

Alexei Tolstoy
PETER THE GREAT

Volume 1

Alexei Tolstoy (1883-1945), "a man with a big, cheerful and valuable talent", as Maxim Gorky called him, was one of the founders of Soviet literature. In the USSR and abroad, his vast historical canvases are well-known—the novel *Peter the Great,* the epic *Ordeal,* the science-fiction novels *Aelita* and *Engineer Garin's Death-Rays,* and stories such as "Ibicus", "The Blue Cities", "The Viper", the children's books, the dramas, and the brilliant publicistic works written during the Great Patriotic War. Alexei Tolstoy founded the new Soviet historical novel. Much prominence is given in his work to life in Russia at the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th century, and to Peter the Great, whose ideas and powerful will were directed towards the transformation of Russia.

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Alexei Tolstoy

PETER THE GREAT

Volume 1

Translated from the Russian by *Alex Miller*
Designed by *G. A. Klodt*



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Moscow

Алексей Толстой

ПЕТР ПЕРВЫЙ

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Foreword

1

Alexei Nikolayevich Tolstoy, Soviet writer and author of *Peter the Great*, was born in 1883 in the small Volga town of Nikolayevsk (now Pugachevsk) in the Russian steppe. His father, count N.A.Tolstoy, was a landowner. His mother, Alexandra Leontievna, was a grand-niece of Nikolai Ivanovich Turgenev, a famous early 19th-century Russian statesman and a leader of the Decembrists*.

The future writer's childhood was spent on the farm of Sosnovka, which belonged to his stepfather, Alexei Apollonovich Bostrom. This was in the outlying parts of Russia that had since times of old been a refuge for various runaways and schismatics who found salvation for their faith in escape from the over-vigilant eye of the tsar's police. The boy's imagination was stirred by memories of the past as preserved in their folklore. Out in the wilds there, he heard the folk legends and songs that told about the heroic deeds of the remote past. He saw the vast spaces of Central Russia. "Garden. Ponds, surrounded by willows and overgrown with reeds. The Chagra, a little steppe river. Village boys for comrades. Riding horses. Steppes covered with feather grass, where only the ancient burial mounds broke the dreary line of the horizon... The changing seasons, like enormous and always new events..."

In those years, the Russia of the landowners was on the way out, though many features of the remote past still survived in the trans-Volga provinces. The colourful, eccentric provincial landowners, the tragic landscapes of a countryside ruined by bad harvests and famine, the first contacts with a background that was truly of the people and with village life—all made a profound impression on the future writer and gave him ample food for reflection.

"I think," he was to write later, "that if I had been born in the city and not in the country, there are a thousand things that I wouldn't have known in my childhood: that winter blizzard in the steppes, in abandoned villages; Christmas festivities, peasant cottages, fortune-telling, fairytales, wooden tapers, barns which have a special smell of their own. I would probably not have been able to describe old Moscow as I did. Pictures of old Moscow evoked deep-lying childhood memories in me. And from this came a feeling for the age, for its physical realities (...) National art is in the smells of one's homeland, in one's native language in which words have, as it were,

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* The Decembrists—revolutionary Russian gentry who organised the anti-monarchist uprising of 14 December 1825.

a dual artistic meaning—today's, and the one imbibed from childhood years, emotional, expressed in words which are evocative of home in taste, appearance and smell..."

In his early years, Tolstoy felt a need to put his impressions and moods in artistic form. When he was thirteen, the future writer was taken away from his environment; his stepfather was obliged to sell the property, and the family moved to the Volga town of Samara. Alexei Tolstoy began publishing after graduating from technical school and entering the Technological Institute. For a brief spell, he was attracted by the then fashionable symbolism, but soon turned to what he knew well and had loved since childhood days, the life of the people in the provinces. Attempting to record the people's views as reflected in the living word, he wrote *Magpie Stories,* based on folklore he had collected.

Tolstoy's interest in the creativeness of the people widened his range as an artist; this subsequently also made itself felt in his writings about the times of Peter I, which involved millions of ordinary people in Russia.

For the time being, however, Tolstoy was interested in something else: he found his own personal theme in the present times. In his prose, he portrays a world of uncouth eccentrics and paints colourful scenes from provincial life. In his short stories of that time, he was able to appreciate and convey the unique flavour of the old-fashioned Russia, while at the same time deepening his understanding of history. In his short stories, novellas and early novels (*The Eccentrics,* 1911, and *The Lame Young Master,* 1912), Tolstoy did not only draw subtle psychological sketches of the characters and not only reflected the complex interweaving of their destinies, but, in one way or another, he reflected on the movement of history, stating his attitude, sometimes bewildered or amazed, but always enquiring and excited.

In his insatiable desire to understand the meaning of what was taking place, to grasp the true principles which move the colourful turmoil of Russian life, Tolstoy became a newspaper correspondent during the First World War... "I saw ruined cities and villages, fields gashed by trenches and covered with little crosses, peasants silently rooting about among the embers of fires, ... women holding out their hands at the crossroads," he recalled. His war reports described without embellishment daily life at the front and conveyed his unconcealed alarm for the future of his homeland.

This feeling compelled him to reflect agonisingly about its past, and Tolstoy's thoughts turned to the subject which has invariably concerned everyone of the great Russian writers, the life of the people and its history filled with great tragedies, terrible ordeals and great victories.

2

In 1917, during the revolutionary events which were coming to a head in Russia, Alexei Tolstoy tackled a major historical subject for the first time. He was trying to enter into the country's past, in which lay the roots of the epoch-making events of the present. And so there appeared the first historical writings which served as a remote and not yet fully harmonious prelude to his novel, *Peter the Great.* The Petrine era attracted Tolstoy, on his own admission, because of the "fullness of the unkempt and creative power of that life when the Russian character was evolving with particular vividness".

The projected novel about Peter was, in the meantime, preceded by the short stories *Obsession* and *Peter's Day*. Later, Tolstoy returned to the Petrine era; his first play, *Under Torture,* appeared in 1929.

For all the remarkably profuse and authentic historical detail, these works were only preliminary approaches to the subject, being far from always successful and, moreover highly subjective.

In Tolstoy's earlier writings, Peter is tragically alone, a stranger in his own country and surrounded by enemies. An almost apocalyptic sense of doom seems to haunt the hero and his innovations. All this, however, is sharply at variance with Peter's character, the very spirit of the era and the living movement of Russian history. Did not Peter have remarkable associates who were courageously and unselfishly devoted to him and his cause? Did not the whole of Russia feel the impact of his fruitful reforms? And did not Peter personally direct its movement towards enlightenment and political consolidation in Europe? Hardly any of this is noticeable in Tolstoy's first attempts to write about Peter.

Tolstoy himself, however, felt dissatisfied; he did not give up his search, and Peter troubled his creative imagination. "I had long been setting my sights on Peter," wrote Tolstoy. "I'd seen all the stains on his waistcoat, but Peter still loomed up for me as an enigma in the mists of the past." He continued studying documentary material on the Petrine era, letters dating back to the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th, diplomatic documents, military orders, notes and eyewitness accounts of contemporaries, and the works of Russian historians Solovyov, Zabelin, and Klyuchevsky. All this gradually brought the writer nearer to the historical era that had appealed to him for such a long time.

* * *

The 1930s saw a period of gigantic changes in Soviet Russia. Industrial construction projects were underway everywhere and the centuries-old face of the Russian countryside was changing. This mighty historical shift, when "the old world was cracking and tumbling down", enabled Alexei Tolstoy to acquire the historical sense which helped him to recreate "a living picture of the Petrine era from scraps of documents that have come down to us". It was during this difficult complex period that, as Tolstoy himself tells us, the plan for the novel finally took shape: to paint a vast panorama of Russian life, telling the story of our forefathers' heritage that endured through the centuries to become our own.

It is no coincidence that almost at the same time when working on his novel *Peter the Great,* he was also busy on his trilogy *Ordeal (The Sisters, 1918* and *Bleak Morning),* which reflected yet another major breakthrough in the life of his homeland—the history of the revolutionary upheavals of the 20th century and the rise of the new, Soviet Russia.

"The era of Peter I," noted Tolstoy, "is one of the greatest pages in the history of the Russian people. In essence, the whole Petrine era is permeated with the heroic struggle of the Russian people for their national identity and their independence. The ignorant, uncultured Russia of the boyars with its backward, serf-manned industries and its patriarchal beards would soon have been swallowed up by foreign invaders. It was necessary to accomplish a decisive breakthrough in the whole life of the country; it was neces-

sary to raise Russia to the level of the cultured lands of Europe. And Peter did just that. The Russian people safeguarded their independence."

In this way, to quote Tolstoy, he found the "pivot of the novel", a work about an era, remote, and yet most important for an understanding of Russia's subsequent destiny and the new, unprecedented changes in her history.

3

"Peter the Great," wrote Tolstoy in 1933, "and I particularly stress this, is not an analogy; it is not a novel about our times in 17th-century images." At the same time, he rightly considered that only by turning to the "critical" periods of Russian history and by understanding it in movement and development, was it possible to find the "answer to the riddle of the Russian state". This explains Tolstoy's tireless preoccupation with the complex, dramatic, cruel and yet sublime period in the history of the Russian state that was associated with Peter I, whose reforms abruptly pushed Russia's somewhat isolated development in a new direction and, by powerful pressure, inexorably and by every means possible brought it into line with European history.

The novel highlights the turbulent period when the unavoidable question arose: was Russia to be or not to be? The terrible scenes so frequent in Peter's reign unfold in the novel as part of the broad movement of diverse events, in the living web of social forces and political clashes.

Peter the Great is a vast panorama on which the destinies of the characters are closely interwoven with the life of the country. In Tolstoy's narrative, the most diverse social strata in the Russia of that time—peasants, manufactory workers, landowners, merchants, soldiers, clergymen, boyars, the new gentry—are reflected by a great variety of vivid characters.

The image of Russia, local colour, Russian characters—the flavour has been preserved all through, beginning with the descriptions of nature and everyday life and ending with the vivid, rich vernacular which does not easily lend itself to translation into a foreign language.

Tolstoy also incorporated in the composition of the novel his striving to "unravel the riddle of the Russian people". He maintained that composition is above all the "establishment of the artist's centre of vision". Tolstoy's "centre of vision" is unusual. Nearly all the historic events and coming changes reflected in the narrative are, as it were, preceded (or accompanied) by popular rumours, hearsay and conversations among the people. They usually reflect the sharp contradictions of the time. In this way, the popular point of view on events, the "voice of the people", is invariably present in the novel.

This variegated talk of the people—in which are interwoven the harsh truth and abysmal ignorance, wise insight and stagnation, and yet, at the same time, a passionate sense of justice—serves in the novel as an introduction to the description of many events and, in particular, of Peter's innovations.

4

Historic events at state level are the main plot nodes of *Peter the Great.* First, the "play" battles of the youthful Peter, the long, agonising struggle

for power, then the Crimean campaigns, crowned with the seizure of Azov and with the fortifications of the southern maritime outposts, and then the peace treaty with Turkey. Afterwards, the Northern War with Sweden for the vitally necessary outlets to the sea, beginning with the defeat of the Russian troops at the first siege of Narva and continuing for several years. The seizure of the northern cities on the Baltic sea-coast. Behind the military operations lay the tremendous impetus of a whole state mustering its forces for these historic events.

One characteristic of Tolstoy as a novelist was his ability to convey the necessity for many events, or what is known as historical inevitability.

The prevision of events in the novel is engendered by the poetically interpreted circumstances, by the mass of details, by the chaos of small and, at first glance, insignificant actions creating the flux of time.

Peter's troops are still fighting with the Swedes for Narva on the banks of the river, but the tsar already foresees not only the immediate failure in the struggle with Charles XII's army, but the successes which may be gained by dint of fresh efforts. And these efforts bring results. "Narva," wrote Engels, "was the first grand disaster of a rising nation, whose determined spirit learnt how to conquer by defeat itself."

Alexei Tolstoy uses the structure of the novel, the selection of the historical events, the nature of the increasing conflicts and the inner logic of the way in which the artistic images develop as a means of representing the true course of Russian history in the struggle of the new with the old.

The expectation of changes lies behind the troubles and hard times that precede the beginning of Peter's active measures. The internal struggle between the low-born Naryshkins and the high-born Miloslavskys is only on the fringe of historical reality, because both parties and their supporters are caught up in their own interests and are looking back to the past. Neither the boyars, hostile to everything new, like the retrograde Buinosov, nor the ambitious tsarevna Sophia, nor the weak-willed dreamer Vassily Golitsyn, are in any way capable of influencing the course of events. Their conflicts, their struggle for power and their interests are of no historical consequence. The Miloslavskys are celebrating victory, but nothing changes in Russia. "Nothing happened. Over Moscow, over the other cities, over hundreds of districts scattered all over that vast country, the centuries-old darkness of poverty, serfdom and deprivation continued to hold sway." It is the same after the victory of the Naryshkin party; "there were no particular changes..." Tolstoy convincingly demonstrates that the historical movement of Russia begins with the activities of Peter.

5

Tolstoy maintained that one of the leading artistic tasks of literature was the endeavour to create, in passion and in great tension, the type of the great man.

In *Peter the Great,* there arise before the reader not only the life and manners of people of the most diverse social positions, not only picturesque scenes from history. None of these scenes would be so tangibly convincing if they were not accompanied by portraits of Peter and his intimates. The image of Peter binds the events of the era into a single whole. In his

searchings, as the writer himself put it, to "unravel the riddle of the Russian people and the Russian state", this proved very fruitful: a giant like Peter could only emerge from a great people: he epitomised the remarkable characteristics of his nation.

Peter's image, as depicted by A.Tolstoy, is full of contradictions. The reader sometimes finds himself asking in bewilderment: Who is he? A barbarian with a thirst for knowledge? A shrewd politician? A rake and a practical joker who wants to violate and destroy the peace of the sleepy realm with his wild escapades? A self-sacrificing and solicitous military commander? A cruel despot? An indefatigable worker?

An unusual figure rose up before the writer's creative imagination as he accumulated a variegated mass of historically authentic information. Tolstoy tried to understand and convey the complex way in which Peter combined greatness with folly, kindness with cruelty, a thirst for culture with ignorance, and Asiatic despotism with simplicity of heart.

"What was Peter like?" we read in one of the rough notes to the novel. "Above all, a strong-willed man. Hot-tempered, almost to madness. Kind, cheerful, amusing in his personal relationships. Inflexible and ruthless where matters of state were concerned..."

Tolstoy had no intention of idealising his hero; he felt no urge, in his own words, to "resuscitate the trivial, text-book image of a carpenter with a crown on his head". At the same time, Tolstoy did not want to "diminish the personality of a man who rose above his time".

Tolstoy traced with particular closeness the historical side of Peter's life and deeds. The reader comes to realise more and more clearly how, in his struggles, Peter prevails over the disturbing childhood memories of the streltsy mutiny and the ominous evidence of palace conspiracies. In more and more detail Tolstoy traces the growing momentum of Peter's main aspiration—to break the old ways and compel court circles, stagnating in ancient customs and habits, to come to terms with the interests of the state. He applies the knout and the club, punishing embezzlers of state funds, and all other kinds of thieves, and not even sparing his favourite, Menshikov.

Peter is truly a man of action, whether enthusiastically learning all the necessary sciences and trades, or cultivating the acquaintance of European dignitaries, or sending sons of the gentry abroad to study and examining them himself, or evaluating everything not by words, but by the end result. Despair never affects him during his first defeat at Azov, when, showing colossal determination, he is able in a short time to build near Voronezh a whole war fleet and send it across the Don. Nor does he yield to despair at Narva when he leaves before the battle, foreseeing the inevitable defeat of his army, but leaving decisively and immediately so as to prepare for new battles.

In Tolstoy's novel, Peter is not only a statesman who disrupts the dreamy existence of "obdurate" Russia, to whom even the Russians are sometimes hateful; he emerges as a Russian himself, sincerely inspired by the natural genius of his homeland and defending the dignity of his own people with great passion.

Needless to say, Peter is an autocrat. Pushing Russia forward to become a world power and strengthening the position of the gentry, he ruthlessly

squeezes out of the peasantry everything he possibly can, not stopping at the cruellest exploitation. Marx was profoundly right when he commented: "Peter the Great conquered Russian barbarism with barbarism."

Countless scenes in the novel illustrate the poverty of a people overburdened with taxes and work duties.

With sincerity and persistence, Peter supports (as the novel shows us) all talented Russians: the wonderful blacksmith and inventor, Kuzma Zhemov; the painter, Andrei Golikov; the shipwright, Feodosy Sklyaev, and many others.

Peter promotes people "from the plough", and relies on those who have not gone to seed in the ancient traditions of the past. Among his intimates is Yaguzhinsky, a simple man of the people who becomes a count; Shafirov, once a small shopkeeper; the shrewd and talented Alexander Menshikov who rises from the very dregs to become the tsar's right-hand man, and many others. He attracts new people who "by talent alone had broken out of the chimneyless hut" and had begun "to think and talk about matters of state".

Peter is a man of his people. "...In Peter, throughout Alexei Tolstoy's novel, the typical Russian shows through all the time under the wig and the German dress in which he was clad," wrote Dmitry Blagoy, distinguished Soviet literary critic.

And it is as a Russian—we feel this from Tolstoy's novel—that Peter in his own way devotedly loves his homeland. That is why his remarkable personality is so attractive; that is why many leading Russian writers have drawn inspiration from him.

6

In his *Peter the Great,* Tolstoy proved himself a penetrating historian and a remarkable creative writer.

This was facilitated not only, in his own words, by "entering into history through the present", not only by a profound grasp of the connection between great events and the formation of character, but also by the artistic design and by the writer's description powers.

The spectacular progress of the Petrine era demanded correspondingly dynamic portraiture on the part of the writer. The scenes in the novel follow one after another at a fast pace, all are rich in historical detail. Above all, each detail, whether a trait of character or a sign of the times, is charged with inner movement. "I always seek movement," admitted Tolstoy, "so that my characters might talk about themselves in the language of gestures." As he explained in another context: "...after the surmised gesture comes the only sentence with the right placing of the words, with the right choice of words and with the right rhythm corresponding to the gesture of your character, that is, to his state of mind at a given moment." This "visual" language helps to preserve, even in translation, the mood that can be irrevocably lost during translation into another language.

Dynamic picturesqueness and an amazing number of large-scale historical events are the novel's essential artistic features and determine the nature of the whole narrative...

Alexei Tolstoy did not cover the whole of the Petrine era. Events break off in the novel during the seizure of Narva. The writer's original intention

was to carry the action of the novel up to Peter's death in 1725. Later, however, in one of his letters, he wrote "I only want to take the novel as far as Poltava (the decisive battle with the Swedes in 1709.—*Ed.*) or perhaps up to the Prut campaign. I don't know yet. I don't want people to age in it—what can I do with them when they are old?" Be that as it may, the era as a whole, in its movement, the images of the most important men of action in it had already been formed in the main by Tolstoy. Consequently, *Peter the Great* acquired artistic completeness and may be undoubtedly considered one of the most vivid historical novels ever written.

V. Yu. Troitsky, Cand. Philology.

BOOK ONE

Chapter One

1

Sanka jumped down from the stove and bumped the jammed door open with her bottom. She was quickly followed by the little boys Yashka, Gavrilka and Artamoshka. They all suddenly felt thirsty and skipped out into the dark passage in the wake of the cloud of steam and smoke that billowed out of the stale-smelling hut. A faint blue radiance filtered through the frosted window. It was freezing in the passage. The water tub was iced up; so was the wooden dipper.

The children hopped from one bare foot to another. Sanka had a kerchief on her head, Gavrilka and Artamoshka were in shirts that only just covered their belly-buttons.

"Door, you little heathens!" yelled their mother from inside the hut.

She was standing at the stove. The wooden tapers had flared up in their holder. Her wrinkled face was instantly illumined by the light. Most frightening of all were her eyes; stark with much weeping, they glittered under the torn headscarf as on an icon. Sanka took fright for some reason and slammed the door as hard as she could. Then she scooped up the fresh water, sipped it, bit off a piece of ice and offered the dipper to her little brothers.

"Are you frozen?" she whispered. "Let's run into the yard and have a look if you aren't. Dad's harnessing up..."

Their father was harnessing the horse into the sleigh. It was snowing lightly, there were jackdaws perched on the high fence, and it wasn't as cold out here as in the passage. Dad—Ivan Artemich to their mother, but to everybody else, including himself, Ivashka, surname Brovkin—was wearing a tall bonnet pulled down low over his angry brows. His ginger beard had not been combed since the Feast of the Intercession... His mittens stuck out from the bosom of a coarse caftan, belted low with twine, his bast shoes creaked irritably over the dung-soiled snow. He was having trouble with the harness. It was coming to pieces; nothing but

knots... He shouted angrily at the wretched horse, a black mare, short-legged like her master and with a swollen belly.

"Stand still, you devil!"

The children relieved themselves at the porch and lingered on the ice-covered threshold, although the cold went right through them. Artamoshka, the smallest, just about managed to say:

"'S alright, we can get warm again on the stove..."

Ivan Artemich finished harnessing up and gave the mare a tub of water. She drank deeply, her shaggy flanks heaving, as if to say: "If I can't be fed properly, water will have to do."

Dad put on his mittens and took the knout from under the straw in the sleigh.

"Inside, quick, or else!.." he shouted at the children. He fell on his side in the sleigh and, picking up speed once he was through the gates, set off at a trot past the lofty, snow-dusted firs for an estate owned by the son of a nobleman named Volkov.

"Oooh, it's ever so cold," said Sanka.

The children rushed into the dark hut and climbed up onto the stove, their teeth chattering. The warm, dry smoke billowed under the black ceiling and escaped through the vent over the door; the hut was chimneyless. Their mother was kneading dough. The household was quite prosperous: a horse, a cow and four hens. They used to say of Ivan Brovkin that he was tough. Glowing cinders fell hissing from the tapers into the water. Sanka pulled a sheepskin over herself and her brothers and went on telling ghost stories in a whisper about the unmentionable ones who make rustling noises in the cellar during the night...

"Not long ago, cross my heart and hope to die, I had the fright of my life. There was rubbish on the threshold, and there was a besom on top of the rubbish... I looked down from the stove—Heaven preserve us! A furry face with cat's whiskers poking out from under the besom...

"Oi, oi, oi!" cried the little ones, terrified under the sheepskin.

2

The fresh sleigh track ran through the forest. The ancient pines blotted out the sky. What with the trees blown down

by gales and the dense thickets, it was hard going. The year before last, Vassily Volkov had been allotted this land separately from his father, a Moscow nobleman in military service. The Land Commission had granted Vassily four hundred and fifty dessiatines with thirty-seven peasants and their families.

Vassily built a manor house, but overspent himself and had to mortgage half the land with a monastery. The monks lent money at the exorbitant rate of twenty kopecks to the ruble. And this when, under the terms of the grant, Vassily had to be at his sovereign's service on a good horse, in armour with a sabre and a harquebus, bringing three soldiers with him, also on horseback and equipped with caftans, sabres and bow-cases... He had barely managed to pay for these accoutrements with the monastery's loan. And his own living expenses? And food for the servants? And the interest for the monks?

The tsar's treasury was merciless. Every year brought new regulations and more demands for cash—for feed, for the road, for tribute and for quit-rent. There wasn't much left over. And they still kept blaming the landowner: why didn't he screw more quit-rent out of his serfs? But you couldn't skin the muzhik more than once. The state had been bled white by wars, troubles and mutinies under the late tsar Alexei Mikhailovich. As soon as that traitor and outlaw, Stenka Razin, had gone on the rampage through the land, the peasants had forsaken the Lord. Squeeze them any harder and they bared their fangs like wolves. They were fleeing to the Don to escape oppression, and they couldn't be brought back, neither with a warrant nor by force of arms.

All covered in rime, the mare was pressing on at a steady trot. Branches kept catching the shaft-bow and releasing a shower of snow-dust. Huddled against the tree-trunks, bushy-tailed squirrels watched the traveller as he passed; the forest was swarming with the creatures. As he lay there in the sleigh, Ivan was thinking. That was all a man had left to do these days—think...

"All right... Hand over this, hand over that... Pay this one something, pay that one some more... But it's too much. What a country! You can never give it enough to eat. We don't shun work, we stick it out. And another thing, the boyars in Moscow have started riding around in gold carri-

ages. So cough up so that his nibs can have a carriage, the slob! All right, then... Force us, take what you need, but don't overdo it... And flaying two hides off a man, lads, that's overdoing it. There's so many government people nowadays—spit, and there's a clerk, or an under-clerk, or a tax-collector sitting there and writing... But the muzhik is all on his own... No, lads, I'd do better to run away; let the wild beasts get me in the forest; at least it's a quicker death than this trickery... You won't live off us like that for long..."

Maybe Ivan Brovkin was thinking along these lines or maybe he wasn't. Gypsy (as he was nicknamed) came driving out of the forest onto the road, kneeling in his sleigh. This was another of Volkov's peasants, a man whose black hair was already streaked with grey. He'd been on the run for fifteen years or so, drifting from household to household. But a Ukase had come out: all runaways were to be returned to the landowners irrespective of the length of absence. Gypsy was seized near Voronezh, where he was working as a peasant on the land, and was returned to Volkov senior. He made another bid to escape but was caught. Orders were given for him to be flogged mercilessly with the knout and kept in prison—on Volkov's own estate—and as soon as his skin healed, he was to be taken out and flogged without mercy again, and then thrown back into prison; that would teach him to run away. Gypsy was only saved by being transferred to Vassily's new estate.

"Greetings," said Gypsy to Ivan, joining the other in his sleigh.

"Greetings."

"Any news?"

"Nothing good."

Gypsy took off a mitten and ruffled his whiskers and beard, hiding his cunning.

"I met a man in the forest: he says the tsar's dying."

Ivan half stood up in the sleigh. He shuddered... "Whoa!" He snatched off his bonnet and crossed himself.

"Who's going to be made tsar now?"

"'None other', he says, 'but the little boy, Pyotr Alexeyevich.' And him scarce weaned..."

"Well, my lad..." Ivan pulled his bonnet down over his ears, and his eyes glazed. "Well, my lad, we're in for it from the boyars now. We'll all be done for..."

"We might, and we might not." Gypsy pushed his face close up to Ivan's and winked. "The man was saying there shall be unrest... So let's wait and see—we'll get by. After all, we've been through a few things in our time." Gypsy bared his wolfish teeth, laughed, and then coughed loud enough for the whole forest to hear.

A squirrel sailed across the road from one tree to another; the snow showered down, a column of needles quivered in the slanting light. A big maroon sun at the end of the road hung over a hill, over high stockades, over the steep roofs and smoke of Volkov's estate...

3

Ivan and Gypsy left their horses near the high gates. Above them, under a pointed roof, was a holy cross. Beyond, an unscalable stockade ran round the whole estate. You could even be safe from the Tatars in there... The men doffed their hats. Ivan took hold of the ring on the gate and said, as was right and proper:

"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us..."

His bast shoes creaking, Averyan, the watchman, emerged from the lodge and peered through the slit: yes, they were friends. "Amen," he said, and began opening the gates.

The men led their horses into the yard. They stood there hatless, glancing at the mica window-panes of the boyar's house. A porch with a steep staircase led to the rooms inside. It was a fine-looking porch of carved wood, with an onion-shaped roof. Above the porch was the main roof, tent-shaped, with two half-barrels and a gilded ridge. The lower part of the house was a cellar built of massive wooden beams. It had been intended by Vassily Volkov as a store-house for winter and summer provisions—grain, salt pork, pickles and various marinades. But, as the men knew, he had nothing in his storerooms but mice. As for the porch, it was fit for a prince: a sumptuous porch...

"Averyan, why did the boyar send for us with our horses—is it a penalty, or something?" asked Ivan. "We've not done anything wrong, after all..."

"You're to drive some soldiers to Moscow..."

"Does that mean ruining the horses again?!"

"What's the news?" asked Gypsy, coming nearer. "War with somebody? Trouble?"

"None of your business, none of mine." The white-haired Averyan bowed. "You'll do as you're told. They've brought a cartload of canes for your lot."

Stiff at the knees, Averyan went back to the lodge. A window gleamed here and there in the winter twilight. There was more than enough buildings in the yard: cattle sheds, cellars, huts, a smithy. But they were all only half used. Volkov had fifteen household serfs altogether, and they were having a thin time of it too. They worked, of course; they ploughed after a fashion, sowed, carted timber; but could anyone make a living on that? It was slave labour. It was said that Vassily sent one of them to Moscow to act the divine fool on the church porch—he brought money back. And two went round Moscow with pedlar's boxes selling spoons, bast shoes and whistles... But the mainstay was still the peasants. They were the ones who provided the food...

Ivan and Gypsy were thinking hard as they stood in the half-light of the yard. There was nowhere to run to. They needn't expect anything good from anywhere. The old men kept telling how much easier it had been before: if you didn't like it, you could go to another landowner. Now that was forbidden: you lived where you were told to. If you were ordered to keep Vassily Volkov in food, you did so whether you liked it or not. They had all become serfs. And before long, times were going to be even harder...

A door squealed somewhere and a housemaid came running across the snow. She was bareheaded, the slut.

"The boyar's ordered you to unharness the horses. He says you're to stay the night. But God help you if you feed the horses with the boyar's hay..."

Gypsy was going to give the girl's smooth behind a flick of the knout, but she ran off... They unharnessed at leisure and went into the servants' hut to spend the night. There were about eight men in there: they had stolen one of the boyar's tallow candles and were slapping greasy cards down on the table, playing for kopecks... There was much shouting and squabbling; one managed to hide some money in his cheek, another forced his lips open. Idlers, but doing well for themselves!

A little boy was sitting apart in a long sack-cloth shirt and tattered bast shoes. This was Alyosha, Ivan Artemich's son. In the autumn, because of the famine, he had had to

give him to the boyar in permanent bondage, since he was short on rent payments. The boy had big eyes like his mother. It was clear from the state of his forelock that he had been seized by it more than once in this place. Ivan glanced covertly at his son, felt sorry for him but said nothing. A silent Alyosha gave his father a low bow.

He beckoned the boy over and asked him in a whisper:

"Have you all had supper?"

"Yes."

"Hell, I forgot to bring some bread with me. (This was untrue: he had a chunk of bread wrapped up in a cloth in his bosom.) You just try and get a bit somehow... I'll tell you what, Alyosha... In the morning, I'm going to go down on my knees in front of the boyar—I've got a lot to do. He might let you go to Moscow instead of me." Alyosha nodded gravely: "Fine, Dad." Ivan began taking off his boots, speaking quickly and animatedly, as if he were feeling cheerful after a good meal:

"Do you enjoy yourselves like this every day, lads? My word, you're really in clover, aren't you?.."

One of them, a tall servant, threw down his cards and looked round:

"And who might you be, telling us off?.."

Ivan didn't wait to be given a thump on the ear; he climbed onto the bunk.

4

Vassily Volkov had a guest staying for the night, a neighbour, Mikhail Tyrtov, a young nobleman with a small estate. They'd supped early. Pillows and bearskin coats were spread on the white benches close to the tiled stove. But, being young, they were not sleepy. It was hot. They were sitting on the bench in their underclothes, chatting in the half-light, yawning, making the sign of the cross in front of their mouths.

"You," the guest was saying solemnly and slowly, "you, Vassily, are envied by a lot of people... But just you put yourself in my shoes. My father has fourteen of us. Seven have been allotted land separately from him: they're having a hard time in the wilds; one has two muzhiks, another has three, the rest of the muzhiks are on the run. I'm the eighth son, I'll be given land tomorrow. They'll grant me a half-

burnt village and a bogful of frogs... What am I going to live on? Eh?"

"It's hard for everybody nowadays." Vassily thumbed the cypress-wood beads dangling between his knees. "We're all having a rough time... What are we going to live on?.."

"My grandfather was higher than Golitsyn," said Tyrtov. "He spent days and nights at Mikhail Fyodorovich's coffin. But we go about at home in bast shoes... We've already got used to shame. We can't care about honour when it's a matter of survival... My father, at the Land Commission, banged his forehead on the floor till he was black and blue... It's no use asking for anything now without a fat bribe. Something for the clerk, something for the underclerk, something for the junior clerk. And still they turn up their noses. We applied to Stepan Remezov the underclerk about a little matter; we sent him a bribe, ten altyns—it was as much as we could do to scrape the money together—and a pood of dried carp. He took the money alright, the greedy drunkard, but he had the carp chucked into the yard... And yet some people manage; they're more clever at it... Vladimir Chemodanov got through to the tsar with his petition and he was granted two villages in perpetuity. And everybody knows that in the last war he ran from the battlefield, from the Poles, scared out of his wits... And his father ran away from the field three times near Smolensk... And instead of taking away their portions and driving them out of their homes, they award them villages... You call that justice?.."

They stopped talking. The heat came billowing out of the stove. The crickets chirped drily. Silence. Tedium. Even the dogs had stopped yapping in the yard. Said Volkov pensively:

"I wish some king would take us into his service—to Venice, or Rome, or Vienna... I'd go without giving it a second thought... Vassily Vassilyevich Golitsyn gave my godfather a book to read, so I managed to get my hands on it and read it... All other nations live well, in plenty; we're the only poor people... I was in Moscow not long ago; I was looking for the armourer. They sent me to the Kukui quarter where the Germans live... Well, they're not Orthodox—God be their judge... But I went inside, and the streets are all swept, the huts are clean and cheerful, there are flowers in the gardens... I went on walking, and I felt shy and it was marvellous, as if I was dreaming... And the people

were friendly, and yet they live right next to us. And the wealth! Kukui on its own is richer than the whole of Moscow with its suburbs..."

"You want to take up trade? You need money for that too." Mikhail glanced down at his bare legs. "Join the streltsy? That's not a profitable line either. You'll kill yourself before you make it officer's rank. Not long ago, a groom from the tsar's stables, Danilo Menshikov, came to see my father. He told him that the Treasury owes the streltsy* regiments two and half years' pay. If they kick up about it, they're clapped under guard. Colonel Pyzhov sends the streltsy to his patrimonies outside Moscow and they have to work like serfs... They went to lodge a complaint and the petitioners were flogged with a knout in front of the Commission's Hall. Oh, the streltsy are bitter. Menshikov was saying, just wait and they'll show everybody what's what..."

"I've heard tell that if you're wearing a boyar's fur coat, you daren't ride out beyond the Moskva River."

"What d'you expect? Everybody's poor now... It's hard, what with the tribute, and quit-rent, and duties. Menshikov was saying that the foreigners know how to trade; they've had stone houses built in Arkhangelsk, in Kholmogory. They buy abroad for one ruble and sell to us for three... And our merchants just let the goods rot out of greed... The artisans are being so cruelly taxed that they're fleeing to the provinces or the open steppes. And now we have to pay an ice-hole tax, just for making a hole in the river... And what's the money going on? Menshikov was saying that Vassily Vassilyevich Golitsyn has built a palace on the Neglinnaya River. It's covered with sheet copper outside and gilded leather inside..."

Vassily raised his head and looked at Mikhail. The other tucked his feet under the bench and looked back at Vassily. Suddenly, it was as if someone else had replaced the subdued character who had been sitting there. He grinned, began tapping his foot, and the bench rocked under him...

"What's the matter?" asked Vassily quietly...

"They robbed another wagon train last week near the village of Vorobyevo. Heard about it?" Vassily frowned and

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* (*Lit.*) archers; members of a standing military force from 16th to early 18th cent. They were freemen, received hay or land from the state and enjoyed other privileges, such as the right to live in their own "liberties", or suburbs, and to own shops, public baths, etc.—*Ed.*

picked up his beads. "Merchants of the clothiers' guild were taking fine goods. They were making haste to reach Moscow by supper-time, but they never got there... One merchant lived to tell the tale. They rushed off to catch the robbers, but all they found was the trail, and that was filled in with snow..."

Mikhail's shoulders shook and he burst out laughing:

"You needn't be frightened, I wasn't there, I only heard it from Menshikov..." He leaned towards Vassily. "They say the trail led straight to Varvarka, to Stepan Odoyevsky's house... Prince Odoyevsky's youngest son... He's the same age as we are..."

"It's time we turned in; it's time we had some sleep," said Vassily gloomily.

Mikhail laughed mirthlessly again.

"We've had a joke, now let's get some sleep."

He rose effortlessly from the bench and stretched, his joints cracking as he did so. He poured some kvass into a wooden bowl and drank deeply, watching Vassily over the rim of the bowl.

"Stepan Odoyevsky has twenty-five house servants carrying sabres and firearms. Desperate characters... He put them up to it himself... Kept them short of food for over a year and just let them out of the gates at night to find their own booty... Wolves..."

Mikhail lay down on the bench, pulled up a bearskin coat, and thrust his hand under his head, his eyes glittering.

"Are you going to go and report what I told you?"

Vassily hung up his beads and lay down without speaking, his face to the pinewood wall. It was some time before he finally replied:

"No, I'm not."

5

After the gates of the Earth Rampart, a pot-holed road wound through the streets past tall, narrow log huts. Everywhere lay heaps of cinders, carrion, shards, rags: everything was thrown out into the street.

Alyosha, reins in hand, was walking alongside a sleigh in which sat three serfs in army bonnets of cotton stuffed with tow and stiff, quilted felt caftans, or *tigels*, with stand-up collars. These were Vassily Volkov's men-at-arms.

There wasn't enough money for chain mail so he'd dressed them in caftans, although he was afraid that he might be humiliated and cursed at the review. If you didn't arm your men as prescribed, that meant you were a swindler...

Vassily and Mikhail were sitting in Gypsy's sleigh. The serfs were leading the horses along behind: Vassily's with a rich blanket and Persian saddle, and Mikhail's battered, cheaply and poorly saddled gelding.

Mikhail was frowning. They were being overtaken and passed by many nobles, shouting and whipping their horses. They were dressed in their grandfathers' chain mail and armour, brand-new coats and short-sleeved or Turkish caftans. The whole uyezd was gathering on Lubyanka Square for the review and for the land allotment and re-allotment. Everyone laughed at the sight of Mikhail's gelding: "Hey, you—taking that to the knackers' yard? It'll never make it!..." As they passed, they lashed out with their knouts and the gelding cringed... Whoops, guffaws, whistles...

They rode across the bridge over the Yauza where hundreds of small windmills stood turning on the steep bank. They trotted behind the sleighs and wagon trains over the square along the white, peeling wall with its rectangular towers and guns in the embrasures. At the low Myasnitskiye Gates there was shouting, swearing and a crush: all were fighting to get through first. Fists were used, hats flew, sleighs cracked, horses reared up on their haunches. Above the gates, an inextinguishable icon lamp glimmered in front of a dark countenance.

Alyosha got in the way of a knout more than once and he lost his hat, but at least he came through alive! They were now on Myasnitskaya street... Wiping the blood off his nose, he looked to either side. Whew!

There were crowds of people surging along the narrow, dung-covered street. Merchants leaned out from their wooden stalls, shouting, plucking at the skirts of passers-by, even snatching off their hats in the effort to attract custom. Behind the high fences could be seen stone cottages, steep red and silvery roofs and multi-coloured church domes. There were churches by the thousand. Big, five-domed ones, and tiny ones at the crossways with hardly enough room inside for a dozen worshippers. The hot flames of candles burned inside. Old women, asleep on their knees. Shaggy, terrifying beggars shaking their rags, clutching at people's legs, whining

through their noses, baring bodies that were all blood and filth... Vagrant priests with terrible eyes pushed fancy buns under the noses of street vendors, shouting "Merchant, come to church or I'll take a bite out of your bread!" Flocks of jackdaws over the little churches...

