CHAPTER XXVI | Mr Cool and the communist family—the food commissar's tears—the Holy Grail

WE WERE PUT IN THE SAME CAMP as Mr Cool, so that our confinement was not without pleasure. The indefatigable missionary had had time during his imprisonment to adjust himself a little to the great changes which had taken place, and even to become reconciled to them. He had not, of course, become a communist—he did not even claim to be a sympathiser—but nevertheless, he had softened and regained his old respect for his two books, the blue and the morocco-bound.

'I was wrong to think that all was lost. The dollar and morality continue to rule mankind. The more they persecute the dollar, the faster it grows, and insulted morality dominates its detractors.'

The Teacher conducted long conversations on abstract subjects with Mr Cool, e.g. 'The evangelists' concept of ownership', 'St Paul and Lenin', etc. And I killed time by playing the card game Sixty-six with the American for a quarter of a pound of tobacco for every sixty-six games won. Although we had been sentenced to forced labour we did nothing and could do nothing apart from the things I have just mentioned. The camp commandant said in reply to our complaints that soon a special commission would be set up to devise a more productive occupation for us. The Teacher's attitude to all commissions was always one of unconcealed scepticism and, since he suffered greatly from our enforced idleness, he began to look for another way out, and presently found one.

It appeared that we could be released on the guarantee of two members of the Communist Party. Aysha was, of course, the first. The second one presented more difficulty. We had heard rumours that Schmidt was completely changed, had sent

his Reich to the devil and had become an active Spartakist, but those were only rumours. The new *élite* had no outward distinguishing features whatsoever; all the tips we had been given turned out to be wrong; portraits of Marx and red stars in the lapel were used by non-party men as well, to ensure more comfortable travel on the trams.

We had almost given up hope of finding a second communist when a lucky chance saved us. One of the inmates of our camp was a certain Bryuhalov, formerly the owner of a tavern and garden on the Shabolovka. He never wasted his time but pored continually over a pile of books. Often at night I would hear him repeating dully but with dogged perseverance: 'Stockholm Congress, London Congress, Mother of God, save and protect us!' One day this Bryuhalov took my tobacco ration of fifteen cigarettes, which I had only just received, and put it in his pocket. I was so indignant that I nearly choked with coughing. But Bryuhalov, by way of explanation, told me amicably that he wasn't really being held in the camp but was staying there of his own free will until the Housing Department found him somewhere to live, and that only yesterday he had passed his examination in Party Education and had been accepted as a candidate in a cell. I stopped coughing at once and began clearing my throat politely instead. Bryuhalov turned out to be a kindly person and free from arrogance. After a brief but serious conversation in private with Mr Cool he gave his signature.

We were released and all three of us obtained jobs at once: the Teacher in the South American Section of Aysha's Department, Mr Cool in the Interdepartmental Commission for the Suppression of Prostitution, and I in Durov's Children's Theatre, where I helped dear Vladimir Leonidovich to train rabbits and guinea-pigs to fire off toy guns, hoist flags and perform similar deeds of heroism.

We all settled down together in two rooms requisitioned from a certain speculator named Grossmann. Next to us in the same flat lived the Nazimovs, a communist couple. Mr Cool

was perfectly happy. Together with Grossmann he devised something like a sequel to Gogol's *Dead Souls* on an American scale. They bought up nationalised factories, cancelled shares and requisitioned securities. Every day Grossmann would hunt round obscure coffee-shops and follow up dubious addresses—usually to be approached by the backstairs—to return with sheaves of dog-eared bonds. Enraptured, he would expound his creed to Mr Cool:

'The stock exchange is greater than anything. Drive us out—we'll go to the catacombs; in darkness, suffocating, we'll live by the murmur of figures, the rustling of notes. For this I am prepared to die, and before I die I'll cry: "The 3 per cent's going up! The Maltsevskys are no good! The pound's stable!" The Stock Exchange is the pulse of the world. I come into a wretched hole of a place, the home of Chibishev, the stock-broker from whom *they've* taken everything. Wife, children, stove, soup, washing! Poverty, smoke, non-life! And then it happens, the fabulous, the mysterious thing. Chibishev whispers in my ear: "The dollar's going up. It was quoted at two higher in Paris!" And I see the triumph of the New World over Europe, the Statue of Liberty in New York harbour. "The lira's falling!" Poor Italy! *They're* setting to work there. Blood is flowing through the veins of the world, and I, Grossmann, cut off from the holy stock exchanges of London, Paris and Berlin, can sense its heat, its pulsating course here, in Bolshevik Moscow.' Mr Cool, transfigured with emotion, would press Grossmann's hand.

But, strange as it may seem, he made friends with the Nazimovs too. They were very nice, honest people, old party workers. Mr Cool liked them for their high morality. Once when a female admirer of my poetic gifts came to see me and didn't take herself off in time, Comrade Nazimova expressed her feelings on the matter to Mr Cool in the following terms:

'Ehrenburg's a first-rate example of degenerate bourgeois culture. Of course I'm against church marriage, but haven't we introduced civil union? The main point is, I wouldn't object so

much to his not having reported his intentions towards this comrade at the sub-department of Civil Registration, if only I could feel that they were bound by real closeness of ideas. But they aren't, are they? Comrade Andrey, my husband, and I are linked by thirteen years of party work. That's the only way to explain it. Suppose he was a Menshevik, do you think I could ever——?'

The walls in the Nazimovs' room were decorated with picture postcards—Karl Marx, Repin's *What Breadth!* and the Venus de Milo—for beauty and the arts were sacred to the couple. When Nazimov went off on a *subbotnik*, or 'working Saturday', usually to carry logs to Ryazansky Station, he would quote his favourite lines of Balmont all the way: '*I long for burning buildings, I long for the howl of the storm*'. Nazimova was very fond of attending the Arts Theatre, and when on the stage the wind whistled, crickets chirruped, sleigh-bells tinkled or the bellies of 'superfluous men' made a rumbling noise, she would go into an ecstasy of admiration: 'That's true theatre! An illusion! A dream!'

The Nazimovs led a very modest regular life: the office in the morning, conferences during the day, meetings in the evenings. Sometimes, past midnight, after a stirring conversation with Grossmann, Mr Cool liked to go to the Nazimovs' room. The lamp would be burning cosily and Comrade Olga would be reading the latest *Theses on Trade Unions* to Comrade Andrey, who would interject from time to time: 'This is syndicalism! Where's Marx in all that? Dangerous Martovist demagogy!', etc. Mr Cool would sit down and listen too, or rather not so much listen as enjoy the perfect calm and peace which reigned within this family. 'You aren't revolutionaries,' he would say, 'you're the worthiest of Quakers. I'm not a bit afraid of you,' and he would courageously touch the arm of Comrade Andrey, who would take no notice, shocked by the petty-bourgeois tendencies of the workers' opposition.

Mr Cool drew Comrade Nazimova into the work of the anti-prostitution Commission. Like many other home industries, the

trade was booming in Moscow, having lost its former narrow caste-bound character. Everyone, of course, understood its deep social roots, but, not satisfied with diagnosis, they wanted palliatives as well. Mr Cool suggested that prostitutes who switched over to productive work should receive bonuses in kind; Comrade Nazimova—who, like most of the communists I've met, was a confirmed idealist—believed in moral persuasion and, particularly, in lectures on the lives of the world's great women communists.

Comrade Radyelov, a Commissar in the Food Commissariat, also played an important role on the Commission. He sometimes came to see Mr Cool, and that is how we met him. A man devoted heart and soul to his work, he spoke exclusively of wagon-loads, freights, hundredweights of bread, dried fish, etc. He went about in a remodelled lady's coat, a hopelessly torn garment which he had acquired heaven knows how, lived on a pound of bread and a vile liquid known as 'vegetable soup for Category B canteens', was thin and in poor health, but thought of nothing except his mysterious wagons crawling along some pre-ordained line.

However, Radyelov had one weakness: sometimes, he would be seized by a wild and raging desire for a woman, not any particular woman—for, preoccupied with wagon-loads, he did not notice people—just woman in general. But he was ugly. His ugliness had a peculiar, museum-piece quality: a purple face deeply pitted with pockmarks, a cataract in his left eye and a huge Adam's apple quivering under a paper collar. No woman had ever felt anything for him except revulsion mixed with pity. Radyelov could never bring himself to go to a prostitute—this would have gone against the very basis of his principles—but in periods of extreme need he resorted to a rather naïve form of self-deception. He would find some housemaid or seamstress, bring her a few presents, talk about his ideas for half an hour or so, and then, finally losing consciousness, he would stop talking and begin to act.

Radyelov was just experiencing such a crisis of long-unsatisfied

desire when I met him. Sometimes it seemed that his mystic trains would all crash at any moment and all his figures would be swallowed up in the dark vortex of lust.

One night Radyelov invited me and Jurenito to go with him to a certain charming telegraphist whom he was instructing and whose sponsor he would soon be on the solemn occasion of her reception into a 'cell'. We agreed, and Radyelov took with him two pounds of sugar and a pound of flax oil, his whole month's rations. As I've already said, he always ate his bread dry and drank his carrot-tea without sugar.

The telegraphist, Comrade Marusya, turned out to be a very meek, but most particularly a very thin creature. I've seen some thin people in Moscow, in fact I've never seen anything but thin people there, but Marusya's thinness was amazing: a skeleton skimpily covered with flabby skin. Seeing the sugar and oil she fixed them with a religious stare and could not shift it. Radyelov began to speak with unusual heat about wagon-loads and how much of what was going to be delivered in Moscow. 'More herrings and kerosene on Card A. What majesty there is in such equalisation of consumption! 13,102 wagon-loads! A unified economic plan. For the first time the working elements, freed from the parasites, have all they need!' Marusya went on staring—motionless, as though mesmerised—at the little bottle of cloudy yellowish liquid.

Suddenly Radyelov gave a great twitch. Leaving unfinished his paean in praise of the new card system, he moved closer to Marusya and muttered, almost choking: 'You, Comrade! . . . conscious and beautiful! . . .' We turned away and began closely examining a reproduction of Böcklin's *Island of the Dead* which hung on the wall.

But suddenly Radyelov jumped to his feet, crying: 'You've got bones sticking out everywhere, bones, do you hear me? What is this? How can this be?'

Marusya, doing up her blouse in confusion, whispered: 'Well, the fact is, Comrade, the ration's been cut again; last month there wasn't any issue at all, no fats, I'm sorry, Comrade!'

Radyelov wept aloud. No, he did not weep, he howled. A few words were recognisable amid the screams: 'The rations! . . . I can't! . . . fats! . . . What is this? . . . poor, poor thing!' He became uglier than ever, his face red and swollen, crouching on the floor, crying more and more bitterly.

We went out. The stairs were slippery with frost, and dark. The insane howling, unlike anything else on earth, still came from the flat. The Teacher said: 'People laugh at anyone who can't calculate the next step, anyone who misses a stair and falls. Poor people! How serious, how solemn they are before all their carnival nonsense, how careless and stupid when faced with impossibility and doom. From the 13,102 wagon-loads to Marusya's sticking-out ribs there's one step or infinity. Radyelov's tears are a great, an unforgettable thing. If I believed in ritual I'd collect them in a cup: a new Holy Grail. And when humanity was about to fall asleep, grunting with pleasure, having composed some suitable rhyme and invented some perfectly feasible reform, I'd sprinkle these tears of despair and shame over the creators of "harmony", the champions of progress, over the rich earth fertilised by the nothingness of the dead and the greed of the living'.

CHAPTER XXVII | The Great Inquisitor outside the legend

IN THOSE DAYS of shortage and boredom, hungry and cold, a knitted scarf wound round my head, I began not to think but to reflect, i.e. to try and encompass the world and myself from all sides at once. Nothing came of it; the full-face cancelled out the profile, but the whole remained elusive. Neither the Holy Grail of the Food Commissariat nor the Nazimovs' idyll could explain the meaning of events. My labours at Durov's theatre were equally fruitless.

I reflected day and night, simply and in verse, and actually called my poems *Moscow Reflections*. I was terrified of being like Hans Andersen's child who remarked that the Emperor had no clothes: the pious gaze of millions would in itself have been enough to weave a resplendent garment even if, in the natural course of events, there had been none. But the other extreme did not satisfy me either. That's the way I'm made. Suppose there's a big hefty fellow singing about the Host of Heaven. Well, I just can't help thinking he's got a nose with blackheads and beads of sweat on it; what's going on inside his head? 'Soon I'll have finished singing, then I can eat vegetable soup and slap Vaska the tomcat on the nose.' Which is better—to put St Paul in clink like any burglar, or to stand open-mouthed before anyone and everyone, watch while he bashes in the faces of gods and men, and wait in case he's suddenly delivered of a new gospel?

Thus I reflected, confronted with the current-events page of *Izvestia*, certain myths, Lenin's speeches and half a pound of dried fish issued against coupon No. 87 by one of Radyelov's assistants. All these doubts I duly communicated to Jurenito. The Teacher said: 'I've been thinking myself that I'd like to clear my mind of various species of dried fish. For that purpose we're going to visit the captain's bridge and have a chat with a

certain personage who occupies it. There, like a medical student in his first year walking the wards, you'll have a chance to study at first hand the various symptoms of this new ideological fever. Meet me tomorrow at 2 a.m.'.

Knowing the Teacher I avoided the pitfall of curiosity and refrained from asking whom precisely we were going to see, why at so late an hour and, finally, how he hoped to obtain a pass.

As we walked through the deserted, blizzard-swept Kremlin towards the 'captain', I realised I was afraid. It isn't that I believed the delightful legends told at leisure by the wives of former assistant attorneys, who represented the Bolshevik leaders as something between Jack the Ripper and the locusts of the Apocalypse. No, I was simply afraid of men who could do things, not only to themselves but also to others. I have always had that fear, even as a little boy when I invariably gave a wide berth to the kindly policeman who used to doze on the corner of Prechistenka. In later years, seeing many of my friends, boon companions and classmates in the role of Ministers, Commissars and other 'men in power', I understood that my fear was aroused not by persons but by something extraneous, or more precisely by the portfolio, the insignia of office, even the merest little mandate. Who knows what such a man may want? But what he wants he will undoubtedly get. In short, I declared to the Teacher that I refused to go and see this leading communist because I was extremely frightened of him. It would be much better if I walked up and down outside the gate and waited. He could tell me all about it afterwards. This took place when we were already inside the front door, and the Teacher, instead of replying, merely gave me a shove towards the stairs in a fatherly fashion. But my terror increased when the last sentry of all, after studying my face for a long time, finally said with unusual solemnity: 'You may go in'.

Entering the private office I just caught a glimpse of a pair of eyes, mocking and intelligent, and understood that I must run. But, instead, I darted behind a pillar supporting a bust of

Engels which stood in the corner and, hidden by it, crouched down, shivering with cold and fear: 'Now, now he'll discover me. What a disgrace! How will the future biographer of Ilya Ehrenburg, the poet, describe this moment? I have not been afraid of either guns or mortars, of Schmidt or Aysha's fellow-tribesmen, yet here I am, suddenly terrified of this good-natured chap who was my neighbour in Paris five years ago and used to drink *bocks* in my favourite café'. Still I could not overcome my fear. I stayed in that corner all the time they were talking. At one point some dust got up my nose and I sneezed, making the great man look up in surprise and the Teacher say disparagingly: 'That's just a comrade I've brought along; pay no attention.'

