs. Sometimes other boys and girls passed, or sat in couples not far away. Young soldiers came to do an honest hour's fishing. Children played down by the bridge and their laughter floated upstream. Sofia and Vladimir did not talk much like young lovers. They were both serious-minded and spoke often about the moral problems of life and the books they had read, and about their studies and hopes.

One evening Sofia spoke about Humanity in a big way and Vladimir listened to her with a smile because of her idealism which went beyond his at that time.

"Soviet Russia," she said, "is too much shut up within itself. We have no contacts with the outside world. We ought to reach out to other countries with a message of universal brotherhood."

"The outside world hates us," said Vladimir. "Other countries wish to destroy us. Japan has her eye on Siberia."

"We could break down their hostility by friendship and love," answered Sofia. "We could persuade them that they need have no fear of Communism, and that it is a message of hope for down-trodden peoples. We ought to open our frontiers and show the world what we are doing and trying to do. Why should we be afraid of foreigners? Why did that librarian get angry because you and I were talking English? That is very narrow and short-sighted! Russia has a great mission to mankind!"

Vladimir saw that she had a kind of mystical light in her eyes as though seeing some beautiful vision.

"We haven't got very far with our own adventure," he answered. "It's still

in the experimental stage, and we can't show the world any magnificent results. And have we any brotherhood among ourselves? Even in the Institute there's a lot of spying and informing against fellow students and all over the country people go in fear of the secret police. I talk to you frankly, Sofia Constantinovna, but I wouldn't dare talk like this to other people. I should be denounced as a critic and obstructor."

"Thank you for your trust in me," said Sofia.

She gave a little sigh and added other words.

"Of course there are things in Russia which are not too good. We're too much afraid of one another. There is always the fear of denunciation."

Vladimir gave a kind of groan.

"My father was shot by the orders of Djerjinsky. He was a noble and loyal Communist. He was a hero of the Red Army, but he was shot. When I think of that I am utterly bewildered. I am tempted to lose all faith in our system."

"Tell me about your father," said Sofia.

"No," answered Vladimir. "When I think about my father I have a sense of despair and hopelessness. I try to put him out of my mind. I try to pretend to myself that no such thing happened. Sometimes at night my remembrance of him makes me cry out, and I remember my mother's hatred of Soviet Russia and think that perhaps she was right, and that we're living in a fool's paradise which is really hell. I am talking to you in great confidence, Sofia. I put my life in your hands."

"It's safe in my hands," she answered. "My own mother was like that," she told him. "She hated Communism which she said was the enemy of God and all religion. It's queer, Vladimir Michaelovitch, that you and I have had to break away from our mother's way of thought which even now tempts us to doubt the new order of things and the splendour of our Soviet system. Other young people have no such doubts."

Vladimir was silent for quite a time sitting there on the bank of the Moskva with this girl who had Italian blood in her veins. Behind them the evening sun was shooting shafts of golden light from the domes of the cathedrals and churches in the Kremlin, and the rose-red walls of that fortress city were suffused with the sunset glow under the darkening sky where already some stars were glinting.

"What are you thinking about, Vladimir Michaelovitch?" asked Sofia softly.

"I am wondering what my own mission in life may be," he answered. "Sometimes I think I am destined to be shot like my father. Someone will denounce me for disloyalty which is not in my heart. I shall be tried and shot."

Sofia gave a little cry.

"No, Vladimir! Let me see your hand. Let me see your life-line."

“Do you believe in that nonsense?” he asked with a laugh. But he held out his hand and a thrill passed through his body almost like an electric shock when he felt it held by the little cool hand of Sofia Constantinovna. She peered at the lines on his hand and gave a little laugh.

“You have a good life-line. There are one or two little breaks in it but it goes on.”

“What are the little breaks?” asked Vladimir, grinning at her.

“Accidents. Illnesses. Dangers. But you come through!”

She looked at another part of his hand and laughed.

“What’s up now?” asked Vladimir. “What amuses you?”

“You have several love affairs,” she told him. “You are going to love quite a lot.”

“That shows it’s all wrong,” he answered half angrily. “I shall only have one love.”

“Fate decrees otherwise,” she told him with a flutter of her eyelashes.

“Bosh!” cried Vladimir, using that English word which he had learnt from his mother. “All stuff and nonsense. I’m very much in love now, and I’m not going to change.”

“May I ask the lady’s name?”

She spoke demurely and avoided his eyes.

“You may. It’s Sofia Constantinovna.”

She was silent for a moment and then spoke softly.

“Dear comrade. It’s so kind of you. A tiny creature like me ought to be very proud of being loved by Lunacharsky’s favourite student—the most brilliant in the Institute of Moscow.”

She spoke lightly with a little touch of humour but there was a lovely tone in her voice, and she held his hand tight and raised it to her lips.

“Sofia,” said Vladimir in a trembling voice, “you are very beautiful. Every part of you is beautiful. I love your eyes and your hands and the shape of your head and the grace of your body.”

Sofia had tears in her eyes for a moment, such big tears that one of them dropped with a splash on to Vladimir’s hand. But she answered jestingly:

“There’s not much of me to love, Vladimir! I’m a miniature. I’m a pocket edition of the female species. You could carry me under one arm and not know I was there.”

“I’d like to do so,” he told her. “I’d like to take you in both arms and hold you tight against my body and never let you go.”

“Impossible!” she cried merrily. “I have to work in a detached way and I must go home and do some work now.”

He kissed her outside her apartment house and the kiss lasted for a long time and he held her little body tight to his.

He was nineteen years of age in the summer of 1933.

XXIV

Sofia introduced Vladimir to her family one evening and it was in this way that he came to know her brother Stanislav Constantinovich with whose personality and career he was afterwards associated closely. The father was a personal friend of Bukharin, one of Lenin's closest associates, through whose influence no doubt—one word from him was enough—he held a high post in the Commissariat of Railways and Transport. He was a man of about fifty with a short beard and moustache turning grey and bluish watery eyes which avoided a direct gaze. He seemed anxious and oppressed as though overburdened by work, but that evening when Vladimir first went to his apartment he was hospitable and charming in manner.

"Sofia tells me that you speak English almost perfectly," he said. "I married an American wife so that I am also familiar with that language. Shall we speak a little now?"

"Vladimir Michaelovitch tells me that I have an American accent," said Sofia, laughing. "But we understand each other all the same."

She turned to Vladimir and introduced him to her brother. She spoke with a little pride in her voice.

"This is Stanislav—he is a better linguist than I am because he speaks Italian as well as English. Mother you know was half Italian but being younger than Stanislav I didn't learn it. He was lucky. His languages have given him a place in the Politburo where he helps to shape the destiny of Russia."

She spoke laughingly but it was clear to Vladimir that she made a hero of this brother. Certainly he was a good-looking fellow—very dark, unlike his father, and with an Italian face rather than Russian or American. At least that was how he seemed to Vladimir who had never seen an Italian. There was something foreign about him—his dark liquid eyes, his rich southern colouring, his full ripe lips.

Stanislav answered modestly enough:

"Sofia exaggerates my importance. I'm a very junior translator in the Politburo, and so far from shaping the destiny of Russia I waste a good deal of time having nothing to do except draw faces on my blotting pad. Still, now and again I get an interesting document thrown at me. Perhaps later on I may be trusted with international secrets."

There was another young man in the room, a friend of Stanislav and fellow colleague, by name of Alexander Alexandrovich Marton. He was a typical young Russian of the Volga region, fair-haired and blue-eyed with a square-cut face.

"We're sworn to secrecy," he said with a laugh. "But Stanislav has let the cat out of the bag by saying that we waste our time."

Stanislav's father smiled at the two young men.

"You ought to feel lucky in not being overworked. In my office we toil like slaves, but then we're an essential department of the Five Years' Plan—second instalment."

Stanislav turned to Vladimir.

"Have you any idea what you will do or be told to do when you leave the Institute? Teaching?"

"I hope not," answered Vladimir, feeling a little shy in the presence of these young men who were older than he and very much at ease.

"Really I would like to become a writer, but I suppose that's a daydream."

"He writes the most wonderful essays," cried Sofia. "He always gets first prize for essay writing."

Vladimir blushed deeply.

"I didn't mean that kind of writing," he said self-consciously. "I meant imaginative stuff. Story-telling; perhaps, one day, play-writing."

Stanislav raised his eyebrows and smiled.

"A noble ambition," he said with a slight touch of irony. "Well, we could do with some new novelists. The present output of Soviet Russia is deplorably feeble."

"That's not quite a wise thing to say," remarked his father uneasily. "It amounts to a sweeping criticism of Soviet literature."

Stanislav shrugged his shoulders slightly and smiled in a superior way.

"I don't think criticism of literature comes within the code of high treason."

"One has to be careful," said his father. "Sing something, Stanislav—one of your Italian songs. There's no harm in those."

Stanislav laughed good-naturedly.

"I'm not so sure, Father. Our neighbours may think so. Every sound goes up through this ceiling and down through this floor. I shall be adding to the infernal and discordant noises of this overcrowded house. Listen to that row going on now. Maddening!"

All sorts of strange noises invaded the apartment from upstairs and downstairs: babies crying; accordions playing; quarrelling between two women with shrill voices; a garbage can bumping down stone steps; someone moving furniture overhead; someone in a nearby room snoring in a regular,

rhythmic and horrible persistence.

"We shan't hear anything if you sing, dear Stanislav," said Sofia, showing off her brother again. "Then we shall be drowned in melody. You know you sing like an angel!"

"Like an Italian ice-cream merchant!" said Stanislav, pinching her arm. "Well, if you'll tinkle the balalaika I'll do my best unless it's going to bore Vladimir Michaelovitch."

"I'm devoted to music," answered Vladimir.

Stanislav sang some old Italian songs charmingly. He had the open Italian voice, less harsh than Russian, wonderfully liquid.

Vladimir rewarded him by an earnest remark spoken sincerely.

"You ought not to be in the Politburo translating dull documents. You ought to be in Opera."

He could not have said anything more flattering to Stanislav, who smiled over to him.

"It's nice of you to say that. To tell the truth it was my secret ambition, just like you want to write. But in Soviet Russia one can't choose one's career. Anyhow I was pushed into the Politburo because of my languages."

"Nobody pushed you," said his father. "The offer came through Bukharin, and it would have been folly to refuse. It's a place of security, especially with Bukharin as your patron."

"I wonder!" answered Stanislav darkly.

For a moment his father's watery eyes rested on him anxiously, but he did not follow up this remark.

Vladimir turned to Sofia.

"You play the balalaika charmingly," he told her. "I had no idea you were so good."

"How kind of you to say so!" she answered, blushing a little because of the soft look in his eyes. "I just strum a little. Stanislav, sing '*Ill sole mi*'."

"Oh, it's too hackneyed," exclaimed Stanislav.

"Not to me," said Vladimir. "I don't know it."

That evening was all very pleasant and home-like after Vladimir's first nervousness. Some students came in from the Institute and there was amusing chatter from these young people. Sofia made some sandwiches and heated up the samovar. Stanislav's father retired after a handshake with Vladimir, and a young crowd were left to themselves and made such a din that there was a tapping on the walls from an angry neighbour. That made them all stifle their laughter.

"Even laughter is a crime against the State," said Stanislav. "What a lot of things are forbidden in Russia!"

One of the students—a boy named Sergei—looked at him with raised

eyebrows.

“I thought you were a loyal member of the Party,” he said with a smile. “Do they talk like that in the Politburo?”

“We’re not in the Politburo now,” answered Stanislav carelessly. “I’m in my own home among friends. At least I hope Judas is not present.”

Sergei coloured up and laughed nervously.

“I was only joking, comrade.”

He took a sandwich from Sofia who played the hostess charmingly.

“You feed the hungry birds,” said the boy with a touch of gallantry of which Vladimir didn’t approve. He was foolishly jealous when any of these young men talked with Sofia, and was surprised at his own uneasiness when this happened. What right had he, he confessed to himself, to monopolize the attention of this girl whom he had met so recently in the library of the Institute? All the same he didn’t like a long conversation she had with that fellow Sergei, and was relieved when suddenly she looked across the room and smiled at Vladimir, and a few moments after came over to sit by him on the floor with her hands clasped round her knees.

“It’s an hour since you spoke to me,” he said like a man with a grievance.

Sofia laughed quietly.

“I hadn’t forgotten you, but I have to be polite to everybody. I’m hostess here, you know.”

“You play that part wonderfully,” he said. “I feel so awkward and ill at ease. I’m not used to such parties.”

“You don’t show that you’re it,” she told him. “You only seem a little aloof, a little haughty.”

“Haughty!” he exclaimed. “Nobody less so than me. I’ve nothing to be haughty about. Look at these cuffs!”

His cuffs were certainly much frayed on an old shirt. These other young men looked smarter than he did.

“That’s nothing!” said Sofia. “One day I’ll mend them for you. I’m good at putting on new cuffs, if you don’t mind losing a bit from the tail. That’s what I do with Stanislav’s shirts.”

“How wonderful you are!” exclaimed Vladimir. “You seem to be able to do anything; I wish my sister were like that. She only dances. She can’t even mend a pair of socks.”

“When are we going to have another little walk?” asked Sofia in a low voice.

“Tomorrow?”

She smiled into his eyes and said “Tomorrow!” and put a finger to her lips as though making a secret of it.

Vladimir went back that night to Irina’s flat feeling excited and emotional.

XXV

Vassily came home in a truck train from Kiev. Vladimir was at home when he arrived. Peter Demchenko and Irina were in their room after supper. It was Vladimir who opened the door into the passage when he heard the knock.

"By all that's marvellous!" he cried when he saw Vassily. "Welcome back, comrade!"

He held out his arms to embrace Vassily and his friend fell into them; and to Vladimir's amazement began to weep with violent hard sobs.

"Vassily, my dearest comrade!" cried Vladimir, "what on earth is the matter?"

He felt the weight of Vassily upon him and the boy would have fallen if Vladimir had not held on to him.

"Are you ill, Vassily?"

For a moment—for more than a moment—Vladimir thought his friend was dying. His face was white, his eyes were sunken, there was a glazed look in them.

Irina had come to the door. She cried out at the sight of her son.

"Vassily! My dearest! What's the matter? Why do you look so ill?"

Vassily staggered towards her and put his arms about her, and presently by an effort was able to speak.

"I've come from hell," he said. "From hell on earth."

Peter Demchenko helped his son into the room.

"Sit down, my son," he said. "Pull yourself together. What have you been doing? You alarm us, Vassily. Have you been drinking? Has anybody knocked you about? Are you hurt?"

"I've come from hell," said Vassily. "Father, I have been in hell. I've seen hellish things. It's all devilish. They are devils who have done this thing."

"What are you telling us?" asked his father harshly. "What is devilish? Who are devils?"

"The devils are here," said Vassily. "They're here in Moscow. They're in the Kremlin. They sit here in the Kremlin without mercy and without pity."

"Silence!" said Peter. "Silence, Vassily! For God's sake——"

He shut the door which had been left open. If there had been anybody on the stairs his son's words might have meant death for all of them. That is how

he looked when he shut the door.

Vassily was silent. He put his arms down on the table and his head on his arms. The others stood staring at him. Irina went down on her knees and put an arm round the boy's shoulder.

"My poor boy! Something terrible has happened to you."

He raised his head slowly and stared at her.

"To me nothing has happened," he said. "But I have seen terrible things. They tore my heart out. They have filled my soul with a black despair. I watched them die. Little Vania, the children of Anton Sokalovsky, and many others. All the children are dying or dead. In every village. There's no hope for them. There's no food. They lie unburied. The babies' bellies are swollen. They cry to their mothers. The old men weep. They cry out for mercy, but nobody hears. They cry out to God but God doesn't hear. I've seen these things. I've walked into the villages of death. Grandfather fell dead at my feet. Uncle Gregori has killed himself."

He spoke in a low strangled voice, so that they could hardly hear his words.

"Grandfather is dead?" asked Peter. "Did you say your grandfather is dead? Did I hear you say that?"

"They gave all their food to me," said Vassily. "They lied to me and said they had enough. Grandfather dropped down dead three weeks ago. He was just skin and bones like the rest. Grandmother died while I was away with Uncle Gregori, the night he shot himself. He said good night to me and went up to his room and I heard the shot."

Demchenko cried out in a voice of anguish:

"My father! My little old mother! My dear brother Gregori!"

Vassily stared at his father and there was a dreadful accusation in his eyes.

"You knew!" he said. "You heard what was happening in the Ukraine. Why didn't you tell me the truth, Father?"

"I knew nothing," said his father. "I heard only rumours which I thought were lies."

"What rumours?" asked Vassily, as though he were his father's judge.

Demchenko answered with a shifty look as though guilty.

"I heard they were taking grain from the peasants, even the seed grain for the next sowing. I heard there was hunger in the Ukraine. There's always hunger somewhere in Russia. But I had no idea of the truth. And your grandfather was overseer of a collective farm. I thought he would be all right. That is why I let you go to him. Why do you accuse me like this? Have I any power to provide food for the peasants? You look at me, Vassily, as though I were guilty of what is happening."

"We are all guilty!" cried Vassily stridently.

He cried out in a mad way.

"We are all guilty! We who call ourselves Communists. We who obey the orders from the Kremlin. We who do not kill those devils."

Vassily had mad eyes. He glared at his father. He pushed his thin fingers through a shock of black hair and cried out in a loud voice.

"I am guilty! If I stay here in Moscow shamming and lying while all those people are dying, then I am guilty of murdering them because I don't revolt against those who give the orders. They seized all the grain from the peasants before they did their spring sowing. Those who resisted for their children's sake were shot or driven away like dumb beasts. They seized the petrol for the tractors. There were fine tractors on the collective farms but they could not plough without oil and they could not sow without seed. Grandfather talked to the mission sent from Moscow to do these things. He said: 'I was a farmer—a *kulak* if you like—but you took my cattle and my land. Because I was loyal to the State you made me an overseer of a collective farm with my brother peasants as my workers. Now you take our seed grain and you stop the tractors from working. You sentence us to death and you give no reason. Millions of little ones will die. The old ones will die, but that doesn't matter. I think only of the little ones and the young boys and girls. Why do you sentence them to death by famine? If you will give me only one reason I will be silent and I will die without cursing you."

" 'The grain is for the Red Army, old man,' they told him. 'In the Kremlin of Moscow they fear a war with Japan. Is not that reason enough?' And Grandfather stared at them and said: 'It is no reason. We shall not defeat the Japanese by starving millions of our own folk. If we do that it is better not to defeat the Japanese. And in any case there is no war, and no attack.'

"The man from Moscow clouted him across the ear and said: 'I've a good mind to have you shot!' But in one case a man from Moscow wept because he saw the children dying in the villages. *The man from Moscow wept!*"

Vassily laughed harshly as though telling a funny story, and he repeated his words in a mad way.

"The man from Moscow wept! That's good, isn't it? That's very good! You see his conscience pricked him. He had to carry out orders he didn't like. They were orders for the death of millions of Russian peasants and children. But he carried out the orders. He demanded the grain. The peasants who resisted were shot or dragged away in batches. But the man from Moscow wept!"

Peter Demchenko strode over to his son and seized his wrist in an iron grip.

"I command you to be silent! You are shouting out treason. You are shouting out things which would cause us all to be killed. Have you no love for your mother? Do you wish her to be dragged off to death?"

“Why should we live in Moscow if they die in the Ukraine?” asked Vassily. “Are we not accomplices of crime if we go on living in Moscow careless of what happens to millions of our own brothers and millions of little ones who, as I speak, are dying? They lie above the stoves unable to move. There’s no food for them. Their mothers weep at their wailing. I have heard it. I have seen it. I come back to tell you.”

Vladimir spoke in a low voice, almost to himself.

“It’s like the famine in the Volga. I remember it when I was very young.”

Vassily sat down at the table again, and again he put his arms on it and his head on his arms and wept while the others stared at him.

“What he says is terrible,” said Irina in a kind of whisper.

“I didn’t know it was so bad,” said Demchenko. “I was afraid, but I didn’t know. I heard only rumours. I heard only whispers.”

Vladimir groaned.

“If it’s true it’s frightful,” he said. “If it’s true it’s a great crime.”

It was true.

XXVI

Vassily had brought the first news of all this horror. Presently refugees came from the Ukraine with stories of this man-made famine, as it was called, but there were not many of them and they dared only tell in whispers among friends whom they could trust, and sometimes could not trust, so that they were arrested by the secret police, now known after the Cheka and the Ogpu as the N.K.D.V., for spreading harmful and exaggerated stories with treasonable intent. A few brief lines appeared now and then in *Pravda* and *Isvestia* hinting at bad conditions in the Ukraine owing to failure of the crops, but rumour and whisperings filled up the gaps and there were few in Moscow who did not know that famine, followed by typhus, was making a heavy toll of human life in the Ukraine. But the Ukraine was a long way off from Moscow. In Moscow there was food. It was best not to talk about such things. It was safer not to think of them. It was foolish to let one's imagination dwell upon them.

There was one boy in Moscow whose imagination dwelt upon them because the horror had burnt deep in him, and there was another who could not put it out of his mind because it confronted him with horrible perplexities already in his subconscious mind. Vassily Petrovich Demchenko could not blot out from his mind the things he had seen, and Vladimir listened to his narrative of horror with a grave face and troubled soul.

"Perhaps there was some overwhelming reason why our leaders had to commandeer the grain," he said once, searching about for some prop to his faith in the supreme Soviet authority which guided the destiny of Russia. "If Japan is preparing war against us——"

"Vladimir," said Vassily, glaring at him, "you're a blasphemer against Truth. You were my hero once. I believed in the honesty of your soul. I believed in your nobility of mind. How do you dare to defend the deliberate starvation of millions? As you speak I see again the swollen bellies of Russian children and hear their wailing for food. How do you dare defend that mass murder?"

"If Japan attacked," said Vladimir, "more millions might die. The Red Army needs food and oil."

"It's a myth about Japan," said Vassily. "Japan has not attacked, and to defend Russia there has been time to supply the Red Army. But that argument

is a devil's argument. I hate to hear you use it Vladimir."

Vladimir flushed and then turned pale.

"If I had seen the things that you have seen," he answered, "I should take your view. I am not without bowels of compassion. But I cannot think our leaders would commit a vast crime, a hideous tragedy, unless it were forced upon them by irresistible necessity. At least I wish to think so, lest all my faith and hope should be destroyed."

"You put your faith in evil," said Vassily. "You put your hope on the fruits of evil. One day, Vladimir Michaelovitch, you'll remember what I tell you now and say 'Vassily was right.' These men in the Kremlin have no mercy and no pity. They're the Devil's disciples. They're filled with the lust of power. They care nothing for human life. They're as coldblooded as fish. They're more ruthless than Ivan the Terrible."

Vladimir looked at Vassily and saw a fury in his eyes. They seemed to glint with red fire. His face was deathly white.

"Vassily," said Vladimir, "you say terrible things because you've seen terrible things. But don't speak about them outside this room."

"Why not?" asked Vassily. "The people of Moscow ought to know what is happening in the Ukraine. I shall tell them. If I am silent because I don't care to risk my own life I share the guilt of this infernal crime against humanity."

Vladimir was silent. There was a conflict in his own brain and soul. Vassily had raised the old hideous doubts which he had tried to scotch, the doubts which, since childhood, had made him question the creed of Communism and the splendour of it and the hope of it. Was it all a monstrous lie, this creed to which he was pledged in loyalty? Had his mother been right in her denunciations and mockery? No! Not even death in the Ukraine could destroy his allegiance to the leaders of Russia and to his faith in the gospel of Karl Marx. His mind was steeped in the theories of Communism and in their call to discipline and loyalty. He couldn't be a traitor to all that.

"I'm not without pity," he told Vassily presently. "If I had been with you round about Kiev I should have been stricken with horror and compassion. But we must look to the end. Perhaps all this sacrifice and death is necessary for the ultimate purpose of creating the New Order."

"Vladimir Michaelovitch," cried Vassily, "you're a hypocrite and a liar! Your conscience stinks in my nostrils."

He strode out of the room fiercely and slammed the door.

Vladimir sat on the edge of his bed with his head bowed. He sat there in that position for something like an hour until the windows darkened and the room was without light.

Vassily was denounced at the Institute by a group of students. He was summoned to an interrogation by the head of the governing body, named

Zelikov, and by four of his colleagues. About fifteen students were summoned to give evidence. They were those who had brought the charges, and Vladimir was called as a witness, being known as Vassily's best friend and constant companion.

Vassily seemed to take the matter lightly though his parents were deeply anxious.

"Those fools," he said, "will try to put a snare about my feet. I shall show them how I despise them."

"It will be a disgrace," said his father gloomily, "if you are dismissed from the Institute."

"They wouldn't dare to do that," answered Vassily. "Even they can't dismiss a fellow for telling the truth."

Demchenko looked at his son anxiously.

"So long as they don't hand you over to the N.K.D.V.," he said.

Irina gave a cry.

"Peter, don't suggest such a thing!"

Demchenko looked at her with a hidden anguish in his eyes.

"Vassily is in great danger," he said. "If he has been speaking to his fellow students as he has spoken to us I'm filled with terror for him."

"My dear Father," answered Vassily, "those rats are harmless. They're known as sneaks and informers. Everybody despises them. Besides, Vladimir, the model student, our prize-winner, Lunacharsky's pet, is going to speak for me. He will do a little perjury, perhaps."

"Don't be too damned ironical!" answered Vladimir sulkily.

An hour or two after Vassily's outburst when he had called Vladimir a hypocrite and a liar he had come to apologize. He had come with tears in his eyes and had kissed Vladimir's hands. Vladimir had forgiven him. They were friends again, but because of this friendship Vladimir was deeply anxious. He knew better even than Irina or Peter that Vassily was a deeply wounded soul and that the horror he had seen in the Ukraine had had a dreadful effect upon his emotional nature, leaving him with a sense of despair and self-torture. He had been having nightmares and once came into Vladimir's room in the middle of the night weeping and trembling.

"I see the starving children," he said one night. "They stare at me in the darkness. They stretch out their claw-like hands to me. They're the dead children. They're already dead, hundreds of thousands of them."

"You're dreaming, old fellow!" said Vladimir. "It's a nightmare."

"I can't get them out of my sight," said Vassily. "I shut my eyes, but they're still there."

"I'll light the kerosene lamp," said Vladimir.

Vassily sat with him for more than an hour. He was afraid to go back to his

own room.

But before his father and mother he put on a mask of pretence, hiding from them after that first narrative of horror.

On the way to the Institute to be interrogated he spoke to Vladimir gravely.

“I know my danger. There’s no need for my father to remind me of it. If they expel me from the Institute there’s no future for me. And if they hand me over to the N.K.D.V. I shall be beaten up and shot. Perhaps that’s the best way out. . . .”

He paused for a moment and added a few words.

“There might be another. . . . I should hate to be beaten up and smashed into jelly before getting a bullet in the back of the head.”

“It won’t come to that,” said Vladimir. “You’ll get off with a reprimand and a warning.”

He spoke with sham confidence. He was not at all sure that Vassily would get off as lightly as that.

The boy was summoned for the interrogatory at eleven o’clock that morning.

Zelikov, the head of the governing board, was a man with black eyebrows meeting over his nose and dark sombre eyes. He called out the boy’s name.

“Vassily Petrovich Demchenko.”

“Here,” said Vassily.

“Stand up at your desk,” said Zelikov. “Do you know why you have been summoned here?”

“Probably by the false accusations of informers and sneaks,” answered Vassily coldly.

Zelikov stared at him with his sombre look and spoke again in an icy tone.

“It’s the duty of any student to report treasonable conversation or the spreading of false rumours, or anything prejudicial to the Soviet State. Are you aware of that?”

“I am,” answered Vassily. “It’s a thoroughly bad system. It puts a premium on spying and sneaking.”

Zelikov wrote something on a writing pad in front of him.

“I have noted that answer,” he said. “It will go against you.”

After a moment’s silence while he blotted the words he spoke again, in that cold harsh voice.

“Vassily Petrovich, some of your fellow students have reported various statements, stories and remarks made by you in recent days. I shall call them to give evidence and repeat in your presence what they have already put into writing. They say that you have denounced the leaders of Russia as murderers and devils. They say that you accuse members of the Communist Party in the Ukraine of deliberate cruelty and the organized starvation of millions of

peasants. Do you deny these charges?”

Vassily was silent until the President spoke again.

“What do you answer, Vassily Petrovich?”

“I answer,” said Vassily, “that I have seen the great horror which is now happening in the Ukraine. Millions of peasants and their families are dying of hunger. Great numbers are already dead. I went into many villages and saw families without any food at all between them and death because by orders from above, orders from Moscow, their grain—even the seed grain—had been taken from them before the spring sowing and all their reserves of grain and all their cattle, and all the oil for use in the tractors, so that even in the collective farms the fields could not be ploughed. I saw the children with their swollen bellies and their claw-like hands, and their bewildered pleading eyes, like starving monkeys. What I have seen fills my soul with despair, with anguish, with horror.”

“That is not an answer to my questions,” said Zelikov.

“Did you or did you not denounce the leaders of Russia, whom you called the ‘men of the Kremlin’, as murderers and devils?”

Vassily was silent again.

“Answer!” cried Zelikov harshly.

Vassily spoke slowly as though dragging the words out of himself.

“I denounced, and I denounce, any men who deliberately ordered the seizing of all grain and stores from the Ukraine, leaving nothing for the life of the people there. It’s a crime against humanity. It is murderous. Those who did it may have misinterpreted their orders and caused the horrors out of fear lest they should be accused of slackness or disloyalty by those who did not know the true facts. I am willing to make those admissions.”

The President of this court, which was one of discipline in the Institute and without legal authority and power, wrote several lines in his notebook and then called upon the fifteen students in turn to give evidence.

Some of them had been special friends of Vassily. He had trusted them but now they betrayed him. One after another they reported his denunciations of the Soviet Government for its actions in the Ukraine. None of them looked at Vassily or saw the scornful curl of his lips when they gave him away.

One man at the high table—it was the head of the technological department, named Panchuk, who was a Ukrainian—questioned Vassily after the fifteen had been interrogated.

“You were deeply distressed by what you saw in the Ukraine?”

“I have frightful nightmares.”

“You have not exaggerated the extent of the famine?”

“It is impossible to tell the whole truth. I saw only a part of it.”

“Did any of your own relatives die of hunger?”

“My Uncle Gregori’s little ones. Two of them.”

“Anyone else?”

“My grandfather fell dead at my feet. He was an old man. He had starved so that others might have food. He was overseer of the collective farm in his own village. He had been loyal to the Soviet.”

“The collective farms suffered in the same way as the peasants still working their own strips of land?”

“Exactly in the same way and even worse, because their tractors could not plough for lack of oil and they gave up all their reserves according to orders.”

Very audible in the big room was a sigh which came from Panchuk, whose own people were Ukrainians.

“After having this experience you came back to Moscow in an abnormal state of mind? You had been thrown off your balance by the tragic things you had seen?”

Vassily shrugged his shoulders.

“If great tragedy unbalances the mind I was unbalanced.”

“You were not quite accountable for the things you said because of deep emotion and pity?”

Zelikov intervened sharply.

“I object to those questions, Comrade Panchuk. They seem to me unnecessary and irrelevant.”

“The student’s state of mind should be taken into consideration,” said Panchuk.

“His state of mind, whatever it may be, does not excuse treason talk,” said Zelikov sternly. “We have the evidence of his fellow students. I call upon Vladimir Michaelovitch. We are informed that he lives with the accused in the same apartment.”

Vladimir stood up and he felt a slight moisture in the palms of his hands and he felt the skin of his face get cold.

“You live in the same house as the student Vassily Petrovich?”

“That is so.”

“You have had frequent conversations with him and been constantly in his company?”

“Yes, he is my best friend.”

“He is still your best friend? In spite of his wild utterances?”

“He is still my best friend.”

“You are aware that no citizen of the Soviet State, above all no student of the Institute, should be friendly with anyone of treasonable and subversive character or speech?”

“I know that,” answered Vladimir uneasily.

“You were present when he first returned from Kiev?”

“I was.”

“Describe his demeanour and let us know how much you remember of his first utterances regarding his experiences.”

“He was in a state of mental distress. He wept very much. He was like a boy, a delicate boy, who had been terribly hurt in his mind, I mean.”

“What did he say?”

“He described the famine in the Ukraine as he had seen it in many villages round about Kiev. He was tortured by the memory of the starving and dying children. He is extremely sensitive to human suffering.”

There was a moment’s silence, lasting even more than a moment.

Vladimir glanced round the room and saw that the students were staring at him intently, as though startled by his defence of Vassily whom they had denounced.

Zelikov spoke again in his rasping voice.

“We are, I hope, all sensitive to human suffering if it is not caused by crimes against the State. But evidence has been given by students that Vassily Petrovich Demchenko denounced the leaders of Russia and those whom he called ‘the men of the Kremlin.’ Did you hear him say such things?”

Vladimir hesitated and then was silent.

“I repeat my question,” said Zelikov. “Did you hear him denounce the heads of the State?”

“I heard only his tears,” said Vladimir. “I heard only his groans. He cried out in the night.”

“You did not hear him make treasonable statements?”

“I heard only his narrative of tragic things.”

Zelikov made some notes on his writing-pad and then addressed Vladimir again.

“You claim that he is your best friend. That is a claim which may lead you into trouble, in spite of your excellent record in this Institute. But do you think it reasonable for us to believe that to his best friend Vassily Petrovich did not reveal his inmost thoughts which he blurted out to his fellow students with whom he was less intimate than with yourself?”

Vladimir thought deeply before answering.

“It is possible,” he said slowly, “that the fellow students who have accused him misinterpreted his words and gave them a sinister meaning.”

“That,” said Zelikov, “is an accusation against your fellow students. It is accusing them of deliberate perjury and infamous lies.”

Vladimir flushed hotly. Not even for the sake of Vassily did he want to utter any slander against his fellow students, though he deplored their denunciations.

“I do not accuse them of lying,” he said quickly. “But if a man talks wildly

because he is torn by some inward agony it is possible to misunderstand his state of mind."

"We are not concerned with his state of mind as far as this interrogatory goes," said Zelikov. "That may be taken into consideration later. We are now concerned with what he said, what were the actual words he used. I ask you, Vladimir Michaelovitch, did you or did you not hear him accuse Party members and officials of abominable crime?"

Vladimir felt himself getting pale. He knew that upon his answer might depend the life or liberty of his friend, at least his future career as a student of the Institute.

"I turned a deaf ear," he answered, "to wild ejaculations by Vassily Petrovich. I listened only to his narrative of things seen. I don't remember his actual words. I also was deeply distressed by his emotion and his fits of weeping."

Zelikov pushed some papers about impatiently.

"Vladimir Michaelovitch," he said, "you are an unsatisfactory witness. You are trying to shield a friend who is undeserving of your friendship, or the friendship of any loyal citizen of the Soviet State. I must warn you that you have jeopardized your position in the Institute today. Sit down."

Vladimir sat down on the bench behind him. Vassily, who was sitting next to him, pressed his hand under the desk.

At the high table, where Zelikov sat with the other heads of the Institute, whispering went on for a moment. Professor Panchuk left his place to say something to Zelikov who shook his head. Below the table the fifteen students were whispering to one another. Presently Zelikov rapped on the table.

"Vassily Petrovich Demchenko. Stand up."

Vassily stood up rigidly.

"On the evidence of your fellow students," said Zelikov, "in our judgment, with one dissentient voice"—he glanced at Panchuk—"you have been found guilty of treasonable and subversive utterances. You are expelled from the Institute. We have no other power, but the papers will be sent to the police. This inquiry is now at an end."

He put his writing-pad in his pocket and gathered up some other papers. The students filed out quietly. When the dais was empty Vassily leaned forward over his desk with his forehead down on his arms. Vladimir touched him on the shoulder.

"Let's go."

Vassily staggered up and looked at him in a dazed way for a moment. Then he laughed harshly.

"Like the rest of them," he said. "They are men without bowels. As cruel as hell."

“Let’s go,” said Vladimir again.

“Better not be seen with me,” said Vassily. “I’m a leper henceforth. I’m expelled from the Institute.”

“I’m deeply sorry,” said Vladimir. “I did my best for you, dear comrade.”

Vassily stared at him and then spoke in a low voice.

“They’re sending the papers to the police. The N.K.D.V. which used to be the Ogpu and first the Cheka. Tomorrow.”

He gave a kind of convulsive shudder and the skin of his face turned grey.

“Courage!” said Vladimir. “Courage, my dear comrade.”

Vassily nodded.

“Yes, that’s all one needs. Courage to face death. Why should I be afraid to die when I have walked through villages of dying folk? Death is a commonplace down in the Ukraine. They just lie down and die. It’s easy really. Death is nothing. But of course it’s not so good to die in the hands of the police. Not a nice death, really.”

He seemed to be speaking to himself rather than to Vladimir.

On the way home the two boys were silent.

XXVII

Irina and Demchenko took it hard when Vassily told them that he had been expelled from the Institute. He kept back from them the fact that Zelikov was sending his papers to the police.

Irina burst into floods of tears.

“My poor Vassily!” she cried. “My poor Vassily!”

Demchenko was harsh.

“You brought it on yourself. I warned you not to speak to your fellow students as you had spoken to us. Now you are disgraced. Your educational career is at an end.”

“No,” said Vassily, looking strangely at him. “It’s only beginning.”

“What do you mean?” asked Demchenko. “You will never get admission to another Institute. Your papers will be marked.”

“I shall go on learning,” said Vassily doggedly. “My soul will go on learning many things—the great mysteries, the meaning of it all, if there’s any meaning to life.”

“How can you go on learning?” asked Peter Demchenko again. “All avenues of education will be shut to you.”

“There’s one door open,” said Vassily. “But we won’t discuss it, Father. You wouldn’t understand. And I’m tired. That interrogatory tired me quite a lot. I shall go and lie down.”

“Are you feeling ill, dear Vassily?” asked his mother anxiously.

“Only tired. I want to sleep. Don’t wake me too soon.”

He looked towards Vladimir before he left the room and smiled at him.

“A thousand thanks, comrade,” he said. “You weren’t one of the sneaks. You were very noble.”

That evening Vladimir went out again with Sofia and told her about the inquiry.

“It’s terribly serious. Tomorrow the papers will be in the hands of the police. Vassily may be arrested.”

Sofia turned pale at those words.

“Oh, Vladimir! That’s terrible. But why did he denounce our leaders? They must be guiltless of all that is happening in the Ukraine.”

Vladimir was silent for some moments.

Were they guiltless? he wondered. Were they guiltless? Could they have done those things deliberately—wholesale starvation with widespread death, the massacre of the children by taking away their food?

"What dark thoughts are in your mind, Vladimir?" asked Sofia. "You don't think that this famine was made by order?"

"I daren't think so," he answered. "It must have been a gigantic blunder—orders misinterpreted by frightened officials. That's bad enough."

"We have to cling on to faith in the divine mission of Russia and Communism," said Sofia. "We're lost if we doubt that. All would be darkness. It would all be hopeless. We should have been deluded."

"This Vassily affair has shaken me to the core," said Vladimir. "I brood over it all day and half the night. It's not only Vassily's danger—and he and I have been like brothers—but it's the questioning in my own mind. I don't doubt his tale of horror but I seek for the cause of it."

"One day we shall know," answered Sofia. "Meanwhile, dear Vladimir, I have another bit of bad news for you and both of us. It's trivial compared with Vassily's danger, but you ought to know."

"What has happened?" asked Vladimir sharply. "Don't tell me that you too are under suspicion, or that I have been accused."

"No! No!" she cried, clasping his hand as they walked in the glamour of the golden dusk which came stealing into the public gardens. "On the contrary, all my friends congratulate me. I've been appointed mistress of an infants' school. In the last examinations I have taken a good place, and this is the reward, they think."

Vladimir looked at her and smiled.

"I don't call that bad news. I shall have to treat you with more respect. But that won't make any difference to our love. Where's your bad news?"

Sofia was still holding his hand and he felt the pressure of it.

"It will mean a separation," she told him. "My school is a long way off. It's the biggest infants' school in Kazan."

"Kazan!" cried Vladimir with anguish. "I shall never see you. Kazan is a world away."

"I shall come back for the long holidays," said Sofia. "My family will be here. I hope I shall be allowed to come."

Vladimir was much distressed and his voice broke when he spoke again.

"We shall have to give up these walks. You will be gone. Moscow will be a desert without you."

"I shall be thinking of you always, dear Vladimir. Every night my pillow will be wet with tears."

"It's tearing us apart," said Vladimir. "It will tear my heart out. I need you. I can't do without you. Oh, my love, my dearest love!"

“Our spirits will meet,” she said. “Think of me as being with you always, by your side, hand in hand like this.”

“This is make-believe,” he answered gloomily. “It’s the same as death, this separation. Must you go? Can’t you refuse?”

She had to go. There was no choice in Moscow. She had to go where she was sent. That was in the rules. She had been educated under that obligation. If she refused she would never be offered another post. It would be resigning her means of livelihood and her vocation.

“We still have a month or two,” she told him. “We must crowd all our love into that time.”

They did a little crowding then before he left her. They stood together in a close embrace of their two young bodies. Other couples passed them and took no notice. Other boys and girls of Moscow were making love in the dusk which was nearly darkness. It was with infinite reluctance that they parted that evening outside Sofia’s apartment house.

Vladimir went sadly back to the Demchenko’s flat. Irina opened the door to him.

“How is Vassily?” he asked.

“He has locked his bedroom door. I have tried the handle twice. He is still sleeping, poor boy. He was utterly exhausted. We won’t disturb him. Peter has gone back to the works. He’s very worried.”

“It’s queer that Vassily sleeps so long,” answered Vladimir. “Something may have happened to him.”

“What do you mean?” asked Irina, turning pale.

Vladimir was pale, too. A terrible idea frightened him. He dared not put it into words.

“I’ll go to his room,” he said.

He tried the handle of Vassily’s door. The door was still locked.

Vladimir called to his friend.

“Vassily, are you awake? Vassily, wake up!”

There was no answer.

“Vassily! Vassily!” shouted Vladimir in a panic.

Irina had her hands to her throat and spoke as though choking.

“Oh, Vladimir! Oh, my son!”

Vladimir put his shoulder to the door with all his weight. The door yielded and he fell inside. It was quite dark in the little room.

“Bring a light,” he said in a kind of whisper.

Irina brought in the kerosene lamp from the next room and Vladimir seized it from her and held it over Vassily’s bed.

The boy was lying there. He was fully dressed. One arm was flung over the bedside and his eyes were open. But they were glazed eyes which saw nothing.

By one look at him Vladimir knew that he was dead. A little bottle lay on the floor and from it came a faint pungent smell.

“Oh, Vassily!” cried Vladimir. “Oh, my friend!”

Irina flung herself upon the body of her dead son calling his name.

The police were too late to take away Vassily to the Liubyanka when they called next day with an order for his arrest. He had gone out by another door.

XXVIII

After the death of Vassily, Vladimir went round very often to the apartment of Stanislav and Sofia which became a second home to him. Irina and Peter were much broken by the death of their son and this tragedy haunted their rooms, and especially the little room where Vassily had died. It was now a ghost chamber. Irina clung to Vladimir in a pitiful way as though in some way he took the place of Vassily and, in spite of his deep sympathy and his devotion to her, he was glad to spend an evening or two of each week in the company of Stanislav and the young men and women who gathered there for music and conversation.

Then there was Olga and her adopted parents, Zabotin and Kusanova, with whom he passed other evenings in another kind of company, mostly dancers and singers of the ballet and opera, very temperamental, very childish even, but amusing and attractive. Olga had grown into a beautiful young woman with many lovers hovering about her, and was now recognized and well known as one of the principals in the *corps de ballet*. Zabotin and Kusanova adored her and were very proud of her as though she had been their own child.

Zabotin had not changed much as the years crept on. He was now a man of over forty but still supreme as a dancer and as a producer of rather fantastic ballets. He was still wildly emotional, gay and laughing at one moment and then agonizing over the state of Russia and the tragedy of life. But Vladimir believed that on the whole he was happy at this time because of the adulation of his own crowd, his absorption in his work and his delight in the company of Olga and Kusanova. To the latter he was undoubtedly unfaithful from time to time but she seemed to regard this as one of the necessities of his nature and even laughed with Vladimir over those episodes.

