CHAPTER XIX

1713 rules of humane killing—we are torpedoed—extraordinary construction of the Patria Hotel for Socialists

THE VOYAGE TO ROME and Ercole's dramatic description of war confirmed us still more in our pacific intentions. The desire for peace manifested itself with particular strength in Alexey Spiridonovich. After reading *Crime and Punishment* for the tenth time and remembering his little Negro he firmly resolved to suffer in order to redeem his guilt. Raskolnikov's example pointed the way, and one morning Alexey Spiridonovich came out on the Place de l'Opéra, dropped down on the pavement at the entrance to the Métro and began to shout: 'Bind me! Judge me! I have killed a man'. A policeman came running at once and wanted to know when and where the crime had been committed. But when Alexey Spiridonovich explained to him that he had killed a Negro during a rebellion, the policeman, instead of binding him, became very affable, pulled him to his feet, gave him a friendly slap on the back and said: 'You're a fine fellow and a brave soldier, only you shouldn't drink too much in the mornings'. And so our friend's attempt to follow in the footsteps of the heroes of Russian literature ended in failure.

We no longer put any hopes in the Church but decided instead to go to the Hague to visit the International Society of Friends and Supporters of Peace.

Arriving in a neutral country we became conscious at once of an abrupt change. Everyone, including deserters of all nations, spoke of peace with great feeling, proud not to be taking part in the barbaric war. At the same time they were terrified that the war might end soon because they were supplying the fighting powers with all sorts of goods, often of a far from pacific nature. Despite our insufficient knowledge of the Dutch language we understood them without difficulty because a similar love of peace had inspired Mr Cool before our trip to Senegal.

As soon as we had accustomed ourselves a little to neutral psychology we set out for the Peace Palace. To our extreme surprise we found inside it a number of highly intelligent-looking people examining bayonets of various designs. I was so startled that I thought we might have landed in the Ministry of War instead of the Peace Palace owing to our ignorance of the language. But the intelligent-looking gentlemen, who spoke all languages to perfection, reassured us by explaining that they were studying the bayonets used by all the armies to ascertain whether any of them were counter to the detailed rules established—unless I am mistaken—in 1886. We learned many interesting things here: war, it appeared, was by no means the savage slaughter we had thought it, but a thing elevated and ennobled by 1713 rules on humane methods of killing people.

'Don't you understand, I've killed a man!' Alexey Spiridonovich roared.

'What with?'

'What do you mean, what with? I fired at him and I killed him.'

'What kind of a bullet was it?'

'An ordinary one.'

'If it wasn't a dum-dum bullet, your action does not constitute a violation of the humane rules.'

We decided that these were merely rank and file members of the Society, and went to a meeting of the Committee. Six old men were sitting in comfortable armchairs sucking at their cigars.

'We all love peace very, very much,' the oldest of them told us, 'but what can we do? There are six of us on the Committee and seven more in the Society. All of us are citizens of neutral countries and past the call-up age. The others, for some reason,

are all very fond of war. A bad peace is better than a good war, but a good war is better than a bad war. That is why we are making sure that everyone should kill each other honourably and in a decent fashion.'

We asked the old men whether they could not, after all, advise us what we could do to pacify Europe. 'You can become full members of the Society of Friends and Supporters of Peace, and then we shall have nineteen members. We shall give you interesting and important work to do. As you know, use is being made of gases not provided for in any of the 1713 paragraphs. To repudiate them altogether would be excessively pedantic and reactionary. You will have to examine and classify these gases. Then, at the next conference after the end of the war, we shall be able to pass a resolution limiting the use of those gases which cause most distress to the human being as he chokes to death.'

We promised to enrol in the Society but declined the job of examining the gases, explaining our refusal by a desire to strive actively for the restoration of peace.

'Look here,' said another of the old men, 'I could offer you work, too, but first allow me to inquire which particular peace you want?'

'How do you mean, which peace?'

'Excuse me, I've never heard of peace without a qualifying adjective. We have one paper here which preaches Pax Britannica and another which is all for Pax Germanica. You can choose either. Both of them offer good pay in local currency.'

That wasn't any use either. We began to take our leave. All the old men except the chairman had by now dozed off and were muttering in their sleep: 'Down with war! Bertha Suttner! Shame, shame! Good night'.

At the entrance to the Palace a very pleasant Scandinavian, seeing our disappointed faces, came up to us and said: 'Do not despair. Keep trying, young men. Write anti-war novels, and perhaps you'll get a Nobel prize in 1930. Or else try smuggling cheese into Germany'.

Amidst the prevailing bestiality these neutral hearts had retained a true love of mankind.

We left Holland with a bottle of excellent Advokaat and a wealth of moving memories, but still without peace. Our misery was so great that fate, it seems, had the philanthropic intention of cutting it short. During the crossing from Flushing to Hull our small ship, the *Hannibal*, was sunk by a German submarine, and for twenty-four hours we drifted in a small lifeboat in the open sea. During those solemn hours each of us was convinced of his impending death, and each expressed this in his own way. The Teacher alone maintained a perfect, I might almost say an everyday, calm. He occupied himself with us, joked with Aysha and told the story of how, as a child, he had taken it into his head to cross the Atlantic in a beer barrel, but the waves—alas!—had washed him back on shore after a few minutes. I asked him whether the thought of inevitable death meant nothing to him. The Teacher shrugged his shoulders.

'It's a matter of habit. I don't feel secure on dry land either. My *Hannibal* was sunk long ago.'

Mr Cool tore a leaf out of his cheque-book and wrote his will with a Waterman pen which he wore clipped to his breast-pocket. He was leaving all his money to the Missionary Society. Then, remembering the Pope, he added: 'pay one dollar to each orphan left by soldiers killed by an arrow manufactured by Cool & Co.'. When he had finished writing he put the piece of paper in the Advokaat bottle which Aysha happened to have kept in his pocket (we had, of course, drunk up the liqueur long ago) and threw it in the sea. Then, an enlightened man faithful to the traditions of American multi-millionaires, he began to sing *Nearer my God to Thee* in a terribly flat voice. Aysha, startled at first, began to cry but the Teacher calmed him down and even managed to amuse him, so that he finally fell asleep in the middle of a game, his head on the Teacher's lap.

What Alexey Spiridonovich did is easy to imagine: he told the story of his life, insisting that everyone should listen with

particular attention, for this was not just a story but a last confession. Having told it all and even repeated the most interesting bits twice, he greeted death with a quotation: 'O Daughter, lightest Ether!' Finally, whimpering, he began to stare into the empty distance in case a rescuing ship should appear on the horizon.

Ercole heaped all the imprecations he knew upon the Teacher, all the rest of us, the Germans, the British, war, peace and the sea. Damnation! He might have been mumbling *Ave's* or drinking *Lacrima Christi* at this very moment, instead of dying. Was it worth while falling from that perilous height? Traitors!

The regular swell of the sea made me sleepy and I began to nod. A succession of pictures passed before my eyes. I am eight years old, I have a live cat's tail wound round my wrist and I am whipping my sisters with the cat. The grown-ups disarm me with difficulty and lock me in the coal-shed. I tear off my clothes and roll in the black dust. When at last the door is unlocked I leap out and frighten Platonovna, our Nanny, who squats down on her heels and crosses herself in terror. Then I run into the dining-room and throw a lighted lamp on the floor. They must have put the fire out. A pity.

Now I am fifteen. I am a revolutionary. A meeting at the Farbe dyeworks beyond the Moscow River. The police. I run. I climb over a barbed-wire fence and leave my trousers behind. Crash! I fall into a vat of dye. The police do not arrest me, but do as Platonovna had done: 'The devil, Lord help us, the devil himself!'

Five years later. I have become religious. Jammes, the author, has introduced me to the monks. Lourdes, Claudel and the rest. Father Innokenty. Tomorrow I shall be baptized. Then religious vows. I have chosen the name of Brother Hippolyte. Not bad! Last hour of instruction. But inside me, not in my brain but somewhere in the pit of my stomach, a spring has broken. Holy father? Ha ha! Allow me to play you something on the guitar. 'Oh flowers, pretty, pretty flowers'. I'm sick of

you, you lenten faces. How about the daughter . . . I mean Filia Virginia planting parsley, celery and other vegetables in her little kitchen garden? Wouldn't be bad, would it, father? Then I collapse on the floor—crash—and start crawling about on all fours: Lord, Lord, Lord have mercy! Why don't you pierce me with gimlets, pinch me, beat me until it dies, my rotten carcass? But the holy father, just like Nanny, plucks up the hem of his habit in terror and mutters in a corner: 'Out! Away! Help!' And I am in the Paris train. Third class. It's crowded. Sailors. My sixth litre, I think. They sway, the scoundrels. Why won't you keep still?

All these pictures flashed before my eyes. I sought a meaning, solid ground, but there was none. Then the pictures vanished and only verbs were left: sucked, squealed, hit, went to school, prayed, kissed, drifted, drank, whined, wrote, masticated and more, more, more. The verbs made the boat rock still harder. Then I suddenly realized that the meaning was in the rocking, insenseless movement, rotation, change. I stood up, shouted: 'Life, I bless you!' and began to vomit.

In the evening an English fishing ketch saw us and picked us up, and two nights later we were already dining in a Paris restaurant. Having rested from all we had been through, we once again tackled the various declensions of the word 'peace' and, having tried the abbots and pacifists, we decided to appeal to people of a dark and dubious kind, namely the socialists. For this purpose we betook ourselves to Geneva.

I have seen many methods of housing people and many fanciful architectural inventions in my day—skyscrapers, the cellars of Rheims during the war, Danish saloon ferries, Paris *pissoirs,* the plans for Tatlin's monument to the Third International—but all of them pale in comparison with the ingenuity of the Patria Hotel specially equipped for socialist delegations.

We went there with great trepidation. Mr Cool, the originator of the whole trip, could not conceal his fear. He dressed as simply as he could and put a bullet-proof metal armour under his workman's blouse. 'Say what you will, they're subversion-

ists,' he argued in self-justification. Moreover, he ordered Aysha to carry a huge red flag. Thus it was that we entered the large courtyard of the Patria (there were two entrances, but we weren't allowed to use one of them because we failed to produce letters of recommendation from some Minister or other), where Mr Cool began singing the *Internationale*. But his voice was drowned by dozens of others singing *Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles* on the right and *Rule Britannia* on the left.

The layout of the courtyard was remarkable in itself. There were two large wings, one decorated with flags of the Allied nations, the other with German ones. Between them were ditches, banks of rubble and barbed-wire barriers more complicated than anything I had seen at the front. In the centre stood an open pavilion which harboured a few ancient democrats surrounded by piles of protests and resolutions. Seeing our helplessness one of these kindly called us over.

'Tell me, are there many subversionists here, or rather revolutionaries?' Such was Mr Cool's first question.

'At present there are at the Patria four Ministers, eleven deputy Ministers, nine chiefs of Government propaganda departments—' Mr Cool interrupted him with an anxious cry to Aysha: 'Tear up that flag, quick!' Then the old man explained to us the cunning construction of the Patria.

Delegations of the two coalitions were housed in the two wings. To avoid being compromised they not only did not meet but did not even correspond with each other, all of them being good and honourable patriots. But, being socialists and members of the International as well, they were anxious to ensure renewal of fraternal relations after the war. For that purpose posters with resolutions, protests and denials were put out periodically from the windows of both wings. No one could object to this, for anybody can do anything he likes in his own rooms. And comrades representing the neutral countries were housed in the pavilion, from where they even negotiated with the opposing sides.

All this was a little complicated but obviously an invention

of genius. We started the proceedings and Mr Cool shouted: 'O subversionists, I mean Ministers, I mean comrades, are you against war?'

Two posters appeared outside the windows at once. The one read: 'Yes. We are fighting against the imperialism of the Allies and their accomplices, false Socialists who started the criminal war'. The other read: 'Of course. Down with German imperialism and its pseudo-Socialist stooges who are guilty of the shameful slaughter'. These excessively similar replies made me suspicious: perhaps the opponents communicated with each other by means of underground passages? But a neutral democrat reassured me, explaining the closeness in the enemies' outlook by spiritual kinship and the comradely solidarity of socialists the world over.

Then Alexey Spiridonovich asked: 'Do you intend to protest against the war?' The posters replied that they had to ask their respective Governments first, and an hour later we read: 'Shame on those who set fire to Rheims Cathedral! We protest before the whole civilised world against German methods of waging war'. And: 'The atrocities of the Cossacks and the black troops cry to heaven. Down with the Allies who trample upon European culture!'

'What shall we do to bring peace nearer?' we asked.

'Set up a republic in Russia, Italy, France and Ireland!' the Germans replied.

'Set up a republic in Germany, Austria and Turkey! Prove to the neutral workers that they must join our side,' the Allies recommended.

Ercole started yelling: 'A swindle! We're for peace', and let off a squib just to see what would happen. There were frightened cries of 'A bomb! A bomb!' and two touchingly identical posters appeared at once: 'Do not forget we are Socialists. Why don't you decorate the hall of a good-class hotel where we might all meet after the war? Remember to put red flags on the walls. Please don't throw any bombs at us. Long live the International! Have you understood?' Soon some

policemen came and asked us not to disturb the worthy revolutionaries.

Leaving the torn scraps of our red flag in the courtyard we wandered off to a beer-shop, still no nearer to peace.