Many and varied interviews with the leaders of Communism have appeared in the European press. Two were particularly vivid: the English author H. G. Wells's conversation with Lenin about walks through towns of the future, accompanied by the merry clicking of a photographer's camera giving its utmost, and an account by the special correspondent of *Buenas Dies*, the Madrid paper, of how Trotsky, throughout the interview, avidly devoured small cutlets prepared from the flesh of bourgeois babies. Nevertheless I believe that the Teacher's midnight talk with the communist is of exceptional interest by reason of the acute and fundamental nature of the subjects discussed. Despite my dismal situation I really felt that the small room with its high windows opening on to a snowy waste was becoming transformed into a captain's bridge, and the dead Kremlin and the whole of icy, sombre Russia into a wild ship casting off into the night.

At first, by the way, the communist attempted to speak about quite different things, preferring not to reply but to question: was the social revolution in Mexico near at hand? Was electrification widespread there? etc. But the Teacher quickly switched the conversation to another track. To do this he adopted a well-tried method of attack, forcing the communist to defend himself and so show his mettle.

'What do you think,' Jurenito began, 'of the inaction, indiscipline and reckless waste of forces in the Soviet Republic? Our immediate programme includes the sowing campaign, the Donbass (Donets coalfield), the Prodagit (agricultural propaganda), and, finally, electrification. Yet what are our forces being spent on? The poets are writing verses about Caucasian Murids and tortoises in the Epirus, the artists are painting beards and washbowls, the philosophers tinkering with new philosophical systems, the philologists picking about among their roots; the mathematicians likewise. The theatres are putting on Claudel's mystery plays. Why haven't all theatres been closed down? Why haven't poetry, philosophy and other forms of idle nonsense been abolished?'

'You'd do much better,' the communist replied peaceably, 'to discuss all that with Anatoly Vasilyevich. Art's his weakness. I myself don't know the first thing about it and have no interest whatsoever in the pursuits you've mentioned. I think it's much more fun to issue decrees on the nationalisation of small livestock—which will awaken millions of people—than to read the poems of Pushkin which, quite frankly, send me to sleep. Since childhood, I haven't read anything except works in my own special field. I never look at pictures because I find looking at charts more interesting. I've never been to the theatre except last year when I had to go once, in the line of duty, to entertain some "guests of the Republic", and it was even more soporific than the Pushkin of my schooldays. In order to achieve communism it is necessary to concentrate all forces, all thoughts, one's whole will, one's whole life on one thing: economics. A sown acre of land, a built railway engine, a batch of manufactured products—these are the way to communism, and therefore the goal of our lives, their meaning and justification. Forget your Sanskrit vocables, your lovers' sighs, your attempts to make new gods or repair the old ones, your pictures, poems, tragedies and so forth. You'd do better to make one scythe or produce a single pound of bread.'

'I understand you,' said Jurenito. 'You are an outstanding

example of healthy single-mindedness. Those who have many thoughts end their lives crouching behind pillars.' (This was after my sneeze). 'Those who start life wear merciless blinkers which focus all their energies on a single idea. Single-mindedness is action, movement, life. Reflection is a splendid and brilliant entertainment, the dessert served at the last dinner before death.

'Now allow me to ask you another question. How can you tolerate those left-wing Socialist Revolutionaries still making speeches at meetings, those idealists who continue—for all that they may do it quietly, within the circle of their families—to run down historical materialism, those millions of people who still believe, not in the triumph of communism but in the healing faculties of Saint Pantheleimon?'

'That isn't up my street either. If you want an explanation, go to Comrade . . .' (an acute attack of fear made me miss the name). 'It seems to me that harmless people, even if they err, should not be persecuted. Of course we're right. Of course they're wrong. Some of them are fools, the others traitors. The former we'll enlighten and re-educate, the latter we'll remove.'

'You're undoubtedly right,' the Teacher agreed. 'Hypocrites will call you a fanatic. But can anyone do anything, unless he's blind, without believing that he's absolutely right? If I'm right —perhaps—well, so is my enemy—one enemy—two enemies —three—if each of us possesses only a fragment of the single truth, as those who have been impotent from infancy would have us believe, all that's left is to recognise the facts and then rest on a cushion and scratch your belly until the hour of death. Action begins where the too-clever "buts" finish. I appreciate the full power of your "of course". It means that you've got the whole truth, not merely 99 per cent of the truth; for if some Menshevik or other's got even one per cent he can't be put in the Butyrky prison but must be invited to the Soviet; it means you must consult, discuss, hesitate and cease to act. The bandage round your eyes is a splendid armour against the devil of wisdom, all-acceptance and other forms of Indo-after-dinner

nonsense. Today's *Izvestia* publishes the list of people shot—'

The communist interrupted the Teacher with a cry: 'That's terrible. But it has to be done'. I could not see his face but the tone of his voice made me understand that he was genuinely unhappy about the executions, that his words weren't a diplomatic excuse but the sincere regret of a man who probably had the kindest possible heart and had never personally hurt anyone in all his life.

He went on: 'We're leading humanity towards a better future. Some people, who find this not to their advantage, are hindering us in every way, shooting at us from an ambush, dynamiting our road, lengthening the distance to the longed-for bivouac. We must eliminate them, killing one man to save a thousand. Others resist us because they cannot understand that their own happiness lies ahead, because they're afraid of the heavy march, because they cling to the pitiful shadow of last night's shelter. We are driving them forward, driving them to paradise with iron whips. The Red Army deserter must be shot in order that his children should know the full sweetness of the future Commune'.

He jumped to his feet and began running up and down the room, no longer smiling, and spoke quickly, as if desperately coughing out his words:

'Why are you telling me this? I know it all myself. Do you think it's easy? Easy enough for you who look on! Easy enough for those who obey! Here, *here's* where the hardship and the torment lie. Of course, of course, the historical process, inevitability and so forth. But somebody had to understand, begin, stand at the head of it all. Two years ago they were going about with sharpened poles, roaring and ranting, tearing generals to pieces, cutting out the udders of landowners' cows. A seething, raging sea. Someone had to seize hold of them and direct the full force of their anger, their thirst for a new life towards one clear, definite objective. Here's a rifle for you, coward, stand up and defend the Soviets! Get down to it, idler, build that engine! Sow the fields, mend the roads, turn the screws!

They would put those generals to a horrible death, burn the landowners in their country houses, drown the young officers in the Moyka; then they'd crawl before the ikons on their bellies, repenting and trembling with fear. Then we came. Who are we? I, tens of us, thousands, the organisation, the Party, the power. We took responsibility off their shoulders. From the peasants' huts and the soldiers' barracks we brought it here, to its traditional home, to these accursed palace rooms. I'm not going to fling myself under the ikons, pray away my sins or wash my hands clean. I'm just telling you it's hard. But it's got to be, do you hear? There's no other way.'

Looking round the pillars I saw the Teacher run up to him and kiss his high vaulted forehead. Numb with amazement and terror I began to run. I came to my senses only by the Kremlin gate, where a sentry stopped Jurenito and me to ask for our passes.

'Teacher, why did you kiss him? Was it reverence or pity?'

'No. I always respect the traditions of the country I'm in. And the communists, too, as I've noticed, are very traditional in their habits. As I listened to him I remembered similar precedents in your Dostoyevsky's works, and, maintaining the rules of etiquette, I bestowed on him that ritual kiss on behalf of many.'

CHAPTER XXVIII

Marcus Aurelius and the Central Authority—Shakse-vaksey

AFTER THAT MIDNIGHT visit Jurenito's position was strengthened and he obtained a high post in the Comintern. As for me, I went on revolutionising rabbits with Durov and receiving half the academic ration for this work. The months passed. I ate millet gruel, at night cherished secret 'contraband' dreams of thick beefsteaks, of Paris cafés—full of light and noise—and of the happy, easy life that was beyond return. Sometimes I felt I couldn't bear it and I would seek support from Jurenito, still as cheerful as ever, though he, too, had grown appallingly thin and was suffering from rheumatism owing to the damp in his room.

He and I used to enjoy walking late at night through the utterly deserted, dead streets with their smoke-covered, dirty houses. Moscow seemed akin to Bruges or Ravenna, a huge mausoleum; and only the sudden desperate hooting of cars and the feverish lights in the windows of various Headquarters and Commissariats reminded us that these were not ruins but a primeval forest, that we were not mourners under a pall of snow but reckless scouts who had thrust forward too far into the unexplored night.

During one of these walks across the Red Square we ran into Alexey Spiridonovich. He had the look of a man who has been finally driven into a corner and has lost all hope. He told us that the spirit was all very well, but that, alas, in addition to the spirit there was also that base organ, the stomach. In short, he had been forced to 'surrender in the unequal struggle' and take a job. He had hesitated for a long time, had considered suicide and escape to the Don until the very last minute, but then he had written a letter to posterity justifying his action

and, in the end, chosen a job which carried a ration slightly better than most others (two pounds of butter). The institution was called *Guvuz* and the job consisted in giving lectures on Russian literature to students taking a course in military economics.

'Imagine the horror! Barbarians! Who can survive it? And Europe is still silent. I tried telling them about Chehov, about the tender, gentle *zemtsy* dreaming of the kingdom of heaven on earth, but then a Commissar came and told me all that was no use to anybody, it was time to drop those bourgeois whimperings and start writing useful tales of heroes of the labour front who over-fulfilled the quota set by the Central Authority by 100 per cent. He also expressed disapproval of Lermontov's poem about the angel and recommended instead a certain Demyan Bedny who called on the peasants to exchange potatoes for nails. What's to be done? It is written: all shall be forgiven except the sin against the Holy Ghost.'

The Teacher remained calm. 'Your Commissar is obviously a good fellow and not devoid of wit. Won't you introduce us? I definitely prefer a communist in love with nails to a communist in the role of Lorenzo the Magnificent who snivels with emotion at the "deathless supra-class genius of Lermontov". What can you do, old chap? You didn't choose the age to be born in. There's no doubt you've struck the wrong season. I'm very sorry for you, but there's no point in cursing and invoking history. Believe me, it's not the first time she's played a trick of this kind. A day will come when Central Authorities, nails and similar rubbish will be transformed into a marvellous mythology, into glorious epics. I even venture to believe that the shepherd in the Epirus used to heat his broth over the fire before his poetic grandson created Prometheus. This is the age of beginning: that is, of barbarism, wholesale negation, the primitive power of first gestures which enchant—contrary to the rule—not the nervous mother but the self-infatuated infant. Forgive me if I linger a moment longer on the gynaecological track: in order that the child should live you've got to cut the

umbilical cord. Then the babe will be raised to its mother's breast and what follows will be the sheerest purple Renaissance. They'll dig your Lermontov out of a miraculously preserved library and they'll gasp: "How wonderful! To think people couldn't understand that".'

Alexey Spiridonovich could not agree. 'They're barbarians, but they lack a lofty spirit, a superior ethic. They have no God. They aren't early Christians but simply vandals. I myself waited with longing for the new revelation, suffered from the materialism of Europe, I myself was ready to fall down—here, on the Red Square—before the stern prophet. But what's that got to do with holy nails and infallible Central Authorities?'

'The answer's simple. You looked for a prophet resembling an idealised version of yourself, i.e. one who studied Solovyev and Dostoyevsky but did not visit tarts in the intervals. Instead, something quite unexpected happened. But remember: did the early Christians appear to the Romans as the bearers of a "great revelation" or as pitiful slaves, with their ignorance, superstitions and primitive morality? Instead of lofty Roman law, the communistic lisping of Jews who had survived the massacre; instead of Homer, the paltry decalogue of a defeated tribe. Nero didn't despise the Christians, you know. He was simply afraid of them. The ones who did despise them were the others—Marcus Aurelius, Pliny—spiritual brothers to your Merezhkovsky. The Central Authorities are the New Testament.

'Look this way—' (we were then passing the Bolshoy Theatre). 'Look at the lights winking on that practically ruined building. What is it? Publicity for a new kind of cigarette? No, it is the tablets of Mount Sinai: *Long live Electrification*! In a country which has worn out its last pair of pants, a country doubled up with the pangs of hunger and typhoid fever, freezing to death in its wooden huts riddled with holes because there aren't any nails—nails, d'you hear, nails, not saints—the crazy slogan is "Electrification". The people gather together, listening to reports, drawing charts. For them these farthing lights shine, illuminating the distant electrified paradise with its dancing

threshers, carefree mills, its groves of smokeless, smiling factories. For the sake of this let the rags and tatters of the last shirt fall to the ground, let the lice eat away the belly swollen with disease, let hundreds of thousands die in the prisons and in the yards of the Cheka. "I believe in the little flame," he cries. How's that for a modern prophet?'

The Teacher's words frightened me inexpressibly. Taking Alexey Spiridonovich—who was moaning quietly—by the arm I led him to my room. We nibbled a crust of bread and tried to comfort each other: perhaps things weren't like that at all but just the opposite. The Communists would be overthrown by a new revolution of the spirit, or else they themselves would change, become benevolent and spiritual, allow me to publish poems about the Mother of God and Alexey Spiridonovich to read lectures on romanticism to his students. We covered ourselves with my sheepskin coat, two old waistcoats and a rug and fell asleep at last.

The following weeks brought a certain amount of distraction. The Teacher, sent to the Caucasus to take part in a Conference of Eastern Peoples, took Aysha and me along with him.

Our journey was extraordinary, for the Teacher, wishing to study the manners and customs of the native population, refused to travel in a sleeper. We forced our way into a goods wagon, but only thanks to the Teacher applying certain methods of French wrestling and to Aysha's warlike bellowings. The company we found in the wagon was jolly and very diversified. Unfortunately, however, for the first fortnight we were obliged to stand, as even a slight movement of the arms provoked protests of indignation from the entire wagon. But by the third day we had become adjusted and learned how to sleep standing up. The train proceeded in a highly original manner, from one lucky chance to another. We would stop by some station shed and dismantle the entire building; the boards would feed the voracious engine for a few hours. When we passed a stretch of forests the passengers would get out and cut down trees. When we saw a sizeable puddle or a small stream we would form a

living chain and pass a bucket from hand to hand, quenching our monster's thirst.

Apart from these peaceful occupations the long days of the voyage were enlivened by military actions. We were attacked four times by different people (we never found out who they were; the Commissar always replied lugubriously that they were "bandits") who fired at us, once—near Harkov—even with a machine-gun. We fired back and just managed to get away. The hucksters travelling on the roofs of the wagons were our sentries. Throughout the journey only four passengers lost their lives, not counting an old man who simply died—I suppose of old age.

Between skirmishes our fellow-travellers, chiefly peasants, would air their views on religion, the construction of roofs, culture and many other matters. No one, at least, could have accused them of lack of originality. According to them, God did not exist, having been invented by the priests for the purpose of funerals, weddings and other ceremonies requiring payment of the clergy, but the churches should be left standing, for what sort of village was it that had no church? It would be better still to kill off all the Jews. As for those who were against the communists—the landlords and princes—not enough of them had been killed yet, and there would have to be more done in that way. But it wouldn't do any harm to knock off a few communists, either. The main thing, however, was to burn all the towns, for that's where trouble and dissension began. But before burning them it would be necessary to salvage any property that might come in useful, roofs for instance—the undamaged bits—men's coats and pianos. That was their programme. As for tactics, the most important thing was to have a small cannon in the village and about a dozen machine-guns. Don't allow any strangers to come near and replace the exchange of goods by raids on trains and the requisitioning of passengers' baggage, which was far more sensible.