“Zabotin has fallen in love again!” she told him. “It’s with a black-eyed sylph from the Caucasus. What a ridiculous creature he is!”

“Why don’t you keep him in order?” asked Vladimir.

Kusanova laughed with good-natured tolerance.

“I’ve never kept him in order and never shall! Of course the poor dear must have a love affair. He can’t dance unless he thinks he’s in love with somebody. It’s essential to his genius.”

Vladimir was shocked, being at that time romantically in love with Sofia

and refusing to believe that he could ever be disloyal to her or think of any other woman.

"Zabotin is a libertine," he said.

Kusanova agreed that he was a libertine.

"He's a Gypsy. He hasn't been tamed. He's as wild as a Greek faun. We're all Gypsies. We live apart in a dream world. Real life doesn't touch us except when we're hungry. We dance and sing and quarrel and laugh except when sometimes we weep, like hurt children."

It was with anguish that Vladimir had his first parting with Sofia, the night before she left for Kazan to take up her duties as a school-teacher. They managed to be alone in her father's flat. Stanislav and his friends were making a party at the Opera and Sofia had refused to join them because of the chance of this evening alone with Vladimir.

"It will be death without you," said Vladimir.

Sofia raised both his hands to her lips and kissed them.

"Dear Vladimir," she cried. "Don't break down my courage. Don't make me weep."

But she wept.

"Kazan is at the other end of the world," he said. "How can I ever see you again?"

"In a year I shall be back," she told him. "Perhaps I can get a job in Moscow. You must pull some strings for me. In any case there will be the holidays. I shall count the days till then."

"A year is a frightful figure in the sum of life," said Vladimir. "A year of days and nights without you. I shall die!"

"My spirit will keep you company," she said. "It will reach out to you, and yours will reach out to mine. I shall kiss you across the distance. I shall feel your dear kisses."

"Let me kiss you now," said Vladimir. "A thousand times."

He put his arm around her and they kissed like Romeo and Juliet before their farewell. Her face was wet with tears and he kissed her closed eyes. Once she nearly fainted in his arms.

"Perhaps we shall never see each other again," he cried in agony later in the evening. "One never knows what is going to happen."

Sofia tried to give him courage, tried to hide her own emotion.

"No, no! Be sensible, my Vladimir! Don't talk dreadful things and spoil our evening together. Let's pretend that I'm only going for a weekend. Let's be happy!"

She tried to cheer him up by being merry, though twice more she burst into tears—once when she was cooking some eggs on a little chafing-dish and once when he gave her a present.

It was a strange secret present which he pulled by a little string from his neck where it had lain hidden under his shirt.

"Sofia," he said, "I give you my most sacred treasure. It lay on my mother's breast when she was dying. It was warmed with the last warmth of her body. In a way it's dangerous. You mustn't let anybody see it."

It was the little silver crucifix which Lucy had worn.

"Oh, Vladimir!" cried Sofia. "How can you let me have it?"

"I should like to think you're wearing it. It has been close to my heart since my mother's death."

"It's the Cross of Christ," said Sophia in a whisper. "Christ was the most perfect of men. He believed in love. He died for love of men. It's a pity we aren't allowed to believe in Christ's words of wisdom and beauty. My mother told me about them but I've forgotten most."

"I have an idea that Christ was a Communist," said Vladimir. "But without cruelty. He wouldn't have stood for a secret police or the awful things that have happened in the world."

Sofia put the little crucifix round her neck and tucked it below her bodice.

"It will help to keep me safe," she said. "It has been against your own dear body."

Vladimir smiled, though his eyes were sad.

"We're getting superstitious. We're like two small children telling fairy-tales."

"Vladimir," cried Sofia. "I hear the others coming back. I hear their laughter at the bottom of the stairs. Give me one more kiss before they come. Hold me tight in your arms for one more second."

They sprang apart as there was a bang at the door followed by loud laughter in the passage. Stanislav came in first.

"Hullo, you two!" he said. "Wallowing in grief? Taking a sad farewell? Hard luck!"

Vladimir pulled himself together.

"Had a good time?" he asked.

"Pretty good," admitted the critical Stanislav. "Tschaikovsky was a great fellow. We can't produce music like that nowadays. Any tea, Sofia?"

Two young men and two young women invaded the apartment noisily. There was loud conversation and peals of laughter until Sofia cried: "Hush! The house kommissar will report us again for making too much noise after ten o'clock."

"Silly old swine!" said Stanislav. "A police spy of course."

Vladimir took his leave ten minutes later.

Sofia stood outside the door with him in the dark passage. They had one more embrace which lasted until Vladimir tore himself away at the sound of

footsteps coming up the stone stairs. It was the house kommissar rattling his keys.

XXIX

BY a curious chance Vladimir found himself in the Politburo with Stanislav, though it was not by that young man's influence or friendship. An inquiry had come down from no less than Stalin himself for a promising pupil at the Institute who had a knowledge of English and could act as translator and, if need be, interpreter. Vladimir had been selected among all others and—not much to his own satisfaction, for he had other dreams—was appointed to a subordinate position as a Civil Servant in the political department. He was in the same room as Stanislav and the young man Alexander Alexandrovich Marton, whom Vladimir had met in Stanislav's rooms. Their chief in an adjoining room was Victor Krassin, an old-time official who had served under Tchicherin and was a man over fifty years of age. He was mild mannered and good-natured, and seemed to take a special liking for Vladimir, talking to him unreservedly at times about international politics, the pressure of world forces, the awakening of Asia and other such subjects of which he had very deep knowledge. An old Party member, he had served as a young man in the Red Army during the civil war and had been one of Tchicherin's private secretaries before being sent on trade missions to England, France and the United States, where with indefatigable industry he had learnt the languages of those countries. Now he was in charge of the translation department of the Politburo.

"As narrow-minded as a white mouse," was Stanislav's description of him when Vladimir first took his seat at the desk. "He has all the preconceived ideas of the Old Gang. Communism is his religion and he has the faith of a fanatic. He believes that all other countries have a mad hatred of Soviet Russia and are plotting to destroy it."

"Isn't that true?" asked Vladimir.

Stanislav laughed.

"I don't suppose they love us but I don't believe they're plotting to attack us. England has gone pacifist and is a weak old courtesan regretting her youth. France is dwindling into a third power and her working classes are ready for Communism. Italy—my mother's country—is under the spell of Mussolini who knows that his beautiful Italians will never make good soldiers, and anyhow Italy is bankrupt."

"What about Germany?" asked Vladimir. "That man Hitler——"

Stanislav shrugged his shoulders.

"A tub-thumper with a gift of magnetism. They say he has apoplectic fits and bites the carpet. . . . Oh, well, let's have a game of nibs. I'll bet you two cigarettes."

He was an expert in a schoolboy game played with steel nibs which were manœuvred for position. The nib which could get its point over the other captured its opponent. He had other diversions for the relief of tedium, making paper aeroplanes which flew across the room in graceful flights when he propelled them. The other young man of this trio, Alexander Alexandrovich Marton, played operas on his teeth with a fountain-pen and spent much time gazing out of the window and was candid on the subject of his love affairs. Vladimir was a more earnest worker and perhaps for that reason was favoured by his chief, Victor Krassin.

One day he smiled at Vladimir when he had taken him translated extracts from the British Press.

"What do you make of things?" he asked. "What are your ideas regarding the international picture?"

Vladimir was modest.

"The picture is blurred in my mind. To be quite honest I can't make head or tale of it all. I'm very ignorant."

Krassin gave a quiet laugh.

"I like your answer. It's not easy to understand what is happening below the surface. Presently one begins to get a glimmering, to fit up the pieces of a jig-saw puzzle, to feel in an intuitive way the political pressures and forces, to have a kind of presentiment or fore-knowledge even of the near future."

"Do you have such a sense of things to come, Comrade Krassin?" asked Vladimir politely.

Krassin laughed and then a grave thoughtful look came into his eyes.

"I'm no prophet," he said, "but I believe that before many years have passed—shall I say five?—Russia will be at war."

Vladimir was startled.

"I profoundly hope not," he said hurriedly. "War with whom, Comrade Krassin?"

Krassin put the tips of his fingers together and leant back in his chair.

"There are two possibilities. Our chief enemies may unite against us. I mean Germany and Japan."

"Do you think that man Hitler——?"

Krassin finished the sentence.

"I think that man Hitler is very dangerous. He has already given German youth a new hope and a new leadership. National Socialism is of course a *bourgeois* revolution which has no likeness to Communism—though it is

thought so abroad—except its discipline and its call to the enthusiasm of youth. I have read Hitler's book *Mein Kampf*. It's a farrago of ideas, some of which he has taken from us, but throughout that book there is a clear intention, a fixed purpose, what the French call *une idée fixe*. It is that German economy and the future of the German folk are dependent upon access to the grainfields and mineral resources of the Ukraine and the Caucasus."

"They say he's a carpet-biter," said Vladimir. "And an epileptic."

Krassin shook his head.

"I have private information from my friends in Berlin. He is a man of immense energy, obstinate will-power, with a highly nervous tension which produces storms of rage and violence—if you like the symptoms of epilepsy, but not epilepsy. He has a certain genius, a mesmeric influence over his people and associates. One day he will endeavour to carry out his dream. We must be prepared. . . . Then there is Japan. Japan covets the rich grainfields of Siberia, but they might conquer China first."

"Not a pleasant prospect!" said Vladimir. "What about England?"

"England," said Krassin, "still maintains the liberal tradition and is equally afraid of Communism and National Socialism. England of course is weakening. One day she will recall her legions from the subject peoples like the Roman Empire when our ancestors came out of the primaeval forests."

"And the United States?" asked Vladimir, the novice.

Victor Krassin smiled.

"The Americans are deeply and instinctively isolationist. They will never again enter a European war. As far as we are concerned they are negligible."

That was only one conversation of many which Vladimir had in the private room of his chief, and those talks were his political education, making a profound influence upon his mind which was a clean slate in such high matters.

It was perhaps after six months in the Politburo that Vladimir received an invitation from him to dine with him and his family—an honour which had not been given to Stanislav or Alexander.

"I would like you to meet my son," he said. "He's a very brilliant fellow and has been private secretary for a time to Bukharin who was Lenin's greatest friend. My daughter also would be glad to meet you."

"I shall be honoured," said Vladimir.

That evening he put on his best suit of clothes which he had obtained from government stores available only to those who had high priority, such as government officials and their families. A change had come over Russia since the death of Lenin. There was developing rapidly great diversities in payment and privileges, producing a well-to-do middle class composed of government officials, works managers, highly paid technicians, and Party members of

influence and power in the administration. The high wage system had been adopted in the industrial life of Russia with an ascending scale of payment for record and technical skill. The old ideal of Communism which theoretically abolished all class distinctions and economic privileges—it had never been achieved—was now completely abandoned by Stalin and the Supreme Committee of the Soviet, due partly to the drive for efficiency in the Five Years' Plan and its successor, and partly to a revulsion from Trotskyism and the old ideals. It happened so gradually that young people like Vladimir were almost unaware of what was happening except now and then when some glaring contrast between extreme poverty and a new elegance bordering on luxury startled them.

Vladimir was startled that evening at Krassin's flat. It was beautifully furnished, with gilt-framed pictures on the walls and oriental rugs on the polished floors. The dinner table sparkled with cut glass and silver where the light from little shaded lamps shone upon them. A maid, neatly dressed, served the meal and it was the first time in Vladimir's life that he had been so served.

"All this is extraordinary!" he thought. "Once I lived in a basement room with an old blanket as a curtain to divide it. Once my dearest little mother worked for low wages in a damp factory which caused her death. What has happened to me? What has happened to Russia?"

For a moment he thought back to the famine in the Ukraine with all that agony about which poor Vassily had told him in burning and terrible words. Here in this flat in Moscow there was no sign of poverty, but an elegance which embarrassed him and made him shy.

He became self-conscious and intimidated by the silver forks and spoons lest he should use them wrongly and was deeply embarrassed when he overset a glass of wine by a clumsy gesture.

"That's nothing," said Krassin's wife gaily. "The damage will be soon repaired."

She called to the maidservant.

"Natalia, bring a clean cloth."

She was in a pretty frock of blue silk and looked too young to be the mother of her son Sacha and her daughter Vera.

Sacha was a talkative young man of about twenty-five, gay and amusing. It was obvious that his father was extremely proud of him and that he was the white-headed boy of the family—that is to say, the pet and idol. He had lately been with Bukharin in the Crimea, and gave a good description of the scenery and climate and of sunbathing and open-air dancing.

"It seems a different world from Moscow," he said. "Life is softer and more leisurely. One plucks oranges off the trees and there is a profusion of exotic flowers. No wonder it was favoured by the Grand Dukes and the old

aristocracy."

"Now it's enjoyed by the proletariat," said his father. "The Revolution did away with the parasites."

Sacha grinned at his father.

"You always bring in the gospel of Communism," he said. "One forgets all that in Crimea. And I wouldn't say that we've abolished all parasites."

"What a lucky person you are, Sacha!" said his sister Vera. "You go about doing precious little work and having a glorious time while I am tied down to a desk in Moscow typing out statistics for the Commissariat of births and deaths."

"No work?" exclaimed Sacha. "On the contrary, Bukharin drives me like the devil. He has a vast correspondence all of which I have to type out in duplicate and he's busy on a book about the early days of the Revolution and his friendship with Lenin. Still, I will admit that he's a good-natured type and has agreeable spasms of laziness."

"A great personality," said his father. "I owe much to him."

"He doesn't see eye to eye with Stalin," said Sacha, "but that is a political secret not to be discussed."

His father looked uneasy for a moment.

"Political secrets are taboo at this table," he said. "Be careful, Sacha."

Vladimir was aware that his chief's glance was upon him, as though not quite certain of his discretion.

Sacha laughed carelessly.

"A good thing too, Father! What could be more dull or more depressing? I'll tell you of an amusing episode I had in the Crimea."

It was a story about some girls who went bathing in the nude in a little secluded cove, leaving their clothes on the sand. When they came out of the water the clothes had gone. Some young fellows had come down, hidden them behind flowering shrubs, and then taken to cover to watch the consequences.

"Don't tell me you were one of those young monkeys!" said his mother. "I'm shocked at you, Sacha."

"It was a great joke," said Sacha, laughing. "The girls squealed and ran about like demented nymphs searching for their garments. Then they had to walk to the neighbouring village without a stitch on them while we lay in hiding laughing our sides out."

Krassin laughed quietly at this narrative.

"What young devils you all are!" he said good-naturedly. "But youth is youth."

"It is indeed!" remarked Sacha. "Nobody can contradict that statement, Father. And if youth can get a laugh out of life before death touches them on the shoulder, so much the better."

“Sacha!” cried his mother. “What a morbid remark!”

“Not morbid,” answered Sacha lightly. “Just truthful. We all live dangerously in Russia. One never knows what the morrow will bring forth.”

Vladimir glanced over at his chief and heard him give a faint sigh. Was he thinking of a coming war in which his son might be one of the fighters, the son who seemed to be the apple of his eye?

“I’m a fatalist,” said Vera. “I believe in predetermination. Our fate is settled in advance.”

“Shut up,” said Sacha. “What do you know about things like that?”

The conversation became lively between brother and sister. It was an interesting evening and pleasant to Vladimir except for that unfortunate incident with the wineglass which made him go hot and cold at the thought of it.

XXX

He was changing as Russia changed. Earning a good salary, he could afford to buy well-cut suits from the private stores open to officials only. He could afford to buy soap and shaving cream which he now needed. He was no longer a boy but a serious young man—a bit too serious in the opinion of Stanislav, Sacha and others who were more happy-go-lucky. As an employee of the Politburo he was treated with respect by men older than himself, and he began to find himself more at ease in social gatherings limited to the size of Moscow flats, where he met officials of other departments and his own contemporaries. He tried, and sometimes succeeded in wiping out the past from his mind—the execution of his father as a Trotskyite, the loss of other friends who had loved his Little Mother, hungry years when he had never had quite enough to eat, the miserable conditions in which he had worked in a basement room, the illness and death of Lucy, the suicide of Vassily. It was no wonder, he thought, that Stanislav and Sacha should think him too serious. They had not had that tragic background, those haunting memories were not in their minds. Nor did they think with any anguish of the famine in the Ukraine and the death of millions of peasants. They never seemed to think of these things, living only for the day with a kind of fatalism as Vera Krassin had said, getting the most out of life as far as they could, at the opera and ballet and picnic expeditions in the summer, and lovemaking and chatter. They had been born, these young people, in a Soviet state, or at least could remember no previous time. They accepted the conditions of life in Russia as a normal and inevitable state of things, as life itself, and the majority absorbed all the propaganda handed out to them with only occasional questionings and criticism, half expressed because they had been trained to beware of loose talk. Only their elders seemed anxious and even fearful. Youth in Moscow, at this period, was unafraid and not dissatisfied unless they were driven too hard in factories and workshops for that blessed Five Years' Plan, second instalment, at which some of them jeered and some of them cursed when the managers were out of hearing. There was of course the Russian temperament which alternated in some minds between high spirits and dark despairs. Vladimir sometimes accused himself of having the Russian temperament, though he was only half a Russian, for he was always conscious of an inner and secret

melancholy which sometimes overshadowed his mind even in amusing company. Or perhaps, he thought, analysing himself self-consciously, as youth does, it was the tug of war in his blood and being, his English ancestry in conflict with the Slav, his mother's character and ideas hostile to the Soviet system. He accepted the system. He was anxious to idealize it. He was a patriotic Russian, loving Russia; and yet always at the back of his mind were sinister questionings, dreadful doubts, agonies of bewilderment. His mother's spirit came to him in his dreams. He heard her mocking laughter when she quarrelled with his father because he believed in the ideals of Communism. "They are evil," she told him. "They are all devils, your leaders. Where is the beautiful dictatorship of the proletariat when millions are starving to death on the Volga? Where is liberty in Russia?" In his dreams, or in his waking dreams, she came to him, his little English mother, so gay sometimes in his boyhood. So proud of England.

England! He knew a lot about England now. Every day he had to translate extracts from the English papers on political subjects. But his eyes strayed to other columns—criticisms of new novels, descriptions of social life, obituaries of famous people, photographs of English scenery with lovely old cathedrals, harvesting in old villages, articles about industry and sport.

Sometimes Stanislav at the other desk in his room at the Politburo would throw a paper pellet at him.

"Why do you read all that stuff, Vladimir? It's outside your job. And you're abominably unsociable. I want to tell you about that party I went to last night. One of the girls was a flaming beauty."

England. Those daily readings were disturbing and yet enchanting. He liked to read the English names. They seemed to have a call to him, the call of the blood. The social structure of England remained the same. There were the names of the old aristocracy and the newly created peers. There was the Honours List with barons and baronets and knights as in the Middle Ages.

In the correspondence columns which he read sometimes with smiling eyes there were letters about the first cuckoo, and the odd habits of an owl, and a nightingale in a London square. Hitler in Germany was forging a powerful new army. So his chief Krassin told him. Japan was buying up scrap-iron in the United States. There were political crises in England, controversies about the League of Nations, alarming unemployment, but *The Times* newspaper opened its columns to funny little letters about nature and the derivation of words and all kinds of trivialities.

"The English are our enemies," though Vladimir, poring over the papers, "but they're an amusing people. They're wonderfully traditional. I keep on being reminded of my little English mother. It's odd to think that I have relatives there—Uncle George who was such a good amateur actor and made

funny faces which used to make my Little Mother laugh like billy-o." "He used to make me laugh like billy-o!" Vladimir remembered her saying that.

In England the Labour Party hated Hitler and National Socialism but they were against rearming and put all their faith in the League of Nations and collective security which didn't seem to work. Vladimir's supreme chief, Litvinov, had been working on that idea too, but in the Politburo, at least in the mind of his chief Krassin, there was a conviction that the League of Nations and collective security would be smashed by Hitler and his gang. Comrade Krassin was getting anxious.

"Germany," he told Vladimir, "is building new weapons of war. All her armament factories are working overtime. Soviet Russia will be Hitler's goal." Already *Pravda* and *Isvestia* were pouring out pages of anti-German propaganda. England and the United States were accused of egging Germany on to attack Russia. "The Pluto-democracies," wrote the leading article writer in *Pravda*, "are consorting to create war between Germany and the U.S.S.R. while they remain neutral and watch the bloody struggle. Germany is preparing for conquest? Against whom? Can anyone doubt that Hitler still covets the Ukraine? That madman, that homicidal maniac, dreams his lunatic dreams that he will raise the Swastika flag above the Kremlin. No German should be allowed in Russia. Every German technician should be expelled as a spy and saboteur."

Every day in such words the Russian people were being prepared for a tragic struggle, and urged to work more intensively, tirelessly, in factories and foundries. Germany was the enemy. Hitler was the arch-plotter. His National Socialism was a mask for aggressive warfare.

XXXI

It was a year before Vladimir saw Sofia again. They had written to each other often, though letters took a long time, or for some unknown reason never arrived. Many of them had been opened by the police censors, as Vladimir was aware because passages from Sofia's letters had been cut out or blacked out. As afterwards she told him, they were quite harmless, but critical of her living conditions in Kazan due to lack of fuel in winter and poor food always, with occasional lamentations over the inadequacy of the school accommodation and equipment, the dearth of school books, exercise books, and the poverty of the children.

This year of separation had been painful to Vladimir who had been faithful to his love which was idealized and spiritualized by the romanticism of youth. He had dreamed of her beauty. He had poured out his heart to her in poetical and passionate words, and then, curiously, when after that year he met her in the station at Moscow he was very shy of her. For a few moments he was disillusioned by the sight of this little schoolmistress in her black frock. She was not so beautiful as the ideal portrait of her which he had painted in his mind. She looked very small and insignificant in the crowd of people at the station. After the long journey she was in need of a wash, as she told him laughingly after their first greeting when he kissed her.

"Vladimir! Oh, my dear! How elegant you look, and how grubby I feel! I must get home and tidy up."

He had been unconscious of that moment's disillusionment, except as a slight sense of dejection which he could and did not analyse, but now after that first kiss and embrace he felt happy and reassured. Sofia had not changed. She was as dainty as ever. There was love in her eyes. Her voice was like music.

"You look terribly handsome!" she cried. "I'm a little afraid of you, David."

She used his mother's pet name for him which he had told her.

"I'm just as you saw me last," he answered with a laugh. "You weren't afraid of me then."

"But you have changed," she told him. "You have lost your boyishness. You look like an ambassador or the head of the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs."

“I hope not!” answered Vladimir with a laugh in his eyes. “Comrade Litvinov is not one of the world’s beauties. He has scurf on his shoulders. He’s a shabby old fellow.”

Sofia held his arm tight with her little hand.

“How wonderful to be in Moscow again!” she cried. “How happy I am to have you close to me! Do you still love me, David? I wept over your letters. I kissed them to rags.”

“This is no place for lovemaking,” said Vladimir. “The Ogpu has its eyes on us. Let’s take a droschke.”

“A droschke!” exclaimed Sofia. “Are you a millionaire?”

“Almost!” answered Vladimir. “That’s to say I can afford a droschke on a day like this when my love comes back again.”

They hailed a droschke and sat close together inside it holding hands.

“How is Father?” asked Sofia. “How is Stanislav? How is everybody in Moscow?”

“Stanislav takes life gaily,” said Vladimir. “But your father has been looking a bit anxious lately, as though afraid of something. So does my chief at the Politburo, and other people I meet. They seem to have a sense of fear. I don’t know what it’s all about unless it’s these rumours of a coming war. But we mustn’t talk about such things in a public droschke. That old fellow in front is probably in the pay of the secret police.”

He spoke jestingly and yet with the customary caution of an employee in the Politburo. The old fellow in front, whose face had the skin of a dried apple under his ragged fur cap, had a scarf tied round his ears and could hear nothing of a conversation in his carriage.

Sofia was as happy as a child at being home again and that first evening when Vladimir stayed late with her she talked a lot about her experiences in Kazan as a mistress of the infants’ school. It had not been too happy. Her headmistress had been unfriendly and harsh. The other mistresses complained because they were underfed and underpaid. Sofia lived in a little bed-sitting-room without a fire and had nearly frozen to death in winter. But she had met some nice people in Kazan. There was a young man named Igor Dolin who remembered Vladimir and his mother.

“Yes,” said Vladimir. “I went to school with him and he came to tea with us. A mischievous young devil!”

“Now a charming young man,” said Sofia. “He’s an engineer with a good job. He has a sister named Vanis who is beautiful. She is secretary to the chief of the agricultural bureau. I saw quite a lot of them as I told you in my letters.”

“I expect Igor fell in love with you,” said Vladimir jealously.

Stanislav laughed heartily at this remark while Sofia blushed rather deeply.

“You can’t expect Sofia to avoid a little amorous dalliance when she’s

away from you for a year, Comrade Vladimir."

"He became rather fond of me," admitted Sofia, with a smile and that blush on her cheeks.

"Curse the fellow!" said Vladimir.

Sofia's father came into the room just back from his office and looking tired and worn.

"Father!" cried Sofia, rushing at him and flinging her arms round him.

He held her face in his hands and kissed her forehead.

"My darling little Sofia!" he said. "I've missed you horribly."

"He looks ill," thought Vladimir. Later in the evening he had another thought.

"Sofia's father looks frightened. He's a frightened man. I know the look. Krassin has it. Other people in Moscow have it. They seem to know something which fills them with fear."

Sofia's father retired to bed rather early, kissing Sofia and Stanislav before saying good night.

"Father looks worried about something," said Sofia when he had gone. "I hope he's not ill."

Stanislav shrugged his shoulders.

"Our elders are always worried about something. They're always in a blue funk. Our chief in the Politburo has been going about lately like a man who feels the hand of doom on his shoulder."

So Stanislav had noticed that, though he hadn't mentioned it before to Vladimir.

"Is anything happening behind the scenes?" asked Vladimir. "Is something horrible going to happen?"

Stanislav raised his hands slightly.

"Quite likely! But personally I take the day as it comes and don't try to see behind the veil of tomorrow. Let's have a game of cards. Where's Alexander Alexandrovich? He promised to drop in to see Sofia."

Their young colleague in the Politburo dropped in, or rather strode in gaily, and kissed Sofia's hand as though she had been a grand duchess.

"You're an affected ass!" said Stanislav. "Come and play cards. Grab one of those cigarettes, but not two—they cost a fortune."

Sofia's holidays seemed to go in a flash of lightning. Vladimir had resumed his evening walks with her in the public gardens. They walked hand in hand unashamedly. On the last night before her going Vladimir asked her about Igor Dolin.

"Is he very much in love with you?"

Sofia blushed again and laughed.

"I'm afraid so, poor boy! It's not my fault."

“If you let him kiss you I shall come and kill him,” said Vladimir.

“Not one little kiss?” she asked teasingly.

“Tell him that if he doesn’t hold off I shall come to Kazan and strangle him.”

“There’s no need to be jealous,” cried Sofia, laughing again and then looking at Vladimir with wet eyes. “You fill my heart to the brim. There’s no room for any other. Tomorrow I shall be weeping on the way back to Kazan.”

She wept a little that evening before the parting.

“Another year!” cried Vladimir. “It’s too terrible. Why don’t you stay and marry me? One room is enough for us. I’m earning a decent salary.”

“You know that’s impossible, my dear. I have to do my three years. It’s the contract I made for my training. I can’t marry until that’s done. Then one room with you will be my paradise.”

Vladimir answered, in the depths of despair:

“We may be dead before then! Two years more? How can I stay alive without you all that time?”

“Think of the little one room,” she told him. “Look forward to it as our future reward for separation and suffering. Let’s leap over those two years in spirit. Work is the best anodyne—work and hope, dearest heart of mine.”

He stood with his fur cap in his hand behind a barrier which held him back from the platform where her train was starting for Kazan. She kissed her hand to him from the carriage window and waved a handkerchief until the train departed.

It was like death to part from her for the second time.

XXXII

Moscow became a sounding-board for rumour. There was talk of many arrests in high quarters. Names were mentioned below the breath—great names and unbelievable. Zinoviev . . . Kamenev . . . Bukharin . . . the Old Guard of the Revolution; the first leaders. . . . Kapek, the old spider of the Kremlin who had had all the threads of international underground in his hands; Kapek who had formed cells in every country as far as China. . . . Yagoda, the chief of the Ogpu with its army of secret police, its prisoners and torture chambers. . . . General Tukachevsky and many other generals. No, it was incredible and impossible. Such things could not happen, even in Russia! Vladimir refused to believe these wild whisperings which he heard in many rooms and even in the Politburo where he sat with Stanislav and Alexander Alexandrovich.

Stanislav had heard them all. He repeated them in a ghoulish way as though enjoying a grisly joke.

"Our heroes have all turned traitors!" he said in a low voice.

"We were brought up to revere their glorious deeds, their illustrious names. Now they're being charged with treachery."

Vladimir answered hotly:

"It's quite unbelievable. It's shameful of you to repeat such lies. I've a good mind to report you."

Stanislav stared at him with a look of fear.

"You would play the part of Judas? That also is unbelievable."

Vladimir's anger cooled down.

"I won't, of course. But I wish to goodness you wouldn't help to spread these rumours."

"They're more than rumours," said Stanislav. "I have the list of names."

"Who gave it to you?" asked Vladimir.

Stanislav hesitated.

"I'm pledged to secrecy about that. Look out! Here comes the old man."

It was Krassin, the father of their friend Sacha, and the chief of their department, who passed through the room. He looked like a sick man. His face was a dirty grey colour and there were dark rings under his eyes. He went to his own room and passed the three young men without saying good morning to

them, which previously he had always done. When he had shut the door Stanislav looked at Vladimir and spoke in a low voice.

"He knows! . . . He's a frightened man."

"I'm frightened too," said Vladimir. "If it's true there will be a panic in Moscow and all Russia."

Young Alexander gave a slight groan.

"We live in a jungle world," he said, "and I'm a fawn without defence against leopards and tigers and jackals and other fierce beasts. I want to enjoy the beauty of life. I want a little love and a little laughter. Is that asking too much?"

"My poor fawn!" said Stanislav. "You and I have the same idea about life. They're very modest desires. We can only hope that our modesty will be overlooked in the struggle between the Kings of the Forest—the eternal struggle for power. That's our only hope, my dear fellow."

Vladimir was silent. These two colleagues were light-hearted. They did not take things seriously. Perhaps they were right. Perhaps he was a fool to take things seriously. What could he do about it anyhow? But even now he disbelieved those stories, he disbelieved in Stanislav's list of names.

Moscow fell into these panics too easily. It was like an Oriental market-place where false rumours whirled round like wildfire.

He disbelieved until four o'clock that afternoon. He had occasion to go into Krassin's room with some translated documents and the usual extracts from the British Press. He tapped at the door and entered, and then stood still distressed and embarrassed.

His chief was sitting at his desk with his head down on his arms. His body was shaken with a silent sobbing.

"Pardon me, Comrade Krassin," said Vladimir softly.

Krassin started and slowly raised himself and looked at Vladimir with red-ringed eyes.

"Shut the door," he said. "Stay with me here."

Vladimir obeyed and stood awkwardly by the desk.

"Your commands, Comrade Krassin?"

Krassin opened a drawer and fumbled for a pill in a dirty envelope. He swallowed the pill with a gulp and for a wild moment Vladimir thought he had taken poison.

"My heart," said Krassin. "Lately it alarms me sometimes."

"I'm extremely sorry to hear that, Comrade Krassin," said Vladimir with sympathy. "Have you seen a doctor?"

"A doctor?"

Krassin gave a kind of laugh which was more like a groan. There was no mirth in his sunken eyes.

“I’m a terror-stricken man,” he said. “No doctor can cure that. For months I have lived with fear.”

“Fear of what, Comrade Krassin?”

“Not for myself. I’m an old man. I’m not afraid of death for myself. But what happens to me may happen to Sacha, my dearest son. Vengeance in Russia reaches out to the families of accused men. Sacha, my young son, my brilliant son, whom I love most in the world. It would be terrible.”

His voice broke and he put a trembling hand to his forehead.

“You are in danger, Comrade Krassin?” asked Vladimir.

Krassin answered in a low husky voice:

“We are all in danger. First they will deal with the great and famous, the old leaders, Lenin’s Old Guard. Then they will get down to the lesser men, those who had the friendship and patronage of those former heroes.”

He mentioned one name—Bukharin.

“Bukharin. . . . He put me here by his influence and power. I am his friend. He has written many letters to me. Bukharin. Lenin’s best-loved comrade. My own dear friend. They are trying him for high treason. They are trying many others.”

“It’s true then?” asked Vladimir in a suffocating voice. “It’s unbelievable. I cannot believe it, comrade. Have we all gone mad? Is Russia a madhouse?”

Krassin rose from his desk and held on to the back of his chair.

“It’s a madhouse,” he said. “The heroes of yesterday are the criminals of today.”

“They shot my father,” said Vladimir beneath his breath. “They exiled Trotsky. My Little Mother. . . .”

It was curious that Lucy should come into his mind at that moment.

Krassin moved a step and put a heavy hand on Vladimir’s shoulder.

“You know Sacha my son,” he said. “He has a great affection for you. Don’t talk to him of this danger which creeps close now. Don’t let him know that he may be in grave danger.”

“No! no!” said Vladimir. “But ought you to be telling these things to me, Comrade Krassin? Are they not terrible secrets?”

“Everybody knows,” answered Krassin. “Everybody whispers it about. On Thursday it will be in *Pravda* and *Isvestia*. The date of the public trial for the first batch has been fixed. For months the secret interrogatories have been going on. They have all confessed.”

He gave a harsh and frightful laugh.

“They have confessed! Bukharin, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Piatokov—all those great men who were the leaders of our Revolution and the founders of Soviet Russia. They have confessed to plots with foreign agents to overthrow the Soviet State, to give away its territory, to kill Stalin and the men of the

Kremlin. They have confessed!”

He raised his hand above his head and laughed in a terrible way as though at some devilish joke.

Presently his voice altered and he spoke with a kind of tenderness.

“Vladimir Michaelovitch, you have worked well here. I have not driven you too hard, I hope?”

“By no means!” answered Vladimir. “I am deeply grateful for your kindness.”

“You have seen my home life. You have met my dear wife and children. I think only of them. That is why I talk to you like this, not as a chief but as a friend. I have always been confident in your loyalty. Now I place one more confidence in you if you will accept it.”

“I shall be honoured,” said Vladimir.

“I have some papers here.”

With a trembling hand he fumbled in the breast pocket of his black jacket and pulled out a number of letters tied up in red tape.

“They’re letters from Bukharin,” he said. “There are passages in them which might be incriminating. They’re critical of Stalin and others. They have an historical value and I do not wish to destroy them. Will you keep them for me in some safe place?”

For a moment Vladimir hesitated. There was danger in those papers. There might be death in having them.

“I will keep them in a good hiding-place,” he said.

“Burn them if you are afraid,” said Krassin. “Perhaps after all it is best to burn them. Use your own judgment, comrade.”

“They will be all right,” said Vladimir, putting the letters in his pocket.

Krassin was silent for quite a long time. Then he gave a kind of whimpering cry.

“Sacha was Bukharin’s secretary. That is terrible! My only son. My Sacha. How can he escape?”

On the following evening Vladimir dined with the Krassin family, having been invited by a note from Krassin’s wife who added a postscript:

“My husband seems very worried lately and is not sleeping well.”

There was no other guest. But Sacha and Vera were amusing at the dinner table and afterwards when they played with Vladimir and their mother a game which the English call “Snap.” Krassin himself had sat very silent at dinner, letting the young people talk, and looking at his handsome young son as though he could not take his eyes from him. Afterwards he retired to his own room. The card game was noisy. Sacha and Vera played it with loud cries of “Snap” when they paired two cards, laughing boisterously and grabbing the cards they had won, with many sham quarrels and accusations of cheating.

Mrs. Krassin entered into the fun, though with greater dignity, and was amused by the obstreperous behaviour of the young people. Vladimir did his best to play up to them, though he could not compete with their quickness of vision and performance. He laughed a good deal, but at the back of his laughter was the thought of what their father had told him less than twenty-four hours ago. It seemed incredible that he had not warned Sacha. It seemed equally incredible that Sacha himself did not seem in the least degree perturbed, though without any word from his father he must have heard the ugly and frightening rumours going about Moscow.

Once in a pause during the game when Vera and Mrs. Krassin retired to make some tea he made a cryptic reference to unpleasant things.

"Nero fiddled while Rome burned. I hope you're not shocked by our childish levity tonight!"

"I'm enjoying myself," answered Vladimir, not quite sincerely because his enjoyment was spoilt by the remembrance of what this boy's father had told him in an agony of fear.

"When I have to die," said Sacha, "I hope I shall die with a smile on my lips, or even a laugh in my throat. Life is a great comedy. It's all so damned ridiculous!"

"I'm afraid I see the tragedy of it too much," answered Vladimir gravely.

"That's a mistake!" said Sacha. "We can't do anything about the tragic side of things. They're mostly due to lack of intelligence and human stupidity. It's best to laugh at the fantastic puppet-show. This game of 'Snap' is better than sitting around with terror. What comes will come. Meanwhile let's make the most of what fun we can get. You're too gloomy, comrade! You're too serious. You've been playing this game as though it were a gamble between life and death."

"On the contrary," answered Vladimir, "I've been much amused. Vera and you would make anyone laugh."

Sacha smiled at him in his charming way.

"We've been behaving like babies, regardless of dignity becoming to a guest in the Politburo who hears all the secrets behind the scenes and hears all the rumours which create panic in Moscow."

Vladimir gave him a sideways glance. Did he know? Had he heard those rumours? Surely he must have heard of the arrest of Bukharin to whom for a time he had been private secretary.

"Have you heard of any panic?" he asked.

Sacha gave him a curious look.

"Everybody has heard. I'm not deaf, but I refuse to be terror-stricken. I prefer the game of 'Snap'."

Mrs. Krassin and Vera returned to the room. There was a pleasant interval

of tea-drinking. Vladimir smoked one of Sacha's costly cigarettes. Vera and Sacha indulged in lively talk about young people they knew. Sacha accused his sister of carrying on a flirtation with a certain young man named Markov who was in her office.

"I never blink an eyelid at him," she protested. "Who has been telling stories about me or about him?"

"My dear Vera," said Sacha, "it's one of the scandals of Moscow. And anyhow why should you blink an eyelid at him? The point is whether you have deposited some of your lipstick on his weak-looking mouth."

"You're disgusting, Sacha!" laughed Vera, blushing hotly. "And what about that girl Nadejda? Haven't you been dancing with her more often than is quite discreet?"

"That's defending yourself by attack," said Sacha. "What has Nadejda to do with Markov?"

So they carried on, while Mrs. Krassin smiled at them and interposed now and then when they said outrageous things.

Vladimir glanced round this room, this finely furnished room with its shaded lights and gilt-framed pictures which seemed to him the height of luxury and elegance. Here was a little oasis of civilization, sheltered, it seemed, from the outer darkness. Here were two people of his own age who had a great gift of laughter and had never been through the hard times which he had known. This brother and sister adored one another as he could see, and in the next room was a father sitting alone with fear in his soul, fear mostly for his son whom he greatly loved. Was it possible that they were all in danger from a deadly menace in that outer darkness? It was hard to believe so. Somehow he couldn't believe it.

"Do you know any other card game, Vladimir Michaelovitch?" asked Vera.

Vladimir thought back to his boyhood.

"My mother taught me a game called 'Old Maid' in English. It's rather amusing. I wonder if I can remember it."

He remembered it and taught them the rules.

"It's supposed to be very unlucky to be the Old Maid," he said to Vera. "You must avoid that at all costs."

"Yes indeed. Heaven forbid that I should remain an Old Maid all my life."

"Young Markov will see to that!" said Sacha teasingly.

There was a gust of laughter from Sacha and a scream from Vera when she found herself left with the Queen of Hearts and was declared "Old Maid."

"Poor old Markov!" said Sacha. "He will never fulfil his ardent passion for you."

"You cheated!" cried Vera with another laughing scream. "Oh, Sacha, you beast!"

Vladimir was laughing too when Krassin came into the room.

"Someone is knocking at the door," he said. "Don't you hear them?"

"Don't look so scared, Father," said Sacha. "It's probably Alexander Alexandrovich or one of the other lads."

"I hope so," said Krassin, putting an uneasy hand up to his mouth. There was another heavy knock at the door.

"I'll go, Father," said Vera. "And I'll give a bit of my mind to any comrade who bangs the door like that."

Vladimir caught a look from Sacha's eyes. He was smiling in a queer defiant way but his face had gone pale.

"The expected happens, perhaps," he said in a low voice.

Vera was talking in the hall. A gruff voice answered her.

"You're one of those we want."

"Who are you?" asked Vera in a frightened voice. "How dare you force your way into the passage? My father——"

"Not so much talk," said the gruff voice. "Get inside."

In the sitting-room there was dead silence while they listened.

Krassin seemed to crumple up. He seemed to become suddenly very old and ill. He put out a trembling hand and gripped his son's arm as though needing his support.

"Courage, Father!" said Sacha in a low voice.

Four men entered the room followed by Vera who cried "Father!"

One of the men put a hand to a revolver strapped at his side and with that sinister gesture addressed Krassin.

"You are Victor Alexandrovich Krassin of the Politburo?"

Krassin put up his hands as though to ward him off.

"What do you want?" he asked in a strangled voice.

"We come from the Liubyanka headquarters of police. We have orders to arrest you and take you there. We are also arresting your family. Is this your son?"

He looked at Vladimir with sombre eyes.

"I am my father's son," said Sacha.

"You were for some time secretary to Bukharin?"

"I was," answered Sacha.

"I arrest you. These women are your mother and sister?"

"We are here," said Mrs. Krassin in a faint voice.

"I arrest you. We have a car waiting outside. You will come with us."

Krassin suddenly shouted as though in a rage but it was a hysterical shout like the scream of a terror-stricken man.

"No! . . . No! . . . Oh, Jesus Christ, our Lord!"

"That name is wiped out of the Communist creed," said the police officer.

“I shall report it at headquarters.”

Krassin’s hands faltered in a beseeching way.

“Take me!” he cried. “Do not take my dear ones! Spare my son!”

“You are all arrested. Please come quietly.”

The other three men closed a little round Krassin very quietly.

“Father,” said Sacha, “I’ve been expecting this. I am prepared. Don’t worry about me. I’m a fatalist. And thanks for everything, my dear father, and my dearest mother.”

“My son!” cried Krassin. “My son!”

He held out his arms and a torrent of tears streamed from his eyes and his mouth was twisted by agony. He meant to embrace Sacha, but the three silent men closed in upon him and one grabbed the wrist of Krassin’s right hand.

The man in command turned to Vladimir and glared at him.

“Who are you? What’s your name?”

When Vladimir had told him he glanced at a notebook which he pulled from his side pocket. It had a list of names but Vladimir’s was not among them it seemed.

Vera had slipped to the side of Sacha. Her face was as white as a sheet of paper, but she spoke bravely.

“Why should we be afraid? We have done nothing wrong.”

“We shall inquire into that,” said the police officer sombrely. “Please come with us and don’t make a noise on the stairs.”

He spoke less gruffly and seemed softened a little by the proud beauty of the girl’s face.

“Little sister!” said Sacha. “That was bad luck about the Queen of Hearts.”

He spoke with a laugh which was a kind of bravado—the *panache* of a French aristocrat going to the guillotine.

He put an arm round his sister’s waist and pulled her close to him and kissed her cheek.

“Sacha!” she cried. “They won’t do anything to us. We’re too young. We belong to the young Russia.”

“Are you coming?” said the police officer. “I should dislike having to use any force.”

He snapped his fingers at two of the men and they grabbed Krassin firmly by the arms. He was whimpering in a pitiful way.

Vladimir heard his last cry.

“Sacha! . . . My son!”

“*Au revoir!*” said Sacha to Vladimir with a smile.