'Charming people, those socialists, and so well-mannered,' Mr Cool remarked as he threw off his armour which prevented him from settling down comfortably in an armchair.

'And so you all recognise that the disease is incurable, and no longer believe in the efficacy of valerian drops,' said the Teacher. 'Now we can go home and get on with our good and honourable business.'

CHAPTER XX | Monsieur Delet gets a decoration—the Teacher on war—we are captured by the Germans

IN PARIS, however, we were awaited by all kinds of unpleasantness. In the first place, the hotel landlady—having first asked us good-naturedly whether we weren't Germans by any chance—told us that a certain gentleman was showing exceptional interest in us and had questioned her closely on where we went on our frequent journeys, what we had for breakfast and what were our general opinions. Although our journeys were quite idyllic in their innocence, we were none too pleased by the gentleman's curiosity, particularly when we heard that he was 'most respectable' and wore a ribbon in his lapel. However, our uneasiness was of short duration, for on the morning after our return we were politely invited to present ourselves in a certain place. There we were received with all conceivable courtesy and a written denunciation of our activities. It was a large sheet of paper on which the following was written, or rather drawn, in beautiful letters: 'Memorandum on the latest activities of five German spies, based on reports submitted by a representative of the League for the Investigation of Suspicious Events'. Everything was put down and explained in a most impressive fashion: the above-mentioned spies were engaged on selling machine-guns to Germany via Holland. They had approached the Pope in connection with proposals for a separate peace. They had arranged the sinking of a ship on which they themselves were travelling, but had, of course, remained unscathed. Bribed by German socialists ('Wilhelm's flunkeys') they had thrown a bomb at some French socialists, severely frightening one of them, a deputy Minister of War Supply. Having listed the main charges, the personage interviewing us

politely explained that such a way of life generally ended facing a firing squad.

After that everything went on as usual. Ercole howled, Mr Cool sang hymns, and so forth. 'Here comes the representative of the League,' someone said. 'He'll complete the information regarding your behaviour. After that the court-martial and a few other formalities, but it will all, I assure you, be over within 24 hours.'

A day and a night! Howl, Ercole! Sing, Mr Cool! He comes, dread Azrael, unspeakable messenger of death! But why is the Teacher so light of heart? Why does he smile and nod his head? Why, instead of *'Ave, Caesar'*, does he cry *'Bonjour, Monsieur'*? I do not understand. I am afraid to look round. I look round . . .

'Monsieur Delet, dear, dear friend! Are you alive? And Zizi? And the carrots? Are we destined, then, to see you before we die?'

'Nonsense. That swine of a *boche* isn't with you, is he? Well, that's all right then. It was my colleague's doing, but don't you worry. *Monsieur le commandant*, there's been an obvious misunderstanding. My business partners. Yes, yes, I'll vouch for them. You're free, my friends. And now let's be off to the Chatelet, it's the aperitif hour!'

So ended yet another attempt by fate to substitute for the universal peace we so much desired a separate peace for the five of us alone.

Anyone who knows the joy of meeting after a long separation, the charm of unchanged habits, the sweetness of shared memories, the delight of forgotten intimacy, will easily understand how we felt over our sherry. Dear Monsieur Delet! He was the same as ever, pills in pocket, clarity of vision and lightness of mind. True, instead of Zizi—who had been unfaithful to him with four (if only it had been just one!) Arabs—Lucie now lived in the little house; true, sweet peas no longer bloomed in the garden, replaced by ordinary peas in defence of the fatherland; but these were mere details. Monsieur Delet's

rosy cheeks were often, though momentarily, aglow with the reflection of universal fires, and his *élan*, his delightful, vigorous *élan* squeezing the cork out of the bottle, was now directed entirely towards the sacred cause of defending civilisation and the fatherland.

The League was wonderful. Only yesterday someone had noticed that a certain Cru went out for walks—would you believe it?—between midnight and 2 a.m., ate at dawn, pursued no occupation, wore a beard and shaved his moustache. And what do you think they found among his things? A German-French dictionary, a brass army button and finally (the impudence of it!) right in the middle of the table, a pile of photographs showing various fortifications: and the scoundrel swore that they were reproductions of the work of somebody called Picasso—most probably another spy. A clear case!

Besides the League, there was the bacteriological laboratory. What's a passport? A scrap of paper. Monsieur Delet had heard a conversation in German with his own ears near the Bastille; let them try to convince him it was Yiddish, he wasn't fool enough to be taken in by that. And why was the name Silberstein written up over the shop? Surely that's German? Of course he was a man without prejudice and did not believe in all those clerical fables. Christ had never existed, that had been proved a hundred times over, so that the Jews could not have sold Christ anyway. But France did exist, and Monsieur Delet himself was an undeniable fact; and the Jews could sell both France and him. Forget about your passport! A prick of your little finger, a drop of blood: under the microscope with it. It'll be seen at once whether the blood is clean or Prussian. His scientists had found a method. He would unmask them all. The other day they had tested a general—and what happened? The analysis showed 0.6 German microbes. It would be a good thing to creep into Malvy's, the Minister's, bedroom at night and prick his finger on the quiet—he'd undoubtedly turn out to be a German.

Monsieur Delet's third occupation was the National League

for the Apprehension of Persons Attempting to Evade Conscription. A medical certificate? Nonsense. A hernia? Let's see it, please. You've lost an eye in the war? Would you mind taking out your artificial one? Monsieur Delet kept a watchful eye on all women who cropped their hair or spoke in a deep voice. A skirt isn't a guarantee, you know. You've got to delve into the substance.

Neither did Monsieur Delet rest during his leisure hours, oh no! He went straight on working, writing articles. 'Down with the defeatists! We have captured a ferryman's cottage on the Isère. The Portuguese are with us. Syria's not bad either.' He contributed to ten newspapers: the *Pontoise Morning Star*, the *Clermont-Ferrand Drumbeat*, the *Bayonne New Herald*, etc. He believed in us. We wanted peace, did we? Oh, peace would come, immediately, next year, next month, next week perhaps. It was only a matter of finishing off those bandits and taking Berlin. We must help to bring this about. The best way was to become journalists. A sacred cause. The pen was a weapon. Then we should win the war, everything would be fine once more, the little garden, Lucie. The skies of France, how glorious they were! Another little glass, and then to work!

Monsieur Delet's proposal seemed to us a tempting one. As I have already said, Mr Cool's economic empire was in a pitiful state. The Teacher believed in the great organising—and therefore also destructive—power of the penny press. Alexey Spiridonovich, long unsatisfied both by us and by chance encounters in railway trains, longed to pour out his soul into some larger receptacle. I, too, by force of journalistic habit, preferred writing copy to trundling trolleys or tearing off those awful tickets. In short, without standing on ceremony we agreed at once.

The Teacher and Mr Cool split America between them. The first took over the newspapers of the twenty-two republics of South and Central America; the second, the United States Press Association covering 817 various periodicals. Aysha was excused from all activities in view of the lack of any periodical press in Senegal. Matters were more complicated where Ercole was

concerned. Unfortunately he could neither read nor write. But we all agreed that he had a remarkable newspaper style, with the required sweep and titanic pathos. It was decided that Ercole should dictate the telegrams for the *Giornale del Arezzo* and Jurenito should take them down. Alexey Spiridonovich refused to write telegrams because he despised brevity. How could he, in a hundred words, express the full torment and sweetness of sacrifice, the horror of sin and his faith in the Third Reign of the Holy Spirit? He preferred to send immensely long letters headed 'Beyond the Last Frontier' to a newspaper which, though ancient, had nevertheless retained its virginity, namely the *Russkiye Vyedomosti*. As for me—some readers will no doubt recall this—I became a regular correspondent of the not-too-exacting *Russian Stock Exchange Gazette*, popularly known in Russia as the *Birzhevka*.

All of us, including Monsieur Delet and with his assistance, set out for the front. First we resolved to write only about what we could actually see: 'It's raining. A soldier is standing at his post, soaking wet. He addresses us as follows: "What do you think you're doing here, sons of a she-toad?" We can hear the sound of gunfire. Two other soldiers are playing cards. At the last station a peasant woman sold us five stale eggs for 10 francs and asked whether there would soon be peace. We are feeling rather excited. Monsieur Delet, chairman of 33 patriotic societies, said in an interview kindly granted us over an aperitif that Germany would be routed'. In reply, however, we received telegrams from our various editorial offices instructing us not to waste any more money on such bilge but, instead, to describe duels between hydroplanes and tanks, bloody battles underground and interviews with commanders-in-chief every day, and to fly to Egypt and go by submarine to the Dardanelles three times a week. We caught on at once and proceeded to execute our orders with the utmost conscientiousness. To remain at the front any further became futile and even harmful, as it merely cluttered up the pure realm of our fancy with humdrum details. Nevertheless the Teacher insisted that we should pro-

ceed as far as the foremost positions. In order to establish a prognosis of the disease, he wished once more to analyse the blood, pus and urine of humanity.

Having coped successfully with a dozen different Headquarters we reached the outskirts of Verdun. There we were involved in a rather curious incident which, however, did not fit into any of the categories mentioned by our editorial offices and therefore received no publicity.

At an observation point near the Marr fortress we met three soldiers. They were dressed in a highly unorthodox manner, with knitted bonnets over their steel helmets, quilted blankets on their shoulders, their feet encased in large watertight balloons and the bonnets, blankets and balloons in their turn covered with a scaly rind of reddish mud resembling an elephant's hide. To reach them we had to crawl on our bellies along a trench torn up by shells, sinking half-way into liquid earth, human excrement and piles of dead rats. After wiping his hands and face on his handkerchief, Monsieur Delet addressed the soldiers with the following greeting: 'Dear *poilus*! Europe, America, the country of the Rising Sun and both poles are looking at you, selfless heroes defending freedom and justice. Today, as I crawled to these historic spots, I personally shared in your sufferings, so that I can now greet you as an equal, for all that I wear a bowler hat. We shall stand fast—I mean you'll stand here and we'll stand at our shop counters, ministerial desks and café tables—until the hour when the cannibals, exhausted, drop at our feet. Allow me to present you with a small gift—my patriotic article in the latest issue of the *Gascony Triumph,* where I say *de l'audace, de l'audace et encore de l'audace* (these are the words of my last mistress but one, or rather Danton's spoken on an earlier occasion for a different reason). Let us remain firm to the end'.

This speech was certainly no worse than many others I have heard at press banquets—it even compared favourably with them in its conciseness and lucidity—so that what followed must have been purely accidental. One of the soldiers, the

oldest and quietest of the three, swore softly under his breath and then said: 'You'd do better to tell us what's the news about peace, Mr Patriot'. Monsieur Delet, offended, said nothing, but Alexey Spiridonovich was delighted.

'My brother, you, too, are for peace, for love! Killing is sin. This rifle pollutes your hands.'

'Hold on a minute,' the soldier protested, 'a rifle's all right' (here he even stroked the butt) 'provided you know what to do with it. Now if it was a matter of putting an end to all those generals, politicians, officers, civilians, priests, socialists, society ladies and the rest of them . . . that would be talking.'

'But who'd be left then?' Mr Cool asked, businesslike as ever. To this the soldier gave the utterly meaningless reply: 'I spit on that', following the words by indeed spitting juicily on the ground.

The second soldier, a much more temperamental character with the appearance of a Southerner, saw fit to make a whole speech in reply to Monsieur Delet's. In quoting the exact text in translation I beg the reader to forgive me, and him, for a certain over-expressiveness in the figures of speech employed.

'Dear pen-pusher, thanks for the paper, we defenders of justice are in great need of it. Moreover, you may, taking with you the Rising Sun and your five lousy friends, go and put yourself straight away in a cow's stomach. I am happy that you have soiled your stinking mug even slightly with the products of my creation, for I, like you in your newspaper office, also produce something twice a day. I hope you spend the rest of your life surrounded by camel dung. A hundred thousand bald-headed pumpkins! Navel of a she-pope! Get into your aunt's woollen drawers, drink dandelion tea and sneeze under a cat's tail.'

No sooner had Monsieur Delet slightly recovered from this strange invitation than the third soldier, a young fellow without a moustache, crying 'one gift deserves another', pulled a dead rat out of a puddle by the tail and thrust it into Monsieur Delet's lapel, which normally housed something of a very

different nature. Though we had pronounced no speeches and had earned no gifts, still, on witnessing the soldiers' energetic approach, we quickly dropped to the ground and crawled away with all possible speed.

Having reached a spot that was more sheltered in every respect, we began to discuss Monsieur Delet's misadventure. Ercole was thrilled by all he had seen. Referring to Monsieur Delet's unusual decoration he cried with deep emotion: 'That was a gesture worthy of a Roman!' Alexey Spiridonovich was anxious to 'grasp the soldiers' soul'. 'They are rough and full of anger, but I feel within myself that they are as devoted to the cause of peace as I. Friends, we have by chance encountered three followers of our great Tolstoy.'