Aysha thought very highly of all this. The Teacher, too, far from objecting, expressed sympathetic approval of such projects

and merely advised taking gramophones instead of pianos, as being easier to play and more fun. But I, a townsman who had not, moreover, lacked a certain idealism in his youth, found such conversations repellent. I reproached Jurenito with inconsistency and reminded him of our Moscow talks. 'Don't tell me these grandsons of the rebel Pugachov are the apostles of the organisation of mankind!'

The Teacher replied: 'My dear boy' (let me say here that I was only three years younger than he), 'your naïve honesty is enchanting. Have you only just noticed that I'm a scoundrel, traitor, *agent provocateur*, renegade, etc., etc.? Everything you say reveals that you used to publish your poems in *Russia's Riches* and are fond (don't deny it—I know!) of the high-minded Socialist Revolutionaries. Next thing you'll remember the leader from a Liberal paper and tell me that "he who has said A must say B". Ha! Who's to stop me saying A again, or pulling out the *izhitsa*—the last letter of the Russian alphabet, now abolished—by the ears? What do I care? So much for consistency. Now about the apostles of organisation. All the intellectuals of your country—those who curse the revolution and those who yearn to receive it—still think in terms of marrying the widowed Stenka Razin, not to his Persian princess, but to a complicated version of Communism. Fools! There was one moment—picturesque it is true, but brief—when the paths of the unleashed element and of those who hoped to utilise that element for their own ends coincided: the autumn of Nineteen Seventeen. Since then more than two years have passed, and Razinism, that is to say fury, chaos, the desire for more killing, is now to the communists what timber is to the railway engine. The logs do not give a direction to the train; they feed the engine. Sometimes, if they're a bit damp, the thing slows down; sometimes the heat is such that the boilers burst and the driver goes flying head over heels. The communist revolution today is not revolutionary. It longs for order. Its slogan, from the word go, has not been free rebellion but a solid system. But the fools go on raging, tormenting themselves, wanting

now to set fire to the whole world, now to grow peacefully like young oaks on their hillsides, as their grandfathers did in days long ago. But a sure hand binds them and pitches them into the furnace, to give power to the engine they abhor.'

At last the battles, the peasants' lectures and the Teacher's commentaries came to an end, and we arrived. Happy days followed and, sometimes, sitting with Aysha in an Oriental tavern, I would recall far-off Senegal. In fact I completely forgot to worry about the world's destinies. Everything about us, even the decrees and the incessant shooting, bore a carefree, sleepy, restful character after monastic Moscow. I would go to the public baths where they plastered me with stinking mud, after which the hair on my body disappeared and the reflection in the pool was almost that of a Narcissus. In the taverns I would study magnificent wines—all sorts of *Napareouli* and *Taliani*—which I would drink from a huge horn. I listened to the music of mournful *sazandari* and wild, deafening *duduki*. In short, I almost became an English tourist.

I visited the Conference only once. The large hall was filled with Caucasians in their *cherkesskas*, Afghans in turbans and long oilcloth coats, Bukhars in brightly-coloured skull-caps, Persians in fezzes and many others. All had portraits of Karl Marx with his patriarchal beard pinned to their breasts. A comrade wearing a simple jacket sat in the middle reading out resolutions. The delegates nodded their heads, pressed their hands against their hearts and approved the comrade's wise theses in all possible ways. I heard one Persian sitting in the back row, after hearing a report on the consequences of the economic crisis, say courteously in Russian to a young Indian: 'Killing the British is most agreeable, don't you think?' to which the other, raising his hand to his lips, murmured: 'Most'.

Suddenly a wild music unlike anything else on earth was heard outside the windows: a clanging of brass cymbals, a blare of trumpets. The Persian—the same one who had been dreaming so agreeably in his armchair—leapt to his feet and without

waiting to vote on the 12th 'whereas' of the current resolution ran out into the street. Intrigued, I decided to follow him, the more eagerly since this Conference, colourful though it was, seemed to me unbearably tedious.

I was fully rewarded, for the spectacle which struck my eyes, for all that it has been described many times, was indescribable. Persian women wrapped in black silk rode in litters decorated with bright carpets and gleaming miniatures. Young men were running everywhere, whipped on by horsemen in armour. Behind them walked whole herds of half-naked Persians flagellating their backs—dark blue from the weals—with iron chains. The most extraordinary sight, however, was still to come. Men —youths, respectable fathers of families and frail old men in snowy white robes—marched in rows swaying rhythmically, crying 'Shakse-Vaksey!' and slashing their faces with sabres. The further they went the more frenetic they became, their cries grew more piercing, their blows harder, and the bright, quick blood ran in streams down their faces, their robes, on to the dry red earth. Some fell to the ground, but no one took any notice. My Persian ran into a house and a moment later, dressed in a white robe like all the rest—the resolution still unvoted—he was howling 'Shakse-Vaksey!', filled with supreme ecstasy, and proving with his blood his devotion to something which was foreign and mysterious to me.

The Teacher had also seen this fantastic ceremony, and that night, when Aysha and I were describing our impressions to him, he said: 'Here are more logs. Let's hope they won't blow up the entire engine. Of course the Eastern peoples are highly susceptible to the gifts of civilisation; they will exchange their beautiful jugs for enamel kettles and their carpets for horrible wallpaper. But they've retained something peculiar to themselves. What European, though he may be thrice a believer—never mind in what: the Pope's shoe, world progress, or those delightful Soviets—will so much as scratch himself with a pin in the name of an idea? But these men—not only those in the street, but the delegates too, or rather both together—would

be only too pleased to do a nice big Shakse-Vaksey on a world scale, not only on their own foreheads, of course, but on many others as well; British ones first, by choice, and then . . . Of course an engine is a pretty complicated thing. Your Persian wouldn't know how to build one, but he's perfectly able to destroy it, and not without pleasure.

'Good night, Ehrenburg. Sleep well. Today we have seen some splendid animals let out of their cages for reasons of high strategy. To get them back is more difficult. Who knows? Perhaps it's here that a good steam bath for organised mankind is being prepared. Pleasant dreams!'.

CHAPTER XXIX

The survival capacity of an ordinary stick—Schmidt's charts

WE TRAVELLED BACK by sleeper and with a special guard. But an unpleasant—if, by that time, fairly trivial experience awaited us: before reaching Moscow we were arrested by members of one of the varieties of the Cheka, namely the 'Ortocheka', i.e. the Cheka which plied its trade on the railways.

Neither then nor later did we learn the reasons for our arrest. I think that suspicion was aroused by Aysha, who had pinned to his suit across the stomach three red stars, the hammer and sickle, the order of the Red Banner and six medallions bearing portraits of Marx, Engels, Liebknecht, Lenin, Trotsky and Zinoviev. Be that as it may, we were taken to Moscow in a carriage which was very far from being a sleeper and placed in the Butyrky prison, where I had been confined once before, at the age of sixteen, for issuing a strike proclamation to Moscow schoolboys.

I was then able to note that during the years of great upheaval the prison had shown the maximum stability by undergoing no change whatsoever. The warders still hung about outside the peepholes and fingered one's body in a vile fashion when making a search. The smell of latrine buckets was as foul as ever, and so was that of the prison slops clinging eternally to the greenish tin bowls. Even the company we found ourselves in was curiously reminiscent of the past: some Menshevik or other was defending Marxism against the excesses of maximalism. They took you away for questioning or to see a visitor through two rows of bars, sometimes they tried you, sometimes they shot you, sometimes they shouted: 'Here, take your things', and discharged you.

I was greatly surprised by such continuity. The Teacher, on the contrary, found it perfectly natural.

'A stick's a stick whoever's wielding it,' he comforted me. 'It can hardly transform itself into a mandolin or a Japanese fan. A Government without a prison is a perverse and unpleasant notion, rather like a tomcat with clipped claws.

'Once upon a time there were two little men living in the Butyrky area, Comrade Ivan and Comrade Pyotr. The former was a Bolshevik and worked on the Moscow Committee of the R.S.D.R.P., the latter was a Menshevik and belonged to the Moscow Organisation of the R.S.D.R.P. They lived quite peacefully, which means that they attended meetings together, spent nights in hiding in the flats of sympathiser lawyers, were sometimes imprisoned together here, in the Butyrky prison, and argued until they practically lost their voices, for Ivan was in favour of sharing out the land and Pyotr of municipalising it, but since the land wasn't in the hands of either Ivan or Pyotr but of the landowners they soon became reconciled, united, and disunited again: in short, it was an idyllic marriage, not Ivan and Pyotr but *Paul et Virginie*. Then a few things changed; Ivan entrenched himself in the Kremlin and began composing, not just resolutions for five intelligent printworkers, as hitherto, but decrees binding on 150 million Russians. Pyotr read the decrees and did not like them. He wanted to have an argument as in the good old days, but at the "holy Kremlin gates" a soldier stopped him and said "no admittance without a pass". So he rallied five equally intelligent printworkers and persuaded them to protest. Ivan heard about it and got angry. And, since by that time Ivan was already in possession of this marvellous age-old stick, he did not argue, did not exclude Pyotr from any party, but called in "certain persons" and simply gave an order, wasting no words. Whereupon everything went on as smoothly as if it had been oiled: Pyotr tried to hide, spent nights in lawyers' flats, Ivan's men hunted him, caught him and finally brought him back here, to his old residence.

'You think that's shocking? You're indignant? My friend,

how wrong you are! Do you really think Pyotr would have acted otherwise? Even if his name had not been Pyotr but Valentine or Maximilian he still wouldn't have managed without "certain persons". To rule without them is like sitting on a stool with one leg missing: an original idea no doubt, but you won't stay there more than a minute. All the rest follows quickly. Make Ercole king of Italy and you'll see: even before he's had time to put on a pair of trousers he'll be ordering people about: "Hey, you there!" Years will pass—not years but whole ages, whole epochs—and humanity will be lined up many more times for the last parade, and every time some Persian will unexpectedly transform those parades into jolly Shakse-Vakseys, until the remnants of the human race will understand at last that it doesn't matter who wields the stick, it is only the stick itself that matters, until they stop changing things and make a clean sweep at last. But in the meantime let's eat our slops, or they'll get quite cold.'

No doubt we would have remained in prison for a long time —for no one seemed to take the slightest interest in us—if the latest piece of ill-luck had not been succeeded by another chance, this time a lucky one. A special Commission of the Moscow Soviet arrived to inspect the prison. We pinned no hopes on it because many other Commissions and delegations had visited us already. But when Schmidt entered our cell I actually began to crow with pleasure. For a second time fate had sent him to our rescue. Thereafter everything happened very simply: a telephone call, a couple of words between friends, and an hour later, with many apologies, we were passing through the prison gate which, though old, was still in excellent condition.

The rumours we had heard of Schmidt's progress turned out to be true. From a general in the army of the German Reich to a gloomy Spartakist in a patched coat may seem a surprisingly long cry, but it should be remembered that even as a student Schmidt had always said that he could become a violent German patriot or an extreme socialist, for both pursued the goal, dear

to his heart, of organising mankind. Arriving in Russia as a convinced German nationalist, he had spent the first few months doing all he could to assist Germany's victory. But after the October revolution new horizons, broad and more enticing, had opened before him. He had decided that the Communist International could subject Europe to a unified plan more surely than the wavering Reich, whose power was already shaken. In the past he had been a frenzied chauvinist and a fanatical monarchist, but he now supported the new cause honestly, without any *arrière-pensée*, and with all the obstinacy and forthrightness of his nature. He had been wounded twice while fighting the Whites. He lived in extreme outward poverty, worked eighteen hours a day, had turned down the offer of an official car although he was wounded in the leg—so that he was obliged to hobble from one Commissariat to another—and was, in short, in all respects an honourable and consistent communist.

The day after our liberation we went to visit Schmidt in his office. The walls were hung with charts, each more strange and elaborate than the next. Schmidt was snowed under with plans, blueprints and drawings. He began telling us with fervour about his work. Up till now, people had expended their efforts in an arbitrary fashion: everything had been haphazard and irrational. Japan and Holland were overcrowded to the point of suffocation, while Siberia and Spain were practically deserted. In the black soil regions of Russia they had tipped wheat into the water because they wouldn't sell it for a few kopeks and desperately tried to keep up the falling prices, while in Peking coolies died of hunger. In England so much cotton was produced that there wasn't anywhere to put it, the crisis began and the workers starved by their idle machines, whilst men in Kaluga still dreamt of owning one new pair of underpants. Poets ran from one newspaper office to another begging the editors to publish their poems, even at five kopeks a line, but there weren't enough agronomists. The number of lawyers was higher than that of criminals, yet sometimes you couldn't find an electrician.

It was chaos, insensate and wild, an economic system of drovers coming home blind drunk from the fair or of apes dressed in frock-coats. Now everything was to be different. This map here showed how many people should live where, exactly, down to the last square metre.

Another chart showed the distribution of the working population by professions. The country needed so many engineers, so many plumbers, so many poets. No deviation permitted. Tula would know that according to the plan for 1930 it must produce 80 doctors, 7 artists, 600 metalworkers, 350 potters and so on. A child would be trained from infancy to love the calling assigned to it. An industrial ABC for schools would be produced, in which every letter would be illustrated by the tools of a particular trade. The total number of births would also be subject to precise planning and must correspond to quotas laid down centrally. The family must be abolished; children could not be left under the accidental and harmful influence of parents, i.e. irresponsible persons. The infants' homes, schools and labour colonies would prepare new generations of workers. At the next stage, hostels, communal feeding, equalised distribution. On finishing work for the day everyone would have the right to go to the entertainments distribution centre of the district to which he was attached. There he could get his prescribed does of aesthetic emotion: music, choral declamation, festivals following exact scenarios to replace the theatre. Finally, sexual excesses would also be put under restraint; a special commission of doctors under the Narkomzdrav was already working on this. And that would be man's life.

Schmidt showed us his most mysterious chart of all, looking like the roots of a giant plant. Man's life!

I remembered the simple-hearted cheap prints of my youth: a boy at play, a youth in love holding a flower in his hand, the father of a family caressing his child, a mature man—always represented, heaven knows why, with a goosequill in his hand—and a decrepit old man tottering towards an open coffin. Here

we saw nothing of the kind. White squares merged into green pyramids which, in turn, radiated out into red circles, the circles became rhomboids, and so it went on, long and elaborate, with no restful grave to be seen but only black triangles representing settlements for veterans of the labour front.

As he showed us all these stages and transitions, reeling off hundreds of figures and names of organising centres, Schmidt said with emotion: 'Here's life for you! No longer a mystery, a fairy-tale, a feverish vision, but a work-process, broken up into its components here, in this poor small room, and reconstructed by the power of reason'.

I remembered another poor small room, an attic in Stuttgart, the timetables on the wall, the sixty marks and Frau Hase. But the rattling typewriters, the secretary incessantly bringing in papers for signature, the queue of visitors in the ante-room told me that this was no childish fancy but a giant workshop for the construction of a new world.