Vladimir who had watched this scene with a sense of stupefaction and although he stood on his feet it was as though he had been stunned. They were taking all this family away. They had taken them away. The door was closed

quietly upon them. He was alone in their lovely furnished sitting-room. On the little mahogany table a pack of cards lay strewn and one card lay face upwards on the floor. It was the Queen of Hearts which Vera had flung down with a little scream of laughter.

It was one of the most tragic and extraordinary moments of Vladimir's life when he found himself alone in a room which a few minutes before had resounded with mirth. He stood motionless, staring at the Queen of Hearts. Then presently he stirred and let himself out of the flat and went downstairs, where he rang a bell for the house kommissar.

The man looked at him in a queer frightened way.

"They were nice people," he said. "Young Comrade Sacha was always very civil to me. He was always very gay. I don't understand."

"Good night," said Vladimir as the man undid the bolts and let him out.

In the street he stood again motionless as though turned to stone.

A group of young people passed him. They were laughing and chattering on their way back from the Bolshoi Theatre.

XXXIII

The treason trials were spread over a long period. It was months before the accused appeared publicly in court. The public trials had been preceded by private examination of the accused and immense numbers of witnesses, and were merely what was called the Demonstration Process.

The first batch consisted of Radek, Piatakov, Muralov and fourteen others. Radek was the old spider of the Kremlin, one of Lenin's Old Guard who had woven all the threads of Communist propaganda throughout the world. Muralov had led the Red Army to Moscow in the time of the Civil War. Piatakov was the head of the Soviet Youth Movement, and had directed all the propaganda which had been drummed into the minds of the young people of Russia, teaching the gospel according to Lenin and glorifying the achievements of the Soviet State. Was it possible that these men could be traitors? The Russian people who had been taught to regard them as their heroes and leaders were stupefied by the accusations against them, and by their "confessions."

The Russian generals, of whom General Tukachevsky had been the chief, were not tried for some five months later, and then secretly by the Supreme Military Tribunal. It was not until June of 1937 that Bukharin, Rykov, Yagod —a former president of the Ogpu—and other leaders were tried in public.

Vyshinsky, the Public Prosecutor, had formulated the charge against them all.

"The accused," he said, "had conspired with the object of expediting an armed attack on the Soviet Union and assisting foreign aggression to seize its territory." Nazi Germany was named as the intending aggressor.

After the trial of Tukachevsky and his generals the findings of the Supreme Military Tribunal was published. The accused had been found guilty of planning a military *coup d'état* involving the assassination of Stalin with foreign assistance in return for which the foreigners were to receive territorial concessions in the Ukraine. The Public Prosecutor stated that "the group of accused is only one of the advanced detachments of Nazi Fascist preparation and war incendiaries. Under the guidance of German, Japanese, and other intelligence services this gang of bandits was engaged in helping the Nazi Fascist governments to overthrow the Soviet Government."

Vladimir was only one of millions in Russia who read the reports of these trials with stupefaction and a sense of disbelief in the incredible. Vladimir himself in his school essays had proclaimed the heroic qualities of these very men. He had read and quoted their speeches. They had been the early leaders of the Revolution, the associates of Lenin, his chosen men. How was it possible that they should conspire against Russia, this Soviet Russia which they had helped to build? And yet in public court they not only admitted their guilt, but elaborated, with eloquent penitence, with abject self-accusation, with an extraordinary examination of conscience before the court, and before the world, the sinfulness of their souls in establishing contact with the enemies of Russia in a conspiracy to overthrow the Soviet Union.

There were only two comrades with whom Vladimir dared to discuss these things. They were Stanislav and Alexander, his colleagues in the Politburo. One morning he lifted his head from the pages of *Pravda* in which he had been reading a full report. His two friends were doing the same thing utterly absorbed. In the next room was the man who had succeeded Krassin as chief of their department—a man named Rakovsky—appointed by Stalin himself and known to be one of his disciples.

"What do you make of it all?" asked Vladimir in a low voice.

Stanislav looked up from his paper and shrugged his shoulders. He spoke only two words and those in a whisper.

"Preliminary torture."

The same terrible suspicion had been in Vladimir's mind. Some explanation of the confessions might be possible if these men had been subject to physical or mental torture by Ogpu methods. Because of terror beyond human bearing, because of some physical collapse due to third-degree examination month after month, they were willing to confess anything. There were discrepancies in the evidence. Some details were obviously inaccurate and yet the accused confessed to all.

Young Alexander sitting at one of the desks with his eyes glued to the report in *Pravda* made another suggestion in whispered words.

"Drugged."

Vladimir thought over that too as many Russian people and all the world were thinking.

Perhaps these poor wretches in the hand of the Ogpu had been given some mysterious drug weakening their will-power, stupefying their senses, even deranging their sanity. The discovery of such a drug had been mentioned in the papers. It first cropped up in relation to the young Dutchman accused of setting fire to the Reichstag. "He had all the symptoms of being drugged," wrote a Russian journalist in Berlin, reporting the trial.

But later during the trials Bukharin went out of his way to deny these

rumours of being tortured or drugged and indeed the accused did not speak like drugged men, but seemed masters of themselves, using eloquent and well-phrased language to express their self-accusations and their sense of sin. “I wish only to clear my conscience,” said Bukharin.

It was all very strange and very tragic to the Russian people.

“Whom then can we trust?” they asked. “If these men betrayed us—these old heroes of the Revolution—then where is truth and where is loyalty? Everyone is under suspicion.”

XXXIV

"Everyone is under suspicion." That was the terrified state of Soviet Russia after the treason trials. It was revealed in orders from the Kremlin. It was the watch-word of the secret police under a new chief named Youzhev who was a sadist and homicidal maniac, a thousand times worse than Yagoda, who had been merciless. He was the instrument and leading spirit of the first Great Purge which struck at every class and section of Russian life without evidence and without pity. A frightful demoralization due to terror produced informers, accusers and slanderers in every social group. Men accused their best friends of disloyalty in order to save themselves. Men and women accused their neighbours for careless words or mere grumbling, or for private vengeance of their own. Children accused their parents, boys their school-fellows, factory hands their shop stewards, shop stewards their managers of departments. Seventy-five per cent. of Party Members and candidates, amounting to a million and a half persons, were removed, arrested, executed or sent to prison camps, or disappeared. In the High Schools and Institutes of Moscow every student was examined and Judas was enthroned in these examinations by betrayals and false accusations. Terror was in every home, in every basement room, in every attic. House kommissars informed against people living in the crowded tenements. Others informed against the house kommissars. Charwomen, office boys, underfed girls, poorly paid clerks were dragged away suddenly and never reappeared. The most terrible sound in Moscow and other cities was a knock at the door. A knock at the door in the evening, at midnight, in the small hours of the morning, after dawn, was like death knocking at the door, and often was death. People spoke in whispers. The closest friends were afraid of talking to one another and gazed into one another's eyes with the unspoken question, "Who among us will betray the others?" A knock at the door during an evening meal made everybody turn pale and every heart give a lurch. "Who is that knocking? Who will open the door? Is it my turn now? Who has accused me? Is this the summons of death, or worse still a sentence for life in some typhus-stricken camp far away, from which there is no return?" During that time of the Great Purge—the first Great Purge—an unexpected knock at the door was so menacing that more than one man fell dead from heart shock before the door was opened.

Vladimir lived through that time and knew the terror of that knock at the door.

One evening he was sitting with Zabotin and Kusanova and his sister Olga and a young man named Sergei. Zabotin was in an excited, highly nervous mood and as usual was talking all the time.

"This is a Reign of Terror. No one is safe. Everyone betrays everyone else."

He strode over to Kusanova and stared into her eyes in a mad way.

"Are you going to betray me?" he asked.

Kusanova caught hold of his hands and kissed them.

"There's nothing to betray except my love," she told him.

He looked at her doubtfully and then with one swift movement, full of grace, stared at Olga.

"Are you going to accuse me?" he asked.

Olga burst into tears.

"Zabotin!" she cried. "My dearest foster-father!"

Zabotin moved away from her and spoke to Vladimir with that wild light in his eyes.

"Are you a Judas?" he asked.

He did not wait for Vladimir's answer but raised his hands above his head and gave a cry for help in the agony of his soul.

"O Jesu! O Jesu!"

Then he turned to the young Sergei and spoke more calmly, though still with excited emotion.

"Pardon me. I think I'm going mad. How can it be otherwise? Yesterday at the theatre my dresser failed to appear. He had been taken off from the theatre by the secret police. The day before yesterday a call-room boy was dragged away half way through the ballet. A week ago a clerk in the ticket office disappeared suddenly. His wife came to see me weeping. He had left the theatre but had not come home. So it goes on everywhere. I can't sleep at night. My heart bleeds with pity for the wrecked homes and the victims of this Terror. And I'm frightened. One day there will be a knock at the door and my turn will come. Then Zabotin the dancer will be dead. There will be no more life in his limbs. He will be lying with a pile of corpses in the police morgue—Zabotin who loved life and beauty, who gave beauty and grace to life, who was a dancing fellow dedicated to art and love. Zabotin, poor devil, will be liquidated."

"No, no!" cried Kusanova. "They will never touch you, Zabotin."

"How do I know?" he asked. "There are many people jealous of me. It's a fine opportunity for them to get rid of me. Any accusation is good enough and I have always blurted out my thoughts in any company. I've jeered at

Communism and all its works. I've denounced Stalin himself for the famine in the Ukraine."

"Hush, hush, Zabotin!" cried Kusanova in a frightened voice.

Zabotin laughed.

"Yes I must be careful! Someone may accuse me."

He tapped his hand on the shoulder of the young man Sergei.

"Are you by any chance going to accuse me? I don't know you very well, young man. I suspect you come here to make love to my little Olga. You may be an informer. How can I tell?"

"Zabotin!" cried Olga. "How dare you insult Sergei?"

The young man laughed quietly.

"Zabotin is right," he said. "One can't be sure of anybody. I have lost six of my friends already. They were all accused by people with whom they had been most friendly."

There was a knock at the door.

A thrill of fear passed through their bodies and minds. Vladimir felt himself go cold and his face get white. Kusanova put her hands to her breast. Olga made the sign of the cross over her forehead. She must have learnt that from Lucy when a tiny child. Zabotin stood listening and his face was a mask of fear. The young man Sergei gripped the arms of his chair as though about to rise, though he stayed motionless and alert.

The knock at the door was repeated.

"It's my turn," said Zabotin in a whisper. "They've come for me."

Zabotin had a maidservant named Eliena. It was she who opened the door to two men who thrust their way past her in spite of her protests which those in the room could hear. They came inside Zabotin's apartment, and Vladimir knew the look of them. They were the same type of men who had forced their way into Krassin's room one night.

"What do you want, comrades?" asked Zabotin quietly.

One of them answered:

"There is a young man here named Sergei Mikaelovich Starobin. We have traced him here."

"It is I," answered Sergei faintly.

"You are accused of dispersionary actions and disloyalty to the Soviet Union. I have an order for your arrest. Please come."

"Who has accused me?" asked Sergei.

"That you will hear later," answered the man.

Sergei moved quickly towards Olga.

"I love you," he said. "Kiss me. It will be our first and last kiss."

"O Sergei!" cried Olga.

She held up her face and Sergei kissed her lips until a rough hand grabbed

his shoulder and pulled him away.

"I protest!" shouted Zabotin in a sudden rage. "I know this young man. He is a loyal citizen of the Soviet Union. I have listened many times to his conversation. I vouch for him. I, Zabotin. You know me, comrades? I am Zabotin, the dancer."

One of the men allowed a faint smile to touch his lips.

"We all know Zabotin," he said. "But we're here to do our duty. It's to take away this young man accused of treason. We are not the judges, you understand. Good night, Comrade Zabotin."

They seized young Sergei by the arms.

"No need to use force," he said. His eyes smiled at Olga and then turned towards Zabotin.

"Useless to argue," he said. "*Au revoir*, my friends. I believe in the immortality of the soul. We shall meet again."

He went out between the two men. In the passage Eliena the maid wept into a little apron which she held to her face.

When they had gone Zabotin cried out again:

"O Jesu! O Jesu! . . . And I am coward enough to be glad that it wasn't I they wanted. How terrible is my egotism! That young man is on the threshold of life, and I am middle-aged. It's time for me to die. But for my cowardice I'm ready to die."

Vladimir made a rush across the room and was not in time to prevent Olga's fall. She lay crumpled upon the floor.

XXXV

What happened in Moscow during the Great Purge—the first Great Purge—happened all over Russia, in the cities and the villages where people of all ages were arrested, executed, thrust into concentration camps or deported to unknown destinations from which they never came back. Husbands were dragged from their wives, sons from mothers, brothers from sisters on the merest suspicion of being hostile to Kremlin rule, the baseless accusations of private enemies or, most often, the inquisition of local officials who were terrified of being purged themselves and hoped that by their ruthlessness with others they might escape suspicion.

During this time Vladimir was not immune from the terror which invaded all minds. Under the tension of fear for himself and his friends his nerve began to break and he was apt to start and turn pale if someone banged a door, or jolted a chair, or came into a room suddenly. He awakened at night suddenly with a feeling of goose-flesh because of some noise in the street below or in his apartment building, the grinding of a car, or a child's wail. Once there was a terrible sound at night in his apartment house which froze his blood. It was a woman's shrieks. She was shrieking with an appalling violence of terror and agony as though under torture. The noise stopped abruptly as though a gag had been put into her mouth. Vladimir sitting up in bed heard heavy footsteps on the stairs and presently the sound of a car driving away in the street below. Then utter silence.

"O my God!" said Vladimir who did not believe in God.

He was startled again by a gleam of light under his bedroom door and heard the door-handle turn quietly.

"Who's that?" he asked in a frightened voice.

"It is I. Irina. May I come in?"

She had already opened the door and came in with a kerosene lamp which trembled in her hand so that its light flickered with a bubbling noise. She was in her night-gown and looked like a ghost.

"That was terrible!" she said. "That woman's shrieks. It has turned my blood cold."

"Mine too," said Vladimir. "Who was it? What has happened?"

"It must have been the woman in the top attic. Shura. She was once a

lady's maid to one of the Princesses under the Emperor. She was always frightened they would take her. Now they've taken her."

"Poor wretch," said Vladimir with a deep groan.

Irina fell on her knees by the side of his bed and put her arms with clasped hands across his knees and wept convulsively. He put his hand on her black hair and caressed her and said several times, "Courage! . . . Courage! . . . Courage!" though in his own heart at that time there was no courage.

Presently Irina struggled to regain control. She sat at the end of Vladimir's bed wiping away her tears.

"Little Vladimir," she said. "How can we go on living like this? It's better to be dead than for ever terrified. One day they will fetch away Peter. He knows that. Now that he's working on the night shift I never know if he will come back in the morning. They may have taken him away tonight! How do I know?"

"Peter is quite safe," answered Vladimir, lying to her. He knew that nobody was safe. Irina knew that as well as he did and spoke his thought.

"Nobody is safe. They may take you, dear Vladimir. They don't spare our young men. Vassily would have been shot if he hadn't killed himself."

Her body was shaken with a convulsive sob at the thought of Vassily.

Vladimir held her hand in a tight grip.

"It's no use pretending," he said. "I'm surprised that I haven't been taken. My father was executed for being a Trotskyite. That's a permanent black mark against me. It's no use pretending that I'm not afraid. I'm frightened like the rest of us."

"We're soaked in fear," said Irina.

Vladimir thought deeply and then blurted out what had been building up in his mind for many days.

"There's only one thing to do, and it's not easy. It's to kill fear. Death is the worst that can happen. We must find a way of killing the fear of death. There are people who believe in God and the future life. That gives them great courage, no doubt. To them death means very little. For them there's the life to come. If I could believe in God—How does one go about it to believe in God? Can you tell me, Irina?"

Irina was startled by this question. She looked at Vladimir in a bewildered way.

"God?" she asked. "It's a long time since I thought about that kind of thing. Since the Revolution God has been mocked. The churches have been shut or used as warehouses. You know that."

"Yes," said Vladimir, "but don't you remember anything about it? My mother believed in God but I used to laugh at her and she was afraid of telling me much because it might have led me into trouble at school and might have

been dangerous for my father."

Irina thought back.

"I remember going to church as a little girl. I remember services in the big cathedral. Priests with black hats and beards in golden robes. People—my father and mother—prostrated themselves before great ikons framed in jewels. I used to stare at the jewels—big rubies and precious stones stuck all round. There was the shrine of the Iberian Virgin at the gate. My father used to take off his hat and cross himself. So did everybody."

"All that is superstition," said Vladimir. "Anyhow it's not the inner meaning of religion. I should like to know the inner meaning. I should like to find out about God, if there's any God. What do you know about Christ?"

Irina knew very little about Christ. She had forgotten most of what she had once learnt.

"He died on a cross," she said. "He was kind. He pitied people and loved them. He wanted to get rid of sin and greed and cruelty. He worked miracles. I seem to remember that."

"Sometimes I feel the need of a God," said Vladimir. "Sometimes I feel a kind of mysticism as though there might be some spiritual reality outside oneself and beyond one's consciousness but in a way part of it. I can't explain very well. It has only happened a few times. Love is a little like that—my love for Sofia. It seems to be greater than one's own egotism and a kind of illumination and ecstasy."

"Tolstoi wrote something like that," said Irina. "He wrote a book called *Where Love Is There God Is Also*."

She shuddered after those words, remembering her terror.

"There's no love in Russia and no pity. God is not with us."

"I must find out," said Vladimir in a low voice as though speaking to himself. "One day I must get hold of some books about religion. Meanwhile ____"

He hesitated for a moment.

"Meanwhile, dear Vladimir?" asked Irina.

"I must kill this fear. What after all is death?"

"It's very unpleasant," said Irina. "It's very terrible unless one is old and ill."

"Soldiers go bravely to battle," said Vladimir. "They're brave it's said. If I have to face an execution squad I hope I shall die with courage. I'm going to steel myself. I'm going to train myself. I refuse to let fear make a craven of me. That's weakness. That's cowardly. Help me to be brave, dear Irina."

"We will help one another," said Irina. "I need your help more than you need mine. I live with fear."

Vladimir heard an echo in those words.

“My Little Mother used to say that. I heard her say it when she was talking to my father. It’s a terrible thought that fear has haunted us Russians all these years. The Cheka was the bogey of my childhood. Now it’s the N.K.D.V.”

So they sat talking in the night after a woman’s screams.

XXXVI

It was after the panic of the Great Purge had died down that Vladimir came into touch officially with a mission from England which came ostensibly to discuss trade affairs, but also secretly, as Vladimir became aware, to explore the possibility of an alliance between Russia and Great Britain as a counterpoise to Hitler's Germany now rearming at a furious pace.

It was his new chief, Metchinkov, in the Politburo who told him of this great opportunity.

"I have recommended you as one of the interpreters to the English Mission shortly arriving in Moscow."

Vladimir was taken aback and felt his face reddening with surprise and emotion.

"That's extremely kind of you, comrade," he said nervously. "I trust I shall be worthy of your confidence."

Metchinkov smiled dourly.

"If you're not you will soon know. One word of caution."

"Certainly."

"Do not get into private conversation with the English deputation, or at least maintain a cold aloofness even if you have to sit next to any member of the mission at a formal dinner in their honour. Do not tell them anything about the social conditions of Russia except to say they are excellent. Needless to say do not mention any recent political troubles. I shall require a report of all conversations you may have, however trivial. They will be checked, of course, by others in your company. You have taken an oath of secrecy when entering the Politburo. Remember that."

His chief had uttered more than one word of caution. He had delivered himself of warnings and threats.

"At your service, comrade," answered Vladimir, somewhat dashed in his enthusiasm for this new preferment. "I fully understand."

"Good! There's no need to say more. I will let you know when the mission arrives."

Vladimir told the news to Stanislav, who raised his eyebrows.

"Interesting but dangerous," he remarked. "I'm glad I'm not in your shoes."

“Why dangerous?” asked Vladimir in a low voice because of that chief in the adjoining room.

“You will get to know many high secrets. Those who know too much are on the black list if things go wrong or if policy alters.”

“Or if one’s chiefs are liquidated,” added young Alexander Alexandrovich, sitting in the same room with them.

“You fellows have not learnt caution,” said Vladimir with an uneasy laugh. “You play with danger by careless speech.”

It was Stanislav who answered this.

“After recent happenings and the surprise of finding oneself alive one’s sense of fear evaporates. I have an entirely false illusion that we have gone through the storm and that life in Russia has now entered in placid waters.”

Vladimir was struck by this speech because it so exactly described his own psychology. Now that the Purge was over—for many months now its fury had abated—the demon of fear had retreated in his mind, only lurking in the shadow world of his subconsciousness. His need of a God had also been put into the background of his mind, though now and again at odd moments and in odd places it came back as an unanswered question.

One such moment was when he sat at dinner in evening clothes with the members of the English mission and their Russian hosts—high officials of the Kremlin, though not Stalin and his most important colleagues in the Soviet Government. There had been morning and afternoon meetings and Vladimir who was only one of the interpreters had been anxious and strained by his work. There were many technical expressions which were difficult to interpret correctly, though he had made an intensive study of British economic papers for the past six months. The English were helpful and polite in a formal way, though once or twice Vladimir noticed a friendly look and smile directed to him by one of the younger members of the mission, by the name of Gerald Willoughby.

Now at table, feeling embarrassed and uncomfortable in a dinner jacket and black trousers provided from the government stores, he sat next to this young man, who several times turned to him in a friendly way and asked questions.

“How do you speak English so well?”

“I had an English mother.”

“Oh, how very interesting! What part of England did she come from?”

“Near London. A place called Clapham Common.”

Gerald Willoughby smiled.

“I’ve often heard of it. One of our suburbs.”

“There were ducks on the pond when she lived there,” said Vladimir.

The young Englishman laughed.

“Quite likely! I dare say they’re still there.”

Vladimir coloured up slightly. It was foolish of him to mention those ducks. His mother had spoken about them on the night she died.

“Do you often go to the ballet in Moscow?” asked Gerald Willoughby.

“I used to,” answered Vladimir. “My sister is a ballerine. She was trained by Zabotin and Kusanova.”

“I am a devotee of the ballet,” said Willoughby with quiet enthusiasm. “I’m very keen to see how it’s done in Moscow nowadays.”

“Oh, you won’t be disappointed,” said Vladimir with national pride. “It’s magnificent. Zabotin is marvellous. He takes one’s breath away. And the *décor* is wonderful.”

Willoughby laughed goodnaturedly.

“I can see you’re an enthusiast like myself.”

“Oh yes,” said Vladimir. “It makes one forget everything. It carries one into a dream world of beauty and loveliness of rhythm.”

“The Russians have a genius for ballet,” said Willoughby.

“I’m so glad you think so!” answered Vladimir, warmed by this praise. “It’s perhaps the one thing in Russia——”

He was silent suddenly and wished he could have bitten his tongue out of his head. He was aware of sombre eyes watching him from the other side of the table. It was his chief Metchinkov of the Politburo. Vladimir had been going to say that the ballet was perhaps the only thing in Russia which was quite beautiful and without danger. Fortunately he had not finished that sentence. His chief’s watchful eyes warned him to guard his tongue. He had been talking too freely with this Englishman, and showing too little lack of reserve.

Willoughby asked a few more questions and was surprised at the sudden iciness of the young interpreter. Presently he found that rather boring and lapsed into silence.

It was during that silence that Vladimir thought of God.

“I wonder,” he thought, “if this young Englishman believes in God. I would like to talk to him about it, but that would be an indiscretion. He looks unafraid. I don’t think fear has ever touched him. Perhaps he believes in the old-fashioned religion of Christianity and that gives him serenity and strength. It’s a pity I can’t ask him.”

Mr. Gerald Willoughby would have been greatly surprised no doubt if he had been asked suddenly whether he believed in God.

After the dinner Metchinkov spoke to him sternly for a moment.

“You talked too much. I shall require a full report of your conversation.”

“Yes, comrade,” answered Vladimir. “It was harmless.”

“You became excited. Watch yourself, please.”

“Yes, comrade.”

For the rest of the evening Vladimir maintained a correct but distant attitude to the English mission, and that night when getting back to Irina's flat wrote out a report of his conversation with Gerald Willoughby. He omitted all reference to the ducks on the pond, which was harmless but absurd.

In spite of Metchinkov's grim manner and stern discipline, it seemed that he was satisfied with Vladimir's work as an official interpreter and that as far as his character permitted he had a liking for this young man. Once or twice he even gave him a few words of praise.

"I have made a favourable report on your work to the new Kommissar of Foreign Affairs."

The new Kommissar of Foreign Affairs was a man named Molotov who had succeeded Litvinov, as Vladimir had learnt only recently.

"I am deeply grateful to you," said Vladimir.

"Needless to say," continued Metchinkov, as though repenting of these words of praise, "you are being closely watched. Any indiscretion you may make will lead to the heaviest penalties."

"Naturally," answered Vladimir, feeling very uneasy. "I trust I shall not make such an indiscretion, Comrade Metchinkov."

There were other English missions and Vladimir had his hands full. In the course of his work he was entrusted with information of a most secret nature, though still completely ignorant of the underlying motives and policy of the supreme chiefs of the Soviet Union represented by that man of mystery, Stalin, who directed everything from the Kremlin. The general line of policy seemed obvious yet Vladimir had many bewilderments. Germany was the enemy-in-chief. All the engines of propaganda were directed against Hitler and his Nazi gang. Day after day in *Pravda* and *Isvestia*, day after day on the Moscow radio, they were denounced as the arch-criminals of the world pluto-democracy. Hitler was its creature and tool. He was the Iron Fist of the plutocratic world. Yet there was a German trade mission in Moscow and mysterious conversations were in progress. Vladimir, junior interpreter, was aware of delaying tactics and secret obstruction in regard to friendly overtures from the British missions. They were out for more than a trade pact. They were advancing definite proposals for an alliance between Soviet Russia and Great Britain, to prevent German aggression in Europe and to safeguard the integrity of Poland.

It was his friend Stanislav, and not Vladimir himself, who had the duty of translating these British proposals put formally into writing. He pushed over the document to Vladimir one morning, and said, "Read that quickly, little comrade, and keep it to yourself."

Vladimir read it with keen ears for any movement in Metchinkov's room and pushed it back to Stanislav.

“It fits in with all I’ve heard,” he said in a low voice. “I’m terribly excited about it. An alliance between England and Russia would be magnificent.”

Stanislav laughed quietly.

“It’s your English blood coming out! It’s a good joke anyhow. For years we’ve been denouncing England as a corrupt and degenerate plutocracy. Now we’re playing with the idea of a military alliance.”

“Not very cordially, I fear,” answered Vladimir, remembering the ice-cold interviews at which he had been interpreter. He gave a whispered warning.

“Look out!”

Metchinkov’s door opened. Their chief came into their room with his stealthy tread and suspicious eyes.

“Is that document ready?” he asked.

“I’ve just finished it,” answered Stanislav.

“Needless to say it’s of the most secret importance,” said Metchinkov. “If a word leaks out from the Politburo you young men will be handed over within an hour. You understand that, of course?”

“Perfectly!” answered Stanislav in his careless way. “Our lips are sealed.”

Metchinkov looked at him with a heavy frown.

“I hear you talking in this room,” he said. “Your lips are loose, young man. Take care of your head.”

Stanislav laughed quietly.

“My head, comrade, is well screwed on. I am not a fool.”

“I should like to agree with you,” said Metchinkov grimly.

He took the secret document and went into his room.

Stanislav looked over at Vladimir and smiled.

It was Vladimir who had the duty of translating the Russian reply to the English offer. He read it with consternation and for a while felt as though he had been stunned. It was an incredible document. The Russian terms for an alliance with Great Britain involved the occupation of bases in Finland and the Baltic States, including islands in the Gulf of Finland. Two Russian armies would, under this agreement, enter Poland from the north and south independent of the Polish General Staff.

The English answer was immediate and definite. They could not accept such terms. They would be infringing the sovereign rights of Finland, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia and Poland.

The unbelievable happened on August 23rd, 1939.

Vladimir was at home with Irina and Peter. Sofia had arrived a few days before from Kazan and was spending the evening with Vladimir in Irina’s rooms. Her brother Stanislav was there with them in a gay mood chaffing Vladimir because of what he called his love-sick eyes and his obvious desire to get rid of a future brother-in-law and Irina and Peter so that he might be alone

with Sofia and indulge in amorous delights.

That was perfectly true. Vladimir had to content himself with sitting next to Sofia and holding her hand. He had not yet had a chance of being alone with her, no chance at all of saying the thousand things he wanted to say to her, nor of holding her in his arms with his lips tightly pressed to hers. He had been kept late every night in the Politburo writing out reports and translating English documents. For the first time during six weeks had he been home at the usual dinner hour. Sofia, he thought, was looking very dainty and more enchanting than ever. Terrible things, she said, had happened in Kazan during the Purge, but she wouldn't talk about them tonight. She wanted to forget those horrors.

"Help me to forget!" she said to Vladimir, looking into his eyes with all her love.

Irina brought in the old samovar and the tea tray. Peter sat moodily silent after greeting Sofia and Stanislav with forced cheerfulness.

"Play something, dearest Irina," Sofia called out. "Play us some Chopin which takes one into a more lovely world."

"No, no!" cried Irina. "I never play now." But that evening in answer to pleadings she played again, but not for long. She was playing one of Chopin's preludes when there was a knock at the door. Irina's hands slipped from the piano and she turned her head sharply with fear in her eyes. Sofia took her hand out of Vladimir's and listened anxiously. Peter stood up and the skin of his face turned grey.

It was Stanislav who laughed.

"We all seem very frightened because someone knocks at the door. Probably it's the house kommissar to stop Irina playing a Chopin prelude because he has no soul for music."

It was Alexander Alexandrovich, Vladimir's colleague in the Politburo.

"Hullo, comrade!" exclaimed Stanislav. "How did you know we were here?"

He added a few words after staring at Alexander whose eyes looked stupefied as though he had been drinking.

"What's the matter with you? Why do you look as if you were going to be sick?"

"Astounding news!" said Alexander Alexandrovich. "I heard it from a friend in *Pravda*. All the world will know tomorrow."

"Will know what?" asked Vladimir.

"It's incredible," said the young man. "I can't believe it. It makes fools of us all."

"What are you babbling about?" asked Stanislav impatiently.

Alexander Alexandrovich gave a sudden harsh laugh.

“You’ll think me mad when I tell you.”

“You look mad,” said Stanislav. “You’ve gone daft. You always were on the border line, little comrade.”

“Tell us,” said Irina. “What new horror?”

Alexander Alexandrovich blurted out incredible words.

“Stalin has made an alliance with Hitler. Soviet Russia has made a pact with Germany. All our propaganda is turned upside down. The Germans are charming people. The Nazis are our greatest friends. Hitler, once the *Iron Fist* of pluto-democracy, is a noble fellow and the friend of liberty.”

The young man laughed again, but in a queer mirthless way.

“We have all been fooled!” he said.

There was complete silence in the room. It was broken by Stanislav.

“You’ve been drinking. Why do you come here in that filthy state and tell us a lie like that?”

XXXVII

There was great bewilderment in Russia over the pact with Germany. The propaganda machine reversed its powerful engines for the guidance of public opinion and there were no more denunciations of Hitler and his "gang of anti-democratic criminals." Great Britain and the United States now received the full blast of criticism and accusation as pluto-democracies and the last champions of an effete and dying Capitalism and economic Imperialism.

The simple folk and the fanatics shrugged their shoulders when others whispered their astonishment and dismay at this complete *volte-face* in foreign policy. "Stalin knows best," they said. "Stalin thinks only of Russian interests." The masses of the proletariat and the toiling peasants in collective farms did not think about it at all. They thought only of what was happening in factories and fields, whether they would get a full meal at midday and fuel to warm themselves in winter, and whether their shoes would hold out for another month or two. It was only the new intellectuals and the politically-minded like Vladimir and his friends who worried about illogicality and double-faced diplomacy.

Vladimir himself, because of his mother's blood and tradition, had set his heart upon a friendly alliance between Russia and Great Britain. The members of the English missions had impressed him as men of sincerity and goodwill. He was distressed when they were let down so flagrantly, as it seemed to him, by this sudden swing towards Nazi Germany, denounced so violently during recent years. One phrase let drop by his chief, Metchinkov, who did not reveal his secret thoughts as a rule, nor indulge in candid conversation, was puzzling and enigmatical.

"It's to gain time," he said, on the morning following the announcement of the German alliance.

"Time for what, Comrade Metchinkov?" asked Vladimir.

Metchinkov looked at him with narrowing eyes and a frozen twisted smile.

"I dislike being cross-questioned. Get on with your work, please."

Then Vladimir too ceased worrying about the inconsistency of Russian policy and propaganda, accepting things as they came because other and more absorbing interests dominated his brain and soul. He and Sofia had decided to get married in a year's time. That would be in the summer of 1940. This

decision was made possible by the promise of an appointment as mistress in one of the infant schools in Moscow. This miracle, as it seemed, had been worked by Vladimir himself, who had taken his courage in both hands and obtained an interview with the secretary to the Kommissar of Education and Culture and put his plea before him. This young man, Melikov, had been a fellow student at the Institute and had always been friendly and good-natured. Now he received Vladimir with both hands and a real warmth of pleasure at seeing him again.

"My dear comrade, what can I do for you?"

"I want you to pull a string or two on my behalf," said Vladimir.

Melikov laughed.

"I'm not a puppet master. When I pull strings nobody dances. It's I who am the puppet, slaving for long hours and answering my chief's bell when it rings as it does every five minutes."

"I want to marry Sofia," said Vladimir. "Do you remember you used to go for picnics with her? I was damnably jealous of you."

"Little Sofia!" exclaimed Melikov with another laugh. "Why, she broke my heart into small bits when I was eighteen or so and very amorous. Where is she now, that miniature madonna?"

"In Kazan," said Vladimir. "That's our trouble. I want to get her back to Moscow. Surely there's a dearth of teachers here? If you could get her transferred I would be eternally grateful."

"My dear Vladimir!" exclaimed Melikov. "Who do you think I am?"

"Secretary to the Kommissar of Education," answered Vladimir. "A word in his ear might do the trick. Sofia has the highest certificates. She has a genius for teaching children. Her reports were marvellous."

"Nothing doing!" said Melikov. "My Kommissar has a certain touch of humanity from time to time—in fact I am devoted to him—but he keeps me well in my place, which is at this desk with my nose on top of a pile of tedious documents."

"For old times' sake," pleaded Vladimir. "For the love you had for Sofia, who still talks about you and still makes me jealous."

Melikov thrust his fingers through his hair, and there was the light of laughter in his eyes.

"You'll make me burst into tears if you go on like that. Well . . . I'll see what I can do."

"Ten thousand thanks!" cried Vladimir, embracing him.

He not only saw what he could do but did it. Sofia received an official chit appointing her as headmistress of an infants' school in Moscow, to begin her duties in September of that year. She was on leave in Moscow when this little document reached her, and she came round to Irina's apartment that evening

when Vladimir was there having his supper. He opened the door to her and saw by her eyes and her breathlessness that something astonishing had happened.

"David!" she cried, using his mother's name for him. "Oh, my David!"

"Your eyes are like stars," he told her. "Have you come from Paradise, if there is such a place?"

"You've worked a miracle," she told him, tilting her chin up to get his kiss.

"Strange news!" he answered. "A fellow works miracles without knowing it! What kind of miracle? Producing a live rabbit out of an empty hat?"

"It's incredible," she cried, laughing and still breathless. "The impossible has happened. I'm being transferred from Kazan. They're making me mistress of the Lenin Infants' School in Moscow!"

Vladimir caught hold of her hands and raised them to his lips. He was intensely excited by this joyous news. After months of dark despondency with Sofia away from him and unpleasant things happening in the world, he saw the chance of happiness near at hand. What did it matter if Stalin made an alliance with Hitler? Sofia and he could get married. They would shut their door against the outside world. They would be sufficient unto themselves. In an attic somewhere, in a basement somewhere, any room with any window and a door, they would be content. Joy would be with them and in them and around them.

"So young Melikov has done the trick!" he said. "Wonderful fellow! I owe him an eternal debt of gratitude. . . . When are we going to get married? Tomorrow? Next week?"

"We must find a lodging first!" cried Sofia. "And I must start my job in Moscow and be certain that I have it. Oh, David, my dearest! I hope I shall make you happy. You're so tall and I'm so small that sometimes I think you will think I'm a mouse nibbling crumbs on your hearthrug."

"I doubt whether we shall have a hearthrug," said Vladimir gaily. "But I shall think you an angel—if there are such beings. I shall feel afraid of you."

Irina came to the door of her room and spoke to them.

"Why do you talk such a long time in the passage? Come in, my dears, and if you don't want my company I'll retire to the bedroom."

They told her the good news and to their surprise and distress she wept a little.

"What's the matter, Irina?" asked Vladimir. "We tell you wonderful news and you cry about it!"

He went over to her and kissed her black hair.

"It's because I'm an egoist," she told him, half laughing and half crying. "I hate the idea of losing you, dear Vladimir. You have taken the place of Vassily. You are my second son."

“And you are my second mother,” he answered tenderly. “How can I ever repay all your kindness and all your love for me?”

It was some weeks later before she spoke of an idea which had been burning in her brain.

“Why not live here when you get married?” she asked one evening. “You can have Vassily’s room. It’s not very big but Sofia doesn’t take up much room and at least it would give you a roof over your head in this overcrowded city.”

That was true. Vladimir had gone in search of a lodging, any attic or any basement, and had applied to the registry of rooms in Moscow, but his inquiries had been received with shrugs or smiles.

“A room for a husband and wife? The best you will get will be the share of a room on one side of a curtain.”

So this offer from Irina seemed wonderful, though Vassily’s room was very small, and indeed not big enough for a double bed.

“A single bed will do,” said Sofia, with a blush and a laugh. “I don’t take up much room. I can snuggle up.”

“It’s all like a fairy-tale,” said Vladimir. “It’s like one of my Little Mother’s fairy-tales. There was one called ‘Hop o’ My Thumb,’ about a little fellow so small that he could ride in the ear of his father’s horse. I walk about Moscow as though I were a fairy prince with a magic ring fulfilling every wish when I give it a turn. I used to think people couldn’t be happy in Russia. I used to be sulky with Olga’s friends because they behaved like children when people were being shot and sent to labour camps, and terrified of the Cheka. Now I go about smiling to myself and contemptuous of world affairs and world tragedy.”

“As long as it doesn’t touch us,” said Sofia.

But it did touch them, a little later on in history.

A world war began in that year, just about the time when Sofia took her seat for the first time in the infants’ school at Moscow. The Russians attacked Finland and at first were unsuccessful in smashing through the Mannerheim Line, until they brought up heavy reserves.

Vladimir was being overworked in the Politburo, as was his future brother-in-law, Stanislav, and all the staff. There were no regular hours now. Often Vladimir did not get home until midnight, having to translate the English bulletins which he heard by wireless. All day long he sat in a small isolated room with ear-phones on his head, taking down English speeches and announcements before translating them, and carrying them to his chief, who awaited them impatiently before summarizing them and sending them to his own supreme chief, Molotov, Kommissar of Foreign Affairs.

“No time for marriage just yet,” said Vladimir on one of the rare occasions

when he could talk with Sofia. “Perhaps in a month or two when things slacken off. In any case old Metchinkov forbids me to get married during this crisis and says that if I disobey he will send an unfavourable report to Molotov with an accusation of disloyalty and slackness.”

“Oh, David!” cried Sofia. “That would ruin you.”

Vladimir nodded.

“It wouldn’t be too good. We must be patient, I suppose, though I’m seething with impatience. Why did that fellow Hitler want to make a war just now when we had a chance of getting married?”

Sofia laughed at this question.

“I don’t suppose he thought about us! But it’s a funny war, isn’t it? Nobody seems to fight. What does it all mean, this silence of the guns on the Western front?”

“One day the guns will talk,” answered Vladimir. “There will be a terrific crash.”

XXXVIII

When the crash came with the invasion of France and Belgium, Holland, Denmark and Norway, Vladimir followed the news with breathless excitement and emotion. Against his will, almost, against his prejudices as a young Russian educated intensively in the propaganda directed against England as an enemy of Russia, the stronghold of aggressive Imperialism and the corruption of international Capitalism—had that not been drummed into him since early boyhood?—his sympathies in this war were on the side of England. Reading English newspapers and translating English broadcasts before and during the first phase of this war, the spirit of the English people reached out to him. Some heroic quality in them stirred his admiration and presently the retreat to Dunkirk, the surrender of France and Belgium, left England alone against the irresistible might of Germany. The invasion of England was imminent. When it happened England would be destroyed.

Vladimir's Russian friends were all talking of England's impending doom. Stanislav spoke about it one evening when Vladimir and Sofia were together in his room.

"England is done," said Stanislav. "It's the end of the English and their old British Empire. Hitler will take it over. I can't say I shall shed tears over it. They used to bully the whole world. They won great victories over unarmed savages. Now their pride will be taken down. They'll have to eat the dirt."

Sofia was more sympathetic.

"They gave great things to the world."

"What things?" asked Stanislav, that Italian-looking young man.

"Shakespeare . . . Dickens . . . Shelley. . . . Many great statesmen of the Liberal Party."

"Oh, that's a school-mistress patter," said Stanislav scornfully. "They captured their Empire with a gin bottle in one hand and a rifle in the other. They exploited India and all their colonies. It's a good job they're going to be wiped out."

He glanced with a smile at Vladimir, whose face was grave.

"Apologies to half an Englishman!"

Vladimir gave an uneasy laugh.

"Yes, I suppose my mother's blood rises in me. I deplore the thought that

England should be invaded and dominated by the Germans. I regard the idea with horror. But I'm not sure it's going to happen."

"It's bound to happen," said Stanislav dogmatically. "What's going to stop it? While we talk I expect they're suing for peace—any kind of peace."

"No!" exclaimed Vladimir, half angrily. "You're wrong, Stanislav. They'll put up a heroic defence. They're a heroic people. I've been listening to a speech by their Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. I've translated it for Metchinkov. He tells the people that England has the honour to stand alone. They will fight on the beaches and on the hills and in the valleys. They will fight, if need be, in the last ditches. I confess my mother's blood tingled when I heard it. It was like Henry's speech before the battle of Agincourt. It called to the spirit of a great people."

"Words!" jeered Stanislav. "What can they put up against the German bombers and the German tanks?"

"The British Navy is still strong," said Vladimir. "To invade England Hitler will have to force the sea passage and sweep the English aviators out of the skies. He hasn't done that yet."

Stanislav laughed good-naturedly.

"You've been steeping yourself too much in English propaganda," he said, "and you're an English sentimentalist because of your mother and her early teaching. My mother was an Italian-American, and I've no sentiment about England, except instinctive dislike as an old bully and braggart who has now fallen on evil days and will have to cringe to Hitler."

"They'll never cringe," answered Vladimir hotly. "Even if they're defeated they will have no Quislings. They'll go down with colours flying. They'll keep their pride and their honour."

Stanislav laughed at him and raised his hands.

"Don't let's quarrel about it, little comrade. To tell you the honest truth, I shouldn't mind seeing Hitler get a knock from the English. That thug will soon believe that he has the world as a ball under his feet."

Sofia took up her balalaika.

"Let's have some music," she suggested. "Let's forget the horrors of war. Let's be thankful for this little sanctuary of ours where we three civilized beings can enjoy the melody of life, and shut out ugliness."

"Very beautifully said, my child!" jeered the ironical Stanislav. "You probably learnt that from an infant's first reader!"

Sofia threw a cushion at him. The imminent invasion of England was forgotten by these young Russians.

During many days and nights Vladimir kept his ears glued to his earphones picking up the reports of war. England was not invaded. England's aviators—the boys of the R.A.F.—were exacting a heavy toll from Goering's

Luftwaffe. The English Channel was still a defence against the German armies crouched and ready on the coast of France. Some of these messages which he picked up and translated excited him and exhilarated him. England was fighting the German monster. Her young men were doing heroic things. He felt that half his soul was on their side. But he had to be careful to disguise this from his chief Metchinkov—that cold-blooded man who hated England and was convinced that its doom was at hand.

"It's curious," he said one day, "that Hitler delays so long in his invasion of England."

"The British Navy sees to that," said Vladimir. "And the R.A.F. has swept the German fighters out of the sky. Goering can't stand such losses, I imagine."