They somehow managed to make their way past Lubyanka, where mounted men-at-arms stood in groups all over the square. Further away, by the Nikolskiye Gates, could be seen the tall, pipe-like sable hat of a boyar, the fur bonnets of the clerks, the dark caftans of the elected representatives. A gaunt, tall man with a long beard would shout something from there and brandish a sheet of paper. A nobleman would ride out, richly or poorly armed, alone or with his soldiers, and would gallop up to the table. He would dismount and bow low to the boyar and the clerks. They would inspect his arms and horses, read the register: how much land had he been granted? There would be an argument. One nobleman would swear and clutch at his chest, another would plead, saying tearfully that things were bad on his wretched piece of land; he was starving and freezing to death.

And so, by the age-old custom, each year before the spring campaigns, there was a review of the sovereign's military service men, the noblemen's levy.

Vassily and Mikhail were on horseback. Gypsy's and Alyosha's horses had been unharnessed and two of Volkov's serfs had been mounted on them; the third, on foot, had been ordered to say that his horse had injured its leg on the way. They had abandoned the sleighs.

Gypsy clutched at the stirrup: "Where are you sending my horse? Boyar! Kind sir!"... Vassily menaced him with his whip: "One word out of you..." When he rode away, Gypsy swore horribly, flung the horse-collar and shaft-bow into the sleigh and then got into it himself, burrowing into the straw in his chagrin...

Alyosha had been forgotten. He put the harness in the sleigh. He sat there for a while and began to feel cold since he was hatless and only wearing a scraggy little fur jacket. Oh well, that was the muzhik's life; he must grin and bear it. Suddenly, a rich aroma made him twitch his nostrils. An artisan in a hareskin hat, a podgy man with small eyes was walking past. On his belly he had a trayful of home-baked pies, smoking under a cloth. The devil! He glanced at Alyosha and turned back a corner of the cloth.

"Golden brown and piping hot!"

Alyosha could not resist the fragrance of the pies.

"How much, Dad?"

"A quarter-kopeck for two. They'll melt in your mouth."

Alyosha had a quarter-kopeck in his cheek. When he had been sent into bondage, his mother had given it to him in case of desperate need. He begrudged the cash, but his stomach was rumbling.

"Let's have them, then," said Alyosha roughly. He bought the pies and ate them. He'd never tasted anything like them in his life. When he went back to the sleigh, however, there was no sign of the knout, or the shaft-bow, or the collar. They'd been stolen. He dashed over to Gypsy, who swore at him from under the straw. Alyosha's legs gave way under him, his head whirled. He sat down on the sleigh and wept but then jumped up and began pestering the passers-by: "Had they seen the thief?" They laughed at him. What could he do? He ran across the square to find the boyar.

Volkov was on horseback, his hands on his hips. He was wearing a bronze helmet. The iron plates of the armour on his chest and belly were white with rime. He was unrecognisable—he looked a real knight-at-arms. Behind him, on horseback, were two serfs, like barrels in their caftans and with boar-spears on their shoulders. They themselves realised what sort of warriors they must look—as silly as they come. They were smirking.

Wiping away his tears and whining pathetically, Alyosha began telling his woes.

"It's your own fault!" shouted Vassily. "Father'll tan your hide. And if he doesn't get new harness, I'll tan his! Get out of the way, stop dithering about in front of the horse!"

At this point he was called out by the lanky clerk waving a sheet of paper. Volkov galloped ahead, his serfs behind him spurring their nags with their bast shoes. They proceeded at speed to the Nikolskiye Gates, where the formidable prince Fyodor Yurievich Romodanovsky was sitting at the table in a hat of fine fur and two coats, one of velvet and, on top of it, one of sheepskin.

What was he to do now? No hat, no harness... Alyosha whimpered as he wandered across the square. Mikhail Tyrtov called out to him, bending down from his horse to grip him by the shoulder:

"Alyosha," he said, and he too was in tears, his lips quiv-

ering. "Alyosha, for God's sake, run over to the Tverskiye Gates, ask for the house of Danila Menshikov, the groom. Go in and bow low to Danila three times... Tell him Mikhail sends his humble greetings... Say that my horse is poorly, I feel ashamed... Ask him to lend me any horse he can spare for the day—just to show at the review. Can you remember all that? Tell him I'll pay him back... I'd slit a man's throat just for a horse... Weep, beg..."

"I'll ask, but what if he says no?" asked Alyosha.

"I'll squash you like a fly, that's what!" Mikhail's eyes bulged and his nostrils flared.

Alyosha ran at full pelt to his destination.

Mikhail was frozen stiff in the saddle; he hadn't eaten all day. The sun was sinking down into the frosty darkness. The snow was already tinged with blue. The horses' hooves creaked more loudly on the snow. Dusk was falling, and all over Moscow they began ringing for vespers in the belfries and bell towers. Vassily Volkov rode past at a walking pace, his head bowed glumly. There was still no sign of Alyosha. He never showed up at all.

6

In the low, over-heated chamber, icon lamps illumined the low vaulted ceiling and the dark paintings on it: birds of paradise, fronds of vegetation.

On a broad bench, under the dark faces of the icons, his frail body sunk in a bed of swan's down, tsar Fyodor Alexeyevich lay dying.

This had been expected for some time: the tsar had scurvy and his legs had been swelling. That day, unable to stand through matins, he had sat down on a stool, but had fallen off. They had rushed up to him—his heart had almost stopped beating. They had laid him down under the icons. His legs were swollen with water to the size of wooden logs and his stomach was beginning to distend. The German leech was sent for. He drained off the water and the tsar quietened down, then began slowly fading away. His eye sockets darkened, his nose grew sharper. At one point, he whispered something, but no one could understand what he was saying. The German bent down over the bloodless lips: Fyodor Alexeyevich was incoherently reciting Latin verse. The leech thought he recognised some lines from Ovid... On

his deathbed—Ovid? There could be no doubt of it, the tsar was delirious...

Even his breathing was inaudible now. Patriarch Joachim was seated on a folding Italian chair at the frosty window, where the moonlight played on the round glass panes. Stern, waxen-faced, in a black cloak and a tall black hood with a white, eight-pointed cross, he sat there hunched and motionless, like a spectre of death. The tsaritsa, Marfa Matveyevna, stood alone by the wall. Her eyes misty with tears, she was watching her dying husband's small brow and protruding nose, just visible above the feather bed. She was only seventeen years old. She had been taken into the palace from the poor Apraksin family because of her beauty. She had only been tsaritsa for two months. Her dark-browed and silly little face was puffy with weeping. She could only whimper like a child and crack her fingers—she was afraid to wail.

At the other end of the chamber, in the gloom under the vaults, the tsar's big family stood whispering among themselves: sisters, aunts, uncles and the boyars: Ivan Maximovich Yazykov, small, well-nourished, good-natured, pleasant, very sharp-witted and deeply versed in the ways of the court life; Alexei Timofeyevich Likhachev, an ascetic, mild old man, a book-lover, and First Gentleman of the Bedchamber; and prince Vassily Vassilyevich Golitsyn, a real beau, curly beard parted in the middle, upturned moustaches, hair cut short in the Polish fashion, and wearing a Polish coat and soft, high-heeled boots (the prince was of medium height).

His dark blue eyes were glittering with excitement. It was the decisive hour: the new tsar had to be proclaimed. Who? Which of the two would it be: Peter or Ivan? Naryshkina's son or Miloslavskaya's? Both were still mere boys and had not yet reached the age of discretion. Such power as they had came from the family. Peter was a hothead and physically robust. Ivan was feeble-minded, sickly, far too pliable. Who was going to be chosen?

Vassily Vassilyevich was standing sideways on to a double-leaved, copper-sheathed little door, his head down, listening: the boyars were droning away in the adjacent throne-room. Ever since morning, without having had anything to eat or drink, they had been sweating in their furs: the Naryshkins with their party and the Miloslavskys with

theirs. The room was full: they were cursing, remembering grievances, aware that some of them would go up in the world today and others would be whisked off into banishment.

"What a hullaballoo, prosze pana," whispered Vassily Vassilyevich and, going up to Yazykov, said quietly to him in Polish: "Ivan Maximovich, you should still ask the patriarch who he's for."

Yazykov, with his thick head of curly light-brown hair, smiled rosily and sweetly as he raised his eyes aloft. He was perspiring in the heat and he smelt of rose oil:

"The patriarch and ourselves await your word, my dear prince... We already seem to know our minds..."

Likhachev came up and sighed, solicitously laying his white hand on his beard.

"We must not be divided at this momentous hour, Vassily Vassilyevich. Here is what we think: Ivan's prospects as tsar are shaky. He is sickly. We need strength."

Vassily Vassilyevich lowered his eyelashes and the corners of his handsome mouth curved up in a faint smile. He knew that to disagree at this stage could be dangerous.

"So be it," he said. "Let Peter be tsar."

He raised his dark blue eyes, and suddenly they flickered and softened with tenderness. He was looking at the tsarevna Sophia, sixth sister to the tsar. She came in, not with a swan-like glide, as befitting a maid, but with urgency, the skirts of her multicoloured gown swirling, not buttoned up over her full breast, the red ribbons fluttering from her horned headdress. Dark spots showed through the powder and paint on her unattractive face. The tsarevna was big-boned, solidly built, hefty, with a large head. The prominent forehead, the green eyes and the compressed lips were masculine rather than feminine. She was looking at Vassily Vassilyevich and had evidently sensed what he had just been discussing and what his answer had been.

Her nostrils quivered contemptuously. She turned to the dying man's bed. She threw up her hands and then clasped them, knelt down on the carpet and leaned her brow on the bed. The patriarch raised his head; his dull stare settled on the nape of Sophia's neck and on her dangling braids. All in the chamber watched. The five tsarevnas began crossing themselves. The patriarch rose to his feet and looked for a long time at the tsar. He thrust back his black

sleeves and, making the sign of the cross over the dying man with sweeping movements of the hand, began to recite the prayer for the departed.

Sophia clutched the back of her head and uttered a wild, piercing scream; then she began keening in a low voice. Her sisters did likewise: the tsaritsa Marfa Matveyevna collapsed prone on the bench. Her elder brother, Fyodor Matveyevich Apraksin, went up to her, tall, corpulent, in a fur coat down to his heels. He began stroking the tsaritsa's back. Yazykov hurried up to the patriarch, kissed his hand and tugged at his arm. The patriarch, Yazykov, Likhachev and Golitsyn went quickly into the throneroom. The boyars flocked towards them, waving their sleeves, their beards jutting out, their eyes bulging shamelessly: "Well, my Lord?"

"Tsar Fyodor Alexeyevich has departed in peace. Let us weep, boyars..."

They ignored him. Pushing and shoving their way through the door, the boyars hastened up to the dead man, fell on their knees, beat their foreheads on the carpet and, half rising again, kissed his waxen and already folded hands. The icon lamps began to sputter and go out for lack of air. Sophia was escorted out. Vassily Vassilyevich disappeared. Yazykov was approached by the princes Golitsyn, the brothers Peter and Boris, by the dark, bushy-browed, ferocious-looking prince Yakov Dolgoruky and his brothers Luka, Boris and Grigory. Said Yakov:

"We have daggers ready and armour under our clothes... Shall we shout for Peter?"

"Go onto the porch, to the people. The patriarch will go too, and then we'll shout... But if they begin calling for Ivan Alexeyevich—stab the miscreants..."

An hour later, the patriarch went out onto the front porch and, blessing the crowd of thousands—streltsy, noblemen-at-arms, civil servants, merchants and artisans—he asked: "Which of the tsareviches is to reign?" The bonfires were blazing. The moon was going down beyond the Moskva River. Its icy light glittered on the cupolas. Shouts came from the crowd:

"We want Pyotr Alexeyevich!.."

Then a husky voice:

"We want tsar Ivan..."

There was a rush towards the owner of the voice; he was

heard no more, and the shouts came still louder from the crowd: "Peter, Peter!"

7

In Danila's yard, two chained dogs strained towards Alyosha, choking with rage. A little girl with sores on her lips and a fur jacket thrown over her head, told him to climb the ice-covered stairs into the house, giggled for no apparent reason and dived under the porch into the basement where, in the darkness, logs were burning in the stove.

As he climbed the stairs, Alyosha could hear someone shouting in a wild voice up above... "Hm," he thought. "I'm not going to get out of this alive..." He took hold of the planed block of wood on the end of the rope and only just managed to free the jammed door from its frame. His nostrils were assailed by the odour of a heated hut, radish and vodka. Two men were sitting under the icons at a table—a priest with a pigtail and a ginger spade beard, and a small man with a pock-marked face and a beaky nose.

"Knock some sense into his rear entrance!" they yelled, banging away with their mugs.

The third, a heavily built man, in an unbelted maroon shirt, had someone pinned between his knees and was thrashing him with a leather strap on the bare backside. The weal-marked, skinny buttocks wriggled and writhed. "Ow, ow, Dad!" yelled the victim. Alyosha froze with horror.

The pock-marked one blinked at Alyosha with lashless eyelids. The priest opened his big mouth wide and shouted thickly:

"Here's another boy, give him a thrashing as well!"

Alyosha reeled and craned his neck in horror. "I'm done for!" The heavily built man turned round. A little boy with round, pale-blue eyes jumped out from under his father's legs, pulling up his breeches. He darted to the door and vanished. Alyosha, as ordered, threw himself at the man's feet and banged his forehead on the floor three times. The heavily built man hoisted him up by the collar and held him level with his own face—coppery, sweaty, and hotly reeking of vodka:

"What have you come here for? To steal? Spy? Snoop round the houses?"

His teeth chattering, Alyosha began explaining about Tyrtov. The copper man's veins swelled—he couldn't understand a word... "What Tyrtov? What horse? So you came for a horse? A horse-thief, eh?" Alyosha burst into tears, swore on his honour and crossed himself with three fingers... Then the copper man clutched him furiously by the hair, and, his boots clumping, dragged him across the room, kicked the door open and hurled the boy down the icy steps...

"Out of here, you thief!" he roared, swaying. "Sharok, Brovka, after him!.."

Lowering his head under the lintel like a bull, Danila Menshikov returned to the table. Breathing heavily, he filled the mugs and took a pinch of grated horse-radish between his thumb and fingers.

"You've read the scriptures, priest, you ought to know," he boomed. "My son's gotten out of hand... He's started thieving, the son of a bitch. What am I to do, kill him? What do the scriptures say, uh?"

Filka the priest replied solemnly:

"The Scriptures say thus: 'Punish thy son from boyhood, and he shall be a comfort to thee in thine old age. And slacken not as thou dost beat the child; for if thou dost beat him with a rod, he shall not die, but shall be the more hale; multiply his wounds, for thou savest his soul from death...'"

"Amen," sighed the beaky-nosed one.

"Just wait—I'll take a breather and call him again," said Danila. "Oh, things are bad, friends... It's worse every year. The children are getting out of hand, there's none of the old piety... The tsar hasn't paid any wages for two years... There's nothing to eat any more... The streltsy are threatening to set fire to the whole of Moscow... There's great unrest among the people... We'll all be lost soon..."

Said the pock-marked, beaky-nosed sexton, whose name was Foma Podshchipàyev:

"The Nikonians* have smashed the ancient faith, and it was by that (raising his finger) that the world lived... There's no new faith... A child is born in sin: beat it unto death—what good will come of it? It has no soul... The

* Followers of Patriarch Nikon and of the church reform carried out by him in 1553.—*Ed.*

children of this age... they're Nikonians. A flock with no shepherd, Satan fodder... The Archpriest Avvakum wrote: 'And dost thou, Nikonian, seek to seduce the flock of Christ and offer it and yourselves as sacrifice to your father, the devil?'... The Devil! (Lifting his finger again.) And, further: 'Who art thou, Nikonian? Thou art excrement, thou art stink, thou art a foul whelp...'"

"Whelps!" Danila thumped the table.

"The Nikonian priests go about in silken robes, their cheeks burst with repletion, the accursed whelps!" said priest Filka.

Foma Podshchipayev waited till they had stopped cursing and said once more:

"And this is what is said by the Archpriest Avvakum: 'My friend, Hilarion, Archbishop of Ryazan! Remember that Melchisedek dwelt in the grove on Mount Tabor. He ate the shoots of plants, and instead of drinking water, he licked up the dew. He was an honest priest; he did not crave Rhenish or Roman wines, or vodka, or strained wines, or beer spiced with cardamon. My friend, Hilarion, Bishop of Ryazan. You see how Melchisedek lived. He did not take comfort in carriages drawn by raven-black stallions. Yet he was of royal blood. But who art thou, priestling?... Thou climbest into a carriage, thou floatest like a bubble on water, sitting in the carriage on a pillow, thy hair combed like that of a wench, and thou ridest across the square with thy snout poking forth that the idle young nuns may fall in love with thee... Oh, oh, my poor one... Verily, the Devil hath blinded thee... Thou hast not beheld nor dost thou know the spiritual life...'"

Filka closed his eyes; his cheeks wobbled and he burst out laughing. Danila poured more drinks. They downed them.

"The streltsy are tearing up the Nikonian books and throwing them away," he said. "God grant that they rise to defend the old ways..."

He looked round. The dogs started barking. The porch steps creaked. A prayer to Jesus was heard behind the door. "Amen" replied the three in the room. In came a tall strelets of the Pyzhov Regiment, Ovsei Rzhov, Danila's brother-in-law. He turned to face the icons, made the sign of the cross and tossed back his hair.

"Here you are feasting," he said calmly. "Don't you know what's going on up there?.. The tsar's dead... The Narysh-

kins and the Dolgorukys have called for Peter... We couldn't have expected such a disaster... We'll all end up under the heel of the boyars and the Nikonians."

8

Alyosha rolled like a tumbler-pigeon down the steps into a snowdrift. The yellow-fanged dogs rushed at him. He covered his head. He shut his eyes... But they didn't maul him... A miracle—God had delivered him! Snarling, the dogs backed off. Someone squatted down beside Alyosha and prodded his head:

"Hey, who are you?"

Alyosha opened one eye. The dogs were snarling again at a distance. The one sitting on his hunkers beside Alyosha was the little boy who had been given a thrashing only a short while ago.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Who are your people?"

"We're Brovkins—from the country."

The little boy studied Alyosha puppy-fashion—cocking his head first on one side, then on the other. The moon from behind the barn roof lit up a face with big eyes. He looked a chirpy enough youngster...

"Let's go and get warm," he said. "And if you don't come, I'll give you what for... Want a fight?"

"No." Alyosha quickly lay down. And again they stared at one another.

"Let me go," pleaded Alyosha. "Don't... I haven't done anything to you... I'm off..."

"Where to?"

"I don't know... They promised to squash me like a fly. And they'll murder me at home..."

"Does your Dad beat you?"

"My Dad's sold me for good, he doesn't beat me any more. The servants beat me, of course. But when I lived at home, they whipped me there too..."

"What are you, a runaway?"

"Not yet... What's your name?"

"Sasha... We're Menshikovs... My Dad whips me twice and sometimes three times a day. I've only got the bones left in my backside, the fat's all been flayed off."

"That's bad..."

"Let's go and get warm..."

"Alright."

The boys ran down into the basement where Alyosha had already noticed a fire in the stove. It was warm and dry down there, and it smelt of fresh, hot bread. A tallow candle was burning in a spiral iron candlestick. Cockroaches rustled on the sooty log walls. You could stay down there and never want to come out.

"Vasyonka, don't say anything to Dad," said Sasha quickly to the little cook. "Take your boots off, Alyosha." He removed his felt boots. Alyosha did likewise. They climbed up behind the stove which filled half the basement. There, in the darkness, a pair of eyes watched them unwinkingly. This was the little girl who had opened the gate for Alyosha. She shrank back into the depths behind the chimney.

"Let's talk about something," whispered Sasha. "My Mum's dead. Dad's drunk every day, he wants to get married. I'm scared of a stepmother. They beat me now, but if he gets married, they'll tear me apart..."

"They'd do just that," echoed Alyosha.

The little girl whimpered behind the chimney.

"That's just what I've been saying... The other day, I saw the Gypsies at the Serpukhovskiye Gates. They were in a camp with bears... They were playing pipes, and dancing and singing... They asked me to join them. Suppose we go roving with the Gypsies, eh?"

"We'll be hungry if we join them," said Alyosha.

"Then we could hire ourselves out to merchants and work for them... And in summer we'll leave. You can catch a bear cub in the forest. I know one man from the settlement; he catches them and he'll show us how... You'll lead the bear and I'll sing and dance... I know all the songs. And nobody in Moscow can do a hotter dance than me."

The girl behind the chimney whimpered again. Sasha dug her in the ribs.

"Shut up, you rotten old thing... Tell you what, we'll take her with us too, all right?"

"Women mean trouble."

"We'll take her in summer, to pick mushrooms—she's nothing special, but she's a whizz at mushrooming... Now we'll have some cabbage soup. They'll call me upstairs for prayers and then they'll thrash me. Then I'll come back. We'll go to sleep. And first thing in the morning, we'll run

to Kitaigorod. We'll cross the Moskva River and have a look round. I've got friends there. I'd have run away ages ago, except that I couldn't find a partner..."

"If we could only find a merchant and get him to take us on selling pies," said Alyosha.

The door banged on the porch; the guests were leaving, making the steps creak. Danila's menacing voice summoned Sasha upstairs.

9

There is a small house on Varvarka Street with six windows and decorated with carved horses and cockerels: it's a drinking-den, one of the taverns owned by the tsar. There's a ram's skull over the gates, which are left wide open as an invitation to all and sundry. In the yard, men lie drunk on snowdrifts yellow with urine or on dungheaps; some have had their faces beaten to a pulp, others have been robbed of their boots or hat. Many sleighs, including merchants' sleighs with painted backs, have been left at the gates and in the yard.

Inside, behind the counter, stands a grim tavern-keeper with black eyebrows. A shelf is stacked with bottles and pewter mugs. In the corner, icon lamps burn in front of black images. Benches and a long table are ranged along the walls. Behind the partition is the second and "best" room for the merchants. If some roughneck or a drunk from the settlements blunders in there, the taverner will call to him, scowling, and if the man doesn't obey, he'll be seized from behind by the breeches and kicked out of the tavern in a jiffy.

In the second room, the conversation is serious; the merchants drink ginger beer or hot mead. They bargain, clinch deals, and shake hands. They discuss business which is enough to make you scratch your head in bewilderment these days.

In the front room, at the counter, there is shouting, uproar, swearing. Drink and have a good time, just so long as you pay up. The Treasury is strict. No money? Then off with that fur coat. And if you've drunk more than your possessions are worth, the tavern-keeper winks at the under-clerk, who sits down at the table with a goosequill behind his ear and an inkpot dangling from his neck, and he starts scratching

away. Come to your senses, you drunken fool! That clever under-clerk will scratch out a bondsman's deed. You walked into the tsar's tavern a free man, but you'll go out of it a penniless serf.

"It's easier to drink nowadays," says the tavern-keeper, pouring vodka into a pewter mug. "Nowadays, a friend'll come for you, a relative or your wife'll hurry in to get you out of it before you drink your soul away. Nowadays, we let that sort go. Good luck! But under the late tsar Alexei Mikhailovich, some friend would come to take the drunk away so that he didn't spend his last copper... Hold it! A loss to the Treasury... Even that copper's needed by the Treasury... You'd shout for the guards at once. The constables would seize the man trying to talk the drunk out of it and they'd march him off to the Criminal Commission. They'd investigate the case there, cut off his left hand and his right leg and throw him out onto the ice... Drink, my brave lads, drink, never fear; we don't cut off arms and legs any more..."

10

People were practically climbing up on top of one another outside the tavern in order to peer through the tiny windows. It was impossible to get through the crowd in the yard and on the porch. There were a lot of streltsy about in their red, green and cranberry caftans. Everybody was pushing and shoving. "What is it?" "Who?" "What for?" Inside the tavern, in the best room, there were streltsy and market traders.

The place was packed full and the condensed steam of human breath was trickling down the window-panes. The streltsy had brought in a man who looked only half-alive. He was lying on the floor and groaning in the most heartrending fashion. His clothes were torn to shreds, his well-nourished body could be seen underneath. The blood had clotted in his grey hair. His nose and cheeks were a bloody pulp.

The streltsy were pointing at him and shouting:

"That's what's going to happen to you soon..."

"You're woolgathering? They're not woolgathering at Kukui..."

"What are the Germans beating up our people for, lads?"

"It's a good thing we happened to be passing by and went in... They'd have beaten him to death..."

"Did things like that happen under the last tsar? Did we let our boys be attacked by damned foreigners?"

Ovsei Rzhov, a strelets in the Pyzhov Regiment, was calming down his comrades and saying respectfully to the merchants:

"It's poverty that's driven us to you, good merchants. We and our wives and little children have nowhere to turn... We're at the end of our tether. This is our second year without any pay. The colonels have ground us down with heavy labour. But what are we to live on? They won't let us trade in the city, and it's too crowded in the suburbs... The Germans have taken everything over. Now they've even bought up the flax and yarn. They're buying up the hides, they do their own tanning at Kukui, the devils... Women won't buy our city-made shoes, they want German ones... Life's become impossible... If you don't intercede for us streltsy, you merchants'll be done for too; the Naryshkins have got their hands on the tsar's Treasury... They're biding their time... Just you wait—the taxes'll be so heavy that you'll have to give up the ghost... Yes, and there's worse than that coming to Moscow: Boyar Matveyev— he's on the way back from banishment... His heart's seething with bitterness. He'll gobble up the whole of Moscow..."

Terrible were the groans of the beaten man. Terrible and sinister were the words of Ovsei Rzhov. The merchants exchanged glances. They didn't really believe that the Germans at Kukui had beaten up this trader. There had been dirty work somewhere. Yet the streltsy were telling the truth. Life was getting worse: every year, things got tighter and more disturbing... Every act—"the tsar has said, the boyars have decreed"—meant more bad news: pay up, pour money into the breach... Who could you complain to? Who would defend you? The chief boyars? They only knew to do one thing—squeeze out money for the Treasury, they didn't care how that money was come by. Take off your last shirt and hand it over. It was as if Moscow was in enemy hands.

A gesticulating merchant, his fingers covered with silver rings, worked his way into the circle of bystanders round the victim.

"We, the Vorobyovs, that is," he said, "took raw silk to the fair in Arkhangelsk. And the Germans made an agreement among themselves and refused to buy a scrap of that silk. And their elder, the German Wolfius, that is, shouted at us:

We'll fix it so that the Moscow merchants are punished for debts, and in future we'll compel them, that is, us Moscow folk, to trade in nothing but bast shoes..."

The hut was in an uproar... The streltsy: "Just what we've been telling you! And soon there won't even be any bast shoes either!" A young merchant, Bogdan Zhigulin by name, jumped into the circle, tossing his curly hair.

"I'm just from Pomorye," he said briskly. "I went to fetch some blubber-oil. And I left as I came, with empty wagons. The foreigners Maxelin and Bierkopow have bought up all the blubber-oil from the Pomorians* for the next ten years. And all the Pomorians are up to their ears in debt to them. The foreigners take the blubber-oil at a quarter of the price and won't let anyone sell except themselves. And the Pomorians are ruined, and they don't go seal-hunting any more, and they've scattered all over the country... Russian merchants can't get to the North any more."

The streltsy started shouting again, thrusting back their sleeves. Ovsei Rzhov reached for his sabre and rattled it, baring his teeth:

"Just give us time; we'll settle up with those colonels... Then it'll be the boyars next... We'll sound the tocsin all over Moscow. All the settlements are on our side. Just you merchants support us... Now, lads, pick him up and let's carry on further..."

The streltsy picked up the beaten man—he began howling, shaking his head from side to side: "Oh, I'm done for!"—carried him out of the hut, thrusting the people out of the way, and made for Red Square to exhibit him to the public there.

The merchants stayed behind. Ah, there was a trouble afoot. Ah, bad, wild things were brewing! Even if you sided with the streltsy, it would be a lost cause—they'd nothing to lose. And if you didn't back them, the boyars would eat you alive...

11

This time, Sasha was thrashed unmercifully after vespers—he was hardly able to crawl down to the basement. He hid away and said nothing, grinding his teeth. Alyosha took

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* Russian fishermen living on the White Sea coast.—*Ed.*

him some kasha and milk up on the stove. He felt very sorry for his friend: "Oh, they've really let you have it, boy..."

Sasha lay for a whole day in the hot place by the chimney, then he recovered and began talking:

"A father like him ought to be broken on the wheel, the murderous devil. Alyosha, fetch the lamp oil from behind the icons. I'll smear my backside with it, it'll be dry by morning, and then we'll leave... I'll die in a ditch before I'll go back home..."

All night the wind and the rain roared on the other side of the log wall. The voices of the house demons wailed in the chimney. The cook's little girl wept softly. Alyosha dreamed of his mother: she was standing in the smoke in the middle of the hut, weeping without closing her eyes, putting her hands to her head all the time and complaining... Alyosha felt desperately unhappy in his dream.

At the first glimmer of daylight, Sasha nudged him: "You've had enough sleep. Get up."

Scratching themselves, they bound up their shoes with care. They found a hunk of bread and took it with them. Whistling to the dogs, they pushed the bottom gate board aside and went out. It was a quiet overcast morning. Damp. The icicles were stirring and falling. The tortuous log-paved streets were black. Behind the wooden city, the dawn seemed very near, spreading its misty, blood-red bands across the sky.

In the streets, the sluggish watchmen were putting away the barriers set up for the night as a deterrent to vagrants and thieves. Cursing at one another, beggars, cripples and God's fools straggled along on the way to take their places at daybreak in the church porches. Bellowing cattle were being driven along the dung-covered Vozdvizhenka to water at the Neglinnaya River.

The two boys arrived with the cattle at the round tower of the Borovitskiye Gates. A German musketeer in a sheepskin coat was dozing by the cast-iron cannon.

"Mind how you go here, the tsar isn't far off," said Sasha.

They walked along the steep bank of the Neglinnaya over piles of cinders and garbage and crossed the Iversky Bridge. It was dawn. Grey clowds were trailing over the city. A deep moat ran round the Kremlin wall. Here and there protruded the rotting piles of long-demolished watermills. On the bank stood gallows, each consisting of two uprights with

a crossbeam. On one of them hung a tall man in bast shoes with his elbows twisted back. His bowed face had been eaten away by the birds.

"There's two more," said Sasha. Corpses, half-covered with snow, were lying on the bottom of the moat.

"Those were thieves. Look what's happened to them..."

The whole square was deserted, from the Chapel of the Iverskaya Mother of God to St. Basil's, white on its dark-blue base and with its blue domes. A sleigh-track wound across to the Spasskiye Gates. Over it, above the golden eagle with spread wings and claws, a flock of crows wheeled, cawing as if it were spring. The hands on the black clock face reached eight o'clock and the bells began playing a foreign tune. Alyosha took off his bonnet and crossed himself, turning towards the tower. It was terrifying here.

"Let's go, Sasha, or they'll see us..."

"You needn't be scared of anything if you're with me, silly."

They set off across the square. The far side was crowded with wooden stalls, show booths and matting tents. The merchants were already taking the locks off their doors and hanging out their wares on poles. The stoves were smoking in the bakers' row and there was a smell of pies. People were streaming out of all the side streets.

Sasha didn't care whether they smacked him on the back of the head or swore at him: he was curious about everything. He wormed his way through the crowd to the stalls and started chatting to the merchants, asking prices and cracking jokes. Alyosha, mouth agape, could hardly catch up with him. Seeing a fat woman in a winter fur coat and a fox-fur hat over a headscarf, Sasha started dragging one leg, sidled up to the woman, shuddered and stammered: "S-s-s-omething for a wretched orphan, m-m-m-mother boyarina, I'm d-d-d-ying of starvation..." The widow hitched up her petticoat, took out two half-kopecks from a purse suspended under her stomach, gave it to the boy and gravely crossed herself. They ran off to buy pies and a hot drink.

"I'm telling you, you'll be all right with me," said Sasha.

The people were still rolling up. Some were coming to look at other people and listen to what was being said, others to show off new clothes, and still others for the pickings. In one alley, where shorn hair lay on the snow like felt, the barbers were soliciting the public and clicking

their scissors. Someone had already been planted on an upended log and was being given a pudding-basin hair-cut. The noisiest place was the needle-and-thread row. Here, the women were screaming as if at a fire as they bought and sold thread, needles, buttons and other trimmings. In order not to lose his way, Alyosha hung onto his friend's sash.

When they came out onto the square again, someone ran past, shouting. A big mob was coming up from Varvarka Street. They were whooping and whistling shrilly. Some streltsy were carrying the victim of the assault in their arms.

"Good people," they were saying, turning in all directions, with tears in their eyes, "look what they've done to this merchant..."

They put the victim down in someone's wooden sleigh. Ovsei Rzhov climbed into it and began telling, as before, how the Germans had nearly beaten the good merchant to death out of spite and how the chief boyars would soon sell out the whole Moscow to the foreigners... Sasha and Alyosha fought their way through the throng as far as the sleigh.

Squatting on his heels, Alyosha instantly recognised the injured man as the pieman with the small eyes and the hareskin hat who had sold him two home-baked pies on Lubyanka. He reeked of vodka. He was fed up with groaning. Lying on his side with his face in the straw, he kept saying over and over again: "Oh... oh... let me go, for Christ's sake..."

Crossing himself, Ovsei Rzhov bowed to the churches and the people. The streltsy were whispering in the crowd. Anger was rising. Suddenly there were shouts of "Here they come, here they come!..."

Two riders were galloping from the Spasskiye Gates over the sleigh trail. The first was wearing the cranberry-red caftan of a strelets and a bonnet at a rakish angle. His curved, diamond-studded sabre slapped against the velvet saddle-cloth. Without slowing down, he dropped the reins and burst into the crowd. Frightened hands seized the horse by the bridle. The horseman quickly turned his head round, showing sparse yellow teeth. He had a broad forehead, hollow eyes and a bristly little beard... This was Tararui, to call him by his Moscow nickname; otherwise prince Ivan

Andreyevich Khovansky, a military commander, a boyar of ancient lineage and a great hater of the lowborn Naryshkins. The streltsy, seeing that he was wearing one of their own caftans, shouted:

"Join us, join us, Ivan Andreyevich!" They ran towards him.

The second, who had ridden up in a less spectacular manner, was Vassily Vassilyevich Golitsyn. Slapping his horse on the neck, he asked:

"Are you angry, good people? Who's offended you, and what for? Speak up, speak up, we feel for the people day and night... The tsar saw you from above, he was scared because he's too young, so he sent us down to find out..."

The people stared goggle-eyed at his brocaded fur coat—you could buy half Moscow with one of those—and at the precious stones in the rings on his fingers as he slapped his horse. They backed away without answering. Grinning, Vassily Vassilyevich rode up and halted stirrup-to-stirrup with Khovansky.

"Hand over the colonels to us, we'll deal with them ourselves: head first from the belfry!" shouted the streltsy at him. "What do the chief boyars think they're doing? Why did they land us with Naryshkin's brat for a tsar?"

Khovansky smoothed his greying moustaches with the hem of his sleeve. He raised his hand. All were silent...

"Streltsy!" He half stood up in the saddle, turning red in the face from the effort, and his throaty voice could be heard even by those at the back of the crowd. "Streltsy! Now you can see for yourselves what an intolerable burden the boyars have imposed on you... And now they've chosen God knows what sort of a tsar... I didn't shout for him... And you just wait: they won't give you any food, let alone money... And you'll have to work like slaves... And your children will be bonded to the Naryshkins in perpetuity... Worse... They'll sell you and all of us to the foreigners... They'll destroy Moscow and wipe out the true faith completely... Oh, Russians were a great people once, but where is that greatness now?"

At this point, the people cried out in such a terrible passion that Alyosha took fright: "They'll trample us down..." Sasha Menshikov, jumping up and down on the sleigh, was whistling with two fingers in his mouth. All that could be heard was Tararui shouting in a frenzy:

"Streltsy! Over the river, to the regiments, and we'll talk there!"

12

Only the unharnessed sleigh and the two boys were left on the square. The beaten man half rose, looked around through puffy, half-closed eyes and blew his nose for a long time.

"Dad," said Sasha to him with a wink at Alyosha, "We'll take you home. We're sorry for you."

The man was not yet himself. As the boys led him away, he muttered something and stumbled. Suddenly: "Stop!" He pushed the boys away and threatened someone, stamping his swollen felt boot. They went across the river, heading for the Serpukhovskiye Gates. On their way, they learned his name; it was Fyodor Zayats. His house in the artisans' quarter was not very big; there was a solitary tree in the kitchen garden with rooks' nests in it, but the gates and the hut were new. "Here they are, pasties and fancy bread," said Zayats joyfully when he saw his home. "Here they are, the honey pasties that keep me going."

The gate was opened by a pock-marked woman with one eye. Zayats pushed her out of the way. Sasha and Alyosha sneaked up behind him. "Where are you going? What for?" He was going to fly at them, but waved his hand instead and went inside the hut. He sat down on a bench covered with fresh matting and looked himself over. All his clothes were torn. He shook his head slowly and burst into tears.

"They beat me up," he said to the one-eyed woman. "I don't remember who beat me or why. Give me some clean clothes." Suddenly he began shouting and banging his fist on the bench: "Heat up the bath-house! That's an order, you one-eyed bitch!"

The woman went out with her nose in the air. The boys huddled closer to the stove, which took up about a half the interior of the hut. Zayats became talkative:

"You saved me, lads. Whatever you want, just ask... My body's black and blue, I haven't a rib left in one piece... What am I to do now? Take a tray and go out selling? Oh dear me!.. But the business can't wait..."

"We don't need any reward," said Sasha, with a wink at Alyosha. "Just let us stay the night."

When Zayats crawled off to his bath, the boys climbed up on the stove.

"We'll go out selling pasties tomorrow for him," whispered Sasha. "Never fear, you'll come to no harm with me."

At the first glimmer of dawn, the one-eyed woman began baking various pies and pasties, meatless with peas, radish, salted mushrooms and meat ones with hare, beef and noodles. Fyodor Zayats groaned on the bench under the sheepskin coat; he had lost the use of his limbs entirely. Sasha swept out the hut, dashed into the yard for water and firewood, carried out the cinders and the slops and sent Alyosha to feed Zayats' livestock. In his hands, the work went with a swing and always with a joke.

"He's a smart little chappie," groaned Zayats. "Oh dear, I'd send you with pies to the market... But you'll clear off with the takings, you'll rob me... Too quick, though..."

Sasha began kissing the cross that hung round his neck, swearing that he wouldn't steal any money, then took the forty saints from the wall and kissed the icon. Zayats had no choice but to believe him. The woman placed two hundred pasties on trays under a cloth. Sasha and Alyosha put on aprons, stuffed their mittens behind their belts, picked up the trays and left.

"Hearth-baked pasties, honey pasties, half a kopeck a pair, still hot from the fire!" shouted Sasha in a ringing voice, looking at the passers-by. "Come along, come along, going for a song!" On seeing a group of streltsy standing nearby, he executed a little song-and-dance routine. "Hurry up, pasties of the tsar's, pasties of the boyars, in the Kremlin they were bought, they gave me more than they ought, the Naryshkins ate them, their bellies are aching!"

The streltsy laughed and bought up the pies with a will. Alyosha also shouted a few rhyming tags. They had to go back for fresh supplies even before they reached the river.

"You boys are heaven-sent," said Zayats, astounded.

13

For over two weeks now, Mikhail Tyrtov had been drifting round Moscow. No military service, no money. The clerks had laughed at him on Lubyanka Square. They had given him neither land nor men. Prince Romodanovsky had cursed and humiliated him, and had ordered him to come back next year,

but without deception and on a good horse.