'Your simple-mindedness,' the Teacher replied to him, 'is assuming the form of an anecdote from the lives of the saints. If there are many like you in Russia I am surprised it hasn't yet been dismantled down to the last stone by those who do not try to grasp other people's souls at every step and do not consider it a sin to deceive those who wish to be deceived. These soldiers are by no means pacifists. They would gladly pin the same decoration as the one they gave Monsieur Delet on the Pope, the Hague humanists, Romain Rolland and all the rest of your saintly peace-lovers, given, of course, the appropriate conditions. Two years ago they were very keen to kill; what's happened in the meantime isn't that their conscience has awakened but that their bottoms have got damp with sitting in wet places. If you set them free it might well be that they wouldn't kill exactly those whom they are supposed to be killing now. It's possible even that they'd take a splendid holiday with loving wives at their side and peaceful little lambs in the meadows. But the time will come and they'll start firing again, for the trenches are far from being a school of altruism or a breeding-ground of Tolstoyans. To pick up a rifle is easy enough and the training's fairly simple—you went through it yourself, remember?—but to put it down again's quite impossible. The best you can do is put it in a corner for an hour or two. The

frightful century is only just beginning. In 1914, when they shouted "Long live the war" (and it *is* still living, thank you very much), that war was something outside themselves, an historic act, an affair of State. Now they grumble "Down with the war", but it has already struck root in their peaceful bodies, it's become their own trade. They'll never lose their liking for the job; at most they may change their employer or the cut of their trousers, but no more than that. You have had to learn different interpretations of the term "holy war"; now you must try to learn another lesson: the word "peace" means the after-dinner sleep of anthropophagi, the sharing of loot between bandits, the transfer of military operations to more attractive parts of the world, say from these muddy fields to Unter den Linden or from the Minsk marshes to the Nevsky in Petrograd. In other words, anything you like but peace.'

Thus, in conversation, we reached the scene of recent fighting between the Douaumont and Vaux fortresses. All around lay a veritable desert. Not a single stone had escaped destruction, not a blade of grass remained upright—everything had been transformed into a liquid grey mass pitted with septic-looking shell craters filled with yellowish water. Here and there protruded a human arm or leg attached to a swollen, rotting corpse beneath a thin covering of soil.

'Remember,' said the Teacher, 'remember that the war has given us not only Mr Cool's economic empire but the whole of this great apotheosis.'

'Wait till peace comes,' Mr Cool replied. 'We shall form yet another limited company. A year or two will pass and we shall restore such order here that no one will believe the wild talk of survivors who had once seen this desert.'

'Of course,' said Jurenito, 'this is far from being a fulfilment or a purification of the earth. So long as Mr Cool—so long as any Mr Cool—is alive, there will be towns, brothels, guns, dollars, holy books, in short all the things a decent man needs to pollute any corner of so-called God's earth in 24 hours, let alone in a year. They'll build, they'll sow, they'll bury the dead

a little deeper. The beans'll grow all the better for it. But look! It is as though before your eyes the curtain of a distant future age were momentarily pierced. That vision is the prototype of the last, the fiery baptismal font.'

The next day, despite protests from Monsieur Delet who had suddenly become extremely cautious, we went forward once more, this time to Hill 384. When we had reached the first line of trenches, the German guns suddenly opened concerted fire along the whole front. There was no possibility of getting back to the rear. We crawled into an excellently equipped dugout and, listening to the roar of exploding shells, turned with redoubled passion to our favourite occupation of running down the war. Monsieur Delet, though he did not seem to share our views, remained tactfully silent; ever since Ercole had expressed approval of the ill-mannered *poilus*' behaviour he preferred not to adopt any position but only to repeat amiably: 'Tolerance, my friends, tolerance and broadmindedness above all things!'

The Teacher, however, spoke out resolutely against us and began to defend the war.

'Once you've started out you must keep going. If you're very uncomfortable you've got to go more quickly, that's all. Never look back, never remember how warm it was by the fireside, how the wind howled in the chimney—Dickens style—or how there was once a dish of sweets on the table, complete with silver tongs. Cowards! You're no true children of this iron age, you're crinoline-chasers, romantics choking on the saliva of cheap emotion, scavengers of yesterday's well-being. You ask what good the war has done? It's given a good crack on the head to all those who had been asleep too long. That's the first thing. Secondly, it's added a healthy dose of strychnine to what you call the springs of inspiration and what I prefer to describe as mud baths. The past has become an impossibility. However hard men may try to restore your Parthenons according to memory, faded photographs and the toothless mumbling of old men, they'll come out looking like Noah's Ark or like a

lavatory of the 21st century. You say you don't care for the 21st century? I agree it isn't any too attractive, but at any rate it's better than the 19th; it's coarse and businesslike, it despises hypocrisy and refuses to declaim Shelley and Verlaine between two swinish acts. And, besides, it's in the future—the 30th, the 50th or the 100th, but anyhow the happy age—and anything that brings us closer to it even by one step is a blessing.

'You curse the war, yet it's not merely a step, it's a leap into the future. It killed all the things in whose name it was begun and has given birth to all it should have killed. A war of liberation, was it? Yet we see now that the peoples are ripe for the great, the undisguised enslavement, for they could no longer bear the fiction of freedom or its spectral boons.

'War will elevate the spirit! It will make an end of rotten materialism! bawled the philosophers, and not only they, but also nice ordinary people with a tendency to dream owing to their stoutness. But the war was conducted with the help of the material, the *thing*. It opened everyone's eyes to the *thing's* meaning and power. In destroying a thousand *things*, annihilating matter with matter, men have learned to respect the *thing* as such, they have come to love it as they never could in the happy days of peace. Hoping that their hour had come, the venerable representatives of all religious cults have come crawling out with their long-neglected wares; the glories of life beyond the grave. But the war has cheated them cruelly. The nearer men have come to the destruction of real everyday life—their own and other people's—the more it attracts them.

'War is the hatred of nation for nation. Yet no sermons about brotherhood, no books, no travels—travels indeed! why, no transmigrations of whole peoples—have brought them closer, welded them more firmly together, destroyed the frontiers more permanently than these years in the trenches. Another of war's jokes: everything's topsy-turvy, don't you see? It has turned out that all—French and English, Germans and Russians—are extraordinarily alike in hating and loving, being afraid, wielding bayonets, suffering in trenches, gasping out their last

breath and rotting in the ground. Now they've all sat side by side long enough to become aware of it. So long as one played the mandolin and the other went hunting the bear it seemed there was a difference. Perhaps it's true; the bear *is* nearer and dearer than the tinkling mandolin-player to the Russian heart. But send them out to do one and the same job and it becomes obvious that they're not merely twins but identical twins, except that one may have a wart below the shoulder-blade whereas the other suffers from attacks of the hiccups.

'Another thing: of all people it was the champions of the old hierarchy, of divine disparity and elevating struggle, of unlimited personality in all its aspects, who put their greatest hopes in the war: the emperor isn't a day-labourer, Rothschild isn't a beggar, the poet isn't a manufacturer of toilet paper, the philosopher isn't a shepherd and so forth. Another disappointment: take away the ermine robes, the dress coats and the collars, put them all in trenches such as this, where you'll find no poems about the Virgin, no toilet paper and no pragmatism, however hard you try, and everyone turns out to be exactly alike, so much so that you could mistake the one for the other. Of course there are epaulettes, headquarters, the gracious home front and the rest of it. But what we're after for the moment isn't the essence but a tiny demonstration. Take these unidentified corpses sticking out of the ground. Your sixteen classes of dead men may become muddled up, Monsieur Delet, and what will happen then?

'All this I see, and when you curse war I bless it as the first day of typhoid fever after which man will either be reborn or die, leaving the earth free for new swinishness or for triumphant legions of rats, ants and infusoria.'

I clearly remember this lesson of Jurenito's. We heard it with deep attention, forgetting the danger which threatened us. The roar of artillery, the rattle of machine-guns and the howling of men seemed to confirm the Teacher's inexorable words, and I believe that if death had come to us at that moment in the shape of a good-sized splinter of a heavy shell we should all—

even Monsieur Delet and Ercole, who of us all were most attached to life—have met it with due resignation.

When the Teacher stopped speaking a sinister calm descended all around. Nothing could be heard but a few odd rifle shots. We decided to crawl out and try to make our way back. But when we got over the top we were awaited by something more terrible than shells. As soon as we saw daylight we froze into immobility: before us stood German soldiers armed with hand-grenades. 'At them!' cried one, but another objected: 'They must be very big nobs, let's take them to divisional Headquarters for questioning, plenty of time to shoot them later'. Having convinced themselves that we were unarmed, the Germans marched us away through a long series of corridors and craters, shoving us forward with their rifle-butts to instil greater respect. Poor Aysha particularly enraged them, and they kept saying they would be glad to finish us off with their bayonets because we were not soldiers but spies. There was nothing to hope for, and we involuntarily slowed down our pace despite the blows, realising that this journey was our last.

We were already passing the second line of German trenches. Everything we saw reminded us of the old familiar sights: big cauldrons of soup were carried past, someone was writing a postcard, a group of soldiers were playing cards. I remembered the Teacher's words about the newly-won kinship. Yet, though they might be our kin, they were about to kill us. I looked enviously at a soldier with a red moustache who sat by a campfire with his shirt off searching for lice. To live as he was living, to crouch on your heels, to drink a muddy liquid out of a tin mug, then to go to sleep in the midst of filth: how little that was, and yet how much!

I do not know what the Teacher and my other friends did during that half-hour or how they felt on their way to certain death. I came to only at the threshold of a small peasant hut. A German pushed me roughly into a dark, narrow room. A candle stood on the table. I saw a general's epaulettes and a pair of calm, absolutely dispassionate eyes. I understood that

there was no salvation and, taking advantage of the fact that the Teacher was still with us, I silently kissed his shoulder, saying good-bye to the cruellest and most beloved thing my short and messy life had ever known.

CHAPTER XXI

The labours of Schmidt—a certain Krüger and bread and sausage

ANYONE INCLINED to believe that there is a hidden meaning to life's merry-go-round, its lucky absurdities and desperate chances, will doubtless find food for thought in this story. Almost every month we fell into mortal peril, yet always there would be a 'but' to save us, were it a fishing ketch, a deputy's visiting card or Monsieur Delet's good-humoured laughter. The percentage of our lucky escapes is considerably higher than that of miraculous cures at Lourdes and similar places, so that I could easily be led to speculate on the powers of Providence, particularly when, instead of the firing squad and the general's eyes, we were confronted with a pair of eyes which belonged to Schmidt and a bottle of cognac, though it was only *ersatz*. However, elevated thoughts are not in my line. I have been in the habit of hanging my head from childhood; I look up at the sky only when I hear the whirr of an aeroplane or when I am wondering whether to wear a mackintosh. The rest of the time I look down at my feet, i.e. at the dirty trampled snow, at puddles, fag-ends and gobbets of spit. It may be that this peculiarity of my, alas, already ossified spine explains my fondness for things of a base and graceless nature. In short, there are about 55 million Germans. If the chances of winning at roulette are 1:36, the difference between that and 1:55,000,000 is merely quantitative and it's a long way from that to mysticism.

Schmidt recognised us at once, though he himself, sunburnt and mature-looking in his spiked helmet, had little in common with the poor young Stuttgart student of yore. I never succeeded in ascertaining his rank or the exact nature of his duties. From his words we gathered that he had gained promotion in the first

few months of the war and now played an important role both at home and, particularly, at the front.

After reassuring us with regard to our fate, Schmidt said he had eighteen minutes at his disposal, which he would gladly devote to talking with us. The Teacher questioned him about his current occupations.

'They are very complicated,' said Schmidt. 'The war has taken a somewhat different turn from what I had expected. It is perfectly clear that we shall not be able to conquer the whole of Europe and put it in order in this one go. Hence certain intermediate tasks have arisen, such as colonising Russia and destroying Britain and France as thoroughly as possible, so as to have less trouble in organising them later on. Those are the general considerations; now let us turn to particulars. We shall soon be obliged, for strategic reasons, to evacuate a largish piece of Picardy; it may be that we shall not return there, and it is already evident that we shall not annex it. I am therefore preparing for the scientific destruction of that country. The task requires meticulous attention. All the local industries have to be investigated: a soap factory at Ham—blow it up; Chauny is famous for its pears—cut down all the trees; excellent dairies in the vicinity of St Quentin—transport the cattle to Germany, and so forth. The place must be left completely bare. If this could be done all the way to Marseilles and the Pyrenees I should be happy: the most painless, humane and rapid transition to German rule, which in turn is only a step towards the organisation of a unified economy within the Reich and thus towards the happiness of all mankind.'

'This is barbarism!' Alexey Spiridonovich cried. 'I've killed one Negro and have become the unhappiest man on earth. Yet you mean to kill millions of innocent people! You speak of the happiness of mankind and sink the children in the *Lusitania*, destroy ancient cathedrals, burn down cities. We won't let you colonise Russia. We shall come out against your infernal machines with ikons and prayers. And you will fall!'

'Do you think all of us Germans like killing? I assure you

that it's far more pleasant to drink beer or this cognac and go to a concert or even to my old friend Frau Hase. No, killing is an unpleasant necessity. A dirty business without enthusiastic cries and without festive bonfires. I don't think the surgeon finds it particularly appetising or jolly to thrust his fingers into a belly inflated with gas and undigested food. But there's no choice. I, my family, my town, my country, humanity itself are only steps. Between killing one weak-minded old man and ten million people for the good of mankind there's only an arithmetical difference. Yet killed they must be, or else the whole world will continue on its stupid, senseless way. Others will be born instead of the ones we kill. I love children no less than you do—let me remind you that I went so far as to trample a bed of flowers in the park in Stuttgart in protest against an order of things which condemned a baby to starvation. That's precisely why, if it should be necessary for the success of a campaign today—which means for the good of Germany tomorrow and of humanity the day after—to sink all the *Lusitanias* and send hundreds of thousands of human beings to their death, I would not hesitate for an instant. Having said that, is it worth while even to mention the cities, churches and so on? Though it's a pity about them, of course.