I was ready to burst into tears out of sheer horror, but burst into laughter instead, unexpectedly and almost indecently, as the words of a popular jingle reached me from the street:

'If I go to the shit-house without a permit
I'll get into trouble, alas.
I'd be only too happy to get a permit,
But there's no one to issue the pass.'

Then Schmidt had a talk with the Teacher about his work and suggested that he might undertake the organisation of the most difficult and chaotic field of all, that of the arts. Jurenito was delighted with the suggestion and everything was settled within a few minutes.

When we had come away I started telling Jurenito what I thought of Schmidt and his charts: 'It may all be very brilliant, but what's it got to do with the life of a man? It's nothing but tiny cogs going round.'

The Teacher replied: 'No, it is new man, as different from you as an inhabitant of the Cameroons or some such place.

You haven't noticed that a new race of men has arisen out of the very depths of a way of life which seemed unshakeable. They have their own psychology, their own morality, their own religious sense. The men of the past used to bow down before the incomprehensible, the mysterious and accidental. Any deviation from the usual—from that which had been empirically explained—was raised to divine status and called a miracle. The new men worship the inherent laws governing phenomena, their sober ecstasy is reserved for the infallible logic of work, ideas, events. You can easily understand the primitive ecstasy of the fire-worshipper squatting in his frosty cave and watching the tongues of flame come sweeping out of the hearth. Now try to understand another kind of ecstasy: that of a mechanic who has just grasped for the first time the workings of a complicated machine'.

We were walking through my favourite little alleys between Prechistenka and the Arbat. The tiny houses with their front gardens, the lilac, the onion domes of the little church of the Assumption over by the Mogiltsy, all this supported me in my protest.

'Teacher, the new men you speak of are monstrous and therefore impossible. In their lives there's no room for chance and therefore for the most beautiful thing of all: the unexpected, the contradictory, the romantic, none of all that. There are millions of Schmidts without even the tiniest Napoleon among them. What boredom!'

'That's too bad. You'll have to content yourself with being bored for a while, for you're a man of the old species. Old things always smell of putrescence and mothballs, but that particular smell is highly valued under the name of "romanticism". We've said goodbye to abbots and Madonnas and Highnesses, haven't we? And we've managed well enough without them. And so they'll say goodbye to the charming eccentricities of American multi-millionaires, the picturesque beauty of rags, the gloss of luxury, the cinema attraction of having to fight for a crust of bread or a mountain of gold. All

the things you're anxious to preserve—the whim and the chance—are rotting away fast, and soon they won't even smell any more. Of course you're free—if you rent a separate room where your neighbours can't hear you—to weep over their demise for the rest of your days, but that isn't likely to change anything.

'Have you seen the Cubists' paintings? After the Impressionists' divine vagaries, there you have precise, carefully thought-out constructions of form, closely akin to Schmidt's charts.

'Have you seen the war? What did you find there—Napoelons, Davids, grand gestures, the self-sacrifice of heroic standard-bearers—or Mr Cool's model economy?

'For all your muddle-headedness you're fond of playing chess. Can't you see how the combination game is yielding to a game of position? Instead of unexpected combinations, the noble sacrificial gambit, there's a precise, economical, closely reasoned plan. I'm surprised that you should be so blind. You poke your nose into everything, yet you fail to notice the most fundamental, the most undeniable features of modern life.'

'If what you say is true,' I cried with indignation, 'what's the use of living? And, in particular, what's the use of copying out Schmidt's decrees, instead of trying to destroy him in some way or other?'

'If, at dawn, you start firing at the sun from a thousand batteries, it'll rise nonetheless. It may be that I hate this dawning day as much as you do. But, in order that tomorrow may come, you must steadfastly meet the cruel sun, you must help mankind to walk in its rays, instead of clinging to the cupola of some little church which yesterday—yesterday or some other time in the past—gleamed warmly in the dying sunset.'

CHAPTER XXX

'Artistic freedom' or the counter-revolutionaries' intrigues

THE MEETING of the Arts Commission was attended by, in addition to the Teacher, the wives of important communists, various minor but honest communists who liked to keep their hands clean, actors, chiefly from among former leading players of His Imperial Majesty's theatres, and painters who had spent all their lives painting eighteenth-century *marquises* in crinolines. The chairman of the Commission was a certain highly revolutionary personage who had once terrified some aged professors so badly that they had almost scattered to the four corners of the earth and only their desire to save their *alma mater* had held them back; but in fact he was a good-natured, fat fellow, an excellent family man, with a gold chain across his stomach and a noble passion for the arts. He adored Balmont's *Liturgy of Beauty* and was in the habit of commissioning painters—no, not Futurists but those who had recently painted the wives of Moscow grain merchants and the mistresses of Grand Dukes—to do portraits of himself alone (fighter for an idea), himself with wife (another fighter), his wife and baby (motherhood), himself and wife in the family circle (fighter resting). All these portraits were endowed with expression and bronze frames.

The Commission was to discuss the question of how to adapt the arts for purposes of agitation and propaganda without destroying the creative impulse. The chairman spoke at length on the lofty heritage of culture, on the giants of the human spirit, and finally proposed a compromise solution: creative artists who produced works of propaganda value should receive a calorie ration equal to two academic rations. All others, without infringing the freedom of inspiration, would be issued with simple rations on the category B labour card.

Jurenito was the next to speak. He started straight off with a radical proposal: to abolish the arts. Here is what he said in defence of the recommended measure:

'What you are suggesting is only a new shop sign over old rubbish, or a camphor injection administered to an already cooling corpse. Why have you abolished religion if you still want someone to surround the sturdy cudgel of your power with the nimbus of poetry? Is a calorie-stuffed caste of privileged priests in the service of an official art better than the old kind of priest with crosses on their bellies? What will you get? A dozen official poets who will manufacture—I beg your pardon, create—odes to God, the swallow, and all sorts of other things which do not come into the plan of State construction. All the poems, tragedies, pictures and symphonies made according to prescription will be poorer and weaker than the old ones, and the simple citizen, comparing them with Pushkin, Shakespeare and El Greco will decide that it's all the fault of modern life and communism. This cannot be allowed to happen. By destroying the arts we must show the world that they and they alone are guilty because they tried to outlive themselves, thus meriting a bullet in the behind instead of an honourable death in the family four-poster.

'The giants of the human spirit whom we heard mentioned here were unquestionably guilty of high treason because they undermined the foundations of rational and sober existence. Of course from our point of view there's nothing criminal in undermining the Queen of England, a German prince or Tsar Nicholas I; on the contrary, we think it's highly praiseworthy. Alas, comrades, you are making a mistake if you think it mattered one jot to the artists what precisely they were undermining. Not a bit of it! Whether Naples was the kingdom of an ancient despot or a communist colony, Vesuvius would go on erupting just the same. Tomorrow the giants of yesterday to whom you erect monuments because you refuse to abandon hallowed tradition, and those of today for whom you spare neither confectioners' goods nor fats, will start undermining your society.

The arts are the focal point of anarchy. Artists are heretics, sectarians, dangerous rebels.

'And so we must unhesitatingly ban the arts as we have banned the manufacture of intoxicating spirits and the import of opium. It will be all the easier to do so as the decrepit arts themselves are trying to end their inglorious old age by suicide. They try to become dissolved in life, thus giving us an excellent opportunity to end the dangerous epidemic. We know that certain gases, when concentrated in one spot, threaten to explode at any moment, causing fires and asphyxiation; but being dispersed in the atmosphere they become innocuous.

'Look at modern painting. It turns its back on the image, pursuing aims which are exclusively constructional, transforming itself into a laboratory of forms which can perfectly well be achieved in everyday life. The crime of El Greco, Giotto, Rembrandt was that their images could *not* be achieved in everyday life; they were unique and therefore useless. The pictures of the Cubists or Suprematists can be used for a variety of purposes—as plans for kiosks on the boulevards, as wallpaper designs, as models for new shoes, and so on. All we have to do is to impart the right direction to this trend; we must prohibit the practice of art as such, so that the picture-frame should not tempt the painter once more to the madness of the image. We must attach the painters to various branches of production. The usual arts will cease to have an independent life and thus to threaten society; instead, they will supply the trappings of communist life, houses, plates, trousers. Instead of Picasso's daubings, a good constructivist chair.

'The same applies to the other arts. Poetry is adopting the language of the newspapers and business conversations; it is shedding skin after skin—rhyme, quantity, image, rhetoric, tradition, last of all, metre. It remains naked and unadorned, so that great professional experience is needed to understand why certain modern poems are poems rather than a newspaper leader or an advertisement for *Spermin*. Therefore the problem's very simple: all we have to do is prohibit the printing of

books with an uneconomical distribution of lines, as traditionally practised by poets in the past, and delete the word "poet"—which might lead men into temptation—from the dictonary. The theatre is breaking its own armour, the footlights; it is moving down into the pit or into the public square, dragging the audience on to the stage, destroying the author and the actor. It could be finally reduced to powder within twenty-four hours, by way of all the intermediate stages of festivals, demonstrations and so forth. Later even these organised pageants will become plain, everyday events, dissolve themselves into gestures, postures and jokes.

'In Kineshma I tried to implement the liquidation of the arts, but I was stopped by the petty bourgeois aestheticism of many revolutionaries. I am sure that you will accept my proposal, and today will be the date of the death of one of mankind's insanities, which has long prevented it from settling down comfortably on this earth.'

There was a flood of protest.

'We aren't barbarians!' the chairman boomed.

'We love the beautiful,' cooed the wives.

'Those in favour?'

Jurenito's was the only vote. The proposal was rejected.

The decision was to let the arts live and, by adjusting the range of rations, to try and guide the creative impulse into the channels of communism. The Teacher smiled: 'You might as well try to use a tornado to operate a windmill'.

Alone with me, he confessed: 'My proposal was entirely logical and correct, but there is a "but"—the presence of Ercole in Schmidt's retinue. You and I won't shed any tears over it, but it'll cause a lot of trouble for the great and small policemen of tomorrow's world. They have decided to light their cigarettes with lightning instead of with expensive Swedish matches. My proposal was that it would be better to concentrate on making matches ourselves, abolishing lightning altogether for the peace of mind of communist children. But, of course, that wouldn't have stopped lightning, some fine

summer's noon from striking the bald head of a man happily convinced that thunderstorms were liquidated forever by decree. Meanwhile let us observe the results of their activities'.

During the next weeks Moscow was shaken by a series of strange and regrettable incidents which served as brilliant confirmation of the Teacher's solemn warnings to the aesthetes of the Arts Commission. The composer Krys, whose music had, until then, been unknown even to the professionals, wrote a symphony entitled *Titan Stretching*. It was performed before an audience of thousands. But, instead of an educative effect, this music produced the most reprehensible emotions. The next day the Soviet institutions were deserted, for none of the people who had heard the symphony turned up for work. More than that, many refused to shovel snow in the streets, weeping, shrieking and making incoherent noises. One man, completely crazed, shouting that he could no longer bear to sit in an office stamping orders for goloshes, climbed up on a roof and hurled a spanner at a militiaman, giving him severe concussion. In the end he was killed attempting to escape. *Izvestia* wrote: 'Another instance of sabotage. The work of Mensheviks in capitalist pay'. Krys, the chief culprit, came to no harm whatsoever and was actually given a hundred thousand roubles and twenty-five loose cigarettes as his fee for the concert.

No sooner had the papers stopped writing about sabotage when a new unpleasantness occurred. A young poet called Yershov contrived—by collaring a printer's allocation through a co-operator of the name of Hailov—to publish a book of verse under the title *Come Worship the Red Stallion*. It contained the incoherent ravings of the last dreamer munching millet from a nosebag who, fancying himself a foal, had begun to neigh in something resembling verse. The book had an extraordinary success; the whole edition was sold out within a few days. Soon a new sect was formed, with a membership composed predominantly of women, who called themselves 'foals'. One wet morning, instead of sewing pants for the Red Army as was their duty on the labour front, they came

out on the Tverskaya neighing, and, questioned by militiamen who appeared on the scene as to where precisely they were going, began to kick. The papers reported: 'Another priest-inspired demonstration'.

Finally, a Red Army man called Krivenko, a former theological student, attempted to blow up the Spassky barracks with an old hand-grenade, injuring the little finger of one hand in the process. On being arrested he explained in stumbling words, but with engaging sincerity, that a few days earlier he and some of his comrades had been taken to a museum where he had seen some extraordinary pictures: houses flying in all directions, purple women cut into fragments, seven cups on a single saucer and some terrifying orange-coloured squares. This had made him understand something, though he wasn't quite sure what. Anyhow, returning to the barracks, smelling the odour of socks and seeing the bed-boards, kitbags and mess tins, he had decided all at once that these two worlds were incompatible and that one of them must perish. He was accordingly declared a Socialist Revolutionary, but since it was not known whether he was right-wing or left-wing he was sent off to a certain place for identification.

There an attempt was made to link all three incidents and orders were issued to arrest a couple of thousand doubtful persons. Yershov happened to be among them but was immediately released, being a poet.

It would seem that, after all these melancholy happenings, the only reasonable thing would have been to remember the Teacher's advice and proceed to the destruction of the arts. Instead, the wrath of the authorities was turned upon some perfectly mild characters doing no harm to anyone, who once upon a time—before socialism and the revolution—had been socialists and revolutionaries, and who now suffered from nostalgia for the Constituent Assembly and the old-fashioned police, a nostalgia as nagging and continuous as a toothache.

Jurenito, too, received a few black looks and decided that a change of climate would not come amiss. We took counsel

among ourselves and decided to go South, taking Aysha along for reinforcement and, for humanitarian reasons, Alexey Spiridonovich and Monsieur Delet as well. Our martyr had, thank goodness, recovered and been discharged from the asylum, but Alexey Spiridonovich, profoundly depressed by the incompatibility of the freedom of the spirit with a food ration, was almost ready to take his place. Both clearly needed a rest.

At the last moment we were joined by Mr Cool who wanted to get to the Ukraine in order to buy a few more 'dead souls', or rather nationalised sugar factories.

Since it was unthinkable to go to a holiday resort, we simply took a chance, getting Aysha to put his finger anywhere on the map. The place we settled on was Yelizavetgrad. We wasted no time thinking it over, equipped ourselves with five good travel warrants, got into a 'delegates' carriage, and slowly, without undue haste, departed for our unknown *villegiatura*.

CHAPTER XXXI

Eleven governments—Jurenito as Pretender to the Russian throne

SOMEHOW OR OTHER we managed to get to Yelizavetgrad in only three weeks. After a good night's sleep we decided to look round the town where fate had brought us as to a promised land. However, no sooner had we left the house than we were stopped by a patrol which demanded to see our papers. Jurenito proudly held out an impressive document stating that we had been sent to the town of Yelizavetgrad on official business, namely that of investigating the musical instruments to be found there. After reading the paper carefully the soldier showed it to his companion and both—for some unknown reason—conceived a powerful desire to shoot us. The Teacher's assurances that the paper bore the signature of the *upravdel*, or departmental chief, himself merely confirmed them in their incomprehensible wish.

We were taken along to Headquarters. Certain that the misunderstanding would be cleared up at once, we walked along cheerfully, admiring the sunlight splashed on the mud of the little streets, signs saying 'Gents' Tailor' decorated with magnificent dark men, and happy carefree boys throwing fragments of a bottle at a lousy hairless bitch: in short, all the innocent joys of a small charming town.