He left the square, intending to spend the night in an eating-house. On the way, he met his elder brother, who cursed him for his bad luck and took back the gelding, but didn't think to take back the sabre or his grandfather's belt of stripped silk with silver medallions. That evening, in the eating-house, warmed by vodka spiced with garlic, Mikhail pawned the sabre and belt with the innkeeper.

Two merry Muscovites latched onto Mikhail, one introduced himself as a merchant's son, the other was an underclerk. But more probably they were just tavern riff-raff.

They flattered Mikhail, kissed him effusively and promised to entertain him. Mikhail went on the spree with them for a week. They took him to visit a Greek in a cellar where they smoked tobacco in cows' horns filled with water: they smoked themselves stupid.

They took him to the tsar's baths for the common people on the Moscow River, not so much to steam themselves as to look and laugh as the naked women, covering themselves with birch switches, scampered out of the billowing steam into the common anteroom. To Mikhail, this was intoxication too, no worse than tobacco.

They tried to talk him into going to a procuress, but Mikhail was still young and afraid of forbidden fruit. He remembered how his father, after vespers, would trim the candle with his fingers, open an old leather-bound book with copper clasps, turn to a page soiled at the corner, and read about women:

"What is woman? A snare for the seduction of man. Bright of countenance, fluttering her eyes, flaunting her legs, wreaking much harm therewith and kindling a wild fire in the loins... What is woman? A nest of vipers, a disease, a demon's frying-pan, the temptation of hell, Satan's den of vice..."

Wasn't that enough to make him shy? Once, they took him to a tavern by the Pokrovskiye Gates. No sooner had they sat down than from behind a matting curtain skipped a diminutive wench with her hair unloosed: eyebrows painted black from the bridge of her nose to her temples; round eyes, long ears, cheeks rubbed with beetroot till they were blue. She threw off her ragged blanket and began dancing near Mikhail —naked, fat, white—beckoning with one hand and then the other, her fingers in copper rings, her bangles jingling.

He thought this must be a she-devil, so terrifying, so horri-

ble was her nakedness. She breathed wine fumes and reeked of hot sweat... Mikhail jumped to his feet, his hair stood on end, he yelled frantically and raised his hand against the wench but then, without actually striking her, rushed out into the street.

The yellow spring sunset was fading far beyond the end of the quiet street. The air was intoxicating. The ice crunched underfoot. Beyond the blue-grey fortress tower with its little iron flag, the coppery red disc of the moon rose up from behind the pointed roof and shone in Mikhail's face... He was terrified... His teeth were chattering, his blood had turned to ice... The tavern door creaked and there was the white spectre of the same wench standing on the porch.

"What are you scared of? Come back, dearie!"

Frightened out of his wits, Mikhail took to his heels.

The money soon ran out. His comrades dropped him. Regretting what had been eaten and drunk, what had been seen and not touched, Mikhail wandered round the town. There could be no thought of going back to his father in the country.

Finally, he remembered someone of his own age, his godfather's son, Stepan Odoyevsky, and knocked at the gates of his house. The serfs, who had ugly, bandit-like faces, gave him a surly reception: "What are you doing, coming up onto the porch with your hat on?" One of them snatched off Mikhail's headgear. After roughing him up, however, they let him through. In a warm, spacious passage, with animal hides spread over the benches, he was greeted by a youth as fancy as a gingerbread; he was dressed in a satin shirt and ornate Morocco leather boots.

"What d'you want with the boyar?" he asked insinuatingly, looking Mikhail arrogantly in the eye.

"Tell Stepan Semyonovich that his friend Mikhail Tyrtov has called to pay his respects."

"I'll tell him," intoned the youth, and he went out, languidly tossing his silken curls. Mikhail had to wait. Beggars can't be choosers. The youth reappeared and beckoned with his finger. "Come in."

Mikhail went into the reception room. Suddenly shy, he made the sign of the cross at the corner where the icons were curtained off with brocade trimmed with gold lace. He glanced covertly round the room. So that's how the rich folk live! What ostentation! The walls were covered with

patterned velvet. A variety of carpets and rugs on the floor... Velvet covers on the benches. Pearl-studded mats on the window-sills. By the walls, chests and coffers draped with silk and velvet. Any such cover would have made a fine coat or tunic you couldn't even dream of. Opposite the windows was a wooden grandfather clock surmounted by a brass elephant.

"Ah, Misha, greetings," said Stepan Odoyevsky from the doorway. Mikhail went up to him and bowed, his fingers touching the carpet. Stepan nodded in reply. Nevertheless, he held out his moist hand to be shaken as was right for a nobleman's son and not a serf. "Take a seat, be my guest."

He sat down, toying with his walking-stick. Mikhail also sat down. Stepan was wearing a gem-studded skull cap on his shaven head. His forehead was round and smooth; he had no eyebrows; his eyelids were red, his nose crooked, and there was a fuzz on his small chin. "Snivelling little runt and all that money!" thought Mikhail, and humbly, as befitting a poor man, he began telling about his failures, about the poverty that had poisoned his young life.

"Stepan Semyonych, for God's sake, tell your humble servant where to lay his head... I'd even go to a monastery ... or take to the highway with a club..." As Mikhail said this, Stepan jerked his head round to the wall and his protruding eyes went glassy. But Mikhail gave no sign of noticing; he had mentioned the club as if it were out of naivety. "Stepan Semyonych, I haven't the strength to bear this accursed poverty any longer..."

They were silent. Quietly, discreetly, Mikhail sighed. Stepan, an unkind smile on his face, ran the tip of his walking-stick over a winged beast on the carpet.

"What counsel can I give you, Misha?.. A clever man can always find a way, but fools only get a raw deal. Why, take Volodka Chemodanov winning two fine villages off his neighbour in a lawsuit... Or Leonty Pustoroslev getting an estate off the Chizhovs not long ago in Moscow..."

"I heard about that. I marvelled... But how d'you set about a thing like that—suing? It's no joke, surely?"

"Find a suitable village, then compromise its owner. That's how it's done..."

"What d'you mean by compromise?"

"Why, buy some paper and ink for a kopeck from an underclerk and make out a denunciation..."

"But how compromise him? Denunciation for what?"

"You're young, Misha, you haven't been weaned yet... Look, Levka Pustoroslev goes to Chizhov's name-day feast. He doesn't so much drink as keep his ears open, and when necessary, he says 'Yes'... Old man Chizhov talks too much at table: 'May God grant good health to our great sovereign, Fyodor Alexeyevich, for they say he won't live through Lent. They say a hen crowed like a cock in the Kremlin last night' ... Pustoroslev, no fool he, jumps up and shouts: 'Treason!' All the guests and the man whose name-day they were celebrating—hey presto!—off to the Secret Commission. Says Pustoroslev: 'The following insulting words were said about the tsar by Chizhov.' Chizhov's hands are tied behind his back and he's hoisted up off his feet. And they build a case on the hen that crowed like a cock. For loyal service, Pustoroslev gets Chizhov's estate, and Chizhov himself is sent to Siberia for life. That's how the clever ones go about it..." Stepan looked up at Mikhail with the unblinking eyes of a fish. "Volodka Chemodanov handled it even more simply. He reported that his neighbour intended to beat him to death and he promised the clerks a third of the proceeds. His neighbour was glad to give his last kopeck rather than face the court."

After thinking it over, Mikhail, twisting his hat round and round in his hands, said:

"But I haven't any experience of lawsuits, Stepan Semyonych."

"If you'd had any, I wouldn't be teaching you..." Stepan laughed so evilly that Mikhail recoiled, looking at the other's small, pitted teeth. "You need experience to go to court... Otherwise you'll end up on a rack before you know it... That's the thing, Misha—keep clear of the strong man and beat the weak one... I can see you came to me without fear..."

"Stepan Semyonych, how do you mean, without fear?.."

"Keep quiet; you must learn to shut up... I'm talking to you as a friend, but d'you know how it is with other people? Let's say I'm feeling bored... I clap my hands... The serfs come running into the room... Amuse me, loyal serfs... They take you by your lily-white hands out into the yard and they play with you as a cat plays with a mouse..." Again he laughed, but with his mouth only; his eyes were dead. "Don't be scared, I've been joking all day today."

Mikhail rose carefully to his feet, intending to bow. Stepan prodded him with the tip of his stick and made him sit down again.

"Forgive me for saying too much, Stepan Semyonych."

"You didn't say too much, but you were too bold for your rank, your place, and your birth," replied Stepan coldly and impressively. "Oh well, the Lord will forgive you. Next time, wait for me in the passage; but if you're called into the room, don't go in. If I ask you to sit down, don't. And you shouldn't give me a low bow, you should go down on your knees before me."

Mikhail's nostrils quivered, but he got a grip of himself and began humbly thanking his host for the lesson. Stepan yawned and made the sign of the cross over his mouth.

"I really must help you in your need... I have a certain worry... Can you keep your mouth shut?... Well, all right, then... I can see you're a smart young man... Come closer..." He banged his stick on the floor. Mikhail hurriedly sat beside him. Stepan looked him up and down carefully. "Where are you staying? In a tavern? Come and stay the nights here. I'll let you have a coat, an undercoat and a decent pair of boots, and you can put those wretched things of yours away for the time being. A certain boyarina needs ... accommodating."

"You mean?.." Mikhail's face was suffused with a deep crimson flush.

"Exactly. She's got the itch. You'll be able to stuff your pockets with money without any trouble at all... There's this high-up boyarina... She owns a fortune and she's got the devil in the flesh... You know what I mean, Misha? As long as you do as you're told, your luck's in. But if you steal, I'll have you flung into the bear-pit and they'll never find your bones." (He shot his hands out of his pearl-studded sleeves and clapped them. The insolent young man of a short while ago came in.) "Feoktist, take the nobleman's son to the baths, give him underlinen and a decent suit of clothes... Bring him to me at supper-time."

14

When the tsarevna Sophia came back from church, she was tired. She had attended two Lent services that day. She had eaten rye bread and cabbage, and very little even

of that. She sat down on her father's chair, which was of foreign make, and laid on her knees a piece of Communion bread wrapped in an embroidered kerchief. The chair had been specially fetched on her orders from the Faceted Hall. When the widow Natalia heard about it, she shouted, "The tsarevna will have the throne moved into the chambers next." Let the tsaritsa Natalia rage on...

The coloured rays of the March sun were beating fiercely through the glass panes of the two small windows. The interior of the chamber was clean and simple; there was an aroma of dry herbs. White walls, as in a monastery cell. The tiled stove was hot. The benches, the table and the utensils were covered with canvas. The rose-painted dial of the standing clock was revolving slowly. The book-case had been draped with a cloth; it was Lent: reading and amusement were out of the question.

Sophia rested her feet in their cloth slippers on the bench and half-closed her eyes, her head nodding as she dozed. Spring, spring, sin wandering about the world and sweetly insinuating itself into a maiden's chamber... And this in Lent!.. She should lower the curtains over the windows and extinguish those beams of coloured light, but she was loth to rise and loth to call the maid. She could still hear in her mind the chants of the ancient piety, but her restless ear was on the alert. Wasn't that a floorboard creaking? Wasn't that the light of her life approaching, ah, wasn't that sin coming in?.. "Never mind, I'll pray for forgiveness... I'll visit all the holy shrines on foot... Let it come in."

It was drowsy in the chamber; only the pendulum tick-tocked away. Many tears had been shed in here. Many times had Sophia agonised within these walls... Scream, bite your hands—the years were passing just the same and youth was losing its lustre... A maid, the tsar's daughter, was doomed to eternal virginity, to the black habit of the nun. From this chamber there was only one door—to the convent. How many tsarevnas in here had screamed frantically at night into their pillows, had torn their hair—no one had ever known.

How many of them had lived their barren lives and had finally gone to rest under the convent flagstones? The names of those tragic maids have been forgotten. Only one had found happiness: she had broken free like a wild bird from the maiden's prison. She had let her heart have its way,

"Love"... The light of her eyes was the handsome Vassily Vassilyevich, no husband with a whip and heavy boots, but a lover whispering sweet nothings, a paramour, secretive and impatient... Oh, sin, sin! Letting go of the Communion bread, Sophia waved her hands weakly as if trying to chase temptation away, smiling, her eyes still closed, at the warm sunbeams coming through the window, at the burning visions...

15

A floorboard creaked. Sophia started, staring fixedly at the door as if her fiery-winged destroyer was about to fly in at the very moment attired in golden robes. Her lips quivered; she rested her elbow on the velvet arm of her chair again and lowered her face onto the palm of her hand. Her heart was thudding loudly in her breast.

Vassily Vassilyevich Golitsyn entered with circumspection, stooping under the low lintel. He came to a halt without saying anything. Sophia would have engulfed him with her tumultuous body like an ocean wave, but she was pretending to be half asleep: it was more becoming this way—the tsarevna was tired after church and was sleeping with a smile on her lips.

"Sophia," he called, almost inaudibly. He bent over, his brocade rustling. Sophia's lips parted. His fragrant moustaches tickled her cheeks, the warm lips drew nearer, applied themselves firmly. Sophia quivered; ineffable desire ran down her spine and dissolved with a hot shudder in her broad loins. She raised her arms to embrace Vassily Vassilyevich's head, then pushed him back:

"Oh, get away with you... What are you doing?... It's a sin, on Friday..."

She opened her intelligent eyes and was amazed, as always, at Vassily Vassilyevich's beauty. She sensed that he was impatient. She shook her head, and her whole being was suffused with joy.

"Sophia," he said. "Ivan Mikhailovich and Ivan Andreyevich Khovansky are downstairs. They bring you great news. Come outside. The matter is most urgent..."

Sophia seized his hands, pressed them to her full bosom and kissed them. Her eyelids were moist with an excess of love. She went to the mirror to adjust her headdress and

absently glanced over her reflection: plain, but he loved her anyway...

"Let us go."

At the window, their sable and fox fur hats touching the vaulted ceiling, stood Khovansky with Ivan Mikhailovich Miloslavsky, the tsarevna's uncle: wide cheekbones, narrow eyes, sweating profusely, in a fur coat—a recent gift—red in the face with repletion and agitation. Sophia went up to them quickly and bowed her head, nun's fashion. Ivan Mikhailovich pushed his beard and lips as far forward as was physically possible—he could not come any closer owing to his considerable girth.

"Matveyev is already at the Trinity-St. Sergius Laura". (Sophia's green eyes widened.) "The monks are greeting him as if he were tsar... Expect him in Moscow on May the twelfth. My nephew, Pyotr Tolstoy, has just galloped over from the Laura... After church, he says, Matveyev abused and shamed us Miloslavskys in front of all the people. 'Ravens,' he said, 'have flocked to the tsar's treasury... They want to hop into the palace on the pikes of the streltsy... But that will never be... I shall suppress any mutiny, I shall send the streltsy regiments away to other towns and to the frontiers. I shall clip the wings of the chief boyars. I shall swear loyalty on the Cross to tsar Pyotr Alexeyevich. Since he is a minor, let his mother Natalia Kirillovna rule in his stead. I shall not die in peace till all this has come to pass...'"

Sophia's face turned grey. She stood with her head bowed and her arms limp at her sides. Only the horned headdress trembled and the thick braid moved on her back. Vassily Vassilyevich was standing apart, in the shadows. Khovansky stared gloomily down at his feet and said:

"It shall come to pass, but not that... Matveyev will not be in Moscow..."

"But," whispered Miloslavsky even more hurriedly, "he shamed and abused prince Vassily Vassilyevich more than anyone: 'Vaska Golitsyn is reaching for the tsar's crown, so off with his head'..."

Sophia slowly turned round and her eye met those of Vassily Vassilyevich. He smiled: a tiny, weak, pathetic line appeared at the corner of his mouth. Sophia realised that his life was in the balance... She would have burned Moscow down without a qualm for that smile...

"What are the streltsy saying?" asked Sophia, swallowing her agitation.

Miloslavsky breathed hard. Vassily Vassilyevich walked silently across the room, glanced at the doors, returned and stood behind Sophia. Unable to restrain herself, she interrupted Khovansky after he had begun speaking:

"Tsaritsa Natalia Kirillovna now thirsts for blood... Why should she? Or is it that she just cannot forget her mean birth? When she lived with her mother and father, she went about in bast shoes... Everybody knows that when Matveyev took her into the palace out of pity, she hadn't even a change of dress... And she'd never lived in a palace, she was used to drinking wine at the same table as the muzhiks." Sophia's full neck, tightly constricted by the bejewelled collar of her shirt, was suffused with rage, and there were hectic patches on her cheeks. "The tsaritsa has lived merrily in her time, and she enjoyed many a jest with my late father and Patriarch Nikon... We know, who have lived in the palace... Little brother Peter, frankly, is an oddity. He doesn't take after his father in look or manners." Sophia's rings grated as she clasped her hands and pressed them to her bosom... "I, a maid, am ashamed to talk to you of the sovereign's affairs... But if Natalia Kirillovna thirsts for blood, then blood she shall have... Otherwise, all of you shall lose your heads and I shall throw myself down a well..."

"It's pleasant, truly pleasant to hear such words," said Vassily Vassilyevich. "Prince Ivan Andreyevich, tell the tsarevna what's happening in the regiments..."

"Apart from the Stremyanny, all the regiments are for you, Sophia Alexeyevna," said Khovansky. "Every day, the streltsy gather in large numbers outside the assembly huts, throw stones and sticks at the windows and shout obscenities about the colonels and their mothers..." ("Hem!"—Miloslavsky cleared his throat at this, and Vassily Vassilyevich blinked uneasily: but Sophia never so much as batted an eyelid). When Colonel Bukhvostov and Sotnik Boborykin started speaking harshly and reproaching them, the streltsy took them up to the belfry and threw them down, and they shouted: "Hurray, hurray!..." And they won't obey the orders. In the suburbs, in Bely Gorod, and in Kitaigorod, they're assembling in groups and stirring the people up in the markets; and they go to the public baths and shout: "We'll not be ruled by the Naryshkins and Matveyev, we'll wring their necks first!"

"They have loud enough voices to shout with, but we must witness great deeds on their part." Sophia drew herself up, her eye-brows raised. "They need not fear to hoist Artamon Matveyev up on their pikes, and Yazykov, and Likhachev—my enemies, the Naryshkins—the whole brood... Nor need they fear to finish off her whelp... Stepmother, stepmother!.. Accursed womb... Here, take this..." Sophia gripped all her rings, pulled them off her fingers and offered them to Khovansky. "Send them these... Tell them that they shall be granted all they ask... Pay, and land, and privileges... Let them stop at nothing if need be. Tell them to call out for me to ascend the throne."

Miloslavsky could only wave his hands at Sophia in fright. Khovansky, almost deranged with excitement, bared his teeth... Vassily Vassilyevich shaded his eyes with the palm of his hand for no apparent reason—perhaps he did not want the arrogance on his face to be seen at these words...

16

Sasha and Alyosha got fat on pies that spring. They had never lived better. Zayats put on weight too and became lazy: "I've done my bit, now you work for me, lads." He sat all day on the porch watching the chickens and the sparrows. He took to cracking nuts with his teeth. Idleness and obesity gave him ideas. "What if the boys hide the money? They can't help stealing, even if only a little."

He began, when counting the takings of an evening, to ply them with questions, to find fault, to feel their pockets and cheeks in search of hidden money. He began to sleep badly at nights, always thinking: "Anyone's bound to steal if he's near money." There was only one recourse left: to put the wind up the boys.

One day, Sasha and Alyosha came in for supper in a cheerful mood and handed over the takings. Zayats counted up the cash and accused them: there was one kopeck missing... They'd stolen it! Where was the kopeck? He picked up a stick cut that very morning, seized Sasha by the hair and began thrashing him, chanting as he did so: "One—for Sasha, two—for Alyosha..." Having thoroughly trounced the boys, he ordered supper to be served.

"That's how it is," he said, stuffing his mouth with meat jelly flavoured with vinegar and pepper, "nowadays, one

that's been beaten is worth two that haven't... I'll make men of you lads and you'll thank me for it, too."

Zayats ate cabbage soup with pork, chicken's rumps in honey with ginger, noodles with chicken, and roast meat. He washed his kasha down with milk. Laying his spoon on the bare table, he belched delicately. His cheeks wobbled with repletion, his eyes went puffy. He unfastened a button on his breeches:

"You'll pray to God for me, my dear children... I'm a good fellow... Eat, drink, look on me as your father..."

Sasha said nothing, pulled a face and would not look Zayats in the eye. After supper, he said to Alyosha:

"I quit my father because of beatings, and I'm certainly not going to stand for this. Now he's going to start getting rough, the hog."

Alyosha was horrified at the idea of running away from such a bountiful life. It would have been better, of course, without the beatings. But how on earth could you find a place where they didn't beat you? He wept secretly on the stove. But he mustn't lose his comrade. They took their trays of pasties in the morning and went out.

It was a fresh May morning. Blue-grey puddles. Fragrant leaves on the birch-trees. The starlings were twittering, their heads lifted to the sun. Mischievous girls were standing at the gates of houses, too idle to work. One barefooted wench was wearing nothing but a linen shift, a bast headdress on her head and ribbons in her hair. She had a wild look in her eyes. The starlings on the roofs chirruped like nightingales, luring the girls into the woods... onto the grass. It was spring indeed!..

"Home-baked pies with honey!"

Sasha laughed:

"Zayats can wait for his takings this time."

"Oh, Sasha, that's stealing!"

"You bumpkin... Has he paid us any wages, the devil? We've been breaking our backs for him for nothing these two months... Hey, come and buy, strelets; hare's meat pasties, hot from the hearth, two for a grosh..."

They kept meeting more and more women and girls at the gates; there were crowds of people at the crossroads. Some streltsy went past at the double, their pole-axes rattling. The people made way for them, eyeing them fearfully. The nearer the boys drew to All Saints Bridge over the Moskva

River, the more streltsy and crowds there were. People had settled like flies all over the river bank. They had climbed up onto dunghills to stare at the Kremlin. In the mirror-like water, barely stirred by the current, lay the tranquil reflections of the green-topped towers, the battlements of the brick walls and the golden domes of the little churches and the cathedrals. But the talk among the people was not so calm. Something was brewing in the Maytime quiet, behind the fortress walls, where could be seen the colourful, fantastic, richly ornamented roofs of the boyars' houses and the monarch's palace. Just exactly what, no one yet knew. The streltsy were making a lot of noise but were not crossing the bridge, which was guarded on the Kremlin side by two cannon. Foot and horse of the tsar's life guards could be seen over there. Swans' wings on copper bows were suspended on their backs over their white caftans. There were not many of them and they were evidently nervous as they watched the thousands streaming up from Balchug.

Sasha was whirling about near the bridge like a demon. He and Alyosha had sold out their pies in no time and had thrown away the trays. This was no time for trade. They felt strangely excited. People were beginning to shout here and there in the crowd. All were at boiling point. Life was intolerable the way things were. They shook their fists at the Kremlin towers. An old man, an artisan, climbed up onto a dung heap, removed the bonnet from his shiny pate and said slowly:

"The people rose up like this under the late Alexei Mikhailovich... There was no bread, there was no salt, money was cheap, the Treasury melted down the silver coins and minted copper ones instead... The boyars were greedy, they bled the people white... The people revolted, they pulled Alexei Mikhailovich down from his horse and they tore the fur coat he was wearing... They smashed up many boyars' houses and burned them down, and they gave the boyars a thrashing... And the great-hearted Cossack Razin rose up on the Lower Volga... And then there should have been liberty, the people should have lived in freedom and riches... But they didn't give him enough support... The people are weak, all they can do is shout. And this time if there's no agreement, just wait and see—it'll be the block and the gallows again; the boyars'll get the better of you..."

The people listened to him, their mouths open... There was

even greater dismay and bitterness in their hearts. They understood only that there was no power in the Kremlin and it would be a suitable time to shake that eternal citadel. But how?

In another place, a strelets rushed up to the crowd:

"What are you waiting for? Boyar Matveyev rode into Moscow just at daybreak... Don't you know who Matveyev is? As long as the boyars hadn't a leader and were squabbling in the Kremlin, at least life was tolerable... But now we've got a real lord and master on our hands—he'll tighten the reins... He'll cripple you all with tribute and taxes such as you've never known before... You've got to rise now; tomorrow it'll be too late..."

Heads reeled at these words. Tomorrow it would be too late... Eyes went bloodshot... The Kremlin seemed like a mirage, lazily reflected in the river—hoary, forbidden, treacherous, full of gold... There was not a single gunner at the cannon on the walls. Everything seemed dead. High in the sky, kites were sailing over the Kremlin...

Suddenly, there was movement among the winged lifeguards and the faint sound of shouting. A horseman had appeared among them, turning round and round on a snow-white horse. They would not let him through, brandishing their broad-bladed pole-axes. He made his horse rear, broke through the cordon, losing his hat, and galloped over the floating bridge, the water squirting up between the planks—clip-clop,—the thin-legged horse merrily tossed its mane.

The thousands watching fell silent. A single shot aimed at the galloping horseman rang out on the far side. Bursting into the crowd, he stood up on his stirrups. The skin moved on his shaved skull, the gaunt, long-nosed face was flushed with the exertion of galloping. He was breathing heavily, his eyes sparkling under the charcoal-black brows. They knew who this was.

"Tolstoy... Pyotr Andreyevich... Miloslavsky's nephew... He's with us... Listen to what he says..."

"People!... Streltsy!.." shouted Pyotr Andreyevich in a high-pitched, broken voice. "Woe!.. Matveyev and the Naryshkins have just strangled tsarevich Ivan. If you don't hurry up they'll get Peter too... Into the Kremlin, quickly, or it'll be too late!.."

The mob growled, bellowed, shouted, then made for the bridge, yelling. Thousands of heads bobbed, Tolstoy's white

steed turning round and round in their midst. The bridge creaked and sank lower; they ran across it up to the knees in water. Silent, ferocious, thrusting the people aside, detachments of streltsy swept through one after another. A bell began tolling somewhere—boom, boom, boom!—faster, faster, more frighteningly. The other belfries responded, the bells rocked to and fro, and all forty-times-forty Moscow churches began sounding the tocsin...

Somewhere in the silent Kremlin, a window flashed in the sunlight as it slammed shut, then another...

17

With the regiments getting mixed up in the general impatience, the streltsy charged up to the Faceted Hall and the Cathedral of the Annunciation. Many had fallen behind on the way and were battering at the heavy gates of the boyars' houses or climbing up to the belfries to sound the tocsin. Ivan the Great boomed terrifyingly in his sixteen-ton bass. Boyars' household servants lay dead or, wounded and groaning, crawled along on their hands and knees down the narrow passages between the houses, stone monastery walls and yellow sides of the Commissions long building. Several frightened, riderless horses galloped past and were caught with much laughter. There was shouting, and windows were being smashed with stones.

The streltsy, the people, and swarms of little boys (including Sasha and Alyosha), stared at the monarch's colourful palace that covered a quarter of the Kremlin Square. Stone and timber buildings, steep roofs, squat houses, towers and turrets, all painted red, green and dark blue, faced with boards or log-built and interconnected by a multitude of passages and staircases. Hundreds of tent-shaped or onion-domed roofs, fantastic pinnacles, ribbed, pot-bellied, serrated like cockscombs, all glittering in gold and silver. Here lived the lord of the land, the first after God...

It was somehow frightening, nevertheless. It was not for the common folk to come here with arms, and even the boyar would leave his horse at the gates and would splash through the mud on foot, doffing his hat and looking up in awe at the tsar's windows. People stood and stared. The voice of Ivan the Great made the chest vibrate. It was overpowering.

Then some nimble characters ran out in front of the crowd.

"Come on, lads, what are you standing and staring for? They've strangled tsarevich Ivan, they're finishing off tsar Peter now. Come on, set up the ladders, break down the doors!"

A roar travelled through the thousands in the crowd. The drums rattled sharply. "Come on, come on," yelled frenzied voices. About two dozen streltsy rushed forward and climbed over the railings, drawing their curved sabres. They ran up onto the Main Porch. They battered at the copper-sheathed door, put their shoulders to it and pushed. "Heave-ho! Heave-ho! Heave-ho!" roared the crowd. Ladders obtained from somewhere swayed overhead. They were set up against the windows of the Faceted Hall and the side banisters of the porch. The streltsy began climbing them.

"Give us Matveyev, give us the Naryshkins!" they shouted gnashing their teeth in fury.

18

"They'll kill us, they'll kill us... What are we to do, Artamon Sergeyevich?"

"God is merciful, tsaritsa. I shall go out and speak to them... Have you sent for the patriarch? Let someone else run and fetch him..."

"Artamon Sergeyevich, that's them, that's them—my enemies... Yazykov saw them—two Miloslavskys, in disguise, with the streltsy..."

"Yours is a woman's business. Say your prayers, tsaritsa..."

"He's coming, he's coming!" There came a shout from the passage. Patriarch Joachim entered, planting the sharp tip of his staff in the oaken floor. His fierce eyes in their dark sockets were fixed on the low windows under the arches. Outside, the faces of the streltsy on the ladders were flattened against the tinted window panes. The patriarch raised a withered hand and shook his finger at them. The heads fell back.

Natalia Kirillovna rushed up to the patriarch. Her plump face was white under the black fox-fur hat. She clutched his icy hand, kissing it over and over again, babbling desperately:

"Save me, save me, My Lord..."

"My Lord, things are bad," said Artamon Sergeyevich

grimly. The patriarch turned the dilated pupils of his eyes on him. Matveyev's pepper-and-salt beard wagged as he spoke: "It's a conspiracy, an outright mutiny... They don't know themselves what they're shouting..."

Eagle-eyed and thin-nosed like an ancient icon, Matveyev was calm. He had seen much in his long life and had been near death many times. Only one feeling was left to him—proud ambition... Containing the fury that trembled in his senile eyelids, he said:

"If we could just talk them into leaving the Kremlin, we could deal with them then..."

The din of blows and shouting continued outside the windows. The handsome and dandified brother of the tsaritsa, Ivan Kirillovich Naryshkin, already a boyar at twenty-four, scurried across the hall from door to door on tiptoe. This was the one whom the streltsy and the boyars abominated worse than Satan himself. It was said that he had already tried on the tsar's crown for size. His little black moustaches seemed stuck onto his now greenish face: it was as if he had a premonition of tomorrow's torture and horrible death on the place of execution. Flourishing his Polish sleeves, he shouted:

"Sophia's come!" He ran behind the door. After him came limping on bandy legs a dwarf no bigger than a toddler, clutching his jester's cap, his wrinkled little face all in tears, as if he too felt that he would betray tomorrow his master. Quickly into the hall Sophia came, Vassily Vassilyevich Golitsyn and Khovansky. Sophia's cheeks were heavily rouged. She was clad all in golden brocade and was wearing a high pearl-studded headdress. Her hands pressed to her bosom, she bowed low to the tsaritsa and the patriarch. Natalia Kirillovna recoiled as from a snake, her eyelashes flickered, but she said nothing.

"The people are angry, which means there is a reason," said Sophia loudly. "You should go out with my little brothers, tsaritsa... God knows what they're shouting—something about the children having been murdered... Talk them round, promise them mercy, otherwise they'll break into the palace at any moment..."

As she spoke, her white teeth were chattering and her green eyes glittering with gleeful excitement. Matveyev stepped towards her.

"This is no time for the settling of women's quarrels..."

"Then you go out to them..."

"I have no fear of death, Sophia Alexeyevna..."

"Do not argue," said the patriarch, banging his staff on the floor. "Show them the children, Ivan and Peter..."

"No!" shrieked Natalia Kirillovna, clutching at her temples. "My Lord, I forbid it... I am afraid..."

"Take the children out onto the Main Porch," repeated the patriarch.

19

And now the lock began to screech on the heavy door of the Main Porch. The crowds edged forward and were silent, watching eagerly. The drums stopped beating.

Sasha was clinging to a column on the porch with his arms and legs wound round it. Alyosha was with him, although he was absolutely terrified.

The door swung open. They saw tsaritsa Natalia Kirillovna in a widow's black caftan and a gold brocade cloak. Seeing the thousands upon thousands of eyes fixed on her, the tsaritsa swayed slightly. Someone's hands held out to her a little boy in a tight-fitting little coloured caftan. With a push of her stomach the tsaritsa lifted him up and stood him on the ballustrade of the porch. The Cap of Monomakh had slipped down over the boy's ear, revealing black, close-cropped hair. Round-cheeked and blunt-nosed, he craned his neck. His eyes were round, like those of a mouse. The little mouth was tense with fear.

The tsaritsa tried to say something, but the words stuck in her throat and she threw back her head. Matveyev emerged from behind her. A snarl ran through the crowd... He was holding by the hand another little boy, slightly older, with a drawn, blank face and a protruding nether lip.

"Who has been lying to you?" began Matveyev in a senile but strong voice, his white brows knitted. "Who has been lying to you that the tsar and the tsarevich have been strangled?.. Look, that is tsar Peter Alexeyevich in the tsaritsa's arms... He is well and in good spirits. This is the tsarevich Ivan." He lifted up the impassive little boy and showed him to the crowd. "Both are alive, by the grace of God..." (They began exchanging glances in the crowd and saying: "That's them all right, there's no deception...") "Streltsy! Go back to your homes in peace... If you need

something, if there are any requests or complaints, send spokesmen..."

Khovansky and Vassily Vassilyevich descended the porch steps and went among the crowd. Laying their hands on the shoulders of the streltsy and the commoners, they enjoined them to disperse, but spoke almost as if laughing up their sleeves. Ugly voices rang out from the now placated crowd:

"What if they *are* alive?.."

"We can see they're alive!.."

"We still won't leave the Kremlin!.."

"You think we're fools!.. We know your fine words..."

"Then we'll have our nostrils torn out in front of the commission's hall!.."

"Give us the Matveyevs and the Naryshkins!.."

"We want Ivan Kirillovich Naryshkin!.. He's tried on the tsar's crown for size!.."

"They're bloodsuckers, those boyars!.. We want Yazykov!.. We want Dolgoruky!.."

The voices were shouting more and more violently, naming all the hated boyars in turn. Natalia Kirillovna turned pale again and clutched her son. Peter kept turning his round head, and someone called out with a laugh: "Look at that—a real pussy-cat." Prince Mikhail Dolgoruky ran down from the porch, all crimson velvet, sables and rattling arms. The son of a streltsy commander, sleek and arrogant, he shouted at the streltsy, brandishing his whip:

"You sons-of-bitches, you're glad my father's sick. Riff-raff! Get out of here, you dogs, you serfs!.."

The streltsy nearly recoiled before the whistling lash... But these were different times; it was a blunder to use such language... Panting, grunting, they strained towards him:

"Haven't you dived down from a belfry yet?.. Who are you to us, you young whelp! Get him, lads!"

They seized him by the cross-belt and ripped it off; the velvet caftan was torn to ribbons. Mikhail Dolgoruky drew his sabre and, fighting them off, retreated up onto the porch. The streltsy lowered their pikes and charged after him. They seized him. The tsaritsa shrieked frantically. Dolgoruky's spread-eagled body sailed into the air and was lost in the crowd that trampled him down and tore him to pieces. Matveyev and the tsaritsa moved towards the door. But it was too late. Ovsei Rzhov and his comrades dashed out of the passage.

"Get Matveyev!" they shouted.

"That's it, that's it!" roared the crowd.

Ovsei Rzhov set on Matveyev from behind. The tsaritsa waved her sleeves and clung to him. Tsarevich Ivan, pushed aside, fell down and burst into tears. Peter's round face was distorted, twisted; he clutched with both hands at Matveyev's pepper-and-salt beard...

"Pull him off, don't be scared, tear him to pieces," yelled the streltsy, raising their pikes. "Throw him down to us!"

They dragged the tsaritsa off and pushed Peter to one side as if he were a kitten. Matveyev's huge body, the mouth wide open, suddenly rose high in the air, the legs apart, and was tossed onto the waiting pikes.

The streltsy, the people and the two little boys, Sasha and Alyosha, burst into the palace with its hundreds of rooms. The tsaritsa with both boys was still on the porch, out of her wits with terror. Once again, Khovansky and Golitsyn approached those left in the square; people in the crowd were shouting:

"We want Ivan for tsar!.. Both of them... We want Sophia!.. That's it, that's it! We want Sophia to reign... We want a column on Red Square, a memorial column, so that our freedom lasts forever!.."

Chapter Two

1

The streltsy had done their worst. They wiped out many boyars: the tsaritsa's brothers Ivan and Afanasy Naryshkin, the princes Yuri and Mikhail Dolgoruky, Grigori and Andrei Romodanovsky, Mikhail Cherkassky, Matveyev, Pyotr and Fyodor Saltykov, Yazykov and others of lower degree. They got their pay—two hundred and forty thousand rubles, and ten rubles for each strelets as a bonus. (Gold and silver plate had to be collected from all the towns and cities and melted down for money to pay the men.) A column was erected on Red Square with the names of the slain boyars, their crimes and their misdeeds, inscribed on all four sides. The regiments demanded charters in which the boyars swore neither now nor henceforth to call the streltsy mutineers, traitors and other things, or to execute them, or to banish them without just cause.

After eating and drinking up the Kremlin stores, the streltsy dispersed to the suburbs, and the artisans to their homes. Everything was as before. Nothing happened. Over Moscow, over the other cities, over hundreds of districts scattered all over that vast country the centuries-old darkness of poverty, serfdom and deprivation continued to hold sway.

The muzhik with his flayed backside somehow picked at the hateful soil. The artisan in his cold home howled under the burden of intolerable dues and taxes. All the petty tradesmen groaned. The small landowner became poorer. The land was being exhausted: the harvest was three times the sowing, thank the Lord. Even the boyars and the rich merchants were grumbling. How much did a boyar need in his grandfather's times? A coat of sables and a fine fur hat. At home, he supped the usual cabbage soup with salt pork, slept, and prayed to the Lord. But now he had a greedy look in his eye. He wanted to live as well as the Polish gentry, or the Letts, or the Germans: they'd heard things and they'd seen a great deal. Their hearts were inflamed with greed.

The boyars began taking on servants by the hundred. But to shoe them, clothe them in uniform and feed the insatiable horde called for more money than ever. It became unseemly to live in wooden homes. Formerly, the boyars or boyarynas had driven out of the yard in a one-horse sleigh with a serf sitting on the box, behind the shaft-bow. They had attached foxtails to the horse's collar, bridle and the breech strap to make others envious. Now, it was the done thing to send to Danzig for a gilded carriage and harness it with a team of four, otherwise you lost prestige. And where was the money to come from? Things were tight, very tight.

Trade was bad. You couldn't sell much to your own people, they were hard up. You couldn't sent goods abroad—there was no transport. The seas were ruled by others. All overseas trade had been taken over by foreigners. When you heard of the business they were doing in other countries, you felt like banging your head against the wall out of sheer frustration. Curse you, Russia, what sort of a country are you? When will you start moving?

Moscow now had two tsars—Ivan and Peter, and over them was the regent, tsarevna Sophia. A new lot of boyars had replaced the old. That was all. Tedium. Time had stopped. There was nothing to look forward to. At one time, a sentry with a pole-axe had stood on duty at the streltsy memorial column on Red Square, but he had disappeared. The common people had thrown all kinds of garbage round it. People began grumbling in the markets again and there were rumours in the air. The streltsy began to have doubts: they hadn't done the job thoroughly at the time; there'd been a big uproar, but no sense to it. Shouldn't they finish it off before it was too late?

The old men talked about the good old days: life had been cheaper, there had been more to eat and there had been better manners. Men and women had joined in round dances in the villages. People had grown fat with idleness in the settlements. Banditry had been unheard of. Oh yes, those times had been and gone!