'In particular let me tell you that one of the gun batteries which smashed Rheims was commanded by Professor Schneider, the author of some magnificent works on the history of Gothic architecture. After gazing through his field glasses at the cathedral which he had longed to see for so many years, Herr Schneider wept. Then he gave orders on the line of fire. As for me, you know that I detest everything that's old in principle. It'll be better if they build a factory or a barracks. We can't spend all our lives snivelling over grandmother's old trunk and going about in torn clothes.

'As for Russia, I've already heard of your queer custom of coming out with ikons against machine-guns, and I am inclined to attribute it to the poor development of schools and railways in your country. But don't despair, we'll put things right. I'm

very fond of you, Herr Tishin, but when we come to Russia you'll have to forget your sighing and weeping and get down to serious business—agronomy or poultry-breeding. The ikons we shall transfer to a museum, and the prayers we shall publish for the benefit of scholars interested in folklore.

'I assume this will all take place quite soon. Meanwhile you'll have to spend a little time in one of our concentration camps. There you'll see German organisation and German culture with your own eyes.'

There were still two minutes left and Alexey Spiridonovich —who had torn off his tie in excitement—as well as Monsieur Delet wanted to argue with Schmidt. But at that moment two sentries came into the room bringing a young soldier with them.

It turned out that this soldier, a private called Krüger, had received a letter informing him that his wife was at death's door. Having no hope of obtaining leave he had attempted to escape, but had been caught near Headquarters.

'I fully understand your feelings,' said Schmidt to Krüger, 'and would be most glad to help you to see your wife at once, but that would be conducive to further attempts at desertion and would thus lower the efficiency of our armed forces. Therefore, for the sake of your own children or, if you have none, for the children of Germany, you will have to die in ten minutes' time. You may hand your belongings and a letter to your wife to the officer on duty.' Having said this and signed a paper, Schmidt quickly took his leave and drove away in a waiting car.

We were taken into a little garden where we were supposed to wait for the arrival of a batch of prisoners captured during the fighting in order to proceed eastwards together with them. After a few minutes Krüger was led out of the house. He walked in a calm, ordinary manner, as though undergoing training or on parade. The soldiers on duty were summoned. They were eating bread and sausage at the time and drinking coffee. After wiping his lips with his hand, the sergeant ordered: 'Form ranks!' Krüger was stood up against the wall of a barn.

A dog belonging to the farm ran up to him but soon went away with its tail between its legs. A batman out in the street was grooming an unsaddled horse with a curry comb.

It was a quiet, simple, everyday scene. I glanced at Krüger; he was looking now at his feet, now at the sky, now down the road, as if expecting an impossible reprieve to appear from one of these directions. The sergeant shouted. The first salvo was unsuccessful and Krüger, wounded in the lower part of the abdomen, jumped in the air squealing. Another salvo. The sergeant went up to the corpse solicitously and touched the head with his foot to make sure of the result. Then two soldiers dragged the corpse aside and went back to their half-eaten bread and sausage. You could hear someone dictating indoors: 'No. 4812 . . . Krüger Hans . . . 4.15 p.m.'

'Teacher,' I whispered, 'what is this? Can one ever forget it?'

He had talked very fluently, had Herr Schmidt, but arithmetic wasn't all there was to it. Even if you accepted the fact, there still remained the 'how'. Was it not better to kill every man on earth in anger, in blind rage for the sake of one's own or one's mistress's stupid, personal happiness than to destroy a single Krüger—a Krüger whom, perhaps, nobody needed—against a barn wall at 4.15 p.m. after calm deliberation, for the sake of the salvation of mankind?

'Remember it, remember it well,' said Jurenito. 'Remember the brains spattered on the wall and the neat slices of sausage. Let them arise before your eyes if ever, exhausted, you should stretch out a hand to bless the shame and filth of this earth.'

That night, locked in a stuffy goods truck going we knew not where, I suddenly saw the whole scene of the deserter's killing once more clearly before my eyes. But let me confess and speak frankly: my feeling then was not one of loathing but rather a horrid, gloating satisfaction at the thought that not I but someone else had stood against the barn wall, that I was alive, enjoying the warmth of the stale air heated by the breathing of men, that I could light a pipe or doze off leaning against the

shoulder of plump Mr Cool. I did not confess this to the Teacher, but I knew that this tedious, blind desire for life—no matter where, be it in a pigsty—prevented me from putting his high teaching into practice. This thought tormented me all night until, towards morning, I understood that weakness was not yet perdition—that Peter's anything but admirable night by the camp-fire had not hindered his saintly death—and, murmuring: 'I deny thee, but only temporarily', I fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXII | Order and culture of the great Reich—we are welcomed in revolutionary Petrograd

WE WERE TAKEN to Oberlahnstein camp on the little river Lahn. On our very first day there we were visited by a middle-aged lieutenant. He told us that Germany was fighting for culture, justice, freedom and the rights of small nations. This was so much like what we had heard daily in the Allied countries that I wondered whether the German, by quoting slogans he had picked up in *Le Matin*, was not trying to pass himself off as a friend of the Allies and provoke us into speaking too freely. But the Teacher explained that 'culture', 'freedom' and the rest were also very much in fashion here, and that the officer had almost certainly read about them, not in *Le Matin*, but in the *Deutsche Zeitung*. Then the lieutenant asked whether there were among us any Russians who weren't Russians (i.e. Ukrainians), English who weren't English (i.e. Irish) or Frenchmen who weren't French (i.e. extreme left-wing socialists). None such were to be found, but the German, concealing his disappointment, promised us nevertheless that we should have every opportunity of appreciating the culture and order of the Great Reich in the camp.

The lieutenant was followed by an N.C.O., who ordered us to fall in. Mr Cool's paunch, Ercole's arms, my round shoulders and, finally, the whole of Monsieur Delet protruded from the ranks. The N.C.O. was displeased and gave Mr Cool a violent jab in the belly, but on hearing that he was an American muttered something resembling an apology and immediately boxed the ears of Alexey Spiridonovich, whose front and rear were irreproachable. I could never understand this trick, which eventually became a habit: whenever our keepers were angry with the Teacher, Mr Cool or Monsieur Delet, they would punish Alexey Spiridonovich, Aysha or me.

After these exercises we were each given a bowl of foul-coloured liquid containing potato peel (the potatoes had, no doubt, been prepared according to the method advocated by Schmidt on a previous occasion).

Then began, day by day, our gradual initiation into the secrets of the culture and order of the Reich. Mr Cool was able to convince himself at once that his dollars had not lost their magic power. By virtue of those dollars, he and Monsieur Delet received an excellent diet and shortly afterwards became only nominal inmates of the camp, moving to the house of Frau Knabe, the senior N.C.O.'s wife, who kept something in the nature of a family boarding-house for prisoners of good social standing. Monsieur Delet complained only of the heaviness of the food—which meant a double dose of Pink pills every day—and of little Ännchen, who was as clumsy as the *Deutschland* statue and did not know even the simplest of Lucie's tricks. But the rest of us, doomed to the eternal slops and peel, grew so weak within a month that we could hardly walk and only got up from the ground for roll-call.

However, we were able to comfort ourselves with the knowledge that similar conditions existed outside the camp. A soldier told me that his wife had had so little to eat during pregnancy that the baby had been born without hair, without nails and an obvious idiot. Yet Herr Löwen, supply chief in the same town of Bieberich, ate a whole turkey every day. I don't know whether Schmidt was aware of this; judging by the fact that it was only French orchards that he destroyed and that he was full of praise for all the Herr Löwens and for German organisation in general, I suppose that the story of the soldier's baby had not reached his ears.

The situation was equally depressing where culture was concerned. One day Aysha, in the infinite innocence of his heart, told a German sentry how he had pulled out the teeth of dead enemies because the 'gri-gri' protected him against the evil spirit—the gun—and advised the German to do likewise. Whereupon the Germans gave Aysha a merciless beating—

breaking his pride and joy, the Ultima arm—and were going to shoot him, but changed their minds and set about photographing him instead, and exhibiting him to various Swedes and Dutchmen as an example of cruelty and barbarism. They would lead him politely into the yard, reel off long explanations to gentlemen in top hats, and measure his head; then, when the distinguished visitors had gone, they would fling him, with kicks and curses, into a dark shed. My poor, tender-hearted Aysha, you did not realise that on those occasions your barbarian nature was meant to throw into relief the culture and humaneness of your tormentors! You did not even know the meaning of that strange word 'culture'; when they stared at you, you would smile shyly, and when they beat you, you sobbed loudly, like a child.

Ercole, after losing a good deal of weight, stole a few potatoes from the kitchens, for which he was sent to the camp prison and also beaten. Alexey Spiridonovich was in poor health all the time; his liver trouble, contracted in Africa, had led to complications. He was exceedingly depressed, and hesitated between three possible courses of action: hanging himself, becoming an out-and-out Tolstoyan—which would mean forgiving his tormentors all and perhaps even inviting the sergeant to beat him to death—or changing his name to Tishenko and being moved to the Ukrainians' camp, where conditions were considerably better. He could not make up his mind and went sick as the best way out. I moaned together with him, cursed culture, wrote all the things that a Russian poet writes under such circumstances — 'Russia — Messiah — devil — resurrection —Russian—prayer—sweetness—stench'—and read my work aloud to Alexey Spiridonovich. He clutched his head, yelled: 'Yes, yes, She comes!', then buried his face in his pillow and cried all night. But I, not knowing how to weep, would either write more verse or sit down opposite a Frenchman who often received food parcels from home and stare at his mouth with all the prophetic frenzy at my command until, driven to despair, he would cut me off a tiny slice of bacon.

The Teacher showed no outward or inward reaction to order and culture. As a Mexican citizen he could have insisted on his release or, at the least, moved to Frau Knabe's *pension*, but he would not leave us. He studied gymnastics, the Gwanza and Herero languages, the development of the sugar-beet industry in the Ukraine and various past attempts to establish State monopolies in the West.

I was greatly impressed by Jurenito's adaptability to the most incongruous living conditions. He was a gourmet of exquisite taste, an honorary member of the *Gargantuans' Club* in Paris, a connoisseur of Burgundy and Bordeaux wines, an expert buyer at the sales of famous cellars, yet he fed with appetite on the unspeakable slops served at the camp and managed to stay brisk, healthy and cheerful. Similarly, he remained unmoved by insults; his attitude towards them was one of frank interest, like that of a traveller studying the customs of a country, or rather, that of a Brehm outside a zoo cage. In fact, however, he was undoubtedly preoccupied by his own thoughts and plans which he did not communicate to us. It is true he often chatted with me, but usually about matters of no importance, to practise his Russian, as he himself admitted.

At the beginning of February a new ordeal began: all of us, including Mr Cool and Monsieur Delet, were unexpectedly transferred from the camp to the eastern front near Kovno and put to roadmending there. This was excessively hard work and I am convinced that, had not various things happened which we could not then foresee, all of us except the Teacher would have found peace in a matter of a month or two, a peace by no means romantic but all the more permanent for that.

About three weeks after our arrival the Germans decorated their Headquarters with flags and joyfully congratulated us: 'There's been a revolution in Russia. The Tsar has abdicated'. How shall I describe our feelings on that day, Alexey Spiridonovich's tears and embraces, my uproarious singing, Monsieur Delet's fears and the Teacher's pleasure and satisfaction?

The next day, when we had finished levelling that hopeless

road, Jurenito gathered us together and said: 'My friends, I want you to prepare yourselves to take leave of the delights of culture. We are about to undertake a small move to the East. I can assure you that the same potato peelings will be served there in a much more ingenious and entertaining manner. The tide of war is swelling beyond the narrow confines of military fronts: in a terrible flood which threatens to break through all the dams, it is trying to wash away the granite, the solid bedrock of the world. Believe me, in savage Petrograd men are now destroying and building the Parthenons, the Quisisanas, the Arcopolises of the universe.'

We did not fully grasp the precise meaning of the Teacher's words but, nevertheless, we began to make energetic preparations for escape. A month passed before we were able to execute our plan, but on the 7th of April, disguised in German uniforms (Aysha with his head completely swathed in bandages), we were making our way towards the forward positions.

What we saw there bore no resemblance to war. No one was firing. From the direction of the Russian trenches came the strains of the *Internationale*, and red banners could be seen bearing such inscriptions as 'Brothers, come over to our side!' 'Long live peace!'. We freely crossed the space separating the Russian from the German trenches and beheld an extraordinary spectacle. A detachment of Germans was marching in full order. An officer snapped a command: 'Eyes right! Kiss the Russians!' and the German soldiers proceeded to embrace the nearest bearded, broad-faced fellows from Perm and Vyatka, who grunted with joy, crossed themselves and shed tears. In the meantime other Germans carefully inspected the positions and clicked their cameras 'for a souvenir'. The embraces dutifully performed, the Germans opened a small but efficient market on the spot, exchanging cardboard cigarette-cases, pocket torches which wouldn't light, and a disgusting liquid bearing the proud name of *cognac* for soap, tea, bacon, sugar and other produce from the country of the savages. This process was described as 'fraternising'.