"You're not here to imagine," said Metchinkov icily. "Hitler is biding his time. England will be blotted out in dust and ashes. We are helping to accomplish that inevitable doom."

"In what way, Comrade Metchinkov?" asked Vladimir.

"We are helping to build up Germany's war potential," answered Metchinkov grimly. "By Stalin's orders Russia is supplying Germany with an immense amount of scrap-iron and other material for Germany's war machine. When England lies prostrate we shall have had our share in that victory for civilization."

Vladimir was silent. This piece of information was new to him. It seemed to him rather horrible.

Metchinkov glanced at him sideways and his thin lips twisted to a smile in which there was nothing kindly.

"I suspect you of pro-English sentiment," he said. "Your eyes beam when the English score a point or two."

"I'm a Russian," said Vladimir guardedly. "I think as a Russian. Our own interests and security come first, Comrade Metchinkov."

"That is so," he answered. "Make it so in your own mind, young man."

But Metchinkov lost his nerve one night—the most stupendous night in Russian history up to that date. Vladimir was working late, translating the nine o'clock news bulletin from the B.B.C. and other broadcast messages sent out by wireless.

Metchinkov was at some conference with Molotov and other chiefs. It was 11 p.m. before he returned.

Vladimir rose from his desk as he passed and spoke to him.

"I have some interesting reports here—the late news from England."

"From England?"

Metchinkov stopped before opening his own door and stared at Vladimir in a dazed way.

“Yes. Winston Churchill has made an important speech. There have been some interesting questions and answers in the English Parliament.”

Metchinkov suddenly laughed harshly.

“To hell with all that! England is now on our side. England is now our brother-in-arms. We, who have hated England, must pretend to love her. Germany, our friend for some time, is now our enemy. The old propaganda against Germany can be brought out again. Our noble ally, Hitler, is once more the Iron Fist of Europe and the gang leader of criminals and thugs.”

Vladimir stared at him.

“Pardon me,” he said, “I do not understand.”

He had an idea that Metchinkov had come back drunk. Perhaps they had drunk too much vodka during the conference. There was a mad look in his eyes.

“We shall have no difficulty in understanding,” said Metchinkov. “It is all clear and simple.”

He laughed again an insane, harsh, terrible laugh.

“We shall understand quite soon in blood and destruction and terror. Russian women will understand when masses of their men lie dead. They will understand when their children lie buried beneath the ruins of Russian cities. There is nothing so simple to understand as war. And it is the supreme test of loyalty. In this city of Moscow there are many cowards and many traitors, and many defeatists. They will have to be wiped out. There must be a second Purge of weaklings and cravens. We shall all be tested, every one of us. It is the supreme crisis of the Soviet Union. It will decide our destiny as a race and as a system.”

“What has happened, Comrade Metchinkov?” asked Vladimir. “You speak in parables.”

“Hitler’s armies are moving against Russia,” said Metchinkov. “They are on the move tonight. It is war with Germany.”

Some sort of stroke seemed to happen to him. He staggered and pressed his hand against his heart.

Vladimir made a rush at him and held him up.

He recovered in a few minutes after sitting in a chair and breathing hard. Then he stood up and walked to his own room, turning at the door.

“It was indigestion,” he said. “Say nothing about it, comrade. Bring me your reports in ten minutes.”

Vladimir stood waiting for those ten minutes quite motionless as though turned to stone.

Germany had declared war against Russia. Her armies were already moving. It was astounding and stupendous news. What would it mean to him and Sofia? What would it mean to Russia?

XXXIX

The first thing it meant to Russia was a state of panic in Moscow and a new Purge. The Men in the Kremlin and the Secret Police were possessed by the fear of widespread disloyalty among their own people. It was caused by their realization that their intensive propaganda among the masses on behalf of their pact with Germany, while Great Britain and France were designated as enemies, now had to be reversed. They had executed the Old Guard and the Generals for establishing contact with the Germans. That was difficult to reconcile with their own change of policy resulting in a Soviet-German alliance, with all the engines of propaganda in full blast in every city and village. Having educated public opinion to this point of view, how could they be sure that the Russian people would unite against the enemy who had been proclaimed as their friend? They had played a double-faced game and were uncertain of its results. The panic which seized them—this mad fear of possible treachery from within—can only be explained in this way. As the heroism of the Russian armies and the desperate and self-sacrificing patriotism of the Russian people proved in the following years of frightful war, it was senseless and unjustified. But it led to a reign of terror, initiated by Stalin himself. A grim manifesto was issued by him and executed mercilessly by the N.K.D.V., the successors of the Cheka and the Ogpu.

"We must organize a ruthless struggle with all disorganizers of the rear, deserters, panic-mongers, cowards, disseminators of rumours. It is necessary immediately to turn over to the courts of the military tribunals all those who, by their panic-mongering and cowardice, interfere with the defence of the country."

Terrible words when interpreted and carried out by a homicidal maniac like Yudhev, the chief of the secret police. History will never know the numbers of those who were shot in Moscow and other cities in consequence of this order. There were thousands, it is reckoned, in Moscow alone. They were not traitors, but bewildered people who had expressed incautiously their consternation at the turn of events. They were not traitors, but fathers of boys, and mothers of sons, who wept when they knew that Russia was to be invaded in a struggle to the death. They were not traitors or cowards but people who had spoken too openly, perhaps, about the terrible ordeal awaiting them. Some of them may

have cursed the Men in the Kremlin for making a pact of friendship with those who now would slay their sons and destroy Russian cities. At the first news of Hitler's attack on Russia, under the stress of sudden and enormous emotion, tongues had been unloosed, caution had been released, the Russian temperament had not resisted the need of talk, criticism, despondency, perhaps even despair. One can only guess what scraps of evidence may have been produced against students, heads of departments, clerical drudges, typists, petty officials, factory hands, foremen of works, school teachers, and Party members left over from the last Purge. Day after day the executions went on unknown and unnumbered.

Vladimir missed some of his friends and guessed their fate, but those nearest to him escaped. Irina's dreadful fear that her husband Peter would be accused was not fulfilled, but he was sent away to superintend an armament factory in the Urals. It seemed to Irina the next worst thing to a sentence of death and she wept in desolation at his going. Zabotin believed that he would be shot in the back of the head like many others, but he remained untouched. Stanislav expected every day to be his last. "Metchinkov," he said, "will report unfavourably on me. That means I shall be condemned. I read my sentence of death in that man's eyes."

So he spoke one evening when Vladimir was in his room. Sofia had been summoned to some examination by her school committee, leaving Vladimir deeply anxious on her behalf. What did it mean—that examination? Was it due to some accusation against her? He watched the little clock on the mantelshelf in Stanislav's room. Minutes lengthened into hours and Sofia did not return.

He answered Stanislav.

"We are all nerve-racked. I walk about like a drugged man. It's not the war but the Purge which puts my nerves on edge. Yesterday they shot Alexei and Igor who were with us at the Institute. I can't believe they were in any way treacherous. They were both good fellows."

"It makes no difference," answered Stanislav. "The lift of an eyebrow, the shrug of a shoulder is enough to get a man shot. I have a presentiment that they'll come for me tonight. That old man Metchinkov gave me a queer look when I left him this evening."

"You imagine all that," answered Vladimir. "The fact is that Metchinkov is a coward in his own heart and is rapidly becoming a nervous and physical wreck."

"So am I," said Stanislav. "It will be a relief to face a firing squad."

He sat there in a cane-bottomed chair with his legs stuck out and fell into a deep moody silence. It was not broken for some time by Vladimir, who was on the rack of anxiety for Sofia.

"Why didn't she come back? What did they want with her? If anything

happened to Sofia——”

He would not let that thought reach further in his imagination. It was too terrible to dwell on it.

“Stanislav,” he said presently. “You and I are different from the ordinary Russians. Your mother was American and mine English.”

“What about it?” asked Stanislav gloomily.

“It gives us a more detached view,” continued Vladimir. “But if it weren’t for these executions I should be happier in my mind now that the issue is so clear-cut. Either Hitler must be defeated at any cost in Russian life or we shall be destroyed from one end of Russia to the other.”

“That’s obvious,” answered Stanislav. “What then?”

“I’m Russian enough to fight for my fatherland. I believe I’m ready to die for it. But I’m weakened by my love for Sofia.”

He looked at the clock again and gave a cry of distress.

“Stanislav, what are they doing with little Sofia?”

Stanislav rose from his chair and paced up and down the room.

“Moscow is a madhouse,” he said. “That maniac Yudhev would have us all shot—women and children as well as men. How can one be loyal to Russia? How can one be ready to die for Russia when we live under a system of Terror, when innocent people are shot in batches, when one’s dearest friends are executed by military tribunals which are merely the secret police in uniform eager for more victims?”

He turned suddenly to Vladimir.

“I am not loyal,” he said. “I loathe the Soviet State. I detest its propaganda of lies and villainies. Once I believed in it all. Those men in the Kremlin are murderers and sadists, panic-stricken because of their own cowardice tormented by their own falsehoods. They should be wiped off the face of the earth.”

He glared wildly at Vladimir his friend.

“Will you accuse me because I say such things?” he asked.

Vladimir gave a groan and then a cry.

“Oh, Stanislav, my friend! What you say is terrible. Sometimes I’ve been tempted to think like that.”

“I think like that,” said Stanislav. “Those are my thoughts.”

“We must think only of Russia,” said Vladimir. “Russia is invaded. Our troops are in retreat. Our cities are being bombed and destroyed while we sit here in Moscow. The fires of hell are rising above the homes of Russian men and women falling before the invader. I think only of Russia, my fatherland. Nothing else matters. In my blood I am only half a Russian, but in my soul I am wholly loyal to Russia—the Russian earth, the Russian people.”

He stopped and looked at the clock again and his face went pale.

“Where is Sofia?” he cried. “Why doesn’t she come back?”

It was half an hour later when she came back. The two men heard her key in the lock. Vladimir made a rush for the door and saw that she was looking white and tired. She fell into his arms and he held her tight.

“What has been happening?” he asked. “What have they been doing all this time?”

“I had a narrow escape,” she told him. “But, oh, David, my love, make some tea. I’ve been very frightened. I want something hot to drink. I’m cold and tired.”

Stanislav questioned her until she burst into tears.

“They accused me,” she sobbed. “I was accused.”

Vladimir went on his knees beside her and put his arms about her.

“Don’t tell us now. Wait till I’ve made some tea.”

She dried her eyes and laughed in a weak way.

“It’s all right now. They let me off. But I’ve been dismissed.”

“Dismissed!” cried Vladimir with consternation.

“They said I was debauching the mind of youth,” she said, and wept again. Presently Vladimir went into the little kitchen and made some tea while Stanislav stared at his sister gloomily.

“More devils’ work,” he said. “More midsummer madness.”

Sofia had been accused by one of the other mistresses. She wore a crucifix round her neck. The other mistress had seen it when Sofia was washing one day. She had raised it to her lips and kissed it. And she had told the children about Jesus Christ and said that Christ loved peace and hated war and all wickedness. That was after Germany had attacked Russia. She was teaching cowardice to the children. At another time she had spoken to them about the American people, her mother’s people. She said they loved liberty and had made a wonderful civilization in the New World. She had failed to denounce them as oppressors of the negro race whom they had made their slaves. She was teaching her children false history contrary to the ideals of Karl Marx and the teaching of Lenin.

“Good God!” exclaimed Vladimir in a low voice. “You were in grave danger.”

“They questioned me for three hours,” said Sofia. “I became dazed and hardly knew what I was saying. There was a police officer present. He frightened me with his eyes. There was an evil look in them. He had a horrible smile. The school managers were frightened of him, too. It was because of their fear that they questioned me so much. Two of them were kind. They tried to laugh the accusations away. I knew they were my friends and they gave me a little courage when I was faint with fear. Oh, David, I wasn’t afraid for myself alone. I knew how much you would suffer if anything happened to

me.”

“If anything happened to you I should die,” he told her.

“And in the end?” asked Stanislav.

“They spoke in secret after the police officer had demanded my condemnation. Then they came back. I was told to stand up. The President of the Committee said I had been found unsuitable for the education of Russian youth. Because of my age they were willing to avoid the severest punishment, but I was dismissed. No further action against me would be taken if I joined one of the women’s organizations for military service, as a front-line nurse or canteen worker. In that way I could serve Russia and prove my loyalty to its sacred cause.”

Vladimir had been greatly distressed by the incident of the crucifix which Lucy had worn at her breast.

“It was all my fault!” he cried. “I led you into danger by giving it to you. I was a fool. Sofia, my dearest, forgive me! Let me have it back again. Give it me now.”

“It’s the symbol of our love,” she answered. “Don’t ask for it back, David.”

But because of his pleadings she gave it to him and he hid it again under his shirt.

Later that evening Sofia regained her cheerfulness.

“It’s not too bad, after all,” she said. “After my fright I see that the best has happened. I shall be glad to be a front-line nurse.”

“An appalling thought!” cried Vladimir. “You will be in the danger line while I sit in safety.”

“I’m a very tiny target!” she told him. “It will be a lucky bullet if it hits me. Don’t be too frightened for my sake, David.”

She tried to speak gaily because of her lover’s tragic look.

“Before this war ends we shall all be dead,” said Stanislav, deep-sunk in gloom. “But I would rather be killed by a German bullet than by a shot in the back of the head in a Russian prison. I shall volunteer for front-line service.”

“So shall I,” said Vladimir. “I can’t sit on an office stool while millions of my fellow men are fighting and dying.”

Suddenly he wept with violence.

This time it was Sofia who rushed to him, calling out his pet name.

“David! Oh, my dear! Courage, my dearest heart!”

He struggled for self-control and presently was able to speak.

“It’s the end of all our dreams,” he said in a broken voice. “We shall be torn apart, Sofia. Our dream of love will never be fulfilled—that little paradise in a basement room—Hitler and his devils have spoilt all that.”

“He can’t kill our love, dear David!” cried Sofia. “My spirit will come to you wherever you are. Your spirit and mine will meet across the battlefields. If

we die our love will go on. I'm certain of that."

"I'm going out," said Stanislav. "You two had better make the most of love. There's not much time left now. We shall all be lagged in one way or another."

He strode out of the room and they heard his heavy tread down the wooden stairs.

"We're alone with our love," said Sofia softly. "Let me creep into your arms, David. Hold me against your heart."

They had an hour of love before it was interrupted by a new alarm.

Two men arrived wearing armlets on their sleeves—some new badge. They had come to take away the radio sets in this apartment house, as from all other houses in Moscow and other cities. It was to prevent the Russian people from hearing uncensored news or German broadcasts telling them of the retreat of the Red Armies from burning cities according to the Scorched Earth order of the Russian High Command. They must not know the number of prisoners taken by the enemy, nor their deadly thrusts towards the heart of Russia, nor the danger coming close to Leningrad and Moscow.

XL

By order of Molotov the young men of military age in the Politburo were sent into the Red Army and Vladimir was among them with Stanislav and Alexander Alexandrovich. He was an Intelligence Officer in Zhukov's army. He did no fighting but followed the trail of war backwards as far as Stalingrad and afterwards forwards in unbroken victories to Berlin.

Those years of war were to him a tremendous psychological experience which burnt into his brain and soul while the flaming fury of war burnt and blasted the Russian earth, devoured cities and villages, and scorched vast tracts of country from which the Red Army retreated until at last the tide turned and they went back across the ruins and the desolation of destruction with an irresistible onslaught.

Vladimir was an eye-witness of this earth-shaking history in all its horror and in all its heroism. He walked into the red heart of it when towns were still burning from high-explosive and incendiary bombs dropped far in the rear of the fighting front. The timbered frames of old houses were still smouldering, and from the rubble heaps of ruins which had once been Russian homes there came the stench of death. Vladimir walked past dead bodies of women and children on his way to some observation post from which it was possible to see the German lines. He went into houses and schoolhouses standing here and there where a chance bomb or shell had killed groups of children huddled there for shelter. Women and young girls, old men and new-born babies, lay in pools of blood along the roads down which millions of refugees had passed, machine-gunned on their way by German aviators. He walked across old battlefields where for miles there was the litter of war after frightful fighting—broken guns, smashed lorries, exploded ammunition dumps, abandoned rifles and machine-guns, crashed aeroplanes, and always the corrupting bodies of young men—just boys many of them—who had fallen before the next retreat or before the next advance. Germans and Russians lay together. Bayoneted men still had their hands slightly raised as they had tried to surrender before cold steel reached them. Month after month, year after year, Vladimir—one human ant in this upheaved world—was a witness of great agony, stoical suffering, pitiful mutilation, as the streams of wounded passed—the walking wounded for whom there was no transport, with dirty bandages and gangrened

wounds and broken limbs and smashed faces. Many of them dropped in the tracks. Crowds of them, after fierce battling, lay as though already dead outside the clearing stations and the field hospitals. There were never enough bandages, never enough nurses, often no anaesthetics, never enough surgeons for the tides of wounded who flowed back from the fighting lines.

Vladimir himself passed through the whole range of emotional experience which was traversed by the Russian people as the years of war passed—darkness of soul, despair, terror in its first phases when the German armies, marvellously equipped with enormous gun power, air power and machine power, smashed their way through the Russian lines taking vast numbers of prisoners, advancing with destructive fury and merciless severity on the civilian populations. It seemed inevitable that Leningrad would fall and that Moscow would fall as they stormed their way forward until the Volga was in sight under their guns. They were checked only by the flesh and blood of Russian youth sacrificed without stint by their commanders as always fresh reserves were brought up and flung into the front lines, going to their death not as unwilling martyrs or slaves but often with fanatical courage and self-sacrifice. There was no mercy on either side, no chivalry, no quarter. "Slay them!" was the Order of the Day sent through to the armies by Generalissimo Stalin. When German trenches or outposts were stormed no prisoners were taken. They were killed like rats, and young Germans shrieking in a last moment of terror were bayoneted after their last bursts of machine-gun fire through which the Russians had rushed regardless of their own losses.

Vladimir as an Intelligence Officer did not take part in this close fighting and killing, but saw only its aftermath. Unlike most of his fellow Russians, there were moments and episodes when he felt the touch of pity for the enemy. Now and then he stopped over the bodies of Germans lying dead on his way across a battlefield or a line of trenches. They looked mere boys, and many of them had fine boyish faces more delicately cut than the Russians, less coarse and primitive than the Russian peasants who were now soldiers. Some of them belonged, it seemed, to a higher phase of civilization and education, though under Hitler they had been led to this end. One day in a dug-out down which he went to find any papers which might have been left there—that was part of his duty as an Intelligence Officer—he found a living man. It was a young German officer wounded and pinned down by fallen timber forty-eight hours after a Russian counter-attack. Vladimir saw him by the light of a torch which he flashed round the dug-out. He saw his eyes in which there was still the light of life. Vladimir spoke to him in German which now he knew.

"Are you badly wounded?"

The young German answered faintly:

"I am bleeding to death. I can't move. Be quick and kill me. . . . Oh, my

God!”

He gave an agonized groan and his face was convulsed with pain. It was a handsome young face, Vladimir thought.

“I will take this timber off your body,” he said. “Don’t move.”

A heavy beam had fallen across the boy’s legs.

Vladimir had to put his torch into his pocket, so that he was in darkness, but he felt the beam and was able to shift it so that the boy’s limbs were liberated. He took out his torch again and flashed it on to the boy’s face. His eyes blinked in the light and he tried to struggle up from the floor of the dug-out, but fell back again with a kind of whimper.

“I have no strength,” he said, very faintly again. “I’m dying I suppose.”

Vladimir looked round the dug-out by the aid of his torch and saw a piece of candle stuck into a beer bottle on a wooden box with matches close to it—one of those little books of matches which he had found in other German dug-outs. He lit the candle and it burnt with a steady little flame.

“Where are you wounded?” asked Vladimir. He saw that the boy’s tunic was soaked in blood, now dry and coagulated.

“I shot myself,” said the boy. “Before the beam fell on me.”

“Why did you shoot yourself?” asked Vladimir.

The boy looked him in the eyes.

“Better than being killed by your men. Why don’t you kill me?”

“I shan’t kill you,” said Vladimir. “I’m sorry for you. How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

“That’s very young, my poor boy,” said Vladimir. “You are just a child.”

The boy answered with a kind of pride:

“I’m an officer. My father is a general. He is a friend of our Führer.”

He had a sudden convulsion of pain and gave a cry of agony.

“Oh, my God!”

Vladimir had a flask in his pocket which still held a mouthful of vodka. He undid the stopper and, holding the boy’s head, poured a few drips into his mouth. It seemed to give him momentary relief.

“Why are you kind to me like this?” he asked. “Why don’t you shoot me? Are you Russian?”

“I’m half Russian and half English,” answered Vladimir.

The boy’s eyes stared at him.

“The English are civilized,” he said. “I had some English friends before the war.”

He was silent while Vladimir watched him, and then he spoke again feebly:

“I’m dying. A thousand thanks.”

He raised his body slightly and raised an arm in the Nazi salute.

“*Heil Hitler!*” he said in a whisper.

He fell back dead just as the candle guttered out, leaving Vladimir in the darkness of the dug-out.

By the light of his flash-lamp he grabbed some papers and a pocket-book which was lying on the muddy floor. Then he stooped with his little circle of light on the boy's face which had the pallor of death but also, he thought, the beauty of boyhood. He stooped lower and kissed the dead boy's forehead, cold to his lips. Then he stumbled up from the dug-out to the litter of a battlefield from which a frightful stench arose under the hot sun.

"What have you been doing down here, comrade?" asked a brother officer. "I thought you must have been knocked out by some German swine firing his last shot. It happened to one of our comrades yesterday."

"I was just searching for papers," answered Vladimir.

Later he read the boy's letters and searched his pocket-book. The letters were from his parents and a sister named Elfa. They were full of loving messages and there was nothing in them of value to Intelligence except as cumulative evidence of despondency and doubt about the chances of victory.

> *The English bombers come over every night now. We have to go down into the shelters. Many houses have been destroyed close to ours. Lots of people have been killed. But that is nothing, dear Helmuth, compared with your dangers and hardships. The Russians are, of course, savages. We think of you always and pray for you. Papa is very pessimistic now that the Americans have come in. It was madness, he thinks, to fight a war on two fronts. The campaign in North Africa goes badly for us according to the English wireless to which people listen in spite of all the threats of punishment. Our poor cousin Karl has been killed in the Afrika Corps and I weep my heart out for him. In spite of everything I believe we shall win in the end. Hitler is invincible. Our losses must be terrible. Why did our Führer attack Russia before ending the war with England? Many people are asking that question. But I must not write dangerous things to you in case it leads you into trouble. My heart's love to you, Helmuth.*
>
> *Your loving sister,*
>
> *Elfa.*

He had read thousands of letters like that searching for small items of news which might be fitted into the jig-saw puzzle of the Intelligence Corps resulting in a picture of German mood and mentality, occasionally giving information of military value. It was from such letters that they were able to gauge the gradual lowering of German morale after the first years of exaltation

and rejoicing in victories.

But why had he kissed that dead boy's forehead? He had no sentimental affection for the Germans. They had done terrible things in Russia. They had executed masses of civilians. They treated Russian prisoners like beasts. He hated them as all Russians hated them for their invasion, their destruction, and their merciless cruelty. And yet when he came in touch with the individual German soldier, prisoner of war or wounded man, or when he saw their dead on the battlefield, some touch of pity, some instinct of humanity beyond racial hatred, some revulsion of horror against this slaughter of youth on both sides, a growing disgust for the senseless and barbaric cruelty of war itself, entered his soul. He was shocked at times by the ferocity and blood-lust of his fellow soldiers, though at other times he was astounded by their heroism and carelessness of death when they flung themselves into the fury of high-explosives and machine-gun fire in order to smash through the German defences. He had come to love many of these rough, simple-minded, ignorant young men from Russian villages and farms. He ate with them, laughed with them, listened to their talk, their frightful oaths, their peasant simplicity, their love for the Russian earth. They had the gift of comradeship. They would risk their lives to rescue a comrade. They had no doubt in their belief that the Soviet system was the new pattern of life and superior to all other forms of civilization. Behind the lines they were good-humoured, enormously patient with foul conditions and every hardship. But in the fighting line they were like primitive men before the dawn of civilization, or like the hordes of Genghis Khan, eager for blood and pitiless. Many of them were half oriental, Tartars and Kalmuks, strangely in contrast to the blond blue-eyed fellows of the Volga or the true type of Slav from White Russia. They had the oriental disregard of death, the oriental ferocity of attack and instinct for cruelty. The veneer of Western civilization had hardly touched them. Christianity had not uplifted them in the times of the old faith. They were uncivilized men as the Western world defines civilization, though they had their own philosophy and tradition and code of honour and racial memories. Russia was a great oriental Empire and drew her reserves of manhood far beyond the dividing line between East and West.

"We are not really civilized," thought Vladimir. "We only have cases of a semi-civilization and around them and beyond them—and perhaps in every Russian mind—there is the darkness and passion of the first Nomad tribes now partly mechanized and partly instructed in the use of modern weapons and machine-made things."

There was only one fellow officer with whom he could discuss these things. The others were very limited in their range of thought, which dwelt exclusively upon the technique of war, the next attack, the mechanism of

transport, the state of their boots, the scarcity of supplies. They had a blind faith in their leaders and in the ultimate victory of the Soviet Union. Most of them were grimly fanatical and unimaginative and suspicious of any abstract discussion. Any touch of pity for dead or wounded Germans would have seemed to them cowardice and treason. Any questioning about the morality of war itself would have been reported to the military police. There was one exception. It was Sergei Sokalov of the Intelligence Corps, attached like Vladimir to General Zhukov's army. He was a young man of sensibility and philosophical outlook, who had been a fellow student of Vladimir's in Moscow, though two years younger. Before the war he had been a painter and designer and had produced some of the propaganda posters which were stuck up on the walls of Moscow and other cities, very bold and striking in their pictorial effect.

Vladimir had rejoiced in coming into touch with him again and they renewed and deepened their student friendship. Sergei had an emotional temperament at times light-hearted and gay, at other times plunged into the depths of mental and spiritual pessimism. As the war went on with its piled-up agonies and widespread destruction of material things and human flesh, he was overwhelmed at times more even than Vladimir by horror at this prolonged experience of butchery and barbarism.

"Sometimes I pray for a bullet or a bit of shell to come my way and make an end of me," he said once. It was when he and Vladimir had taken shelter in the crypt below a ruined church because of German harassing fire. Both of them were on their way back from a first interrogation of German prisoners who had just been captured and put behind barbed wire near a railway siding now under the fire of German guns.

"I'm disgusted with the human animal," he added. "He's more cruel than the wild beasts. He defiles the earth by his abominations. Without man the world would be beautiful and at peace. Man was a mistake of the creation. God made a mistake."

"Do you believe in God?" asked Vladimir.

There was a smell of corruption in this crypt below the church into which a faint light came from the ruins above. Soldiers had used it for a latrine. A rat scuttled past Vladimir's feet. Above them in the debris of the church shells were bursting and scattering the rubble or knocking down bits of wall already broken.

"Naturally I believe in God," said Sergei. "He speaks to me sometimes. I speak to Him."

"How do you mean?" asked Vladimir, amazed by these words.

"He speaks within my soul," said Sergei. "Sometimes I have the vision of universal and everlasting beauty. That is God. Sometimes I am caught up in an

ecstasy of consciousness which seems to see everything and know everything and be part of everything. That is also God."

"All that's very vague," said Vladimir. "It's a kind of pantheism. I feel it too at times. It's generally when I am very exhausted and my mind seems to get outside my body. But if there is a God, why does He permit all this horror around us? Why does He sanction so much wickedness? What is the meaning of all this conflict between human beings who inhabit the same world and ought to share it in comradeship?"

"There is also a Devil," said Sergei.

He paused a moment to throw a bit of broken brick at another rat.

"I have the Devil within me also. He too speaks to me and I speak to him. I say: 'Down, you old devil! Do not tempt me to be as foul as my fellow men, as cruel and beastly as so many of them.' If you like to put it in a better way it is, of course, the struggle between good and evil, between beauty and ugliness, between love and cruelty. At the present time the Devil wins. I hear him laugh. He laughs like hell at all the ruin of the world."

"Sergei," said Vladimir, "you are not talking seriously. You're talking nonsense. Let's talk seriously because in twenty minutes when we shall have to leave this shelter you and I may be killed before we've walked twenty paces. That shell-fire is pretty heavy."

Sergei laughed and Vladimir could see his dark smiling eyes and the twist of his lips and his thin sharp-featured face in the semi-darkness of this cellar.

"I'm talking seriously," he said. "One can't put it into words really. Beyond the appearance of things, beyond this dream called life, above and also within this illusion of matter which we call the universe, there must be some eternal Mind and some ordered plan. Those who frustrate the plan are on the side of evil and against God. Man is, in my belief, frustrating the will of God —that is to say Intelligence and Beauty and Law."

"I believe in love as the key to the great mysteries," said Vladimir. "That includes the love of my fellow men and compassion and comradeship between all races of men."

Sergei laughed again.

"You and I are traitors," he said. "We utter the most treasonable sentiments. It's a good thing we're alone in this stinking cellar."

"I have an inclination to be a Christian," said Vladimir. "I'm beginning to believe in Christ. I've been reading some of His words as written down by his followers. It's in a book called *The New Testament*. I found it on the body of a dead German."

"Christ was, no doubt, a good chap," agreed Sergei. "I think the spirit of God was in Him, from what I've read now and then. Of course I was brought up in the Godless creed."

“My mother was a Christian,” said Vladimir. “But she had to hide it from me.”

He put his hand to his shirt and felt the shape of the little crucifix.

“It’s all a mystery,” said Sergei. “But sometimes I think I get a glimpse beyond the veil. The other night. . .”

He hesitated and then laughed.

“We ought to be going,” he said. “The gun-fire has eased off.”

“Tell me,” said Vladimir. “The other night——”

“The other night,” said Sergei, “when I was lying in that lousy trench—you remember?—my Little Mother came to me. She died of pneumonia at the beginning of the war. I saw her very clearly and she smiled at me and I sat up and called out ‘Moushka’ and the other men thought I had gone mad.”

“Perhaps it was a dream,” said Vladimir.

“No, it was not a dream. I was stark awake. Don’t you believe that?”

“I should like to believe it,” said Vladimir. “I should like to have such a visit.”

For a moment he broke down and wept with his face in his hands.

“My poor Vladimir!” cried Sergei tenderly, putting an arm round his friend’s shoulder. “I’ve jangled some chord in your soul. Pardon me, my comrade.”

“Sergei,” said Vladimir. “I am in despair. I suffer an agony of fear because of one I love. We were going to get married before the war—my little Sofia who was all that life meant to me. I don’t hear from her. I don’t know if she is alive or dead.”

“My dear fellow,” said Sergei, “we’re all in that boat. None of my girls send me a line. No letters get as far as this. Our own world before the war is just another dream. Here we are in another world of filth, dead bodies, rats, vermin, stench of death, and German high-explosives which search for our living bodies. Sometimes I think of the girls I loved and who loved me. I shall never see them again. I shall be dead or they will be dead. There was one called Natalia . . .”

He gave a deep sigh and then said: “Let’s go! This is a filthy hole.”

It was the first time that Vladimir had spoken about Sofia to one of his fellow officers, but always she had been in his thoughts and in his heart, and often in his dreams. He had tried many times to get in touch with her by some kind of mental telepathy. Crouched behind a bank or earth or a smashed lorry in some observation post, or as cover against harassing fire behind the lines, he had tried deliberately to establish contact with her across space by mental vibrations. He sent her messages. “Sofia, here is your lover. I am Vladimir who is thinking of you now. I send you my heart’s love, little Sofia. Tell me if you are well. Tell me if you are safe. Come to me across these ruins. Speak to

me somehow. I am listening. I hear with all my soul. I kiss you across the battle-fields and across the burnt cities. I long for one sign from you, the sense of your presence. If there is any truth in mental telepathy, and there is much evidence, we can reach one another by thought. Answer me. I am calling to you. I am calling Sofia Constantinovna. Sofia, hear me! Answer me!"

He put an intensity into these mind waves. He concentrated all his mind on this transmission of thought. Then he listened intently with his brain rather than with his ears. Several times, even as much as a hundred times, he had a sensation of comfort and happiness as though his message had gone through and been received. He had almost a conviction that Sofia had heard him. But nothing came back from her, unless in his dreams. He dreamt of her many times with an extraordinary sense of reality, so vivid, so actual, that he awakened to the war scenes around him or in army headquarters with a sense of having been with her. They were sitting on the banks of the old Moskva, or walking hand in hand in the public gardens. She said funny little things. Once he woke up laughing but could not remember what she had said which was so amusing. But they were only dreams, very precious and comforting in their way but not waking experiences beyond the stuff of dreams. No news came to him from Moscow. No letters reached him. He was cut off utterly for two years from any knowledge of the world in which he had moved before the war. He was no longer the same Vladimir. He was changed physically and mentally. One day he caught sight of his face in a broken mirror inside a ruined house.

"Who is that?" he thought for a second. He did not recognize that sun-baked face with sunken eyes and lines of pain about the lips. "It is I!" he said aloud. "Good God! Sofia will not know me."

He was changed in his mind. All that agony of war, all his fears, all his self-repression had turned him from a boy into a man who bore the wounds of war in his soul. One could not see these things, these horrors of hell on earth, without being changed somehow. Boyish illusions about life, the romance of youth, vaunting ambitions, the pursuit of happiness, even the quest of knowledge, had dropped out of his way of life and his mental processes. Beauty was dead in the ruins. Love was denied him, at least the love of woman. There was no happiness for him. Perhaps that was his own fault—the fault of his upbringing and education. He could not enjoy the gross jests of the ordinary Russian soldier. Their gusts of laughter even in deadly places meant nothing to him. He was very much alone in his soul except for Sergei with whom he could talk seriously and to whom he could reveal himself. Sofia might find a stranger in him if ever he came back to her. She might be frightened by those sunken eyes and the look in them.

Vladimir was twice wounded by chance shells. The first wound broke a leg and he escaped gangrene by a miracle as it seemed, because he lay out for two

days and nights before being picked up by stretcher-bearers. He was sent in a cattle-truck with crowds of other wounded to a base hospital behind Stalingrad, where the surgeon looked at his leg, doubtfully wondering whether it would have to come off.

"Give it a chance," said one of the nurses.

"Perhaps so," said the surgeon. "Get that muck off it."

He still had two legs when he returned to duty six months later. To every nurse he met he made inquiries about Sofia. Had they come in touch with her? Was there any way in which he could find out her whereabouts?

They shook their heads and smiled.

"Like looking for a needle in a bundle of hay," said one of them, "or a very particular louse in a soldier's shirt."

The second time he was wounded was when the tide of battle turned and the German armies were in full retreat from Stalingrad, after the annihilation of the Vth Army under General Paulus who was taken prisoner. Vladimir was put out of action for a time by a machine-gun bullet in his left arm. It was while he was in this hospital that he had a curious experience which excited him so much that his temperature went up with a bound—to the astonishment of his nurse.

He had never relinquished that idea of mental telepathy in order to reach out to Sofia and he practised it as he lay in bed. His concentration was so intense sometimes that he was utterly oblivious of the other men lying in this great barn which had been turned into a hospital. Their groans, their coughing, their snoring, their swearing, did not reach his ears. They were listening for any answer which might come. Again he was often comforted by the conviction that his messages were being received.

The strapping young woman, flat-faced, with black hair looped over her ears, was often astonished by his immobility and aloofness.

"What are you always thinking about?" she asked him once. "You lie there like a corpse. You don't see anything or hear anything. I've just brought you your food, but I might as well bring it to a dead man."

"Sorry, Nurse! I'm just busy with my own thoughts."

"You'll go mad if you don't look out," said the nurse. "If I were to think like that I should go dotty. I can only carry on in this butcher's shop by not thinking."

There were no direct answers to these telepathic messages until once in this hospital. But very often he had a sense of Sofia's presence close to him and at those times he had for a few moments a feeling of happiness and comfort. At night in the dark ward this feeling was very strong with him and more than once he put a hand outside the bed-clothes as though to clasp another hand which was Sofia's. He spoke to her in a low voice.

“Sofia, my beloved! I believe you are here beside me. Let me feel the touch of your hand.”

No physical hand touched his. His own hand outside the bedclothes was empty but in a queer way he felt in contact with this girl spiritually and mentally. Perhaps it was an illusion. He had that doubt. “I am weak,” he thought. “My mind may be playing tricks. I am perhaps in a morbid state. In such a state one’s imagination is no doubt stronger than reality. Yet I am convinced that Sofia hears me and comes to me in her mind. She promised to do so. This is the fulfilment of her promise.”

“What are you babbling about?” asked a man lying wakeful in the next bed. He spoke roughly and angrily. “How can I go to sleep when you keep jabbering? It’s bad enough to hear the others snoring and snuffling.”

“Pardon, comrade!” said Vladimir gently.

Then one night an apparition came to him. He had been deep in sleep and suddenly awakened and sat up in his bed as though some hand had touched him.

“What is it?” he asked. “Who wants me?”

The ward was almost dark except for a few candles burning in lanterns which gave the dimmest light in this long room crowded with wounded men. At first he thought he saw only the glimmer of one of these distant lanterns but something moved towards him, or he thought it moved towards him. It resolved itself into a shape, into the shape of a young nurse. It was one of the night nurses, he thought, and he watched her come nearer, very near to his own bed. She moved silently and in a floating way. There was something strange in this moving figure. He could see her face. He could recognize her. It was Sofia. She was smiling at him. He could see the shining light in her eyes. She seemed to be speaking because her lips moved but no sound reached him.

He gave a cry. He called out her name.

“Sofia! . . . You have come! . . . Oh, my dearest heart!”

He saw her only for that moment. A candle in one of the lanterns on a window-sill nearest to his bed guttered out and the extinction of that glimmer made the long room darker and in the darkness the vision which had come to him vanished.

He called again.

“Sofia! . . . Do not go! . . . Sofia, come back to me!”

From the end of the ward the night nurse came forward.

“What’s all this noise?” she asked. “Who is that shouting?”

She saw Vladimir standing by the side of his bed. He had flung back the bed-clothes and put his feet to the floor.

“Have you lost your senses, comrade?” she asked sternly. “Get back to bed.”

A soldier in one of the other beds complained.

"That fellow is always howling out or muttering to himself."

"I'll have to report you to the doctor," said the nurse, grabbing Vladimir by the arm and pushing him back to bed.

That night he had a high fever and was delirious. Afterwards he wondered whether he had been delirious before he saw the face of Sofia, and whether it was just the phantasy of a fevered brain. How could he be sure? How could he prove to himself that he had seen her, that she had come to him, that she had spoken to him unheard words of love as her smile showed? He wanted to believe it. It would be vastly comforting. It would establish the truth of mental telepathy and would open a new vista of communication between two minds.

He told no one about this until he returned to his unit and met Sergei again.

They were alone together in a ruined village, a hundred miles west of Stalingrad. From this village the enemy had retreated only two hours before. Everywhere the enemy was in retreat, though fighting desperate rearguard battles before many of their battalions were encircled and wiped out. Hitler had ordered them to fight to the last man and to give no ground. They were forced to give ground but in many places fought to the last man with heroic and desperate courage and despairing self-sacrifice. They were mostly very young, those German soldiers who tried to stand against the encircling movements of Zhukov's men.

Vladimir and Sergei were alone together again in a shelter made of broken timber and iron girders in which German soldiers had huddled under Russian gun-fire. The floor was littered with cartridge-clips and scraps of blood-stained tunics and broken bottles.

"You don't look fit enough to be back on duty," said Sergei. "They ought to have kept you in hospital. You have an other-worldly look, comrade."

"No," answered Vladimir. "I'm glad to be back now that the tide of war has turned. We have the enemy on the run. We're liberating Russia."

"That's to say we're regaining the scorched earth and a world of ruin," said Sergei. "Victory will be without any lovely fruit but ruin and desolation. It's the end of Europe. Perhaps it's the end of civilization which was mostly an illusion anyhow."

"Sergei," said Vladimir after a silence. "I had a strange experience in hospital. You are the only man to whom I dare tell it."

"Tell me," said Sergei with a smile. "I won't give you away to the military police."

Vladimir told him of the vision he had had in hospital, extraordinarily vivid with all appearance of reality in his mental consciousness.

"What do you think?" he asked. "Was it just the mirage of a disordered imagination in a state of high fever? I should hate to think so. The fever came

afterwards as far as I know. When I sat up in bed as though awakened by a sudden touch I was, I believe, in full possession of my senses and not dreaming. I saw my dearest Sofia as clearly as I see you now. I saw the shining light in her eyes. I saw her lips move. Am I under a delusion or may I believe that her spirit, her mind, came across space to me?"

Sergei was silent for what seemed like a long time.

"One can't prove these things," he said. "It's impossible to draw a line between reality and appearance. There is no reality in the gross meaning given to it by the common mind."

He kicked a bit of rusty iron.

"That seems real. But analyse it, and according to the scientists it is made up of whirling particles which are just expressions of electrical force—little universes of electrons and nuclear energy. The mental and physical worlds are part of the same power. I believe that thought is an energy giving out vibrations. I see no reason to disbelieve that Sofia's mind touched yours so that you saw her appearance. It was the same when my mother came to me. But I fear, my dear comrade, that such appearances only happen, or mostly happen, at the moment of death when the spirit rushes from its material body, so called, and visits one who has been dearest to it in life. That thought occurred to you, of course."

Astonishing as it may seem, this tragic thought had not occurred to Vladimir. He believed that Sofia had come to him because of his experiments in telepathy and in answer to his calls.

"Sergei!" he cried. "You say the most terrible thing. You put the most frightful fear into my mind. If my little Sofia is dead I shall die."

He gave a cry of anguish and hid his face in his hands.

It was a month later when he had news of Sofia. He heard it from Stanislav whom he met in a ruined city. He had been transferred as an Intelligence officer from one corps to another which had just come under Zhukov's command.

They met face to face in the market-place under the broken walls of the cathedral. Batteries of field-guns drawn by tractors were going forward interminably. The market-place was seething with Red Army troops, and out of this kaleidoscope of human bodies and machines came Stanislav whom Vladimir had not seen since the beginning of the war. He was a different-looking Stanislav, older, haggard, thin, and with that look in his eyes which comes to all men who have faced death day by day and walked through the stench of death in many fields.

"Stanislav!" cried Vladimir.

"Can that be Vladimir?" asked Stanislav, starting back.

He flung his arms round Vladimir and patted him on the back and kissed

his cheek and then stepped back and punched his shoulder.

"Vladimir! My ancient comrade of the Politburo, looking like one of Napoleon's Old Guard on the retreat from Moscow!"

"Stanislav, tell me all the news, if you have any? How is Sofia? Where is she? I haven't had a line."

Stanislav's smile left his face.

"Do you mean to say you haven't heard?"

"Heard what?"

Vladimir felt his heart give a lurch. He felt fear contract his throat.

"Poor little Sofia was killed in a German air-raid two months ago. The hospital was hit by heavy bombs. They made a shambles of it. One of my friends escaped. He told me about poor little Sofia. She had been a wonderful nurse, he said. All the men adored her. I'm sorry to be the first to tell you."

"Two months ago?" asked Vladimir in a flat unemotional voice.

"Yes, two months, bar a few days."

It was about the time when Vladimir had seen, or thought he saw, Sofia Constantinovna coming towards him in the ward.

"For me that is a death-blow," he said in a low voice.

"Hard luck," said Stanislav. "Courage, Comrade Vladimir. This war is not amusing. In this war the women die as well as the men. Steady, Vladimir!"

Vladimir felt unsteady. He wanted to weep in that market-place through which thousands of men were surging with guns and lorries. But it was only that night that he covered his head with his overcoat and wept for the little dead Sofia.