Six Old Believers appeared in one of the streltsy quarters. They were old dogmatists, as dry as bones. "The only salvation," they said to the streltsy, "your only salvation is to get rid of the Nikonian patriarch and the whole Nikonised and Polish-influenced boyar assembly and return to the God-fearing faith, to the old life." They read passages from

the Solovetsky notebooks* on how to avoid the blandishments of Nikonianism and save the soul and the body. The streltsy wept as they listened. One of the Old Believers, Nikita Pustosvyat, stood on a wagon in the market and read aloud to the people from a Solovetsky notebook:

"Brethren, I have seen the Antichrist, verily I have seen him... Once, being sorrowful and thinking how the Antichrist would come, I was saying my prayers, but I fell into a trance, cursed that I be. And lo, I saw a multitude in the field. And one was standing at my side. And I said unto him: 'Wherefore this multitude?' and he answered: 'The Antichrist cometh, stay, have no fear.' I leaned on my two-horned staff and I stood there cheerfully. But lo, they were leading a naked man, his flesh was all filth and exceeding foul, and he was breathing fire from his mouth, from his nostrils, and a foul flame issued forth from his ears. After him came our tsar, and the mighty, and the boyars, and the stewards and the noblemen of the Duma... And I spat on him, and I felt the evil and the horror... I know by the scriptures—he shall come soon. Already he hath many offspring like mad dogs..."

Now they knew what to demand. The streltsy rushed to the Kremlin. The head of the Streltsy Commission, Ivan Andreyevich Khovansky, took up the cause of the old believers. The six bony schismatics and Nikita Pustosvyat, after supping no sup and eating no crumb for three days, brought a lectern, wooden crosses and old books to the Faceted Hall, and reviled and abused the patriarch and the clergy in front of Sophia.

"We want the old faith, we want the old ways!" shouted the streltsy at the Main Porch. And others said even more firmly: "It's time for the tsarevna to go to a nunnery, she's caused enough trouble with her rule." Only one option remained, and Sophia threatened them in fury:

"You would exchange us for six monks, six muzhiks, six ignoramuses? In that case, we tsars cannot live here. We shall go to other cities, we shall tell the whole people of our ruin and of your treachery..."

The streltsy realised what Sophia was threatening them with and took fright: "Hey, lads, doesn't that mean she'd

* A reference to the Solovetsky Monastery, founded in the first half of the 15th century on Solovetsky Island in the White Sea. It became a centre of the anti-Nikonian movement.—*Ed.*

march on Moscow with a noblemen's levy?" They backed down. They began coming to terms. Already, by order of Vassily Vassilievich Golitsyn, tubs of vodka and beer were being brought up from the tsar's cellars onto the square. The streltsy wavered, their heads reeled. Someone shouted: "What the devil do we want with the old beliefs? It's priests' business! Get those old believers!" One bony old man was decapitated on the spot and two were crushed to death. The others ran for it and only escaped by the skin of their teeth.

The accursed boyars got the common people drunk and extricated themselves from a nasty predicament. Moscow buzzed like a beehive. Each shouted about his own concerns. Not a single leader was found, all stormed about at random. They smashed up the tsar's taverns. They seized under-clerks from the Commissions and tore them to pieces. It was impossible to walk or ride through Moscow in safety. They went to besiege the boyars' houses and the boyars only just managed to beat them off. Great was the slaughter at that time. Entire rows of huts were in flames. Abandoned corpses lay in the streets and markets. The rumour went round that the boyars had encircled Moscow with troops; they intended to quell the uprising at one stroke. Once again, the streltsy and flocks of runaway serfs went to the Kremlin with a petition stuck on the point of a pike demanding that all the boyars be handed over for trial and punishment. White with fury, Sophia came out onto the Main Porch. "They're lying about us! There was no thought of such a levy, I swear by this!" she cried, tearing off her glittering diamond cross. "It's tsarevich Matveika that's been spreading the lies about us." And the only victim to be thrown from the Porch onto the pikes of the streltsy was the nondescript Tatar tsarevich Matveika. Choke yourselves on him!

Matveika was torn to pieces. The streltsy appeased their fury and went away again, having really gained nothing at all... For three days and three nights Moscow was in turmoil. Flocks of crows flew high into the sky at the tolling of the tocsin. Then the most desperate ones decided to sever the head from the body—to put both tsars and Sophia to death. When Moscow woke up on the fourth day, however, the Kremlin was empty: no tsars, no tsarevna. They had fled with the boyars. The people were terror-struck.

Sophia went to the village of Kolomenskoye and sent

heralds out to the provinces to muster a noblemen's levy. All that August, she toured the villages and monasteries round Moscow, wept at the church porches and bewailed her grievances and ruin. Ivan Andreyevich Khovansky stayed with the streltsy in the Kremlin. They even thought of proclaiming him tsar—he was an amiable man, of ancient lineage, loyal to the old customs. He would be the right tsar for the common people.

In expectation of rich rewards, the nobles blithely mounted their horses. An enormous levy of some two hundred thousand converged on the Trinity-St. Sergius Laura. Meanwhile, Sophia was still fluttering round Moscow like a bird. In September, she sent out a detachment of horse under Stepan Odoyevsky which descended on the village of Pushkino at dawn. Ivan Andreyevich Khovansky had camped for the night there in a tent on a hill; he had been touring the country outside Moscow with the steltsy. They had gone to sleep without posting sentries, as they should have done. While still half-asleep, they were all sabred to pieces. Still in his underlinen, Ivan Andreyevich rushed out of his tent brandishing a poleaxe. Mikhail Tyrtov jumped down from horseback straight onto his shoulders. Bound to the saddle, Ivan Andreyevich was taken to the village of Vozdvizhenskoye, where Sophia was celebrating her name day. The boyars were sitting on the outskirts of the village on benches specially brought out for the purpose. They were in wartime array—in helmets and cloaks. Mikhail Tyrtov flung Khovansky down from the saddle. In his grief and shame, only half-dressed, the prisoner kneeled down on the grass and burst into tears. Shaklovity, the Clerk of the Duma, read a summary of his crimes. "Lies!" shouted Ivan Andreyevich in a frenzy. "But for me, Moscow would have been swimming in blood long ago..." It was not easy for the boyars, making up their minds whether or not to shed the blood of so ancient a family. Vassily Vassilyevich sat there as white as a sheet. He and Khovansky were Gediminovichi, and a Gediminovich was now being judged by low-born upstarts. Noticing this hesitation, Ivan Mikhailovich Miloslavsky went to the mounted men and whispered something to Stepan Odoyevsky. The latter tore at full gallop across the village to tsarevna Sophia's silken tent and returned at the same speed, trampling down chickens and little children on the way. "The regent has ordered us to entertain no doubts

and to despatch the prince." Vassily Vassilyevich left hastily, covering his face with a kerchief. Khovansky screamed frantically when Mikhail Tyrtov seized him by the hair, dragging him through the dust onto the road. There, on the outskirts, Khovansky was beheaded.

The streltsy were left without a leader. When they heard about the execution, they rushed to the Kremlin in horror, locked the gates, loaded the cannon and prepared for a siege, exactly like the Poles a hundred years before, when Moscow had been invested by the troops of the Novgorod merchants.

Sophia hastened to the Trinity-St. Sergius Laura to take refuge within its impregnable walls. She appointed Vassily Vassilyevich commander-in-chief of the levy. And so they stood, the two sides, threatening one another and waiting to see which would lose courage first. It was the streltsy who lost their nerve and sent spokesmen to the monastery with a letter of repentance. That was the end of their freedom. The pillar was removed from Red Square. The freedom charters were rescinded. Shaklovity, a quick man to administer punishment, was appointed head of the Streltsy Commission. Many regiments were sent to other towns. The people simmered down and became as quiet as mice. And once again, a despairing silence reigned over Moscow and over the whole land. The years dragged on.

2

Sasha was running down the street along the fences at dusk. His heart was thudding and his eyes were half-blinded with sweat. A hut on fire in the distance threw a sombre glow on the puddles in the wheel-ruts. Some twenty paces behind, his boots clumping, ran Danila Menshikov, drunk. This time, however, it wasn't a whip in his hand, but a curved, glittering knife. "Stop!" Danila was shouting in a terrible voice, "I'll kill you!" Alyosha had long been left behind and had shinned up a tree.

Sasha had not seen his father for over a year and then had suddenly met him near a wrecked, fire-gutted tavern. Danila had instantly rushed after his son. All this time, Sasha and Alyosha had been living a hungry life, but at least a merry one. The boys were well known in the suburbs and were hospitably given shelter for the night. They spent the sum-

mer wandering round Moscow through the woods and along the streams. They caught singing birds and sold them to the merchants. They stole berries and vegetables from kitchen gardens. They dreamed all the time of catching and training a bear, but it proved hard to trap one. They angled for fish.

Once, after throwing his line into the quiet, clear Yauza that flowed out of the dense forest of the Losiny Ostrov, they saw a little boy sitting on the bank opposite with his chin on his hands. He was dressed fancily in white stockings and a green caftan that was not of Russian cut, with red lapels and bright buttons. Nearby, on a hill, above the lime groves, rose the crested roofs of Preobrazhensky Palace. It had once been entirely visible, colourfully reflected on the surface of the river, but it was now hidden by trees and was falling into neglect. Some women were running about and calling near the gates and in the meadow. They must have been looking for the little boy. But he stayed sitting sulkily, hidden by the burdocks and paying no heed. Sasha spat on a worm and shouted across the river:

"Hey, stop scaring our fish away... Watch out, or else we'll take our breeches off and swim over! We'll give you what for!"

The little boy merely sniffed.

"Who are you? Who are your people, boy?..." continued Sasha.

"When I have your head chopped off," said the little boy in a rather muffled voice, "then you'll know who I am..."

Alyosha prompty whispered in Sasha's ear:

"What are you doing? That's the tsar!" He threw down his fishing rod intending to take to his heels. There was a mischievous twinkle in Sasha's dark blue eyes.

"Wait, we can get away in time." He cast his line and, laughing, stared at the little boy. "We're ever so scared of you; someone like you chop off people's heads? What are you sitting there for? They're looking for you..."

"I'm hiding from the womenfolk."

"I see—you're our tsar, aren't you? Eh?"

The little boy didn't answer immediately. He was evidently astonished at being spoken to so cheekily.

"All right, I'm the tsar. What's it to you?"

"You could go and fetch us some sugar gingerbreads." Peter looked intently and unsmilingly at Sasha. "Why don't you go and bring some back and I'll show you a little trick."

Sasha removed his hat and took a needle out of the lining. "Look, is that a needle or not?.. I'll pull it through my cheek with a thread, if you like, and it won't even show..."

"Are you telling the truth?" asked Peter.

"Cross my heart and hope to die. Want me to cross myself with my foot?" Sasha sat down nimbly, took hold of his bare foot and crossed himself with it. Peter was even more astonished.

"It would be a fine thing to have the tsar running to fetch gingerbreads," he said irritably. "But will you pull the needle through for money?"

"I'll pull it through three times for a silver coin, and it won't show."

"Honest?" Peter blinked with curiosity. He stood up, glanced from behind the burdocks towards the palace, where the women were all rushing about, calling and hallooing. Then he ran along the bank to the footbridge.

He went as far as the end of the bridge, three paces from Sasha. Dark-blue dragonflies were darting over the water, in which were reflected the clouds and a weeping willow that had been blasted by lightning. Standing under the willow, Sasha showed Peter his trick. Three times he drew the needle and black thread through his cheek, but nothing happened: not even a drop of blood—just three dirty marks on his skin. Peter stared with owl-like eyes.

"Give me the needle," he said impatiently.

"Steady on, how about the money?"

"Here!.."

Sasha caught the ruble in mid-air. Peter took the needle from him and began drawing it through his cheek. He poked it right through, pulled it and burst out laughing, throwing back his curly head. "As good as you, as good as you!" Forgetting all about the two boys, he ran off to the palace, probably to teach the boyars how to pull needles through their cheeks.

The ruble was brand new with a double-headed eagle on one side and the regent Sophia on the other. Sasha and Alyosha had never earned so much in their lives. Since that day, they took to walking along the banks of the Yauza, but they only saw Peter from a distance. Either he would be riding a pony with fat old tutors cantering along behind him, or he would be walking with a drum in front of some children dressed in German caftans and armed with wooden muskets;

and the same old tutors would be dithering about in the offing, waving their arms.

"He's wasting his time on a lot of tripe," said Sasha, seated under the blasted willow.

At the end of the summer, he somehow managed to buy from the gypsies for half a ruble a skinny baby bear with a hump like a pig. Alyosha began leading it by the nose ring. Sasha sang, danced, and wrestled with the bear. But autumn came and the Moscow streets and squares were knee-deep in mud because of the rains. There was nowhere to dance. You weren't allowed indoors with an animal. Moreover, the bear ate a lot—it drained them dry, and still wanted to curl up for the winter. They had to sell it at a loss. In winter, Alyosha, dressed as pathetically as possible, went begging for alms. Sasha shivered on the church squares, naked to the waist, in the freezing cold. Pretending to be dumb and paralysed, he made money out of the soft-hearted. It would be no exaggeration to say that they lived quite well that winter.

And again the land dried out, the woods began to turn green and the birds to sing. The boys had plenty to do: fishing at dawn in the misty river, wandering round the markets in the afternoon, going into the woods at evening to set snares. People told Sasha time and time again: "Watch out, your father's been looking for you all over Moscow for ages. He's threatening to kill you." Sasha only spat through his teeth a distance of three sazhens. And then, surprise, surprise, he ran into him...

Sasha pelted all the way down Old Basmannaya—his legs were going numb. He stopped looking round; he could hear the boots clumping behind him nearer and nearer and Danila's whistling breath. He was done for! "Help!" squeaked Sasha.

Just at that moment, a high carriage, rocking from side to side, turned out from a side street onto Razgulyai, where there was a famous tavern. Two horses harnessed in tandem were proceeding along at a spanking trot. On the box sat a German in hose and a broad-brimmed hat. Sasha immediately dived for the rear wheels, swung himself up onto the axle and scrambled onto the carriage's footboard. When he saw this, Danila roared "Stop!", but the German dealt him a swinging cut of the knout and Danila, choking with abuse, fell down in the mud. The carriage drove past.

Sitting on the footboard at the back of the carriage, Sasha recovered his breath. He must get as far away from this place as possible. After the Pokrovskiye Gates, the carriage turned off onto a smooth road, picked up speed and soon drove up to a high palisade. A foreigner detached himself from the gates and asked for something. A head poked out of the carriage: it was like that of a priest, with long curls, but the face was clean-shaven. "Franz Lefort," replied the head. The gates opened and Sasha found himself in Kukui, the German quarter. The wheels whispered over sand. The welcoming light from the windows of the little houses fell on low fences, neatly trimmed trees, and glass spheres mounted on posts amid the sandy paths. Flowers gleamed white and smelt marvellously fragrant in the gardens before the houses. Here and there on benches and on the neat little porches sat Germans in knitted bonnets with long pipes in their hands.

"Saints, it's clean in here!" thought Sasha, twisting his head from side to side at the back of the carriage. He could see lights everywhere. They drove past a rectangular pond with trees in green tubs. Between them burned lamps, casting a glow on several boats in which, laughing and singing, their outer petticoats tucked up so that they wouldn't be creased, sat girls with arms bare to the elbow, chests bare, and in plumed hats. Here, too, under a windmill, at the illuminated door of a hostelry, or tavern, men and girls were dancing in pairs with linked arms.

There were musketeers walking about everywhere. In the Kremlin they were grim and silent, but here their caftans were unbuttoned, they carried no weapons and they went about arm-in-arm, singing, laughing, without anger and in peace. Everything was peaceful and friendly here, as if it were not of this world. It made you want to rub your eyes.

Suddenly, they drove into a spacious courtyard in the middle of which water was dancing in a round pond. In the background could be seen a brick-faced house fronted with white pilasters. The carriage stopped. The long-haired man alighted and noticed Sasha jumping down from the footboard.

"Who are you, what are you doing here, where did you come from?" he asked, and it was funny the way he pronounced the words. "I'm asking you, little boy: are you a thief?"

"Me, a thief? Strike me dead if I'm a thief." Sasha looked cheerfully up at the clean-shaven face with the upturned nose and the little smiling mouth. "Didn't you see my father running after me with a knife at Razgulyai?"

"Ah! Yes, I saw him... I laughed; such a big man after such a little boy..."

"My father'll cut my throat just the same... Please take me into service... Sir..."

"Service? And what can you do?"

"I can do everything... First, I can sing you any song you like. I play the pipe, the horn and the spoons. I can play the fool too—how many people have split their sides laughing at me! Dance? I can start at dawn and finish at sunset, and I won't even sweat... Anything you say, I can do it..."

Franz Lefort took Sasha by the sharp chin. He had clearly taken a liking to the boy.

"Oh, you're a good lad... Get some soap and wash yourself, you're dirty... Then I'll give you some clothes... I'll take you on... But if you steal..."

"We don't do such things; have we got any sense or haven't we?" said Sasha with such assurance that Franz Lefort believed him. He shouted something about Sasha to the groom, and went towards the house, whistling, his feet turned out, almost dancing as he went, probably because music was playing on the lake not far away and the German girls were squealing with delight.

3

"That will do, Nikita Moiseyevich, or the boy will have a headache..."

No sooner had Natalia Kirillovna said this than tsar Peter stopped reading the Gospel in mid-phrase, hastily crossed himself with ink-stained fingers and, without waiting for his tutor and attendant, Nikita Moiseyevich Zotov, to bow low as was stipulated, kissed his mother's hand that trembled helplessly as it reached out to hold the boy for a moment. His clumsy strides bore him impatiently over the creaking floorboards and steps of the passages and stairways, frightening the old women in the dark corners of Preobrazhensky Palace.

"Your hat, your hat, or you'll get sunstroke!" cried the tsaritsa weakly after him.

Nikita Zotov stood before her, correct and upright, as in church; hair combed, clean and tidy, in soft boots and in a dark undercoat of fine-woven cloth, with a collar that stood higher than his head. The agreeable face with the soft lips and curly beard was lifted up in honest zeal. A pleasant person, no question. Say, "Throw yourself onto a knife, Nikita" and he'd do it. More devoted than a dog, but easy-going and amiable to a fault. Not the right sort of mentor for a spirited little boy.

"Nikita Moiseyevich, you should read more scriptures with him. He doesn't even look like a tsar... Before you know where you are, it'll be time to marry him... To this day, he hasn't learned to walk properly; he runs about all the time like a commoner... There, just look..."

Glancing out of the window, the tsaritsa threw up her hands feebly. Peter was running about the courtyard, stumbling in his haste. Behind him were some gangling youths, palace servants with muskets and with axes on long poles. Some yokels rounded up from the village were standing on the earth rampart—a play fort built in front of the palace. They were wearing broad-brimmed German hats and had even been ordered to hold pipes of tobacco in their mouths. Looking in fright at the tsar as he bounded towards them, they forgot the rules of the game. Peter shouted furiously in a cockerel's voice. Natalia Kirillovna shuddered as she noticed her little Peter's wild, round eyes. He scrambled up onto the top of the fort and, in a temper, hit out with his little musket several times at one of the play yokels, who drew his head down between his shoulders.

"He would kill anyone who crossed him," said Natalia Kirillovna. "Where did he get that hot temper of his?"

The game started from the beginning again. Forming up the gangling youths with choppers on the end of long poles, Peter flew into a rage again because they couldn't understand what he wanted. It was a disaster: in his fury, he began to talk incoherently, spluttering in his haste as if he wanted to say more than he had words for on his tongue.

"Why has his head started jerking like that?" said Natalia Kirillovna, looking in fear at her son. And suddenly she covered her ears. The yokels in the fort rolled out an oak-wood cannon which, by strict order of the tsaritsa, was only to be loaded with soft things such as steamed turnip or apples. They fired it. Throwing down their arms at once,

they put up their hands in token of surrender.

"You mustn't surrender! You must fight!" shouted Peter, shaking his head from side to side. "From the beginning. Right from the beginning again!"

"Nikita Moiseyevich, shut the window, they're making a lot of noise and it's given me a headache," said tsaritsa.

The stained-glass window closed. Natalia Kirillovna bowed her head, her fingers moving slightly as she touched her holy seashells, a rosary from Mount Athos. Tedium. Grief and tears had aged Natalia Kirillovna; only the brows and the once fiery dark eyes were left of her former beauty. She was always dressed in black with a black kerchief on her head. That was how tsaritsa Maria Nagaya had once lived in Uglich with the unfortunate tsarevich Dimitry... God grant that no such tragedy happens here... The regent Sophia is living for the day when she marries Golitsyn and reigns. She has already ordered herself a crown from the German craftsmen.

Preobrazhensky palace was empty; there was no one there but servants scurrying about on tiptoe and old women whispering in the dark corners. These were wet nurses and nannies. The tsar may only have been a youth, but he could not bear the sight or sound of old women. If he saw a nurse with candlewax stains on her dress creeping along a wall, he would snap so sharply that the old lady would be frightened out of her wits and only just make it to the corner.

The boyars didn't visit Preobrazhenskoye; there was neither prestige nor profit in it. They were all thronging the Kremlin to be nearer the sun. To keep up appearances and for decency's sake, Sophia ordered four boyars to stay at tsar Peter's court: Prince Mikhail Alegukovich Cherkassky, Prince Lykov, Prince Troyekurov and Prince Boris Alexeyevich Golitsyn. Not that they were much use. They would dismount lazily at the porch, go to kiss the tsaritsa's hand, sit down and say nothing, sighing. They could find little to talk about with the out-of-favour tsaritsa. Peter would run into the room, and the boyars, bowing to the unreigning tsar, would ask about his royal health and would again sigh, shaking their heads. The tsar was becoming terribly lively. Just look at him: scratches on his cheek, his hands all sores. It was unseemly.

"Nikita Moiseyevich, I've heard there's a woman at Mytishchi, Vorobyikha by name, who tells the future on kvass

dregs, and everything she says comes true," said the tsaritsa. "I would like to send for her!.. But I'm afraid to, I have my doubts, you know. She might foretell evil..."

"My Lady, what evil can the Vorobyikha woman foretell?" said Zotov in his pleasant sing-song voice. "In that event, the least you could do would be to tear her to pieces."

Natalia Kirillovna raised a finger and beckoned. Zotov went up to her silently in his soft boots.

"Moiseyevich... Not long ago, in the kitchen, the widow of a strelets brought a sieve of berries, and she said that Sophia was shouting in the palace the other day, and everybody heard her: 'A pity,' she said, 'that the streltsy didn't strangle the wolf cub and the dam as well...'"

Natalia Kirillovna's lips quivered; framed in the black kerchief, her double chin wobbled and the big eyes filled with tears.

What could he answer? What consolation could he offer? Sophia had the streltsy regiments and the noblemen's levy on her side, while Peter had three dozen adolescent yokels to play with and a wooden cannon loaded with turnips... Nikita Zotov shrugged his shoulders and leaned his head back until the nape of his neck pressed against the stiff collar...

"Send for Vorobyikha," whispered the tsaritsa. "Let her tell the truth, otherwise I shall only be more frightened..."

A long, tedious summer's day. White clouds almost motionless over the Yauza. A sultry day. Flies. Through the heat shimmer can be seen the countless domes of Moscow and the tops of the fortress towers. Nearer, the spire of the German Kirch, the windmills at Kukui. The hens whimper, inducing drowsiness. Knives clatter in the kitchen.

Under Alexei Mikhailovich, there had been noise and laughter at Preobrazhenskoye: crowds of people milling about, horses whinnying. There had always been some kind of entertainment—hunting, or bearbaiting, or horse races. And now even the drive leading up from the stone gates was already overgrown with grass. Life had passed by. Sit and tell your beads.

Something struck the window-pane. Zotov opened the window. Standing under a lime-tree, covered in dust and sweating like a little peasant boy, Peter shouted:

"Nikita, write a Ukase... My muzhiks are no use, they're just a bunch of old fools... Hurry up!"

"What does Your Royal Majesty wish the Ukase to be about?" asked Nikita.

"I need a hundred good young muzhiks... Hurry up!.."

"What should I write that the said muzhiks are required for?"

"For war games... They might send me useable muskets and gun powder... And two iron cannon for gunnery... Quickly, quickly... I'll sign it and we'll send a special messenger..."

The tsaritsa pushed aside a branch of the lime-tree and leaned out of the window.

"Peter, my dear, that's enough fighting... You should have a rest. Come and sit by me..."

"Mama, there isn't time, Mama, later..."

He ran off. The tsaritsa sighed as she watched him go. Zotov made the sign of the cross and took out of his pocket a goose-quill and a pen-knife, carefully sharpened the nib and tested it on his thumbnail. Crossing himself again, with a prayer this time, he thrust back his sleeve and sat down to write in cooperplate: "By the grace of God, We, Most Illustrious and Great Monarch, Tsar and Grand Prince Peter Alexeyevich, Autocrat of all Great, Little and White Russia..."

Out of boredom, the tsaritsa began reading Peter's exercise-book. Arithmetic. The book was covered with inkstains; the writing was almost illegible: "Example of addition... Many depts, but I have less munny than the said depts, and I have to compute—how much more have I to pay? And so it's set out like this: the dept on top, and underneath it the munny, and you take away each figure underneath from the one on top of it. Example: one from too leaves one. So write too on top, one underneath it, and under the one draw an answer line, and under the answer line put the figure that is got, or the answer figure..."

The tsaritsa yawned—she wanted something to eat, or perhaps something else...

"Nikita Moiseyevich, I've forgotten—did we have lunch today?"

"My lady," Zotov put aside his quill, rose and bowed. "After we had dinner, you retired to sleep. On rising you were served berries and cream, stewed pears and honey from the monastery..."

"Then... Soon it will be the time for vespers..."

The tsaritsa rose lazily and went into her bedchamber. There, by the light of the icon lamps (the curtains were drawn across the window) by the wall on covered chests sat spiteful old frumps, bringing up their grievances against one another. All rising together, like rag dolls, they bowed to the tsaritsa. She sat down under the images on a high-backed Venetian chair. A she-dwarf crawled from out behind the bed, eyes rheumy, snivelling like a child, and crouched at her mistress's feet. The old retainers had hurt her feelings in some way.

"What are you doing, telling about your dreams, you silly women?" asked Natalia Kirillovna. "Has one of you seen a unicorn?"

To mark the end of the day, the bell struck slowly on top of the palace church. The children of low-born small landowners, appeared in the passage and on the staircases, wiping their puffy eyes. These were the squires appointed by Sophia to Peter's palace. Here, too, was Vassily Volkov; his father had begged on his hands and knees to obtain this honour for his son. It was a contented, easy life, with a salary of sixty rubles a year. But it was boring. The squires just about slept twenty-four hours a day.

The bell was ringing for vespers. There was no sign of the tsar. The squires went off to look for him in the courtyard, the kitchen gardens and meadow down by the river. To help them, the tsaritsa sent two dozen of the women with the loudest voices. They combed the whole area, shouting—the tsar was nowhere to be found. Lord, he hadn't drowned, had he? The squires shed their drowsiness in a twinkling. They galloped away bareback and dispersed over the darkling fields, shouting and calling. Panic broke out in the palace. The little old ladies hurriedly began whispering in all the corners: "Assuredly her handiwork—Sophia's... Not long ago, a stranger walked round the palace... And they saw a knife sticking out of the top of his boot... They've cut his throat, they've cut our master's throat..." Maddened by this evil whispering, Natalia Kirillovna ran frantically out onto the porch. A haze was floating up from the dark fields, the corncrakes were calling in the damp gullies. In the distance, over the black pine-forest of Sokolniki, a dull, sinister-looking star had appeared. Natalia Kirillovna's heart was pierced with anguish.

"Peter, my son!" she cried wringing her hands.

As he galloped along the river, Vassily Volkov came upon a fisherman's campfire. The men jumped up in fright and the pot of ruff tipped over into the fire.

"Men, have you seen the tsar?" asked Volkov breathlessly.

"Wasn't that him going past in a boat a little while back?.. Seemed to be rowing straight to Kukui. See if he isn't with the Germans..."

The gates to the German quarter were not yet shut. Volkov galloped down the street to where some Germans were milling about. Being on horseback, he could see the tsar and, with him, a long-haired man of medium height with the skirts of his short caftan splayed out like a turkey's feathers. In one hand he was holding a hat, in the other, a cane and, laughing, completely at his ease, the son of a dog, was chatting to the tsar. Peter was listening and biting his nails. All the Germans were standing about in the most disgracefully lackadaisical manner. Volkov dismounted, pushed his way through and kneeled down before the tsar.

"Sire, your mother the tsaritsa is distraught: God knows what they've been imagining about you. Pray return home to attend vespers..."

Peter impatiently jerked his head sideways onto his shoulder.

"I don't want to... Get out of here..." And since Volkov was still looking up at him eagerly from down on his knees, the tsar lost his temper and dealt him a kick. "Get out, serf!"

Volkov bowed low and, glumly ignoring the people who were laughing at him, rode off at a steady trot to report back to the tsaritsa. A kindly German with a pink double chin, who was attired in a waistcoat, a knitted bonnet and embroidered slippers, and who had come out of the tavern to look at the young tsar, took the clay pipe out of his mouth. This was Ivan Mons, the vintner. "It is jollier for His Royal Majesty with us than at home..."

The foreigners standing round took the pipes out of their mouths and nodded their agreement with good-natured smiles.

"Oh yes, it is jollier here..."

And they edged in closer to hear what was being said to the tall tsar with the long, child-like neck by the elegant man in the luxuriantly curled peruke. Lefort. Peter had met him on the Yauza: he had been sailing in a heavy boat, the servants

rowing clumsily and rattling the oars in the rowlocks. Peter was sitting in the bows with his legs tucked up underneath him. The glow of sunset lit up the slowly approaching tiled roofs, sharp spires, tops of trimmed trees, windmills with their weather-vanes, and dovecots. Strange music was heard coming from Kukui. It was like a waking dream of the city in the magic kingdom, in the magic country about which his nurse had crooned to him in his cradle.

On the bank, on a pile of garbage, a man appeared in a velvet caftan with flared skirts. He was wearing a sword and a black hat with the brim turned up on three sides. This was Captain Franz Lefort. Peter had seen him in the Kremlin at receptions for foreign ambassadors. Lefort swung the left hand holding the cane away from him, doffed his hat, took a step back and bowed—the curled ringlets of his peruke falling over his face. He straightened up no less nimbly and, the corners of his mouth curved up in a smile, said in broken Russian:

"At Your Majesty's service..."

Peter looked at him, craning his neck as if he had seen a miracle—the man was so nimble and merry, like no one he had ever seen before. Lefort said, shaking his locks:

"I can show you a water-mill that grinds snuff, grinds millet, works a loom and raises water into a great barrel. I can also show you a mill-wheel in which a dog runs, thereby making it revolve. In the house of Mons the vintner there is a music box with twelve knights and ladies on the lid, and also two birds, all according to life, but no bigger than your fingernail. The birds sing like nightingales, shaking their tails and wings, although all this is no more than a most cunning machine. I will show you a spy-glass through which you can look at the moon and see the mountains and seas thereon. At the apothecary's you may look at a child of the female sex that dwells in spirit—the face across is one quarter and a half, the body is covered with hair, and it has two fingers on each hand and two toes on each foot."

Peter's eyes had been growing rounder and rounder with curiosity. But he said nothing, his small mouth compressed. He imagined, for some reason, that if he stepped ashore, lanky and long-legged as he was, Lefort would laugh at him. He sniffed angrily out of shyness and hesitated to get out of the boat, although it was already bumping against the bank. Then Lefort ran down to the water—merry, handsome,

kindly—took Peter's hand with its scratches and bitten fingernails, and pressed it to his heart.

"Oh, our good folk of Kukui will be sincerely happy to see Your Majesty... They will show you the most diverting tricks."

Lefort was nimble and artful. Before Peter knew where he was, he was walking beside him to the gates of the quarter, waving his arms in the air. Here they were surrounded by well-fed, red-cheeked, kindly Germans. Each wanted to show Peter his house, his mill where the dog turned the wheel round and round, his garden with its sanded paths, clipped shrubs and not one superfluous blade of grass. They showed him all the ingenious things that Lefort had described to Peter.

Peter marvelled and kept asking: "And what's this for? And what's that for? And how is it made?.." The Germans nodded their heads and said approvingly: "Oh, the young tsar Peter Alexeyevich wants to know everything, and that is most commendable..." Finally, they went up to the rectangular pond. It was already dark. Light was falling on the water from the open door of the tavern. Peter saw a little boat with a little sail hanging loose in the still air.

A young girl was sitting in it. She was wearing a dress as white and gorgeous as a rose. Her hair was bound up and decorated with flowers, and she was holding a lute in her ungloved hands. Peter was terribly shaken; he even felt frightened for some reason. Turning towards him her face that was marvellously beautiful in the twilight, the girl began playing on the stringed instrument and, in a thin voice, sang in German something so touching and delightful that all felt their noses tickling. Among the green spheres and cones of the clipped trees there was the sweet fragrance of white tobacco flowers. Peter's heart began beating wildly at the indescribable impression it all made on him.

"She is singing in your honour," Lefort said to him. "She is a very good girl. She is the daughter of Johann Mons, our prosperous vintner."

That gentleman himself, with his pipe, cheerfully raised his hand and waved to Peter. Lefort's seductive voice whispered:

"The girls will gather in the tavern soon. There will be dancing and fireworks."

There was the sudden noise of horses galloping frenziedly

up the dark street. A party of the tsar's squires made their way through to Peter with strict orders from the tsaritsa to go home. This time they had to be obeyed.

4

The foreigners who visited the Kremlin used to say in amazement that, as distinct from Paris, Vienna, London, Warsaw or Stockholm, the tsar's court was like nothing so much as a merchant's office. No sprightly galanterie, no balls, no games, no refined musical entertainment. The boyars in their golden-hued fur coats, the haughty princes and the distinguished military leaders talked in the low, hot Kremlin chambers only of business transactions, hemp, potash, blubber oil, grain and leather... They quarrelled and shouted over the prices. They complained that the land was so bountiful and there was so much of everything, but trade was bad; the boyars' patrimonies were vast, but there was nothing to sell from them. On the Black Sea there were the Tatars, to the Baltic there was no passage either. China was too far away, and in the north the English had their grip on everything. They should conquer the seas by warfare, but they weren't up to it.

Moreover, the Russians were sluggish. They lived like bears behind massive gates and impregnable stockades on their estates in Moscow. They attended three church services a day. They ate heavily four times, and, what is more, had an afternoon nap to keep up appearances and for health. They hadn't enough spare time. The boyar had to ride to the palace and wait until it suited the tsar to demand his services; the merchant had to sit in his shop and cajole the passers-by, and the clerk had to wheeze over documents in the Commission.

The Russians would have gone on scratching their sides, hawking and coughing and grumbling indefinitely, but the unexpected happened and they had a stroke of good luck. Jan Sobiecki, King of Poland, sent high ambassadors to Moscow to discuss an alliance against the Turks. The Poles said gently that it was inadmissible for the heathen Turks to torture Christians, and it was no good for Orthodox Russians to be at peace with the Sultan of Turkey and the Crimean Khan. Moscow immediately grasped that the Poles were having hard times and that this was the moment to bar-

gain with them. And Moscow was right. Poland, in alliance with the Emperor of Austria, was barely managing to keep the Turks at bay and was threatened by the Swedes in the north. All still had memories of the devastating Thirty Years' War, when the Austrian Empire had been shaken to its foundations, Germany had been depopulated and Poland had become little more than a Swedish patrimony. The lords of the seas were now the French, the Dutch, the Turks, and, all along the Baltic coast, the Swedes. It was clear what the Poles were now trying to achieve: to protect the Ukrainian steppes with Russian troops from the Sultan of Turkey.

Prince Vassily Vassilyevich Golitsyn, Warden of the Tsar's Great Seal and of State Ambassadorial Affairs and Viceregent of Novgorod, demanded that the Poles should return Kiev to Russia. "Return to us the tsar's ancient patrimony of Kiev with its dependencies, and next year we shall send forces to the Crimea to fight the Khan." The Poles disputed this for three and a half months: "It were better to lose all rather than yield Kiev." The Russians were in no hurry, stood their ground and read out to the Poles all the chronicles beginning with the baptism of Rus. Patience and logic won in the end.

Jan Sobiecki, defeated by the Turks in Bessarabia and weeping bitterly, signed for eternal peace with Moscow and the return of Kiev with its towns. It was a great success, except that there was no alternative now but to muster an army and make war on the Khan.

5

Golitsyn's courtyard opposite the Okhotny Ryad was clean and tidy. The copper-faced walls of the house shone brightly from roof to ground. At the entrance, on rugs, stood two tall Swiss musketeers in iron helmets and ox-hide cuirasses. Another two were on guard at the gilded, openwork gates. The crowds of common people outside wandering along the Okhotny Ryad stared at the well-fed faces of the Switzers, at the spacious courtyard paved with coloured slabs, at the sumptuous, all-glass coach and four chestnut horses, and at the copper sheen of the house owned by the regent's protector and paramour.

In the intolerable stuffy air, Vassily Vassilyevich himself was sitting in a draught near the open window and talking

in Latin to de Neville, a foreigner from Warsaw. The guest was wearing a wig and French attire of the kind that had just become fashionable at the court of Louis XIV. Vassily Vassilyevich was not wearing a wig, but was also in French dress: hose, red shoes, and short velvet breeches with ribbons. There was fine laced linen showing on his stomach and peeping from under his velvet jacket. He had shaved his beard, leaving his moustaches untouched. Maps, Latin books bound in parchment with scrolls and architectural plans lay on the French table in front of him. The walls, lined with gilt hide, were hung with portraits of the princes Golitsyn and, in a sumptuous Venetian frame, a picture of a two-headed eagle clutching a portrait of Sophia in its talons. French tapestry- and Italian brocade-upholstered chairs, multicoloured carpets, several wall clocks, Persian arms, a copper globe, a thermometer of English workmanship, solid silver candlesticks and chandeliers, book covers and, on the vaulted ceiling—a celestial sphere, done in gold, silver and lapis lazuli—all were reflected many times over in the mirrors between the windows and over the doors.

The guest glanced from time to time with approving curiosity at this half-Asiatic, half-European interior. His legs crossed, Vassily Vassilyevich, toying with a goose-quill and smiling magnanimously, was saying (only occasionally did he stumble over the Latin words and pronounce them somewhat after the Moscow manner):

"Let me explain, Monsieur de Neville. Two estates are the foundations of our society: the providers and those in military and official service, which is to say, the peasantry and the gentry. But these classes find themselves in great need, wherefore the state has nothing to gain from them, unless it be ruin. It would be a most happy achievement to separate the landowners from the peasants, for the landowners now, out of pure greed, are relentlessly devouring the peasant serf, and the peasant is for that reason deprived, and the landowner is deprived, and the state is deprived..."

"Lofty and wise words, Monsieur Chancellor," said de Neville. "But how do you hope to fulfil so arduous a task?"

His face lighting up in a smile, Vassily Vassilyevich picked up off the table a Morroco-bound exercise book inscribed in his own hand: "On the Civic Life, or the Rectification of All Matters Pertaining to People in General..."

"It were a great and laborious task to enrich the whole

people," he said, and began reading from the notebook: "Many millions of acres are lying waste. These lands should be ploughed and sown. The cattle should be multiplied. The scraggy Russian sheep should be eliminated and English fine-fleeced stock should be raised in their stead. People should be attracted to all industries and to the mines, and given a just reward for their toil. The many excessive forms of quit rent, bonded labour, dues and obligations to be abolished and all to be liable to a single moderate poll-tax. This is only possible in the event that all the land be taken from the landowners and free peasants be settled thereon. All former deeds of servitude to be annulled, so that henceforth none of the people should be bonded to anyone whatsoever—unless it be for a small number of household serfs..."