We were greatly amazed by it all, particularly when, among the fraternisers, we recognised our friend Karl Schmidt dressed in a simple soldier's greatcoat. On seeing us he was embarrassed for an instant, but quickly recovered himself and announced that he had thrown over his former job, dreamed of the brotherhood of nations and, won over by the peace-loving attitude of the new Russia, was on his way to Petrograd to continue 'fraternising' there.

I will not hide the fact that Schmidt's sincerity did not convince me and I communicated my doubts to Alexey Spiridonovich. He, however, exclaimed: 'You have a hard heart. During these days of the world's first true spring, the rays of brotherhood have melted away the pack-ice of the Reich. You don't understand. Schmidt's eyes have been opened. Schmidt is sorry. He is my brother, and I am infinitely happy that he is coming with us.'

A brother? Very well. Why not? I raised no further objections. Together, the seven of us set off into Russia. After ten years' absence I saw once again those grey smoky fields; those little railway halts where pure young girls walk about dreaming of Moscow, the Arts Theatre and the love of some idealistic young lawyer; those junctions with rissoles and roses, where there's always a drunk army captain sucking vodka from a teapot spout and an untidy pile of soldiers, peasant women and children on the platform slimy with spit, smoking pipes, industriously scratching for lice and swearing obscenely. Russia, my Russia!

From Pskov the Teacher dispatched a telegram to the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Provisional Government: 'Travelling petersburg mexican delegate three allies one german anti annexations contributions one liberated negro stop take measures forthwith'. (Copy to all newspaper offices).

Although in those months the arrival of foreign delegations was an everyday event, we were given a touching, nay, a solemn reception. Representatives of a wide variety of organisations gathered at the station, e.g. those of the Okhta District

Soviet of Soldiers' Deputies, the League for Russia's Last Salvation, the Union of Socialist Generals, the Association of Primary Schools, etc. The League presented Monsieur Delet with an album containing photographs of heroes of the great French Revolution—Poincaré, Albert Thomas and Chkheidze—whilst the schoolgirls demanded autographs from the utterly discomfited Aysha. Monsieur Delet was pleased with the photographs and even went so far as to praise Chkheidze—'a handsome man'—but when the band struck up the *Internationale* he took fright and began whispering in Mr Cool's ear: 'D'you hear that? *C'est la lutte* . . . We must try to get away. Oh, *mon Dieu*! One was safer even with the *boches*'.

Of us all, Ercole was the most overjoyed by the welcome. He snatched a flute out of the hands of a meek university student and began blowing it for all he was worth. The public, thinking this was a foreign national anthem, reverently bared their heads. Then he called for Bengal lights and finally, exhausted, lay down on a Bukhara carpet in the special waiting-room for important visitors—the so-called 'Tsar's waiting-room'—and began spitting. When he found that no one threw him out but, on the contrary, photographed him and brought him flowers, he cried: 'This is a wonderful country! At long last I've found something worthy of my via Pascudini, only softer and more comfortable!'

CHAPTER XXIII | Ercole turns head over heels—we are jubilant—we are worried

COMING TO THIS CHAPTER the reader may be shocked by the frivolity and incoherence with which I tell my tale. In self-justification I can only say that throughout the early months of the revolution I was totally absorbed by a single occupation, namely that of being jubilant. My jubilation took various forms: I would now march through the streets with fellow-jubilators attempting to sing something or other, now climb on the plinths of monuments or simply on boxes and deliver speeches lasting many hours, now shout 'Long live—! Down with—!' at home, in front of portraits of my favourite leaders, greatly frightening Dunyasha the cook in the process. With this way of life it was naturally difficult to observe or remember, not only current events, but even the doings of my Teacher. They remain in my memory, vivid, fragmentary, yet connected in their picturesquely random way.

The day after our arrival we were invited to a meeting held at midnight at Chinizelli's circus. The time and place startled me a little, but a Socialist Revolutionary I knew explained that even a young State organism has its traditions, and I refrained from investigating their origins. It was an extraordinary meeting. Not I alone but all those present—and there were not less than a thousand of us—were frankly and unashamedly jubilant.

The first to speak was Monsieur Delet. 'Citizens, permit me to greet you on behalf of my country, the mother of all revolutions—' ('Hurrah!') 'Do not think there's anything new about all this. We've had it all. Don't worry, everything passed off all right. Now we've got a republic—' ('Hurrah!') '—and what a republic it is! There's Liberty — Equality — Fraternity written up everywhere, even over the prisons—' (from the

gallery: 'Boo! Insist on an amnesty in France!' the chairman: 'Order, order! Everyone has a right to speak.') '—But citizens! Only ill-intentioned people—enemies of order—sit in the prisons. In France we have order. Believe me, life is as beautiful there as a rose in May. I've got a little house with a garden, ramblers in the garden—' ('Bourgeois!') '—and little Lucie . . .' (The chairman: 'I've received a note asking the speaker to stick to the subject of the meeting, "The Revolution and The Universe".') '—Citizens, I will be brief. You know yourselves what we expect of you. Citizens, to the front! Be prepared to die for your freedom.' ('We'll die for our freedom!') '—Long live France, the symbol of eternal liberty!' The rest of Monsieur Delet's speech was drowned in thunderous applause and shouts of 'Long live France!'

Then Schmidt came to the rostrum and said in fairly good Russian, without the help of an interpreter: 'Citizens and comrades! We are all tired—' ('That's right!') 'We all want peace. I know for certain that Germany is eager to hold out the hand of friendship to revolutionary Russia. The British imperialists want you to go on defending yourselves—' ('Shame!'—'Down with the war!' Another storm of applause).

Alexey Spiridonovich: 'Brothers! The prophecies have been fulfilled. The eyes of the whole world are upon the Messiah, the sacrificial lamb. If only the sage of Yasnaya Polyana had lived to see this hour. Rise, brothers!' (All rise. From the back rows: 'Sit down, we can't see anything.') 'Vladimir Solovyev wrote that after the Kingdom of the Father and the Son there would come the Kingdom of the Holy Ghost. Prepare yourselves for the final ordeal! Brothers, at the next meeting I shall tell you the story of my life and you will see how the revolution opened my eyes. Now, unfortunately, I have only two minutes at my disposal. But what is time? We shall conquer time. Down with time!' ('Down with time! To hell with time!') 'Long live eternity and the revolution of the spirit!' (Bravo! Give him more time! More! Enough! Hurrah!).

A working man: 'That is, comrades, I was thinking, like this

comrade here said about the spirit, first of all the reservists ought to be sent home, and then we've got to do something about the market gardeners, I mean, they've got no conscience, potatoes at five roubles a pound, whoever heard of such a thing!' ('Inform the Government! Comrade, speak about the Universe! Let the representative of the proletariat have his say!')

Then a concert artist sang the *Song of the Toreador*. A girl student read *The Muse of the People's Wrath*, with feeling, out of a book. Shouts from the back rows: 'We've been swindled. Where's the Mexican?'

The Teacher: 'If I could only see as far as tomorrow and did not know how to turn the leaves of the calendar, I would say that you're the world's greatest reactionaries. Thanks to God—' ('down with the priests!') '—and the war, the freedom about which you're all speaking has been relegated to the archives. But you are not living, you are tossing in a fever; your delirium is not the memory of something which was never yours, it is a glimpse into a distant future. I salute your madness, your ravings, your senseless resolutions and this circus arena where so religiously, in such deadly earnest, you are turning somersaults before the astounded eyes of Europe'.

Bewilderment. Silence. The general happy mood was disturbed. Then an old peasant woman of unspeakable appearance, wearing a spotted shawl, a single tooth protruding from her mouth, got up and mumbled: 'Such a dream I've had, little fathers! There was this great big cockroach, you see, and it ate a whole potful of jam and then it crawled right under Father Mihail's behind and it threw him off his chair with those great whiskers it had. Did you ever? The only thing it can mean is, somebody has it in mind to seize the throne'.

Shouting. Upstairs the fighting had already begun. As ill-luck would have it, Ercole, enchanted by the spectacle, wanted to show his mettle. He slid down quickly on to the sand and turned head over heels. It was not meant as an allegorical gesture, just a beautiful trick worthy of Bambucci the Roman. A terrible noise broke out. Indignation everywhere. '*Agent*

provocateur!' 'Who's an *agent provocateur*?' 'Death to the *agent provocateur*!' The back rows pressed forward. Ercole was in danger. It turned out, however, that the *agent provocateur* wasn't he but some gentleman in a felt hat. No, the gentleman was a deputy Minister and a comrade. A resolution was put to the vote. Alas, Ercole was not yet satisfied. He let off some squibs which he had had the forethought to bring along. 'They're shooting!' Panic. We only just managed to get away. Somebody protested: 'Comrade, you entirely lack social consciousness. You've trodden right on the baby's head'.

I was vexed that our meeting should have broken up in such a way, but the same Socialist Revolutionary again made reference to tradition. The Teacher, on the other hand, was wholly satisfied by the stormy evening and decided to make meetings his speciality; he organised dozens of them under various titles and for persons of all categories.

I particularly remember three meetings: one for thieves, one for prostitutes and one for Government Ministers. A representative of one of the ministries, another Socialist Revolutionary —incidentally a very moneyed gentleman, a wholesaler in the coffee trade—tried to convince the thieves that, in the first place, private property was, of course, theft—as Proudhon had said long ago—but that, secondly, stealing was wrong and everybody should work honestly for defence. The thieves disagreed, invoked the hardships and responsibilities of their profession, adopted a trade union constitution and decided to issue a protest against double locks on front doors, which interfered with the freedom of citizens. The evening ended in uproar: the Socialist Revolutionary noticed the disappearance of his wallet containing a quantity of pounds sterling, began to shout at the top of his voice: 'Thieves, scoundrels, to prison with the lot of you!' and called for the militia. However, the militiaman who arrived towards morning declared that he must first ask his committee, and the Socialist Revolutionary, remembering the Tsarist police longingly for the first time, went off to the next meeting.

Alexey Spiridonovich had his chance to talk at the prostitutes' meeting. He recalled Sonechka Marmeladova and Mary the Egyptian, asked for forgiveness, forgave everybody in his turn, told the story of his life, and finally invited the meeting to 'purify themselves' in the waters of the revolution and to occupy themselves with knitting pants for the 'gallant defenders of freedom and the motherland'. Many wept. Later several citizenesses called for a raising of tariffs. Alexey Spiridonovich tried to speak again, burst into tears from excess of emotion and was led away by a kind-hearted sister of Mary the Egyptian, who whispered in his ear: 'Darling comrade, you're ever so sweet'.

The meeting of Government Ministers was particularly crowded, the invitation having been extended to past, present and future Ministers. Since the office was a shortlived one and anyone could expect it to fall to him to be a Minister one of these days, not less than two thousand people turned up at the circus. A meeting of the Government was cancelled for the occasion. All the Ministers, even the future ones, expressed contrition and promised that, when they were Ministers, they would not be like other Ministers. Their speeches were highly lyrical, all about the sea, sunsets, rusty chains, keys to people's hearts and so on. As a rule I'm dreadfully afraid of Ministers, but these weren't frightening at all and I felt as if I were in the company of young, inexperienced poets. I even plucked up sufficient courage to pronounce the following speech: 'Citizens, during the ten years of my wanderings through Europe I have done some horrible jobs. I have had to shave poodles, push trolleys full of doubtful china and act as cashier in one of my friend Mr Cool's brothels. But here's my word of honour that I've never been a Minister and never shall be one. I am generally fond of human beings and you in particular strike me as very nice people indeed. Let me advise you, too, to do something different. You all seem to have a bent for poetry and I'm sure you would be capable of writing advertising copy for cigarettes or describing the beauties of country

life in *Russia's Riches*. Long live pure poetry!' I was enthusiastically applauded.

After these meetings and some newspaper articles the Teacher's merits came to be appreciated by all. He was appointed Supreme Commissar, though he never found out precisely of what, as the signatory to the decree, hurrying to a meeting, failed to complete it, saying for the Teacher's comfort that somebody somewhere would sort things out.

About the middle of the summer—I cannot say why—I stopped being jubilant and turned to another occupation, that of worrying. This, too, took up a lot of time. I worried in the mornings as I stood in queues or read the papers, at conferences during the day and at meetings in the evenings. At night I would walk along the crowded Nevsky. Everyone was out for a stroll—officers, sailors, Ministers, prostitutes, speculators, Socialist Revolutionaries, ordinary citizens—and everyone, like me, was worried. Every night somebody would try to seize power but would eventually change his mind and put it off till later, and the thing would end with a slight skirmish. Thousands of bearded soldiers would come rushing from the railway stations, knocking over ladies—who fell into a swoon anyhow at the mere sight of them—and charming 'land hussars' who tried to persuade the bearded ones to go back to the front 'for land and freedom'. In the expensive restaurants, where we were sometimes invited by Mr Cool, the waiters still bowed from the waist. Rumanian allies twanged and tinkled their instruments ('here, you, Rumanian front, let's have that again, the one about the girlie'), Irroy's cold punch foamed in the jugs, and the diners, after rummaging in their wallets, would produce three-rouble notes and throw them with a broad gesture into the collecting box for St George's cavaliers ('let's hope they help the General to get rid of all this scum'). After one of these dinners we could starve for three days almost without noticing it. Our money didn't go far enough even to buy bread.