XLI

That was the life story of Vladimir Michaelovitch Rogov, Lieutenant in the Intelligence Corps of Zhukov's Army, who was first to reach a camp for British prisoners of war on the outskirts of Berlin. It was on the day after the night when Hitler had killed himself before his last testament to the German people whom he had led down the road to ruin, whom he had infected with a poison of sadistic cruelty and whom by his megalomania he had doomed to a future of misery, hunger, slave-labour and political humiliation. The armies under his command had made a desert along the trail of a war in which the sum of human agony is beyond calculation and record, and the reach of imagination. Millions of young men had died to fulfil his will in a mad adventure for world domination? and on the other side, to defend their own soil. Along the track of war, which stretched across the world, there were broken homes, women weeping for dead youth, maimed and blinded men, famine and pestilence. Millions of people had been murdered in cold blood. Hangings and shootings had followed the entry of his troops into other people's lands. By the authority of this one man, devil-possessed, and by the evil genius of his creed and will-power, many things more needful to the souls of men than the cities they had built, or the treasures of their heritage, had crashed into ruin—the moral code of Christendom, the tradition of chivalry, liberties gained at great cost, spiritual values, civilized decencies. Everything had collapsed into ruin, even sanity of the human mind among those who had lost and those who had won this war. The ruins of Berlin into which Vladimir walked as he had walked through many other ruined cities were the memorial of the man whose charred bones lay somewhere under a foot or two of earth near the great grim Egyptian-looking building he had raised in his pride. This was the end of his mad dream. Here was the hideous graveyard of his far-reaching ambitions. Here amidst these heaps of rubble the people whom he had demoralized and betrayed came out of their hiding-places, furtively and afraid, to see their conquerors. Most of them had had a blind faith in him. Millions of young man had fought with heroism—their courage did not fail—until they fell on the battle-fields. They had cried "Heil Hitler!" on the way to death. Now Germany lay prostrate. The Red Army occupied this wreckage of a city which had once been Berlin. The Soviet Flag was raised above the

Brandenburg gate still standing in the ruins.

Vladimir walked through the ruins of Berlin.

He walked with his friend Sergei and other officers of the Intelligence. He shared a room in a great white building of cement and stucco which had been the headquarters of the German Air Ministry. Now it was the S.M.A., or Soviet Military Administration.

He walked out of it one evening with Sergei for a breath of air and an exploration of the scene around him. Dusk was beginning to creep up on this evening in May. There was a sickle moon in the sky still faintly blue. They walked across the Thiergarten, now a wide barren space like a deserted battle-field. The trees had been cut down. Two tall flak towers for anti-aircraft defences stood up grimly. They passed huge concrete bunkers in which civilians had taken shelter during the British and American air-raids. They passed through the Brandenburg gate and went up Unter den Linden, standing for a moment to look down the Wilhelmstrasse which was now piled with broken rubble from many great buildings.

"The German Foreign Office was down there," said Vladimir. "I have often read about it. In the old days it was the headquarters of German diplomacy."

Sergei nodded.

"I know. Let's go and see the place where Hitler lived and died—if he died. Some of our crowd think he may be alive in hiding somewhere. A very unusual type of madman. A doctor told me that he suffered from all the symptoms of incipient epilepsy. Personally I've an idea that he was a homicidal maniac like so many of the world's heroes—Napoleon, our Peter the Great and Ivan the Terrible. There's a lot of trouble in the world because of our heroes. They are a great nuisance to the common folk."

He spoke with a light touch of irony and then gave a heavy sigh.

"I'm sick of ruin, Comrade Vladimir. I want to see beauty again. I want to walk through green meadows and across flower-spangled fields. I want to get away from the stench of death. It reeks here in Berlin. There are many bodies under these rubble heaps."

"The living people are frightened of us," answered Vladimir.

Sergei laughed.

"Poor devils, I don't wonder at it. Some of our men are beast-like—no higher than the antropoids."

The dusk deepened in the streets of skeleton houses and piled-up masonry. It was just before curfew-time imposed by the Russian Army in those early days of occupation. German men and women were hurrying homewards. That is to say they were hurrying to cellars beneath the ruins or to air-raid shelters used as communal dwelling-places or to houses here and there which by some

miracle of luck had escaped destruction, as in the neighbourhood of the Grunewald where some fine well-furnished houses still stood intact.

"Some of these German girls are good looking," remarked Sergei. "Some are even beautiful. I'm sorry for them if they get into the hands of our young savages and subhumans, as most of them will before we clear out—if ever we do."

Here and there were hurrying figures. A lorry-load of Russian soldiers came slowly down the Friedrichstrasse. The men were armed with tommy-guns. A military police car followed. It was almost dark and ten minutes later the city became silent and deserted except for the Russian patrols.

"Better get back to the S.M.A.," said Vladimir. "All this is very depressing and we shall probably break our necks over the twisted iron and masonry."

"I'll take you to a place I've found," said Sergei. "It's an underground restaurant, well lighted. One can get French wine there. There's a German violinist who plays like a master. It's tolerated by our police for officers only."

"Well, lead the way," said Vladimir.

Sergei used his flash-light. They had been walking a hundred yards or so when ahead of them was a sudden burst of machine-gun fire. The dark figure of a man was running towards Vladimir and Sergei. They could hear his panting breath until he flung himself into a gulf of darkness between two shattered houses.

A military car travelling fast pulled up by Vladimir and Sergei and a voice spoke to them after picking out their figures in the headlights.

"Did you see anyone run past you, comrades?"

"Yes," said Vladimir.

"Which way did he go?"

"Somewhere over there," answered Vladimir, pointing in the opposite side of the street to where the man had disappeared.

He asked a question in his turn.

"Why did you fire? The order is to arrest people found in the streets after curfew, not to shoot them down."

"The fellow wouldn't stop when we summoned him. He took to his heels. We have a right to fire in that case, comrade."

He gave a harsh laugh.

"In any case he's a German. Better dead. Good night, comrade."

Vladimir and Sergei went on. Sergei asked a question.

"Why did you point in the wrong direction?"

"I don't like to see hunted animals," answered Vladimir. "I expect he was quite harmless. He was only terror-stricken."

Sergei gave a quiet laugh.

"You're a queer fellow, Vladimir. You're as queer as I am. We're both

very odd types. We have pity even for Germans. We have respect for women—even if they are German women. We're not amused by cold-blooded murder or exalted by the sight of piled-up corpses where German boys made their last stand on the battle-fields. Once I was very sick at such a sight and I've seen you turn green at the results of bayonet-work on the bodies of our enemies."

"I don't see anything queer in that," answered Vladimir coldly. "I hope I've certain decent instincts."

Sergei answered him in the darkness, keeping the little pool of light from his flash-lamp a pace ahead of them.

"You and I, my friend, are going to suffer intolerably during the coming years if we remain in Germany with the Army of Occupation. We shall have to be witnesses of things that make our gorge rise—looting, the ill-treatment of women, the methods of the N.K.V.D. applied to a conquered race, the enslavement of a people more civilized than ourselves, the policy of extermination by famine, or, if not extermination, the breaking of a nation's spirit to the level of licking their chains and getting converted to the creed of their conquerors. All that is coming and you and I, Comrade Vladimir, won't like it very much because there's a streak of softness in us. I see life with a poet's eye, and you with English sentimentalism which came to you with your mother's milk. Now that this war is over with our glorious victory we shall see a grey, grim, ghastly world and a state of misery which we shall call Peace. We shall see the death of European civilization. It is here around us and you and I shall be conscience-stricken because our leaders will work for the domination of the world by the Slav race and its political system and its police tyranny, which you and I, in our hearts, my comrade, utterly abhor."

Vladimir sighed heavily and then spoke his secret hopes.

"I look forward to the co-operation of Russia with all other nations of the earth. I hope this victory of ours will lead to a happier world for all mankind. Now that we've won we can afford to give liberty to our own people and all others. We can now raise the standard of civilization in our own Russia and work for the prosperity of the human brotherhood everywhere."

Sergei halted and turned his flash-lamp on to Vladimir's face and laughed as he did so.

"My comrade, you delude yourself. And you know you are deluding yourself. That is a sin against the inner light."

"Why do you say that?" asked Vladimir emotionally. "It's a terrible thing to say about a comrade, Sergei."

He could see Sergei's smile in the little circle of light he made by his torch.

"I know you, Vladimir," he answered. "You and I have revealed our minds to each other in the neighbourhood of death. I know that in your soul there is a conflict which you hide from yourself. You repeat the old slogans of Lenin and

Marx but you have long disbelieved them. You have tried to make excuses for all the evil of the Soviet system, for all its villainies and its hideous cruelties, but at the back of your mind, crushed down by will-power, are horror and hatred of evil. You are torn asunder by a division of blood—your English mother, your Russian father—and by a more desperate conflict tearing at your soul—the antagonism between two ways of thought, two ways of feeling, merciless on one side, pitiful on the other. You are a Christian without confessing it, and there is no reconciliation between the Christian idea and the creed of the Godless state. Comrade Vladimir, I know you. I'm sorry for you, my dear fellow, as I'm sorry for myself. You and I are out of tune with our own people. You and I will break our hearts against iron walls."

"My heart is broken," said Vladimir. "When my little Sofia died my heart broke."

"That wound will heal," said Sergei. "But you'll never patch up the rent, the bleeding gap between two different ideals of life as hostile as good and evil."

Vladimir cried out in the darkness of Berlin.

"You are torturing me, Sergei. Shut up, for God's sake!"

"We are both tortured," said Sergei quietly. "Let's go and drown our sorrows in drink."

He tucked his arm through Vladimir's with a good-natured laugh.

"I must talk nonsense now and then," he said, as though making an apology.

"How much further to that haunt of vice?" asked Vladimir presently.

"It ought to be near here," said Sergei. "This infernal darkness bewilders me."

Out of the darkness close to them a woman's shriek rang out several times.

In a doorway a Russian soldier was dragging out a girl. He had his arms about her and when she shrieked again hit her across the mouth so that she fell limp.

Vladimir ran towards them, and grabbed the soldier's arm.

"Leave that woman alone," he said harshly.

"I want her," said the man. "What I want I take. Take your hands off me or I'll slit your throat."

"I'm an officer," said Vladimir. "I'll report you. What's your unit number?"

The man straightened himself up while the girl collapsed at his feet.

"Pardon me, Comrade Officer. I was searching for a little love. It's not my fault this slut began to squeal."

He kicked the girl's body and would have lurched off but for Vladimir's grip on his arm.

“Your number and unit.”

The man gave it sulkily.

“Now go.”

The girl lay at Vladimir’s feet and gave a moan. He stooped down and held her up.

“Bring your torch here, Sergei.”

By the light of Sergei’s torch he saw the glint of the girl’s hair like spun gold and the pallor of her face. She was very young.

He spoke to her in German, holding her with one arm and feeling her weight against his body.

“Where do you live?”

She answered faintly:

“Three doors away.”

“How did that soldier get hold of you? Did you promise to go with him?”

He felt her body shudder.

“No, sir! I was with my mother who is lying ill. He came down and flashed a light on me. He spoke in Russian and then seized me and dragged me outside.”

She began to weep noisily.

“We will take you back,” said Vladimir.

He spoke to Sergei.

“Help me with this young girl. Show us a light.”

With their arms about her the girl was able to walk, and twenty yards further on pointed to some steps going down to a basement room.

“Here?” asked Vladimir.

He took her down, pushed open a door, and blinked because of the light from an oil-lamp. It was a stone-built room which had once been a wine cellar and had a damp smell. A sick-looking woman was lying on an iron bedstead and a small boy and girl about eight and ten years of age were sobbing and crying, until they saw the girl, when they made a rush at her clasping her in their arms.

The woman on the bed raised herself slightly and spoke to Vladimir.

“One of your soldiers has behaved brutally to my daughter. Are you all savages? I could not protect her. I am very ill.”

“She is safe now,” said Vladimir. “I regret the incident. The man will be punished.”

The girl he had rescued began to weep again but he heard two words she murmured.

“*Danke schön!*”

Sergei had come down the stone steps and looked round the cellar. He was going to put his hand on the small boy’s head with its shock of straw-coloured

hair, but the boy shrank back from him and was afraid.

"Let us go," said Vladimir.

He said good night to this German mother and her children and went up the steps into the dark street again.

Sergei followed him.

"Didn't I tell you that we are queer fellows?" he asked. "We shall have our hands full if we rescue Germain maidens in distress because of drunken and beast-like Russians. We shall end up in front of a firing-squad for interfering with military discipline and fraternizing with the enemy. Vladimir, you're a Don Quixote. It's perilous to come out with you."

"Where's that drinking-shop?" asked Vladimir impatiently. "I don't want to drink but I dislike wandering in the dark."

"Twenty paces more," answered Sergei.

He peered about with the light of his torch and seemed to find his whereabouts. Then he led the way down some more steps under a wrecked house, pushed open a door and entered a very large room in which there were many small tables with shaded lights. A number of Russian officers were sitting round the tables drinking wine and listening to a violinist accompanied at a piano by a little fat man with plump fingers. Vladimir's eyes roved round the room. It seemed to him very splendid. It was astonishing, he thought, to find this place under the ruins. Tall gilt-framed mirrors hung on the walls which were tapestried, and as he followed Sergei to a vacant table his feet were silent under a thick carpet. On the tables were silver-handled knives and forks and tall wine-glasses which caught the light of the shaded lamps. A number of German girls scantily clad sat together at the end of the room. Later in the evening they did some dancing—very badly in the opinion of Vladimir who had been a devotee of the Russian ballet. But it was obvious they were there to encourage the Russian officers to drink French wine.

One officer, very drunk, seized one of the girls and put her on his knee, fondling her grossly, while his companions roared with laughter, though others looked on grimly.

"This is a low haunt," said Vladimir. "Why did you bring me here?"

"I like to see life in all its phases," said Sergei.

"I find it horrible," answered Vladimir. "Those German girls are willing to sell themselves to Russians however brutal."

"So it has happened all through history," said Sergei. "Women are among the prizes of war since the times of Attila and his Huns or Genghis Khan and his Golden Horde of Mongols. Now it is our turn as invaders and conquerors. German women will be among our victims and slaves. When famine comes they will sell themselves for bread. Young mothers will sell themselves for the sake of their children. It happened after the First World War, so I was told by

my father."

"You will drink some French wine, gentlemen?" asked a sinister-looking waiter with a perfectly bald head and a scar down his cheek. "We have some excellent Burgundy."

"How much does it cost in German marks?" asked Sergei.

The waiter mentioned a sum which seemed to Vladimir excessively high and beyond his pay as Lieutenant of Intelligence.

"One bottle, if you please," said Sergei.

Vladimir spoke to him in a low voice after the waiter had gone.

"You are mad. We can't afford it."

"We will divide the cost," said Sergei. "Once in a while it's amusing to be extravagant. I am told that Burgundy warms the heart and stimulates the imagination. It makes the world seem a happier place. It is of course wine stolen from the French after their defeat. These Germans were great robbers. They looted the treasure-houses and the larders of Europe. We, of course, shall follow their example in due course. We shall strip their factories, remove their reserves of food and reduce them to the level of the Ukraine in time of famine."

"They asked for it," said Vladimir sombrely, "but the innocent will suffer for the guilty."

They drank the French Burgundy. It seemed to warm the spirit of his friend Sergei, who became talkative and poetical.

"This wine," he said, "is liquid sunshine. I see the grapes being gathered in French vineyards by peasant men and women who praise God for the fruits of the earth. It is only those who are close to the earth who believe in God and human kindness."

One of the girls, almost naked, danced under a spotlight.

Vladimir watched her. She had a beautiful body, he thought. It was sad that she should be hired to dance in this place of evil. It was certainly evil. He thought of Sofia, his dead love. If the Germans had won the war and occupied Russia she might have been caught in such a trap, though she would have died rather than yield to this kind of fate.

"You look sad, comrade," said Sergei presently. "I have been talking rather well but you haven't heard a word."

"Let's get out of it," said Vladimir. "I find it very depressing."

XLII

After some time in Berlin Vladimir was recalled to the Politburo in Moscow. For him it was an unhappy time. The death of his little Sofia left him with a sense of inner desolation, though his first passionate grief abated. Gradually Sofia took her place with Lucy in the spirit world with which sometimes he tried to get in touch without success, though now and then, at rare times, he had a kind of belief that they were close to him.

He watched the deepening misery and despair of the German people with pity for the women and children and for individuals with whom he came in touch by hazard. He saw the division of Germany into separate zones of control—British, French and American. Berlin itself was so divided and for a time he hoped that this would lead to pleasant international contacts, especially with the English. To them he was attracted by the call of the blood, though as a Russian he was still deeply suspicious of their political and economic ambitions. He was still strongly prejudiced against their old traditions of Imperialism and their desperate adherence to the pluto-democratic system with its exploitation of the working classes, its corruption in high places, and its horrible degradation of the proletariat. Had he not been convinced of all that since early boyhood? It had been dinned into him. It was the very basis of his intellectual equipment. But illogically—is not the human brain choked with illogicalities?—he hankered after the association of English people whose heroic spirit during the war could not be denied, at least by his own mind, though denied utterly by most of his colleagues and brother officers. They were contemptuous of the British contribution to victory and were convinced that the long delay in starting the Second Front was due to the deliberate policy of Winston Churchill, fanatically hostile to Russia. He heard all that in conversation with his Russian friends and brought trouble upon himself at times by arguing against such views.

"Comrade Lieutenant," said his colonel one day in the mess room of the S.M.A., "you express views about England which are not in accordance with our Russian sense of reality. I should regret having to report you. I am willing to make a certain amount of allowance on account of your general service, but I beg of you not to be a propagandist for our English allies and former enemies."

He spoke good-naturedly, but it was a warning and a serious one.

"I was only putting in a word for their national character and courage," answered Vladimir. "I am, of course, convinced that their political system and fundamental ideas are hostile to our own. Nevertheless, Comrade Colonel, I venture to hope that we shall be able to co-operate with them on a peaceful basis according to the Charter of the United Nations. That surely is the hope for all humanity."

The Colonel shrugged his shoulders and another officer in the mess gave a harsh laugh.

"In my opinion," said the Colonel, "that is an illusion which for a time is necessary for us to encourage. There is only one hope for humanity, and for universal peace, if that is ever possible. It is for the conversion of all States to the Soviet system under Russian leadership, and direction from Moscow as the central capital of a new world state. You agree, of course?"

Vladimir hesitated for a moment, and then answered:

"It's a great ideal, Comrade Colonel. Perhaps that is our future destiny."

In his own mind that moment of hesitation was due to some dark subconscious doubts. Would it be good for mankind to have its destiny directed by the men in the Kremlin and enforced upon them by military police? Would it not put humanity in chains? Had it not been Adolf Hitler's dream of world domination by one race and one authority? Was Russia now to drive along the same road by the same methods? Had one dictatorship been overthrown to erect another equally ruthless and equally ambitious?

These doubts lurked in the hinterland of his consciousness but did not come to his lips or even to the forefront of his mind.

"The so-called United Nations," said another officer grimly, "is likely to be a dog-fight or a bear-garden. The enemies of Russia who now fawn upon us because of our power will intrigue behind the scenes to obstruct our legitimate demands and to restrict our sphere of interest. They are likely to form secret combinations against us. We shall be surrounded by plotters, conspirators, and fanatical foes who, professing friendship, will resist our advance at every turn."

"Molotov will see to that," said the Colonel with a quiet laugh. "Our leaders know every move in the game. They will not be deceived like a lot of children. They know the wiles of our so-called allies. They have a dossier about that man Churchill. They won't trust him an inch."

All that was typical of the conversation day by day in Vladimir's unit when politics and world affairs were discussed. It became monotonous and depressing. But not so depressing to Vladimir as the iron curtain drawn between the Russian zone and the occupying zones of the allies in Berlin. The Russian zone came westward to the Brandenburg gate at the Wilhelmplatz and

Unter den Linden. The Russian Memorial with its double flight of steps and Russian inscriptions on tablets above them was just inside the British zone, having been erected before the arrival of the English. Inside the British zone were the Thiergarten and part of the Grünewald as far as the lake called Gato. North of them was the French zone including the Wannsee, the Pfaueninsel and other pleasant places. South of the British zone were the Americans. Here was the opportunity for international contacts and understanding, but to Vladimir's disappointment there was no free traffic of personalities or ideas. Strict orders were given by General Zhukov under instructions from Moscow that there must be no trespassing into the Russian zone by any of the allied troops. None would be allowed in without a pass for some special purpose granted by the S.M.A.

This restriction led to regrettable incidents—regrettable, that is, to Vladimir. One afternoon he saw a young man who looked like an English officer arrested by military police. He was protesting energetically in angry English which the police, needless to say, could not understand. They handled him roughly when he tried to get away from their grasp. Vladimir stepped up to act as interpreter and inquired into the incident.

He spoke to the police first.

"Why do you arrest this British officer, comrades?"

The senior policeman answered sullenly.

"We have our orders. This man has no right to come into the Russian zone without a pass, which he does not possess, it seems. In any case he is not a British officer. He is not wearing the right badge of rank."

Vladimir spoke to the Englishman—a young man with reddish hair and blue eyes and a thin-featured face.

"I speak English. If I may be of service."

The young Englishman laughed but in a vexed way.

"Tell your men to take their hands off me. I'm an English war correspondent, Bertram Miles."

Vladimir knew his name. He had heard him broadcasting from the British front in Normandy. He even knew his voice and heard it with a curious thrill of pleasure. He was a very well-known English war correspondent.

"I'm sorry to meet you like this," he said. "But it's not serious I'm sure."

"It's outrageous," said Bertram Miles. "Haven't we been fighting the same enemy? Don't we call ourselves Allies? I'm getting fed up with Russian impertinence and brutality. I have already had my wrist-watch stolen by three of your drunken soldiers."

"That is most unfortunate," said Vladimir, feeling deeply embarrassed. "Some of our men are rather 'rough diamonds.' Isn't that an English expression?"

“It’s a perfectly good English expression,” said Bertram Miles, “but meanwhile these two men won’t let go of me. I protest against this treatment.”

Vladimir spoke to the military police again.

“Kindly release this gentleman. He’s an English war correspondent. I will make myself responsible. I am Lieutenant Vladimir Michaelovitch Rogov of the Intelligence.”

“We don’t take our orders from you, comrade,” said one of the men. “This man must come with us to military police headquarters.”

Vladimir argued with him but it was useless. The man was obstinate in carrying out his orders.

“I’m afraid I can’t help you at the moment,” said Vladimir, turning to the English war correspondent. “It will be necessary for you to accompany these men. I will report the matter to my own headquarters and doubtless you will be released without delay. Didn’t you know that it was forbidden to enter the Russian zone without a special permit?”

“I don’t care a damn about that,” answered the young Englishman angrily. “I have a perfect right to walk about Berlin. I expect courtesy and friendliness from those who call themselves our allies.”

“Personally I wish to be very courteous, sir,” said Vladimir. “I very much regret you are under arrest. May I advise you to go quietly? I will report the matter to my superior officers.”

“Tell them I shall demand an apology,” said the young Englishman hotly.

He was marched away by the military police. It was several hours before Vladimir obtained a chit for his release after a telephone conversation between his Chief of Intelligence and the officer commanding police headquarters.

His own chief had taken the matter lightly but agreed to intervene.

“It won’t do him any harm to kick his heels for a bit. It will teach these damned English that we don’t like them inside our zone. They seem to think they won the war.”

He laughed loudly.

“They were no more than a flea-bite on the tiger’s back. It was our war and our victory. Anyhow you had better take this chit and escort the fellow back to his own zone.”

Vladimir found Bertram Miles in a small room furnished only by a table and a chair. The door was guarded by a sentry with a fixed bayonet. Miles was smoking his last cigarette and was in a thoroughly bad temper when Vladimir arrived with an officer of the military police who held an order for his release.

“This affair will be heard of again,” he said. “I shall report the incident to my paper. It will open their eyes to the hostile attitude of the Russians towards those who wished to be friendly.”

“I have been instructed to accompany you as far as your own zone,” said

Vladimir politely. “That will be a pleasure for me. I have a very great desire for friendship between Russia and Great Britain.”

Bertram Miles looked at him dubiously and then smiled for the first time.

“I’m glad to hear one Russian say that,” he answered. “It’s not the general attitude.”

“The Russian people,” said Vladimir, “share that desire, I am certain.”

“What about the Russian leaders and the Russian officers?” asked Bertram Miles, challenging him with his blue eyes.

Vladimir hesitated to answer that question directly.

“There are differences in our ideologies,” he said cautiously. “Shall we go, sir?”

“As soon as you please.”

Vladimir walked with him as far as the Brandenburg gate. The English war correspondent was still fuming inwardly no doubt but he coerced himself to be fairly civil to a friendly young Russian and complimented him on his English.

“You speak it remarkably well.”

“I had an English mother,” said Vladimir.

“Oh, that accounts for it!”

He asked an awkward question.

“Why do you Russians put up such barriers against the outside world? Do you want to hide things? Are you afraid of people seeing behind the Iron Curtain?”

“I am a patriotic Russian,” said Vladimir, cautiously again. “Doubtless our leaders have good reasons. It is probably a matter of high political consideration. I don’t profess to understand these things.”

Bertram Miles laughed more good-naturedly than before.

“They’re damned hard to understand. There’s no sense in them, old man. And something has happened today which makes it necessary that we get together and establish peace on earth before another war blots out mankind for good and all.”

“Something unusual has happened?” asked Vladimir. Bertram Miles laughed again but this time with a queer look in his eyes and a queer note in his voice.

“Something most unusual! Something which has never happened before in the history of the world.”

“You astonish me!” said Vladimir. “May I enquire?”

Bertram Miles was surprised that he had not heard of the atom bomb which had blown Nagasaki and Hiroshima off the map, destroying everything, killing everybody and everything, and forcing the Japanese to surrender.

“It’s the disintegration of the atom,” said Miles. “It liberates terrific forces. It puts a new weapon into the hands of man which will wipe him out unless he

learns to mend his morals."

Vladimir stared at him.

"You are telling me the truth, sir? I have not seen the morning's news. It sounds incredible."

"It is incredible but true. Well, good night. Thanks for your company. But I'm not going to lie down under the insult I've received. Tell your chiefs that. So long!"

He raised a hand and went through the Brandenburg gate. He had told something of an earth-shaking bomb, threatening the annihilation of mankind if it were used for destruction, but his own little trouble, his own sense of insult and humiliation, was not blotted out by that terrifying threat to humanity.

That was the first time Vladimir heard of the new atom bomb, but in the mess that night they talked of nothing else and for months afterwards, even for years, the refusal of the Americans to share the secret of that power was another cause of distrust and suspicion in the Russian mind against the Western world and its pluto-democracies, as Vladimir came to know and deeply regret.

There were houses round about Grünewald which had escaped the ferocious air raids of the British and Americans and Vladimir went into some of them with Sergei and other officers for the purpose of interrogating their owners. Some of them were on the black list of the N.K.V.D. and were taken away to prisons and concentration camps; others were considered suitable for administrative positions under Russian control. Vladimir and his brother officers were staggered by the magnificence and luxury of these German residences, and even still more astonished by the comfort and elegance of smaller houses here and there which belonged to the bourgeoisie of Berlin. Nothing of this kind existed in Russia. In one house from which the owners had fled Sergei expressed his astonishment to Vladimir.

"These German folk belong to a higher stage of civilization than ourselves. Look at all these books. Look at these pictures. Feel the softness of the carpets beneath your feet. Before the air-raids there must have been thousands of houses in Berlin as good as this. Our beautiful Soviet system, which according to our propaganda has raised the proletariat to a high standard of living, looks rather foolish when we stand in a house like this. Haven't we been living in a fool's paradise? Isn't that all a mockery—our slogans and our self-conceit?"

"Material comfort doesn't mean everything," answered Vladimir, but he too had been dumbfounded by the high standard of living in Germany before their defeat and destruction.

Sergei, who was very childlike in some of his characteristics, seemed to delight in pulling the plug of the lavatory upstairs.

"Marvellous!" he cried.

He laughed excitedly like a boy with a new toy as he pulled the plug again.

"Our soldiers," he said, "don't understand the use of this. They think it's for washing and wonder why it's placed so low that one has to go down on one's hands and knees. I confess I was baffled the same way myself until it was explained to me by a friendly German."

He fingered the silk curtains in the drawing-room, patted the upholstered chairs, sank into one of the armchairs in the library and stretched out his legs.

"They lived like princes," he said. "One family to a house, instead of two families to a room as one finds in Moscow."

Vladimir was looking at the books and took down some of me volumes.

"Educated people lived here," he said. "They had a good standard."

Presently he gave an exclamation of surprise.

"English books! Some by Charles Dickens. *The Pickwick Papers. David Copperfield.*"

"That seems to excite you," remarked Sergei, enjoying a sense of ease in the deep arm-chair.

"Yes," said Vladimir. "Yes indeed! My mother's copy of *The Pickwick Papers* was like this. It had the same illustrations. I remember them as a very small boy. It takes me right back in time when I was a wanderer with my little English mother during our Civil War. It makes me want to weep, for some reason."

He laughed, but with tears in his eyes at the sight of "Mr. Pickwick" in one of the illustrations by Cruickshank.

"Put it in your pocket," suggested Sergei. "You may as well do a bit of looting like all the rest of our savages."

"No," said Vladimir, who for a moment had been tempted. "I still remember my mother's code of honour. If I stole this copy of Pickwick I should let her down."

Sergei laughed good-naturedly.

"You're an odd creature. Comrade Vladimir! I have remarked on that before. You call yourself a Russian, but you have the soul as well as the blood of your little English mother. You don't see life through Russian eyes. You're haunted by English fairy-tales and English moralities."

"You repeat yourself, Sergei," answered Vladimir. "And you put a strain on my friendship by talking nonsense whenever you talk, which is too often."

Sergei laughed at this rebuke and knew that between him and Vladimir there was an unbreakable comradeship.

"I propose to go on talking nonsense. It's the only freedom left to a Russian, and even that leads him to the firing-squad sooner or later. Meanwhile I don't mind telling you that I have fallen very much in love with a German *Mädchen*. I haven't spoken to her yet but we have talked with our

eyes. She's as beautiful as a poet's dream, and she wears silk stockings on her lovely legs. She also wears a frock with a pattern of little flowers and short sleeves which show her bare and exquisitely shaped arms. She lives below a heap of rubble in some basement room from which she comes up as though from the boudoir of a German princess in the time of Frederick the Great."

"Better be careful, comrade!" said Vladimir warningly. "Remember the orders against intercourse with German women except in licensed houses."

He too had remarked many times how well dressed and good-looking were many of the German girls who appeared among the ruins. They wore the prettiest frocks, unlike anything he had seen in Russia. They had neat little shoes with high heels. Most of them wore silk stockings. Their hair was beautifully curled or braided. It was almost impossible to believe that they lived in cellars or roofless houses or in air-raid shelters which they shared with masses of homeless people.

As they passed him in his Russian uniform many of them turned their heads away and their lips hardened. But now and then a girl looked at him furtively or gave him a fleeting smile of which he took no notice. One girl spoke to him. It was before the curfew hour and she was hurrying down a narrow street on the south side of the Thiergarten, picking her way hurriedly through heaps of rubble. Suddenly she fell over a bit of twisted iron and gave a cry.

Vladimir was near her when she fell and he hurried forward and helped to pick her up, speaking a few words of German.

"I hope it is not serious, *Fräulein*."

For a moment she looked frightened but was reassured by his face and manner.

She smoothed down her frock and laughed.

"Nothing serious," she told him. "But if I am caught in the streets after dusk I shall be arrested or shot by the Russian police."

"You live far from here?"

"The other side of the Thiergarten. I must run!"

"I will come with you," said Vladimir. "You will be safe with me."

She looked at him suspiciously and then smiled.

"You don't look very Russian and you are certainly very kind."

"I'm a Russian officer," he told her. "I have a respect for women. You may trust me. I will take you to your home."

"You are very kind," she said again. They walked together silently for a little while. Then the girl spoke to him.

"You know German very well. How is that?"

"I learnt it in the Institute at Moscow. I specialized in foreign languages. I speak English also. I had an English mother."

She glanced at him sideways.

“That’s the reason why you don’t look very Russian,” she said. “That is the reason why I trust you, perhaps.”

“I hope my fellow Russians are not all brutes,” he said gravely. “You seem to suggest that.”

“They behave abominably,” she answered. “They do horrible things to German girls. They loot the ruined houses. They go into shops and steal everything. They grab any German with a wrist-watch and take it from him by force. I have seen them kick a woman to death because she refused to go with them. How is it you allow these things? Have you no discipline in the Russian Army?”

“We have a very severe discipline,” answered Vladimir. “Many soldiers have been shot for looting and other crimes.”

“Many more ought to be shot,” said the girl.

She was probably about twenty years of age and he was surprised at the courage with which she spoke to a Russian officer. But he reminded her of recent history.

“The German armies were not gentle in Russia. They also committed many crimes and many cruelties.”

“No,” she said. “I don’t believe it. Germans are civilized.”

“I have seen many horrors,” he answered gravely. “War seems to liberate the brute in man.”

She did not answer but walked on silently for a time. It was dusk now and Russian armoured cars were beginning to patrol the streets. Two Russian military police came towards Vladimir and the German girl. They stared suspiciously but passed on with a salute to Vladimir.

“Without you I should have been seized by those men,” said the German girl.

“Unless you had run home very fast,” said Vladimir. “Is your home far away now?”

“Twenty yards away,” she told him. “I live in a cellar with my mother and two little sisters.”

They walked the twenty yards and then stopped and she held out her hand.

“I shake hands,” she said, “not with a Russian officer but with the son of an English mother. Thanks a thousand times.”

“Shall I tell you why you were safe with me?” he asked.

“I should like to know.”

“Because in my heart there is a dead girl whom I loved. Her name was Sofia. She was killed by German bombers.”

“That might have made you want revenge,” she said. “It might have made you cruel to a German girl.”

“No. Sofia was kind. I should disgrace my love if I were cruel to any girl.”

She was quite silent for several moments. Then she spoke.

“Shall we meet again? I should like to talk with you another time.”

“At the moment it is against orders,” he told her. “Perhaps a little later we might meet.”

He saluted her and she said “*Auf Wiedersehen*” and smiled at him as he could see in the darkening twilight.

He was attracted by her pride and courage and some quality in her which he thought was rare. She belonged perhaps to one of the old aristocratic families of Berlin of whom he had heard.

But he never met her again, being recalled to the Politburo in Moscow.

XLIII

Four years had passed since Vladimir had been to Moscow—the years of war which had changed him from a boy into a man with frightful and searing memories of human agony. That war had blasted its way along the road to Moscow but the fury of the enemy had been thwarted by the sacrifice of millions of young Russians and the city was held.

It was with emotion that Vladimir passed again through the gate of the Iberian Virgin and crossed the Red Square flanked by the rose-coloured walls of the Kremlin. But at the end of a few days he felt downhearted, melancholy and lonely. Walking through the public gardens he remembered his walks here with Sofia after his hours of study. They had walked hand in hand with a song of love in their hearts. All that was gone. Sofia was gone. Their dream of love had vanished. Others had gone—many of his friends killed in the purges or in the war. For him Moscow would have been a desert but for Irina and his sister Olga who still lived with Zabotin and Kusanova.

Irina received him with a cry of joy and embracing arms. He was startled and shocked by her appearance. During those four years of his absence she had become an old woman, thin and frail. Her hair so black and lustrous had gone grey. There were lines of age, or of tragic years, about her eyes and mouth.

"Irina!" he cried after that first embrace. "You look ill. What have you been doing?"

"You mean that I look old," she answered. "Yes. I hate to look in a mirror now. 'Can that old hag be me,' I think. And yet I am not old, Vladimir. It's not age which has altered me but fear and loneliness and starvation and despair."

"What news of Petrov?" he asked, hiding his pity.

She began to weep but only for a moment.

"My Petrov is dead," she said. "He was killed in an air-raid. So they told me, but what can I believe? Who can believe anything? I never saw him since that day they sent him away to manage some factory in an unknown place. He was dead for me then. Everybody is dead—everybody in the world I knew."

"I am alive," said Vladimir, kissing her hands. She had been his second mother, though as a boy he had loved her for a time in his adolescent dreams. "You and I, Irina, still remain alive. Like you I feel lonely and not too sure that it's good to be alive. My Sofia is dead. You knew that?"

She nodded.

“Stanislav told me. He came to Moscow a year ago for three days. Is he still alive?”

“I believe he is. Do you ever see Olga?”

She shook her head.

“She is leading ballerina now. She has taken Kusanova’s place. She never comes my way.”

“Tell me of your war years,” said Vladimir, that evening when she had made him some tea and sat holding his hand in a tight clasp as though afraid he would go away from her. She spoke always in a low voice because of people in her other rooms. At the very beginning of the war officials had put people into her other rooms because of the overcrowding in Moscow. She had fought them wildly when they took away Vassily’s little room.

“Leave that one to me,” she had cried. “My son died in there. His spirit haunts it.”

But of course they wouldn’t listen. They took away Vassily’s room.

There had been several panics in Moscow when the Germans were coming close. Officials and their families had fled and many had been shot for cowardice or other crimes charged against them. For a time before the tide of war turned Moscow had been like a doomed city. Many people believed that nothing would stop the German advance. They had resigned themselves to death or capture. Irina had worked for a time in a factory like most other women until her health broke down. It was better for some reasons in the factory. There was the companionship of other women and there was food, however poor. But when she lay ill in her own room she had nearly starved to death and often was so weak that she could hardly crawl out of bed to make herself some tea. Some of the neighbours had been kind to her. They had saved her life by sharing their food with her, though they could ill spare it. The loneliness was hardest to bear. Sometimes she was terrified and hysterical when she lay alone in this room believing that she was dying.

“It’s not amusing to die alone,” she said.

“No,” agreed Vladimir. “That is not amusing, poor Irina! But how is your health now?”

She told him that she suffered horribly from bronchitis and asthma but otherwise was better.

“Bronchitis doesn’t kill one,” she said. “It’s a poor kind of malady. Neither one thing nor the other.”

Irina’s company was not exhilarating, but because of loyalty, remembering her love for him after Lucy’s death when as a boy he greatly needed it, he spent as much time with her as possible when he could get away from the Politburo to which he had returned.

He went of course to see his sister Olga and found her again with Zabotin and Kusanova. Olga was now in the full bloom of her young womanhood and beautiful he thought. He was much touched when she flung her arms about him and called him by his mother's pet name for him and kissed him a hundred times.

"Oh, David! . . . My dear David! . . . How often I thought you must have been killed!"

Zabotin and Kusanova embraced him and he was warmed by this affectionate and excited welcome.

"You are like one come back from the dead!" shouted Zabotin. "My dear fellow! My imagination is too weak to picture all the horrors you have seen, all the perils you have escaped, all your hardships and agonies in this atrocious war which has turned men into tigers and wild beasts. Here was I, Zabotin, still producing ballets while the world reeks with human blood, and while millions of men not far away were engaged in a fight to the death. I feel ashamed of myself in the presence of a front-line soldier. I cannot look him in the eyes. I have danced while his comrades have died. I have lived in comfort—in something like comfort—while they were crouched in holes in the ground under infernal fire, or hurled themselves upon the enemy whom they overwhelmed by human flesh alone against machines of death. God knows, however, that I too have suffered. The imaginative man, the artist, the poet, suffers in his soul all the agonies of his fellow men. He dies a million times thinking of them."

Kusanova spoke more quietly.

"We have thought of you always, dear Vladimir. We had no idea where you were or how you were. But I had a faith that you would survive. I wouldn't let Olga give way to despair about you. And now you see I was right. Here you are looking wonderful and our hearts are filled with gladness at the sight of you. I think of the time when you were a small boy in Kazan and jumped down from the bed above the stove when we came to your mother's house, hungry and wanting food. Do you remember how you frightened us all?"

"That was before I could remember anything," said Olga. "I missed a lot of those early adventures with our Little Mother."

It was Olga who later in the evening turned to him with a question which stabbed his heart.

"How is your little Sofia? Have you heard from her?"

"Sofia is dead," he told her, and put his arm over his eyes to hide a sudden gush of tears.

Olga flung herself beside him and put her arms about him.

"My poor David! I'm so sorry. It is tragic for you."

It was only by sudden reminders of Sofia that he broke down like this. His heart-wound was healing and sometimes he was ashamed of that, ashamed because he was able to eat and carry on with life, and sometimes laugh, though Sofia was dead, and had passed into a dream world like his mother and father and Vassily and many friends.

Zabotin questioned him about the kind of peace which would be made and the effect of the war upon the Russian way of life.

"Will it bring more liberty? Will the Russian people enjoy the fruits of their own labour? Will there be peace in the world?"

These were questions not to be answered easily or lightly.

"I have great hopes," said Vladimir. "I put my faith in the United Nations in which we shall play an important part. If we co-operate with England and the United States and the smaller democratic nations there will be a new era of peace and happiness. Russia will no longer be shut in mentally and socially. We have much to learn no doubt from the Western nations in culture and beauty. The Capitalist states will have much to learn from us—the proper treatment of their proletariat and the abandonment of their old Imperialist policies and financial exploitation of the masses."

Zabotin found it necessary to argue in his emotional and violent way.

"They have nothing to learn from us," he cried, "except the abomination of State tyranny, the denial of human liberty, the terrors of a Secret Police, the ruthlessness of political purges, an utter contempt for individual life and for the freedom of the mind."

Kusanova, getting rather fat and middle-aged, laughed at him.

"It's a wonder you're alive, my Zabotin! It says something for our police that you have not been shot in the back of the head."

"I am Zabotin," he answered. "They dare not touch me."

He forgot the time of his own terror when he believed that he would be betrayed by his own friends.

Vladimir answered him after a long-drawn sigh. Was not all that Zabotin had said deep down in his own mind? Had he not asked the same questions in his secret and moody hours? Had he not discussed them in strange places very near to death with his friend Sergei?

"This war," he said, "and this peace, may change many things in Russia. The minds of our people will be opened. I have seen that happening in Berlin. In houses which have escaped the general ruin they have seen the high standard of comfort of the Western pluto-democracies. Our men who won the war will come back to Russia demanding more personal liberty. They won't tolerate police methods and tyranny. A new wind will sweep through Russia blowing away all that evil stuff. Our young men who fought in the war will come back with new ideas. International co-operation in the United Nations

will break down the old frontiers of suspicion and hatred. I'm looking forward to that. It's the hope of the world, after these years of war. There must be no more war because of one thing which has happened to make it impossible. The Atom Bomb, Zabotin."

Zabotin threw up his hands.

"Lord God have mercy on us!" he cried. "Man has now discovered the source of illimitable power for destruction. Man will use it to destroy himself and everything—all life, all beauty. That discovery means the death of all living things. I had forgotten the Atom Bomb when I asked you what would happen and what kind of peace it will be. That is what will happen. Our doom is near at hand. We look out upon a world condemned to death."

"There will be international control of atomic energy," said Vladimir.

Zabotin waved that statement away.

"International control? How is that possible? The nations will agree to international control maybe. And in deep caves, behind great mountains, in far and secret places, men believing themselves patriots, men dreaming of world domination, men who love destruction and death, will be making atomic bombs better than those used in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. That idea of international control is an illusion. It is, my dear comrade, a lie!"

Vladimir groaned but would not agree to that black pessimism.

"Humanity will refuse to commit suicide. Our representatives in the United Nations will demand the total abolition of that weapon and the use of atomic energy for peaceful purposes which will transform all our present ways of life by giving us a new source of inexhaustible energy and the supreme chance of universal prosperity."

Zabotin placed both hands on Vladimir's shoulders and stared into his eyes.

"Do you believe what you say, my comrade?" he asked. "Do you believe that the morality of men has reached a stage when they will deny themselves any power which may give them victory at the risk of their own destruction? Or are you jabbering the usual slogans of our Soviet propaganda and of man's insincerity? Tell me, my dear Vladimir."

Vladimir answered uneasily.

"I hope for the best," he answered. "I refuse to surrender my mind to the worst."

Kusanova cried out in her laughing way:

"Zabotin, you wretch! What do you know about these things? You are as ignorant as a child."

"That is true," answered Zabotin. "I have the soul of a child. But I also have the truthfulness of a child and the instincts of a child, wiser often than the subtleties of grown-up people, and less evil."

“You’re a ridiculous creature, Zabotin,” cried Kusanova. “You make me laugh. If you go on like this I shall box your ears.”