"Mister Chancellor," exclaimed de Neville, "history knows no examples of where a ruler thought of such great and decisive plans. (Vassily Vassilyevich promptly lowered his eyes and his dull cheeks turned pink.) But will the gentry agree without a murmur to yield the land to the peasants and to liberate the serfs?"

"In compensation for their land, the landowners shall receive an emolument. Troops will be recruited from the gentry alone. We shall abolish compulsory levies from among the serfs and taxed people. Let the peasant be engaged in his work. For military service, the gentry shall receive not a grant of land and souls, but an increased salary which the tsar's treasury shall deduct from the general land tax. The income of the state should be more than doubled..."

"Methinks I hear the philosopher of ancient times," whispered de Neville.

"The sons of the gentry, the adolescents, must be sent to Poland, France and Sweden that they may study the art of war. We must found academies and sciences. We shall grace ourselves with the arts. We shall populate our wildernesses with an industrious peasantry. We shall transform the wild people into literates and filthy hovels into palaces of stone. Cowards shall be made brave men. We shall enrich the poor. (Vassily Vassilyevich glanced across at the window as a column of dust passed by, carrying fluff and straw in its wake.) We shall pave the streets with stones. We shall build Moscow in stone and brick... Wisdom shall shine forth over our wretched land."

Still holding his goose-quill, he left his armchair and

paced up and down the carpets, expressing many more unusual thoughts to his guest:

"The English people themselves put an end to unjust ways, but in their anger they stooped to great crimes: they touched the head of the Lord's anointed... Fearing such horrors, we crave benefits equally for all estates alike. If the gentry oppose our enterprise, we shall break their ancient intractability by force..."

Their talk was interrupted. A servant in livery, his eyes round with fright, tiptoed up and whispered something to the prince. Vassily Vassilyevich's expression became tense and grave. De Neville noticed this, picked up his hat and began to take his leave, backing towards the door. After him went Vassily Vassilyevich, also bowing, laying his beringed and lace-covered hand on his heart and then carrying it away from him and down with a sweeping flourish.

"I am deeply mortified and in the utmost despair, Monsieur de Neville, that you have seen fit to desert me so soon."

Left alone, he looked himself over in the mirror and, his heels tapping quickly, went into the bedchamber. On a double bed under a scarlet silk canopy adorned on top with ostrich plumes, the regent Sophia was sitting with her temple resting against the carved bedpost. As always, she had driven up secretly through the back entrance in a closed carriage.

6

"Sophia, my dearest, how are you?.."

She did not answer, lifted up her gloomy face and looked intently at Vassily Vassilyevich with her green, masculine eyes. He stopped short of the bed in bewilderment.

"There is something wrong? My lady..."

That winter, Sophia had secretly had to get rid of her unborn child. Her now puffy face with its strong muscles at the corners of the mouth did not glow with its former colour—care, thought and disquiet had given it a permanent expression of fastidiousness. She still dressed exuberantly like a girl, but her bearing was womanly, stately and assured. The necessity to hide her love for Vassily Vassilyevich caused her much anguish. Although everybody down to the last kitchen girl knew about it, and although recently, instead of the sinful and shameful word lover, a decent

foreign term had been found for it—cavalier—she still felt that it was unseemly and vile—without the law, and unchurched—to surrender her no longer young body to her paramour. Why, this very spring she would have born the child with all her woman's strength and in sweet pain... People had made her get rid of the baby... Moreover, her love for Vassily Vassilyevich was uneasy and not seemly for one of her age. It was all right for a seventeen-year-old girl to love like that, with eternal torment, hiding, thinking without respite, burning in bed at night. She sometimes choked with hatred, too. After all, he was the cause of all her suffering; he was the father... As for him—it cost him nothing: he was in the clear anyway.

Sitting on the bed, dumpy, her feet not quite touching the floor, hotly damp under her heavy dress, Sophia looked Vassily Vassilyevich up and down with displeasure.

"You look funny," she said. "What's that you're wearing? Is it French? If it weren't for the breeches, those things wouldn't look amiss on a woman... You'll be a laughing-stock... (She turned away and suppressed a sigh.) Yes, trouble, trouble, my dear... We have little to be happy about..."

Sophia had recently been coming to visit him more and more often in a gloomy mood and with things on her mind. Vassily Vassilyevich knew that the two female jesters close to her, who spent all day sneaking about the palace, were listening to what was being said and whispered by the boyars and that they told Sophia everything as she retired for the night.

"It's nothing, my lady," said Vassily Vassilyevich, "just idle talk. Don't fret, ignore it..."

"Ignore it?" She began drumming her fingers on the bedpost, her teeth slightly bared. "Do you know what they're saying in Moscow? We're too weak to rule, that's what they're saying... There has been no sign of great deeds from us..."

Vassily Vassilyevich fingered his moustaches and shrugged. Sophia looked at him covertly. "Oh, he's beautiful, oh, he's my torment... He's weak, he's soft. All tricked out in lace..."

"This is how it is, my dear... You're a great one for reading books and a great one for writing; you have beautiful thoughts, I know... But yesterday, after vespers, Ivan Mikhailovich said this about you: 'Vassily Vassilyevich was

reading to me from an exercise-book about the bondsmen, about the muzhiks. I began to wonder; is the prince all right in the head?' And the boyars laughed..."

Vassily Vassilyevich blushed like a girl; his blue eyes flashed under the long eyelashes.

"What I've written is beyond their grasp..."

"They are what they are. We have not been favoured with cleverer servants... I have to put up with things, too. I would like to dance as the Queen of Poland dances, or go hawking, sitting side-saddle in a long skirt. But I keep it to myself. There's nothing I can do about it. They'd call me a heretic; even now the patriarch shoves his hand at me to be kissed as if it were a spade."

"There's something I want to say to you. We are beset by monsters," whispered Vassily Vassilyevich.

"Take off that lace and hose, put on a campaign cloak and arm yourself with a sabre... Show us great deeds..."

"What?.. They haven't been talking about the Khan again, have they?"

"They all have one thing on the brain: to make war on the Crimea... It cannot be avoided, my dear. You shall come back victorious. Then you may do as you will. Then you shall be the strongest of the strong."

"Please understand, Sophia Alexeyevna, we must not make war... The money is needed for something else..."

"That will come after the Crimea," said Sophia firmly. "I have already drawn up the decree. You are to be a great military leader. I shall remember you day and night in my prayers. I shall wear out my knees, I shall go on a pilgrimage round all the monasteries on foot, my dear... You shall return as victor. Who will dare gainsay you then? We shall cease hiding from shame... I believe, I truly believe that God will help us against the Khan." Sophia came down from the bed and looked up at his averted eyes. "Vassily, I was afraid to tell you... Do you know what else they are whispering? In Preobrazhenskoye, they say, a mighty tsar is growing up... But the tsarevna, they say, is wearing out the ermine to no avail... Have pity on my thoughts... I am having such evil ones." His hand trembled as she took it between her own hot palms. "He's already turned fourteen. He has shot up like a beanstalk. He has sent out a Ukase. All grooms and falconers are to be conscripted for his play troops. But their sabres and muskets are made of iron...

Vasya, save me from sin... They keep whispering and whispering in my ears about Dmitry, about Uglich... Would that really be a sin? (Vassily Vassilyevich quickly withdrew his hand from her grasp. Sophia smiled slowly and pathetically.) But, as I say, it is sinful even to think of such things... That was in the old days... All Europe shall know of your exploits. Then there will be no need to fear him; let him have his frolics..."

"We must not go to war!" exclaimed Vassily Vassilyevich bitterly. "We don't have a good army and we don't have any money... Grandiose schemes! Alas, all futile! Who can appreciate it, who can understand? Oh Lord, give us just three or even only two years without war..."

He waved his lace sleeve hopelessly... Talk, persuade, resist—it made no difference, it was useless.

7

Natalia Kirillovna would chide Nikita Zotov: "Run after him, find him. He rushed out of the palace at daybreak, never said his prayers, never had a bite to eat..."

It was not so easy to find Peter, however. If shooting and drumbeats were heard in a wood somewhere, it meant the tsar was there too, amusing himself with his play army. How many times had Nikita been taken prisoner and roped to a tree so that he couldn't get on their nerves with his requests—to go to church, or listen to some boyar who had just arrived from Moscow. To save Nikita from getting bored at his tree, Peter would have a flagon of vodka set down in front of him. In this way Zotov acquired a taste for the bottle, and sometimes he even asked to be taken prisoner under a birch-tree. Returning downcast to Natalia Kirillovna, he would throw up his hands:

"There's nothing I can do, my lady. Our young master refuses to come..."

Peter had a passion for games—he could go days and nights without sleep or food, playing any game, just so long as it was noisy, cheerful, amusing; just so long as the guns were firing or the drums were beating. He now had some three hundred play soldiers from the royal stables from among the falconers, and even the sons of high-born families. He went with them on campaigns round the villages and monasteries near Moscow. They nearly frightened some

of the monks to death. In the noonday heat, when not a leaf was stirring in the birch-trees, the bees were buzzing heavily under the limes and drowsiness began to overcome you, suddenly, some characters in green coats, not Russians, by the look of them, would come charging at you out of a wood, and then—boom-rat-tat-tat!—they would fire wooden cannon balls at the peaceful monastery walls. It was even more terrifying for the monks when they realised that the tall, restless youth, all stained with dirt and gunsmoke, was the tsar himself.

Service with the play troops was hard; there was never enough sleep, or time for a square meal. Whether it was raining or unbearably hot, if the tsar took it into his head, you had to go, the devil knows where and why, to scare good people. Sometimes, the play troops were roused in the night. "Orders: to outflank the enemy. Swim across the river..." Some even drowned in the rivers at nighttime.

For laziness or desertion—when someone, bored by the senseless route marches, absented himself or tried to escape home—the punishment was a caning. Recently, a voivode, or general, to use the new word, had been assigned to the troops. His name was Avtonom Golovin. He was an egregious ass, but he had a thorough knowledge of army drill and he introduced strict discipline. With him there, Peter, instead of fooling about in a disorderly manner, began seriously studying the science of war in the first battalion, known as the Preobrazhensky.

Franz Lefort was not in Peter's employ, since he was busy with his duties at the Kremlin; but he often rode over to visit the army and give advice on what to arrange, and how. Through him, a Captain Fyodor Sommer, a foreigner, was engaged on salary for fire-arms and grenade fighting, and he too was made a general. They obtained sixteen cannon and then began teaching the soldiers to fire cast-iron bombs. The instruction was harsh: Fyodor Sommer did not want to draw his pay for nothing. It was no longer a game. Many livestock were killed and many people were injured in the fields.

8

The residents of Kukui often talked about the young tsar Peter. Gathering of an evening on the sanded square amid the

clipped trees, they would slap their hands on their tables:

"Hey, Mons, a mug of beer!"

Mons, in his knitted bonnet and green waistcoat, would sail out of the brightly lit tavern doorway, holding five earthenware mugs in each hand. Each mug would be topped with a head of froth. The evenings were quiet and pleasant. The Russian sky would be sprinkled with stars—true, not as bright and gorgeous as those in Thuringen, or Baden, or Württemberg—but one could live well under the Russian stars too.

"Mons! Tell us how tsar Peter paid you a visit!"

Mons would join the goodly company at table, take a sip from someone else's mug and, with a wink, begin his story.

"Tsar Peter is a very inquisitive fellow. He heard about the remarkable music box that stands in my dining-room. My wife's father bought it in Nürnberg..."

"Oh, yes, we all know your wonderful box," the listeners would confirm, glancing at one another, their pipes bobbing up and down.

"I was a little afraid when Lefort and tsar Peter came into my dining-room one day. I did not know how I should behave... In such cases, the Russians go down on their knees. I didn't want to. But the tsar asked me straightaway: 'Where's your box?' I replied: 'There it is, Your Anointed Majesty.' Then the tsar said: 'Johann, don't call me Your Anointed Majesty, I'm fed up with all that at home. Just speak to me as if I were your friend.' And Lefort said, 'Oh yes, Mons, we're all going to call him Herr Peter.' And the three of us all laughed for a long time at this joke. After that, I called my daughter Anna and bade her wind up the music box. We only wind it up once a year, on Christmas Eve, because it is of great value. Anna looked at me, and I said: 'Never mind, wind it up.' And she wound it up, and the cavaliers and the ladies danced, and the little birds sang. Peter was amazed and said: 'I want to see how it is made.' I thought: 'There goes your music box.' But Anna, she's a very clever little girl. She performed a beautiful curtsey and said to Peter: 'Your Majesty, I also can sing and dance but, alas, if you should wish to see what is inside me and what makes me sing and dance, then my poor heart would be broken after all...' As he translated these words, Lefort burst out laughing, and I laughed loudly, and Anna laughed like silver bells. But Peter did not laugh, he went as red

as bull's blood, and he looked at Anna as if she were a tiny little bird. And I thought: 'Oh, there are a thousand demons inside this youth!' Anna also blushed and ran out with tears in her blue eyes..."

Mons took a sip from someone else's mug. He had a wonderfully moving way of telling a story. The pleasant night breeze stirred the pom-poms of his neighbours' knitted bonnets. Anna appeared in the open doorway, looked up at the stars with her innocent eyes, sighed happily and disappeared. Puffing at their pipes, the visitors said that God had sent Johann Mons a fine daughter. Oh, yes, such a daughter could bring wealth to the house. The bearded, ruddy-faced, powerfully built blacksmith, Garrit Kist, a Dutchman from Zaandam, said:

"I can see that if you go about the matter shrewdly, much of advantage can be gained from the young tsar."

"Oh no, that is a bad hope," replied old Ludwig Pfeffer, the watchmaker. "Tsar Peter has no power... The regent Sophia will never let him reign. She is a cruel and determined woman... She is collecting an army of two hundred thousand to fight the Crimean Khan. When they return from the Crimea, I would not lay as much as ten pfennings on the tsar..."

"You argue wrongly, Ludwig Pfeffer," replied Mons. "I've been told many a time by General von Sommer, who was recently just plain Sommer (Mons opened his mouth and guffawed, and all laughed at his joke), I've been told many a time by him: 'Wait, give us a year or two, and tsar Peter will have two battalions of an army that the King of France or Prince Maurice of Saxony himself wouldn't be ashamed to command...' That's what Sommer said..."

"Oh, that is good!" said the others, exchanging significant glances.

Such were the chats of an evening on the well-swept square outside the door of Johann Mons' tavern.

9

It was so hot and stuffy in the vaulted halls of the Palace Commission that you could have cut the air with a knife. At the long tables, copy clerks with heads bowed, their hair down over their eyes, were scratching away with quills. There were flies in the ink. There were flies settling on their cheeks and damp noses. The chief clerk, who had

gorged himself on pasties, sat half asleep on his bench. Ivan Vaskov, a clerk, was making a fair copy from a sheet of paper into a ledger.

"... and by a Ukase of their majesties, a German suit of clothes for him, His Majesty, Tsar and Grand Prince Peter Alexeyevich, Monarch of all Great, Little and White Russia; and for this purpose, the following merchandise was purchased from general Franz Lefort: two balls of gold thread—paid one ruble, 13 altyns, 2 dengi; nine dozen buttons at six altyns per dozen; and for the waistcoat—6 dozen buttons at 2 altyns, 4 dengi per dozen; silk and linen for 10 altyns; applied hair—three rubles..."

Blowing away a fly, Vaskov raised his drowsy eyelids.

"Listen, Petrukha, how do you write 'applied hair': with a capital letter or a small one?"

The under-clerk sitting opposite thought for a moment and answered:

"Write it with a small one."

"Hasn't he got any hair of his own, the young tsar?"

"Have a care... For saying such things..."

Cocking his head sideways in order to write better, Vaskov quietly shook with laughter. It seemed very strange to him that they should be buying hair for the tsar from the German women at Kukui and paying three rubles for such rubbish.

"Petrukha, where's he going to hang this hair?"

"As His Majesty wills—wherever he wants to, that's where he'll hang it. Any more questions from you and I'll complain to the chief clerk..."

The flies had also got the better of the chief clerk. Taking out a silk handkerchief, he flourished it round him, then wiped his face and his goatee beard.

"Aha, you're asleep!" he shouted sluggishly. "Are you copyists and under-clerks, or aren't you? Gobbling up the Treasury's money for nothing! You have no fear, you've forgotten the Lord, you're just a lot of useless dolts. I'll have the whole Commission flogged. That'll teach you to work with diligence...

"There's never enough ink for you, and you squander paper... Thunder strike you down, you tribe of Herod..."

He languidly waved his handkerchief and dozed off again. Things were dull these days: no petitioners, no gifts. Moscow was empty. The streltsy, the boyars' sons and the landowners had all left on the Crimean campaign. Nothing

remained but flies, dust; and trivial office tasks.

"I wouldn't say no to a drink of kvass, Petrukha!" said Vaskov and, looking round at the chief clerk, he stretched so hard that his worn caftan split under the armpits. "I'll go to a certain widow this evening and drink as much as I can hold." He shook his head and went on writing:

"...by a Ukase of His M.Ts. and G.P. Pyotr Alexeyevich, Monarch of all G., L. and W.R., it is ordered to send to the village of Kolomenskoye to him, His M. and G.P. of all G., L. and W.R., the palace grooms Yakim Voronin, Sergei Bukhvostov, Danila Kartin, Ivan Nagibin, Ivan Ievlev, Sergei Chertkov and Vassily Bukhvostov. It is ordered that the aforementioned palace grooms be raised to the rank of play gunners and be granted wages of five rubles each, five quarters of rye, the same of oats..."

"Petrukha, some people have all the luck..."

"Who's that talking now? Oh, you lazy dogs," mumbled the chief clerk, still half asleep.

10

The squire Vassily Volkov received the German clothes and wig, signed for them and carried them carefully into the tsar's bedchamber. Dawn was only just breaking and Peter had already jumped up off the bench on which he had been sleeping under a sheepskin coat. He snatched up the wig first and tried it on. Too tight! He wanted to cut his dark curls with a pair of scissors. Volkov had some difficulty in dissuading him, but managed to do so in the end. Peter pulled the wig over his head and smirked at himself in the mirror. This time he washed his hands with soap and water, cleaned his fingernails and hastily donned the new clothes. He knotted a white neckerchief round his throat as Lefort had taught him and, over the flared caftan, a silk scarf, also white. Volkov marvelled as he attended to his master. It was not like Peter to bother with his clothes. Trying on the narrow shoes, he ground his teeth. They sent for a house serf, Stepan Medved, a tall lad, to stretch the shoes. Stepan thrust his big feet into them and galloped up and down the stairs like a foal. At nine o'clock (by the new system of telling the time), Nikita Zotov arrived to fetch the tsar for early mass.

"Tell Mother," replied Peter impatiently, "that I have

urgent matters of state to deal with... I'll pray alone. Oh, by the way, you come back, and at the double, d'ye hear?"

He suddenly threw back his head and burst out laughing, as always, violently, convulsively. Nikita realised that the tsar had thought up some new practical joke; he had been taught enough of them in the German quarter. Zotov meekly obeyed, however, hurried away in his soft shoes and soon returned, well aware that he was going to regret it bitterly. He was right. Peter, his eyes rolling, gave him his orders:

"You will ride as the high ambassador from the Greek god Bacchus to pay your respects to a man on his name day."

"At your service, Sire," replied Zotov eagerly. There and then, exactly as commanded, he donned a hareskin coat inside out, put a bundle of bast on his head, on top of that a crown made out of a bath switch, and took a goblet in one hand. To avoid an undesirable scene with his mother, Peter left the palace by the back entrance and ran to the stables. All the servants were laughing as they tried to round up four lusty hogs. Peter rushed to their aid, shouting, fighting, bustling. They caught the hogs, held them down fastened breech straps on them, and then harnessed them into a low gold carriage on carved wheels. (A bridegroom's present from the late Alexei Mikhailovich. Natalia Kirillovna had ordered that it should be treated with special care.) Lips trembling, the chief officer of the stables looked on at this destruction and vandalism. To the whistles and guffaws of the servants, Nikita Zotov was crammed into the carriage. Peter sat on the driver's box. Volkov, wearing a sword and tricorne hat, walked ahead, strewing carrots and turnips in front of the hogs. The grooms whipped them on either side. They set off for Kukui.

They were met at the gates of the quarter by a whole crowd of foreigners. "Good, good, very funny!" they cried, clapping their hands. "Enough to make you split your sides laughing!" Peter, red in the face, his lips compressed and an ugly look on his face, sat upright on the box. The whole quarter came running up. They roared with laughter, holding their sides, pointing at the tsar and at the bast-haired head of Zotov, half-dead with fright in the carriage. The hogs were pulling different ways and had tangled up the harness. Peter suddenly snatched a knout from one of the grooms and frenziedly belaboured the hogs. Squealing, they rushed off, taking the carriage with them... Someone was knocked over,

someone else fell under the wheels, women snatched up their children. Peter, standing upright, kept lashing away. He was purple in the face, the nostrils of his short nose were distended. His round eyes were red, as if he were fighting back tears.

At Lefort's house, the grooms somehow got the hogs together again and turned in through the open gates. Lefort, whose name day it was, ran across the courtyard, flourishing his cane and hat. Behind him were guests in all their colourful finery. Peter jumped awkwardly down from the driver's box and dragged Zotov out of the carriage by the collar. Still staring wildly at Lefort, as if afraid of seeing someone in the crowd, he said breathlessly:

"Mein lieber General, I have brought the high ambassador with a great vivat from the Greek god Bacchus..." Huge beads of sweat broke out on his face; he licked his lips and, still looking straight at Lefort, said with an effort: "Mit herzlichen Gruss... Which means, he pays his respects... He sends you the hogs and carriage as a present..." Still gripping Zotov convulsively, he bade him in a whisper: "Down on your knees and bow..."

Handsome, in a pink velvet and lace, powdered and perfumed, Lefort understood at once... He clapped his hands high in the air, burst into peals of merry laughter and, turning first to Peter, then to the guests, said:

"This is a most excellent jest. I have never had occasion to see a merrier one... We thought to teach him amusing japes, but he could teach us how to jest instead. Hey, musicians, a march in honour of Bacchus' emissary..."

Drums, kettledrums and trumpets struck up behind the lilac bushes. Peter's shoulders relaxed and the purple tinge faded from his face. He threw his head back and laughed loudly. Lefort took his arm. Then Peter ran his eyes over the guests and saw Anna. She smiled, her teeth sparkling. She was bare down to the shoulders, as if she had risen to meet him out of her dress that was as gorgeous as a rose.

Again, a wild embarrassment tugged at his throat. Stepping high, like a crane, he walked towards the house in front of the guests and beside Lefort. On the open space in front of the porch stood singers in scarlet Russian blouses. They took up a dance with whistles. One of them, blue-eyed and bold, sprang out, shouting: "Ai, dudu-dudu-dudu!" He went down onto his haunches, drumming away with his heels and

smacking the palms of his hands on the sand. Then, with a spin and a bound, he began whirling round and round like a top: "Hey-hoy-hi!"

Good old Sasha!

11

The violin, violas, oboes and kettledrums in the gallery were playing old German songs, Russian dance tunes, ceremonial minuets, and merry Anglaises. The tobacco smoke billowed in the beams of light shining through the little round windows of the hall. The guests, slightly tipsy, were using language that made the young girls blush like the sky at dawn, and the berouged beauties in billowing barrel-like farthingales and heavy trains laughed dementedly. It was the first time that Peter had ever sat at table with women. Lefort brought him some anisette. For the first time, Peter tasted an intoxicating drink. The liquor ran like fire through his veins. He looked at Anna, who was laughing. The music made every part of him dance; his neck swelled. Clenching his teeth, he was struggling to quell cruel desires that he did not yet understand. He could not hear what the guests were shouting as they raised their glasses to him... Anna's teeth sparkled, she never took her enchanting eyes off him...

The feast went on and on as if the day would never end. Pfeffer, the watchmaker, poked his nose, as long as a carrot, into his snuff box and began sneezing, pulling off his wig and waving it over his bald skull. It was killingly funny! Peter rocked back and forth, his long arms overturning everything on the table about him. His arms seemed so long that he only had to reach across the table to slide his fingers into Anna's hair, squeeze her head, try her laughing mouth with his lips... Again his neck swelled and darkness shrouded his eyes...

When the sun went down behind the windmills and the open windows admitted the cool air, Lefort offered his hand to Frau Schimmelpfennig, the miller's eight-pood wife, and partnered her in a minuet. He executed a sweeping flourish of the hand, and shook his locks powdered with gold dust, flexed his knees and bowed, langourously rolling his eyes. Frau Schimmelpfennig, content and happy, sailed off in her enormous petticoats like a forty-gun battleship bedecked

with flags. All the guests followed the two of them out of the hall into the garden, where Lefort's initials were picked out in flowers, the shrubs and trees had been strung with ribbons to which gold and silver paper flowers had been attached and the paths were patterned with squares like a chess-board.

After the minuet, the band struck up a jolly country dance. Peter stood apart, biting his nails. Several times, ladies curtseyed low before him and invited him to dance. He shook his head, mumbling: "I can't, I don't know how..." Then Frau Schimmelpfennig, escorted by Lefort, gave him her bouquet. This meant that he had been chosen king of the dance. It was impossible to refuse. He glanced at Lefort's cheerful but firm eyes and convulsively took the lady by the hand. Lefort, on tiptoe, with his feet turned out, flew over to Anna and stopped beside her opposite Peter for the country dance. Anna, twisting a kerchief in her hands, looked as if she were appealing for something. The kettledrums rattled deafeningly, the big drum boomed, the fiddles and trumpets started up and, scaring the bats away, merry music soared up into the evening sky. And again, as in the episode with the hogs, something snapped in him; he felt feverish, wild. Lefort shouted:

"First figure! Ladies advance and retreat, gentlemen spin the ladies round!"

Seizing Frau Schimmelpfennig by the sides, Peter turned her so that her gown train and farthingale spun round like a whirlwind. "Ach, mein Gott!" was all the miller's wife could say. He released her and began to dance as if the music itself were tugging at his arms and legs. With compressed lips and distended nostrils, he was executing such hops and bounds that the guests held their sides as they watched him.

"Third figure," shouted Lefort. "Ladies change partners!"

Anna's cool little hand lay on his shoulder. Peter immediately shrank, and his wildness subsided. He was trembling slightly. His legs carried him of their own accord, whirling round in time with Anna, who was as light as a feather. The lights of the lampions, ignited by a train of gunpowder, sped between the trees. Hissing angrily, a rocket soared. Two trails of fire were reflected in Anna's eyes.

"Ach," she whispered in a thin voice, "Ach, it's so wonderfully beautiful!.. Ach, Peter, you dance so marvellously..."

Rockets shot up all round the garden. Catherine-wheels whirled, transparencies glowed, thunder-flashes banged like cannon, fireworks crackled, fountains showered sparks. The dusk was veiled by gunpowder smoke. Wasn't he dreaming this in the wretched tedium of Preobrazhensky Palace?

Lefort bounded past with a woman as tall as a soldier. "Cupid pierces hearts with his arrows!" he shouted at Peter. Warmed by the dancing, Anna breathed a fresh charm. "Ach, Peter, I'm tired," she moaned in an even fainter voice, hanging onto his arm. A rocket burst overhead, fiery snakes lit up the girl's marvellous face, now drawn with fatigue. Not knowing how to go about such things, Peter put his arm round her naked shoulders, half-closed his eyes and felt the moist touch of her lips. But only for a moment. Anna slipped out of his grasp. Hundreds of snakes burst with a demonic crackling. Anna disappeared. From a cloud of smoke there emerged a hareskin coat and the mop head of Bacchus' ambassador. Completely drunk, Nikita Zotov, still holding a goblet, was wandering about and babbling all kinds of drivel... He stopped dead and swayed on his feet.

"Drink up, sonny," he said offering Peter the goblet. "Drink. You and I are undone anyway... We've destroyed our souls, we've tasted forbidden fruit. Drink to the bottom, Your Sovereign Majesty of all Great and Little..."

He wanted to threaten someone but fell backwards into a bush. Peter threw away his drained goblet. Joy whirled in him like a catherine-wheel.

"Anna!" he shouted and set off at a run...

The illuminated windows of the house and the light of the lampions and the transparencies began to swim round and round. He clutched his head and planted his legs wide apart.

"Come on, I'll show you where she is," said an insinuating voice in his ear from behind. This was the singer in the scarlet blouse, Sasha Menshikov of the piercing eyes. "The girl's gone home..."

Peter ran silently after him somewhere into the darkness. They climbed over a fence, encountered some dogs, went through several hedges, and came to the square and the mill before the tavern. A long window was shining up above.

"That's where she is," said Sasha in a whisper. He threw sand at the window. It opened and Anna put her head out. She had a shawl round her shoulders and her hair was all in paper curlers.

"Who's there?" she asked in a thin voice. She looked intently, saw Peter and shook her head. "You mustn't... Go to sleep, Herr Peter..."

She looked even more charming in curlers. She slammed the window and pulled down the lace curtain. The light went out.

"The girl's careful," whispered Sasha. He looked intently and, taking Peter firmly by the shoulders, led him towards a bench. "You'd better sit down... I'll fetch the horses. Will you make it on horseback?"

When he returned, leading two saddled horses by the halter, Peter was sitting hunched over as before, his clenched fists on his knees. Sasha peered at his face.

"Are you drunk, then?" Peter did not answer. Sasha helped him into saddle, lightly mounted his own horse and, holding Peter lightly, rode out of the German quarter at a walking pace. A mist was spreading over the meadows. The autumn stars were ablaze all over the sky. The cocks were already crowing at Preobrazhenskoye. Peter's icy hand, clutching Sasha's shoulder, was inert, lifeless. Near the palace, he suddenly straightened his back, began to fall backwards, clutched Sasha by the neck and snuggled up to him. The horses stopped. His chest wheezed and his bones ached.

"Hold me, hold me tighter," he said huskily. After a while, his arms relaxed. "Let's ride on," he half sighed, half groaned. "Just don't leave me... We'll lie down together..."

Volkov hurried up to them at the porch.

"Sire! Oh God, we thought..."

Squires and grooms came running up. Peter jabbed his foot from above into their midst, dismounted unaided and, without letting go of Sasha, went inside. In the dark corridor, a little old lady crossed herself and twittered something. He pushed her away. Another scuttled under the staircase like a rat.

"Foul whisperers, a plague on you," he muttered.

In the bedchamber, Sasha took off Peter's shoes and caftan. He lay down on the mat and told Sasha to lie beside him. He rested his head against the other's shoulder, was silent for a moment and then said:

"You're to be my valet... Tell the clerk in the morning, he'll write out the Ukase... That was fun, oh, it was such fun... Mein lieber Gott!"

A little later, he whimpered something like a child and fell asleep.

Chapter Three

1

The noblemen's levy was being assembled all that winter. It was not easy, winkling the landowners out of their country retreats. The chief military leader, Vassily Vassilyevich Golitsyn, sent out menacing Ukases and threatened disgrace and ruination. The landowners were in no hurry to climb down from their warm stoves: "His mind's wandering, he wants to make war on the Crimea. Thank God, we have peace in perpetuity with the Khan. We pay a harmless tribute, so why trouble the nobles for nothing? That's just like the Golitsyns: they want to climb to glory on other people's backs..." They pleaded illness, poverty, or simply absented themselves. Others played practical jokes; all kinds of crazy ideas come into one's head during the tedium and inactivity of winter time. Squires Boris Dolgoruky and Yuri Shcherbaty, unable to dodge the campaign, dressed their men-at-arms in black and rode black horses, themselves all in black as if they had risen from the grave, and when they joined the army they all but frightened everybody to death. "There's going to be a disaster," said the men in the regiments. "We won't come back from this campaign alive."

Vassily Vassilyevich, in a foul temper, sent a letter to Moscow for Fyodor Leontyevich Shaklovity, whom he had appointed to be at Sophia's side: "Be so kind as to obtain a Ukase against those offenders so that for this villainy they may be ruined, exiled to monasteries in perpetuity and their villages distributed to those without any, making so severe an example of them that all may tremble..."

The Ukase was drawn up, but in the goodness of his heart Vassily Vassilyevich forgave the jokers, who begged for mercy with tears in their eyes. No sooner had this matter been hushed up than a rumour went round the army that a coffin had been sent during the night to Prince Golitsyn's house and left in the passage. People trembled as they whispered about this terrifying incident. Vassily Vassilyevich, they say, got drunk that day, rushed into the passage and

slashed at the empty darkness with his sabre. The omens were bad. The baggage trains, as they drove up, met white wolves howling eerily on the kurgans of the steppes. Horses dropped dead in their tracks for no known reason. One windy night in March, many heard the regimental mascot, a goat, cry out in a human voice: "Woe! Woe!" They were going to beat the creature to death with wooden stakes, but it ran off into the steppe.

The snows vanished and a balmy breeze blew from the south. The willow bushes along the banks of the rivers and lakes began to turn green. Vassily Vassilyevich went about looking blacker than a thundercloud. Cheerless news was coming from Moscow: Mikhail Alegukovich Cherkassky, a palace boyar of tsar Peter, had been talking too much and the boyars were apparently listening to him and making fun of the Crimean campaign. "The Crimean Khan has given up waiting for Vassily Vassilyevich in the Crimea. In Tsargrad, and all over Europe too, they've written the campaign off. The Golitsyns are costing the tsar's Treasury too much..." Even Patriarch Joachim, who had been in favour of Vassily Vassilyevich, for no apparent reason threw out of the Church-on-the-Barashi the vestments and caftans donated by Golitsyn and forbade any service to be conducted in them. Vassily Vassilyevich wrote Shaklovity alarming letters to the effect that he should keep a vigilant eye on Cherkassky and should watch that the patriarch did not visit Sophia so often... "As for the boyars, their eternal greed is legendary; they begrudge parting with as little as a copper for a great cause..."

Dismal news was coming from abroad. The King of France, whom the high ambassadors Yakov Dolgoruky and Yakov Myshetsky had asked for a loan of three million livres, had given them no money and had even refused to see them. It was written of Ushakov, ambassador to the Dutch: "He and his staff have taken to theft in earnest, in many places they have been feasting and drinking and have uttered many foolish words to the discredit of their royal majesties..."

At the end of May, Golitsyn finally left for the south with his army of a hundred thousand and joined the Ukrainian hetman Samoilovich on the Samara River. The army moved slowly, with countless baggage trains behind it. The towns and watch-towers ended; the army entered the steppes of the Dikoye Pole. It was blazing hot above the desolate plain,

across which the men marched through grass shoulder-high. Carrion birds wheeled in the scorching heavens. Mirages shimmered and undulated on the far horizon. The yellow and green sunsets were short. The steppe was filled with the creaking of wagons and the whinnying of horses. The smoke from the campfires of dry dung smelt of ancient sorrow. The nights fell quickly. Terrible stars blazed in the sky. The steppe was a desolation without roads or pathways. The advance regiments went far ahead without meeting a living soul. Clearly the Tatars were luring the Russian army into the waterless desert. With increasing frequency, they came to the dried-up bottoms of river gullies. Only the seasoned Cossacks knew where to get water here.

It was already mid-July, but the Crimea was still only a dream. The regiments were strung out from one end of the steppe to the other. Heads swam with the white glare and the dry chirping of the crickets. Lazy birds flew slowly down onto the distended bellies of fallen horses. Many wagons had to be abandoned. Many of the drivers were left at their wagons, dying of thirst. Others wandered north towards the Dnieper. The regiments were grumbling...

The voivodes, the colonels and the officers would assemble for dinner near Golitsyn's canvas tent and look with alarm at the limp banner. No one had the courage to say: "We must go back before it's too late. The further we go, the worse it will be. After Perekop, there will be nothing but dead sands."

At such times, Vassily Vassilyevich would rest in his tent, taking off his shoes and coat, lying on the carpets and reading Plutarch in Latin. The great ghosts rising from the pages of the books fortified his oppressed heart with new courage. Alexander, Pompey, Scipio, Lucullus and Julius Caesar shook their Roman eagles to the wearisome chirping of the crickets. To glory, to glory! He drew further strength from re-reading Sophia's letters. "My dearest, my most precious Vasya! Bless you for many years to come! May God grant that you vanquish your enemies. My dear, I cannot believe that you will return to us... I shall believe it, dearest, when I see you in my embrace... My dear, you write that I should pray, as if I were indeed a sinner before God, and unworthy. However, though truly sinful, I dare to count on his mercy. Truly! I always pray that I shall see my dear one in joy. And so, bless you, my dearest,

for years to come without end..."

When the heat abated, Vassily Vassilyevich would don helmet and cloak and leave his tent. On seeing him, the colonels, the officers and the Cossack esauls* would mount their horses. The trumpets would sound and the horns would blow their long, sustained notes. The army was now moving at nighttime until the onset of the noonday heat.

That's how it was today too. From the top of a kurgan, Vassily Vassilyevich surveyed the smoke of countless fires, the dark blobs of the troops, the lines of the baggage trains melting away into the gloom. But the darkness was different today: a wall of dust hung all round as far as the eye could see. It was hard to breathe owing to the lack of wind. The sunset was spreading a purple stain over half the sky. Flocks of birds were on the wing, as if fleeing from something... As it set, the sun became swollen, misty, terrifying... The stars were just beginning to twinkle, but soon they were veiled as by a shroud. A smoky glow was flickering and glowing brighter. A stifling wind rose. Dancing tongues of flame became more clearly visible: the whole army was ringed with fire...

A group of riders halted near the kurgan. One galloped up to the tent in a series of heavy bounds. He dismounted, adjusting his tall hat. Vassily Vassilyevich recognised the flabby face and grey moustaches of Samoilovich, hetman.

"Bad news, prince," he said quietly. "The Tatars have set the steppe on fire..."

The hetman's smile was not noticeable under his drooping moustache; his eyes were masked by a shadow...

"It's on fire all round," he said, pointing with his whip.

Vassily Vassilyevich stared intently into the glow for a long time.

"All right, we'll mount the infantry on horseback and go across the flames..."

"How can you ride over ashes?" No food, no water. We'll perish, prince."

"You expect me to retreat?"

"Do as you think best... The Cossacks won't go over burnt steppe."

"Drive them with whips through the flames!" Vassily Vassilyevich could not contain his wrath. He stamped

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* A Cossack military rank.—*Ed.*

about the kurgan, his iron heels digging into the dry ground. "I've noticed it for some time, the Cossacks have been unwilling to go with us... It's laughable to watch them; they're half asleep in the saddle... You may be sure they served the Crimean Khan with greater zeal... And you're not being straight, Hetman... Have a care. Tougher customers than you have been dragged to the block by their queues in Moscow... And you, priest's son—how long ago were you trading in candles and fish?"

The portly Samoilovich breathed like a bull as he listened to these insults. But he was intelligent and cunning; he kept silent. Grunting, he mounted his horse, rode down from the kurgan and disappeared behind the wagons. Vassily Vassilyevich shouted for the bugler. The calls rang out hoarsely over the smoky steppe. Horse, foot and baggage trains moved off through the fire.