All my friends were worried too: Monsieur Delet because

the Russians were not attacking; Schmidt because they were planning to attack; Mr Cool couldn't bear the financial panic; Ercole had used up all the squibs in Petrograd and there were no new deliveries; and Aysha got beaten, out on the islands, by some drunken waiters who took him either for the devil or for a member of the Black Hundreds, so that he was now afraid to go out into the streets.

Alexey Spiridonovich was more agitated than anyone else. He was on the point of enrolling in the 'death battalion' and going off to save the motherland, but for one reason and another changed his mind at the last minute.

It was necessary to join a party or at least to vote for a particular list of candidates in the elections to the City Duma. But the right-wing Socialist Revolutionaries were too left for him and the left-wing Populists were too right. He worried, sighed and—after drinking plenty of cold punch—wept on Mr Cool's shoulder: 'The twelfth hour will soon strike; Russia is about to perish! And here am I, drinking cold punch. A fine citizen I am, a fine son of the motherland! Come, redemption! Come, torments of the Cross! Oh, oh!'

Then the German offensive started. Schmidt rejoiced and treated Alexey Spiridonovich—who by now did not weep but sobbed—to Riga kümmel. Monsieur Delet threatened: 'Just you wait, I'll pack my things and go. You'll see how Russia gets on without me!'. On the Nevsky there was still more rushing about, singing, swearing and shooting. Finally a solemn gala meeting in honour of free Liberia was announced, and Aysha was persuaded to be a native of that republic instead of Senegal. However, he had no regrets on that score. He was put in the place of honour and every attention was lavished upon him. A lady made a speech about Harriet Beecher Stowe and advised the Russians, 'those pitiful mutinous slaves', to follow somebody's example, though she did not make it completely clear whose—Harriet Beecher Stowe's or the Negroes'. A professor who was a left-wing Cadet strongly advised Aysha to introduce the system of proportional representation in Liberia

and even offered his collaboration. In the end a long-haired youth came forward and began to shout: 'The main thing is to end the serfdom of the spirit, to introduce Futurism into life. If you, O Liberian, are an adulterer, a murderer, a bandit, I love you. We shall smear our faces with soot and glorify the primitivism of the future. Tonight come one and all to Tenishevsky School to a lecture on *The Navel and Something* with practical demonstrations'.

When we left the hall where this celebration had taken place, I suggested that we should immediately go to the Futurist lecture, but the Teacher said: 'I'm sick of that. Anyway, my friends, tonight I shall disappear, though of course only for a time. We shall soon meet again.

'Look at these frightened, anxious, desperate streets. Every stone, every snotty-nosed phiz cries to high heaven: "Away with freedom, it is heavier than the yoke, it is too much for us". Is freedom conceivable without perfect harmony? It quickly transforms itself into disguised enslavement. I become free by oppressing another. It doesn't take long to learn not to allow yourself to be crushed, but iron ages of a new, unheard-of art of living are needed to lose the will to crush others. Don't be taken in by the beautiful fables and the nostalgic sighs for Hellas. History has laid its conjuror's cloak over the wise and free philosopher whose privy was cleaned out by a perfectly ordinary slave. Laugh when you are told of the divine hierarchy of India or the freedom of the independent Britons. All these are merely poetic formulations of a single truth. Freedom does not exist and has never existed. One way or another, despite everything, Epictetus still wanted to eat. The laws were written first and, whatever poetic nonsense Ehrenburg may talk, he still walks on two legs, enjoys a good dinner, isn't indifferent to women and so forth. Thousands of different religions, dogmas, philosophical systems, laws, are merely expressions of that which exists.

'What humanity is heading for today is by no means paradise but the harshest, blackest, sweatiest purgatory of all. The

final twilight of freedom is at hand. Assyria and Egypt will be exceeded by this new, unheard-of slavery. But the slave-galleys are a preparatory stage, a token of liberty—not the liberty of the statue in the square, not of the penny-a-liner's hackneyed idea, but of created liberty, faultless in its equilibrium, the *ne plus ultra* of harmony. You may ask why we had to have that backward or sideways step, those aimless months of madness. They were a good object lesson. What we have today is a mirage—the bearded ruffians at the stations and the "land hussars", the queues and Irroy's cold punch, Shchukin's Picasso and everybody's stupid, dull-witted "What's that you say?" But the day will come when it will be the truth. It is impossible, it is necessary. Freedom that has not fed on blood, that has been picked up in the street or handed out as a tip, is at its last gasp. But remember—I am telling you this today, when thousands of hands are stretching out for the stick, and millions voluptuously prepare their backs for the beating—a day will come when no one will need the stick any longer. A distant day! Meanwhile, *au revoir*.'

CHAPTER XXIV

Everything upside down—Monsieur Delet suffers a mental breakdown

WE WERE LEFT ALONE in that fictitious city which—according to absolutely accurate information supplied by all Russian authors—is in reality non-existent.

At night I wandered about the straight, flat streets. There, in identical low-built houses, lived shady officials giving birth to Antichrist himself between two 'Out' trays—incidentally without any labour pains at all, merely getting their fingers stained with ink; Finnish or possibly German tailors of amazing neatness, with starched wives, who drank kümmel on holidays and then measured the sky above St Isaac's Cathedral with their yardsticks and asked the invisible Being up there whether his suit wasn't a little tight under the arms; churchwardens, retired house-porters and coffin-makers who sprinkled their fuchsias and geraniums with some kind of muck and then lifted their floorboards in search, perhaps of a dead rat, perhaps of a hidden three-rouble note, perhaps of the navel of the earth: in a word, all the famous characteristic rubbish of St Petersburg. Unexpectedly, out of the dirty cottonwool of fog, a huge square building would loom up, with blank walls, a lift stuck forever between the fifth and sixth floors and a typewriter tapping out tediously, to the point of toothache: 'Save Russia, save Russia!'.

Dull, troubled crowds gathered for days on end outside the white projection screens of the newspaper offices. The thing distinctly smelt of Belshazzar, but instead of *tekel* and the other normal words, what one read on the screens was pure delirium: 'New cabinet in Spain—Chernov appointed Resettlement Minister—smoke Kri-Kri cigarettes'. I would test the pavement of the Nevsky, and it did not give way; the Admiralty needle,

without which—as everybody knows—Russian poets cannot exist, was also in its place.

I would go to the *Vienna* and shout: 'Hors-d'oeuvres and you-know-what! More, more, to save my life!' Bald waiters murmured: 'Save our lives!' A reporter hiccuped after a filling dinner: 'Absolutely necessary to save their lives!' And the vodka glasses rattled: 'Save, save our lives!'

By October things became altogether intolerable. Waking up one morning I remembered that there was such a place as Moscow and ran off joyfully to tell the others. That evening we were already besieging a train at Nikolayevsky Station. Reassured that, apart from Petersburg, there were also earth, yellow leaves and, here and there, jolly piglets on the outskirts of villages, I calmed down and fell asleep.

But when we got to Moscow the weather was as damp as in Petersburg, machine-guns rattled and everything was utterly familiar. In the station booking-hall an official and a soldier were going on and on trying to shout each other down: the one bawled 'Save Russia', the other 'Save the Revolution'. Then, to make salvation doubly sure, they started to fight. Soon afterwards the guns began to speak quite close and we all hastened to withdraw to different addresses.

As everyone knows, heavy fighting continued for a week. I sat in a dark closet and cursed my ill-conceived nature. It had to be one of two things: either I must have different eyes or I must get rid of my useless hands. At that moment outside the window men were making history, not with their brains, their imaginations, their miserable poetry, but with their hands. 'Happy is he who has visited this world at moments of decision.' What could be easier, it seemed—just run down the stairs and make history, make it; hurry whilst the substance under your fingers is clay and not granite, whilst history can be written with bullets, not read in a learned German's six-volume edition. Yet there I was, sitting in a closet, munching a cold rissole and quoting Tyutchev. Accursed eyes, eyes squinting, blind or long-sighted, but rotten eyes in any case! What is the use of seeing

thirty-three truths if, as a result, you cannot grasp and clutch your very own truth, a bit skimpy perhaps, but blood of your blood and strong, strong? All around they were at least breathing 'oh's' and 'ah's', rejoicing and praising the All-Powerful for one reason or another.

'Thank God Alexeyev's coming, the bandits have been driven away!' cried Lelya, a charming girl. 'Thank God,' said Matryosha, Lelya's maid, with deep feeling, 'the Bolsheviks are getting the upper hand.' But I am incapable even of that. If the Teacher had been there, he would have relieved me of my unbearable freedom, he would have said 'go!' and I should have gone. But he was not there and I went on munching my rissole. Mark well, O members of so-called posterity, what Ilya Ehrenburg, the Russian poet, was doing during those never-to-be repeated days!

Eventually everything quietened down. The charming Lelya (pure, bright, Russian girl), her charming brother Seryozha (long-haired, honest, idealistic, admirer of Lavrov and Mihailovsky), in a word everyone all round, began to weep. I myself don't know how to weep (no doubt a matter of certain glands not functioning), but I'm very fond of people who do. A sort of dirge broke out everywhere. A curious feature was that many people bewailed things they had not even noticed in the past, or had not approved of when they had noticed them: Lelya lamented the autocracy, Seryozha (the one who was for Mihailovsky) the Church, Fedya, the schoolboy, their younger brother, lamented industry and finance. At least it was something to do, and in the absence of anything better I turned to lamentation.

I peeled off like an onion my memories of far-off days: the faith of my childhood, life with family dining-rooms, aspidistras and cold *zakuski* on the table, Russia's mission according to *The Diary of a Writer*, the cupolas of little churches at Pskov, the café Baum on the Tverskaya with its sweet cakes and Alexey Nikolayevich Tolstoy's merry tales of the psalm-chanter who used to put billiard balls in his mouth. The tears would not

flow, but I whimpered long and dutifully, like a dog in dirty weather.

I was born in 1891, went to the First Gymnasium in Moscow and, being still a junior schoolboy, made the following entries in my *Tovarishch* diary: 'Your favourite author?—Dostoyevsky. Your favourite hero?—Archpriest Avvakum'. How was I not to lament and not to whimper? My habits were already formed; even at table I despised base matter. Somewhere inside me there was a core of dyed-in-the-wool chauvinism; most of the time I would be living abroad and everything would seem to be all right, and then suddenly it would seize me like a fit: 'At home in Russia everything's special, we even slit bellies in a special way'. Normally, I think, I preferred it when there was no slitting of bellies, but every now and again, in some cosy café in Copenhagen, there I'd go again, seeing myself as a Scythian, despising pitiful petty-bourgeois Europe and all the rest of it.

I am giving this boring autobiographical information to explain my state of mind in the autumn of Nineteen Seventeen. I looked back, lamented, wrote poems and read them aloud in numerous 'poets' cafés' with moderate success.

Two months passed in that way. The Teacher gave no sign of life. Instead, one frosty December morning, Monsieur Delet came rushing into my room, flung himself into the armchair and cried: 'I'm dying'. I knew that Frenchmen have an exceptionally delicate physique, so that even at two or three degrees of frost whole droves of people die in Paris of a special *congestion* peculiar to the race. I therefore became alarmed and tried to feel his pulse. But Monsieur Delet snatched away his wrist and declared that, whilst he was in fact unwell and suffering from constipation as never before in his life, that was not the point. The point was Kuzma the house-porter and Russia in general.

I must explain that, being engaged in my lamentations, I had never found time to visit any of my friends; only once, at a 'poets' café', had I run across Alexey Spiridonovich, who, after

hearing my poems, had begun lamenting in his turn, not in the literary sense but with a pocket handkerchief to his eyes. I knew nothing about Monsieur Delet's way of life, so that Kuzma was to me a wholly mysterious individual. I asked Monsieur Delet for the necessary explanation, and he, sobbing and choking with indignation, told me of his misadventures.

When *ces apaches* had first seized power, Monsieur Delet had decided in protest not to go out at all. Appalling for the digestion, but culture comes first. He had been waiting for a delegation to approach him: negotiations, perhaps a compromise. No one came. Indigestion, insomnia. To make matters worse, Monsieur Delet had previously deposited a very special packet of notes in the safe of the *Crédit Lyonnais*. He must leave the house and go there. Would you believe it? The safe gone! The bank gone! Everything gone! Do you hear that? Nothing, only a crowd of people and a terrible row. On the Kuznetsky he had met a general he knew, Pirikin or Ripikin by name. He had hastened to accost him: 'What's to be done, *mon général*?' But the other—all atremble—'Hush, hush! Not *mon général*! That's a thing of the past. Hush!' Do you hear that? Better to neglect one's stomach, better to kill oneself than to walk about in this hell where nothing exists any longer.