Vladimir did not go often to Zabotin’s rooms nor to any other rooms in Moscow. He was sent elsewhere.

It was a new chief of his department in the Politburo who gave him great news one evening.

“Comrade Rogov,” he said, after summoning Vladimir to his room. “I have orders to send you to England. You will act as one of our interpreters at the meetings of the United Nations Organization.”

Vladimir felt his heart beat fast. It was beyond his dreams of ambition.

“England!” he exclaimed in a faint voice. He felt breathless at this astounding and wonderful announcement. To see England, his mother’s country, would be a marvellous joy. It would be the adventure for which even in his boyhood he had longed.

“We have had very good reports of you,” said his chief, good-naturedly. “They have been forwarded to Molotov who has written the word *excellent* across your papers. It is in some way a reward of your services. I am glad to give you this promotion.”

“I am deeply honoured,” said Vladimir.

“You will start tomorrow with other members of our mission.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Not too soon for your private affairs, I hope,” said his chief with astonishing kindness.

“By no means!” answered Vladimir.

His chief motioned him to sit down and for the next half an hour indulged in a monologue which doubtless he regarded as a conversation.

“The situation will be very delicate. It will require the most careful diplomacy on the part of our representatives. That goes without saying. The Soviet Union, of course, has no faith at all in the sincerity of her so-called allies, nor do we desire it. The leopard doesn’t change its spots. The pluto-democracies are inevitably hostile to the U.S.S.R. They professed friendship with us during the war because they knew that they would be destroyed without our tremendous and overwhelming might. The English leader Winston Churchill, whose hatred for our ideals of Communism is written in black and white, swallowed his frantic words and fawned on us. So he would have fawned upon the devil himself—I speak in an allegory, not believing in the devil!—if he had come out to destroy Hitler and Nazi Germany.

“The leaders of the U.S.A.—the most corrupt nation on earth—ruthless in its economic Imperialism—utter platitudinous ideals, well knowing that Big Business in America will declare an economic war upon us as soon as some kind of peace has been patched up. They will never make a truce with our State

system of international trade. We have evidence already, before any peace treaty has been signed, before the so-called United Nations have met, that they are preparing for a Third World War."

Vladimir could not resist a gesture of horror which his chief ignored.

"Frankly one must admit that they read history correctly. Another war is not to be avoided. I need hardly remind you of Lenin's words on that subject. 'It is inconceivable,'—did he not write?—'that the Soviet Republic should continue for a long period with Imperialist states. Ultimately one or the other must conquer. Meanwhile a number of terrific clashes between the Soviet Republic and the bourgeois states is inevitable.' You will find that in his collected works, Vol. 24, page 122."

He smiled at Vladimir as though proud of his feat of memory.

"Does not our Generalissimo Stalin confirm and emphasize Lenin's clear-sighted forecast? No doubt you heard his address on the radio the other night."

Vladimir nodded. He had listened to it with a sense of depression.

"He too," said his chief, "regards war as inevitable so long as the Capitalist system exists. That includes England and the United States. He declared, you will remember, that the Capitalist system of world economy conceals the elements of crisis and war. Thus, he points out, as a result of the first crisis in the development of Capitalist world economy arose the First World War. The Second World War arose as the result of the second crisis. The Americans do not err in prophesying a Third World War."

Vladimir could not resist a groan, but his chief went on with his dogmatic exposition.

"Hence their refusal to share the secret of the Atom Bomb. The insincerity of their professions is revealed blindingly by this non-participation of a scientific secret—completely senseless because our own scientists will quickly discover it. The Americans have the start, of course. Perhaps a three years' start, and they will use that weapon as a threat against us and as an unspoken argument behind their political pressure at the Conference table.

"England, conscious of her weakness, financially bankrupt, compelled to surrender much of her Imperial pride, will of course be drawn into the American sphere of influence. England will want American dollars and American aid. England will be the satellite of the Yankees. Her former Dominions, now independent, will lean heavily towards the American continent, knowing that in any future war the Old Mother Country—effete, worn out and senile—will be unable to defend them. I can see very clearly the picture emerging from the confusion of this post-war transitional period. England, led by old and crafty men, old and frightened men, will scheme to form a Western bloc against Soviet outposts of influence and Soviet internal might. They will resist our advance into Europe and into the warm waters of

the Mediterranean at all points. They will bolster up Greece and Turkey to protect their strategical bases for air and naval forces directed against us. They will try to keep their grip on Palestine, in spite of the Jewish revolutionary movement which we will encourage. They will endeavour—the reactionaries—to link up with France, rapidly going Communist, and with countries like Belgium, Holland, Denmark and Norway, whose manpower may reinforce their own military weakness. They will do all that, or try to do it, under the mask of the United Nations, and they will pretend it is a first step towards the United States of Europe. All this is emerging. All this is very obvious. In Germany the situation is interesting, as doubtless you have seen. After their first fears of our occupation, natural enough because of their own crimes in Western Russia, many Germans who fled beyond our zone are coming back. Those who remained realize that a close association with the Soviet Union, a conversion to our political system is the only hope for a renaissance of Germany. Meanwhile the English are unable to get any order out of chaos in their own zone. Admittedly it is difficult for them as they have the overcrowded and starving cities of industrial Germany. They will get deeper into the mire. Their ridiculous ideology, their insincerities, of the old Liberalism, their weakness and inefficiency, will not prevent famine in Hamburg and other cities within their zone. We shall be in no hurry to come to their rescue. The area of famine is the fertilizing ground of Communism. The pitiful efforts of the English to 'de-nazify' the Western zone and win over the German industrial populations to milk-and-water democracy of the old worn-out style will end in utter failure. Our Soviet sphere of influence will reach as far as the Channel ports—not immediately, but before the peace treaties are signed.

"Our policy, fixed and unalterable, is the conquest of non-Communist states through the world, first by class warfare from within, second by the installation of puppet governments directed from Moscow. When that has been achieved throughout the world, or over the greater part of it, humanity will have peace. Otherwise there will be war, and the atom bomb may thwart our purpose of a universal Soviet by the abolition of humanity itself. Nothing else can."

He laughed and leaned back in his chair.

"That, Comrade Rogov, is how I see the picture. Forgive me for too long a monologue."

He ended his monologue and Vladimir made a cautious comment.

"I am obliged to you for this general view of things."

It was not in accord, that picture, with his own hopes and ideals. He found it very depressing, though nothing at this hour could spoil his joy at the thought of going to England.

“A few words of caution,” said his chief. “You will come in touch with English people—your mother’s people. Do not let the insincere courtesies of their traditional manners, nor their false professions of friendship, blind you to their craftiness and their essential enmity. Keep a cool head and avoid intimate social contacts.”

He laughed good-naturedly again.

“I’ve been talking too much! You will get your orders in London. Comrades Vyshinsky and Gromyko will be your immediate chiefs and the Soviet Embassy in London will impose its own discipline, which I believe is rather rigid. They will not encourage you to mix freely in English social circles.”

He rose from his desk and held out his hand.

“All good wishes. Comrade Rogov!”

“I am deeply obliged,” answered Vladimir.

“I shall follow the reports about you,” said his chief. “They will be favourable, I am sure.”

Vladimir left the room in the Politburo and next morning with a group of other men and two women left Moscow on the way to England.

XLIV

From the Russian Embassy in London Vladimir Michaelovitch Rogov walked into the streets and squares and parks and was enchanted. To him this exploration of London was filled with strange psychological emotions. He had a feeling sometimes that he had seen it all before in another life, having been born again in the process of reincarnation. He was no stranger here, it seemed. Surely he had belonged to these English people who walked about and with whom, now and then, he talked in shops and restaurants. He had their blood in his veins. He was related to them. That doubtless was the secret of this psychological experience. His little English mother and all her ancestors had bequeathed to him physical characteristics, racial memories, some part of his brain structure. He couldn't rule out the idea of racial memories when he sat on one of the chairs in Kensington Gardens watching the children with their nurses. Hadn't he been here once as a small boy with an English nanny? No, that was impossible because he had been a little refugee in the Russian Civil War, trudging behind farm-carts, sleeping in barns with Lucy and Olga. In Westminster Abbey he stood with a sense of awe and wonderment, and yet also with a sense of familiarity. Had he not knelt here once? Had he not seen before the shafts of light through the big windows striking the tall grey pillars in this hushed twilight of the nave?

He wondered how much his Little Mother had told him about all these things when he was a small child. Perhaps she had told him more than he could remember with his conscious mind, until now in London it came seeping up from his subconsciousness—her stories, her fairy-tales, her prattle to a sleepy child.

Trivial little incidents moved him profoundly and startled him. Once in Kensington Gardens a tiny boy, perhaps four year old, stood on a sand heap and cried out, "I'm the King of the Castle, Get down you dirty rascal." Years ago—a lifetime ago—perhaps in some former dream of life, he had shouted out those words like this little English boy.

And one afternoon under the trees in Hyde Park, by the lake called the Serpentine, there was a young mother crooning to an infant lying back in its perambulator. He heard her little song and it was as though she had touched some secret and sensitive nerve in his emotional make-up.

Ba, ba, black sheep, have you any wool?
Yes sir, yes sir, three bags full.

He was walking slowly past her but stopped irresistibly and spoke to her with a smile.

"My mother used to sing that to me."

The girl—she looked no more than twenty—in a shabby frock and white blouse looked up at him with surprise and then with amusement. She spoke with a Cockney accent.

"All mothers sing it to their brats, don't they?"

"I'm a Russian," he told her.

"A Russian?"

She looked astonished and then laughed.

"I suppose you don't want to pinch my wrist-watch, do you?"

"No, no!" he answered with a laugh. "I had an English mother. She used to sing me the old nursery rhymes."

"Nice for you," said the girl. "But I want to get this kid to sleep. Sorry and all that."

He took a taxi-cab to the Tate Gallery one day and had a talk with the driver before going in to see the pictures. He was a lean-faced fellow who had been singing to himself as he drove along.

"London," said Vladimir, "is not so much destroyed as I thought."

"Stranger here?" asked the driver, looking at him quizzically. "Well, if you want to see a bit of ruin just to make you feel cheerful—nothing like other people's misfortunes to cheer one up—have a look at Limehouse. Have a look at Brixton or Clapham."

"Clapham?" exclaimed Vladimir in an excited way.

"Got it badly," said the driver. "So did Brixton. I know because I live there. My own house was blown off the map one night. My mother-in-law copped it. Never found her again. What a game it was when old Jerry came over every night and dropped his eggs! Some people miss it—people who like a little bit of drama, you know. Them doodle-bugs was the worst in my opinion. Couldn't stick 'em. No warning beforehand, at least when I was driving this rattle-trap. Couldn't hear nothing—then suddenly Crash! and you was dead before you knew it. What a game!"

He laughed loudly at this merry game of death in London during war-time.

"My mother was born in Clapham," said Vladimir.

The taxi-driver glanced at him with cocked eyebrows.

"You don't say? Not a bad place. Gone down a bit in recent years."

"She used to play on Clapham Common by the Round Pond. Do you happen to know it?"

“ ’Appen to know it?”

He laughed again at this question.

“Why, as a nipper I used to sail a boat on the Round Pond, and catch tiddlers in a glass jar. But you’re a foreigner, ain’t you? You speak English all right, but with a bit of an accent.”

“I’m a Russian,” said Vladimir. “But I had an English mother.”

“A Russian?”

He cocked his humorous eyebrows again.

“Communist, may I ask?”

“We live under a system of State socialism,” answered Vladimir.

“You can ’ave it!” said the taxi-driver. “We don’t want none of that over ’ere. They’ve put in a Labour government after turning out the man who led us to victory in time of war. That’s Winston Churchill. And mark my words they’ll make a mess of it. I’m an individualist. I like my liberties. I don’t want to get pushed about and told that I can’t do this and I must do that. See was I mean? But no offence meant. Lord love a duck! That’s what we get for ’aving won the war. Less food and more forms to fill up. A Labour government? Well there’s no accounting for taste, as the old lady said when she kissed her cow.”

Vladimir had failed to understand some of his words, spoken in a Cockney way, but that last phrase rang a bell in his memory. Lucy had said that sometimes and made him laugh. Wasn’t it one of Sam Weller’s sayings? This taxi-driver was remarkably like that character in *The Pickwick Papers*.

“I expect you know Sam Weller,” he said with a laugh. “He used to say that.”

The man looked puzzled.

“Sam Weller? Not one of my pals. Well, I must be getting on.”

He shook hands with Vladimir after being paid more than twice his fare.

What Vladimir had told the taxi-driver about his surprise that London had not been more destroyed was an understatement. He was astounded by his first impressions of London. After years of bombardment from the air the great mass of it still stood, with only gaps here and there to show its wounds—except round St. Paul’s and further east where there were wide areas of vacant land and few houses standing. Vladimir had tramped through towns and cities in Russia utterly destroyed. He had walked through the ruins of Berlin. But in London one had to search for the gaps between the houses, and the rubble-heaps had been cleared away. The descriptions in *Isvestia* and *Pravda* were vastly exaggerated and the German accounts of what had been done by rockets and pilotless ’planes had been false and fantastic.

He spoke aloud to himself as he walked through Belgrave Square on his way to the Russian Embassy.

“What can one believe?”

This question nagged at him not only about the ruins of London but about everything he had been told in endless propaganda since boyhood about English life, English government, English tyranny and exploitation of the masses. Where, he asked himself, were the ragged and starving proletariat? Where was the sharp contrast between the very rich and the very poor? Where could he find the outward and visible signs of degeneracy which had overtaken, they said, the last strongholds of the Capitalist system? Where were the unemployed, the beggars, the tramps and the homeless?

There was no outward sign of them being downtrodden and oppressed after a long war in which certainly they must have suffered great hardship, and stood the strain of mortal danger. They looked to his eyes prosperous, cheerful and in no state of despair or misery. Moscow was a slum compared with London. The Russian people in the devastated cities and districts were living in holes in the ground from which they emerged haggard, ragged and stricken. In Moscow he had seen many people ill-clad and ill-shod, worn to skin and bones, living in extremes of wretchedness. Here in London the omnibuses and Tube trains were crowded with men and women—the hated bourgeoisie of Soviet propaganda—quite well dressed after six years of war—better dressed than anyone in Russia, except high officials and their wives. The young women were extraordinarily attractive, he thought, some of them as pretty as pictures in a fairy-tale. Yet by their numbers it was certain that they did not belong to an aristocratic caste fattening on the poverty of slave-labour, as he had been taught. These were the common folk of England, the ordinary housewives, shop girls, city clerks and students. Had he then been utterly deceived? Were they all lies that he had been told a thousand times? Perhaps this was only the surface crust above depths of misery and starvation. Perhaps he would have to dig deeper to discover all that, carefully hidden out of sight. He must talk to these people. He must find out the truth of things. He would like to get into the little homes and see their way of life.

That was not easy for him. He lived under strict discipline. His hours of free time were few and then restricted in what he did with them.

“We don’t encourage our young men to make social contacts with the English,” said his new chief who was in charge of the interpreters and translators. “Any conversation they may have with English people in any place or class must be fully reported, particularly any information of a political character, or revealing the morale and outlook of the working classes. We have, of course, our agents and investigators, closely in touch with our Military Intelligence and Secret Police. It is contrary to the interests of Soviet Russia and the discipline of our diplomatic staff that any intimate friendship should be formed by one of its junior members. Disciplinary action will be taken against anyone who disobeys this ruling or who, without special permission, stays out

beyond the allotted hours as shown in the time-table. That is understood, comrades? Needless to say your behaviour will be carefully noted."

Some latitude was given before the first session of the United Nations Organization. Vladimir made use of it for an expedition to Clapham. It was an interesting and emotional adventure which began in a London tramcar.

It was in the early afternoon and the tramcar was crowded with women who had been shopping. Some of them had two or three children with them. Next to Vladimir was a young woman with a small boy aged about four who reached out a podgy hand for Vladimir's tram ticket and said: "Give it to me. I'm collecting them."

"Be quiet, Bertie!" said his mother. "Leave the gentleman alone."

Vladimir smiled at her.

"He's not worrying me. I like small children."

"A father yourself, I dare say," said the young woman, looking sideways at him and answering his smile.

"No," said Vladimir. "I wish that were so."

"Oh, what a shame!" cried the young woman. "Can't you find a nice girl?"

"I found her but she died," said Vladimir.

"Oh, what a shame! Killed in the air-raids?"

"Yes," Vladimir said, "but not here."

"Awful, wasn't it?" exclaimed the young woman. "I 'ad some very near shaves myself when my Bill was away in North Africa. No fun at all sitting under the stairs while things crashed all around one. Scared? I should think I was!"

She laughed as though it were quite funny to be scared when high-explosive bombs were falling around.

"Seems like a dream now!" said a stout woman sitting opposite with some cabbages in a string bag. She smiled at Vladimir in a motherly way.

"We took our little risks while the boys were away fighting. We women were in the front line all right, though we didn't like to boast about it. I was buried under my own little 'ouse and dug out after two hours. ' 'Ow are you feeling, Ma?' asked the gentleman who first dragged me out by the 'eels. 'I feels like a cup of tea, dearie,' I told 'im, and he seemed to think it funny."

"A cup of tea 'elps a lot in the worst of times," said the young woman with the small boy who was now on the floor collecting tram tickets. "The worst of it is they talk of cutting down the tea ration. Awful, ain't it, and we're supposed to 'ave won the war! One still 'as to queue up for everything. Time we did away with all that, especially under a Labour government. I thought when Labour came in we should be in for a good time."

The fat woman opposite gave a shrill laugh.

"Not on your life, dearie! You've backed the wrong 'orse. Labour? Why

they'll all go Communist like those awful Russians. Then we shan't be able to call our souls our own. The man we want is Winston. Didn't he win the war for us? Then the people chucked him out just like an old boot on to the rubbish heap. It makes me sick."

"Oh, well," said the younger woman. "My Bert voted Labour and I don't like to go against him. He's a good boy. One of the Desert Rats, you know."

Vladimir ventured to ask a question of the younger woman who had now dragged her small son on to her knees and slapped his hand which made a grab for Vladimir's stick.

"Is there likely to be a revolution in England? Do many people wish to overthrow the King and establish a Republic?"

The young woman with the boy and the fat woman opposite stared at him as though he had gone mad.

"What's that you're asking?" said the fat woman. "Get rid of our King and Queen? Make a revolution in England? Where 'ave you come from, young man? Not German, are you?"

"I'm a Russian," he told her.

"Lord love a duck!" she cried. "Fancy me sitting in a tramcar with a Russian! Do you think it's safe, dearie?"

She looked over at the younger woman and laughed in a shrill voice. Then she spoke to the woman conductor who was handing out a ticket to an old gentleman who had just come in at the last stop.

"This gentleman says 'e's a Russian, dearie! Wants to know if we're going to get rid of the King and Queen? I don't think!"

The conductress in her blue tunic and slacks looked down at Vladimir.

"Better keep his tongue in his head. We don't like that kind of talk on this line."

Vladimir realized that he had made a *faux pas*.

"Excuse me!" he said. "I have only just come to England. I am very ignorant of public feeling."

"How is it you talk English, young man?" asked the fat lady with the cabbages.

"I had an English mother."

"A pity she didn't strangle you at birth, sir," remarked the old man who had come in at the last stop. "Get rid of our King and Queen! I've a good mind to report you to the police."

The young woman next to him put in a friendly word.

" 'E didn't mean no 'arm. 'E's a stranger. 'E don't understand what a lot the Royal Family mean to England. I'm Labour—at least my Bill is—but I'm dotty on the Queen and the Princesses. The gentleman was just inquiring like."

"Exactly," said Vladimir, feeling uncomfortable. The last thing on earth he

wanted was to be reported to the English police.

"Well, he's had his answer," said the old gentleman. "England has no use for traitors and dirty Communists."

"Keep a civil tongue in your 'ead. Pa," said the young woman. "This gentleman comes from Russia, which I can't say I could find on the map. 'E just wants to know 'ow we feel about things. . . . Bertie, I'll smack your bottom if you don't keep still!"

Vladimir was relieved when he came to Clapham which was the terminus for this tramcar. He lifted his hat to the woman with the small boy who smiled back at him and said: "Cheery-bye. You'll learn a lot more soon, ducky."

Vladimir walked along the crowded High Street and thought back to that conversation. He would make a report about it. Even those who had voted for Labour were loyal to the monarchy. They were hostile to Communism, according to his experience in a London tramcar whose occupants seemed typical of the lower-class bourgeoisie.

XLV

Clapham was more damaged than the central parts of London. There were many gaps and open spaces where houses and shops had been but Vladimir walked quickly to the Common and to the Round Pond, and asked his way from an elderly man reading a paper on one of the seats. He pointed westward and said: “Over there. . . . Don’t want to drown yourself I hope? The water isn’t deep enough really.”

He seemed to think this funny and laughed wheezily.

Vladimir returned his laugh and walked on.

It was not much of a pond. He was surprised at its smallness, having expected something like a lake from his mother’s descriptions. It had seemed very important in her life. She had fallen into it once when the ice cracked. Her brother Richard had dragged her out and thought it a great joke. Vladimir was disappointed also because there were no ducks on it. She had spoken about ducks on the pond almost with her dying breath.

He stood there for a few moments with tears in his eyes. This was a sentimental pilgrimage. His Little Mother had played round this bit of water as a child. She had remembered it far away in Russia as a fairy lake.

A few grubby urchins were dragging small nets round its edge and one of them had two tiny fish in a bottle. He exhibited them to Vladimir with a fisherman’s pride.

“Took same catching, guv’nor.”

“Very good,” said Vladimir. “Marvellous.”

He walked back and went into the church on the edge of the Common. This surely was the church where Lucy’s father had been clergyman. He stood there in the cool dim light thinking of his mother as a young girl saying her prayers and listening to her father’s sermons. Once she had fallen asleep with her head on her brother’s shoulder.

“It’s a miracle,” he thought, “that I’m standing here now. If only my Little Mother could stand beside me!”

There was only one man in the church. He wore a little black cap and seemed to be dusting the pews. He looked old and thin.

“I wonder if I dare speak to him?” thought Vladimir. “Perhaps people don’t speak in English churches.”

He decided to risk it and went up to the old man and made a bow.

"Would you permit me to ask a question, sir?" he said in a low voice.

The old man put his hand to his ear and answered in a shrill piping voice.

"I'm rather deaf. Speak louder."

Vladimir spoke very distinctly.

"I think my grandfather was a clergyman here. Do you know the name of Oliphant? He was the Reverend John Oliphant."

The old man looked astonished.

"Oliphant? Yes, of course I remember him. But it was a long time ago. Thirty years I dare say. There's a tablet to his memory."

He put a skinny hand on Vladimir's arm and led him toward the choir.

"There it is."

It was a brass plate dedicated to the Reverend John Oliphant—"Vicar of this Parish for twenty-one years during which time he was devoted to the Poor and Suffering and to the Service of God."

The old man cackled with something like a laugh.

"A bit of a tartar," he said. "One of the old school, you know. Rather grim I should say, not like the present vicar who always comes to the whist drives and has a pleasant word for everybody. Old Oliphant was against the pleasures of life. I dare say his family had a hard time with him. I remember 'em well. Two boys and a girl."

"The girl was my mother," said Vladimir, greatly moved.

"Say that again," said the old man, cupping his ear with his right hand.

"The girl was my mother," repeated Vladimir. "Her name was Lucy."

"That's right. Lucy. A pretty little thing. Full of spirit. Your mother, did you say? Well, that's remarkable, and you so tall and grown up. Well, well, how time flies. The son of little Lucy Oliphant. Dearie me! I should never have guessed it. When you see your mother tell her that Tom Littlewood, the verger, still remembers her."

"My mother is dead," said Vladimir. "She died in Russia."

"In Russia? That's a long way off! Yes, now I come to think of it she went away to Russia as a Governess to a German Baroness. It's odd how I remember that, after all these years. As one gets old, one forgets a lot, but things come back. They come back like ghosts. Dead, did you say? Little Lucy?"

Tom Littlewood. Tom Littlewood. Vladimir remembered that name. His mother had once told him a story about Tom Littlewood. He had tried to kiss her when she came out of the choir one evening. She hadn't dared to tell her father or her brothers.

"I should like to shake hands with you, Mr. Littlewood," said Vladimir.

He didn't shake the old man's hand but raised it to his lips. It was a human

hand which Lucy had taken in hers.

The old man was astonished.

“Why do you kiss my hand? I’m not a saint! Far from it.”

“Forgive me,” said Vladimir. “You knew my mother. I kiss your hand because of that.”

The old man seemed to be thinking back, struggling with far-off memories through the mist of years. Something loomed up in his mind and his toothless mouth twisted to a smile.

“Your mother once boxed my ears,” he said. “She was full of spirit—very hoity-toity! She gave me a clout over the ear. I well remember it. She looked very pretty when she was angry. Now, fancy remembering that!”

He remembered something else which Vladimir wanted to know. It was the number of the house where the Reverend John Oliphant had lived with his family.

“Is it far from here?” he asked.

“Three minutes’ walk,” answered the old man after the question had been repeated.

Vladimir walked there and saw a tall stuccoed house with a portico above a flight of steps.

On the right of the steps was the window of one of the rooms. That must have been the room into which his mother had climbed one night when her brother Richard was so drunk that he could not speak English properly. The Reverend John Oliphant had come downstairs in his pyjamas and had been so angry and said such cruel things that Lucy had made up her mind to earn her own living. That was why she had gone to Russia. That was why Vladimir was born.

A young girl of eighteen years or so came swinging up to the house and saw him staring at it.

“Is the house on fire?” she asked laughingly. “I wouldn’t be surprised. My father is always leaving lighted cigarettes about.”

“Pardon me,” said Vladimir, raising his hat. “My mother lived here many years ago.”

The girl laughed and he noticed how pretty she was and how frankly she looked at him with her grey-blue eyes.

“A sentimental journey, eh?”

“Yes, I would much like to go inside. Is that at all possible or am I asking for too much? I am a foreigner, or half a foreigner. I don’t understand English etiquette.”

The girl seemed amused by his words.

“No etiquette in my family!” she told him. “We’re all very free and easy. I suppose the war had something to do with that. There’s no etiquette, or not

much, in an air-raid shelter, or a queue outside a fish shop. It made us all very chatty with each other. What particular brand of foreigner—or half a foreigner—are you, may I ask?"

"I'm a Russian. I have lately come from Moscow."

"Gosh!" she cried. "You're not Mr. Gromyko or Mr. Vyshinsky, I suppose?"

He could see that she did not ask this question seriously. She must have read those names in the paper with reference to the meetings of the United Nations.

"They are my chiefs," he answered. "I am one of their interpreters."

"Well, I wish they would give you better things to interpret," she said breezily. "They seem very sticky."

That was a new word to him applied to human beings but he let it pass, especially as she gave him an invitation which was very thrilling.

"Come in and have a cup of tea. Pa will be delighted to meet you. He gets very bored now he has retired from the Board of Trade. He spends his time doing crossword puzzles and helping with the household chores."

"Do you really mean it?" asked Vladimir doubtfully. "Shan't I be trespassing upon your kindness?"

"Come along!" said the girl. "My name's Barbara. Barbara Northcote. What's yours?"

"Vladimir Michaelovitch Rogov."

She gave a laughing cry.

"That's a bit of a mouthful."

"My Mother called me David," said Vladimir.

"Oh, that's better. I'll call you David."

She opened the front door with a latchkey and her voice went ringing down a little square hall.

"Pa! . . . Ma! . . . Viola! . . . Who's at home?"

An elderly man came into the hall from the room on the right of the door. He was a small tubby man with a bald head and smiling eyes through steel-rimmed glasses. Vladimir looked at him with astonishment. He bore a remarkable resemblance to Mr. Pickwick.

"Pa," said Barbara Northcote, "this is David. He's a friend of mine. That is to say I picked him up on the pavement a minute ago."

"Glad to meet any of your friends, my dear," said the elderly man after kissing his daughter on both cheeks. "Some of them are rather queer now and then but I'm very broad-minded."

He held out his hand to Vladimir.

"Come in, David," he said in a genial voice. "Just in time for tea."

"How very kind of you, sir!" said Vladimir. "I can hardly thank you

enough."

Mr. Northcote seemed surprised by this intensity of gratitude.

"That's all right," he said. "Barbara brings home anybody she likes. Some of her fellow students at the art school don't wash quite enough but otherwise are pleasant and amusing. Are you an art student?"

"Now, Pa," said Barbara, "I had better make this quite clear. This gentleman is a Russian not long from Moscow. He has a very high-sounding name but his mother called him David, which is what I propose to call him. His mother was English and lived in this very house, to which David has come on a sentimental journey. That's the set-up, as they say in America."

"Well, I must say it's a very strange story," remarked Mr. Northcote good-humouredly. "But I'm prepared to believe anything, especially from you, Barbara."

"Thanks, Pa," said Barbara. "Ask David to come and sit down. Is tea ready? I can do with three cups at least."

"The kettle is on the boil," said her father. "It's only a question of putting it into the teapot. Viola has gone to change her book at the library but will be back in due course. Your mother has been taking her afternoon sleep after a rather poor night. Come in, David, no ceremony, my dear fellow. All that went out with the war. Bombs came in and manners went out, at least the old-fashioned manners which used to prevail when I was young. That was a thousand years ago. Throw your hat on that chair. We have tea in this room. I call it my study but all I do now is to solve the crossword puzzles in *The Times* after reading its leading articles which fill me with the darkest depression."

After delivering himself of this rather long speech he led the way into the room to the right of the hall. It was a library room with many tattered books on the shelves. In the centre a table was laid for tea. There were some deep leather arm-chairs and around the table some upright chairs of an old-fashioned style.

"Chippendale," said Mr. Northcote, seeing Vladimir's glance at them. "They came to me from my great-grandmother. Eighteenth century, you know."

"Doubtless you have some very old books," remarked Vladimir, looking at them respectfully.

Mr. Northcote laughed.

"Old but not valuable. Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, and so forth, but not, alas, first editions. Modern stuff by H. G. Wells, Galsworthy, and that kind of thing. Lots of detective novels for light-reading after dull hours in the Board of Trade."

They were both silent for a little while. Mr. Northcote whistled a little tune to himself and rattled some coins in his trousers pocket. He was certainly much like Mr. Pickwick.

“My mother once came through that window,” said Vladimir proudly.

“Really!” exclaimed Mr. Northcote. “One generally comes through the door.”

“It was late at night,” said Vladimir. “Her brother Richard had drunk too much wine. They had forgotten to take the latchkey and were afraid of their father who was a very stern man.”

Mr. Northcote laughed and held up his hands.

“Those Victorian fathers! Oh dear, oh dear! Now the pendulum has swung the other way. My daughters cheek me all the time, call me ‘Old Pop’ and names like that. They would only laugh if I tried to be stern with them.”

Their mother came into the room—a plump, smiling lady, much younger than her husband.

“One of Barbara’s friends?” she asked, holding out her hand to Vladimir.

“Vladimir Michaelovitch Rogov,” he said, introducing himself.

“Good gracious!” exclaimed Mrs. Northcote. “That’s very formidable. Polish I suppose?”

“Russian,” said Vladimir.

Mrs. Northcote looked faintly startled.

“Well, I suppose you can’t help it. But I wish you Russians would be a bit more co-operative. The *Daily Mail* takes a very dim view of the situation.”

Vladimir felt embarrassed. As an interpreter at the United Nations Organization he had been gravely disturbed at the lack of friendly co-operation from Gromyko and Vyshinsky. He was deeply distressed by an exposition on Soviet world policy by one of his chiefs a night or two ago. But Mr. Northcote answered for him.

“Little differences in procedure, my dear. We can’t expect everything to go smoothly at first.”

Mrs. Northcote smiled at her husband.

“You’re always an appeaser, Tom. Pouring oil on the troubled waters, and handing out the milk of human kindness without any coupons.”

Mr. Northcote laughed while his face became a little pink at this character study of himself.

“I wish that were true, my dear! But I have all the instincts of a Dictator. If I were psycho-analysed I should be remarkably like Nero.”

This astonishing sentence was overheard by Barbara who returned with a teapot.

“That’s a good one, Pa!” she cried with dancing eyes. “Thumbs down to the poor Christians in the arena. Why, you won’t let us kill a mouse when it’s caught in a trap. I don’t think you’d kill a flea even if it were biting you.”

“I have a very savage nature,” argued Mr. Northcote. “I’m one of the most intolerant of men. But why do we go on talking nonsense before a complete

stranger?”

“Not a complete stranger,” answered Barbara. “David and I are comparatively old friends, and anyhow his mother lived in this house as a girl.”

“Viola’s late,” remarked Mrs. Northcote. “What can she be doing all this time?”

“Flitting from book to book in the lending library,” answered Barbara. “However, there she is—I hear the rattle of her latchkey.”

A moment later a tall girl with three books under her arm came into the room.

“Sorry to be late,” she said. “I couldn’t make up my mind which books to get. I’m afraid those I chose are trash.”

She kissed her father on his bald head and then became aware of Vladimir seated at the tea-table. She gave him a smile and he thought it was a charming smile.

“One of Barbara’s friends, I suppose?” she guessed.

“Yes,” said Barbara. “Quite an old friend of mine. We met on the doorstep. He comes from Moscow and has a very difficult name. I call him David. His mother used to live in this house before he was born on the Russian Steppes to the music of a balalaika.”

“I was born in Moscow,” said Vladimir, correcting her statement with a smile. “My father was fighting in the Red Army—during the Civil War.”

“Wasn’t he on the wrong side?” asked Barbara.

Vladimir hesitated.

“My mother thought so,” he answered. “She was very English.”

“Good for her!” remarked Barbara. “Have another piece of bread-and-margarine, David.”

“What was your mother’s name?” asked Viola presently.

“Lucy Oliphant.”

“Lucy?”

That name seemed to suggest something to her.

“I’ll show you something in my bedroom after tea,” she said.

Those words drew a squeal of laughter from her young sister.

“What would our Victorian grandmamas have said to an invitation like that? Aren’t you going a bit fast, Viola? Is that the kind of stuff they did in the A.T.S. when you were a sergeant?”

“Don’t be absurd, Barbara,” said Viola, laughing, and even blushing a little. “You’re being contaminated by your fellow students at that horrible art school.”

“I’m contaminating them, poor boobs,” retorted Barbara. “One of them calls me the Circe of Clapham, and grunts like a pig because I’ve enchanted

him, he says."

Mr. Northcote sat smiling with twinkling eyes at these two daughters. They seemed to amuse him. Mrs. Northcote sitting behind the family teapot was not quite so much amused, though she smiled good-naturedly now and then.

"I suppose I shall get hardened to Barbara's outrageous way of speech," she said. "I suppose one gets hardened to almost anything, including German bombs, shopping queues, and a Labour government."

Mr. Northcote coughed slightly.

"Perhaps we had better avoid any political discussion," he suggested, with a glance at his guest.

Vladimir put him at his ease on this account.

"Not for my sake, sir. I want to understand the English point of view about political affairs and world policy. It would be a great favour to me if you would give me the benefit of your philosophy, based, no doubt, upon the English tradition."

This remark was received with loud laughter from Barbara and by a smile from her sister Viola.

"Poor old Pop!" she cried. "He has the philosophy of a baby in a perambulator looking out on life with a bland smile and believing that all the people he meets are nice and kind. He cannot understand the wickedness of the world. He thinks that's all to be cured by sprinkling this pest-house with rose-water and being kind to criminals."

Mr. Northcote became pink again under this attack and derision.

"You give me a good character as a Christian, my dear Barbara," he answered mildly. "Perhaps a little more Christianity of that kind might be advantageous to humanity."

Viola came to his rescue, and Vladimir saw the look of affection which passed between this Pickwickian father and his elder daughter—a look of tenderness and understanding.

"I'm on your side, Father. I think the world would be a better place if Mr. Tom Northcote were President of the United States of the World."

"Very kind of you, my dear," said Mr. Northcote, "but you're quite wrong. I should be attacked by megalomania like all those who get great power. I should end by ordering massacres on Saturday afternoons instead of going to the movies. By nature I am ferocious. Give me power and heaven help everybody!"

"You cherub!" said Viola in a low voice, reaching for his hand and kissing it, much to his embarrassment.

It was Vladimir's first acquaintance with English family life and it gave him a sense of deep pleasure to be sitting here at this table and in this house where his mother had lived. There was a sense of peace here. They need not be

frightened at a knock on the door. They spoke with perfect freedom, unsuspicious and unafraid, even before a stranger. They had the English sense of humour which he had remembered in the books of Dickens. These were characters out of Dickens, except perhaps the girl Barbara who was so frank and outspoken and very modern. This room in which he sat with its shelves crammed with old books and its water-colour paintings on the walls, and its soft but well-worn carpet underfoot, and its deep comfortable old chairs, was unlike anything one could see in Russia. The English spirit dwelt here, he thought. It was all enchanting to him in some subtle way beyond intellectual analysis, touching perhaps some chords deep in the subconscious mind, or in the make-up of his blood and being.

It was after tea that Viola—an elegant young woman, he thought, more thoughtful than her sister, more serious, though with a little elusive smile—fulfilled her promise of showing him something in her bedroom.

"Come upstairs for a moment," she said. "I have an idea."

"Now, look here, Viola," cried Barbara, "you can't get away with things like that, you know! I picked up David on the doorstep. He's my prize. Hands off, woman!"

"Stop behaving like an art student," said Viola severely.

"Oh, very well," said Barbara. "But the next time I bring a gentleman friend I shall take him up to my room by the back stairs."

"Come along and see what I have to show him," said Viola.

"Oh, no! Nothing like that, dearie. I shall retire to my studio and sulk."

Viola gave a little low laugh as she walked upstairs followed by Vladimir.

"That sister of mine!" she exclaimed. "She needs a little military discipline in the A.T.S. or a little naval discipline in the W.R.E.N.S."

She led the way into a fair-sized room on the top floor nicely furnished. There was no sign of a bed. Perhaps an ottoman covered with a rug served as that by night. There were some good etchings on the walls and several shelves crowded with books like those downstairs. The only sign of femininity was a dressing-table on which was an old mirror, some little glass pots, and some silver-backed brushes.

"It's wonderful that you have the whole of this big house," said Vladimir, looking round the room. "In Moscow there would be six families, perhaps, in a house of this size."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Viola. "Apart from mothers-in-law and bombed-out relations most people have a house of their own in England—unless, of course, they're living in flats."

"England is very rich and very lucky," said Vladimir.

Viola looked at him and he saw a smile of incredulity in her eyes.

"Do you think so? We think we're very poor and very unlucky. We spent

all our money on the war and now where are the fruits of victory?"

"You have an old civilization," he answered. "You have a great heritage of possessions and comfort, at least in your well-to-do bourgeoise."

"Poor old bourgeoise!" exclaimed Viola. "We call it the Middle Classes. They're taxed very highly and get few of the benefits given free to the labouring classes."

"I was taught to hate the bourgeoise," said Vladimir, answering her smile. "They were Public Enemy Number One."

Viola shook her head.

"A very old-fashioned idea! The Middle Classes produce most of the brains, most of the genius, and most of the remarkable men and women in history. Isn't the ideal to raise up the so-called working classes—don't we all work?—to the level of the Middle Class? Isn't that what the Socialists want to do?"

Vladimir raised his hand with a vague noncommittal gesture.

"In Soviet Russia," he said, "we have a long way to go yet."

Viola stooped down and touched a bit of boarding at the bottom of the bedroom wall.

"Look!" she said. "This is what I wanted to show you when you said your mother's name was Lucy."

Vladimir knelt down and saw three names carved by a knife in the skirting-board.

Richard
George
Lucy

He was greatly moved. He touched the names with his finger, tracing them out. They were deeply cut.

"This must have been the nursery or play-room," said Viola. "I dare say it's haunted by their young ghosts—their vibrations I mean. I've always thought it a happy room."

Vladimir had tears in his eyes when he stood up again.

"My Little Mother!" he said in a low voice. "I owe everything to her. We were great comrades. It's wonderful to stand in this room where she used to play and talk with her brothers whom she adored. Those were my uncles Richard and George. As you say, her spirit haunts this room. Perhaps she is here with me now. I wish I knew. I wish I could feel her presence."

"Would you like to stay here a little while alone?" asked Viola with a sympathy which touched him.

He shook his head.

"Some other time if you will allow me to come again. I must be going

now."

"Do come again," said Viola.

Before he left the room she asked him a difficult question, looking gravely into his eyes.

"You are half a Russian and half English. Do you think that one day there will be a Third World War with Russia on one side and America and England on the other? People are already talking about it. They say it will be an Atomic war."

Vladimir could not lie with that girl's eyes looking into his.

"I hope not," he answered. "I hope from the bottom of my soul that we shall avoid that last horror. But I am uneasy. I'm getting afraid. The Soviet State does not see things in the same way as Western Europe. There is danger of a division between East and West, suspicious of each other, arming against one another. We are uneasy about the atom bomb in American hands. We think the secret should be shared."

Suddenly he stopped and looked over his shoulder as though in Moscow.

"I'm talking dangerously," he said. "This, of course, is very private between us."

Viola reassured him.

"We're in England, you know! No torture chambers here. But you're not reassuring. Well, never mind for the moment. Let's make our peace with Barbara. Come and look at her work. It's rather good."

"I must go," he said again. "I'm terribly late already."

But he lingered long enough to look into Barbara's room—her studio as she called it.

Round the walls were studies of various nudes and a portrait—almost a caricature—of her father, strikingly like him and making him look more than ever like Mr. Pickwick.

"Well, you two," said Barbara, leaning over a drawing on which she was busy. "I fear the worst."

"That is excellent," said Vladimir, looking at the portrait of her father. "It's very much alive. It's exactly like him."

"Oh, David," cried Barbara, as if she had known him for years, "you cover me with confusion! I am abashed, dear sir, by your prodigality of praise. Far be it from me to deny the merit of my own work."

She spoke like one of Jane Austen's ladies, though Vladimir was unaware of that, but knew she was playing a part.

Suddenly she caught hold of his arm and stood away from him.

"Gosh!" she cried. "I'd like to do a head of you. I believe I could do something rather good. I'd try to get that Russian look of yours with something tragic coming through your smile. What about it, tovarish? Will you let me

have a go at you? Six sittings of half an hour apiece. No fee charged?"

"It's a good idea," said Viola, looking at Vladimir with her head slightly on one side and amusement in her eyes—amusement with a touch of admiration.

Vladimir was slightly embarrassed and slightly flattered.

"I can't spare the time," he told Barbara. "I shouldn't be allowed to sit for you."

"Allowed? Who's going to allow you or not allow? Aren't you a free man, David?"

He shook his head and laughed.

"Not very free! I'm under strict discipline. It's our Soviet way. Besides, I work very hard as an interpreter."

Barbara made a somewhat irrelevant remark.

"One does not live by bread alone. Also we breathe the air of liberty, at least in Clapham. You will come, David? You will not thwart my young ambitions?"

He promised to come if he could. He would ring her up one day if he had a couple of hours off duty.

"In that case," said Viola, "I hope to be here."

"That woman!" cried Barbara. "That grabber of men!"

Both the girls came down into the hall to say goodbye to him after he had spent a moment in the study to shake hands with Mr. and Mrs. Northcote.

"A thousand thanks for your hospitality," he said in a formal and polite way. "I shall never forget this visit to my mother's old home."

"Come again, my dear sir," said Mr. Northcote genially. "We're simple folk."

"No, Pa," said Barbara, "one of your daughters is full of complexity. I don't say which."

There was laughter again, and on that note Vladimir left this middle-class house of an English family—Lucy's house, his Little Mother's dream house to which her heart had always gone back.

He was terribly late and received a stern reproof from his immediate chief.

"If it happens again I shall report you," he said. "There will be serious consequences, you understand?"

"I lost myself in London," said Vladimir. "It is such a very large and difficult city for a foreigner. I very much regret the incident."

Certainly he had lost himself in a kind of enchantment.