Suddenly, as we were nearing the Headquarters, I cried out: 'They've got epaulettes!'

'What does that mean?' Monsieur Delet asked carelessly.

'It means they're really going to shoot us.'

Realising that the men before us were not Bolsheviks, Mr Cool brightened up: 'Do not worry, my friends. I'll have no trouble coming to terms with respectable people'. And indeed he acted as our spokesman with the lieutenant who interrogated

us, explaining that he was the owner of many enterprises and had fled from the accursed land of the Soviets to save himself, his soul and his dollars. Monsieur Delet and Jurenito were his partners, Alexey Spiridonovich and I his clerks, and Aysha his manservant. Supported by an American passport all this seemed to me highly convincing, but the lieutenant, though a little hesitant, was still in favour of having us shot.

Mr Cool decided to bring up his big battalions. He took out a Bible and solemnly read to the lieutenant: 'The Fifth Commandment: Thou shalt not kill'. The lieutenant replied that he wasn't a godless swine; he believed in God—here he even crossed himself—but all that sort of thing was for honest people, not Bolsheviks and Jews, who should be killed at every opportunity, like mad dogs. The packet of dollars obtained by Mr Cool with Grossmann's assistance in Moscow had a much more positive effect. It meant far more to the lieutenant than our travel document or the Bible, and he let us go.

Holiday life in Yelizavetgrad proved to be most unusual and it took us some time to get used to it. The fact was that the opponents of the Bolsheviks differed favourably from them by their diversity. They included supporters of 'Single and Undivided' Russia, just Ukrainians, Ukrainian Socialists, just Socialists, Anarchists, Poles and not less than three dozen major Atamans, not counting the minor ones who kept themselves going by train robberies and village pogroms. They all fought, not only the Bolsheviks but also each other, seizing our residence for short periods in turn. In three months we saw a succession of eleven different Governments. You had to be the Teacher, with his unique Mexican experience, to see your way even moderately clear in that muddle. Leaving the house in the mornings we used not to know who held the town; and just in case, we kept all the pockets of our coats, waistcoats and trousers stuffed with an enormous variety of documents in many languages and dialects, eagles with and without crowns, sickles, tridents, and even hayforks which were the emblem of 'Little Father' Shilo.

I should point out, however, that this diversity found expression almost exclusively in flags and emblems and had no effect whatsoever on the life of the town. The townspeople, liberated every week from one yoke or another, did not even notice it, for the actions of the tyrants and the liberators were surprisingly alike. Moreover, everybody wore the same grey uniform left over from Tsarist times. Besides, the tradition of places proved stronger than human change: the furnished rooms which had housed the Cheka were later used by the 'counter-intelligence' and all the ten subsequent institutions of the same kind. The prison went on being the prison, though people who had put others in it were always being put in it themselves: it did not become a musical academy or a kindergarten for all that. Even the shootings were carried out on the same traditional waste ground behind the prison. Each successive regime, as it came in, issued laws on the freedom and inviolability of the individual and the death penalty for the slightest expression of dissatisfaction with that freedom. Then, for the duration of their short butterfly existence, they would hasten to 'establish normal living conditions', i.e. rob the greatest possible number of Jewish watchmakers and shoot all persons with unprepossessing faces or ill-sounding surnames.

One day, sitting in a small, dirty coffee-shop which, thanks to the quick-wittedness of its Greek owner, was able to provide an island of rest amid the raging ocean outside, the Teacher inquired: 'What Government have we got today? Ukrainian, isn't it?'

The Greek hissed back nervously: 'What are you saying! We're all Little Russians and our Government's the Rostov Government. The Romanov currency has risen no end, but the Ukrainian's selling at three for a hundred, even worse than Soviet money'.

'That makes me feel younger,' laughed Jurenito, 'whoever would have thought I'd return practically to the conditions of my homeland in my old days?'

Aysha asked: 'Master, tell Aysha, Aysha very stupid, Aysha

no understand why they all say they no like each other, yet all do same thing, just like brothers?'

'Dear Aysha, you aren't stupid at all, you're much too wise. Forget the heights of your African philosophy. You're trying to find a difference where there can be none. Listening to speeches and looking at flags is all very well for you savages; we cultured people are more interested in different types of machine-guns. Of course it would be more intelligent if they all united for these operations, but the sense of solidarity has no roots in this particular trade. I can well imagine all the advantages of a "trade union of workers endeavouring to seize power". What an economy of time and strength! Each section would get a town for a month, thin out the population, fight luxury, raise the output of printers and signwriters by publishing a new code of laws and introducing the new spelling on all signboards or restoring the old, then quietly pick up its banners, law codes and other belongings and move on to the next town, leaving the place free for their comrade-enemies. Unfortunately the ground isn't yet ready for such a union and you must reconcile yourself to the fact that, besides the lawful prey—namely the ordinary citizens—the rivals also senselessly kill each other.'

And all the time—on the quiet days, that is, those without gunfire—that we wandered about the town, drank coffee at the Greek's and talked philosophy, Mr Cool and Monsieur Delet, wasting no time, discussed something with great concentration.

The sequel of these tête-à-têtes was unexpected. One calm morning well suited for idyllic walks, our two respectable friends came into Alexey Spiridonovich's room and Monsieur Delet said with solemnity, but also with a certain warmth: 'The great hour has struck! Dear Monsieur Tishin, you have been mobilised'.

Alexey Spiridonovich, who was still lying dreamily abed, leapt up shouting: 'What are you saying? Good God! Mobilised? By whom?'

Mr Cool replied importantly: 'Not by us, of course. We

aren't interfering in your country's internal affairs. We only hired a certain retired sergeant for the purpose, and he signed the order. My friend, you mustn't grieve. Rejoice, for you're going to defend culture and liberty against the barbarians'.

Then they both withdrew, leaving behind them the mobilisation order and two dollars for Alexey Spiridonovich's outfit. Alexey Spiridonovich, who had once already defended culture from the barbarians, fell back on his bed and began wailing at the top of his voice, which he continued to do until evening when the Teacher and I arrived upon the scene.

He told us all about his torments. Of course the Bolsheviks were barbarians and should be overthrown. But he was against violence, he was almost a Tolstoyan; it wasn't for nothing that his Saint Sophia campaign had ended with the death of Aysha's brother. Besides, he was afraid to fire at Russians, his own people. True, Monsieur Delet had assured him that the Red Army consisted of anything but Russians: Bashkirs, Kirghizes, Jews, Hungarians, Chinese and Lithuanians. But what if, by chance, there happened to be among them even a single brother-Russian? Lord, Lord, what should he do then?

But there was nothing he could do. Having received a rifle and a tricolour flag from Monsieur Delet and, from Mr Cool, a Bible and another dollar, Alexey Spiridonovich went off with thirty other 'volunteers'—burning, like himself, with the desire for battle—to seize the village of Dyrky from the Reds.

Following a heroic attack in which they lost twenty-three men, the volunteers occupied the village and the adjacent sugar factory. To Alexey Spiridonovich's utmost horror and dismay he was obliged to bayonet a Russian, and all the corpses he found at Dyrky looked less like Chinese than peasants from Tula or Kaluga. His torments redoubled.

To crown it all, Mr Cool and Monsieur Delet arrived at Dyrky to greet and thank the glorious fighters. Mr Cool explained that he had acquired Kutumenko's factory dirt cheap and Monsieur Delet reminded the *paysans libérés* of the necessity to work with all their might to pay off Russia's debts, to

which was now added the cost of thirty rifles, two flags and the sergeant's pay.

All this had such a strong effect on Alexey Spiridonovich that he fled from Dyrky by night, straight to the Teacher's flat, exchanged his rifle for two bottles of home-distilled vodka and insisted on declaiming *To Russia's Slanderers* in a drunken state. Aysha had to take the part of a 'slanderer' and receive annihilating glances, a spray of saliva and even an occasional tap from Alexey Spiridonovich's hand.

From that day on Alexey Spiridonovich was obliged to hide, particularly from the sergeant and Monsieur Delet. He grew dreadfully thin and dilapidated. He would lie for days in the Teacher's larder, dreaming of how lovely it would be if to Kerensky's freedom you could add Schmidt's organisation, the dollar and the higher soul peculiar to the Slavs. But as things stood they were very bad.

My own position was no better. I have a Semite's lips and a dubious surname. Under such circumstances I ran the risk at any moment of ending my difficult progress on this earth against the peeling wall of some outhouse in Yelizavetgrad.

One night some officers stopped me in the street. 'Halt! Are you a Yid?' In reply I swore, juicily and going into great detail, just like a shoemaker in Dorogomilovo might swear when he's been paid for an order and had a bit to drink. This seemed convincing and they let me go.

Another fellow in uniform turned up at the Teacher's flat—where I too was living—and started screaming: 'Yids! You crucified Christ! You sold Russia!' Then, without any transition, in a businesslike tone: 'This cigarette-case is silver, isn't it?'

Even the Teacher had to pay the penalty. On one of the traditional 'three days' when this new sport was especially popular, he went out for a walk. In the street he ran across an officer apparently frozen in a dreamy pose.

'Yid! Come here!'

'I'm a Mexican.'

'In that case I apologise. Perhaps you could tell me where I might find a single Yid?'

'Try looking for one.'

'That's the whole trouble. They're all hiding—I've been standing here since morning'; and, contenting himself with the Teacher's fur cap, the unlucky sportsman went off in search of the rare game.

Generally speaking, the Teacher, too, was in low spirits. Already during the last months in Moscow I had begun to notice in him a certain tiredness and apathy. Still he kept going and struck up friendships with many of the White Russians who stayed in the town longer than the rest.

One of them, Second-Lientenant Ushkov, was a touching and delightful adolescent. He was mad on the romanticism of the past, on the bugle calls of the Old Guard, the victorious fluttering of a great army's banners. His ideas were general and meagre, but he was driven by a strong and mystic love of the past. A hundred things—the battle of Kulikovo, Palm Sunday with its lights dancing through the streets and alleys of old Moscow, the cathedrals of the Kremlin, dances with his sister's friends the *institutkas*, the Patriotic War of 1812, Mamma and the traditional Christmas tree—merged in his mind into one passionately adored whole, which wicked strangers had taken away. The Teacher said of him: 'Here's Pushkin's Yevgeny, the poor crank who will not wait until the horseman's flesh becomes transmuted into bronze. Whose fault is it if Julio Jurenito, pushing the scenario-writer aside, has come upon the scene five centuries before he was supposed to, whilst gentle Ushkov was born as many years too late, skipping the first Romanovs and the magnificent officers who fell on the fields of Borodino, turned the Parisiennes' heads with their dancing and their moustaches, and were in love both with their own Natashas and with Liberty, that foreign freemason's daughter?'

In the same regiment as Ushkov there served a certain Davilov, a young landowner, a passionate gambler but a man of sober thinking. He referred to Ushkov as 'that schoolgirl'.

'Everything's clear and simple, and no romantic nonsense about it: it's either us or them. I'd rather be killed by a bullet than lead a "proletarian" existence, mouthing a jargon I detest. If we win we'll live, live properly, like our fathers and grandfathers before us, with receptions given by the marshal of the nobility, with drinking parties in the *Strelnya*, with thousand-rouble notes on the green cloth, with verve and dash, recklessness and style. If not, we'll perish and then the "comrades" will come and spread such utter boredom for centuries to come that even pure-blooded Russian flies will die of sheer misery.'

Jurenito's third friend, a Cossack officer, was a fellow of unusual height with a giant's legs, nicknamed The Tank. He regarded the Civil War as a dangerous but fascinating sport. He chased commissars, Atamans, anyone he could catch, and for the tenth or hundredth time the diamond earrings of Yagoditseva, the merchant's wife, or the pounds sterling of Eisenstein, the speculator, would change hands.

'A real genuine Mexican,' the Teacher would say with pride, thumping The Tank on his massive back as he displayed his latest trophy, a gold leaf bracelet. 'You're not five centuries too late, my friend, but only three years. Back in Nineteen Seventeen you'd have had all the fun you wanted. But now it won't do; now the Schmidts have got the thing so well organised that you'd get sent to unload railway trucks, and what's more the crates would all be counted.'

Despite the friendships with the officers I have described, the Teacher was not left in peace. Now it would be the 'counter-intelligence' anxious to find out what precisely he had been doing on July 12th, 1915, now the Ossetians would come for the hundredth time to establish his religion, picking up an old pair of trousers or a tea-set on the way.

Perhaps because of all this, perhaps simply out of boredom, the Teacher decided to act and—to everyone's surprise—proclaimed himself a Pretender to the Russian throne. He proved that he was related to Maximilian, the executed Mexican

Emperor who had been a descendant of the Hapsburgs, who in turn were related to the Danish royal family and, consequently, to the Romanovs.

Jurenito made his intention of occupying the empty throne known to the local 'counter-intelligence', *Osvag* and the foreign powers. The 'counter-intelligence' ceased its vexatious visits and one of its members actually brought the Teacher a bottle of Martell brandy, which we emptied not without pleasure. *Osvag* exhibited Jurenito's portrait in its shop window, but diplomatically omitted to say anything about the throne for fear of hurting the feelings of certain tame socialists. From abroad the Teacher received some telegrams wishing him success, as well as 100 francs for petty expenses. We got Mr Cool to exchange this money for 100,000 roubles and blued it in truly royal style. Aysha was so impressed by all the drink, and particularly by the Turkish delight bought at the Greek's, that he conceived the wild idea of declaring himself a Pretender too, in order to get another 100 francs.

But the time of the eleventh Yelizavetgrad Government was running out. The usual flurry descended on the town; carts loaded high with goods started moving towards the toll-gates; everything reminded one of Moscow at the beginning of the summer holidays in the good old days. We, too, wearied by events and compromised by Jurenito's monarchistic enterprise, decided to take a holiday. Where the enemy was coming from and who precisely the enemy was we did not know. We set off at hazard and, that same night, after covering about fifteen miles, found ourselves in a village held by the Red Army. We pulled the old but still respectable Soviet warrants from the linings of our coats and, after safely passing through nine 'O.O.'s' (Special Departments), proceeded northwards to Moscow.

CHAPTER XXXII | A few contradictions

OUR JOURNEY lasted seven weeks; often, instead of travelling in goods wagons, we had to save our skins by striking out across marsh and trackless waste. Instead of Schmidt's charts we saw a country resembling a monstrous bog, where rebellions, like the tremblings of a feverish body, sprang up and were put down; a country of intolerable poverty, replying to all speeches, appeals and manifestoes by the same indestructible 'what's that you say?'—the response of apathy, ignorance and death.

Weak with hunger, we wandered from village to village, begging in vain for a slice of bread, giving away waistcoats, hats, watch-chains for a jug of milk. Even Monsieur Delet's trinkets—Faith, Hope and Charity—were exchanged, all three together, for a single egg, which turned out to be addled. Aysha let us down completely, for instead of exchanging goods the peasants would either break into headlong flight or, bravely, begin to pursue the 'unclean Arab'. However, sometimes we were able to overcome their lack of confidence, and the peasants would chat with us amiably and give us maize or millet biscuits for a mere shirt or leather wallet.

I was much surprised to see, in that starving countryside, the black, rich, weed-grown, unsown soil. The peasants we spoke to, on the other hand, found this very natural and even assured us that next year they'd sow still less: 'Just enough so as not to starve. What's the use of sowing—they'll take it away anyhow.'