But they would not even let him die in peace. Some bandits had come, so evil-looking that in Paris they wouldn't have been allowed even into the prison, saying that henceforth they would live in Monsieur Delet's flat because they were not simply six tramps but—listen to this—Monsieur Delet read aloud: 'a Sub-Group for the Protection of Motherhood and Infants'. All that's very well, but might he ask where he—Monsieur Delet—was to live in that case? Oh the horror, oh the brutality of it! Monsieur Delet squealed and hopped about my room. They had offered him a foul, cramped backroom. What did it mean? The number of cubic metres of air, they had said, was entirely sufficient. Instead of dining-room, drawing-room, hall, bedroom and study—cubic metres of air! Monsieur Delet was a Frenchman, he loved freedom, space, air, even in paintings there had

to be *plein air*, he would suffocate in those cubic metres. But his entreaties had made no impression whatsoever.

Then Monsieur Delet had screwed up his courage for a desperate gesture, a heroic deed. He would go himself to the bandits' den, the District Soviet. And what do you think? There, in the midst of all the other scoundrels, he had seen his own house-porter, Kuzma. Was that not madness? Nevertheless, Monsieur Delet had stood his ground: he was a Frenchman, immunity, *n'est-ce pas*? 'We aren't interested, we've already put away three consuls who'd been up to their tricks. What is your class history?' A ray of hope! Familiar words! The unforgettable sixteen classes! Proudly he had replied: 'Of course I'm not like you—three years in a common grave—class sixteen thanks to my own kind-heartedness! I'm class four, class three, ownership in perpetuity, I could be in the special class, how's that for you?'.

'Oh, my dear Ehrenburg, the most dreadful thing has happened to your country, it has turned upside-down. Everything's in a hopeless muddle. I found myself at the bottom of the scale. They turned me out, and Kuzma actually laughed. He said "There, comrade" . . . Oh! Oh! he really said that. ". . . there, Comrade Delet, there's your special class!" Friend, save me! Where's Jurenito, my partner? Where is everybody? I may be dying! I am worn out! For the first time in my life I've lost my appetite, my *élan*, everything. Even Pink pills don't help me any longer. If you were to offer me a dozen real Marenne oysters, a bottle of Chablis, Lucie herself, I wouldn't move a finger. In Petersburg you were always talking about saving something. Now see if you can save Delet!'

These complaints touched me to the quick. I telephoned the newspaper office, the *Trefoil* café and a certain charming actress to say that I wouldn't be lamenting today, and decided to go with Monsieur Delet to look up our friends. Perhaps one of them might be able to help our dying fellow-disciple.

First we went to see Mr Cool, but on the way Monsieur Delet threw one or two more hysterical fits. As soon as we were

out of the front door he rushed towards a wall which every morning was plastered with decrees and insisted that I should translate them for him. He enjoyed this exercise, deriving from it a certain masochistic pleasure. He heard about the mobilisation of agronomists and the census of sewing-machines with equanimity—neither one nor the other affected him in any way—but the third pronouncement made him break out into a loud, unrestrained howl. This was a poem by a young Futurist entitled *Decree* which, in elaborate language bristling with new word-formations, called on the population to transform and beautify their lives, bring out their pictures into the streets and beat drums in the squares. The poem ended with a fierce threat to the effect that the pitiful reactionaries who failed to do these things would die an inglorious death.

'Oh, damnation! That means I shall be shot tomorrow! Yes, yes, tomorrow—I know. They do everything within 24 hours. Tomorrow at half-past ten in the morning! Oh, what can I do? I'd be glad to bring my picture—*Young Girl dreaming in an Orchard*—out into Zubovskaya Square, but they've taken it from me, those bandits for the Protection of Motherhood! I don't know how to beat a drum. That means the end, death, death without even the undertaker!' I managed with difficulty to calm him down by explaining that this was only a poem. 'What? You use that glorious word to describe the ravings of a mad dog? I love poetry! Zizi and I always used to read Hugo or Rostan "before", to promote *élan*, and Musset or the Comtesse de Noailles "after", when we were resting. But this—this is a horror, a crime, not a poem!'

In celebration of some holiday or other (ever since I was expelled from school I have lost all interest in saints' calendars, including revolutionary ones) the streets were hung with posters —futurist, cubist, suprematist, expressionist and others. Selecting one which meant the most to him—it showed an emerald green woman with legs growing out of her breasts and four behinds in different positions, illuminations and interpretations —Monsieur Delet began to sob. 'Oh art! Oh my dear hunts-

man who filled me with *élan*! Oh beauty! Woman! Love! All is desecrated!'

In this way we reached Teatralnaya Square, where a curious scene met our eyes. A certain Khryashch, by profession a champion wrestler and a 'Futurist of Living', who went in for advising young girls how to achieve communion with the sun, was in the process of erecting a monument to himself in the middle of the square. In real life he was a tallish chap with frizzy hair tinted golden with bronze powder, a blank face and splendid biceps. On the statue he was entirely naked, looked more intelligent and stood on one leg, the other pointing in the air. The crowd, thinking he must be a 'big Bolshevik', was silent and rather scared. Monsieur Delet sobbed. Then a Red Army man came along, spat on the ground, tipped the statue over and smashed it.

The audience dispersed and we went on to the hotel where Mr Cool was supposed to be staying. Alas, we were informed that the American, as an 'incorrigible exploiter', had been sent to a concentration camp near the Simonov Monastery.

'This is a second deluge!' cried Monsieur Delet. We decided to go at once to visit poor Mr Cool. We found him in a state of the utmost depression. He was as thin as a rake and had actually grown a beard. Out of sheer boredom he had kept a record of the little diversions of prison life in his cheque-book, which had lost all its charm as a source of mysterious delights: '24th. Two pounds of dried fish issued. 27th. Millet for dinner. 29th. Smith the factory-owner got a pound of sugar in a parcel and let me borrow three lumps'. Wishing to comfort Mr Cool I brought him a large illustrated Bible as a present and started reading aloud: 'The last shall be the first'. But Mr Cool, doubtless suffering from mental aberrations owing to under-nourishment, failed to recognise his favourite text, snatched the fat volume out of my hands and, enraged, brought it crashing down on my head. Then he began to yell that Monsieur Delet was just as 'incorrigible' as he and ought to be in the camp as well. We hastily departed.

From Mr Cool we went to see Alexey Spiridonovich. Already on the stairs we heard wails and moans. That was our friend reading the paper.

'They've cut down the Cherry Orchard,' he cried without even saying how-do-you-do. 'Russia's dead! What would Tolstoy have said had he lived to see this day?' Then he hurled himself on Monsieur Delet's breast. I am not a great collector of photographs but I would give much to see that scene recorded on a snapshot today. Alexey Spiridonovich explained to Monsieur Delet that Russia had nothing to do with what was going on; it was all the fault of two or three foreigners in German pay. But soon the liberation would come and he, Alexey Spiridonovich, gave Monsieur Delet his word of honour that all debts, all down to the last centime, would be paid. Now, however, he was unable to help in any way for he was suffering from nervous debility, engaged in sabotage and waiting for the happy day of the inauguration of the Constituent Assembly.

Our next visits brought us little comfort. We were never even allowed to see Schmidt, who was occupying some important post or other. After standing in queues for many days and obtaining seven different passes, we were finally turned away by some individual who disliked both the stamps on our passes and the look of our faces. To make up for this disappointment we ran into Ercole in the street. Seeing us he at once assumed a heroic pose, pointing with one hand and pressing the other to his heart. 'You don't know it yet, but I'm a monument now, yes really, a monument. It's a job like any other, no worse than telling beads.'

Ercole told us there had been a move to draw him into some sort of manual work, shovelling snow or some such thing, ignoring the fact that he, Bambucci the Roman, had never done any work in his life and would not do any in the future. He had met another Italian—a fellow in the coral trade—and they had consulted together on what was to be done. Ercole had thought of reviving his Vatican past and declaring himself a Dominican once more. 'The Madonna protect you!' the coral

merchant had cried. 'That isn't at all in fashion now, quite the contrary.'

'Very well, then, I'll say that I've killed a thousand Austrians, that I'm practically a general, a sub-general.'

'That's even worse, they might shoot you for that.'

'But what *do* they like, then, the devils?'

'Art. It's the same thing as monks used to be in the old days.'

Ercole, delighted, remembered his native Rome, the statues of goddesses, the devils over the church portals and the Englishwoman who had painted his portrait. At first he decided to proclaim himself an artist. 'But they might make you paint pictures eight hours a day!' Hesitation. Expectoration. Solution. He would not be an artist but a picture, or rather, not a picture but a sculpture.

Next day, overcoming all obstacles, he burst into the meeting of some archaeological commission and began impersonating the gods, generals, tritons and poets of monumental Rome. That day he went home with the longed-for certificate announcing that 'Comrade Ercole Bambucci was a person protected by the "Department for the Preservation of Art and Ancient Monuments of the R.S.F.S.R.".'

After telling us all this and adding that his rations were pretty thin but he could nevertheless let Monsieur Delet have a pound of grain and a quarter of a pound of so-called 'confectioner's wares', Ercole did the Fountain of Neptune for us, spat with special significance and went away.

All these meetings and conversations had a dreadful effect on Monsieur Delet. During the week I spent in his company I had every opportunity to convince myself of the gravity of his condition. There remained one feeble hope: Ercole had told us how to find Aysha, who, he added, was doing very well. Monsieur Delet cheered up a little and said he supposed Aysha was working as a manservant to some 'important bandit', or Bolshevik, and might be able to get back Monsieur Delet's bank, safe and savings book and help him to get out of this barbarous country.

We went to the address given to us, namely the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs. The spacious reception rooms were deserted, for in those days Russia entertained no relations with any foreign State. There was only an old lady—evidently a governess—having a stormy scene with the Commissar himself over the unlawful requisitioning of several nightshirts and other garments which she, a Swiss citizen, not being a Bolshevik but an honest Calvinist, could not mention by name. Monsieur Delet, never the man to waste an opportunity, also became very agitated, talking about the safe, Kuzma and Pink pills all at once. But the Commissar did not take kindly to this. He gave a diplomatic smile and left the room.

We went through to the offices at the back of the building. These were full of people and humming with activity. We asked for Aysha and were taken to the 'African Peoples' Section'.

Although I had lost the divine faculty of surprise during the years of war and revolution, Aysha's story made me sit up. Taking it all in all, Ercole made a pretty good monument and prison bars went well enough with Mr Cool and his perpetual thirst for a spiritual life. But Aysha, dear little Aysha with whom I had played so innocently on the banks of happy Senegal, Aysha as Director of Propaganda for the Negro Peoples—this was extraordinary and amazing, this had the simplicity of genius. 'Whites kill us, Whites bad. No more good corporals for us.' In short, Aysha felt wonderful in his new role. But I dared not glance at Monsieur Delet: his eyes were wild, there was a rattle in his throat and he was trying crazily to snatch the rubber stamp lying on the table and put it on Aysha's hair. Aysha, smiling gently, gave proof of his good memory and noble nature by addressing Monsieur Delet thus: 'Remember you tell Aysha, Aysha French, Aysha mine, Aysha go, fight in war? Now Aysha say you mine, you Senegalese, Aysha love you very much. Come and work here. You junior clerk Aysha's office'.

What happened next was perfect madness. Monsieur Delet jumped up on the table and began to crow in a high cracked

voice, like a cockerel: 'Special class for me! Toads! Carrion from Class Sixteen! You're trying to pinch my legs! I'll show you! How they stink! Mob! Corpses! I want three hundred scented handkerchiefs! I put my seal on your Senegal and bury it under Class Three! Give me back my safe! *Vive l'alliance franco-russe*! Officer, tie up Kuzma! To Monsieur Deibler with him! Chop off his head! Then into the pit, and no undertaker for him!'.

Alas, there could be no more doubt: poor Monsieur Delet had taken leave of his senses. They tied him up and took him off to the asylum in Kanatchikova Dacha. Next day I resumed my interrupted duties and, lamenting everything, shed a sincere tear for dear Monsieur Delet, who for the sake of the chimera of a Universal Necropolis had exchanged his green peas and his Lucie for the dreary wards of a lunatic asylum. His sense of order and harmony, the hierarchical structure of his world—graceful like a Gothic cathedral—his feather-weight enjoyment of life, his carefree, smiling wisdom proved unable to withstand that ghastly chaos or, as the Teacher had foretold, that 'cosy preparatory form'.

CHAPTER XXV | Jurenito issues degrees—argument about freedom in the central Cheka

IN THE EARLY SPRING, when even the Government, convinced at last of the unreal nature of Petersburg, had moved to Moscow, the Teacher suddenly arrived. He came to see me, inquired into my way of life, expressed disapproval and proposed that I should immediately stop lamenting and go with him to Kineshma as his private secretary. When I asked him what he had been doing for the past six months he replied briefly: 'Pretty tough, their habits, the devil take them! I've been pulling them up by the roots. My hands are all blisters'.

He was going to Kineshma as Commissar.

Three days later we were sitting on the sagging bed of a Kineshma hotel room, and the Teacher, gazing through the window at the local sparks who furtively pawed the sleepy ox-eyed peasant women going past whilst simultaneously admiring two copulating dogs, developed his programme: 'The worst will be if, instead of demolishing and building anew, they start patching up. What could be more trite, after moving the gallery down to the stalls, than to go on performing the same problem play? I am going to try and translate into reality the new foundations of equality, organisation and rational existence'.