By dawn, it was clearly impossible to go any further; the steppe lay black and dead in front of them. Only columns of dust whirled over it from time to time. The wind was freshening from the south, driving the clouds of ashes along. They saw the Cossack scouting parties ahead turn back first. At midday, the voivodes, colonels and atamans assembled in the wagon train. The hetman rode up looking gloomy, thrust his mace into his boot-top and lit his pipe. Vassily Vassilyevich placed his beringed hand on his armour and, swallowing his pride, said tearfully:

"Shall we go against the hand of the Lord? It is written: 'Man, swallow thy pride, for thou art mortal'. The Lord has sent us a great misfortune... For hundreds of versts, there is no food and no water. I do not fear death, but I fear shame. Voivodes, think, and then say what is to be done."

The voivodes, the colonels, and the atamans thought and replied: "Retreat to the Dnieper without delay."

And so the Crimean campaign came to its inglorious end. The troops retreated in great haste, losing men and abandoning wagon trains on the way. They did not stop until they were near Poltava.

2

Colonels Solonina, Lizogub, Zabela, Gamalei, the esaul Ivan Mazeppa and Chief of Staff Kochubei went to Vassily Vassilyevich's tent in secret and said to him:

"It was the Cossacks who set the steppe on fire. They were sent by the hetman. Here is a denunciation of him. Read it and send it to Moscow. Do not delay, because we cannot tolerate his wilfulness. He is rich now, he has ruined the Polish gentry, high-ranking Cossacks are not allowed to stand before him in their hats. He insults everybody. He lies to the Russians, he treats with the Poles and lies to them too, and he wants to take the Ukraine as his permanent possession and strip us of our privileges. Let them send a Ukase from Moscow for us to elect another hetman and unseat Samoilovich..."

"Why should the hetman not want me to beat the Tatars?" asked Vassily Vassilyevich.

"He would not want you to beat the Tatars," replied esaul Ivan Mazeppa, "because as long as the Tatars are strong, you are weak; but if you beat the Tatars, the Ukraine also will soon become a patrimony of Moscow... But all this is idle chatter... We are younger brothers to the Russians, we are of the same faith and we are happy to live under the tsar of Moscow..."

"Well said," confirmed the blue-headed, pigtailed colonels, their eyes fixed on the ground. "Just so long as Moscow confirms our privileges as nobles."

Vassily Vassilyevich remembered the black clouds of dust, the countless graves left in the steppes, the ribs of the horses on all the roads. His cheeks flushed as he recalled his dreams about the campaigns of Alexander the Great. He remembered the narrow passages in the Kremlin palace, where the boyars, his foes, would bow to him, covering their moustaches with their fingers to hide their smiles..."

"So the hetman set fire to the steppe?"

"Yes," confirmed the colonels.

"Very well. Let it be as you wish."

That day, Vassily Tyrtov galloped with a change of horse into Moscow, a denunciation of the hetman sewn into his hat. When they reached Poltava and pitched camp, a letter arrived in reply from the great sovereigns. "Since Samoilovich is displeasing to the elders and the entire Little Russian army, strip him of the great sovereign's banner, mace and all insignia, and send him to the Great Russian cities under close guard. In his place, appoint such a hetman as shall be pleasing to the elders and all the Little Russian army..."

That night, the streltsy moved a baggage train round the hetman's headquarters and in the morning seized him in the field church, threw him into a ramshackle cart and took him to Golitsyn. There he was interrogated. The hetman's head was bound with a wet rag and his eyes were bleary. In his terror, he kept saying:

"They're telling such lies, Vassily Vassilyevich. By God, they're lying... It's Mazeppa's trickery, he's my enemy..." When he saw Mazeppa, Gamalei and Solonina coming in, he went purple in the face and began shaking all over. "So you're listening to them, are you? The dogs, that's what they want to do—sell the Ukraine to the Poles."

Gamalei and Solonina drew their sabres and rushed at him. But the streltsy officers shielded the hetman. He was taken to the north in chains at night. It was essential to make haste and elect a new hetman: the Cossack regiments spiked some barrels of vodka in the baggage train, put the hetman's servants to the sword and impaled a universally detested colonel on a spear. Shouts, singing and musket fire were heard all over the Cossacks camp. The Moscow regiments also began to show signs of restlessness.

Mazeppa went into Vassily Vassilyevich's tent without being summoned. He was wearing a long grey Ukrainian coat and a simple sheepskin hat, and was carrying a costly sabre slung on a gold chain. Ivan Stepanovich was rich, of noble Polish descent, and had lived much in Poland and Austria. During the campaign, he had grown a beard like a Russian and had trimmed his hair in the Moscow style. After bowing low, but with dignity, as equal to equal, he sat down. Pinching his chin with long, dry fingers he fixed his protuberant, intelligent eyes on Vassily Vassilyevich.

"Perhaps the Pan Prince would prefer to speak in Latin?.." (Vassily Vassilyevich nodded coldly. Mazeppa, without lowering his voice, began in that language.) "It is not easy for you to understand Little Russian affairs. The Little Russians are cunning and secretive. The new hetman has to be elected tomorrow, and there is a rumour that they want to choose Borkovsky. In that event, it would be better not to depose Samoilovich: Moscow has no more deadly foe than Borkovsky... I speak to you as a friend."

"As you know yourself, we do not wish to intervene in your Little Russian affairs," replied Vassily Vassilyevich.

"As far as we're concerned, any hetman is a good one, so long as he's friendly to us..."

"Such clever talk is sweet to the ears. We have nothing to hide. To us, Moscow is as a mother..." Vassily Vassilyevich smiled quickly and lowered his eyes. "You do not take away from us the lands we nobles own. You are favourably inclined towards our customs. Why conceal it?—there are those amongst us who favour Poland... But these, in their avarice, are pure destroyers of the Ukraine... We know well that should we but yield to Poland, their landowners would dispossess us, build Catholic churches and make serfs of us all. No, prince, we are the loyal servants of the great tsars..." (Vassily Vassilyevich was silent, never raising his eyes.) "Well now, God has not begrudged me his favours... Last year, near Poltava, in a secret spot, I buried a cask of ten thousand rubles in gold for a rainy day. We Little Russians are simple people, we would not begrudge even our lives for a great cause... What would be terrible? If the mace should go to a traitor or a fool—that is what would be terrible..."

"Well, Ivan Stepanovich, God grant you good fortune. Vote for the hetman tomorrow." Vassily Vassilyevich rose and bowed to his guest. He paused and, taking the other by the shoulders, kissed him three times.

On the next day, outside the canvas field church, the mace, banner and hetman's insignia lay on a table covered with an altar cloth. Two thousand Cossacks were standing round. Prince Golitsyn came out of the church in Persian armour, a cloak, and a helmet with maroon plumes. After him came all the Cossack elders. Vassily Vassilyevich stood on a bench, holding a silk kerchief in one hand and resting the other on his sabre, and said to the Cossacks, as they moved up closer:

"Great army of the Little Russians, Their Royal Majesties permit you, by the old Cossack custom, to choose your hetman. Say whom you prefer and it shall be so... Whether you prefer Mazeppa or some other—the decision is yours..."

"We want Mazeppa!" shouted Colonel Solonina. Other voices took up the cry, and the whole field roared: "Mazeppa for hetman!"...

On that same day, four Cossacks carried an earth-blackened cask of gold into prince Golitsyn's tent.

3

The fortress, erected about two years previously on the Yauza below the Preobrazhensky Palace, was rebuilt that autumn from plans drawn up by generals Franz Lefort and Simon Sommer. The walls were thickened and reinforced with piles, deep ditches were dug outside and strong towers with battlements were put up at the corners. Fascines of plaited willow and sandbags served as cover for rows of bronze cannon, mortars and howitzers. A mess hut to take five hundred men was built in the middle of the fortress. Carillons played on the main tower over the gates.

The fortress was a play fortress, but should the occasion arise, it could be used against siege. Two battalions, the Preobrazhensky and the Semyonovsky, drilled from dawn till dusk on the broad, mown meadow. Simon Sommer spared neither his throat nor his fists. Soldiers marched like clockwork toys, holding their muskets in front of them. "Halt!" The soldiers would stop, each bringing down his right foot with a bang and standing stock-still. "By the right—quick marsch! Vorwarts marsch! Wrong! Lumpen! Scums! Listen to me-e-e-e-e!.." Seated on his horse, the general would turn as red as a turkey-cock. Even Peter, now a non-commissioned officer, craned his neck and rolled his eyes in fear as he marched past.

Two more Germans were brought over from Kukui: Franz Timmermann, who knew mathematics and the use of the astrolabe, and old Karsten Brandt, who had a sound knowledge of seafaring. Timmermann began teaching Peter maths and fortification. Karsten Brandt undertook to build vessels on the model of the remarkable boat found in a storehouse in the village of Izmailovo: it could sail into the wind with a side sail.

More and more frequently, boyars ride over from Moscow to see for themselves. Just what are these games being played on the Yauza? What is happening to so much money and so many weapons from the Armoury?.. The boyars do not ride across the bridge but stand on the far side of the river. In front, on horseback, there is a boyar in a costly fur coat; he is as fat as a feather mattress, he has a beard like a broom and cheeks suffused with blood. Behind him are noblemen who have crammed themselves into three or four caftans of the costliest. They stand there for an hour or more

without moving. On the other side of the river, carts are filing past loaded with sand or fascines. The soldiers are dragging beams. On a tall tripod, a heavy pile-driver is being raised by block and tackle and—whump!—it descends onto the pile. Earth flies from shovels, foreigners pace up and down with plans and with pairs of compasses; axes thud, saws whine, foremen hurry about with rulers. And look—Oh Lord!, ye holy Saints—the tsar is not watching the fun from a gilded stool on top of a hill—oh no! In a knitted bonnet, in nothing but German breeches and a soiled shirt, the tsar is trotting over the duck-boards with a barrow...

The boyar takes off his hat of forty sables, the noblemen take off their hats too and they all bow low on their side of the river. And they look, throwing up their hands in dismay... Their fathers and grandfathers had stood round the tsar like an indestructible wall, protecting him so that not a grain of dirt or a fly should settle on his anointed majesty. On rare days, almost as if he were a living god, they had led him to the people, preserving the ancient Byzantine magnificence... But what is this? What is this one up to? Like a serf among serfs, like some useless dolt, he runs over duck-boards, shameless, and in his mouth a pipe stuffed with the noxious weed... He is rocking the very foundations... This is no play or amusement... See how those serfs bare their teeth over the river...

One boyar plucks up courage and cries in a trembling voice, his beard wagging:

"Put me to death, Sire, for this truth, but I am too old to be silent; for this is the most shameful, shameful and unbelievable thing to see..."

Like a long pole, Peter climbs up onto the wicker rampart and peers across:

"Ah, so it's you... Listen... What has Golitsyn been writing? Has he conquered the Crimea or has he still not managed it yet?" Then the accursed foreigners whoop and guffaw behind the ramparts, and after them our own people, who should go down on their knees, instead of laughing themselves hoarse on seeing a man so close to the tsars. It would even happen that a boyar would be stubborn enough to risk his neck and, without respite, remonstrate and put Peter to shame: "I dandled your father on my knees, watched day and night at the coffin of the tsar. We are descended from Rurik, we ourselves sat at the royal table. Therefore spare a thought

for our honour, abandon this tomfoolery, think again, go to the bath-house, go to the church of the Lord..."

"Sasha," says Peter, "give me that slow match." And, taking aim, he blasts peas from a twelve-pound howitzer all over the boyar. General Sommer roars with laughter, holding his stomach, Lefort laughs, the quiet Timmermann smiles good-naturedly, the small, stocky Karsten Brandt, his face creased with mirth like a baked apple, shakes from head to foot. All the foreigners and Russians jump up onto the ramparts to watch the fine-fur hat fall off and the boyar sink back into the arms of the palace nobles, while the horses shy and kick. It's enough to keep everybody laughing and talking for the rest of the day.

The fortress was named "the capital city of Pressburg".

4

After ending up that night in Peter's bedchamber, Sasha Menshikov stayed on. He was artful, lively, quick on the uptake, and could guess what the other was thinking. He would turn round, make a dive, and that was that. There was no knowing when he slept: he would run the palm of his hand over his face and it was as if he had just washed; there he was, cheerful, clear-eyed, full of fun. He was almost as tall as Peter, but broader in the shoulders and slimmer in the waist. Wherever Peter went, Sasha would go too. He was game for anything he might be asked to do—beat the drum, fire a musket, or hew brushwood with his sabre. If he started doing impressions, you nearly died laughing: how the bear put its paw into the hollow tree for honey and disturbed the bees; or how the priest frightened the merchant's wife into paying for a mass to be celebrated; or how the two stammerers quarrelled... Peter would laugh until he cried, looking at Sasha with what can only be described as affection. At first, all thought that he should be the tsar's jester. But Sasha was aiming higher. Although he was always telling jokes and anecdotes, there were times when the generals and engineers got together, pondered how to do this or that, and pored over the plans. Peter would chew his nails with impatience. Sasha would poke his head over someone's shoulder and say, speaking quickly, so that they hadn't time to chase him away:

"But this is how you ought to do it. It couldn't be simpler!"

"A-a-a-a-ah!" the generals would say.

"He's right!" Peter's eyes would flash.

If anything was needed, Sasha would take the money and ride immediately to Moscow, jumping over wattle fences and galloping across kitchen gardens. He would get the necessary as if out of a hat, giving the bill to Nikita Zotov (manager of the Play Commission). He would heave a deep sigh, sniffing and blinking: "Correct to the last copper, no cheating."

"Sasha, Sasha," Zotov would say, shaking his head. "Since when did fir poles cost three altyns each? The top price is an altyn. Oh, Sasha..."

"If you have time to spare they cost an altyn; but it comes more expensive if you are in a hurry. I got the poles quickly, that's what matters—so that Peter Alexeyevich wouldn't worry..."

"Oh, you'll be hanged for your pilfering one of these days..."

"Lord, what's come over you? Why are you insulting me for no good reason, Nikita Moiseich?.." Sasha would speak so pathetically, turning his face away and squeezing the tears out of his blue eyes.

Zotov would wave his quill at him:

"All right, off you go... I'll take your word for it this time. But mind how you go in future..."

Sasha had been promoted to batman. Lefort spoke highly of him to Peter: "The lad will go far; he's as devoted as a puppy and as sharp as an imp." Sasha was constantly running to Lefort's house in the German quarter and he never returned without a present. He loved presents madly, whatever they might be. He wore Lefort's caftans and hats. He was the first of the Russians to order himself a wig in the German quarter. It was a big one, red as fire: he used to wear it on feast days. He shaved his upper lip and his cheeks, and powdered himself. One or two of the servants had already started calling him Alexander Danilych.

One day he brought to Peter an earnest young man dressed in a clean blouse, new bast shoes and foot-cloths.

"Myn Herz* (as Sasha often addressed Peter now) tell him to show you his skill as a drummer... Alyosha, take the drum..."

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* My Heart (Dutch).—*Ed.*

Alyosha Brovkin unhurriedly put down his hat, took a drum off the table, looked up at the ceiling with a bored expression and suddenly began rattling away, sounding Assembly, Reveille, a campaign march, and "Run, thrust, slash, hurrah!" Then he hammered out a dance rhythm. Good old Alyosha! He stood like a statue, only his hands and the sticks moving so fast that they were just a blur.

Peter rushed at him, seized him by the ears in astonishment, looked into his eyes and kissed him several times.

"To Number One Company as drummer..."

And so Sasha's right-hand man ended up in the battalion. When the days became shorter, the ground was in a grip of ice and stinging snow came down from the clouds, balls and drinking evenings with music began in the German quarter. Through Sasha, the foreigners sent invitations to tsar Peter. They were written on beautiful paper portraying a naked, pot-bellied man sitting on a barrel, above—a naked boy shooting an arrow from a bow, and below—an old man with a scythe laid down beside him, and all this framed with columns and grapevines. In the middle were lines of verse in gold ink:

"With heartfelt respect we invite you to a mug of beer and dancing"; but if you were to read the first letters only, it came out as "Herr Peter".

As soon as it was dusk, Sasha would drive a gig up to the porch (Peter did not like riding on horseback; he was too tall). They dropped everything and left for Kukui. On the way Sasha would say:

"I dropped into the tavern the other day, myn Herz, to order half a mug of beer on your instructions, and I saw Anna Ivanovna... She promised to be there today without fail..."

Peter sniffed and was silent. He was irresistibly drawn to those evenings. The iron-rimmed wheels rattled over the icy ruts. It was impossible to see the road in the dark, and naked branches howled on the dam. At last, welcoming lights came into view. "To the left, to the left, myn Herz," said Sasha, peering ahead. "Turn into the side street, we won't get through here..." A warm light pouring from the low Dutch windows. Huge wigs behind bottle-glass window-panes. Bare shoulders of women. Music. Couples whirling. On the walls, three-branched candelabra with reflectors casting funny shadows.

Peter always entered abruptly, his eyes bulging in an odd sort of way; tall, no colour in his cheeks, his small mouth compressed, he would suddenly appear in the doorway. With quivering nostrils, he inhaled the sweet women's perfume and the pleasant aroma of pipe tobacco and beer.

"Peter!" shouted his host. The guests leapt to their feet and came up holding out their arms in welcome. The ladies curtseyed before this strange young man, tsar of the barbarians, revealing full breasts pushed up high by the tight corsets. Everyone knew that Peter would invite Anna Mons to the first country dance. Each time, she flushed with joyful surprise. Anna was growing more beautiful every day. The girl was in the full bloom of her youth. Peter was already conversant with German and Dutch; she listened attentively to his fragmentary, always hurried stories, and intelligently put in a word from time to time.

When, jingling his enormous spurs, some dashing young musketeer invited her to dance, a cloud would descend on Peter. He would sit hunched on a stool, glancing sideways to watch Anna's petticoats flying as she whirled in the carefree dance, her light-brown head turning, bending to the musketeer, her neck bound with a velvet band on which twinkled a tiny golden heart.

His heart ached mightily—she was so desirable, so inaccessibly alluring.

Sasha danced with respectable ladies who, because of their age, were sitting idle by the wall. He worked like a Trojan. At ten o'clock, the young people left and Anna disappeared too. The distinguished guests sat down to sup on black pudding, stuffed pigs' heads, and some extraordinary earth apples, wonderfully sweet and filling, called potatoes. Peter ate a great deal, drank beer to shake off the spell of love, chewed radish and smoked tobacco. Towards morning, Sasha helped him into the gig. Again the icy wind whistled through the impenetrable darkness of the fields.

"If only I had a mill in the Quarter, or a tannery, like Timmermann... Then I would..." said Peter gripping the iron handrail of the gig.

"What's so great about that?.. Hold on tight, here's a ditch."

"Fool... Have you seen the life they live? Better than ours..."

"Then you'd get married..."

"Shut up or I'll clout you one..."

"Wait ... we're off the road again..."

"I'll have to answer to mother tomorrow... 'Go to the bath-house, confess, take Communion, you've soiled yourself...' I've got to go to Moscow tomorrow—I don't know anything worse. Put on the scapular, spend half the day at a church service and the other half on the throne with my brother—below Sophia... My brother Ivan's nose stinks. And those dozy boyar mugs—wouldn't I like to give them a kick or two... 'Be quiet,' they say, 'have patience'... Tsar, indeed! They'll cut my throat, I know it..."

"You mustn't think like that; it's the drink talking..."

"Sophia—now there's a real snake in the grass... And the Miloslavskys are greedy locusts... I won't forget their sabres and their pikes... They wanted to throw me down from the porch, and the people screamed horribly... You remember?"

"I remember!"

"Golitsyn's ruined one army in the steppe and now he's been ordered off to the Crimea again... Sophia and the Miloslavskys can't wait till he gets back with the troops... They have a hundred thousand... They'll point the finger at me and they'll sound the tocsin..."

"We'll take shelter in Pressburg..."

"They've already tried to poison me once ... and they sent someone with a knife." Peter jumped to his feet, looking around. It was pitch dark and there was not a glimmer of light to be seen anywhere. Sasha seized him by the belt and sat him down again. "Blast them! Blast them!"

"Whoa!.. That's where it is—the dam." Sasha gave a flick of the reins. The willows whistled. The good horse took them out onto a steep bank. The lights of Preobrazhenskoye came into view. "Myn Herz, the streltsy can't be roused with a tocsin now. Those times are over. Ask anyone you like. Ask Alyosha Brovkin, he's often in the suburbs... They're not too pleased with your sister either..."

"To the devil with you all, I'll run away to Holland, I'd do better to become a watchmaker..."

Sasha whistled.

"And not see Anna Ivanovna any more, like your ears."

Peter bent over his knees. Suddenly he coughed and burst out laughing.

Sasha guffawed merrily and lashed out at the horse.

"Your mother'll marry you off soon... And a married man, as everybody knows, stands on his own feet... It won't be long now, have patience... There's just one thing wrong: she's German and she's a Lutheran... Otherwise what could be simpler or better, eh?.."

Peter moved towards him and, with lips trembling in the cold, tried to see Sasha's eyes in the darkness...

"Why isn't it possible?"

"Aha, so you want to! Anna Ivanovna for tsaritsa? Then you'll hear that tocsin sound all right..."

5

Anna's enticing petticoats only whirled on Sundays: once a week there was drinking and merrymaking. On Monday, the Kukui folk put on knitted bonnets, padded waistcoats and worked like bees. They treated work with great respect, whether it was that of the merchant or the simple artisan. "He earns an honest living," they would say, lifting a respectful index finger.

At dawn on Monday, Sasha woke Peter and reported that Karsten Brandt, the masters and the apprentices had already arrived. A shipbuilding workshop had been set up in one of the halls at Preobrazhenskoye. Karsten Brandt built models of ships from Amsterdam plans. The Germans, masters and apprentices taken by a Ukase from those of the palace squires and play soldiers with the necessary skill, planed, sharpened, hammered together and tarred small models of galleys and ships, fitted them with rigging, sewed sails and carved decorations. Here, too, the Russians learned arithmetic and geometry.

Banging, voices as raucous as at market, singing and Peter's abrupt laugh invaded the sleepy palace. The little old ladies froze with horror. Yearning for peace and quiet, tsaritsa Natalia Kirillovna moved to an extension at the far end and there, in a haze of incense and the glimmer of icon lamps, incessantly thought about and prayed for her little Peter.

Through her loyal women, she knew everything that was happening in the Kremlin: "Sophia guzzled fish again on Friday, she doesn't fear the Lord. They brought her sturgeons from Astrakhan, huge ones. She never even thinks of sending you at least one poor little sturgeon, my lady... She's getting

terribly greedy, she's starving her servants..." They told how, missing Vassily Vassilyevich, Sophia summoned upstairs Silvester Medvedev, a learned monk. He is by way of being a ladies' man and an astronomer. He goes about in a silk robe with a diamond-studded cross, wiggles the rings on his fingers and trims his beard—it's raven black and smells nice. He calls on Sophia at all hours and they practise magic. Silvester climbs up onto the window-ledge, stares at the stars through a tube, writes signs and, placing his finger on his nose, reads from them. Sophia pushes her breast up against him and keeps asking: 'Well, what does it say, what does it say?' Yesterday they saw him bring in a bag a cast of a human footprint and some bones and roots. He lit three candles, whispered magic words and burned someone's hair in the candle flame... Sophia trembled, her eyes popped, and she sat there as blue as a corpse..."

Cracking her fingers and leaning over towards the woman telling the story, Natalia Kirillovna asked in a whisper:

"And whose hair did he burn? It was dark, wasn't it?"

"Dark, my lady, dark, God's truth..."

"Curly?"

"Just so—curly... And we all wondered if he wasn't burning our young master's hair..."

It was said of Silvester Medvedev that he taught the bread-worshipping heresy that came from the late Simeon Polotsky and the Jesuits. He had written a book in which he claimed and reasoned that the bread is transubstantiated into the holy sacrament only at the words "Take, eat". In Moscow, all they ever talked and argued about, rich and poor alike, in the palaces and in the markets, was bread: at which words is it transubstantiated? Their heads reeled, they didn't know how to pray in order to be fit for transubstantiation. Many were fleeing from this heresy into the schism...

A ginger-haired priest named Filka was going about Moscow, and when people gathered round him, he would begin ranting: "I have been sent from God to teach you the true faith; the apostles Peter and Paul are my kinfolk... To teach you cross yourselves with two fingers and not three; for in three fingers sits Kika the Demon, that is, the fig; all the underworld is in him, for you are crossing yourselves with the fig..." Many believed him and were tempted. And by no measure of cunning could he be caught.

All had been impoverished by the tax levies for the Crimean

campaign. For the second campaign they were going to lose the shirts off their backs. The suburbs were emptying. People were fleeing in their thousands to the schismatics, beyond the Ural mountains, to the Pomorye, to the Volga, to the Don. And the schismatics were waiting for Antichrist—there were some who had already seen him. The Old Believers were going about the villages and hamlets, persuading the people to burn themselves alive in the barns and bath-houses to save their souls at least. They shouted that the tsar, the patriarch and all the clergy had been sent by Antichrist. They were taking refuge in the monasteries and fighting the troops sent by the tsar to put them in irons. In the Paleostrovsky Monastery, the Old Believers fought off two hundred streltsy, and, when they could hold out no longer, locked themselves up in the church and burned themselves alive. Near Khvalynsk, in the mountains, thirty Old Believers barricaded themselves in a barn with harrows, set themselves on fire and were likewise burned alive. In the forests near Nizhni Novgorod, people were burning themselves to death in their huts. On the Don, on the river Medveditsa, a runaway named Kuzma was calling himself Pope, making the sign of the cross at the sun and saying: "Our God is in heaven, but on earth God is no more, on earth there is Antichrist: the tsar of Moscow, the patriarch and the boyars are his minions..." The Cossacks gathered on horseback to listen to this Pope and they believed him... The whole of the Don was in turmoil.

Such talk frightened Natalia Kirillovna into a state of profound misery. Young Peter was having fun and amusing himself, unaware of the darkness that was about to descend on his head. The people had forgotten humility and fear... They were throwing themselves alive into the flames. Were not such people terrifying?

Natalia Kirillovna trembled whenever she remembered Stenka Razin's bloody revolt... It was as if it had only been yesterday... They had expected Antichrist in those days too. Stenka's atamans had crossed themselves with two fingers. Distraught, Natalia Kirillovna looked at the lights of the coloured icon lamps, went down on her knees moaning, and pressed her brow for a long time to the worn prayer mat...

"I must marry Peter off," she thought. "He's shot up, he's fidgety, he drinks wine, and he's always with those German

girls... If he marries, he'll settle down... I would go with him and the young tsaritsa round the monasteries and pray to God for happiness, protection from Sophia's witchcraft, strength against the frenzy of the people..."

She really must marry Peter off. There had been a time when the palace boyars would arrive and he would at least sit with them for an hour or so on his father's throne in the dilapidated reception hall. But now it was always: "I'm busy..." They'd installed a vat in the Throne Room and emptied two thousand buckets of water into it to launch the model ships, filling the sails with bellows and firing out of little guns loaded with real powder. They'd scorched the throne and smashed a window.

The tsaritsa tearfully complained to her younger brother, Lev Kirillovich. He would sigh wearily: "All right, then, sister, marry him off; no harm can come of it... The Lopukhins, now—the okolnichy Larion—have a girl of marriageable age, Evdokia; she's in full bloom, sixteen years old... The Lopukhins are a troublesome lot, there's a whole tribe of them and they're short of money... They'll be round you all the time like puppies..."

As soon as the roads were fit for travel, Natalia Kirillovna left, ostensibly to pray at the Novodevichy Convent. Through a reliable woman, a hint was dropped to the Lopukhins. The whole clan, some forty of them, hastened to the Convent and filled the church to overflowing—lean, malevolent, small people, all staring at the tsaritsa. Evdokia, faint with fear, was brought with great care in a covered carriage. Natalia Kirillovna received her, looked her up and down, took her into the vestry and there, left alone with the girl, examined her thoroughly in private. She took a liking to the girl. Nothing was said this time. Natalia Kirillovna left, and the eyes of the Lopukhins were burning...

There was one happy occurrence amid the grief and tedium: Vassily Vassilyevich's brother, prince Boris Alexeyevich Golitsyn, on returning from the Crimean army, near Poltava, attended service on the regent's birthday in the Cathedral of the Assumption dead drunk in front of Sophia. Then, at table, he cursed Vassily Vassilyevich: "He's shamed us before Europe, he shouldn't be leading regiments, he should be sitting in a summer-house and writing happy thoughts down in a notebook." He cursed and abused the palace boyars: "You think with your bellies and your eyes are swim-

ming in fat. Any idler could take Russia with his bare hands now..." After that, he took to visiting Preobrazhenskoye.

As he watched Pressburg being built and the exercises being carried out by the Preobrazhensky and Semyonovsky troops, Boris Alexeyevich did not shake his head with an ironic smile like the other boyars, but showed interest and gave praise. Looking round the ship-building workshop, he said to Peter: "The Romans captured the ships of the pirates at the battle of Actium, but they didn't know what to do with them. They cut off the copper prows and nailed them to rostra, that is, to columns. But as soon as they learned to build and fit out their own ships, they conquered the seas and the whole world."

He spent a long time talking to Karsten Brandt, testing his knowledge as he did so, and advised him to build a play wharf on the lake at Pereyaslavl, a hundred and twenty versts from Moscow. He sent the workshop a wagonload of Latin books, plans, copper-plate engravings, pictures of Dutch cities, shipyards, ships and naval battles. To translate the books, he presented Peter with a learned Arab dwarf named Abraham, whose comrades, Tomosa and Seka, were also dwarfs. One was twenty inches high, the other, twenty-two. They were dressed in quaint little caftans and turbans decorated with peacock feathers.

Boris Alexeyevich was wealthy and powerful, with an exceptionally keen mind. He was no less learned than his cousin; but he was immoderately addicted to drink, loving amusement and lively company above all things. Natalia Kirillovna was frightened of him at first: mightn't he have been sent by Sophia? Why should such a distinguished bigwig be more interested in the weak than in the strong? Day after day, however, the forecourt of Preobrazhensky Palace would resound to the rumble of a massive carriage and four with two frightful Ethiopians on the foot-board. Boris Alexeyevich always made a point of kissing the tsaritsa-mother's hand first. He was ruddy in countenance, with a big nose and puffy bags that wobbled under his eyes. A fragrance of musk came from the twisted moustaches and the trimmed, forked little beard. Looking at his teeth alone made you smile; they were so white and cheerful...

"Has Her Majesty slept well? No unicorns dreamed of, I trust? I come to see you so often that you must be weary of me. Forgive me for being such a dullard..."

"Really, prince, we're always pleased to see you... But what's the news from Moscow?"

"It's a bore, tsaritsa, and it's a bore in the Kremlin too... The whole palace is covered with cobwebs..."

"How could you say such a thing! Really..."

"The boyars are snoozing on their benches in all the palace rooms. Such gha-a-stly tedium... Things are bad. There's no respect from anyone... For over two days the regent Sophia has locked herself up and hasn't shown her pretty little face in public... I hastened to kiss tsar Ivan's hand. His Royal Majesty lies there on the stove-shelf in a fox-fur coat and felt bootie-wooties. He looks so woebegone. 'How now, Boris?' quoth he. 'Is it not dull here? The wind howls in the chimney, is it not frightening?.. Why should it be so?..'"

Natalia Kirillovna would finally realise that he had been joking all along. She would look at him and laugh...

"It is only here with you that I can be of good cheer, tsaritsa... You've born a fine son; he'll outwit them all, given time... He has a watchful eye..."

He would go out, and Natalia Kirillovna's eyes would sparkle for some time. Excited, she would walk up and down her bedchamber, thinking. So, during incessant rain the sun promises to shine through patches of blue in the flying, impenetrable clouds. It meant that the throne was shaky under Sophia if such eagles were flying away from the nest...

Peter took a liking to Boris Alexeyevich. On meeting him, he would kiss him on the lips, consult him on many matters and ask for money, which the prince never refused. He often tempted Peter, the generals, the master-craftsmen, the batmen and the dwarfs to go and have fun and play practical jokes at Kukui. He thought up the most unusual diversions. Many times, heated with wine, he would jump to his feet, one eyebrow down, the other up and, his teeth sparkling, his nose turning crimson, he would recite from Virgil in Latin:

"Let us praise the gods for generously filling the cup with wine, the heart with merriment and the soul with sweet sustenance..."

Peter would look at him as if hypnotised. The wind boomed outside, flying across thousands of versts of plains, forests and swamps, lifting the thatch of a chimneyless hut, bowling a drunk over into a snow drift, making the frozen bell

clang in the leaning bell-tower... But here inside, there were shaggy wigs, red faces, smoke curling up from long pipes, candles spluttering. Noise. Merrymaking...

"Let the drunken assembly be indissoluble!" Peter ordered Nikita Zotov to draw up a Ukase. "From this day hence, all drunkards and revellers are to foregather on Sunday to extol the Greek gods". Lefort suggested they meet in his house. This was the beginning of it all. Zotov, the heaviest tippler, was awarded the rank of High Priest and a flask was hung round his neck on a chain. Sasha, in all his unclothed splendour, was made to sit on a barrel of bear, where he sang songs that made all present laugh until their sides ached.

Rumours of these gatherings reached Moscow. The boyars whispered in fright: "Those confounded Germans at Kukui have got the tsar drinking, they're blaspheming and going on the rampage." Prince Priimkov-Rostovsky, a pious old man, came to Preobrazhenskoye, paid his respects to Peter and talked to him eloquently and in Old Slavonic for an hour on how to preserve the Byzantine decency and piety which were the sole foundations of Russia. Peter listened in silence (he was playing chess with Sasha in the banqueting hall, and it was dusk). Then he pushed away the board and chessmen and began to stride up and down, biting his nails. The prince went on and on, uplifting the sleeves of his heavy fur coat. He was long-bearded and dry... Not a man, but a tedious old ghost, a pain in the neck, a bore!.. Peter bent down and whispered something to Sasha who went out spluttering with laughter. The horses were brought up presently, Peter bade the prince get into his sleigh and took him to Lefort's place.

At table on a high stool sat Nikita Zotov wearing a paper crown and holding a pipe and a goose egg in his hands. Peter unsmilingly bowed to him, and asked his blessing. With dignity, the High Priest blessed him for drink with the pipe and the egg. Then all (about twenty of them) began to sing hymns in whining voices. Prince Priimkov-Rostovsky, afraid of betraying his irreverence, secretly crossed himself under his fur coat and secretly spat. When a man climbed stark naked onto a barrel with a goblet in his hand, and when the tsar and grand prince of All Great and Little etc., pointing at him with his index finger, said in a loud voice: "This is our god, Bacchus, whom we worship", the boyar

froze and swayed on his feet. He was carried out unconscious to his sleigh.

Peter ordered Zotov to be called from that day on the Supremely Drunken Pope, High Priest of the God Bacchus, and the gatherings in Lefort's house were to be known as the Most Wild and Most Inebriated Synod.

News of this also reached Sophia's ears. Furious, she sent Fyodor Yurievich Romodanovsky, a palace boyar, to have a talk with Peter. He returned from Preobrazhenskoye looking thoughtful.

"There are many jokes and diversions there," he reported to the regent, "but there is much real work being done too... They are not asleep at Preobrazhenskoye..."

Sophia's heart was filled with hatred and vague fear. In no time at all, the wolf-cub had grown up.

6

Vassily Vassilyevich arrived unexpectedly from Poltava. Dawn was only just breaking, but it was already impossible to make one's way through the palace entrance halls and passages. The building was buzzing like a beehive. Sophia had not slept that night. Her dress, embroidered with gold thread and covered with a pattern of pearls, her gem-studded scapular, her necklaces and the chain of gold all weighed heavy on her shoulders. She sat by the window, pressing her lips tightly together for fear that they might tremble. Vera, her chambermaid, breathed on the frosted window-pane.

"Oh, my lady, my dear, here he comes!"

She supported the tsarevna by the elbow and Sophia looked out: from the Nikolskiye Gates a team of six dappled greys were coming over the snow that had fallen during the night. They had plumes on their heads and velvet breech straps and ornamented tassels that almost touched the ground. In front of the horses came runners in white caftans shouting: "On your knees!" Officers in armour and short capes galloped alongside the low, brocade-covered carriage. They halted at the Main Porch. Jostling one another in the crush, the nobles hastened to assist the prince to alight...

The regent raised her eyes to heaven. Vera supported her again. "Oh, she's been missing him so much, the poor dear!"

"Vera, give me the Cap of Monomakh," said Sophia huskily.

She saw Vassily Vassilyevich only as she ascended the throne in the Faceted Hall. Candles were burning in their chandeliers. The boyars were seated on benches. He stood there, richly dressed, and yet looking somewhat moth-eaten. His beard and moustaches had grown again, his eyes were hollow, his face had a yellow tinge, and his sparse hair seemed stuck to the top of his head.

Sophia had to fight back the tears. She lifted a hot hand, tightly constricted at the wrist, from the arm-rest of her throne. The prince went down on one knee and kissed it, brushing it with rough lips. She had been expecting something different and she shuddered, as if sensing disaster...

"We are glad to see you, Prince Vassily Vassilyevich. We wish to know about your health..." She coughed slightly, to clear her throat. "Did God bless the affairs which we entrusted to you?"

She sat there, all in gold, stout, her cheeks rouged, on her father's throne with its walrus tusk ornamentation. As stipulated by the Charter, four bodyguards, blissfully quiet striplings all in white, wearing ermine hats and armed with silver axes, stood behind the throne. The boyars on either side, like the saints in heaven, surrounded the three-stepped throne dais covered with crimson cloth. It was all very dignified, according to the ancient ceremonies of the Byzantine emperors. Vassily Vassilyevich listened on one knee, his head bowed, his arms outstretched...

Sophia finished her speech. Vassily Vassilyevich rose and thanked her for her gracious words. Two constables of the Duma solemnly set up a folding chair for him. The matter had now reached its climax—the reason for his arrival. Searchingly, mistrustfully, Vassily Vassilyevich glanced covertly at the rows of familiar faces, dry as those on the icons—coppery red, malevolent, bloated with idleness, with knitted brows. They were on tenterhooks, waiting to see what prince Golitsyn would say as he tried to dip his fingers in their purses... Vassily Vassilyevich broached the matter indirectly... "I, slave and serf of you, the great sovereigns, the tsars and great princes and so forth, humbly beseech you, the great sovereigns, that you, the great sovereigns, should, as before and in time to come, grant mercy to your serf Vassily and his comrades, and should command that the image of the most holy and most pure Mother of God, the merciful Queen and Virgin Mary, be sent from

the Donskoi Monastery to your victorious and invincible army, the army of the sovereigns, so that the most pure Mother of God herself may lead your regiments and protect them from all evil and grant most glorious victories and wondrous dominion over your foes..."

He spoke for a long time. From lack of air and the sweating of the boyars, a mist hung like a glow over the dripping candles. He finished speaking about the icon of the Don Mother of God. The boyars, after thinking it over for propriety's sake, said: "It shall be sent." They sighed with relief. Then Vassily Vassilyevich, this time firmly, spoke about what mattered most of all. The troops had not received any pay for three months. The foreign officers, such as Colonel Patrick Gordon, were taking offence, flinging the copper coins onto the ground and demanding to be paid in silver, or at least, in sables... The men's uniforms were worn out, there were no felt boots, the whole army was in bast shoes, and even they were in short supply... Yet in February they would be away on campaign... This can also end in a shameful disaster...

"How much money do you require of us?" asked Sophia.

"Some five hundred thousand in silver and gold."