'Try to understand,' the Teacher explained. 'A hundred million "what's that you say's" are being expected to make a tremendous, selfless, superhuman effort for the sake of an idea they cannot understand. Who demanded their obedience in former times? The landlord, the merchant, the Tsar: but behind them all stood God with a whole scale of intermediaries, starting with the Queen of Heaven and ending with the village

beadle. God never took anything away: He borrowed, promising to make ample return in the next world. His solvency was unquestionable. All the ascetics, the hermits, the poor, merely exchanged the corruptible treasure of forty or fifty years' doubtful earthly joys for the "eternal gold" of heaven. Now it's been revealed to them that the only thing that matters *is* those forty years: the bread, the marzipan which the parasites used to eat, the featherbeds, our women, our theatres, in short this thrice-dear, beloved earth. Your Mayakovsky's put it very nicely:

We're sick of the sweets of heaven,
Give us good rye bread to eat.
We're sick of paper passions,
Let us lie with our own warm wives.

'But, instead of immediate carefree hours with your wife and a good chunk of bread, you're offered a mere couple of ounces—and even that looks pretty stale—overtime—"working Saturdays", "working Sundays"—incessant duties: the same vows of poverty, the same hairshirt all over again, only this time there's no promissory note on the Kingdom of Heaven; on the contrary, they guarantee worms in the grave and demand absolute disinterestedness. Someone—your children, children's children, grandchildren, grandchildren's grandchildren—will have a better life. Justice? But that's an abstraction, promises unsupported by any guarantee. Idealistic materialism has turned out to be a hundred times higher and more difficult than materialistic idealism. How can you wonder if the hundred millions haven't all become super-saints? Be surprised, rather, that thousands of new saints *have* been found, great self-immolators whose dream is not to fly to heaven with the smoke of their burning bodies but only to give a little heat to the frozen countryside.'

In the train we got into conversation with a shop assistant from Maly-Yaroslavets, an unprepossessing hunchback. He attacked communism in a highly original fashion: 'What am I? A monster. An insect with a human being's passport. In the

old days at least I had one hope: I'd get rich, stuff my pockets with hundred-rouble notes, then I'd get my own back. Perhaps you'll say money can't buy everything. You're wrong, believe me. She may find me repulsive but she'll dote on me, don't you worry, she'll kiss my hump and the boil on it. And now what is there for me? Work for my rations? Equality? Let them first make sure that everyone's born nice and equal, good-looking, you know, and strong. All right, for eight hours of work you get one and a half herrings. But who'll pay for my hump, my humiliation, my constant misery, I ask you? There's only one thing left: I'll join the Cheka and no one'll dare to say a word against me. What I'll get out of it won't be more than what other people pick up free. I shan't become a Cheka man out of greed but in the name of holy equality'.

The whole thing put me into a state of such depression that I longed more than ever before for the Teacher's cheerful and elevating words. But he frowned and was silent. I had known him to go through such periods before, but then he had been busy working on his projects; now he openly expressed fatigue, indifference and boredom. I became alarmed. Perhaps he was ill? Jurenito smiled: 'I'm not Monsieur Delet. You can't put my affairs right with Pink pills'.

Only once did he comfort and encourage us. Having acquired a tiny roll of white bread at an enormous price we shared it out fairly into five thin slices and carefully picked up all the crumbs. The Teacher said: 'Rejoice, my friends, for you are experiencing the greatness of human labour, the sacredness of that which is created by horny hands. Do you remember Paris before the war, suffocating with an excess of superfluous things, weary with work that was like the prisoner's pouring dried peas from one container into another? Who, then, could have understood the height, the brilliance, the divine nature of a bread roll or a boot? Today, pristine joy has been restored to you and, having lost a hundred false ideals, you have gained possession of that which truly deserves worship. You used to trample the blessed earth and scan the skies, not those known

to the astronomer, but painted by any fraud not too lazy for the job. Yet at your feet lay gladness, happiness, delight, these white crumbs resembling the finest stars. You used to despise labour and admire the mumbling loafers droning out their tales of Eden and Atlantis, yet incapable of sewing a button on their trousers. Now an expert hand has done the useful work of sifting the false stones from the precious'.

Those words were the only lighthouse during many months at sea. The Teacher fell silent once more. Heavy with new disillusionments, we alighted on the dirty platform of the station in Moscow.

CHAPTER XXXIII | Of heroism, of boredom and particularly of the aeroplane which wouldn't fly

WE ARRIVED IN MOSCOW towards ten o'clock in the morning. Coming out on the square we saw long processions of Soviet office workers going to their offices with sacks to carry their rations. Now and then cars with important personages and horse-sleighs bearing comrades not below the rank of People's Commissariat Departmental Chief would race by.

At Food Distribution Point No. 93, pickled cabbage and a pound of salt were being distributed against coupon No. 107. A long queue of women, old men, children and officials running the risk of being late at committee meetings stood silently with their little sledges at the entrance.

An old woman was pasting up *Izvestia* on the wall, and a long-haired character—one of the 'opposition' to judge by his sarcastic smile—was reading the latest article on world revolution, slowly freezing to death and shifting his weight from one foot to the other. A young lady was selling three caramels, but everybody—except for us, who had the silly notion of asking the price—obviously knew that they were going for three thousand roubles, and walked past quickly, looking away. Only a small boy could not take his eyes off those caramels, his pupils quite pale with ecstasy.

Everyone knew, too, what awaited them—the former readers of *Russkiye Vyedomosti*—today, tomorrow, the day after tomorrow. The task for today was to draw up a new budget based on the old figures in such a way that the Workers' and Peasants' Inspection passed it; send back empty-handed the 100 delegates from the provinces who had come for books or machinery; draw up a report on last month's inactivity and a plan for the inactivity of the next; in short, to create an

impression of feverish work by marking time, shuffling, dragging your feet and mumbling under you breath. This would be followed by dinner consisting of water and *psha* for the first course and *psha* and water for the second, then cranberry tea with 'Red Star' saccharine bought for a month's salary. Then, together with your wife, you would lower your voice and criticise the Soviet power, dream of paradise lost and Einem pastries. Finally, sleep in a frosty hole of a bedroom behind curtains smelling of dog. All this was written on their faces, whose features no longer differed from those of the lower classes.

The Teacher said: 'Don't you notice a smell of humdrum day-to-day existence hereabouts? It doesn't matter that it's a poor existence so far; one day they'll be better fed. Rejoice, Monsieur Delet: people here are no longer walking on their heads but on ordinary, though severely emaciated legs.'

It is true that, this time, those among us who were most pleased to be back in Moscow were the fiercest enemies of the revolution, Mr Cool and Monsieur Delet. With a courtesy worthy of Paris or London they were declared 'guests of the Soviet Republic', housed in a good hotel, fed on meat cutlets and invited to a gala box at the Bolshoy Theatre to see *Les Sylphides*. All this, including the classical *pas* of the ballerinas, proved to their entire satisfaction; they became swollen-headed and took to speaking contemptuously, not only to us, but to the Teacher himself. Once Monsieur Delet brought me half a meat cutlet—which he had left unfinished owing to the inadequate action of a Pink pill—as I waited in the corridor, and said: 'Here's a noble gesture of the Republic's guest!' Since they considered us worthy of only the briefest remarks I was unable to establish exactly what their occupations were apart from those I have already mentioned. I found out only that Mr Cool played bridge of an evening with high-ranking officials with whom he also negotiated major concessions—a half of Turkestan, perhaps, or an eighth of Siberia. Monsieur Delet suggested that the Teacher might approach the same officials on the

subject of the Universal Necropolis, but Jurenito refused with a short but expressive 'Enough!'

Ercole's position, on the other hand, was no longer what it had been. He came to see us in a state of the utmost dejection.

'A thousand devils! How things change! They found me out! Some fellow—a controller or whatever you call them—came along and neither Jupiter nor the Triton were any use at all. They told me, Ercole Bambucci, to go to work! And what work, do you suppose? Letting off squibs? Hanging out flags? Not a bit of it. Productive labour! The bloodsuckers! The Jesuits! What's the use of the Soviets, in that case? What's the difference between this and Germany? They've given me something called a labour book and entered in it that I had a pair of old trousers and a waiter's coat issued to me, and now they want to enter how many hours work I've done. But before they can do that, the idiots, I'd have to *do* some work! May the Capitol collapse before that!'

Alexey Spiridonovich, after his experience at Dyrky, stopped waiting for the generals and the Allies. His only hope now was that the communists would give in completely to the voice of conscience, reopen the delicatessen shops and remove the ban on the publication of *Russkiye Vyedomosti*. Then everything would be perfect.

Aysha and I, like honest citizens, went back to our former jobs: he devoting his efforts to the African revolution and I to the rabbits, which, owing to Durov's outstanding energy, had become far more politically conscious in my absence.

But, alas, my work failed to satisfy me and I was not happy. I would sit in my little room and conduct long metaphysical arguments with myself on what was preferable: cold or smoke? Inclining towards the latter I would go out into the yard, quietly pinch a few logs delivered to my neighbour—the owner of a shop dealing in unrationed goods such as saccharine and frozen apples—chop them up and, with much difficulty, light my little stove. The frozen walls would begin to thaw and I on my bed would gradually come to feel like a sailor in a small

boat in the middle of the Arctic Ocean. Then the wind would blow in through the window which served as exit for the stove-pipe, the stove would tremble and cough out clouds of acrid smoke. I, too, would cough, weep and say I was sorry. Then, in despair, I would pull on my sheepskin coat of dubious origin and go out on to the staircase. Perhaps I should go to the House of the Printed Word? There I would find a fish-paste sandwich and a discussion on 'proletarian choral declamation'. Or to the Polytechnic Museum? No sandwiches there, but 26 young poets reading their verses on the *Mass of the Railway Engine.* No, better sit on the stairs, shiver with cold and dream that all this is not in vain, that I, crouching here, am preparing the distant sunrise of the Renascence. I would dream both in prose and in verse, occasionally producing some tolerable iambics:

How bright will be the noonday of the age of gold,
How blue the sky after the evil storm!
The juices of the barbarous vine shall be transformed
Into the limpid wine of the millennium. . . .

So the days passed. Never before had I led a life so poor and honest, so spiritual and chaste. The whole of Moscow seemed to me like a monastery with a strict rule, with perpetual fasting, masses and penances. The boredom itself had something heroically saintly about it. Only a heart smothered in layers of fatty tissue could fail to admire the touching greatness of this insane people which had shouted its message of the advent of paradise, the descent of heavenly stars on earth into a rainy autumn night, and then, buried by the blizzard, had fallen silent, stoically chewing its last handful of grain, yet refusing to come to the bonfire at which many an apostle had warmed himself in the past.

The Teacher was not employed anywhere and did no work. He smoked *makhorka* all day and stared ahead with dull, unseeing eyes. To me he said: 'The poet Shershenevich has written a book called *A Horse Like Any Other Horse.* If you carry on with that idea you could very amusingly write another

called *A State Like Any Other State.* Mr Cool enjoys general esteem. Ercole's an office messenger. The loose cigarettes and the packets of carrot coffee are stamped with the coat of arms of the mutinous republic, the R.S.F.S.R. The French have written Liberty—Equality—Fraternity on the walls of their prisons; here, on the ten-thousand-rouble bonds with which the speculators and contractors are stuffing their pockets, the revolutionary slogan is "Workers of the world, unite". I can't go on looking at this aeroplane which will not fly. It's a bore. But take no notice. It's possible to take the opposite view of all this. One day I realised it and was tempted to poach on your preserves: I wrote a little poem. Listen:

No, there's no riot in Russia, there's no rebellion.
Her banners are the sceptre of her power,
And, thousand-handed, she is laying the foundations
Of a new world.
No matter if the day's work is dirty,
No matter if the East is steeped in blood,
The giant butterfly is fluttering in anguish
Breaking its way through the ugly cocoon.
And in the wretched papers of the Sovnarhoz,
Under the Red Army man's bayonet, amid ink and blood,
In unbearable pain, the miraculous rose is waiting to open,
The rose of invincible love. . . .

'And so on. I though of sending it to Schmidt in the *Sovnarhoz,* but decided he might take offence at the "wretched" and tore it up. Fiddle-dee-dee! The point is, Ehrenburg, I've got to die, for my work is done'.

In terror and dismay I was unable to utter a single word, but could only, gripping the Teacher's knee, shake my head senselessly as Jurenito continued:

'I'm sick of the whole thing, utterly and completely sick of it. But to die, strange though it may seem, is quite a difficult undertaking. One idiot calls me his "guide", another his "partner", the third his "friend", the fourth his "comrade",

the fifth his "boss", the sixth his "master" and you, the seventh, call me your Teacher. What will the seven of you say on hearing that Jurenito's taken his own life, like any little dressmaker disappointed in love? For the rest of their days their faith in commerce, friendship, divinity will be shaken. I'm not cruel enough for that. I must die in a seemly manner. For anyone else that's easy, for it's enough to entertain convictions which do not correspond to those held by the generality. But I, as you know, have no convictions whatever; that is why I have been able to emerge with a cheerful smile from all the Prefectures, Kommandaturas, Special Departments and counter-intelligence. I cannot die for an idea. There's only one hope. Boots.'

Shaken to the core by the Teacher's terrible words and the incomprehensible mention of 'boots', I decided that he was out of his mind and wanted to run for Monsieur Delet, who was experienced in such matters. But the Teacher stopped me, asking me to admire a pair of English cavalry boots with laces up to the top which, as the Pretender to the Russian throne, he had received in Yelizavetgrad.

'I can die only for a pair of boots. The trouble is that the Bolsheviks have driven all the bandits away from Moscow. I'll have to go to the South, where local customs are much simpler. You and Aysha will go with me. Him I love best of all; you I don't love at all, but you will write my biography and must therefore accompany me to the end. Prepare yourself. Tomorrow we are off to Konotop, a cosy little town by all I hear.'

I was completely dazed with fear and anguish. Perhaps I should have summoned up courage to try to talk the Teacher out of his plan, or at least, to mark the occasion, tried to squeeze a single tear out of those damned glands. But I, understanding nothing at all, went obediently to an office where I had some friends and obtained travel papers for the Teacher, Aysha and myself. The warrants stated that we were being sent to Konotop to 'liquidate illiteracy'.

Coming home that night I did not light my stove, composed no poetry and dreamed no dreams. Instead, crouching in a corner, I cried until morning: 'Help, help! The Teacher wants to die for a pair of boots!' And sang a funeral dirge.

CHAPTER XXXIV | Death of the Teacher

IT WAS THE WAY of the Cross. There is a meaning and a greatness in the passing of worlds, epochs and men. I knew that the Teacher was adding the last stone to the astounding edifice of his life; that, for posterity, his death would be the solemn and inevitable full-stop on a page which could not but have been the last. Yet I loved him with a simple animal love, as only a dog can love a man who has picked it up in the street as a mangy blind puppy. Thus, faithful to that feeling, I forgot to think of posterity, and, paying no attention to our embarrassed fellow-passengers, threw back my head and howled long and hopelessly.