A little later typewriters began to clatter defiantly in the next room: that was Jurenito issuing decrees. He began with equality. All commissars, Soviet experts and artistes of the local Karl Marx cabaret were ordered to move into slum dwellings and basements. Further, commissars in charge of clothing depots or 'Commissions for the Requisitioning of Surplus Goods from the Bourgeoisie' were ordered to wear a standard uniform: Russian shirt, sheepskin coat (of simple cut), peaked cap and army boots. Finally, the diet of both higher and lower officials

of the Foodstuffs Department was to be confined to millet gruel, popularly known as *psha*. However, these measures, though sensible enough in themselves, led to appalling disorder. The activities of various highly important institutions (including the Commission for the Requisitioning of Surplus Goods and the Karl Marx cabaret) ceased almost entirely. Many complaints were dispatched to the Centre in Moscow.

Jurenito, undaunted, proceeded to prepare for total organisation and the exorcising of the phantom—the corrupting phantom, as he said—of personal freedom. On one and the same day, April 12th, he issued three short decrees affecting different spheres of life. Here is the exact text:

'1. In view of the shortage of leather raw materials and manufactured footwear, and also of the poor condition of the pavements in the town of Kineshma, all citizens are hereby forbidden to walk in the streets during working hours from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. except on official business or with appropriate authorisation.

2. Until such time as the Central Soviet organs shall have worked out a unified plan of births for 1919, citizens of the town of Kineshma and district are hereby forbidden to procreate as from the 15th instant.

3. Existing conditions demand that all honest citizens should make a maximum effort towards the reconstruction of industry and transport. Therefore, to avoid putting the brains of Soviet workers under unnecessary strain, the issue of philosophical and theological books by the public library is temporarily suspended.'

These decrees caused a veritable storm. The Kineshma Communist organisation decided—I cannot imagine why—that Jurenito was not a Marxist, and appealed to the Party Central Committee.

'Oh hypocrites!' cried the Teacher in indignation. 'They have been called upon to destroy, yet, among the ruins, crowbar in hand, they are playing at being archaeologists or, at the very least, antiquarians. What's the difference between their

splendid scale of food rations—from the quarter-pound loaf of bread to the caviare sandwich—and our unhappy friend's sixteen categories? They love freedom just as much as Gladstone, Gambetta or the members of the *Society for the Protection of Petty Trade in the Southern Departments of France*. No less than the gentlemen of Old England are they concerned that the home should remain sacred. Is it more difficult to order or prohibit procreation than to command men to kill or pray, forbid them to harbour forbidden thoughts or to sleep with goods not bonded and bought? O bigots, hangers of draperies over the crater of Vesuvius, members of high society dressed up as *apaches*, tailors stitching the last pitiful patch—a scrap of stuff taken from the least suitable part of the garment—on Adam's threadbare trousers!'

But Jurenito's enemies thought differently and took energetic steps to have him replaced. In a report sent to the Petersburg *Krasnaya Gazeta* the Teacher was described as an 'ignorant autocrat', a 'hanger-on' whose actions brought dishonour upon the sacred cause of the proletariat.

The decisive battle was fought shortly afterwards in connection with Jurenito's attitude to aesthetic problems. The Teacher believed that the arts—in the sense of the word used hitherto, i.e. the proliferation of absolutely useless things—were not needed by the new society and should be destroyed without delay. In a later chapter I shall explain in detail the considerations which guided Jurenito in his neo-iconoclasm, but in the meantime I give only his conclusions; namely, his firm intention to mete out the same treatment to the nine Muses as to the 'incorrigible' Mr Cool. The Kineshma Bolsheviks held a diametrically opposed view and worshipped the arts to the point of silliness. Eighteen theatres had been opened in the town. Everyone acted in them: members of the Central Committee and the Cheka, chiefs of statistical departments, first-formers from the unified school, militiamen, 'counter-revolutionaries' under arrest, even actors. Nightly, at the Liebknecht Theatre, the Young Communist League put on a play entitled *The*

Mother-in-Law, or Everything Upside Down, in which the mother-in-law was not at all the world revolution but a perfectly ordinary mother-in-law from the good old days.

All this, of course, differed only in degree from the former Kineshma theatre run by the merchant Kutehin.

A good deal, too, had been achieved in the sphere of painting. Owing to the peasants' irresponsible attitude towards art, various masterpieces had been taken from nearby country houses, and Kineshma solemnly opened its own picture gallery. Pride of place was given to three pictures: the first showed a dead fish with its mouth agape, an empty bottle and a head of cabbage ('Dutch School'); in the second ('attributed to Andrea del Sarto') a very large-breasted, heavy woman was smiling coquettishly at a postman dressed as an angel, making sheep's eyes; whilst the third was dotted all over with blotches, some purple, some plain dirty, which, in the painter Vrubel's opinion, were meant to convey superhuman passion.

The Teacher unhesitatingly ordered the gallery and all theatres to close down at once, the accommodation to be made available for technical and vocational schools, the painters to be set to work on designing comfortable men's footwear and armchairs for Soviet offices, and the actresses to be furnished with the necessary directives and sent into rural districts to persuade the peasants to grow more potatoes.

RABIS, or the Union of Workers in the Arts, sent a despairing wire to Moscow, and presently an answer was received: 'Remove the vandal'. The chairman of the local Communist organisation was triumphant: 'Didn't I say he wasn't a Marxist but a bourgeois, that is, a vandal?'. Jurenito and I went back to Moscow.

Directly on arrival we went to a big Communist meeting in the lecture hall of the Polytechnic Museum. The very first speeches convinced us that the Kineshma actors' point of view was shared by the country's great, audacious leaders. Here is what they said: 'The beauty of the antique world is being born again in the proletarian State'—'we are the champions of free

thought'—'the reign of freedom has arrived'. Unable to bear this ancient cud-chewing, these faded forget-me-nots, these hundreds of thousands of musty mattresses, the Teacher cried: 'Aren't you ashamed of wasting your time on stale beauty and rotten freedom? You are the real counter-revolutionaries!'.

There was some consternation, and when we had left the museum and walked a hundred paces or so, two well-dressed young men approached us very civilly with a suggestion that we might like to continue our journey by car, and delivered us with all speed and comfort to the Cheka headquarters.

The Teacher's interrogation was brief: 'Do you deny the existence of beauty and freedom in the Communist State?'

'Certainly.'

'Do you regard the speakers at the meeting as counter-revolutionaries?'

'Of course.'

As for me, I merely hummed and hawed and complained of pains in the stomach, but in the end I signed my name to the Teacher's statement.

In the evening they came to tell us that we had been sentenced to the supreme penalty.

'What does that mean?' I asked the Teacher.

'Since to sentence us to immortality lies beyond their power, I fancy this is a perfectly banal death sentence,' Jurenito replied.

Once again I lived through the sombre boredom of the hours preceding death. I was not at all eager to die, firstly because I have a frank and unashamed love of life—any sort of life, even in a Cheka cell—and secondly because I was curious to know how this whole marvellous commotion was going to end.

In those days I could not yet grasp and comprehend the events around me; blindly obeying the Teacher's words, I could not understand his intentions, and often, in my heart of hearts, I rebelled. Sometimes I was seized by a tremendous longing for ordinary everyday life, without any universal scale, without the prospect of millennia, without the obligation to shoulder the heavy burden of reflection, doubt and all the rest of it, a

life which included cream cakes and the poems of Balmont. At those times I would run to Alexey Spiridonovich, who had a large map of Russia and always knew the exact position of the Czechs, the Don Cossacks, the Germans and the French: in fact, he knew whether the 'glorious resurrection' was at hand.

Sometimes, when I happened to be in the company of lawyers or businessmen who, like myself, missed their *Russkoye Slovo* with its soulful *feuilletons* by the unfrocked priest Grigory Petrov over their morning coffee, the stock exchange, the club, the 'freedom of speech, conscience, movement and the press', I would suddenly become quite cheerful and gloat over their grief. At such moments I derived a deep moral satisfaction from the triumph of justice—like something in a good English novel—as well as finding true delight in the glorious rumpus, a delight familiar to all admirers of that outstanding actor Charlie Chaplin, who knows so well how to wreak havoc in a china shop and knock respectable ladies off their feet.

But there were other moments when neither the Czechoslovaks with their sweet buns nor the broken sugar bowls could satisfy me any longer. I tried to comprehend the Teacher's words about the 'new iron art of living'. I tried to see myself through Ilovaysky's distorting eyes. Then I would see weird and wonderful things—the sky above was dimmed by cyclopic spirals and cubes. Future generations marched with resounding step, rational yet sheeplike, across the cold, bright squares. Nature cringed fawning at their feet, producing what looked like a white flag from underneath her regulation 'veil of mystery'. And, at the end of it all, I glimpsed something like a final railway crash, involving comets and other heavenly bodies (or perhaps not), with splintered glass, rusty iron, and liberation.

As I waited for death in the Cheka cell I thought convulsively of everything at once, conscious of the absurdity, the utter silliness of having to die without even witnessing the end of Act I. The night passed miserably. In the morning we were summoned and led up and down slippery stairs smelling of cats

and cabbage, along narrow passages and across well-like interior courtyards. The Teacher had his arm thrust through mine, and this alone gave me strength. He smiled and joked with the soldiers, protesting that he hadn't been issued a full day's rations in the morning, which he would have had ample time to eat. There was a buzzing in my ears, and unexpected scraps of blue which someone had forgotten to sweep from the sky flickered senselessly before my eyes. Then—I couldn't understand why—they led us off again through corridors and up and down stairs, and instead of finishing us off, simply and honourably, with a few rifle bullets, they took us into a room with dirty wallpaper where an intellectual-looking man was drinking tea and munching lumps of sugar.

He glanced at us with short-sighted, very good-natured eyes and said that on the occasion of the arrival in Moscow of a deputation of—he thought—Siamese Communists, a general amnesty had been proclaimed and we in particular would not be shot. The Teacher heard this in silence; I uttered a polite *merci* as I had been taught to do as a child. The intellectual-looking man, however, obviously thinking me unworthy of notice, turned to Jurenito with a question:

'Tell me—I'd genuinely like to know—are you really so blind and malicious in your hatred of the Government of Workers and Peasants that you can't see something that's obvious to all? Do you refuse to recognise the simple fact that the R.S.F.S.R. is the true home of freedom?'

The Teacher smiled.

'Alas, comrade, I'm neither malicious nor blind. I say "alas", for malice and the refusal to see are tokens of struggle and movement, and therefore of life. Regrettably, I have good eyes, a sober mind and a well-balanced temperament. But that's by the way. Still less can I hate a Government, for life has taught me to respect all trades practised by man. As to the revolution, it's very near to my heart, and I may say that for 31 years of my life I have occupied myself, by preference, with destruction, subversion, infiltration and other purifying operations. Free-

dom, however, is an abstraction and in our day a most harmful one. You are destroying freedom: that is why I salute you. You are the greatest liberators of mankind, for the yoke you bring is a most excellent one, not of gilt but of iron, sturdy and well-made. A day will come when "freedom" will be the revolutionary slogan of boys in their last year at school, and from it, like feathers from a plucked chicken, will come flying the magnificence and all the thousand vestments of the world you're building today. But for the present "freedom" is a counter-revolutionary concept, the *rentier*'s pillow, the sticky sweet clutched in the anthropophagus's fist, the consecration of all the world's refuse-heaps. I salute you, for in the space of a year you have completely knocked the very notion of freedom out of the heads of idlers, dreamers and good-for-nothing prattlers. But it pains me very much to see that you are not the captains of your ship, and that the crazy change of course is due, not to a turn of the helm, but to the force of the black waves. In short, you don't know yourselves what you're doing. Of course it often happens, but it's a sad thing for all that. If you don't shoot me I'll collaborate with you to the full: that is, I shall destroy beauty and freedom of thought, feeling and action wherever I can in the name of a unified, lawful and correct organisation of mankind.'

The intellectual, who turned out to be a Revolutionary investigator, grew indignant. He put aside his cup and actually jumped off the sofa, crossed the room at a run and, wishing to convince the Teacher, opened the *Communist A.B.C.* and started reading out about the rate of surplus value. After three pages or so he exclaimed: 'Now, I hope you've understood: from the reign of necessity we've entered the reign of freedom!'

'Dear comrade, I don't doubt that the reign of freedom will be established one day (possibly when the last men are wiped off the face of our planet). Meanwhile it is precisely the reign of pure necessity that we are entering, where brute force is not concealed under the trite and sentimental trappings of a British Lord. I beg of you, do not trim your cudgel with

violets! Your mission is a great and complicated one: to accustom men to their fetters until they come to regard them as a mother's tender caress. To achieve this you've no need to creep up stealthily, hiding the fetters behind your back. No, you must create a new mystique for the new slavery. It is not enough to tempt the first-former with university diplomas, you must teach him to look forward to the years—hundreds, perhaps thousands of years—stretching before him. For all your education and fondness for quotations, you strike me as a man of commonsense and action. Why don't you leave freedom to the syphilitics in the cafés of Montmartre and go on without it to do all the things you're doing anyway?'

'You're incorrigible,' the investigator replied coldly. 'Owing to your curious terminology I wasn't able to make sure exactly what you were, a monarchist or an anarchist. In any case you're a counter-revolutionary and your sympathy for Soviet power bears a clearly provocational character. We are not freedom's enemies but its most jealous defenders. Your death sentence, and that of citizen Ehrenburg, are commuted to forced labour and confinement in a concentration camp until the end of the Civil War. I hope that there you'll come to realise your error!'