The boyars gasped. Several dropped their canes and walking-sticks. There was an uproar. They jumped up, beating their sides with their sleeves: "We are undone!.." Vassily Vassilyevich was watching Sophia; she responded with burning eyes. He spoke out even more boldly:

"Two came to visit me in my camp. They were from Warsaw, Jesuits both. They bear a letter from the king of France to say that they are to be trusted. They propose a matter of great import. You (rising, bowing to Sophia), Most Illustrious Majesties, stand to gain from this matter in no small way... This is what they say: 'There are many pirates on the high seas, French ships are finding it perilous to sail round the world and many cargoes of merchandise are perishing. However, there is a direct and easy route across the land of Russia to Persia, and India and Cathay. You Russians have nothing with which to transport your goods, your Moscow merchants are without money. But the French merchants are rich. Why, then, guard your frontiers to no avail? Let our merchants pass through to Siberia and beyond, wherever they will. They will lay roads across the marshes, and they will set up milestones and post houses. In Siberia

they will buy furs and pay for them with gold, and if they find ores, then they will commence mining also'".

Unable to restrain his anger any longer, old prince Priimkom-Rostovsky interrupted Vassily Vassilyevich:

"We are in a fine enough predicament as it is with those Kukui heretics of ours. Now you would hang foreigners round our necks... It means an end to the Russian Orthodox faith!.."

"We have only just delivered ourselves of the Englishmen under our late tsar," shouted Boborykin, a nobleman of the Duma, "and now we are to come under the French?.. It must not happen."

Another, Zinoviev, said in fury:

"We must insist that the ancient arrogance of these foreigners be finally broken and not that they be offered a free gift of industry and trade... They must be brought into subjection... We are the Third Rome, after all..." "True, true!" shouted the boyars.

Vassily Vassilyevich looked round, eyes flashing and nostrils quivering with rage...

"I care for the state no less than you... (He raised his voice.) I tore my breast with my fingernails ... (he rapped his rings on his chainmail) when I learned how the French ministers dishonoured our high ambassadors Dolgoruky and Myshetsky... They went empty-handed to ask for money and they lost honour thereby... (Many boyars breathed hard.) But had they gone with an advantageous proposition to the king of France, three million livres would have long been lying in the Commission of the Grand Palace. These two Jesuits have sworn on the Bible that if only their majesties would agree to their plan, and if only the Duma would approve it, they swear by their heads for the three million livres that we shall receive before the spring."

"Now, boyars, give this some thought," said Sophia. "It is a matter of great import."

It was easy to say: "Give this some thought..." There had indeed been a time after the Great Troubles when foreigners swooped on Russia like vultures, seized the industries and trade and beat down the prices on everything. The landowners had all but been giving away flax, hemp and grain. Those same foreigners got the Russians into the habit of wearing Spanish velvet, Dutch linen and French silks; to ride in carriages and sit on Italian chairs. The Russians had

cast off the foreign yoke under the late Alexei Mikhailovich. "We'll ship our own goods overseas," they had said. They had fetched master Karsten Brandt from Holland; with much toil they had built a ship, the *Orel.* And there the scheme had fizzled out; there had been none capable of seafaring. There had not been enough money either. Besides, it would have been too much trouble. The *Orèl* rotted, standing on the Volga in Nizhny Novgorod. Now the foreigners were creeping in again, scheming to dip their arms up to the elbow in Russian pockets... Let's see if we can't think of something. Lay out five hundred thousand rubles on war with the Khan—Golitsyn won't go without the money... Ah, that was a clever trap with the three million! It makes you break out in a sweat to think of it..."

Zinovyev, clutching a handful of beard, said:

"We should impose another tax of some kind on the artisans and merchants... Even if only for salt..."

Prince Volkonsky, an old man with a sharp wit, replied:

"There's no tax on bast shoes yet..."

"True, true!" roared the boyars. "The muzhiks use up to twelve pairs a year. Impose a tax of two dengi on a pair of bast shoes and that's when we'll beat the Khan."

The boyars felt better. The problem had been solved. Some wiped away their sweat, others twiddled their fingers and puffed. Yet others farted with relief into their fur coats. They had outwitted Vassily Vassilyevich. He did not surrender, however, but violated procedure by jumping to his feet and banging his stick on the floor.

"Madmen! You're beggars, yet you throw a fortune into the mud. You're hungry, yet you push away the hand that offers you bread... What is the matter? Has the Lord clouded your wits? In all the Christian countries, and there are those that are not as big as one of our districts, trade prospers, the people grow rich, all seek their own advantage... We are the only ones so sound asleep that there is no waking us up again... The people are fleeing as in time of plague, here, there, everywhere. They are desperate... The forests swarm with robbers, roaming wherever the fancy takes them... The land of Russia will soon be called a wilderness! Come, Swede, Englishman, Turk—take over..."

Tears of acute chagrin burst from Vassily Vassilyevich's blue eyes. Sophia, her nails digging into the arm-rests, leaned down from her throne. Her cheeks were quivering.

"There's no cause to admit the French," said boyar prince Fyodor Yurievich Romodanovsky. Sophia turned her eyes on him. The boyars were silent. His paunch swinging from side to side as he worked his way to the end of the bench, he stood up: short-legged with a broad back; the small head, set low on his shoulders. It was chilling to look into his dark, slanting eyes. He had recently shaved his beard and curled up his moustaches; the slightly hooked nose protruded over the thick lips. "We have no need of French merchants. They will take our last shirt off our backs... Yes, indeed... I was recenly with the tsar at Preobrazhenskoye... Play, pranks, it's true... But even play can have a purpose... Germans, Dutchmen, artisans, shipbuilders, officers—they know their trades... The two regiments, Semyonovsky and Preobrazhensky, are no match for our streltsy. We need no foreign merchants, but we cannot do without foreigners either... We should start industries here in Russia: mining, cloth, leather, glass... We should use windmills for sawing timber, as at Kukui. We should begin building a navy—that is what is needed. As for whether or not we vote for a tax on bast shoes today... Confound you, vote for one, it's all the same to me..."

As if in a temper, his fat face wobbling, curled moustaches and all, he backed away and sat down on the bench... That day, the boyars' Duma made no final decision.

7

It was a frosty evening and many guests had foregathered in the tavern. A servant foolishly kept feeding the fire in the hearth with birch logs. "Oh, it's hot in your place, Mons!" The guests played dice and cards, laughed and sang. Johann Mons broached the third barrel of beer. He discarded his quilted waistcoat and was left in his jersey. His neck was purple. "Hey, Johann, you should go and stand in the frost for a while, you have much blood." Mons smiled vaguely, unable to understand what was wrong with him. The sound of voices seemed to come from somewhere far away, and tears sprang to his eyes. While picking up ten mugs of beer, he found himself unable to lift them and spilled the drinks. Weakness stole over his body. He pushed open the door, went out into the cold and leaned against an upright under the shed. High in the sky hung an icy moon inside three

enormous rainbow rings. The air was full of frosty, shimmering needles... There was snow on the ground, on the shrubs and on the rooftops. An alien land, an alien sky, death on everything. His breathing quickened... Something was drawing near to him with unbelievable swiftness... Ah, if only he could look once more at his native Thuringen, where there was a cosy little town in the valley between the mountains and on the lake!.. Tears ran down his cheeks. A searing pain clutched his heart... He fumbled for the door and opened it with an effort. The light of the candles and the wavering faces of the guests seemed made of ash. His chest heaved convulsively, forcing a cry out of him, and he suddenly collapsed...

So died Johann Mons. His passing left all the Germans stunned with grief and surprise for a long time. He was survived by his widow, Mathilde, four children and three businesses—the tavern, the mill and a jeweller's shop. That autumn, thank God, he had been able to marry off the eldest daughter, Modeste, to a worthy fellow, Lieutenant Fyodor Balk. That left Anna and the two little ones, Philimon and Willim. As often happens, affairs after the death of the breadwinner proved to be less than prosperous and IOUs were found. It was necessary to give up the mill and the jeweller's shop to pay for the debts. At this grievous time, Lefort did much to help with money and intercession. The house with the tavern passed to the widow, and there Mathilde and Anna wept bitter tears day and night.

8

"You called, Mama?"

"Sit down, Peter, my angel..."

Peter flopped onto the stool and looked with displeasure round his mother's bedchamber. Natalia Kirillovna, sitting opposite him, smiled affectionately. Oh dear, he was so dirty and his clothes were torn. His finger was bandaged with a rag. His hair was untidy. There were shadows under his restless eyes.

"Peter, my angel, don't be angry, just listen to what I have to say..."

"I'm listening, Mama."

"I want you to get married..."

Waving his arms, Peter shot up off the stool and ran errat-

ically across the chamber from the illuminated images of the saints to the door. Sat down. Jerked his head... The toes of his big boots were turned in.

"Who?"

"I've had a look at her and I like her. She's such a little darling..."

Natalia Kirillovna bent over her son, stroking his hair. She wanted to look into his eyes. His ears were suffused with a bright flush. He ducked out from under her hand and jumped to his feet:

"But I haven't the time, Mama... Really, I've got things to do... Marry me if you must. I'm too busy for that."

Bumping his shoulder on the doorpost, stooping, skinny, he went out and ran like one demented down the passages. A door slammed in the distance.

Chapter Four

1

Ivan Brovkin, Alyosha's father, had brought a cartload of frozen poultry, flour, peas and a barrel of sauerkraut along the sleigh road to Preobrazhenskoye. This was the quit rent for Vassily Volkov. The bailiff had collected it from the village and, so that the produce should not spoil, had ordered it to be taken to the master at his place of service, where Volkov, as a squire, had his little room and larder in the palace. As he drove into the courtyard, Ivan Brovkin took fright and removed his hat. There were a great many rich sleighs and carriages standing at the Main Porch. Groups of serfs in their best clothes were chatting in the morning frost; horses adorned with fox and wolf tails were frisking about and stamping their hooves on the clean snow; the long pent-up foals were whinnying wickedly. Sparrows were busy round the smoking dung.

Squires in their golden caftans and officers in foreign coats with red lapels and curly effeminate locks were ascending and descending the open stairs at the double. Brovkin recognised his master. Vassily Volkov had put on weight on the tsar's victuals, his beard was curly and he walked with dignity, his hands on his silken sash.

"Hell, I'm going to be held up, I came at the wrong time!" thought Ivan. He unbridled the horse and threw it some hay. One of the tsar's hounds came up, eyed Ivan sternly with its yellow eyes and growled... He smiled ingratiatingly: "Well, doggie, old fellow, what's the matter, what's the matter, eh?.." It went away, the overfed tyke, and didn't bite him, thank God. A broad-shouldered groom walked past.

"Hey, tramp... Settled down here to feed your horse?.."

Thank God, the groom was called away, otherwise Ivan would never have come out of it in one piece... He put away the hay and bridled the horse again. At that moment, the bells began ringing merrily in the palace tower. The servants leapt into action. Some galloped off as outriders, others jumped onto the footboard, and the pug-faced, broad-bottomed

coachmen straightened the reins... On every step of the staircase stood squires, their hats tipped at a rakish angle. The marriage procession streamed out of the palace: children with icons, youths with empty dishes; costly hats, green, brocaded, and crimson velvet caftans and fur coats shone bright on the snow under the weeping, rime-dusted birch-trees. As the occasion demanded, Brovkin began crossing himself. The boyars came out... Among them was a woman in many fur coats, each more costly than the last... Under the horned head-dress, her eyebrows were heavily whitened, her eye-lids were painted blue to the temples and her cheeks were rouged with round patches the colour of cranberry juice. A face like a pancake... A sprig of rowan in her hand. Beautiful, merry, and obviously drunk, supported on either side, she was being led from the porch. As they ran past Ivan, the palace maids were saying:

"The matchmaker—look! Oh my!"

"She's come to get the bridal chamber ready..."

"And make the bed for the young couple..."

The grooms whooped, the air sang with the noise of sleigh-bells, runners screeched, rime showered down from the birch-trees. The procession stretched across the plain towards the blue haze of Moscow. Ivan stared with his mouth open. Suddenly, he was shouted at sharply...

"Wake up, big eyes!"

Vassily Volkov was standing in front of him. As was meet for a master, he was scowling and his eyes were hard and piercing...

"What have you brought?"

Ivan bowed down to the snow and, taking from his bosom a letter from the bailiff, handed it to his master. Vassily Volkov planted one leg out sideways and, frowning, began to read:

"Dear Lord and Master, we are sending you a supply of provisions for your table. Forgive us for the Lord's sake that less has been collected than last year: There are fewer geese and there are no turkeys at all... The people in Your Honour's village have thinned down altogether and five souls are on the run; we no longer know how to answer to you for this... Some are barely alive from hunger. The grain only lasted till Intercession and people are eating goosefoot. These are the reasons why there has been an insufficient collection."

Vassily Volkov ran up to the cart: "Show me!" Trembling with fear, Ivan uncovered the cart. The geese were scrawny, the chickens were blue and the flour was grainy.

"What's that you've brought? What's that you've brought me, you mangy dog?" yelled Volkov in a frenzy. "You've been stealing! It's become a habit with you!" He snatched the knout up from the cart and began whipping Ivan. Brovkin stood there bareheaded and did not duck but merely blinked. He was a crafty muzhik, he understood: let him whip away, it wasn't hurting through the sheepskin coat...

The knout broke off at the handle. Volkov, in a temper, seized Ivan by the hair. At that moment, two in military caftans came running up from the palace. "They've come to help him," thought Ivan. "Now I'm done for!.." The one in front, the smaller of the two, suddenly flew at Volkov and thumped him in the side. The master nearly fell down and released Ivan's hair. The other, taller, blue-eyed, with a long face, roared with laughter... All three began to shout and swear... Ivan was truly terrified now and went down on his knees again... Volkov blustered away:

"I won't stand for dishonesty! They're both serfs of mine! I'll have them flogged without mercy... The tsar cuts no ice with me..."

Then the other, his blue eyes narrowing, interrupted him:

"One moment, one moment, say that again... The tsar cuts no ice with you? Alyosha, did you hear those words? (To Ivan.) Did you hear them?"

"Wait, Alexander Danilych..." Volkov's fury suddenly subsided. "I didn't mean what I said... I didn't mean it really... Truly... It's just that my serf nearly drove me to the limit..."

"Let's go to Peter Alexeyevich, we'll sort it out with him..."

Sasha walked off towards the palace. Volkov followed him, and, halfway there, began tugging at his sleeve. The third one did not go with them, but stayed by the cart and said quietly to Ivan:

"Dad, it's me you know... Don't you recognise me? It's Alyosha..."

Ivan was completely abashed. He looked at Alyosha covertly. A clean young man was standing before him, in expensive clothes, bright buttons, false hair down to his shoulders, a sabre at his side. It might be Alyosha at that...

There was no telling.

"Of course, how could we not recognise you..." Ivan replied ambiguously. "It's a father's business to..."

"Greetings, Dad."

"Greetings, young man."

"How are things at home?"

"Thank the Lord."

"Yes, but how's life?"

"Thank the Lord."

"Dad, you haven't recognised me..."

"Anything's possible..."

Seeing that there were going to be no more beatings and suffering, Ivan put on his hat, picked up the broken knout, and angrily began fastening up the cover of the cart again. The young man did not go away but hung on. Perhaps it really was the lost Alyosha. Which meant that the boy had gone up in the world. Mightn't it be a bad blunder to recognise him? It would be more proper not to... Even so, Ivan's eyes narrowed cunningly.

"I have to go to Moscow next. The old woman's told me to buy salt, but I haven't half a kopeck to my name... If you could let me have five altyns or so, or eight kopecks, you won't have seen the last of them after all, we'll pay you back..."

"Dad, but of course..."

Alyosha pulled out a handful of money from his pocket, and not coppers either, but silver: three rubles or more. Ivan was flabbergasted. And when he had taken that money into his hand that was as coarse as a wooden scoop he began trembling and his knees flexed. He was going to bow... Alyosha waved his hand and hurried away... "Oh, my son, my son..." wailed Ivan softly. His narrowed eyes suddenly alerted. Had any of the house servants noticed the cash? He tucked two coins into his cheek for safety and put the rest in his hat. He unloaded the cart quickly, handing over the goods to the master's servant to be signed for, and then, lashing the horse with the reins, made off at speed for Moscow.

Vassily Volkov could have had to face some nasty consequences for saying "The tsar cuts no ice with me". He could have been introduced to the arm-stretching experts in the Commission for Secret Affairs... He rushed up behind

Sasha into the covered porch, hung onto his arm, dragged himself along the floor and, weeping, beseeched him to take his ruby ring, which he pulled off his own finger.

"Listen, you swine of a nobleman's son," said Sasha, sliding the precious ring onto his middle finger, "this is the last time I'm going to save your neck... And you can give Alyosha Brovkin some money or cloth as an apology for insulting him... Understand?"

He glanced at the ruby, shook his periwig with a smile and went off on his high heels, his shoulders swaying... How long ago was it since people had pulled him by the hair when they smelt the putrid hare's meat filling in the pies? Now look at the power he was beginning to have over people!..

Volkov glumly went back to his little room. Opening the chest, which began playing a tune, he found a length of cloth... He felt resentful and outraged almost to tears... Fancy giving this away to the son of a muzhik, a serf, who ought to be presented with a cut of the whip across his ugly face instead. He felt badly about it. He shouted for his servant:

"Take this to Alexei Brovkin, drummer of the Preobrazhenskaya Number One Company. Say I send my respects, and let there be friendship between us..." Suddenly, clenching his fist, he added grimly: "You needn't smirk, or you'll get one in the mouth... Speak to Alyosha quietly, carefully. The scoundrel is dangerous now..."

Sasha Menshikov hunted for Peter in all the palace rooms, where the servants were decorating the benches and window-sills with festive drapes, laying carpets, hanging curtains that were in creases after long storage, and putting up pearl-embroidered cloths for the icons... The icon lamps were being topped up with oil. There was a noise of banging and running feet all over the palace.

He found Peter alone in the bridal chamber, which had only just been prepared by the matchmaker. It was an extension, without a layer of turf on the roof so that the young couple would not sleep underground, as in the grave. Peter was dressed for informal processions. He was still holding the silk kerchief presented to him when he met the matchmaker. He had torn it to ribbons with his teeth. Peter glanced evasively at Sasha and flushed...

"Beautifully done-up," said Sasha in a sing-song voice,

"prepared for the angels in heaven..."

Peter unclenched his teeth and laughed. He pointed to the bed:

"What junk..."

"If she's young, comely, passionate... Hardly junk... So help me, myn Herz, there's nothing sweeter..."

"You're lying..."

"I've known it since I was fourteen... Goodness knows what wenches have come my way... And yours, they say, is a real beauty..."

Peter heaved a short sigh. Again he ran his eyes over the log-built chamber with the coloured windows let high into three walls, which were hung with Teheran carpets. The floor was spread with a rug patterned with birds and unicorns. Four arrows had been stuck in the corners of the room and each had been draped with forty sables and a fancy loaf. On two benches joined together, on twenty-seven sheaves of rye and on seven feather mattresses, a silk bed had been made up with many pillows covered with gem-studded slips. A fur hat had been placed on top of them. There were marten-skin blankets at the foot of the bed. By it stood limewood casks of wheat, rye, oats and barley.

"Haven't you seen her yourself, then?" asked Peter.

"Alyosha and me slipped the servants a bribe and climbed up onto the roof. It was no use. The bride's sitting in the dark. Her mother never leaves her; they're scared someone might turn the evil eye on the girl and spoil her... They've been ordered not to carry the rubbish out of her room... Her uncles, the Lopukhins, march about the yard day and night with harquebuses and sabres.

"Have you heard anything of Sophia?"

"Why, she's been furious; but can she stop you getting married? You watch it, myn Herz, when you sit at table with the bride. Don't eat or drink anything... If you feel like a drink, look my way. I'll give you a cup and you can drink out of that..."

Peter chewed at the torn handkerchief again.

"Shall we drive over to the German quarter? Nobody need know... Just for an hour or so... Eh?"

"Don't ask for that, myn Herz. You mustn't even think of the Mons girl now..."

Peter stuck his head out of his collar; his nostrils distended and his face went white.

"Don't you be so free with me! (Seizing Sasha by the chest so that the buttons flew off...) How dare you?" He shook him again, but let him go and continued more calmly, this time: "Fetch any fur coat you can find... I'll go into the garden and you can bring the sleigh there..."

2

The wedding was celebrated at Preobrazhenskoye.

Few guests were invited, apart from the Naryshkins and the bride's family, some of the palace boyars, Boris Alexeyevich Golitsyn and Fyodor Yurievich Romodanovsky. Natalia Kirillovna had invited him as sponsor. Tsar Ivan was absent owing to an indisposition. That day, Sophia left Moscow to pray.

Everything was in the ancient style. The bride was brought to the palace in the morning and they began dressing her. The maids of the bridal chamber, after washing in the bath-house and donning the headbands and jackets lent to them for the occasion, sang without stopping. To their music, the boyarinas and bridesmaids dressed the bride in a light shift and stockings, a smock of red silk with gems at the wrists, a gown of Chinese silk with wide sleeves falling to the floor and marvellously embroidered with grasses and beasts, and a diamond-studded beaver collar that covered her shoulders. This was drawn so tight that Evdokia all but fainted. Over the gown went a wide, short-sleeved caftan of mulberry cloth with a hundred-and-twenty silver filigree buttons, and over that—a silver-thread robe of light fur, and a cloak, heavily studded with pearls. Her fingers were adorned with rings and her ears with tinkling earrings. Her hair was combed back so tightly that she could not blink her eyes. Her braid was bound with many ribbons, and a headdress in the likeness of a tower was placed on her head.

By three o'clock, Evdokia Larionovna was only half alive, sitting as if made of wax on a sable cushion. She could not even look at the sweetmeats in the oak casket that was brought in as a present from the bridegroom: sugar animals, ginger-breads imprinted with the faces of the saints, cucumbers boiled in honey, nuts and raisins and firm apples from Ryazan. According to custom, there was also a carved bone casket containing needlework and another of gilded copper filled with rings and earrings. On top lay a bundle

of birch twigs symbolical of chastisement.

Her father, the tsar's steward Larion Lopukhin, who was to be called Fyodor from that day, came in from time to time, running his tongue over his dry lips: "Well, how fares the bride, eh?" His nose looked even bonier than before... He stumped about the room for a while, remembered something, and hurriedly went out. Evstigneya Anikitovna, the bride's mother, had long since lost the power of movement, leaning against the wall. The maids of the bedchamber, who had not eaten since dawn, were beginning to lose their voices.

The matchmaker hurried in, waving sleeves two yards long.

"Is the bride ready? Call the wedding procession... Take the loaves and light the lanterns... Where are the girl dancers? Oh dear, there aren't enough of them... The Odoyevskys had twelve, and we're marrying a tsar here after all... Oh, my dears, look at the bride—a real beauty! Where would you find the like? Nowhere... Oh, my dears, my precious ones, what have you gone and done, you'll be the death of me... Our bride isn't properly dressed... You've forgotten the most important thing of all... The veil, where's the veil?"

A white cloth was draped over the bride's headdress. They folded her hands on her breast underneath it and told her to keep her head bowed. Evstigneya Anikitovna began to wail softly. Larion ran in, holding the icon for the blessing in front of him as if going into battle. The dancers flourished their kerchiefs and began stamping their feet and circling round:

Hops fare abroad on holidays
Hops sing a song themselves to praise
The hop vine am I, and ever shall be
There's none more merry or blithe than me...

The servants raised the loaves on their platters. They were followed by the lamp-bearers with mica lanterns on poles. Two candle-bearers bore the bride's thirty-pound candle. The bride's man, Pyotr Lopukhin, Evdokia's cousin, in a silver caftan with a towel tied across one shoulder carried a plate of hops, silk kerchiefs, sable and squirrel skins, and a handful of gold coins. After him came the two uncles, the Lopukhins, very brisk, well known for their lawsuits and denunciations. They guarded the route, making

sure that no one ran across the bride's path. Then came the matchmaker and her assistant, leading Evdokia by the arms. The poor girl was shaky at the knees because of the heavy dress, fasting and sheer fright. After the bride came two old boyarinas carrying dishes with a married woman's velvet headdress on one, and napkins on the other to distribute to the guests. Then came Larion in furs borrowed from the whole tribe and, one pace behind him, Evstigneya Anikitovna. The whole of the bride's family brought up the rear, jostling one another impatiently in the narrow doors and passages.

In this manner they entered the Reception Hall. The bride was set down under the icons. The plate of hops, furs and money, together with the platters of loaves, were placed on the table, already set with salt, pepper and vinegar cruets. They sat in order of rank. No one spoke. The eyes of the Lopukhins were strained and dry—they were afraid of committing some blunder. They did not stir, they did not even breathe. The matchmaker tugged Larion by the sleeve.

"Don't drag things out..."

He slowly crossed himself and sent the bride's man to announce to the tsar that it was time to come for the bride. As Pyotr Lopukhin went out, the close-shaven back of his head trembled. The icon lamps sputtered, the candle flames did not waver. There was a long wait. From time to time, the matchmaker tickled the bride's ribs to keep her breathing.

The staircase in the passages began creaking. They were coming! Two bodyguards appeared silently and stood by the doors. In came the sponsor, Fyodor Yurievich Romodanovsky. His eyes bulging at the glittering icon frames, he crossed himself, shook Larion's hand in greeting and sat down opposite the bride, his fingers interlocked. Again there was a short silence. Said Fyodor Yurievich in a thick voice:

"Go ask the Tsar and Grand Prince of All Russia that he should be so kind as to come to his ceremony without delay."

The bride's family blinked and swallowed. One of the bride's uncles went out to meet the tsar. He was already approaching, being young and impatient... Puffs of incense floated in through the door. Then three came in: a tall, thick-haired archpriest from the Annunciation Cathedral with a copper cross containing holy relics and swinging the

censer in wide arcs, while a young palace priest whom hardly anyone knew (except that Peter called him Bitka) sprinkled the red carpet with holy water. Between them walked the tottering, feeble-voiced metropolitan in all his pontifical glory.

The bride's family jumped to their feet. Larion ran out from behind the table and kneeled down in the middle of the hall. Boris Alexeyevich Golitsyn, the best man, led Peter in by the arm. The tsar was wearing a scapular and his father's golden robe that only reached down to his knees. As for the Cap of Monomakh, Sophia had refused to let him have it. Peter was bareheaded and his dark curls were parted in the middle. His face was pale, his eyes were glassy and unblinking, his jowls bulging. The matchmaker propped up Evdokia more firmly; she had felt the girl's ribs beginning to quiver.

After the bridegroom came Nikita Zotov, the master of ceremonies, whose duty it was to protect the wedding from harm by witchcraft and to preserve decorum. He was sober, clean and radiant. The older members of the Lopukhin family exchanged glances. Zotov was a shameless debauchee. They had never expected such a man to be put in charge of the ceremony... Lev Kirillovich and old Streshnev were escorting the tsaritsa. For this occasion, her old finery had been taken out of the chests: a summer dress of a charming peach colour, a caftan with foreign glass beads and embroidered with floral designs... As they dressed her, Natalia Kirillovna had wept for her lost youth. Now she walked in, as beautiful and dignified as in the old days...

Boris Golitsyn went up to the Lopukhin sitting next to the bride and, jingling some coins in his hat, said in a loud voice:

"We wish to buy a place for the prince."

"We're not selling cheap," replied Lopukhin and, as was the custom, barred the bride with his hand.

"Iron, silver or gold?"

"Gold."

Boris Alexeyevich emptied the gold coins into a plate and, taking Lopukhin by the arm, led him away from his seat. Peter, who was standing among the boyars, smirked. They began to push him gently forward. Golitsyn took him by the elbows and sat him next to the bride. Peter felt the warm curve of her thigh and moved his leg away.

The servants brought in the first course and put it on the table. His eyes raised to heaven, the metropolitan recited the prayers and blessed the food and drink. But no one touched the food. The matchmaker bowed low to Larion and Evstigneya Anikitovna.

"Bless the bride that she may card and spin."

"God will bless her," replied Larion. Evstigneya merely moved her lips. Two candle-bearers stretched an opaque cloth between the bridegroom and the bride. The chambermaids in the doorway and the boyarinas and their daughters at the table began singing cheerless, long, drawn-out songs. Out of the corner of his eye, Peter could see the matchmaker and her assistant fussing about behind the screen and whispering: "Put the ribbons away... Lay the braid, coil it... The headdress, give me the headdress...". Evdokia began to weep in a soft, childlike voice... Peter's heart was beating wildly: something forbidden, feminine and warm was weeping beside him, secretly preparing for something than which there was nothing sweeter in this world... He moved right up to the cloth and became aware of her breathing... Up popped the painted face of the matchmaker grinning from ear to ear.

"Have patience, Sire, you shall not languish long..."

The screen fell. The bride was sitting there, again with her face covered, but already wearing the head-dress of a married woman. With both hands, the matchmaker took some hops out of the plate and sprinkled them over Peter and Evdokia. Having done this, she fanned them with the sables and began to throw to the guests the kerchiefs and gold coins from the plate. The women started singing cheerfully and the dancers circled round. Tambourines and kettledrums struck up behind the doors. Boris Golitsyn cut the loaves and the cheese and distributed them with napkins to the seated guests according to rank.

Then the servants brought in the second course. To show that they were not hungry, none of the Lopukhins had been eating. They pushed their dishes away. Immediately the third course was brought in, and the matchmaker said loudly:

"Bless the young couple to be led to the altar."

Natalia Kirillovna, Romodanovsky, Larion and Evstigneya lifted up the icons. Standing side by side, Peter and Evdokia bowed to the ground. Having blessed them, Larion Lopukhin unfastened the whip from his belt and struck his daughter on

the back three times so hard that it hurt.

"My daughter, you have known your father's whip. I hand you over to your husband. Not I but your husband shall be the one to beat you with this whip for disobedience..."

Bowing, he handed the whip to Peter. The candle-bearers lifted up the lanterns, the best man took the bridegroom by the elbows, and the matchmakers did the same with the bride. The Lopukhins guarded the route: one girl, who crossed their path owing to a natural necessity, was pushed aside so hard that the servants carried her out half-alive. The whole wedding procession moved slowly to the palace church along the passages and staircases. It was already after seven.

The metropolitan took his time over the service. The church was cold, with draughts coming through the log walls. It was dark outside the grilles of the frosty windows. The weathervane squeaked fretfully on the roof. Peter could see only the hand of the unfamiliar woman under the cloth: weak, with two silver rings and painted nails. As she held the dripping candle, she was trembling—blue veins, a short little finger... She was trembling like a lamb's tail... He turned his eyes away and scowled at the lights on the low iconostasis...

...Yesterday, he had been unable to say goodbye to Anna. The widow Mathilde, seeing Peter drive up in an ordinary sleigh, had rushed up, kissed his hand, sobbed that they were perishing of poverty, there was no firewood and so on and so forth, and poor Anna had been lying in a fever, delirious, for over two days... He pushed the widow aside and ran up the stairs to the girl... The small bedroom was lit by an oil-lamp; on the floor—a copper basin, discarded slippers. It was stuffy. She was lying under a muslin canopy, the hot strands of her hair in disarray on the pillow. Her brow and eyes were covered with a damp towel; her mouth was hot and sore... Peter tiptoed out of the room and put into the widow's shaking hands a fistful of gold coins (Sophia's wedding present to Peter)... Sasha was instructed to be on duty at the widow's day and night, going to the apothecary if need be. If the patient should ask for any foreign food, then it must be obtained at all costs...

The arch-priest and the priest Bitka were being very free with the incense, the candles shone as if in a fog, and the deacon sang "Many years" in a Jericho roar. Peter glanced

out of the corner of his eye again; Evdokia's hand was still trembling. A cold bubble of wrath seemed to swell in his breast... He snatched the candle from Evdokia and squeezed her fragile, lifeless hand... A frightened whisper ran round the church. The metropolitan's bald head quivered. Boris Golitsyn hurried up to him and whispered something. The metropolitan put on speed, the singers chanted more quickly. Peter continued firmly squeezing her hand and watching his wife's head bend lower and lower under the veil...

They were led round the lectern. Peter walked forward impetuously. Evdokia was supported by the matchmakers, otherwise she would have fallen... And so they were wed... A cold copper cross was held out for them to kiss. Evdokia sank down onto her knees and rested her face against her husband's Morocco boots. Imitating the voice of an angel, the metropolitan chanted in a feeble sing-song:

"To save the soul, it is meet for the husband to chastise his wife with a rod, for the flesh is sinful and weak..."

Evdokia was helped to her feet. The matchmaker took the ends of the cloth: "Look, look, Sire!" and, with a skip, she pulled it off the young tsaritsa's head. Peter looked eagerly. A bowed, anguished, half-childlike little face. A mouth swollen with tears. A soft little nose. To hide her pallor, the bride had been rouged and powdered... At the sight of her husband's round-eyed, burning stare, she took fright and covered her face with her sleeve. The matchmaker moved it away. "Show your face, tsaritsa—that's bad... Raise your eyes, my dear..." All crowded round the young couple. "She looks pale," said Lev Kirillovich... The Lopukhins breathed heavily, ready to argue if the Naryshkins spoke disparagingly of the young bride... She raised her brown, tear-filled eyes. Peter touched her cheek with his lips and her lips moved feebly in response... Smirking, he kissed her on the lips. She whimpered.

They had to return to the Reception Hall. On the way, the matchmakers sprinkled the young couple with flax and hemp. A flax seed stuck to Evdokia's lower lip and stayed there. Clean, in red shirts, some muzhiks specially brought from Tver dutifully and docilely played pipes and tambourines. The girls sang. Again, hot and cold dishes were served. This time, the guests ate with gusto; but for the young couple to eat would have been unseemly. When the third course was brought in—swans, the young pair were served with a roast

chicken. Boris picked it up from the dish in his hands, wrapped it in cloth, and, bowing to Natalia Kirillovna, Romodanovsky, Lopukhin and Lopukhina, said merrily:

"Bless the young couple that they may retire..."

Already slightly tipsy, the mob of relatives and guests led the tsar and tsaritsa to the bridal chamber. On the way in the darkness, some woman in a fur coat inside out—it was impossible to tell who—sprinkled them laughingly with flax and hemp from a basket. At the open door stood Nikita Zotov, holding a bared sabre. Peter took Evdokia by the shoulders; she winced and shrank back, resisting. He pushed her into the bedchamber and abruptly turned round to face the guests. Their laughter died away when they saw the look in his eyes and they stepped back... He slammed the door after him and, looking at his wife as she stood with her fists pressed to her breast by the bed, he began chewing his nails. It had all been so damned unpleasant and nasty. He was seething with exasperation... Confounded wedding! They'd had fun with their silly old ritual! And now that one—standing there trembling like a ewe lamb! He took off his shoulder mantle, pulled the gown over his head and threw it on a chair.

"Sit down... Evdokia... What are you scared of?"

Evdokia nodded briefly and obediently, but was unable to climb onto the high bed. She sat on a barrel of wheat instead. She looked covertly in fear at her husband and blushed.

"Want something to eat?"

"Yes," she replied in a whisper.

The roast chicken was lying on a plate at the foot of the bed. Peter tore off a leg at once and began eating it without bread or salt. He pulled off a wing:

"Here."

"Thank you..."

3

At the end of February, the Russian army moved off again for the Crimea. The cautious Mazeppa advised Golitsyn to proceed along the bank of the Dnieper, building forts as he went; but Vassily Vassilyevich would not countenance any delay. He was anxious to reach Perekop with all possible speed and redeem his shame in battle.

In Moscow, they were still riding in their sleighs, but the kurgans here were carpeted with buttercups. In the plain, already turning green, the wind ruffled the surface of the lakes in the flood lands and the horses went through them up to their knees. From time to time, the sun shone dazzlingly through a gap in the spring clouds. The land here was black and fertile—a real gold mine! They should send their forest and bog muzhiks here; they'd walk about up to their ears in grain. But there was not a living soul to be seen anywhere, only flights of cranes winging overhead at a great height and uttering their long, drawn-out cries. These steppes had been watered with the tears of captives: century after century, millions of Russians had passed this way, led into captivity by the Tatars, to the galleys of Constantinople, to Venice, to Genoa, to Egypt...

The Cossacks admired the steppe: "The harvest here is child's play: spit, and a tree'll spring up. If it weren't for the damned Tatars, we could have farms here." The soldiers from the northern provinces were amazed at the richness of the land. "This war is just," they said. "It's not right for such land to lie fallow." Members of the landowners' levy looked out places for estates, quarrelled over the shareout and rushed to Vassily Vassilyevich's tent to pay their respects: "If God permits us to conquer these places, perhaps the tsar would grant such-and-such a patch of land from such-and-such a gully to the kurgan with the stone effigy of a woman..."

In May, the combined Muscovite and Ukrainian army of one hundred and twenty thousand men reached Zelyonaya Dolina, a valley rich in pastures and water. Here, the Cossacks brought Vassily Vassilyevich a "tongue"—a stocky red-bearded Tatar in a quilted robe, his face glistening in the heat. Vassily Vassilyevich raised a handkerchief to his nose in order not to smell the prisoner, who stank like a ram, and gave orders for him to be interrogated. They tore off his robe. The Tatar twisted his blue, close-cropped head round, baring his small teeth. A gloomy Cossack brought a whip down with a swinging blow across the swarthy shoulders. "Master, master, me tell all," jabbered the Tatar. The Cossacks translated: "The skinhead says the Horde is not far away and the Khan himself is with it..." Vassily Vassilyevich crossed himself and sent for Mazeppa. Towards evening, the deployed army, with horse on the

right and left flanks and with the baggage train and cannon in the middle, moved off against the Tatars.

Just as the disc of the orange sun rose over the low, trampled steppe, the Russians saw the Tatars. Parties of their horsemen kept merging and then dispersing again. Vassily Vassilyevich, standing on a wagon, peered through a spy glass at the many-coloured robes, pointed helmets, high cheekbones and savagely cheerful faces, the horses' tails on the lances and the stately mullahs in their green turbans. This was the advance party of the horde.

Detachments of horse turned, converged, and coalesced into a dense mass. The dust rose. Charge! At full gallop, the Tatars streamed outwards like lava. There was an ear-splitting yell. Then they were screened by the dust that blew into the faces of the Russians. The spy glass trembled in Vassily Vassilyevich's hands. His horse, tethered to the wagon, bucked violently, snapping its bridle. A feathered arrow was sticking out of its neck... At last!—the cannon roared deafeningly, the muskets rattled. Everything was veiled in billowing white smoke. An iron arrowhead thunked on Vassily Vassilyevich's armour, directly over his heart. Shuddering, he made the sign of the cross over the spot.

The firing lasted for over an hour... When the smoke dispersed, a number of horses were thrashing convulsively on the plain and up to a hundred corpses were lying on the ground. Driven off by the fire, the Tatars were withdrawing out of the field of vision. Orders were given to cook dinner and water the horses. The wounded were put into carts. Before sunset, the army moved off again with great caution towards Chernaya Dolina, where the Khan and his Horde were positioned on the Kolonchak River.

A strong wind blew up from the sea at night. The stars were blotted out. There was a distant rumbling and occasional claps of thunder. Eerie flashes of light flickered among the impenetrable clouds, illuminating the grey plain —sand, wormwood, salt pans. The troops moved slowly. Between four and five in the morning, the sky split open and a bolt of fire fell into the baggage train, melting a cannon and killing the gunners. A whirlwind struck, bowling men over, snatching up capes and hats, tearing the hay from the carts. The lightning darted again and again, dazzling the eyes. The order was given to raise the icon of Our Lady of the Don and bear it round the army.

The rain fell in torrents at dawn. On the right wing, through the wind-driven curtain of the downpour, the army saw the Horde. The Tatars were advancing in crescent formation. Without giving the Russians time to rally, they forced the cavalry back and drove the leading regiment into the baggage train. The cannon fuses would not ignite and the powder was wet in the musket pans. The screams of the wounded were drowned by the splashing of the rain. The Tatars stopped in front of a triple row of wagons. Their bowstrings were wet and their arrows were falling without effect.