Why do I now write of my grief, my weakness? After all, it is not in order to communicate my pitiful experience that I am throwing this great book into the unexplored void. This is the story of the great Teacher, not of his weak, insignificant, contemptible disciple. Ilya Ehrenburg, author of mediocre poems, journalist who had written himself out, coward and renegade, petty hypocrite, dirty bounder with the soulful eyes of an idealist, was weeping on a railway-carriage bench. Who can bear this offensive, tiresome detail when next to him, in the same carriage, waving his pipe and cracking jokes with Aysha, the man of greatest worth—not of our age, but of all ages—was preparing for death? Be still, base heart, restrain your unseemly beating, do not offend the liturgical purity of this unique agony!

I shall not speak of Aysha's grief, nor of our arrival in the little town which has since become immortal. Everything happened as the Teacher had foreseen.

On March 12th towards evening we were sitting on a bench on the long boulevard leading from the station to the centre of the town. The Teacher, carefully shaven and solemn, had taken us out for a walk. Were it not for his torn coat, I would

have felt myself once more to be the secretary of the Ambassador of Labardan. It even seemed to me in my stupidity that the Teacher had changed his mind and meant, not to die, but to proclaim himself Tsar, President or Negus of some glorious nation. But he addressed us with the following words, his last:

'Today, very probably, the cupidity of some bandit or other will be aroused by my boots. Comrade Oltenko has told me that robberies in the town are on the increase. Unfortunately, posterity will never know the perpetrator's name. I see clearly a monument erected in 1980 to the memory of that unknown saviour of States past, present and to come from Julio Jurenito, the Mexican bandit. What a pity I shall not be there to lay a wreath at his feet; a most delightful occupation! To that and many other ends do you, Ehrenburg, betake yourself after my death to some quiet place and year after year, neither sparing your time—which nobody wants—nor knocking up an unnecessary number of lines (you've a fondness for that), describe all you know of my life: conversations, work and anecdotes, particularly the last. The blessed anecdote has long since taken the place of the epic and the sermon; it is the key to the treasure-houses of mankind. The book will evoke laughter in the wise and indignation in the foolish. But, to tell the truth, neither the first nor the second will understand very much of it. Then do not grieve over your lack of talent. To understand me is altogether a difficult thing. At the very dawn of this dark, majestic day I was already speaking of the morrow—running ahead like a dog, sniffing, cocking an ear. Alexey Spiridonovich asked me once: did I really detest this life so much? No, it is not hatred but a profound lack of love which has laid waste my heart. Build! Work! Grow! I do not call you back, I do not offer you bombs nor do I counsel you to take off your trousers and become shepherds in the manner of Raymond Duncan. Dear Aysha, believe me, you are the finest of all the men I have ever met in my life. But it will not be your childlike person that will save the world. Ten times already you have

gone out to "save culture"; you have your job in the sub-department; you have a liking for fountain pens and gramophones. In short—the sequence of the seasons, and so forth. In order that the world's spiral should soar to new happiness it is necessary to describe the circle of the ages, the circle of blood, sweat, coal, the iron circle.

'I see the noon of this new day. The Parthenon will be remembered as a pitiful childish plaything in the dining-rooms of those giant States. The structure of any pumping station will put the Gothic cathedrals to shame. A simple *pissoir* in the street will exceed the pyramid of Cheops in the majesty of its concrete, the virgin purity of its glass. It shall be so. Here, in poverty-stricken, ruined Russia I speak of it. For it is not those who have a superfluity of stones that build, but those who are not afraid to bind the stones together with their living blood. I foresee it, but I am not glad.

'In my last hours I should like to see something else, the next stage, the thing still shrouded in mists. Here comes a man with a file of papers. On his hip, in a special pocket, he carries a Browning. Don't be afraid, he isn't a bandit, he's an honest official. This morning, having typed something under a serial number, he has shot a man who disagreed with him on some issue or another. Now he has dined and is briskly walking to a meeting. Do you see the cat at his side? It, too, has most probably eaten a mouse today. Let me bow down before the cat, before Aysha, before the absence of serial numbers, and look ahead: can it be that there are no cats there but only serial numbers, more serial numbers, even cats classified under serial numbers? The world is closed to man. What's Mars to him—and not only Mars, but even, say, the nature of the horse? He only thinks of stars when he's in love, and then only as of a specially provided heavenly illumination. New worlds, to him, are the preparations for an expedition to the South Pole. He has separated himself, locked himself in, and in the harmony of the process of being he has lost his own harmony. A man can be made to walk on a tightrope, but as soon as the audience

has gone he will come slap down on the soft sand of the arena. Outside harmony there is no freedom, no love, no defeat of death. Either it's Mr Cool exterminating Aysha by scientific means, like a cockroach, or it's Aysha, in the intimate circle of his family, lunching off Mr Cool's thigh. Or else both of them will be harnessed under one yoke and, hating each other, everybody and everything, they will pull the festive chariot of "liberated mankind". Either it's Ercole left to his own devices, scratching his navel in the via Pascudini, or it's Schmidt's eternal military parade. They run from death, they seek it, but no one goes simply to sleep, all of them twitch and jump. Instead of love there's an accounts ledger—of intimacy, help, betrayal, estrangement; there's love, not of an object but of one's own feeling, warming one's own coldness—according to good King David's prescription—on the heart of another. Outside harmony there's no life but only the great existence of men and races. Remember Monsieur Delet? He, too, used to speak of harmony. For him it meant a sensible diet, the simple mean of all, the basic units of the world. Of course I'm not speaking of that but of a sense which man has lost and which is yet needed for a beautiful life, a sense of the concord of the entire universe.

'I don't know how it will be achieved—in the laboratory, on the waste ground left after the fires of the elemental disaster, or by the last effort of the rational will. I don't know when it will come, that hour of liberty, joy and thoughtlessness. I know that it will come; and I know, too, that for it to come it is necessary to hasten the inevitable hour-hand of the events, the wars, the revolutions, of this day for which I have no love.

'Do it as best you can. As for me, I don't feel like it any longer. I'm full right up, my stomach feels heavy, in short, a case of colossal indigestion which would shake even our Delet. Farewell, my friends! Take care of your health. Make no fuss over my body. Another thing: when you get back to Moscow, eat plenty of yoghurt; it's unrationed, and highly recommended for immortality.'

Having finished speaking the Teacher ate a frozen pear, wiped his forehead with a big red silk handkerchief, gave Aysha a kiss and me a well-smoked meerschaum cigarette holder and, ordering us to remain on the bench, walked off down the deserted road. I shivered and whimpered.

Soon we heard someone give a loud shout, then a whistle and the crack of a shot nearby. Aysha started to run after the Teacher. I crawled under the bench, pulled up my legs and lay very still.

A quarter of an hour later I climbed out and decided to go and see. A hundred paces from the bench I found the Teacher lying in a ditch with blood on his face. He was dead, the boots were gone from his cold, forlorn-looking feet. I fell down at his side, without letting go of those feet in their darned striped socks. Here lay what had been my all.

Aysha came running, flourishing his big African knife. He had tried to catch up with the murderer, but in vain. What should we do with the Teacher? Surely not call the militiamen, exchanging the great mystery for a vile criminal report? Taking advantage of the darkness and the absence of people, we carried the Teacher's body to a field beyond the town and there, using Aysha's knife, dug a hole all night.

When everything around us began to tremble in the approaching dawn, the grave was ready, and the dim strip of the first light seemed to remind us of the Teacher's prophecies. I found a stick, knocked it in and hung up my labour card—there was nothing else at hand—on which I had written: "Attention! Here lies the Teacher of Humanity, Julio Jurenito, murdered on March 12th 1921 at 8.20 p.m.'. Today, surely, there is no trace left of his holy grave.

Whilst we were working, the effort and petty worries shielded me from what had happened. But when we returned to the station and I realised that we would leave without the Teacher, that never again would I hear his dear, steady voice, I cried aloud with pain. In vain did Aysha try to calm me, saying that Jurenito was now a god, that he would live in other men. All this was

pitiful babbling, unworthy of his name. I knew he was dead, for good, for ever. And I remained, and I had no boots, and even if I had had any I would hide them, hide myself, go on living somehow. . . . What was to be done?

Demented, I rushed towards a woman selling hot pies and, upsetting her stall, began to shout: 'Don't you understand, the Teacher's dead, dead for a pair of boots! I'll not survive it!'

As the reader will realise, this remark was not a real threat but only an image expressing the boundlessness of my grief.

They gave me a beating and took me to the Commissariat, but in the evening they let me out again and we took the train to empty Moscow, into a world which had lost the right to turn, to revolve, to rush ahead; a world without meaning, without end. . . .

CHAPTER XXXV | For which, quite obviously, there is no need

PERHAPS I SHOULD STOP at the Teacher's death and not begin this chapter, dreary and dull without the radiance of his presence. But it seems to me that the reader might be interested in a brief account of what happened to the men who accompanied the Teacher during his passage on earth. Besides, everything I have seen in Europe has so shaken my frail imagination that I do not think I can conceal the emotional and unbalanced condition which preceded the writing of this book. That is why I have decided to make the clumsy addition of a thirty-fifth and final chapter to the graceful structure.

On my return to Moscow I summoned together our whole company to announce the Teacher's death. We gathered in his room, and his affectionate, mocking presence seemed to be with us all the time. Alexey Spiridonovich wept bitterly as he remembered all his disagreements with the Teacher, his moments of mistrust, weakness and faithlessness: 'I am a perjurer,' he cried, 'and may that bandit be branded as a regicide!'. Monsieur Delet could not bear to hear my story of the hole in the ground and the stick I had knocked in: 'Such a respectable man, my partner, and yet he gets something worse than Class Sixteen! A country of barbarians, that's all I have to say!'

Grieving and weeping, remembering the Teacher's words and habits, we passed, little by little, to the question of our future. Despite our various affairs and occupations, the main thing which had united us and kept us in Moscow had been the Teacher's presence. Mr Cool, though he had got a certain amount of business going, was not averse to exchanging the meat cutlets of a 'guest of the Republic' for Vattel's oysters and crabs, for which he had a special fondness. Monsieur Delet sighed every minute for his beautiful country: *la belle, la douce*

France, for Zizi, Lucie and the sweet peas. Ercole, too, was missing the Roman sun, the wine and the shop sign in the via Pascudini. Alexey Spiridonovich did not miss anything in particular and despised the needs of the flesh, but longed to emigrate in order to 'save the freedom of the spirit from the corrupters and violators'. I could not rise to the same heights as he, and the greatest lure remained, for me, a cup of rotten coffee with a glass of cheap *marc* on the terrace of my never-to-be-forgotten Rotonde.

But when I turned with yearning to the West, it was not entirely without idealistic motive. For all my narrow egoism and the predominance of animal instincts, I was conscious of my duty to humanity: had not the Teacher charged me with writing the story of his mysterious and edifying life? And writing in Moscow, or anywhere in Russia for that matter, was extremely difficult. A lot of time was taken up, if not by the rabbits themselves, then by the commissions devoted to them, the business of obtaining various rations and getting hold of a quarter of a pound of tobacco on the black market. Even the paper necessary for so voluminous a work would be very hard to find. Furthermore, I had lost a lot of weight and could hardly concentrate on the Teacher's elevated problems. Finally, the atmosphere of history in the making was not conducive to the chronicler's quiet labours. I knew that it would be enough for me to get to the Rotonde, drink a few glasses, call *garçon, de quoi écrire*! and my quick hand would start at once recording the Teacher's sacred preachings on the coffee-bespattered sheets. As for Aysha, he was so helpless, so orphaned without his master that he was prepared to follow us no matter where.

So it was that all of us, introduced by the Teacher into the purgatory of the Revolution, now longed to return to the cosy hell or, if such a definition should appear unwise, to the unaired paradise. To do this was not so simple, but luckily Schmidt, too, was going abroad, guided—it is true—by special considerations which he concealed from us. With his help we managed

to obtain the necessary passports and, two weeks later, we were devouring fat pork chops in a good restaurant in Riga, one chop after another, all of us—even Monsieur Delet—having for the moment lost every trace of moderation.

Our jaws, and dozens of others all around, were working in unison, with resonance and solemnity. The sleepy musicians were conscientiously pumping out the latest hit tune. Mr Cool beckoned, as to a dog, to a modest-looking young lady, gave her a dollar and obtained everything due to him for the price. Monsieur Delet entered into conversation with some neighbours on political themes, was deeply touched to hear of Germany letting the Allies have some milch cows, and murmured: 'Justice has triumphed!'. It was a night of joys and reconciliations, wide, soft embraces, arms opening to receive the prodigal son. Mr Cool expressed all our feelings when he raised his glass of *ersatz* champagne and proclaimed: 'Friends, let us drink to the triumph of civilisation!'

Excited, I went out on the balcony for a breath of fresh air. Here she was again, wise, eternally beautiful Europe. The noise of mastication, the perky accents of the band and the sucking sounds of kissing were dying down to a tender silence. Everything was gradually drowned by a majestic snore, a snore embellished by whistling, grunting and wheezing. Monsieur Delet—Riga—all Europe, having dined and squirmed awhile on the marriage bed, having earned its daily bread and done its best to take away the daily bread of others—for 'man does not live by bread alone'—was peacefully asleep. I gave way completely to my pent-up feelings and began to sing *Hush-a-bye-baby*, but misjudged the power of my own voice. A waiter came and asked me to stop, as I was disturbing all twenty of the establishment's private rooms.

A few days later there began a series of touching good-byes, tears and promises to send picture postcards. To leave, it is true, was not altogether easy, for Europe had, during the time of our absence, become enriched by an institution which, though tiresome, was absolutely rational, namely that of visas. After

all, chains on front doors, vigilant house-porters and closely inspected visiting cards have existed for a long time past. If the ordinary citizen shows such caution, would it not be madness on the part of a State to let strangers enter its gates without previously ascertaining whether their faces are attractive, their convictions suitable and their wallets well-filled? Owing to this innovation we did not leave all at once but gradually, thus confirming the justice of the hierarchy of nations.

Mr Cool and Monsieur Delet, of course, departed in a first-class carriage; and, when all the others had gone their various ways, Alexey Spiridonovich and I still stayed behind for a long, long time, standing for the appointed number of hours in the queues in waiting-rooms of the consulates of powers great and small. However, we ourselves were conscious of the justice of such discrimination, and Alexey Spiridonovich when asked his nationality, would reply, as though apologizing, with a vague gesture:

'Oh, you know . . . a country . . . Eastern Europe . . .'

But mercy, not vengeance, was the watchward of the cultured nations, and after standing in queues for the appointed length of time even we received our visas. I shook the hand of the consulate porter—who, in the course of a month, had had time to get used to me as to a piece of furniture—I bowed once more in reverence before glorious Chinara who had received an oak leaf in her lap, and was about to speak of this to the porter, but remembered that the country of Ronsard has no love for barbarian poets and went out quietly.

And so the wheel had turned full circle: I was going to Paris, my dear, beloved Paris, Paris regained.

After many years of war and revolution, the entire journey was to me a single continuous demonstration of the triumph of peace, order, reason and civilisation.