XLVI

A girl of about seventeen opened the door to Vladimir when he knocked at a house in The Vale, Hampstead, at four o'clock on a Sunday afternoon. He had been doubtful about this address. Searching the London telephone directory in a room at the Soviet Embassy, he had tried to find his Uncle George, but there were quite a number of G. Oliphants and he had to arrive at the object of his quest by a process of elimination. There was G. Oliphant chemist, G. Oliphant butcher, G. Oliphant hairdresser and others. George Oliphant, profession unnamed of The Vale, Hampstead, seemed to him the most likely, and this girl who opened the door to him was, he felt certain, a blood relation. There was something about her eyes which startled him. They were so much like his mother's eyes. There was something also in her features, finely cut and delicate. She was astoundingly like his Little Mother as he remembered her before she became ill.

"Yes?" asked the girl, seeing his hesitation, seeing some astonishment and emotion when he looked at her searchingly.

"Mr. George Oliphant?" he asked. "I mean is he at home?"

"It depends on your business," said the girl. "He doesn't see clients on Sundays."

"No, no!" said Vladimir hurriedly. "I am his nephew. At least I believe I'm his nephew."

The girl raised her eyebrows just as Lucy used to do with a funny little expression of surprise and amusement.

"You don't seem to be very certain! And, anyhow, I know most of my cousins. I only have four as far as I'm aware, and you're not one of them."

She did not open the door any wider—an old-fashioned door enamelled white with a fan-shaped window above it in the eighteenth-century style—and she stood there guarding it from mysterious strangers. As she confessed to him afterwards she suspected him of coming to borrow money from her father who nearly always parted with a bit, however unconvincing was the hard-luck tale of a most obvious scrounger.

"I'm a Russian," he told her. "But my mother was Lucy Oliphant. She had a brother George."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the girl. "Yes, Daddy has often told me about

his sister Lucy. She went out to Russia."

"Exactly," said Vladimir. "I'm her son."

"Well, then you must be my cousin," admitted the girl somewhat reluctantly. "In that case you had better come in. We can't kill the fatted calf for you owing to the rationing system, but I dare say we can produce a bit of Spam."

"Pray don't put yourself to any trouble," said Vladimir hurriedly. "I wish only to make the acquaintance of my mother's brother. For me this is most exciting."

"My name is Betty," said the girl in a more friendly way. "What's yours?"

"Vladimir. Vladimir Michaelovitch Rogov."

"Wow!" cried the girl. Like Barbara Northcote had cried "Gosh!" at the sound of his name.

"My mother called me David. After David Copperfield, I think."

The girl laughed for the first time.

"Well, that's easier! Come in, Cousin David. The family is scattered around the house. I'll yell to them."

She called out in a strong young voice:

"Daddy! . . . Mummy! . . . Dick! . . ."

No one answered.

"The silence of the grave," she remarked. "My father is probably asleep over the *Sunday Times*. My mother is probably asleep over the *Sunday Express*. Dick is probably asleep over the *Observer*. It's Sunday afternoon in Hampstead. Sorry! Do you play gin rummy by any chance, Cousin David?"

"I'm afraid not," he answered gravely.

"What a devil of a row you've been making, Betty!" said a resonant voice from a room with an open door leading into the hall. "What's the idea of arousing the entire household on a quiet afternoon?"

"That's Father," said Betty. "He'll tell you that he hasn't closed one eye for a second. Come in and meet your uncle, Cousin David."

Vladimir felt his heart beating faster. To him this was a wonderful moment. As a young boy he had heard so many stories about Uncle George. Now here he was by some miracle about to meet him.

"Father," said Betty solemnly as befitted the occasion, "allow me to present a long-lost nephew of yours—your sister Lucy's son. Just arrived from Russia. He doesn't mind being called David, though that's not his real name."

Vladimir found himself facing a tall, elderly man with a lean actor's face, and with a sensitive humorous mouth.

He looked at Vladimir with astonishment which he then expressed in words.

"Lucy's son?" he exclaimed. "Good God! . . . Lucy's son? Incredible!"

Suddenly his eyes lit up and he put a hand on Vladimir's shoulder.

"Incredible but true," he said. "My dear fellow, I can see your mother in your eyes; and in your mouth. Good God! . . . Good God! . . . Tell me about your mother. I haven't heard from her for years."

"She is dead," said Vladimir. "So many people die in Soviet Russia."

"I'm sorry," said Mr. George Oliphant. "I had no idea. As young people, Lucy and I were the greatest pals."

"You used to make her laugh," said Vladimir. "She used to laugh at your jokes and tricks. You made a face like a cod-fish."

"He still does!" cried Betty with a loud laugh. "It's terrible at a party when he gets bored or when some of Mother's ladies come to tea. He makes his face like a cod-fish and I nearly suffocate with suppressed laughter."

"You exaggerate, Betty," said her father with a laugh in his eyes. "It's a very ordinary sort of face. One sees it in fishmonger's shops."

"Make it now, Daddy!" said Betty. "Show it to Cousin David."

"No, no. One has to have the right time and place for that kind of nonsense. Sit down, David. Make yourself at home. Dick and Mary will be down presently. Also your Aunt Margaret. We tend to avoid each other for a little while on Sunday afternoons. There's a general rendezvous at tea-time. Tell me about your mother—poor little Lucy."

"She went through tragic days," said Vladimir. "I find the memory very painful."

"Oh, well, later on," said Uncle George hurriedly. "Don't let's dwell on tragic things this afternoon. My son Dick—your cousin Richard—freezes my blood by his talks about the Atom bomb. Here he is! Dick, this is a cousin of yours. Your Aunt Lucy's son. She went to Russia, you know. I've often told you."

A good-looking young man had come into the room, jauntily whistling a tune. He stopped and gave Vladimir a quick amusing glance.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "You must be Russian. How long have you been in England?"

"A very short time," said Vladimir, answering both questions. "I'm an interpreter and translator for our Soviet delegation of the United Nations Organization."

"By gum! That's very interesting," said Vladimir's cousin Richard.

"My son," said Uncle George, "is a crypto-Communist. He's on the left of Labour. I confess that he and I do not see eye to eye on the political situation."

Richard Oliphant laughed quietly.

"Oh, you're one of the old reactionaries, Father. You refuse to admit that things have changed since your young days—thank God! Individualism is dead after two world wars. We must plan or perish."

“My dear Dick,” said his father, suppressing an inward irritability. “This is a Sunday afternoon. I refuse to embark upon a political discussion, but I will merely say that if you use that word ‘planning’ again I shall retire to another room.”

“Sorry, Father!” said Richard good-naturedly. “I won’t disturb your mid-Victorian ideals.”

He turned to his new-found cousin.

“We must talk about Soviet Russia,” he said, “but not when Father is about. I don’t disguise my leanings towards Communism. As a scientist I think we ought to share the secret of the Atom bomb with you. I don’t believe a word of all that propaganda about what happens behind the ‘Iron Curtain’—purges, tortures, concentration camps, a police state, and all that rubbish which is put out by reactionary minds to scare us off Anglo-Russian friendship, and to kill Communism in this old-fashioned island.”

Vladimir was silent. This advocacy of Communism by his English cousin, this disbelief in the evil side of the Soviet system, was extraordinarily disturbing to him. Up to now he had had to answer those who were suspicious of Soviet Russia, suspicious and hostile, but this young man brushed aside—he disbelieved—the stories of purges, secret police, concentration camps and other terrible things in the Russian way of life. But he, Vladimir, had known them and been afraid of them. So many of his friends had been shot. His own father had been executed as a Trotskyite. His Little Mother had been put in prison. He had lived with those who turned pale at the sound of a knock on the door. But his English cousin disbelieved all this. What could he answer without lying? What could he answer to himself and to his own conscience? There was a ghastly dilemma in his own soul. Since he had come to England, so short a time, this hideous dilemma confronted him and tortured him. These people had freedom of speech. They were not afraid. They breathed the air of liberty. There were no purges. Their standard of living even after a world war was immeasurably higher than that in Russia. He could see nothing of all that exploitation of slave labour, that grinding down of the proletariat, that cruelty and greed of the pluto-democracies which he had been taught since childhood. Was it all a lie, that stuff which he had learnt from his earliest days? Yes, they had all lied to him, and at the back of his mind, in his subconsciousness, he had known it all the time.

He had professed loyalty to the Soviet leaders and to the Soviet ideology. At the Institute he had written grandiloquent essays stuffed with the glorification of the heroes of the Revolution—who afterwards had been shot for treason. All the time, even as a boy, he had hated it with one part of his mind—his mother’s part, the English half of him. With the other half he had believed or pretended to believe. As half a Russian he had wanted to be loyal

to Russia. He still wanted to be loyal to Russia. He loved the Russian people, who were his people. The war had made things easier in his mind. Here was a straight call to patriotism, the defence of the fatherland. There were no arguments about that, no hideous doubts. But now, after the war and here in England, he was torn in half again by this sharp division between truth and falsehood, between honour and dishonour, between allegiance to evil and escape from all its horrors. His English cousin ridiculed the idea of an "Iron Curtain" behind which sinister things were happening. But those things were happening and the "Iron Curtain" hid them from the outer world. Terrible things were being done in Latvia, Esthonia and Lithuania—mass deportations of all the best citizens, drum-head court-martials, brutalities unspeakable. They had been told to him in whispers by men who had seen and were ashamed. Behind the "Iron Curtain" in Poland, in Roumania and Jugo-slavia, in Finland, there was a reign of terror under Russian direction. Now in the United Nations Organization the representatives of Soviet Russia were deliberately obstructing all progress and unity. There must be no quick and easy peace. Hunger, misery, disease, despair would play the Russian game. The Soviet system would extend its spheres of influence over the fields of ruin everywhere. There must be sufficient co-operation and lip-service to the United Nations to prevent a new war for another generation at least and to secure full reparations from the defeated powers, but never could there or must there be co-operation between the Soviet ideals of world government and world Communism and those states who clung on to their medieval faith in private enterprise. Only twelve hours ago he had heard all that from one of his superiors in a formal and secret lecture. It would be necessary, said this Party leader from Moscow, to compromise here and there when there was strong resistance, to yield points now and then, to make strategic retreats in one direction in order to advance in others. That had been the strategy of war which had led to victory. It would be the strategy in the political and economic war now being fought. The enemy must be lulled and deceived, hoping always for Russian co-operation in their out-of-date liberalism and half-hypocritical humanitarianism. There must be, for some considerable time, no open and irreparable break. Ultimately, of course, war was inevitable, and the Russian outposts must already be prepared and extended. Lenin had stated that quite clearly.

Vladimir had listened to all this with a growing sense of despair and with a kind of rage burning in his mind—a kind of rage and a kind of horror. Was he to be, in however small a way, an instrument of this devilish policy? For it was devilish in its disregard of honour and honesty and all human liberties. Was it for this that millions of young Russians had died? Was it for world domination that Hitler had been overthrown? How could he, Vladimir Michaelovitch, serve such masters when in one half of his mind he hated it and looked round

for a way of escape?

All that, in one second of time, surged up into his mind when his cousin Richard spoke lightly about his leanings towards Communism and his disbelief in the stories of abominable things behind the curtain. Vladimir smiled at him and asked a question quite off the track of a political argument.

"Are you a scientist, Cousin Richard?"

Richard nodded and laughed.

"That's a big name for a small job. I'm an assistant lecturer in physics at London University. Very poor pay with no glorious prospect ahead."

"But extremely interesting, I am sure," said Vladimir.

Richard half agreed.

"Not too bad in that way. You must come and lunch with me one day. I'll show you the laboratories if that would amuse you."

"It certainly would," said Vladimir warmly. "But I am not master of my own time. I get very little leisure, especially during the sittings of the United Nations."

"Oh well, we'll fix it up one day," said Richard carelessly. "Tell us about Russia. How are you shaping out after the war?"

"There are many difficulties," said Vladimir cautiously.

Further conversation on that subject was prevented by the appearance of his aunt—a delicate-looking lady with hair going white and tired eyes.

"Elizabeth," said Mr. Oliphant, "strange as it may seem, this is a nephew of mine. Lucy's son. You knew she went to Russia, poor dear. Now she's dead."

Mrs. Oliphant held out her hand.

"How surprising! Then I suppose you're a Russian?"

Vladimir admitted the fact.

"Well, you Russians helped to finish off Hitler," said his aunt. "We couldn't have done without you, I suppose."

Vladimir smiled. His fellow Russians were convinced that they had won the war by their own power alone.

"It's nice of you to say so," he answered politely.

"It's a pity you're a God-less state," said his aunt. "But perhaps Stalin will be converted to Christianity. I sincerely hope so."

This remark was received with loud laughter from her son Richard.

"Mother, you're incorrigible! You say the most devastating things. Why drag in God before you've finished shaking hands with your Russian nephew? It's tactless!"

"I don't believe in tact," said his mother. "I just say things as they come into my head whether people like them or not."

Mr. Oliphant smiled at his wife with his humorous eyes.

"I was aware of that on our wedding day, my dear, when you said that I

looked overdressed for the part! I've been aware of it ever since."

Mrs. Oliphant returned his smile.

"Oh, I dare say it's done you good! I don't believe in humbug, but aren't we going to have some tea? Betty, my dear!"

Vladimir sat again at an English tea-table. These were his blood relations. That was a thrilling thought to him. "I have the blood of these people in my veins," he said to himself. "In a way it's like coming Home! An English home. So secure. So free and easy, so utterly without fear, so rich in comfort. My Little Mother loved Uncle George. She always laughed when she spoke of him. Now there he is on the other side of the table looking at me from time to time with quizzical eyes. Kindly eyes, though. Nothing harsh in them."

He sat next to young Betty and felt shy but smiled sideways at her.

"Are you still at school?"

"Oh lord, no!" she exclaimed. "Thank heaven I've done with that. I have a job in the Times Book Club. It's rather fun. One meets all kinds of people—some of them very nice and some of them very odd. I want to strangle some of the old ladies who don't know what books they want and don't like the ones recommended to them."

"Betty recommends very pornographic works," said Richard, who was listening in.

"Shut up, Dick!" said Betty. "I don't even know what 'pornographic' means."

"It's time you did, old girl," answered Richard.

"It means filthy books," said Vladimir's Aunt Elizabeth in her blunt way. "Most of the modern novels come under that heading."

"Now then, Mother!" exclaimed Richard. "Don't give a false idea of English literature to our Russian cousin."

"Do people read Charles Dickens nowadays?" asked Vladimir.

Betty made a little face.

"A bit old-fashioned now."

"He was my introduction to English life," said Vladimir. "I used to laugh over Mr. Pickwick until I nearly died. My mother read it out to me."

"That England has gone, thank God," said Richard. "His types—caricatures mostly—have disappeared."

Vladimir laughed and shook his head.

"Pardon me, I can't agree. I see them everywhere. I have certainly met Sam Weller. Not long ago I met Mr. Pickwick, or someone very much like him."

"You're right," said Mr. Oliphant. "Dickens' characters still come into the Courts of Law. When I was a young barrister there was one of my brother counsel exactly like Serjeant Buzfuz, and in the dock, in the jury-box, even on the Bench, were characters straight out of Dickens' novels. There they are still.

Only the other day Mr. Jingle stepped into my chambers—the same staccato sentences, the same swagger, the same impecunious and fraudulent fellow. 'Mr. Oliphant, sir. Glad to meet you. A little affair of mine. Needs counsel's opinion. . . . Trivial. . . . Ridiculous. . . . Very annoying. My cousin Lord Medley . . . you've heard from him? Nice fellow. Utterly brainless, of course. Refuses to pay back a loan. Must sue him, of course. Very painful'."

Mr. Oliphant did a very good bit of acting in the part of Mr. Jingle, and it was rewarded by the laughter of his family.

"Daddy, you missed your vocation," said Betty. "You ought to have gone on the stage."

"He was daft on amateur theatricals before I married him," said Vladimir's Aunt Elizabeth.

She turned to her Russian nephew and asked him an abrupt question.

"What has happened to your father? We haven't asked about him."

Vladimir's face flushed. A painful emotion seized him.

"He died," he answered. "He was shot."

"Oh dear!" said Aunt Elizabeth. "In the war? I'm so sorry."

Vladimir had a strange desire to tell this family the truth, to say he was shot as a Trotskyite, though he was one of the heroes of the Red Army.

He saw his Uncle's eyes fixed upon him searchingly. Perhaps he had observed Vladimir's flushed face and the haunted look in his eyes.

"My father died when I was a boy," he answered quietly. "My sister and I were looked after by our mother."

"Your sister?" asked his aunt. "You have a sister?"

"Olga. She is a ballerina. She is quite famous in Russia. She was the pupil of Zabotin and Kusanova."

"I've heard of Zabotin," said his uncle.

"How glorious to dance in the ballet!" exclaimed Betty. "I expect she has a wonderful time."

"It's very hard work," answered Vladimir. "There's no rest for a dancer."

"Is she beautiful?" asked Betty.

Vladimir smiled and looked at Betty sideways.

"She is rather like you. There is something about the eyes and mouth."

"Oh lord, then she isn't beautiful!" said Betty promptly.

"I think her beautiful," said Vladimir.

"There you are, Betty!" cried Dick. "The ugly duckling is suddenly admired by Prince Charming."

"You're not bad looking, Betty," said her mother. "You would be quite passable if you didn't use too much lipstick. It hardens your mouth. It makes you look like a slut."

"Thanks, Mother," said Betty. "Very complimentary!"

“Your mother is a mistress of understatement,” said her father. “When she says you are not bad looking, my dear Betty, she means that you are very glamorous indeed.”

That little argument ended in laughter. Vladimir noticed that all their arguments ended in laughter, though at times they seemed to get hot. It was astonishing and pleasant to him that they should accept him so readily as one of the family, dropping all formality and behaving as if they had known him for years.

They insisted upon him staying to supper and he was enlisted for the duty of helping to wash up in which they all took a share as their maid was out on Sunday, and indeed on most nights of the week. They were all very merry about it, whistling and singing. Mr. Oliphant put an apron round his waist and made funny faces, pretending to be an English butler of the old school. Only Aunt Elizabeth sat in the drawing-room “like a lady,” as Uncle George remarked.

He saw the look of astonishment on Vladimir’s face at the beginning of these operations.

“Don’t they do this kind of thing in Soviet Russia?” he asked.

“We don’t have such spacious kitchens,” answered Vladimir. “Several families would be using the one tap. But I didn’t know that well-to-do English families would help in the household work. I think we have rather wrong ideas about England.”

“Just as we have wrong ideas about Russia,” said Cousin Richard. “Pass me another dishcloth, Betty, old girl.”

After the washing-up episode he was taken into a room where there was a table covered with a green cloth.

“What does one do here?” asked Vladimir.

Richard grinned at him.

“One plays a game called Billiards, or ‘pills’ for short. Betty and I will take on you and Father.”

“But I’ve never played!” exclaimed Vladimir, feeling very self-conscious and embarrassed.

“Oh, you’ll soon get into it. Look, you hold your cue like this. You hit that red ball and pop it into that pocket. Like this. That counts three. Or you hit that white ball and then the red. That’s called a ‘cannon’ and counts two.”

“You’re showing-off, Dick!” cried Betty. “That was an easy cannon, anyhow. Try it, David. See what you can do.”

David could do very little until he was shown how to make a bridge with his hand and how to hold his cue. Then he seemed to do something surprising. All three balls suddenly disappeared into pockets, followed by general hilarity.

“A marvellous stroke!” cried Richard.

“Stupendous,” cried Betty. “That only happens once in a blue moon.”

“I’m proud of my partner,” said Uncle George. “With my Russian ally victory is certain.”

But victory had to be called off.

Vladimir looked at a clock on one of the walls. It was a quarter past nine.

“Forgive me!” he said in an agitated way. “I must leave immediately, otherwise I shall be late.”

“What’s the hurry?” asked Richard.

“I must get in before ten o’clock. Otherwise the consequences are very serious. I have already been reprimanded.”

“Do they treat you like a little schoolboy?” asked Betty.

“I’m under very strict discipline,” he answered.

He advanced upon Uncle George and kissed him on both cheeks, to that gentleman’s profound embarrassment.

“A thousand thanks to you, dear Uncle,” he said emotionally. “Your welcome has been overwhelming. I seem to have come home to the English home which has been so often in my dreams.”

“Make it your home, my dear fellow,” said Uncle George.

“Do we embrace each other?” asked Richard, grinning at him but retreating when Vladimir advanced.

Betty held out her cheek demurely.

“Good night, Cousin David. Come again soon. Take me to a show, one night. Let me eat caviar. Let me drink vodka. Let us be very, very Russian.”

“You’re a hussy,” said Aunt Elizabeth, smacking her arm.

Aunt Elizabeth blushed very deeply when she was kissed by this new-found nephew, and everyone burst into laughter.

“God bless my soul!” exclaimed Aunt Elizabeth. “This is very unusual, but I can’t say I dislike it.”

Another gust of laughter followed, to the bewilderment of Vladimir, who could not understand this amusement at his demonstration of affection.

He ran to the Hampstead Tube station, anxious lest he should be late.

XLVII

The interpreter and translator staff of the Soviet delegation to U.N.O. in London was heavily overworked, and two more men were sent from Moscow, to the joy of Vladimir, who was joined by two of his friends. They were Stanislav and Sergei.

Both of them were thankful for their great luck in being sent to England and were glad to have their comrade Vladimir as their guide in London now and again when they could escape for an hour or two from hard-driven work. Always they had to report their comings and goings, their conversations with strangers and the places they visited in brief sorties. They stood with Vladimir and were awed in the dim twilight of Westminster Abbey. They stared into the shops down Bond Street and along Oxford Street, staggered by what they thought was their splendour compared with the government stores in Moscow, and still more amazed by the crowds of middle-class people—the surge of prosperous-looking *bourgeois* in Tube trains and buses.

"These people seem untouched by war," said Sergei. "We have been deceived. London isn't a ruin. These English don't look down-trodden and oppressed."

"They hide their wounds," answered Vladimir. "But the war didn't break their spirit, and they live like lords compared with people in Moscow and other Russian cities."

He took them to the Zoo one day—he had been there with his cousins Richard and Betty—and after wandering around and staring at the animals like three schoolboys they sat down to watch the English crowd—mostly of mothers and children and schoolboys and girls.

Sergei watched them intently with a smile in his eyes.

"They look happy," he said. "Our people aren't so happy in Moscow."

"For me," said Stanislav, "Moscow is haunted by the ghosts of all my dead friends. After the first delirium of victory it has had the sick headache of reaction. The question asked, in whispers of course, is where are the fruits of victory? Where is the peace? Already there is propaganda about a Third World War and people are afraid again."

"Who is to be the enemy next time?" asked Vladimir ironically.

Stanislav shrugged his shoulders.

“You know the answer! The Yankees hold the secret of the Atom bomb. Isn’t that enough to reveal them as warmongers according to the gospel of *Pravda*?”

“I’m getting disheartened,” said Vladimir in a low voice. “The supreme chance of the world lies in U.N.O. But our leaders haggle over every point of procedure. Gromyko and Vyshinsky have to await orders from Moscow before conceding any trivial point.”

He glanced over his shoulder from force of habit in Russia.

“What about the English?” asked Stanislav. “I’ve no faith in their sincerity. They play their own game as we play ours. It’s a game of poker with bluff on both sides.”

“With human lives as the counters,” said Sergei. “Millions of devils in different countries will be flung into the pool as the stakes are raised. The gamblers in human destiny do not worry about their blood which will be spilt, nor their homes which will be blasted off the face of the earth. At the moment the Americans have an ace up their sleeves—the beautiful Atom bomb. Presently we shall have three aces up our sleeves, bigger and better Atom bombs. The game of poker will end in one almighty smash. You and I, dear Vladimir, will be smudged out with the rest of humanity.”

“No!” said Vladimir. “There is a way out of that. God won’t let it happen.”

“God?” asked Stanislav, raising his eyebrows.

“I’m beginning to believe in God,” said Vladimir quietly. “At least I am groping my way towards this belief. The spirit of evil which is in the world today must have its opposite. That, perhaps, is God. One finds it among the simple people—in England as in Russia. I believe with Tolstoi that where Love is there is God also. There is still love in the world, among the common folk. I find it in English homes. We have found it in the comradeship of our own armies even on the battlefield, and in the ruins.”

Sergei stared at him and then laughed.

“Vladimir is becoming a mystic! Our comrade Vladimir is probably going mad. But then I myself have been mad for a long time. We’re all mad! How can we maintain any sanity or reason in a world which has deliberately flung itself into the flaming furnace?”

“Against the will of the common folk,” said Vladimir. “They did not fling themselves, but were flung into the furnace.”

“They went like sheep,” said Sergei. “They obeyed their leaders. They were accomplices in crime. They are still accomplices.”

Vladimir shook his head in disagreement.

“Because of fear, because of mistaken loyalty to evil leadership, because of their inability to resist lying propaganda which they thought was truth—propaganda of hatred against other nations.”

“What then?” asked Sergei. “What then?” I ask.

“We must think these things out,” said Vladimir. “We must become missionaries of truth.”

“Truth?” asked Sergei the sceptic. “Who will define truth? Russian truth is not English truth nor American truth. What is true to us is false to them and the other way about.”

“We must start an underground movement,” suggested Vladimir. “Early Christianity was an underground movement. It was a religion of slaves. They performed their rites in the catacombs. They worshipped their Christ in dark and secret places, until in due course their faith conquered the world.”

“And what good did that do the world?” asked Sergei. “Then the Christians started killing one another, burnt and hanged one another.”

“True,” said Vladimir, “but their faith raised humanity to its highest ideal which is still the heritage in many hearts, as I have found a Russia beneath all the terror and all the cruelty, and now I find in England.”

“Assuredly the man is mad,” said Sergei. “But it’s interesting, my fellow lunatic. We must have further talk about these things. Is your idea, my mad little comrade, to re-Christianize the world including Soviet Russia and the United States?”

“Something of the kind,” admitted Vladimir with a laugh. “I know it sounds idiotic but isn’t that the only defence against the Atom bomb—the power of good against the power of evil?”

Stanislav rose from the chair on which he had been sitting.

“You two sleep-walkers jabber in your dreams! Let’s go and have a look at the monkeys. They’re excellent caricatures of the United Nations Organization.”

It was a strange conversation between three young Russians in the Zoological Gardens of Regent’s Park.

XLVIII

It was some weeks after his first visit to the Northcote family, in his mother's old house, that Vladimir ventured to call upon them again, on an afternoon when he was given two hours' leave. He had the pleasantest recollection of this family and especially of the two sisters, who had been so friendly and sympathetic. They were, he thought, typical of English family life. Two hours! No more than that to get to Clapham and back. That gave him less than an hour at the house, but he knew it would be time well spent when the door was opened to him after his timid knock by Viola Northcote.

"Oh dear!" she cried at the sight of him. "Barbara is out. She'll be terribly disappointed. It's her afternoon at the art school."

Vladimir hesitated, not knowing quite the next step in English etiquette.

"Perhaps I might present my compliments to your venerable father," he said.

Viola Northcote laughed as though he had said something very funny indeed.

"Poor old Pop!" she exclaimed. "He wouldn't like to be called venerable. He's not much more than sixty. Quite a child really! But do come in. I'm alone as it happens. Mother and Father have gone to the pictures. It's my mother's birthday and Dad is standing her a little treat to celebrate the occasion."

"I'm afraid I've called at an awkward time," said Vladimir, feeling embarrassed. "Perhaps you will allow me to call another day more convenient to the family."

"Oh no! Come in," said Viola. "I was having a cup of tea all by myself in the kitchen as a matter of fact. If you prefer the drawing-room—"

"Not at all," answered Vladimir. "I should be happy to talk with you anywhere, Miss Viola."

He saw a little smile in her eyes.

"That's kind of you! But you needn't call me Miss. Shall I go on calling you David?"

"I hope very much that you will," he assured her earnestly. "It makes me feel at home."

"Sorry about the kitchen," she said, "but it's quite a nice one."

She led the way to it and he was impressed by its beauty and magnificence.

It was a big room, with many cupboards and shelves with plates and dishes and cups and saucers neatly arranged. Over the sink was a rack stacked with blue and white plates. At one end of the room was a long stove of a type he had never seen before.

A check cloth was spread on the kitchen table with tea-things for one.

"Now tea for two," she said. "So much nicer, don't you think, if the other person is amusing? . . . Take a chair. I'll get another cup."

"I find this enchanting," said Vladimir. "It's like a fairy-tale."

"Why? Do you mean to say that I'm like Cinderella?"

Cinderella? Yes, he remembered that. It was one of the stories Lucy had told him when he was a small boy.

"There was a fairy godmother," he said. "Yes, she changed Cinderella's rags into a beautiful dress. A pumpkin was turned into a grand coach and the mice into horses."

"Quite right!" said Viola, smiling at him.

He looked round the big kitchen and spoke emotionally.

"My mother must have sat in this room very often as a child. How strange that I should be sitting here now! That, too, is like a fairy-tale."

"Tell me about your mother," said Viola, pouring him out some tea. "Was she happy in Russia?"

Vladimir was silent for a moment. How should he answer that question? What should he say? The truth?

"She was unhappy," he said. "She was terribly unhappy. Russia frightened her. She was always frightened, even when she told me fairy-tales and laughed and joked with me."

"Why should she have been frightened?" asked Viola.

"There was first the Revolution, and then civil war," he said. "My father fought in the Red Army. We two children and my Little Mother were caught between the two fires, between the Reds and the Whites. We fled from burning villages. That was when I was a very small boy, I remember."

He checked himself and said, "Am I talking too much?"

"Tell me," said Viola, "I want to know."

He told her something of his life as a boy, trudging behind farm carts, holding on to his mother's dress. He told her about Miss Smith and the typhus and the vermin, and nights under the clear shining stars and days under a burning sun; and about the dust and the flies, and men—dead men hanged by the neck, and the days of famine on the Volga, until suddenly he stopped.

"Excuse me! I talk too much."

Viola Northcote had her elbows on the table and her chin was propped in her hands and her eyes were looking into his as though intensely interested by this narrative.

“Tell me more,” she said. “What happened afterwards? What happened to your father?”

Vladimir suddenly became pale.

“They shot him,” he said. “He was shot as a traitor and Trotskyite.”

“A Trotskyite? Wasn’t Trotsky the leader of the Red Army? I don’t quite understand.”

He looked at her with a kind of tragic intensity.

“No one can understand. That is what is terrible in Russia. No one can understand why men are dragged out of their beds and shot, why we were friends with Germany at one time and fought to the death with them afterwards, why the heroes of the Revolution were accused and shot for contact with Germans when a little later Stalin made a pact of friendship with Hitler. No one understands what has happened or will happen in Russia. There is always terror in Russian minds. The heart gives a lurch when there’s a knock at the door. One’s friends disappear and one never hears of them again. One dare not speak one’s secret thoughts. The secret police—”

Suddenly he stopped.

“I ought not to say these things. It’s treason. For saying them I also could be shot. I just wanted to tell you why my mother was always frightened. I have said too much. It’s because I’m in this English house where my dearest Little Mother lived. It’s because you are kind. These things have been locked inside myself. Suddenly I could not help telling you. Please don’t repeat them. What I have told you is very private.”

Viola Northcote put her hand on his for a moment as though to reassure him.

“Don’t be afraid, David,” she said. “I shan’t tell anyone. But there are no secret police round about here. Thanks for telling me.”

He had been excited and emotional. Thoughts that had been imprisoned in his subconscious mind had suddenly surged up so that he blurted them out. Now he calmed down and smiled at this young English woman who seemed to him beautiful and charming.

“All the same,” he said, “I’m a Russian. I love the Russian people. I hope that one day they will get the liberty as one finds in England. Perhaps after this war pressure will be relaxed. The returning soldiers—those who have seen the standard of life in other lands—will demand a change. They will refuse, perhaps, to be the victims of the secret police and the concentration camps.”

“Is there any chance of that?” asked Viola.

“There may have to be another revolution,” he told her. “If it happens it will be terrible. But there may be another way. The Russian people must find their soul again. Perhaps it will happen like that—a spiritual revolution working underground at first in prisons and concentration camps, with its

saints and martyrs. There would be many martyrs."

"One has to be very brave to be a martyr," said Viola.

"Yes," he said. "It needs great courage and great faith."

He broke off from this subject and threw up his hands.

"I am an egoist. I've been talking all the time about myself."

"I liked hearing it," she told him.

"Let me know something about you," he asked.

She laughed and a little more colour crept into her face.

"About me? What can I tell you? I'm studying for a degree at London University. After tea I shall have to go back to my books. There's an exam tomorrow."

"Tell me about your inner life," he said in his Russian way. "Have you found the key to happiness? Are you at peace inwardly?"

"Bless the boy!" she exclaimed, laughing at him. "Do you want to psycho-analyse me? Do you want me to turn myself inside out? We don't do that in England."

"No," he agreed. "You hide yourselves. But even when you laugh I see a little sadness in your eyes. I wonder why you are a little sad. Forgive me but I've told you so much about myself."

"I dare say there's a lot more to tell me," she answered, steering him away from questions about herself. "I shall be very glad to listen."

"One day," he said, "I should like to tell you about Sofia Constantinovna. We were going to get married. She was killed by a German bomb. Her spirit came to me, I believe. I loved her with all my soul. Now she has faded away from me. It's as though I knew her in another life. I find that very sad. I accuse myself of forgetfulness. I call out to her, but she doesn't come. Do you understand?"

"I understand," said Viola. "One's wounds heal, and one hates oneself for the healing."

"You understand!" he said. "How do you understand so much?"

She did not answer for a moment, and then spoke in a low voice.

"Because it has happened to me. But why do you drag this out of me? Why do I tell you? I hate talking about it. Let's talk about something else."

"You are so English!" he exclaimed. "And I am so Russian in spite of my English mother."

As he spoke there was a heavy bang at the back door and he turned pale instinctively.

"What is that?"

Viola laughed and reassured him.

"The laundry, I expect. Don't look so scared. We're not in Russia."

She went to the back door and said "Good afternoon" to someone outside,

and then came back with a heavy basket which she dumped on the kitchen floor.

Suddenly Vladimir gave an exclamation of alarm.

“Heavens! Is that clock right?”

“Ten minutes fast,” she told him, glancing at a little tin clock ticking on the kitchen dresser.

“I shall be late. I shall get into hot water. Oh, very hot indeed!”

He took her hand and raised it to his lips.

“May I come again?”

“Why not?”

“This is a little paradise,” he said, looking around the kitchen again. “I feel at home here. My mother’s spirit inhabits this house. I feel very close to her here, and you have been so very kind. How can I thank you enough?”

“Don’t be late!” she said warningly, ignoring his thanks, shy of his emotional manner.

She led him into the hall and there was the noise of a key in the lock of the front door. It was Barbara Northcote letting herself in.

“Gosh!” she cried at the sight of Vladimir. “If that isn’t my old friend David! Viola, you’re a wretch. I believe you made a date with him!”

“He must go,” said Viola, smiling at her. “Otherwise he’s going to get into hot water from the Russian Ogpu.”

“We will defy the Ogpu,” said Barbara. “I want to make a sketch of David’s head. I want to immortalize his Slav soul. Come on, David No shirking!”

He lost another two minutes making his excuses. He was late again, and reported to his chief who took a serious view of the case.

“You are reprimanded for indiscipline,” he said harshly. “I shall have to report unfavourably upon your mysterious disappearances, and failure to keep appointed hours. You are aware of the consequences of an unfavourable report?”

Vladimir turned pale. He was quite aware that an unfavourable report would be serious for him.

XLIX

After the first sessions of U.N.O. in London Vladimir was kept hard at work as a translator of English political speeches and documents for Moscow. It was not his duty to make the selection. That was done by his chiefs of the department, but gradually he perceived the trend or bias in the selection of news and comment which he had to translate. Any speech regarding the control of atomic energy was immediately cabled to Moscow. Any criticism of Soviet policy in the House of Commons or elsewhere, however trivial, had the same priority. Articles in monthly periodicals—one of them was openly hostile to the Soviet system and to its action in occupied countries, and those within its sphere of political and economic influence—had to be translated fully. Items of information appearing in the English Press purporting to be revelations of what was happening behind the "Iron Curtain"—it was astonishing how they obtained such information—had been carefully marked with blue pencil before they reached Vladimir's desk, or the desks of his colleagues, Sergei and Stanislav and other members of the translating staff. In addition there were items of news and comment suggesting from the English Left-Wing sources that Britain was co-operating secretly with the United States for hostile purposes against Russia or playing a reactionary game in Greece, Palestine, Turkey and other countries in order to promote a Fascist bloc in Europe hostile to Russian "democracy."

Day after day, month after month, Vladimir and his colleagues toiled at this work which became monotonous and depressing. Some of it appeared twisted and exaggerated in the Russian Press for propaganda purposes to persuade the Russian people that the strongholds of Capitalism in the Western world were deliberately conspiring against the security and power of the U.S.S.R. and were stealthily preparing for a Third World War and world domination by the Anglo-Saxon bloc. Most of it, no doubt, was for the information of officials in the Kremlin who would shape their policy according to such reports from many countries. It was the raw material of their propaganda machine.

Vladimir was glad to escape from this daily drudgery for brief periods, seldom for more than an hour or two, and glad to let some fresh air into this miasma of the mind. Often with only half an hour or so of free time it was

impossible to meet his English friends or relatives and he could do no more than walk through the London streets and squares watching English life as a passer-by, or looking into shop windows. In one direction he was able to walk as far as half-way down the King's Road, Chelsea, which he found interesting and amusing for the types he met there—old Chelsea pensioners in their red coats, side-whiskered young men who looked like poets or painters, young mothers with babies in perambulators doing their shopping. In the other direction he walked through Kensington Gardens to Knightsbridge. Sometimes Sergei walked with him and sometimes Stanislav, but often he was alone because they had to take turns with their work.

Curiously enough, he was able to make friends on these walks, and had some interesting conversations with chance acquaintances. Perhaps it was due to something in his look, in his smile, in his slight foreign accent and manner. People were interested in him when he said he was a Russian. So it was with a young man behind the counter in a cigarette shop near Sloane Square. So it was with an elderly ruddy-faced man who sold evening papers outside Sloane Square station.

"A Russian, eh?" said the young man in the cigarette shop. "First time I've met one! Playing a funny game, aren't you, you Russians?"

"In what way?" asked Vladimir, very noncommittal.

"Mr. Vyshinsky always says no! Mr. Gromyko doesn't look very genial in his photos. Aren't you going to co-operate to work the United Nations and make a better world?"

"That is my own earnest wish," answered Vladimir.

"Otherwise," said the young man, "the Atom bomb will wipe us all out. Seems silly somehow if we all commit suicide after a long struggle for civilization!"

"Very silly indeed," agreed Vladimir. "But I don't think it will happen."

"Glad to hear you say so. I hope your Mr. Stalin is of the same opinion. Excuse me, there's another customer."

"He doesn't seem to like us, that young man," thought Vladimir. "But he seems to study the world situation. A quite intelligent fellow."

The man who sold the evening papers had different ideas.

"A Russian? That's interesting. Must be a great country, Russia."

"Great in extent," said Vladimir.

"Great in other ways. You started from scratch, didn't you, after the Revolution? But in less than thirty years you were able to beat Germany on the Eastern Front. Pretty good that! There must be some good brains behind it. It says something for Communism. Russia is the workers' paradise according to the paper I read when I'm not selling 'em. Wish I were there! This country is neither one thing nor the other. The Labour Government are just a lot of pink

rabbits."

"It's not bad in Sloane Square," said Vladimir, smiling at him.

The workers' paradise. This man selling papers was better off than many of the slave-driven factory workers in Russia. He was a free man. He wouldn't be dragged out of his bed at night or sent off to the Siberian forests or the Galician mines. He wouldn't be accused by fellow workers for treasonable talk and incautious criticism of Soviet discipline, and sentenced for life to a verminous typhus-stricken camp where in due course he would die.

It was in conversations with those who believed in Soviet Russia that Vladimir was brought face to face with his own doubts amounting now to a tragic revelation. All that he had been taught was false. He had been fed on lies. The Russian people had a standard of life incomparably lower than that of England which had been pictured as a worn-out and degenerate state where the masses were exploited by ruthless Capitalists. He had seen no hideous poverty, no pitiful misery. But apart altogether from material things England had a civilization which was old and high, and rich, in tradition. The minds of these people were civilized. They were orderly without being cowed and bullied. They had great possessions of culture and the spirit. He had seen that in Westminster Abbey whose grandeur and beauty and age-long history moved him strangely and profoundly. He had seen it in many old churches into which he went now and then for a few minutes on one of his walks. He was aware of all this when he went one day with some of his colleagues to the Tower of London, and on another day to Windsor Castle with its view from the walls of the old forest with its ancient oaks, and of Eton which had produced so many great men, though the public schools of England were ridiculed and denounced in the Soviet Press. Above all, the people he saw in the streets and buses, the hated *bourgeoisie* of Russian propaganda, were friendly, intelligent, cheerful and kind. If he lost his way in London, as often he did, anyone he asked took trouble to put him right, going out of their own way to do so. The shop people smiled at him and chatted brightly in answer to his questions, interested to meet a Russian. They were people without fear, and people with freedom of the mind, unaware of their own treasure because it was their natural heritage like the air they breathed.

Richard, his cousin, embarrassed him deeply because of his illusions about Russia and his defence of the Soviet system. It was indeed this defence, this admiration for Communist ideals, which brought Vladimir face to face with his own dilemma of the soul.

By reluctant permission of his chief he had lunched one day with Richard and two of his friends in a Soho restaurant. He was introduced by Richard to the other young men as "my Russian cousin, straight from Moscow," and this seemed to be in his favour.

“Delighted to meet you,” said one of the young men who, unlike most Englishmen, wore a spade-shaped beard. “This is going to be an interesting lunch.”

“Yes, indeed!” agreed the other young man who was clean-shaven and shabbily dressed in a pair of grey flannel trousers and a sports jacket frayed at the cuffs.

Richard, in his breezy, humorous way, gave Vladimir some insight into their personalities and professions.

“This fellow, bearded like the pard, is Jerry Littlewood. In spite of his appearance, he’s quite harmless and, in fact, one of our leading idealists. He works in Fleet Street, writes tripe for a Tory newspaper, but in private life and personal convictions is an ardent supporter of Left-Wing Labour. That is to say, he’s a crypto-Communist. He is also a poet.”

“Shut up, Dick!” said the bearded young man, grinning at his friend. “Why all this psycho-analysis?”

“I want my cousin to know that he is going to feed with friends of Soviet Russia,” said Richard. “No Tory reactionaries at this table, old boy!”

He turned to the shabbily dressed young man.

“This is Kit Merton, lately a flight-lieutenant in the R.A.F., and now a medical student with a passion for dissecting dead bodies. While engaged in that gruesome task he thinks beautiful thoughts. He’s a Socialist with love of his fellow men and hatred for all cruelty, injustice and vested interests.”

“I want some beer,” said Kit Merton. “Not so much gab, old dear.”

Conversation became general after the arrival of *soupe à l’oignon* and four pints of beer.

“What do you think of England?” asked Jerry Littlewood, dropping some soup down his beard.

“I am deeply impressed with it,” answered Vladimir.

His cousin Richard laughed.

“An innocent child! My Russian cousin hasn’t had time to find us out—our smug hypocrisy, the control of public life by vested interests, our sham democracy and national inefficiency. We must put him wise, Jerry, put the lad wise to our tragic plight!”

“It’s all pretty obvious,” said Jerry. “This country is bust. The Capitalist system has broken down after two world wars, but our so-called statesmen are still trying to patch up the cracks. They refuse to tell the ghastly truth to the simple and ignorant masses.”

“Quite right, old boy!” said Richard Oliphant, as though gloating over impending ruin. “This Labour government is led by a group of Girondins—old-fashioned Liberals who are terrified of root and branch measures for dealing with a situation which demands vision, courage and ruthlessness.

Stalin could teach them a thing or two! We must discipline the workers, stop all this nonsense about private enterprise and private ownership of wealth, abolish all class distinction, get rid of the House of Lords, with all the prerogatives which surround it, and link up with Russia as one of the Communist States of Europe. I see no salvation otherwise. I see only the menace of the Third World War with the Atom bomb as its chosen weapon. We must establish the United States of Europe, in fact the United States of the World, or perish in a universal cataclysm. We can only do that with union with the U.S.S.R."