I stayed a week in hospitable Copenhagen, and though—due to my innate sobriety of outlook—I failed to notice the mystic quality made famous by Bang, I was indeed shaken

by the wealth of shop-windows and the excess of foods. All the people I saw in the street were fat, red-faced and cheerful. After my Moscow reflections I experienced a sense of reverent admiration in front of every rounded paunch swaying regularly inside its snug waistcoat. At the Tivoli Café I saw a waiter, before pouring himself out a cup of coffee, rinse it first with thick, rich cream. This electrifying sight so impressed me that I actually rose from my seat. Somewhere far away, in Vienna or in Petersburg, thousands of children were dying at that very moment for lack of milk, while here it flowed, as in Arcadia, unwanted by anyone. Here they had no revolutions, made no attempt to reshape the world, but honourably engaged in trade, passed laws in the Rijksdag and grazed their cows. What an instructive story of the good and the naughty boy for our children! Was it possible, after that, not to cry out in furious anger: down with the heroes, soldiers, poets, revolutionaries, madmen of all colours! Long live the honest tradesman!

In London I went about the streets as in a temple, on tiptoe and hat in hand: once again I was in the true home of law, freedom and the inviolability of the person, the home of *habeas corpus*. What dignity, what independence on the proud faces, even those of junior City clerks! I remembered the English policemen bringing their truncheons down with a crack on the heads of citizens of Batum guilty of infringing the published regulations. Now, in London, I understood that it was the uncultivated Russians, Georgians, Turks who had been at fault, that it was they who did not deserve *habeas corpus* but merited only the profoundly educative truncheon.

My enthusiasm reached its peak when I beheld at last my beloved Montparnasse and the Rotonde. Though manners within it had changed, like those of a man who has reached the age of reason, I yet felt there like a homing-bird. What had been the use of dreaming, suffering, wandering, only to return once more to the little round table with its pile of saucers? But it was here that I became aware of my irrevocable loss with

full intensity. How could I, without the Teacher, comprehend this wine-glass, this city, this whole life? Instead of a well-constructed picture I saw flickering before my eyes the dots of the *pointillistes*, creating an illusion of seeing from afar, yet giving no firm support.

My beloved Paris was still the same as ever. The lights of the cafés and advertisements gleamed like those of a trusty lighthouse lit by the hand of an ever-watchful keeper. The ruby and emerald streams of aperitifs still flowed; deputies, making a heroic effort, still went on overthrowing cabinets; poets wrote faultless verse about women's breasts and hips; desperate revolutionaries smashed the Government—which, however, did not greatly mind—once a week in the smaller journals; and clerks in the savings companies entered new noughts, like milestones, in the savings books neatly covered in brown paper.

But there were many changes as well. The men wore suits with tight waists and big breasts and behinds such as are natural to the other sex: this was explained by the prevailing fashion for love slightly different from the generally accepted variety. In the cabarets and the salons they were dancing a new dance called the fox-trot, based on associative swayings. Finally, the newspapers had started a vogue for the novel and fascinating sport, unknown in former days, of 'Marshal-racing'.

A few days after my arrival I was impressed beyond words by a truly magnificent spectacle. A prize-fight was announced between two famous boxers, a Frenchman and an Englishman. Paris—the capital of the world—and, after it, all the towns of Europe and America awaited the outcome with bated breath. I went with Alexey Spiridonovich to watch this great encounter.

Two very healthy-looking, large men came out into the ring. Everyone grew very still, knowing that the world's destinies were about to be decided.

First the Englishman takes a good swing and hits the Frenchman in the face with all his might. A tooth is knocked out, the

blood flows . . . Alexey Spiridonovich moans: 'Oh God, what are they doing! The face! The countenance! The image of God!' What with all the Tolstoy he's read, the poor fool can no longer appreciate the beauty of war, of national power, of art, of boxing, in short of anything which distinguishes a man from a sheep. Carried away by the fight I abstain from arguing with him. The blows come fast and furious. Each of them is reported at once by wireless to the whole world. Crowds have gathered in front of gigantic screens in London and New York, discussing the weight and significance of the fist which has knocked out the tooth. Bets involving millions of dollars and pounds are made. Aboard the s.s. *Turbania* in the Pacific Ocean, the passengers jostle each other by the radio receiver, excited by the news that the Frenchman has been hit twice on the chin. I know that at this moment I am in the centre of the universe. But what is this? The Frenchman rallies his strength and, with full force, strikes the Englishman on the nose. The blood spurts. The hefty fellow falls to the ground. A knockout. *Vive la France*! I run out into the square. What jubilation! All the lights are on. Three aeroplanes are flying over Paris, dropping leaflets printed with the glad news. Trumpets are blaring, women are throwing flowers. A true feast of national pride that has been justly satisfied!

After all the joys I had experienced in the preceding days, the prize-fight completely dazed and intoxicated me. I lost my peace of mind. Again I raved like a madman, ready at any moment to fall on the ground and kiss the ancient, grey, beloved paving stones. Then friends whose names I do not know decided to help me. Whoever they may be, of one thing I'm sure: it was love of mankind, of Russian poetry, of myself that guided their hands, and I shall remember those mysterious benefactors as long as life and memory last. They understood that I was weak in body and spirit, that I needed rest and fresh air, and invited me to change my residence forthwith.

I went to hospitable Belgium where, recovering from the surfeit of impressions, I approached the task entrusted to me

by the Teacher. But before I describe my life during those months, let me recount all I know of the destinies of my other friends, disciples of Julio Jurenito.

Mr Cool is still doing business with Russian representatives. In addition, he is making sure that mankind shall enjoy a long peace. Even the ancients knew that to achieve this it is necessary to prepare for war. Mr Cool, as a leading humanitarian of our age, is doing precisely that with his characteristic energy. His newly-equipped factories and shipyards have doubled their output since the war. All the Teacher's inventions of 1915-1916 have been developed. At the same time Mr Cool does not neglect the purely ethical side of things: he writes tracts on the blessings of peace and works in the League of Nations.

I regard his activities as a token of well-being and the peaceful flourishing of nations. Germany has been completely disarmed, not without his assistance, and, of course, other countries will follow suit. And yet, for reasons which escape me, European powers keep mobilising here and there, and semi-savages in Silesia, Lithuania, Turkey and elsewhere persist in following the old paths, unable to grasp the change which has occurred in world affairs.

Mr Cool writes to me: 'I am happy. The power of religion is growing stronger. The dollar is stable. All the shells made at my factories are stamped with the olive branch of peace. May they one day carry the good news to all countries, islands and continents'.

Monsieur Delet, too, is getting on pretty well. He recovered very quickly from his shattering experiences and, without reviving the Necropolis, became the head of an undertaking called the Veni-Vidi-Vici Agency which organises trips to the scenes of recent fighting. Many Americans, English and French of both sexes, who only a few years ago avoided the front like the plague, have now come to their senses and regard it with the liveliest curiosity. In the North of France there still remains a wide strip of territory totally ravaged by the fighting, with wrecked fortifications, scraps of barbed wire, agglomera-

tions of crosses. Its ruined, pitiful inhabitants live herded together in wretched huts. Monsieur Delet became aware at once of the high patriotic and commercial interest of such excursions. A group of gentlemen and ladies leave Paris in comfortable cars. At Verdun they examine the ruins and cemeteries and have a good lunch. Then they continue on their way. At places where the fighting was particularly fierce, Monsieur Delet has installed cafés where you can drink iced orangeade and send a picture postcard to friends at home. Then there's dinner at Rheims (where souvenirs made of shell splinters are sold) and a comfortable return journey.

'My friend,' he writes to me, 'I have rediscovered the sweetness of life. My propaganda work for heroism and self-sacrifice is not merely profitable but also truly great. My little house still stands, requiring only minor repairs. I have engaged as my housekeeper a very young girl, Mlle Gabrielle from Arcachon. Don't be sorry for me, I'm very brisk and full of *élan*. "How terrible is life!" cried King Oedipus (Mlle Gabrielle took me to the Comédie Française last night, it was her birthday; she's a serious girl but well up in other things too). But my cry is: "How beautiful is life!".'

Fate has been less kind to Ercole. Even in Riga he was arrested, for, coming to a first-class restaurant and having consumed an abundant meal, he did not, of course, pay his bill and—to make matters worse—threatened the management that he would organise such a *Sovieto* there and then that even the tables would take to their heels. On that occasion they let him go. But recently in the *Giornale d'Italia* I read that during a clash between socialists and fascists a certain Ercole Bambucci had been arrested in the via Pascudini in Rome. This individual had fired at both sides and, when questioned, had replied that he sympathised with everyone equally but loved disorder and Bengal lights best of all things in the world.

Of Schmidt, too, I hear only through the newspapers. He was arrested by the German police during the latest unsuccessful *putsch*.

Aysha's got a rather unusual job: Madame Jobe, wife of a contractor grown rich during the war, employs him as tutor to her favourite dog, a Brussels spitz called Victoire. Aysha has to instil in Victoire a love of order, take her out for walks, clean her teeth with a toothbrush and give her mud baths, for Victoire suffers from sciatica.

Madame Jobe recently came to Ostende and Aysha and I were able to meet. He devotes himself to his work with the same zeal as, a year ago, he put into the Propaganda Sub-Department. With pride and admiration he showed me the special dog's goloshes he puts on Victoire's feet in wet weather. I fully shared his feelings. Can anyone, confronted with those goloshes, deny the existence of world progress? Sceptics will say that the children of many unemployed lack a good pair of shoes. A coarse and stupid judgment worthy of no attention. What matters is not quantity but quality. Barefooted children there always were and always will be, but had the ignorant Middle Ages such things to show as dogs' goloshes and dogs' tutors? We are moving forward!

Poor Alexey Spiridonovich has fared worse than that. With open heart he approached the Russian émigrés, but his reception was far from friendly. Of course it was his own fault in many ways. For example, he started recounting the boring story of his life to a certain worthy academician, who, however, cut him short at once with the question: 'Those are all petty details, tell me rather how the Commissars make soup out of infants' fingers?'. Alexey Spiridonovich replied that, though the Bolsheviks were certainly barbarians, he was hearing about the soup for the first time and could offer no information whatsoever. The academician lost his temper: 'Would you mind stating your religion?'.

'Russian orthodox.'

'And to what social class do you belong?'.

'The nobility.' This seemed so utterly improbable that it evoked a long, scornful grimace worthy of the best of the Academies.

A few days later an émigré newspaper published the news that the Bolshevik Tishin had been a Cheka Commissar in Samarkand and had tortured the local shopkeepers with sugar-tongs. Alexey Spiridonovich, indignant, wrote a letter to the editor at once, but—no doubt from excitement—used the reformed alphabet. On reading this the editor became quite convinced of his own fabrication.

Alexey Spiridonovich was obliged to go into hiding. Nevertheless he longed for intercourse with honest Russian émigrés of the group called *The Hour is At Hand*. Learning from experience, he made no protest against finger-soup but even outlined methods of preparing it. But the émigrés, who consisted of democratic members of the Black Hundreds and monarchistic socialists, were very busy and had little time to spare for intimate friendship.

In the mornings they would stand through long memorial services for crowned persons. Then they would go to see various nice Rumanians and Poles and try to convince them of the immediate necessity to wipe out all the Bolsheviks, among whom there wasn't a single Russian. In the evenings they would read in the paper that the Japanese had killed a Russian, whisper in each other's ears 'probably a Bolshevik' and hug themselves with delight. At night they would industriously consume *caviare russe* and drink champagne to the coming 'Renascence', to the great General and to that modest but honourable worker, the policeman.

Alexey Spiridonovich found life in this company fairly hard going: he was fond of memorial services, it is true, but he was terrified of the Japanese and hadn't enough money for caviare. In fact he hadn't enough money even for bread. He searched for a job in vain and, starving, looked back longingly even at *psha*. Finally, he struck up an acquaintance with a private detective in the street and found a post which, though it carried material security, caused him dreadful moral torment.

He is living in the flat of a certain Madame Diercks, sleeping in a dark, secret closet, and no one but the lady herself knows

of his existence. This strange way of life is by no means due to the vices of Madame Diercks, but, on the contrary, to her excessive desire for family happiness. Her husband is a very frivolous character and Alexey Spiridonovich has to follow him everywhere and report all he sees to Madame Diercks.

Let me quote an extract from my friend's letter which will sum up his mental condition: '. . . my brother, where are you? I perish! I will not speak of the simple fear that my master, or rather, my mistress's husband, will find me out at last, will insult me (deservedly!), will beat me. But why, why did I flee from the murderers of the human spirit? Was it in order to watch whether this red-haired stockbroker isn't being unfaithful to his better half? Where's life? Where are the holy ideals? They're spat upon, trodden underfoot, destroyed! O how right was Jurenito when he proved to me that nothing exists, not even—oh, horrible!—man. He has gone away into non-being, into Lethe, into Nirvana, and I am left behind. Tell me, what must I do? Why should I live?'

Receiving this letter I, too, began to hesitate and wonder. My initial transports of joy had meanwhile cooled down. I began asking myself whether I was not, after all, betraying the Teacher. My friends' letters, the dark memories of recent years and, finally, the immoderate development of culture troubled and oppressed me. I even went so far as to find in a shop a pair of boots resembling those which had relieved the Teacher of his life, and wrote several poems for a posthumous edition. But I pulled myself together quickly, knowing that a great task lay before me: that of telling the story of the Teacher's life.

Now the book is finished. My heart is empty and at rest. I have lived again through the past, year by year, and have restored the Teacher's image, which had already begun to pale. I am no longer afraid that I might betray the unforgettable Traitor. No longer do I run like a coward from insurmountable contradictions, for they were of the essence of the Teacher's life. Russia, France, war, revolution, satiety, rebellion, famine—

and repose pass in review before my eyes. I do not argue; neither do I worship. I know that there are many chains, of different metals and of various shapes, but all are chains, and to none of them will I extend my feeble hand.

A fair abundance of grey hairs, frequent palpitations of the heart and general debility are my consolation. I have broken the back of life, and the hour may not be too distant when I shall no longer have to wake, wash, dine, write, nor even to remember. My duty is done: the book is written. I know that it will repel all those who hitherto, out of excessive love of literature or a sense of commiseration, still tried in vain to understand or justify me. What consul now will stamp my passport with a visa? What mother will allow me to cross the threshold of her home, where honest youths and pure girls are growing up? Loneliness and rejection await me. In this tale of true events, this confession of sincere emotions, the doubting Thomases who know no mercy will see a vile lampoon, and my very name will come under contempt. Let it be so! I have led a bad life, and a happy sunset would be no more than an absurd and offensive dissonance.

The life around me today is quiet and smooth, as if it had been thus for a thousand years. In the mornings someone downstairs plays the piano. Then they ring the gong for lunch. I go, I eat my soup, my meat and potatoes, my stewed fruit. The ladies living at the *pension* point at me: 'an odd person'. I say nothing, I smoke my pipe, I walk a little, I read a little, something like Rony's tales of adultery or Einstein's Theory of Relativity in a popular edition. Then I wind my watch, put my pipe down on the bedside table and go to bed.

Such is my life; not a good life. But I am not ashamed nor hopeless. Of course I'll die without ever beholding those wild fields with the dancing, the raucous cries, the child-like, mindless laughter of men set free at last. And yet, today, I am casting forth the seed of the fleabane, the wild mint, the ragwort of that far distant future. The inevitable will come, I believe it, and to all those who await it, to all my brothers

without a god, without a programme, without an idea, naked and despised, loving only the wind and outrage, I send my last kiss. Hurrah! Hip-hip-hip hooray! *Vive*! *Zivio*! *Hoch*! *Evviva*! *Banzai*!

Crash! Bang!