"Meanwhile," said Kit Merton, late of the R.A.F., "old Bevin is behaving like John Bull or Winston Churchill, insulting Russia every time he opens his mouth, and deliberately paving the way for the next mass murder. I agree with Dick that we must co-operate with Soviet Russia at all costs."

The black-bearded young man, Mr. Jerry Littlewood, had something to say on this point.

"Our foreign policy—God help us!—is based on subservience to the dollar sign—that is to say, the financial hegemony of the United States."

A deep groan came from Richard Oliphant.

"Those dreadful people! We grovel before them. We go to them as beggars, cap in hand, 'Give us a dime, masters!'—and with what inevitable result?"

"War!" said Kit Merton gloomily. "War in which this little island will be caught between two fires and blotted out by half a dozen Atom bombs. The U.S.A. are determined to challenge the Russian system of State ownership which they regard as a threat and a rival to the American system of private enterprise and Capitalism. In my opinion those two ideas can't exist in the world together. They are bound to clash in the final show-down. Personally I'm convinced that Communism is the new pattern of life. Private enterprise has had its day and served its usefulness. Why resist the march of time, and the inevitable progress towards a new social order? Gosh! I'm talking too much. Give me some more beer, Dick!"

Richard turned to his cousin with a smile of pride.

"Our little Kit—our Christopher Marlowe—expresses himself rather well, don't you think? One of our future leaders!"

"Shut up!" said Kit Merton, not displeased by this audible aside.

Black-bearded Jerry took up the argument.

"I'm not so much interested in the material side of things as in the ideals behind Communism. I believe in sharing the wealth of the world. I believe in the brotherhood of man. I believe in the equality of all mankind without difference of race or caste. In fact, I'm a Christian—without any formal allegiance to Christianity."

“You’re a poet, my dear,” said Richard. “You have lovely ideas. Bless you, my child!”

Vladimir listened to all this and to much more with a kind of tumult in his mind. He listened to an eulogy of Stalin as the greatest leader in the world, and to the admiration of these young men for the equality of opportunity in Soviet Russia.

“J. B. Priestley’s broadcast after his visit to Russia was a complete denial of all those rumours and lies put out by Tory newspapers and reactionary minds,” said Jerry Littlewood. “He found nothing in Russia but happiness, team-work and brotherhood.”

Vladimir was tempted, almost overwhelmingly, to break up this discussion by terrible words. He could feel them surging up in his mind, almost bursting to his lips.

“You are all wrong,” he would say. “You are under frightful illusions. You have utterly false ideas about Soviet Russia. You have not lived as I have through its cruelties, its enslavement of men’s minds. You haven’t seen the fear in people’s eyes. Your fathers have not been shot after false accusation. Your comrades have not been executed in bloody purges. You do not know that equality does not exist in Russia, that there are more distinctions of rank and pay than in this country, that the only equality is that of slave workers in the factories and slave workers in the collective farms. You have never seen the starving children of Russia in the famine districts, nor visited the concentration camps which hold millions of political prisoners of both sexes. You want England to go along the same road. It is the road to hell. This sweet England with its freedom of the mind, its loveliness of the spirit, its heritage of beauty, should never go that way.”

“Gentlemen,” he said. Yes, he must tell them. “Gentlemen——”

“In my opinion . . .” said the black-bearded young man.

In his opinion, which took some time to tell, the English people were utterly misinformed about Soviet Russia by the Tory Press—even by the Liberal papers. He was all in favour of the Royal Commission on the Press. It would reveal the suppression of impartial comment by chain papers controlled by one proprietor—one of the Press Barons—who could dictate policy in a hundred provincial newspapers. In Russia such a thing would be impossible.

“Gentlemen——” said Vladimir, thinking of *Pravda* and *Isvestia* State controlled.

Surely he must tell them that the Press in Russia was under the iron dictatorship of Russian censorship. He must tell them the whole truth about Russia.

“Of course the absurdity of it is,” said Kit Merton, “that we accuse Russia of non-co-operation when they have every just reason for suspicion and

distrust. Break that down and we should find Russian friendship. Stalin, after all, has said some pretty generous things lately, very reasonable and favourable to peace."

"Gentlemen——" said Vladimir.

"The fact is——" said Richard.

Suddenly he looked at his wrist-watch and gave a cry of dismay.

"Lordy! Lordy! I must rush. Well, I must say we've had an interesting conversation. I hope we've proved to Cousin David that there are friends of Soviet Russia in England."

"I must make a move," said Jerry Littlewood. "Back to Fleet Street. Back to the Street of Falsehood."

"I must go, too," said Kit Merton, holding out his hand to Vladimir. "I have to attend a lecture on morbid pathology. Thanks for all you've told us. Most interesting. So long!"

Vladimir had hardly spoken two sentences. No revelations, no terrible words had passed his lips.

He went out of the restaurant with Richard who hailed a passing taxi.

"See you soon, David! Interesting lads, eh? I thought you would enjoy meeting them. Open minds and open hearts."

"Are they typical of English thought?" asked Vladimir.

"Oh lord, no! We're a select few, crying in the wilderness. Taxi! I'm sure it had its flag up."

His voice cried out, not in the wilderness, but in Frith Street, Soho.

"Taxi! . . . Taxi!"

He stopped one and with a wave of the hand to Vladimir jumped into it.

L

Vladimir was able to see Viola Northcote from time to time and found some happiness in this. He had an accidental meeting with her during the luncheon hour when he took half an hour's walk sometimes in Kensington Gardens. He found her there on one of the little green chairs away from the paths. She was reading a book and eating sandwiches out of a paper bag. She wore no hat, and the sun glinting through the trees seemed to find some gold in her dark hair.

"Dare I speak to you?" he asked timidly, lifting his hat.

She raised her eyes from her book and smiled at him without annoyance.

"Why not?"

"You're reading," he said. "You want to be quiet."

"Only a text-book. I'm doing some research work in the College of Science over there." She pointed in the direction of Queen's Gate. "Fetch one of those chairs," she suggested.

"It's very kind of you," he said.

He dragged over one of the green chairs and put it beside her, though not too close.

"Tell me how the world goes," she said. "Your Russian friends don't seem very co-operative."

She laughed at her own words as though they held no menace to humanity.

"There are great difficulties," Vladimir admitted. "I'm afraid of a Western *bloc* forming against Soviet Russia and the countries under her protection."

"Protection?" she asked lightly. "That's a good word for political domination."

He was surprised by her knowledge of the international situation. Or at least by this shrewd answer.

"Are you interested in these things?" he asked.

She laughed again and he liked the sound of her voice when she laughed.

"They're rather important, aren't they?" she answered. "One can't ignore the progress of events which may result in Atomic warfare and the end of all things. There's a lot of chat about all that among my fellow students."

"Dare I ask what they think about Soviet Russia?" he inquired after a moment's hesitation.

He saw the smile about her lips making a little dimple in one cheek.

"It's not a very daring question—it won't lead to police court proceedings—but difficult to answer. My Communist colleagues in the same laboratory—one of them is an Indian—think that Soviet Russia is threatened by a future war and making plans accordingly. Others are getting tired of Mr. Vyshinsky's continual 'No!' and Mr. Gromyko's grumpiness."

Vladimir glanced over his shoulder. In Moscow one did not mention names with this lightheartedness.

She saw his glance—she had seen it before—and reassured him.

"It's quite all right! No spies behind the trees!"

"England is wonderful," he said. "People can speak freely here. Sometimes I forget."

"You'll miss it when you go back to Russia."

She saw his face suddenly change colour and get rather pale.

"That's a terrible thought," he told her. "To go back to Russia! I regard it with dismay after this time in England."

"As bad as that?" she asked, looking into his eyes with some surprise.

He spoke emotionally.

"I feel so English! I become more English every day. It's the call of the blood—my mother's blood."

"Oh, well, I hope you'll stay," she said.

He shook his head.

"One day I shall be called back. Then I shall break my heart."

She answered lightly again, perhaps to check further emotionalism. He had called himself very English, but he had the Russian temperament, she thought, according to Tchekov and Turgeniev and those Russian plays on the wireless. Russians in those plays were filled with self-pity and self-inflicted misery.

"Some hearts break more easily than others. Some people have fragile hearts, poor dears!"

"You are jeering at me," he said in a hurt voice "You think I'm a weakling. You don't understand the ordeal of going back to Russia after breathing the free air of England."

She was repentant of being unsympathetic.

"I didn't mean to jeer. Sorry, David—if I may call you that, like my impertinent sister Barbara."

"I love you to call me that."

He could not have much more talk with her that day but he discovered that she came here quite often at lunch-time. It was for him a happy discovery.

"May I meet you here again?" he asked. "I'm a lonely man. I crave for a little conversation with English friends."

"It would be nice to meet you again," she answered, with that sudden look

of shyness which he thought so pretty.

He met her again. He might perhaps have met her every day, but he rationed himself lest he should tire her with his company or make her think that he was thrusting himself upon her. Always she sat in the same place by a leaning tree, away from the footpaths. She raised her hand when she saw him coming, or sometimes sprang up from her seat and went towards him, and said: "Let's have a quick walk. I'll show you Peter Pan's statue—or go once round the Serpentine with you."

Several times he was late back at his office after one of those walks, and knew that another black mark had been put into his dossier. But it was worth the risk, he thought. These were his half-hours of happiness. He hated to break with them. He needed her sympathy, her friendship, her very English spirit, so humorous and yet so understanding.

He told her once about Sofia under the trees in Kensington Gardens.

"She meant everything in life to me," he said brokenly. "Now I'm alone. My dream was smashed."

"I'm sorry," she said, and he saw pity in her eyes.

It was not then, but a week afterwards, that she told him about her own loss.

"I was engaged to a boy in the R.A.F. He was shot down in the Battle of Britain. That's a long time ago now. We were both nineteen—just children."

"It is very tragic," said Vladimir. "My heart bleeds for you."

"Don't let it bleed," she said, with her dislike of emotion. "My heart has stopped bleeding. One can't wallow in grief for ever. Not that I've forgotten my Michael. But one has to carry on."

"To carry on!" exclaimed Vladimir, repeating that phrase. "It's the English way. They always carry on, whatever happens, in war or peace. I must become more English. There are times when I feel myself too Russian. The English don't weep over their wounds."

"We don't wear our hearts on our sleeves," she said cheerfully. "Let's stop talking about our dead loves. Let's keep them private."

On another afternoon when they sat together on the little green chairs away from the footpaths he spoke to her about his quest for some spiritual aid.

"Is there a God," he asked, "or is that one of the world's illusions?"

"Perhaps the only Reality," she answered. "Haven't you any faith in Christianity? Aren't you a Christian?"

"I haven't learnt the A.B.C. of it," he told her. "My mother was afraid to teach me, and I didn't want to learn. It seems to me like one of her fairy-tales, and we were taught to jeer at it as outworn superstition. On the wall opposite the shrine of the Iberian Virgin were the words, carved in the stone, 'Religion the Opium of the People'."

“That’s blasphemy,” said Viola.

“I would like to be a Christian,” said Vladimir. “Perhaps the repudiation of religion led to all the cruelties which have overpowered civilization. I’m beginning to think so, but I’m only groping in the darkness.”

They were silent for a little while, thinking these things out under the trees in Kensington Gardens, where some children were playing on the grass.

“Don’t you believe in anything?” asked Viola. “I mean, anything spiritual and beyond the material appearances of this collection of atoms and electrons which we call the universe?”

“There are some things I believe,” he told her. “I believe in pity for human suffering, and mercy towards all men. I believe in love and goodwill. I hate cruelty. I desire the happiness of children. I believe in the freedom of the mind. I believe in loyalty and kindness and goodwill between nations.”

Viola raised her eyebrows and laughed at this *Credo*.

“You’re a pretty good Christian without knowing it,” she told him.

“I would like to think so,” he answered humbly. “I’m very much in need of some kind of faith. I’m very much in need of moral courage.”

“Are you engaged on some desperate adventure?” she asked, smiling at him.

“A desperate adventure of the mind,” he answered. “A frightful conflict inside myself.”

He did not explain more. It was time for him to go. Before leaving her at Queen’s Gate and hailing a taxi, he clasped her hand.

“These walks and talks with you are enchanting,” he said. “They give me a very great happiness.”

She hummed a little song to him.

> “Madam, will you walk,
> Madam, will you talk,
> Madam, will you walk and talk with me?”

The taxi glided alongside.

“Hop in!” she said. “Don’t be late, Christian.”

He wondered why she called him that. She would not let him be serious for very long. She ended all earnest and soul-searching arguments with a joke or a laugh. She was very English, this Viola Northcote.

Stanislav was sent to New York with a diplomatic delegation connected with the United Nations, much to the envy of most of his colleagues who did not include Vladimir, happy to be in England.

Before going the two friends had a long talk. It was in Vladimir’s barely furnished bedroom in the house at Bayswater, where some of the translating staff were billeted.

They talked about old times and old friends in Moscow and drifted inevitably to the war days when they had been separated on different fronts.

"It was our heroic time, after all," said Stanislav. "The Russian people rose to great heights of sacrifice. Now everything seems flat and purposeless, and victory itself is without profit. We saved our soil by rivers of blood, but the survivors are still hard driven in factories and workshops as though preparing for another war. Only the armies of occupation have a good time."

"What is going to happen when those men go home?" asked Vladimir. "They have seen the low scale of Russian life compared with that in other countries. They've enjoyed a certain amount of liberty. They have been thinking things out, comparing things, watching life in other countries, hearing other people's views. Will they be content with lean rations and police rule?"

Stanislav shrugged his shoulders.

"They'll grumble a bit. Some of them will be shot or exiled far from their own districts. There will be a new orgy of propaganda driving people to work and save for the restoration of the devastated regions. Our people have been serfs for centuries. They still have the mentality of the serfs."

Vladimir was not certain about that.

"They have learnt to think. They talk among themselves. During the war I listened to this talk sometimes. There is a great spirituality among some of them, a craving to find a key to mysteries outside themselves and to look forward to a better way of life."

Stanislav smiled and shook his head.

"That's your romantic imagination, Comrade Vladimir Michaelovitch. It's a reflection of your own inner consciousness. Look at all their brutalities and ferocity. They have primitive instincts. Many of them are even sub-human."

"I disagree," said Vladimir. "I found War brings out the worst in some men but in others the best. Their comradeship was wonderful and their courage supernatural. Men who face death daily talk with truth. I had many strange and revealing talks with men who spoke their inmost thoughts and they had a mysticism which impressed me and made me wonder. They are groping for a new faith or the revival of the old one. They are not materialists."

Stanislav laughed in a sceptical way.

"All that's beyond me. I never met such types. Perhaps I'm not the kind of fellow to whom they reveal themselves. But what are you driving at, anyhow? What does it lead to, even if you're right?"

"It may lead to a new phase of history in Russia," answered Vladimir. "It may overthrow the power of the Secret Police."

"Only by new rivers of blood," said Stanislav. "The present rulers will be ruthless in hunting for heretics against the Soviet creed."

"The Christian martyrs were victorious," said Vladimir. "The slave religion

working underground converted their persecutors. Might it not happen in Russia? Might not we produce our own saints and prophets and re-Christianize our people? Isn't that the only hope for Russia and mankind?"

Stanislav stared at Vladimir with an ironical smile.

"You're always harking on that theme," he said. "Have you taken to religion? Are you going to found a new sect of crazy fanatics?"

"I wish I had the courage," answered Vladimir. "I'm not made of the stuff of martyrs. I'm talking theoretically. I'm developing a thesis."

"A very dangerous one!" answered Stanislav. "Not in accordance with the principles of Lenin. I hope these walls haven't ears."

He stood up from his chair and went to the door to see that it was well closed. Then he turned and looked at Vladimir, who was sitting on the side of his bed, staring at the floor, deep in thought.

"Vladimir," he said, "you'll have to be more careful. You're not in the good books of our bosses. They're keeping a watch on you. You have been reported by the security police."

Vladimir sat up and stared back at Stanislav.

"How do you know?" he asked. "Reported for what?"

"I don't know the details," said Stanislav. "I overheard some sinister words from Boris Fedin. He mentioned your name. He said that you were too closely in touch with English families. He said 'that young man needs a watchful eye upon him'."

"That's very mild," said Vladimir with a careless laugh. "There's nothing very sinister in that."

He felt reassured. He had expected something far worse than that. Of course it made him feel a little uneasy, but not frightened—not frightened yet. There was nothing to be scared about in a casual remark like that. He was doing good work. He had hardly any time to himself. He had been complimented lately by the senior interpreter. He couldn't be spared while this torrent of work poured in.

"Well, my dear fellow, a friendly warning," said Stanislav. "Don't get into trouble. Send me a line to New York. Now I must shove some more stuff into my bags."

The two friends embraced.

"You will have a marvellous time," said Vladimir. "Beware of the American beauties. Don't overeat in that land of plenty. Think of me when you walk down Fifth Avenue, which, I believe, is paved with diamonds and precious stones."

Stanislav laughed and raised his hand.

"Don't become an English snob or embrace the reactionary ideals of the English *bourgeoisie*."

He hesitated for a moment as though reluctant to go, then he came back and kissed Vladimir again, and said, “Good-bye, comrade,” with unusual emotion and affection.

LI

Now that Stanislav had gone Sergei was the only colleague with whom Vladimir could talk reasonably and frankly. The others were incapable of thinking or speaking outside the rigid dogma of Soviet faith. They were suspicious of anyone like Vladimir who dared to express a word of admiration for the English way of life or the English parliamentary system. They were fiercely sensitive to any word of disparagement against the Soviet system or the standard of living in the U.S.S.R. They held to the creed that Russia alone had won the war, that the Western powers had desired the defeat of Russia, and were now conspiring against Soviet interests everywhere. Suffering intensely and unconsciously from an inferiority complex, they found it necessary to jeer at the shabbiness of English people, their bad taste, their lack of intelligence, and their low standard of manners and morals. They were venomous in their denunciations of the dollar dictatorship of the U.S.A. and deeply resentful of the American possession of the Atomic bomb and its secret. They shunned any social contacts with English people and needed no disciplinary measures to prevent such intimacy.

Vladimir found it hard to conceal his disagreement with all this, his contempt for such narrow and false opinions, his increasing love and admiration for England and its people. By his very silences among his colleagues he gave himself away. He knew that they accused him among themselves of being pro-English and contaminated by *bourgeois* sentiment. He could tell that by an exchange of glances among themselves when he sat silent during their tedious conversations about the pluto-democracies and their manoeuvres to form a Western *bloc* against the U.S.S.R. He could tell by their occasional references to his English relatives.

One of them named Spiradov goaded him into incautious speech one day by turning to one of his colleagues and saying jeeringly, “Our comrade Vladimir Michaelovitch is happier in the company of English aunts and cousins than with his colleagues. He prefers their tea and their *bourgeois* ideals to our intelligent conversation.”

Vladimir’s face flushed. They had been talking the usual stuff about Russian supremacy in Europe and the advance of true democracy throughout the world under Soviet control.

“Your conversation makes me tired,” he said. “You’re like a lot of bragging schoolboys. You know nothing of England or the English people because you see nothing and close your minds to everything.”

“You insult us,” answered Spiradov coldly. “That is not surprising. You have been seduced from your old loyalties by philandering with English girls.”

He laughed in an unpleasant way and glanced with an equally unpleasant smile at three or four colleagues who were sitting in the room.

Vladimir found himself breathing rather quickly and knew that his colour was rising.

“I regard that as an offensive statement,” he said hotly, but trying to control himself.

Spiridov laughed again.

“Kensington Gardens,” he said, “is too public a place to escape observation. You have been observed, Comrade Vladimir.”

Vladimir rose from his chair and his right fist was clenched.

“If you talk like that I’ll knock the teeth out of your head,” he said fiercely. Spiridov’s smile faded from his face and he turned a little pale.

“No offence meant, comrade!” he said quickly.

Vladimir regretted his sudden lack of control. It was foolish and dangerous. He swallowed his rage and made an apology.

“Pardon me, comrade. I lost my temper. I’m sorry.”

Spiridov recovered his nerve at this surprising climb-down and answered with a pretence of friendliness.

“Charming of you to say that, comrade. But I advise you to watch your step. Some of your colleagues suspect that you are falling away from the true faith. Quite understandable, no doubt.”

Vladimir felt his rage rising again, and answered bitterly:

“Some of my colleagues are spies and slanderers. I despise them and pity them. They have the minds of sparrows.”

He left the room, but not before he heard the remark of another man there.

“I shall report those words to our chief.”

So it was only to Sergei, his true friend, that he could talk with ease and frankness—Sergei with his whimsical and philosophical mind. Sergei with his scepticism touched by mysticism. Vladimir told him of this scene he had had with his colleagues, and Sergei laughed and agreed that they were an intolerable crowd of fanatics, inhuman in their rigidity of mind and prejudice.

“All the same, they’re the fellows who will dominate the world. It’s by their fanaticism and single-track mind that the U.S.S.R. will extend its dictatorship over the whole globe.”

“The democracies are still strong,” answered Vladimir. “The United States and Great Britain are capable of resistance.”

Sergei shook his head. He was sitting on the side of Vladimir's bed in an attic of the house in Bayswater where they were now billeted.

"They are being converted by the Marxian dogma," he answered. "The Labour government here will be undermined by Communist rats gnawing at the foundations. Our missionaries are at work."

"I have faith in the English tradition," said Vladimir.

Sergei laughed and shook his head.

"All that is gone, my comrade! Haven't you yet perceived that the old world is destroyed? Even the old world of ideas and morals. The ruins will never be rebuilt on the old lines. It's a new world, and the men in the Kremlin are making the blue-prints of its future plan. Not that they are the architects really. They are merely the instruments of a new world force and a new pattern of life which replaces the old individualism by State control over the lives, minds and liberties of the human ants. We are approaching—we belong to—the termite ant form of society, every ant having its special function as one tiny organism in the body of the State like the blood corpuscles in the human body. There will be the controlling brain, the discipline of the ant-heap, the division of functions—the soldier ants, the police ants, the working ants, the slave ants, driven by the inexorable discipline of the mass by the master mind."

Vladimir gave a shudder and felt his blood run cold.

"That's too horrible and it's false to human history. Men will revolt. They will throw off this tyranny. The human ego is unconquerable. The soul of man is intolerant of tyranny."

Sergei raised his hands slightly.

"I should be glad to think you're right, comrade! I'm an individualist. I dislike the regimentation of man. Perhaps there will be another struggle for liberty. History moves in cycles. There are, I believe, twenty-one dead civilizations. Man begins all over again after creating a civilization and losing it in a period of degeneracy. After the next five hundred years of State tyranny leading to world chaos and extinction of all but a few survivors, some man and some woman will produce another human family who will cut another road through the jungle towards another civilization."

"You say terrible things, Sergei," said Vladimir. "I don't believe they're true."

Sergei laughed good-naturedly.

"Quite possibly not! I think according to mood. But you must confess, my friend, that things are going that way. The masses are moving that way—even in China. All this stuff about the United Nations is an illusion behind which Communism moves with its secret police, its secret cells, its secret discipline, and its unswerving plan which is world domination—not by force alone, but by conversion and strategy."

Vladimir answered after a long pause:

"I see things moving in a different way. I see at last the possibility of revolt against a spreading tyranny. I believe the human soul will seek and find some better faith than the Godless creed."

"What faith?" asked Sergei sceptically.

It was a moment or two before Vladimir answered.

"They will become Christians again," he said after this pause. "I shall be one of them working among them for the revolution of the spirit. I am very much drawn that way."

Sergei looked at him with smiling eyes.

"You're asking for trouble, comrade! That very old-fashioned faith—how can one believe it now?—is not favoured by the gentlemen in the Kremlin. They recognize it as their most deadly enemy. Are you prepared for martyrdom?"

"Not yet!" answered Vladimir with a quiet laugh. "I shall try and postpone it."

The conversation languished. Sergei yawned, and then slept for a few minutes. When he awakened he stood up from Vladimir's bed, stretched himself, and then asked a question carelessly.

"By the way, a word about that young woman you go walking with in Kensington Gardens."

"Yes?" asked Vladimir, feeling embarrassed. Had everybody in the world seen him with Viola in Kensington Gardens?

"She is in a way beautiful," said Sergei.

"I think so," said Vladimir.

"Do you love the lady?" asked Sergei, yawning again and blinking the sleep out of his eyes.

"What then?" asked Vladimir.

"I'm sorry for you," said Sergei. "Love is a very painful affair, and generally breaks one's heart. Well, good night, Comrade Vladimir Michaelovitch."

Being self-analytical, Vladimir knew that he loved Viola Northcote. He knew that by his acute disappointment when he failed some days to meet her in the Gardens, and he knew it by the very deep pleasure, the joy even, with which he met her again. There were moments when he felt guilty about it. It was perhaps treachery to his eternal love for Sofia, and he hated treachery. Was it possible that he could love any other woman? Yes, it was possible, for undoubtedly he loved Viola for her English quality, for her gift of friendship, for her frankness, for her shyness when sometimes she avoided his eyes, for the tone of her voice—so 'cello-like and soft—for her laughter even when she laughed at him, and for some grace in her, some quiet elusive loveliness of

mind, some fragrance of the spirit which was new to him in his experience of life.

She seemed to like his company, or not resent it. He amused her, perhaps, as a strange and foreign type. He hoped it was more than that. Sometimes he dared to think that she might bring herself to love him a little. Once or twice, more than that, he thought that her eyes shone with a new light when she saw him coming, though her greeting was casual with just a "Hullo!"

Several times unknowingly she led him into trouble by making suggestions —exciting little suggestions which he could not refuse whatever the consequences—one more black mark in his dossier for being late. He could not refuse her one afternoon when she suggested taking a boat on the Serpentine.

"I'll row," she told him. "You can do the steering."

It was a warm afternoon and it was very pleasant and amusing on the stretch of water with its little wooded island. A few other boats were out crowded with young soldiers and their girls. Multi-coloured ducks bobbed their heads and disappeared for a long time. The stately swans, so proud and unfriendly, paddled by within an inch of Viola's oars.

"This is an earthly paradise!" said Vladimir.

"It will be an earthly hell if you steer into that boat," she warned him.

"I would like this to go on for ever," he said presently, "never to set foot on land again. To go floating like this with you timelessly."

"We should get hungry," she answered, smiling at him over her oars.

She rowed with a beautiful long sweep of her oars feathering on the return stroke. She had long finely modelled arms and strong hands. He thought the poise of her head was beautiful and the suppleness of her body.

"You look beautiful in a boat," he dared to tell her.

He saw a faint colour creep up to her face, but she laughed at him.

"Not so beautiful on a cross-Channel boat," she answered. "I'm always sick when it's rough. Not that I've crossed the Channel since I was a schoolgirl. First the war, now the peace. No escape from little old England."

"No need to escape," he answered. "I want to stay here always."

"Any chance?" she asked.

He was silent. He wondered within himself whether there was any chance of staying in England always. Could he escape from his Russian allegiance? Could he escape from those people who even now would be waiting for his return and marking him down as late? How wonderful it would be if he could live with this girl by his side in some little English house, anywhere in England!

"One never knows," he answered evasively. "Would you be glad if I stayed?"

"Delighted!" she answered as though to a casual acquaintance asking to

stay to tea. But she avoided his eyes again.

There were other adventures, as when she took him into the dim light and vastness of Westminster Cathedral, where on the altar far away candles were burning with little haloes round their wicks.

She knelt down on one of the chairs and Vladimir, after standing a while, knelt beside her and whispered to her, “How does one pray?”

She smiled at him sideways.

“It’s easy. Have a try.”

She only stayed a minute or two. When they came out she asked a question.

“Did you say a little prayer?”

“I tried to—To the Unknown God.”

“He’ll hear all right,” she answered.

There were lots of people passing. Vladimir and Viola were walking towards Victoria station during the rush hour.

“I prayed,” he said, “that I might stay always in England if——”

“If what?”

A man in a hurry pushed his way between them. Vladimir closed up to her again.

“If you would stay with me,” he said. “If I might be with you always. Do you think God heard that?”

He heard her laugh blown away from him by an east wind.

“I’m sure He heard. He hears everything, but He doesn’t grant everything. It might not be good for you.”

“It would be very good for me,” he assured her. “I should be the happiest man on earth.”

“That might not be good for you!” she answered. “It might do you a lot of harm, and I shouldn’t know you in that state. You would be very different without your Russian melancholy. Quite like a stranger!”

She was teasing him and trying to steer him away from emotionalism. He knew that and tried to prevent it. But it was difficult on Victoria station where she was going to catch a train for Clapham. They were in a surge of hurrying humans.

“I want to tell you things in my heart,” he said when she had bought an evening paper at the bookstall.

She gave a little laughing cry.

“No time and no place! I’m catching the 5.30.”

He took hold of her hand and raised it to his lips.

“I love you,” he said. “I want to say so a thousand times.”

“Sorry!” she said. “I mean I’m sorry there’s no time. But I’m glad to be loved.”

“By me?” he asked eagerly. “By no one else but me?”

“Egoist!” she cried, and fled from him. He lost her in the crowd.

He did not see her for more than a week after that and was much distressed. During his time off duty he paced up and down the paths in Kensington Gardens or sat on one of the little green chairs hoping to see her walk across the grass to him, but always he was disappointed. Then one afternoon he saw her in the usual place between two paths. She looked up and raised her hand as he hurried forward.

“Hullo, David!”

“I thought I had lost you for ever,” he said. “Why didn’t you come?”

She was shy of his eyes and laughed with her head turned a little sideways.

“I thought we were seeing too much of one another.”

“We can never see too much of one another,” he answered.

“Is it wise? Does it lead anywhere, David? I mean we must be sensible.”

“Why shouldn’t it be wise and sensible?” he asked. “It will lead us along the road of happiness if you will love me.”

He took one of the little green chairs and sat beside her and took her hand and kissed it.

“Don’t you know that I love you?” he asked.

She looked into his eyes, no longer shy of them.

“I had an idea you were getting that way,” she answered with an elusive smile.

“And you?” he asked. “You, Viola?”

She hesitated for a moment.

“I like you very much,” she told him. “I think I could love you very much, but I’m a bit worried about it.”

“Worried? Why should you worry? You fill me with joy.”

He was still holding her hand, and she let him keep it in his warm clasp.

She asked a question which startled and distressed him. He had asked it of himself.

“Wouldn’t it be disloyal to your little Sofia and to my Michael? They were our loves. We pledged ourselves to them, didn’t we?”

He gave a groan and, letting go of her hand, sat staring at the grass beneath his feet.

“I’ve thought that out,” he said presently. “I haven’t put Sofia out of my heart. She came to me, I am almost certain, when I lay ill in hospital. But if her spirit is still with me—I wish to God we knew!—she would be glad to see me happy. Her love would not be jealous in a small mean way. One love does not kill another. Love, if it exists after death, must be like God’s love, if there is a God.”

“What a lot of ‘ifs’!” cried Viola, laughing at him. “I thought you were on

your way to be a perfectly good Christian. We said a little prayer together, didn't we?"

"I prayed for your love," he reminded her. "If you give me your love I will be a perfectly good Christian. I'll believe in miracles. It will be a blinding revelation of God's kindness."

"A promise?" she asked, with a laugh in her eyes and yet behind the laugh a kind of earnestness and hope.

"A vow!" he answered.

"I'm not sure it's the right way to get converted," she said doubtfully. "It's a funny kind of way to be a Christian—unless love is very spiritual, and very unselfish, and bigger than one's own egotism! Christ died because of His love for men."

"I know," answered Vladimir in a low voice. "I have the mark of the cross on my chest. It hurts me sometimes. Look!"

He thrust his hand beneath his shirt and pulled out the little crucifix which Lucy had worn on her death-bed.

"That was my mother's. I've worn it a long time as a kind of charm—as a love token. In Russia one takes risks in wearing such things."

Viola touched the little cross.

"What a strange history it has!" she said.

"Perhaps it's a symbol. Perhaps it has some terrible meaning."

"Why terrible, David?"

He shirked that question and then took her hand again.

"Viola! What's all this to do with our love? This is a queer way of love-making. I want to hold you in my arms. I want to kiss you."

Viola laughed again at this Russian lover.

"Kensington Gardens on a sunny afternoon is no place for kissing. It's quite against the regulations, and, anyhow, I must go. In fact, I must get the nearest taxi at all costs."

He walked with her to the gate and had to walk fast because of her quick stride.

"I walk on air," he told her. "You love me!"

She smiled at him over her shoulder.

"I can hear the scrunch of your feet on the gravel."

"My heart is bursting with joy," he said after a few more paces.

"You Russian!" he answered derisively.

"I'm all English," he protested. "I'm in love with England and Viola Northcote. I've come home to my mother country."

"There's a taxi," said Viola. "Stop the brute!"

The taxi slid along the roadway and halted in answer to Vladimir's raised hand.

“Thanks, David,” said Viola. “Good-bye for the present.”

He pulled her hand towards him and kissed her on the lips, and she did not shrink back from him.

He could see her laughing face as she drove away.

“I believe in God!” he cried in a loud voice, as though to high heaven.

An old gentleman with a small dog on a lead thought the remark was addressed to him.

“Very difficult, nowadays,” he said. “The world’s in a dreadful state. There are many devils about. The Labour government——”

Vladimir did not enter into any argument on this subject but walked hurriedly to the Russian Embassy. He walked on air. His heart was bursting with joy.

At eleven o’clock next morning Vladimir was summoned to the room of his departmental chief. He went without apprehension, expecting to get orders for some urgent translation. But the first words of his chief were as terrible to Vladimir as though he had been struck a mortal blow.

“Comrade Vladimir Michaelovitch, you have been recalled to Moscow.”

Vladimir felt himself turn cold and white. He could not answer. He was speechless.

A quiet flat voice spoke other words.

“You will go by an aeroplane leaving Croydon tomorrow at 12.30 by way of Berlin.”

Vladimir remained silent. It was as though he had been stunned. But his brain was active. It was like a rat in a trap seeking some way of escape. How could he escape this order? He couldn’t go back to Moscow. He would be leaving Viola who loved him. He would be leaving England, perhaps never to return. He had become English. All his mother’s blood in him had made him English. These people were his people. He loved Viola and she returned his love. Here was his happiness. Here were peace and liberty. No longer did he start at an unexpected knock on the door. Here were no firing squads, no concentration camps, no purges. How could he go back to that police-ruled state where everyone feared his neighbour and where not even victory after heroic sacrifice and rivers of blood had brought any relief or joy to the people? Somehow he must escape. He must go into hiding in some English house, or in some field or ditch. Perhaps Uncle George would give him sanctuary. In England he would be safe. These people would never dare to drag him away. The English police would protect him. Uncle George would come to his rescue. He would never go back to the rule of the Kremlin with its power policy, its false propaganda, its cold determination to rule the world, its hatred of England, its coldblooded purpose to keep Europe deep in misery so that out of misery would come the maggots of Communism, the spreading plague of

Soviet domination. He must escape tonight. He must see Viola tonight and tell her that he would stay in England until death. He must work out his best way of escape. . . . Escape! . . . Escape! . . .

What was that man saying in his quiet, flat voice?

"I regret that you go back with an unfavourable report. I have overlooked some of your indiscretions. I have no complaint against your work. But you have been too intimate with your English relatives and friends. You have been seen many times in the company of a young woman. You have not reported your private conversations, and you have disobeyed discipline by not keeping strictly to your hours of duty. More serious than this is your aloofness from your colleagues and your veiled hostility to their ideology and way of thought which is wholly loyal to our Soviet principles and faith. You are suspect, Rogov. I will say no more. You may go. I hope I have made myself clear?"

Very clear indeed! This might be a sentence of death. This man's report might mean a concentration camp on the way to the timber forests of Siberia. That was a sentence of death after two years or three. Few lasted longer than that. Hunger, typhus, exhaustion killed them off quickly.

"I fully understand," said Vladimir in a low voice.

He bowed slightly to his departmental chief and walked out of his room with a curious stiffness at the knees, like an automaton.

After his day's work—there were many documents to translate—he walked across the park to Bayswater and went into the tall house where he had a bedroom in the attic. For some time—for more than an hour—he sat on the side of his bed thinking deeply, or trying to think. He could not think very well. He was in a kind of black-out. It was the blackness of despair which enveloped him and bore down upon him. Several times he cried out like a wounded animal and once rose from his bed and with both hands raised flung himself against the wall. Several times he called out the name of Viola, and once the name of Sofia whom he had loved in Russia.

"My little Sofia!" he cried. "Help me now! Help me now! What am I to do?"

Perhaps it was the name of Sofia which sent his mind back to Russia and to the public gardens in Moscow where he had walked with her, hand in hand. He had told Viola that he was all English, but that was not true. He was still half a Russian. He had lived with Russians all his life. He loved them. He had seen their heroism and their agony in the war. He had shared their hunger and their suffering and their comradeship. Could he desert them for ever? Would it not be a cowardly thing to leave them in the lurch, cutting himself off from them? His father had been one of the heroes of the Red Army. His son must not be a coward. Perhaps it would be better to go back, even if he went back to death or the slave camps. Perhaps in that way he might pay back the debt he owed to

his father. If he lived he might work underground to bring back a new faith, a new hope of liberty to a few Russians, a few peasants, a few fellow prisoners. The early Christians had worked underground. Christianity meant self-sacrifice even unto death. Had he the courage for that? No, no courage at all, but only fear and despair.

"Sofia!" he cried. "Sofia, my little Sofia, why do you call me back?"

She had not called him back in any audible way. But in this bedroom in Bayswater he had a mental vision of her. She was beckoning him back. She was calling him back.

"I'm going mad," he thought. "Russian blood and English blood! I am torn in half. I have always been torn in half."

"O Christ! Help me now! Take away this agony of doubt."

He felt the coldness of his hands and rubbed them together and shivered, though it was a warm evening.

"I feel ill," he said aloud. "But I must get busy. There is little time."

He left the bed-sitting-room and said "Good evening" to a colleague who passed him on the stairs. It was still early—not yet nine o'clock—and still light in English summer time. He went into a telephone booth in the entrance of a Tube station and, after fumbling with coppers, he managed to ring up a number in Clapham.

A girl's voice answered. It was the fresh, gay voice of Barbara Northcote.

"Who's that?" she asked.

"It is I, Vladimir—David. I wish to speak to your sister."

"Lucky sister!" answered Barbara. "When am I going to do your head?"

"I am rather pressed for time," answered Vladimir. "Is your sister at home? Will she see me for a few minutes? It is very urgent."

"Come along!" said Barbara. "Spend the night. Bring a toothbrush—if Russians use toothbrushes. Do they?"

"I will come now in a taxi," said Vladimir.

"Millionaire!" cried Barbara. "Only Russian Communists would take a taxi all the way to Clapham."

He took the taxi to Clapham and arrived at the house where once Lucy had lived. From this house she had gone to Moscow as the Governess of a German Baroness.

The door was opened by Barbara who greeted him with her usual gaiety until suddenly she saw he had a strained and tortured look.

"Anything wrong?" she asked. "Is David frightened of Goliath?"

"I am a bit worried," he admitted. "I have to make a great decision in life."

"That's all right," said Barbara reassuringly. "Viola, won't say No. Blast the woman! If it had only been me!"

She opened the study door and said: "There you are. I'll vanish."

“Hullo, David!” said Viola. “How nice of you to come!”

She spoke as though he were just an ordinary friend who had dropped in for a chat, but she saw that something tragic was in his mind.

“What has happened?” she asked. “Tell me, David!”

“I am recalled to Moscow,” he told her. “It’s like a sentence of death.”

She turned a little pale but answered jestingly:

“Bad luck for me! Come back soon.”

“I may never come back,” he said. “I may never see you again. That’s a terrible thought. It kills me!”

Suddenly he burst into tears like a wounded boy, and stumbled forward and caught hold of her hands and put his face down on her breast.

“David!” she said softly. “David, my dear! Don’t cry like that. You make me feel so sorry for you, and so sorry for myself. Tell me everything.”

He held her in his arms and kissed her forehead and lips.

“Viola!” he cried. “My English rose! My English love! How can I leave you? But I know I must go back. I can’t be a traitor to my own people. Something drags me back. Something tells me that I must drink this bitter cup. Perhaps I am called back for some purpose bigger than my own life. Viola, I need your wisdom. I need your love. What shall I do? What does your faith and your spirit tell me that I ought to do? I am torn asunder. My heart is dripping blood. I am on the rack of torture.”

There was a wild look in his eyes. He spoke incoherently and with a Russian accent unusually strong.

“Let’s talk quietly,” said Viola in a frightened way, as though a little scared by this emotional scene. “I don’t understand yet. I want to understand so that I can help you.”

She slipped out of his arms and said: “Sit down, David. Let’s talk like sane people. What is all this tragedy about? Why do you come here weeping in agony? Because they want you in Moscow for a little while? They may want you for a great work in Russia—to help the peace of the world, to make friendship between our two peoples. You mustn’t shirk that because we shall be parted for a little while.”

She was speaking to soothe him down to make him calm again, to make him reasonable.

Her English voice and self-control, and the words she spoke, seemed to quieten him and make him less Russian in the violence of emotion.

“Forgive me,” he said. “I don’t behave like an English gentleman. You will despise me for this weakness.”

“You make me feel very mothering,” she told him with a smile. “I want to mother you, David, poor boy.”

“I want to be mothered,” he said. “It tempts me again to run away, to hide

myself, to find some secret place in England. With you that would be heaven."

"Wouldn't it be a surrender?" she asked. "Wouldn't you despise yourself one day? Wouldn't Russia always be calling to you?"

He sat with his head drooping and his eyes cast down until presently, after what seemed like a long silence, he looked at her again.

"You read my soul," he said. "My tortured soul."

"You have great work to do," she said. "Perhaps God calls you."

"For what purpose?" he asked.

She had an idea that the peace of the world could only be made by a new spirit in Russia.

"I am only an ant," he answered. "I have no power. The power is in the Kremlin with their secret police."

"Couldn't that be changed?" she asked. "Couldn't you be a missionary of a new faith among the people?"

He shook his head. "I'm not a saint or a prophet. I have no faith. And yet sometimes—tonight even——"

"What?" asked Viola.

He looked at her in a tragic way.

"Some voice outside myself—or some voice within myself—called me to walk along that road."

"It's worth living for," said Viola. "It's even worth dying for, dear David—that job and that hope, for humanity's sake."

"Worth dying for?" he asked doubtfully. "Death is terrible."

"Millions of boys died in the last war," she reminded him. "My Michael flew to his death. He knew he would be killed but made no fuss about it."

"I have walked through the fields of death," said Vladimir in a low voice. "Death is always terrible."

Viola took his hand and fondled it and then raised it to her lips.

"Why do we talk about death? Let us talk about life. You are going back to Moscow for a little while. If you won't come back soon I shall fly out to you if you'll pull a few strings for me."

"You would join me?" he asked incredulously. "You would come to Moscow? You would be my Russian wife?"

She quoted the words of Ruth.

"Where thou goest I will go, and your people shall be my people."

Vladimir stared at her with a queer smile in which there was a kind of joy and a kind of doubt.

"That would be wonderful! That would be like heaven."

He went towards her again and held her in his arms.

He was back late at the tall house in Bayswater and the house kommissar

was glum with him.

“I shall report this,” he said sullenly.

“It will make no difference,” answered Vladimir carelessly. “I am going back to Moscow.”

There was one thing he had not told Viola. He had not told her that he was going back to Moscow with a bad report. Was it pride that had made him keep that back, or was it because he did not want to frighten her?

He had time next morning to ring up his cousin’s house in Hampstead.

It was Richard who answered.

“Hullo, David! Going strong?”

“I wish to say good-bye,” said Vladimir. “I have been recalled to Moscow.”

There was a pause and then a laugh.

“Lucky fellow! I wish I were coming with you.”

“Give my love to my uncle and aunt and to cousin Betty,” said Vladimir. “A million thanks for all your kindness.”

“My affectionate regards to old man Stalin,” said Richard. “Tell him that Communism gains many converts in little old England. The Bastille has fallen. The Dictatorship of the Proletariat is at hand. Well, so long. See you back again soon, I hope!”

Vladimir Michaelovitch Rogov, called David, stepped into an aeroplane at Croydon which was flying to Moscow by way of Berlin.

THE END.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

[The end of *Behind the Curtain* by Philip Gibbs]