Vassily Vassilyevich rushed round the baggage train, whipping the gunners, seizing hold of wheels, tearing out slow-matches. The rain lashed his eyes and his mouth. The gunners found a way nevertheless: they covered themselves with their sheepskins, struck lights, sprinkled in dry powder, and the guns belched their lead shot at the Tatar horsemen... On the left wing, Mazeppa and the Cossacks hacked away desperately. Then came prolonged cries from the mullahs. The Tatars withdrew and vanished into the rain and the darkness.

4

"To my lord and my joy, tsar Peter Alexeyevich... Bless you, my dearest, for many years to come..."

Writing was sheer agony to Evdokia. The three fingers with which she was gripping the goose quill just above the nib were black with ink. She was spoiling her third sheet of paper: either the letters came out wrong or she made a blot. And she wanted to write so warmly that her dear Peter would be delighted by her little letter.

Can you really express the feelings of your heart in ink, on paper? It was April outside. The birches, all fluffy, as if covered with chicken down, were beginning to turn green. Snow-white clouds with dark-blue bases were sailing across the sky.

Evdokia gazed and gazed at them, and her eyes filled with tears. Silly of her, really... She glanced at the door: she didn't want her mother-in-law to come in and see her like this. She wiped her eyes with her sleeve and wrinkled her childlike brow.

...What else could she write to him?.. He'd gone, bless him, to Lake Pereyaslavskoye and hadn't written to tell

her when he'd be back. Otherwise they would be fasting together, they would be attending matins... Breaking the fast together... (Evdokia remembered the chicken, how they had eaten it after the wedding, blushed, and laughed to herself...) On this first day after Lent she could call the girls, play on the meadow, roll eggs... Songs and dances. Laugh on the swings and play at blindman's buff. Should she write about that?.. Peter, my dear, my sweet, please come back, I'm so-o-o miserable... Could she put that down? There weren't even any letters for it!..

She picked up the quill again and, moving her lips, traced out:

"We would beg a favour: please, my lord, come back to us and do not tarry... Dunya, your little wifey, sends you greetings..."

She read it over and was delighted. It was very well written. Oh Lord, what a fool she was! She hadn't mentioned her mother-in-law! Write it out again for the fourth time!.. Oh dear, that mother-in-law, Natalia Kirillovna, was a strict one!.. However sweet you were to her, she always found some fault... "Why are you so thin?" she'd say. And she wasn't thin at all: she'd got all she needed, she was well-rounded... Why had Peter galloped away to Lake Pereyaslavskoye after only a month together? What was the matter with her? Was she unsavoury or maybe such a miserable fool that her husband should flee to the ends of the earth to get away from her as if she was a plague sore?.. She wasn't a fool and she wasn't a sore. It was their fault! Why did they let Lefort, and Sasha and the Germans get at him? They were the ones who enticed him to Lake Pereyaslavskoye and they'd lead him into something even worse.

Evdokia dipped her pen angrily into the inkwell. But then she looked up—a pale light was falling through the green of the birches into the open window; a pigeon was puffing himself up and strutting about on the window-sill, and other birds were twittering somewhere... It smelt of the meadows... And a great big teardrop fell onto the fourth clean sheet of paper... What a shame!..

5

Hardly a day went by without a letter from his wife or his mother: "Without you," it would run, "I'm so bored. Will you

be back soon? We could go to the Trinity-St. Sergius Laura together..." Old Testament boredom! Peter had no time to read these letters, much less answer them. He was living in a newly-built hut at the shipyard on the shore of Lake Pereyaslavskoye, where two almost completed vessels were standing on the stocks. They were laying the decks and putting the finishing touches to the carved wooden faces on the prows. A third ship, "The Capital City of Pressburg", had already been launched: it was thirty-eight yards along the waterline and had steep bows decorated with a gilt mermaid and a high stern with the wardroom built on top. On its flat deck, bounded by a lathe-turned taffrail, was the admiral's bridge and a big glass lantern. Under the upper deck, on each side, eight guns peered through the open ports. The ship's hull, its sides converging upwards, glistened blackly with tar.

In the morning, when the lake was only just steaming, the three-masted ship seemed to hang suspended in mid-air as in the marvellous Dutch pictures presented by Boris Golitsyn... They were only waiting for a wind so that they could set out on their voyage. As if on purpose, not a leaf had stirred on the trees for over a week. Clouds with dark-blue bases sailed lazily over the lake, the hoisted sails merely hung there, flapping slightly. Peter never left Karsten Brandt's side. The old man had been unwell since February, his chest continually racked by a wet cough. However, wrapped in a sheepskin coat, he was at the shipyard all day, losing his temper, shouting and sometimes even using his fists over sloppiness or stupidity. By a special Ukase, some hundred and fifty monastery peasants had been sent to the shipyard: carpenters, sawyers, blacksmiths, navvies and reliable women to sew sails. Fifty play soldiers, released from the regiments, were studying seamanship here: how to pay out and belay a line, climb to the mast-top, obey orders. They were being taught by Pamburg, native of Portugal, hook-nosed, with bristling black moustaches, evil, satanic, a pirate. The Russians said of him that he had been hanged more than once for his crimes, but the devil had saved his neck; he had survived and ended up with us.

Peter was in a fever of impatience. The workers were roused at dawn by drumbeat and sometimes with sticks as well... The spring nights were short, and many of the men were dropping with exhaustion. Nikita Zotov raced

against time to write—His R.M.Ts. and G.P. of all G., L. and W.R.—Ukases to the neighbouring landowners for the delivery of foodstuffs: they were to send grain, poultry and meat to the shipyard. The landowners brought the goods out of fear, but the cash was harder to obtain. Although Sophia was glad that her brother had moved even farther away from Moscow, where a play boat might capsize with him on board, funds were low in the Commission of the Grand Palace. Everything had been swallowed up by the Crimean war.

Whenever Franz Lefort was able to get away from his affairs and ride over to the shipyard at Pereyaslavl, the fun would begin. He would bring wine, sausages, sweetmeats and—with a wink—greetings from Anna Mons: she was better now, looked even more beautiful, and would Herr Peter be so kind as to accept two citrons as a present?

In the newly-built hut, at dinner and supper time, they freely raised their glasses to the great Pereyaslavl fleet. They designed a special flag for it—three stripes: one white, one blue, one red. The foreigners yarned about their former voyages, storms and sea battles. Pamburg, his feet planted apart, his whiskers quivering, would shout in Portuguese as if he were actually on board a pirate ship. Peter drank in these speeches, all eyes and all ears. Why should he, himself a landlubber, be so drawn to the sea? In the night, lying on his bunk next to Sasha, he would dream of waves, clouds over the watery wastes and phantoms of passing ships.

He was not to be lured to Preobrazhenskoye by luxuries. When their letters got on his nerves too much, he would write back:

"To my dearest mother, tsaritsa Natalia Kirillovna, whom I love more than my bodily life, from your unworthy son Peterkin, busy with his work.

"I ask your blessing and wish to hear of your health.

"You command me to visit Preobrazhenskoye, and I am willing, save, allas, allas, that I have so much to do: the ships are not finished yet, for lack of rope. Be so kind as to ask for those ropes to be sent without dillay from the Gunnery Commission. And so our life continews. I hereby ask your blessing.

"Your unworthy Petrus."

6

As folk walked past Ivan Brovkin's hut, they took off their hats these days. The whole village knew: "Ivan's son, Alyosha, has power, he's the tsar's right hand. Ivan only has to bat an eyelid and he gets as much money as he asks for". With Alyosha's money (three and a half rubles) Brovkin had bought a fine calf for one and a half rubles, a ewe for three ten-kopeck pieces and four piglets at three altyns each. He had had his harness repaired, put up new gates and leased from the muzhiks eight dessyatines of land for spring crops, paying a ruble cash down with a bucket of vodka and promising one sheaf in five of the harvest.

The man was now on his own feet. No longer did he tie a bast rope round his hips, but walked about with a Moscow sash under his chest so that his big stomach showed. He pulled his hat down over his eyes and held his beard up. This commanded respect. And he said: "Just wait; this autumn I'll call on my son and get some money, and then I'll build a mill." Volkov's bailiff no longer called him Ivashka, but, neutrally, Brovkin. He was released from compulsory work for the master...

His sons and helpers were growing up. All that winter, Yakov went to a sexton in the neighbouring village for lessons in reading and writing. Gavril was now a handsome young man, and the youngest, Artamon, the quiet one, was no fool either. God had blessed Ivan with fine children. Suitors were already applying for Sanka's hand in marriage, but with things as they were now, to let her marry one of his own kind—a muzhik in bast shoes—well, that needed thinking about...

In July, the rumour got round that the army was returning from the Crimea. Everyone was waiting for the warriors—fathers and sons... Every evening, the womenfolk climbed the hill to watch the road. They learned from a passing stranger that the men had indeed returned to the neighbouring villages. The women began weeping: "Ours have been killed, then..." Finally, Gypsy turned up in the village with a thick, wiry beard and only one eye, his shirt and breeches gone rotten on his body.

Brovkin and his family were having a supper of cabbage soup and salt pork in the yard. There was a knocking at the gates: "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy

Ghost..." Ivashka put down his spoon and looked suspiciously at the gates.

"Amen," he replied, and then more loudly: "Watch it—we have fierce dogs here, mind how you go."

Yakov slid back the bolt and in walked Gypsy. He looked round at the yard and the family. Opening wide his mouth, in which some of the teeth had been knocked out, he croaked hoarsely:

"Greetings!" He sat down on a block of wood by the table. "Having supper in the cool? Fed up with the flies indoors?"

Ivan's eyebrows went up and down. But Sanka, without asking permission, pushed a bowl of soup over to Gypsy, wiped a spoon on the apron and handed it to him.

"Have a bite with us, Dad."

Brovkin was astounded at Sanya's boldness... "My word!" he thought, "I'll give her a beating for that!.. Throwing our goods to all-comers!.." But he was chary of starting a scene. Gypsy was hungry and ate with relish.

"Been to the wars?" asked Brovkin.

"I have..." (Back to the soup again.)

"So what was it like, then?" continued Brovkin, unable to sit still on his bench.

"The usual. We fought the way people fight."

"Did you beat the Tatars?"

"We beat them all right... We lost about twenty thousand of our men at Perekop, and as many again on the way back..."

"Ai, ai," Brovkin shook his head. "But they're saying here that the khan submitted to us..."

Gypsy bared his few yellow teeth.

"Ask those who were left behind to rot in the Crimea—ask them how the khan submitted to us... Blazing heat, no water. To the left, a stinking sea; to the right, the Black Sea, and that water's undrinkable, and, what's more, the Tatars choked the wells with carrion... We got stuck near Perekop; we couldn't go forward and we couldn't go back... People and horses were dying like flies... Oh yes, we've been to the wars all right..."

Gypsy combed his moustaches with his fingers, wiped his lips, turned his eyes, one of them a bloody socket, on Sanka: "Thank you, Missy..." He rested his elbows on the table.

"Ivan, when I went on campaign, I left a cow behind..."

"Yes, we told the bailiff, you'd be back, and how were you going to manage without a cow? He took no notice and

helped himself to it."

"I see... And the pigs? One hog and two sows. I asked the village to look after them..."

"They did, friend, they did... The bailiff was very hard on us... We thought maybe you'd be killed in the war..."

"So Volkov ate my pigs?"

"He ate them, yes, he ate them."

"I see..." Gypsy dug his fingers into his tousled iron hair and scratched his scalp: "Very well ... Ivan!"

"What?"

"Keep quiet about me calling on you."

"Who would I tell about it? I always keep my mouth shut anyway."

Gypsy rose. Glanced at Sanka. Quietly went to the gates. And from there, with a note of menace:

"Mind you keep quiet, Ivan... Goodbye." He disappeared. Since that time, no one ever saw him in the village again.

7

Ovsei Rzhov stood swaying at the gates of the eating-house on the Varvarka, counting the money in his hand. Up came streltsy officers Nikita Gladky and Kuzma Chermny.

"Hullo, Ovsei."

"Stop counting your kopecks and come in with us."

"We want a word with you, there's bad news abroad," whispered Gladky.

Chermny jingled the silver in his pocket and burst out laughing:

"There's enough here for a night of it..."

"Robbed someone, have you?" asked Ovsei. "Oh, streltsy, what have you been up to?"

"Fool," said Gladky. "We've been on guard duty at the palace. Understand?" Both laughed again. They took Ovsei into the eating-house and sat themselves in a corner. The grim old tavern keeper brought a flagon of wine and a candle. Chermny promptly put out the candle and leaned over the table, listening to what Gladky had begun whispering.

"A pity you weren't with us on guard. We were standing there... Out comes Fyodor Levontievich Shaklovity. 'The tsarevna,' says he, 'sends you five rubles each for your faithful and unblemished service...' And he hands us a bag of silver... We don't say anything. What's he driving at?

Then he sighs bitterly: 'Ah,' says he, 'streltsy, faithful servants, you haven't long to live with your wives in those rich houses over the Moskva River...'"

"Not long? What does he mean by that?" asked Ovsei in alarm.

"He means this... 'They want,' says he, 'to move you streltsy to the other towns, remove me from the Streltsy Commission, and banish the tsarevna to a nunnery... And Natalia Kirillovna, the old tsaritsa, is stirring up it all the time. That's why she married Peter off... It's on her instructions that the servants—save that we haven't managed to find out who—are dosing tsar Ivan with slow poison. They've blocked his doors with firewood and logs and he goes out through the back porch... Tsar Ivan hasn't long to live in this world. Who's going to take care of you, streltsy? Who will stand up for you?"

"And Vassily Vassilyevich?" asked Ovsei.

"If there was one man they were afraid of it was Vassily Vassilyevich. But now the boyars are dead set against him for the Crimean disgrace... They're going to hang Peter round our necks before we know where we are."

"Not so fast. Let them wait. It wouldn't be the first time we've been called by the tocsin..."

"Not so loud." Gladky pulled Ovsei closer by the collar and said almost inaudibly:

"We won't be saved just by the tocsin. Even if we kill them all, same as seven years ago, we still won't pull the trouble up by the roots... We've got to get rid of the old she-bear... And why put up with the bear cub?"

"Onto a boar-spear with him too—we've got to save ourselves, lads."

Dark and terrible were the words of Nikita Gladky. Ovsei shuddered. Chermny poured from the bottle into the pewter mugs.

"This must be done without any fuss... Pick some fifty trusty men and set fire to Preobrazhenskoye at night. We'll get them with cold steel in the fire."

8

The streltsy regiments had long dispersed to their homes in the suburbs and the noblemen's levy had returned to their estates, but the wounded, the crippled and the runaways

were still straggling along the Kursk and Ryazan highways on the way to Moscow. Thronging the church porches, they showed their terrible sores and wounds, whining, stretching out the stumps of arms to the compassionate people or turning up their sightless eyes.

"Feel, good people—it's an arrow in my chest..."

"Kind folk, I'm blind in both eyes, they beat me horribly over the head with a whip..."

"Merchant, smell and look—my arm's rotted to the elbow..."

"See how they cut strips of hide from my back..."

"Sores from mare's milk... Have pity on me, good people!.."

The kind-hearted parishioners were shocked by these appalling mutilations and freely gave away their coppers. During the night, in out-of-the-way places, people would be found with their heads cut off. Robberies were being committed on the highways, on the bridges, in the dark side-streets. Crowds of crippled soldiers streamed to the Moscow markets.

There was not enough to eat in Moscow either. Many shops had closed down in the market rows; some merchants had been ruined by imposts, others were hiding their goods and money in hope of better times. Everything had become expensive. No one had any money. The grain brought in had dirt in it and the meat was wormy. Even the fish seemed smaller and thinner after the war. Zayats, the pieman everybody knew, took out such stinking muck on his tray that it turned your stomach. A poisonous fly appeared; if you got bitten by it, your cheeks and lips would swell. You had to fight your way through the crowds at the market, but if you looked closer, you saw that there was nothing on sale but bath switches. Evilly, idly and hungrily roared the enormous city.

9

Mikhail Tyrtov cocked his hat as he reined in his foal. Handsome, finely dressed, the collar of his kaftan higher than his head, lips painted, eyes pencilled to the temples. The curved sabre rang on the Persian stirrup. Stepan Odoyevsky bent down to address him from the porch:

"Listen to what they're saying... Don't shout to them

without listening first..."

"All right."

"This is the patter: the tsaritsa and Lev Kirillovich have bought up all the grain. They're deliberately starving Moscow to death... And don't forget about the poisonous fly, it's part of their witchcraft..."

"All right..."

Tyrtov bent over and, peering cold-eyed between the ears of his foal, careered at full gallop through the open gates. The street was full of dust and smells. A tramp, naked to the waist, his skin covered in purple patches, began shouting and pushing the people aside so as to throw himself under the horse's hooves. Tyrtov gave him a sweeping lash of the whip. From all directions they crowded in on the rich boyar, holding out dirty, calloused hands... Scowling, his hands on his hips, Mikhail Tyrtov slowly forced his way through the dense mob.

"Give us something, Fancy Breeches..."

"Chuck us a copper..."

"I'll catch one in my mouth..."

"Give us money, give, give..."

"Watch it, or I'll plaster you with dung! You'd better cough up!.."

"I'll sell you a handful of lice! Buy, you can have extra for nothing!"

"Trample me, trample me, I want to eat..."

The horse champed restively at the bit and rolled its proud eyes at the fluttering rags, dishevelled hair and terrifying faces. The beggars and tramps were coming up more and more boldly. In this wise, Tyrtov sailed down to the end of the Ilyinka, where a notice had been nailed to a post under an icon. A decent-looking fellow was reading in a loud voice, trying to shout down the mob.

"Whereas we, the great tsars, thank you, palace boyar and protector, prince Vassily Vassilyevich Golitsyn, for your great and diligent service to us, in that those savage and immemorial foes of the holy cross and all Christianity by your service were defeated in their pagan dwellings, *not by chance and in unprecedented wise* by our tsar's warriors and were conquered, and were driven thence..."

A husky voice from the crowd:

"Who was defeated, who was conquered? Us or the Tatars?"

The crowd buzzed angrily.

"Where did we beat the Tatars, and when?"

"We even never saw hide nor hair of them in the Crimea..."

"We saw our men flee from them, frightened out of their wits..."

"Who's that fool reading the notice?"

"He's an under-clerk from the Kremlin..."

"One of Golitsyn's creatures, his faithful hound."

"Get him by the skirts of his coat..."

The decent-looking fellow, his voice breaking, went on reading:

"...the Tatars themselves were destroyers of their own dwellings, they set fire to the settlements and villages in Perekop, and, filled with despair and horror, did not appear before you with their pagan hordes... And whereas you with your fighting men returned unscathed to our frontiers with the aforesaid victories glorious all over the world, even as Moses, who brought the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt—for all this we give you our most heartfelt praise..."

A swarthy, one-eyed man with wiry hair again shouted:

"Aren't I mentioned in the notice, reader?"

There was a burst of laughter. Some swore and went away. A ball of mud smacked onto the notice... "Guard!" shouted the reader, shielding his face with his arm... Tyrtov, parting the crowd with his horse, made his way towards the one-eyed man. But Gypsy merely bared the stumps of his teeth at him and disappeared. Someone seized the bridle: "Let's strip this one!" Someone else prodded the horse with an awl; it bucked snorting. Some were whistling like brigands. A stone grazed Tyrtov's cheek. He fled, with the crowd roaring, whistling and whooping after him.

At the Nikolskiye Gates, he saw on horseback Stepan Odoyevsky and a pale, hook-nosed man with fine moustaches. From the stiff folds of his clothing it was clear that he was wearing mail under his kaftan. Tyrtov doffed his hat and bowed down to the horse's mane in greeting to Fyodor Levontievich Shaklovity. His intelligent face was gloomy, the lower lip tightly covering the upper. He was eyeing the mob balefully.

"Did you shout to them, Mikhail?" asked Odoyevsky.

"Go and shout to them yourself... (Tyrtov's cheeks were flaming.) Those starving devils don't care whether it's tsarevna Sophia or Peter... We ought to get a couple of hundred

streltsy here to disperse that rabble and leave it at that..."

"We should send them someone a bit shrewder," said Shaklovity between his teeth, "and incite them to go to Preobrazhenskoye and demand bread... Let the play troops meet them... Germans are beating up Russians on Peter's orders—that's what we'll say... (Odoyevsky laughed.) Go on, make haste, shout to the streltsy about it... And I'll send reliable people to the markets... We must get the people away from Moscow, we don't need a general tocsin, we'll manage with just the streltsy..."

10

Covered with dust, a travelling carriage drawn by a team of four different-coloured horses emerged from a copse onto the shore of Lake Pereyaslavskoye. The stately coachman and the barefooted postillion on the leader surveyed the scene. Beams, planks, piles of shavings and broken tar barrels were lying all over the place. There was not a living soul to be seen; only the sound of heavy snoring could be heard here and there. Four tarred ships were riding at anchor not far from the shore. The high poops, with their wood-carvings and little square windows, cast their reflections on the greenish water. Seagulls were weaving in and out among the masts.

Lev Kirillovich alighted from the carriage and rubbed the small of his back, frowning. The journey had shaken him up. Although not yet an old man, he was corpulent with overindulgence in drink. He waited for someone to approach. Too lazy to shout himself, he cleared his throat. The coachman peered at the sun and said:

"They're resting ... dinner-time..."

And, indeed, it was possible to make out, protruding from behind the beams and barrels, a pair of feet in bast shoes, or a filthy shirt rucked up on a bare back, or a tousled head. The rider, coming to the rescue of the lazy boyar, called out briskly:

"Hey, anyone here alive, good people?.."

Thereupon a bloated, round, un-Russian face with incredibly long black moustaches rose up from behind some cables near the carriage and snarled in broken Russian:

"Vat are you yelling for, you fool?"

The coachman glanced round at the boyar. Should he give

this one a cut of the whip? But Lev Kirillovich signalled him not to. There was no way of telling who was who. With tsar Peter, even drunken generals lay about on the ground. He asked, without any loss of dignity, where the tsar might be.

"The teffle knows," replied the mustachioed one, and again slumped onto the cables. Lev Kirillovich went along the shore looking for a man of Russian appearance and, without a qualm this time, dealt a kick at one in bast shoes. He jumped to his feet, blinking. It was a peasant carpenter who answered, when questioned:

"This morning Peter Alexeyevich went sailing and fired the guns. He must be tired, so he's having a nap."

They found Peter in a boat. He was asleep, his head wrapped in his kaftan. Lev Kirillovich dismissed everybody from the boat and waited for his nephew to wake up. Peter was snoring sweetly. His unstockinged feet in their shoes stuck out of the baggy Dutch breeches. He rubbed them once or twice, warding off the flies in his sleep. This in particular depressed Lev Kirillovich... The tsardom hanging by a hair, and all that bothered him was the flies.

The boyars were already making a fuss in the Kremlin: "Peter should go straight to a monastery. He's a roisterer, the soldier's best friend, he's gambling away the tsar's crown in a tavern." Drunken streltsy were beginning to roam round the Kremlin again, insolently putting their hands on their hips whenever one of the boyars walked past. Sophia, dangerous because these drunken sabres were on her side, was beside herself with rage. Gloomy as a raven, Golitsyn, the inglorious warrior, stayed in his copper-lined chamber and allowed no one to come near him except Shaklovity and Silvester Medvedev. All understood that he must either relinquish affairs with ignominy or try for the throne by bloodshed. A thundercloud hung over the Kremlin...

And look at this one, fast asleep in a boat—as if he hadn't a care in the world...

"Ah, Uncle, Cat Kirillovich, how d'ye do!"

Peter sat on the gunwale of the boat, sunburnt, dirty and happy. His eyes were slightly swollen, his nose was peeling, the ends of the newly sprouted moustache were curled up.

"What have you come for?"

"To fetch you, Sire," replied Lev Kirillovich sternly, "and not to ask a favour, but because there are things afoot just

now that make it most pressing for you to be in Moscow, and I will not take my leave without you..."

Lev Kirillovich's full face trembled, the perspiration trickled down his temples from under his hat. Peter looked at him in amazement. Oho! Things must indeed be bad if his lazy uncle was in such a dither. Peter bent over the gunwale, scooped up a handful of water, drank it and hitched up his breeches.

"Very well, I'll come one of these days..."

"Not one of these days—today. We cannot afford to lose a single hour. (Lev Kirillovich moved up closer and said almost directly into the tsar's ear.) Last night, just outside Preobrazhenskoye, in the undergrowth on the far side of the Yauza, they found over a hundred streltsy lying in ambush. (Peter's ear and neck suddenly crimsoned.) Our Preobrazhensky troops on guard burned torches all night and shouted through horns... The streltsy thought twice about crossing the river... And after that, the news went round Moscow that Ovsei Rzhov was saying they've arranged it: as soon as shouting is heard in Preobrazhensky Palace at night, they're to be ready and anyone who is driven out of the palace is to be cut down, no matter who it is..."

Peter suddenly covered his eyes with his hand, his fingers digging deep into the flesh. Lev Kirillovich went on to describe how Shaklovity was sending criers round the markets to incite the starving people to go and smash up Preobrazhenskoye.

"The people are desperate, they have one obsession: to get there and loot the place. And Sophia is just hoping for more trouble... The streltsy in her confidence have already tied a rope to the tocsin bell in the Spasskaya Tower. They'd have sounded it long ago, except that the streltsy regiments, the merchant guilds and the artisans' quarters are having doubts. After all, they're fed up with the tocsin... This time, the boyars are staying in their houses as if under siege... And my sister, Natalia Kirillovna, is out of her mind with worry... (Lev Kirillovich leaned his head on Peter's shoulder and whimpered.) Peter, my dear, for God's sake go before the people in all your majesty as tsar. Call them to order... They're missing their tsar. Just put your foot down and we'll help you... Our enemies, not to mention ourselves, are sick of Vassily Golitsyn, and Sophia's stuck in everybody's craw..."

Peter had heard such talk many times, but today his uncle's whimpering put the fear of death into him... Again he seemed to hear shrieks that made his hair stand on end. He could see the gaping, twisted mouths, the swollen necks, the blades of the levelled pikes, Matveyev's body landing heavily on them... The physical horror of his childhood days!.. His own mouth twisted, his eyes bulged, an invisible blade was piercing his neck under the ear.

"Peter, my dear! For heaven's sake, Sire!" Lev Kirillovich seized his nephew's heaving shoulders. Peter writhed in his arms, spraying his uncle with foam. Wrath, horror and confusion were in his incoherent shrieks. People jumped up and, terrified, gathered round the tsar as he threw his fit. The moustachioed Pamburg brought some vodka in an earthenware pot. Like an infant, Peter could only splutter without being able to drink, so tightly clenched were his teeth. He was carried to Lev Kirillovich's carriage, but he kicked out and demanded to be laid on the grass. He calmed down... Then sat up, hugging his bony knees. He looked at the bright sheen of the lake, with the seagulls flying over the masts of the ships. Nikita Zotov appeared from somewhere, swaying on his feet. On the occasion of morning's mock battle, he was wearing his Prince-Pope's chlamys, he was unkempt and there was hay in his beard. He sat down near Peter, looked at him, for all the world like a bearded old grannie, and said pathetically:

"Peter Alexeyevich, I'm an old fool, but at least listen to me..."

"Go to the devil..."

"I'm going, Sire... We've been playing games long enough... It's time to stop... They're children's games, after all..."

Peter turned away. Nikita crawled round on his knees to look at his face from the other side. Peter pushed him away and silently went to the carriage. Lev Kirillovich crossed himself hastily as he ran after him...

11

Service was nearly over in the Cathedral of the Dormition. The patriarch's choir on the left and the lay singers on the right were taking turns to make the dark gold vaults ring, now with sweet adolescent singing, now with the roar of

lusty throats. With a soft crackling, the massed candles in front of the gold icon-frames cast their light on the flushed faces of the boyars. The patriarch was officiating at the service; it was as if a great martyr had stepped down from one of the Suzdal icons: his eyes were glittering, his arms were weak, and the narrow beard that reached down to his stomach was quivering over the heavy vestments. Twelve gigantic, wild-haired and leonine deacons clanked their ponderous censers. The patriarch floated in wreaths of incense smoke and, on either side of him, the metropolitans and the arch-priests. The whole cathedral was filled with the archdeacon's booming versicles as with strong wine. Truly, this was the Third Rome. The proud Russian heart rejoiced.

Sophia was standing in the tsar's place under a crimson canopy. On her right was tsar Ivan, his eyes half closed, his cheeks burning on his sickly face. On the left stood the lanky Peter. He looked like a muzhik dressed at Christmas in tsar's robes that did not fit him. The boyars, raising their handkerchiefs to their lips, smirked as they looked at him. A clumsy stripling who didn't know how to stand; he kept shifting from one foot to the other, like a goose, and couldn't hold his head still... Sophia at least understood high ceremony... A footstool to give her height. Face calm, palms together on her breast. Hands, bosom, shoulders, ears and crown ablaze with gemstones. It was as if our Lady of Kazan herself were standing under the canopy... But that Kukui rake stood there, jowls bulging at the corners of his mouth as if he was going to bite at any moment—except that his jaws were still too weak... He had evil, insolent eyes... And, as all could see, there was no piety in his thoughts...

The service was over. The church officiants began bustling about. The banners, the mica lanterns, the crosses and the handheld icons swayed. The procession moved off through the boyars and nobles, who divided to let it pass. The patriarch, supported by the deacons, bowed to the tsars, asking them, according to custom, to take the image of our Lady of Kazan to the Cathedral in Red Square. The Moscow metropolitan lifted up the icon and offered it to Ivan. The tsar pinched his sparse beard and glanced round at Sophia. Rigid as a statue, she was staring at the light in the little mica window...

"I'll not be able to carry it there," said Ivan timidly. "I'll drop it..."

Bypassing Peter, the metropolitan offered the icon to Sophia. Her hands, heavy with rings, opened and rapaciously clutched the image. Still staring at the light, she stepped down from the bench. Vassily Vassilyevich, Fyodor Shaklovity, Ivan Miloslavsky, all in sables, at once moved towards the regent. The cathedral became quiet.

"Hand it over..." (Everybody heard the indistinct, muffled voice.) "Hand it over..." (Louder, with hatred.) When they looked at Peter, they realised who had spoken... His face crimson, rolling his eyes like an eagle-owl, he clutched the carved gilt upright of the canopy and the whole structure moved.

But Sophia merely paused momentarily without turning round or losing her composure. Then, for the whole cathedral to hear, Peter snapped in an ugly voice:

"Ivan isn't going, I'll go... Return to your place... Hand over the icon... This is no woman's business... I forbid it..."

Raising her eyes, Sophia said sweetly, as if not of this world:

"Choir, sing the Great Entrance..."

And, descending, she went slowly through the rows of boyars, small of stature and plump. Peter followed her with his eyes, his neck protruding from his collar. (The boyars tittered into their kerchiefs.)

"Don't, Peter," whispered Ivan, carefully going down after his sister. "Be reconciled with her... There is no cause to quarrel..."

12

Leaning forward in his chair, Shaklovity looked intently at Vassily Vassilyevich. Silvester Medvedev, in a mulberry silk robe, carefully holding and chewing his sleek, raven-black beard, also looked at Golitsyn. A candle was burning on the bedroom table. The ostrich plumes over the bed canopy cast their shadows all the way across the ceiling, on which winged horses, flying cherubs and bare-legged maidens were crowning a hero with the face of Vassily Vassilyevich. Golitsyn himself was lying on a bench covered with bearskins. He was shaking with the fever he had picked

up on the Crimean campaign. He was swathed up to the ears in a squirrel coat and his hands were tucked up inside the sleeves.

"No," he said after a long pause. "I will not countenance such talk... God gave him his life and only God can take it away..."

Shaklovity banged his hat on his knee in frustration and looked round at Medvedev, who was at no loss for words.

"It is said: 'I shall send an avenger.' This may be taken to mean: not by God is life taken away, but by the hand of man at God's will..."

"He shouts in church as if it were a tavern," continued Shaklovity heatedly. "Sophia Alexeyevna hasn't recovered from it yet—he frightened her so much... They've raised the wolf cub, and once he gets going, look out. You can expect him in Moscow with his play troops, three thousand of them if not more... They're champing at the bit. Am I right, Silvester?"

"From him you can only expect ruin for people, insults to the Orthodox Church, and rivers of blood... My hair stood on end when I cast his horoscope: words, figures, lines—all swollen with blood. Verily, verily... It has long been said: 'Wait for this horoscope...'"

Vassily Vassilyevich half rose on one elbow, his face ashen pale.

"You're not lying are you? (Silvester shook his pectoral cross.) What are you talking about?"

"We have long been waiting for this horoscope," repeated Medvedev so strangely that a chill ran down Vassily Vassilyevich's spine. Shaklovity jumped up, his silver chains jingling, snatched up his sabre and hat and tucked them under his arm.

"It will soon be too late, Vassily Vassilyevich... You'll see: our heads will end up on pikes... You're temporising, you're being timid, and so you've tied our hands..."

"I am not tying your hands..." said Vassily Vassilyevich, closing his eyes.

They never got another word out of him. Shaklovity left, and was heard madly galloping his horse through the gates. Medvedev, sitting at Golitsyn's bedside, brought up the subject of Patriarch Joachim. He was two-faced, foolish, and frail. When they were dressing him in the vestry, the metropolitans pushed him about and made impious gestures

at him behind his back just for the fun of it. What was needed was a young and learned patriarch so that the church might prosper in gaiety, like a vineyard...

"It would entwine your crown, prince, with the heavenly vine... (His light brown beard, scented with rose and sandalwood oil tickled Golitsyn's ear.) I, for one, would not refuse the patriarch's robes... And you would prosper... Vaska Silin, the soothsayer, looked from the Ivan the Great Bell Tower at the sun through a gap between his fingers and saw all this in the signs on the sun... You talk to Silin... As for Joachim, they take him four buckets of carp secretly from Preobrazhenskoye every Saturday... And he accepts them..."

Medvedev left too. Vassily Vassilyevich opened his dry eyes. He listened carefully. His valet was snoring behind the door. The sentries were pacing over the flagstones in the yard outside. Vassily Vassilyevich took a candle, opened a secret door behind the bed canopy and began descending a steep staircase. He was shivering with fever and his thoughts were confused. He stopped from time to time, raised the candle over his head and peered apprehensively into the darkness below...

"Renounce my great ambitions and retire to my patrimonies? Let the troubles pass, let them eat one another alive and come to their senses without me... But what about the shame, the dishonour? First he led regiments, they'll say, and now he's feeding geese, that prince Vassily... (The candle shook in his cold hand.) He was reaching for the crown, and now he's feeling chickens... (His teeth chattering, he ran down several steps.) What is the alternative: as Sophia, Shaklovity, and the Miloslavskys want it?... Murder! If they don't kill him, he will kill them. What if we don't succeed? A dirty business, a secret business, a risky business... Lighten our darkness, o Lord... (He crossed himself, leaning against the brick wall.) If only I could go down with the fever when that happens..."

On reaching the bottom, Vassily Vassilyevich slid back the iron bolt with an effort and went into a vaulted cellar, where the wizard Vaska Silin was lying on a felt mat with his leg chained.

"Boyar, kind sir, what have I done to deserve this?... I..."

"Stand up..."

Vassily Vassilyevich put the candle on the floor and pulled his sheepskin coat round him. The other day he had ordered

that Silin, who lived in Medvedev's household, should be seized and chained up. The man had started talking too much about how powerful people were obtaining a love potion from him and giving it to someone whom it was too awful even to mention, and for this they were letting him have a house in Moscow and would allow him to have a good time whenever he wanted without paying for it.

"Have you been looking at the sun?" asked Vassily Vassilyevich.

Babbling, Vaska threw himself at the prince's feet and avidly kissed two places on the earth floor. He got up again, stunted, squat, with a face like the muzzle of a bear, bald, the thick eyebrows slanting up from the ridge of his nose to the curly hair over his ears, the deep-set eyes glittering.

"They took me up to the bell-tower early in the morning and again, another time, at noon. I won't hide what I saw..."

"Unlikely," said Vassily Vassilyevich. "The sun is a celestial body. How could there be signs on it? You're lying..."

"Signs, yes, signs... We're used to looking through our fingers, and prophecy comes forth from me, as it were. I look, as into a book... Of course, others see the future in kvass lees or through a sieve held up to the moon... They have the knack... Oh, master"—Vaska Silin suddenly snivelled through his bear-like snout and, swaying from side to side, stared intently at the prince. "Oh, merciful one ... I've seen it all, I know it all... A tsar stands there, he is tall and dark, and his crown dangles on his back... The other tsar is bright... Oh, it's horrible to describe... There are three candles at his head... And between the tsars, two are joined together, and they roll and roll, like man and wife. And both are wearing crowns, and the sun between them blazes so fiercely..."

"I don't understand what you're drivelling about," Vassily Vassilyevich picked up the candle and retreated a little way.

"It shall all come to pass as you wish... Fear nothing... Stand firm... And use my herbs, use them... That will make things more certain... Don't give the maid any peace, goad her, goad her... (Vassily Vassilyevich was already at the door...) Kind sir, have the chain taken off me... (He pulled at it like a watchdog.) Master, have food sent to me, I haven't eaten since yesterday..."

When the door slammed, he began rattling his chain and wailing in an ugly voice.

13

Streltsy officers Kuzma Chermny, Nikita Gladky and Obrosim Petrov wore themselves out stirring up the streltsy suburbs. They burst into the huts, tearing the doors open with savage violence: "What are you doing? Sleeping with women, and soon your heads'll all be rolling!.." They shouted terrible things in the regimental headquarters: "We're going to mark the boyars' houses and the tradesmen's shops with tar. We're going to loot them and share out the spoils. Our freedom's coming back to us..." They threw leaflets down in the market places and read them out to the people there and then, swearing horribly...

But the streltsy, like damp logs, hissed without catching fire. Moreover, they were afraid: "Look at all the rabble about in Moscow; sound the tocsin and they'll smash everything up. We'll lose all we have."

Once, early in the morning near the Myasnitskive Gates, they found four streltsy sentries unconscious, their skulls broken, their joints hacked. They were taken to the Stremyanny Regiment. Fyodor Levontievich Shaklovity was sent for and this is what they told him:

"We were on sentry-go at the gates, so help us, we weren't drunk. It was at daybreak... Suddenly, some riders flew at us from the wasteland and set about us with hammers, battle-axes and bludgeons. The worst was a fat man in a white satin caftan and a boyar's hat. But the others tried to hold him back: 'They've had enough, Lev Kirillovich, you'll kill them...' But he shouts: 'That's nothing to what's coming! I'll pay those damned streltsy back for my brothers!'"

Shaklovity listened, grinning. He inspected their wounds. He picked up a severed finger and exhibited it from the porch to chance passers-by and to the streltsy. "Yes," he said, "it looks as though they'll soon have you by the heels as well..."

It was strange. No one believed that Lev Kirillovich had gone on the rampage like that. But Gladky, Petrov and Chermny bruited it about the suburbs that Lev Kirillovich and his cronies were riding abroad at night, looking for any who had looted the Kremlin seven years ago and beating them to death... "Of course," replied the streltsy meekly, "you don't get a pat on the head for stealing."

Three days passed, and again the same horsemen with the same fat boyar attacked the watch with metal hammers, whips and sabres and wounded many... The alarm was sounded here and there in the regiments, but the streltsy really took fright and did not come out... Men began deserting when on sentry duty. They demanded that the guard should be at least a hundred strong with a cannon... The streltsy had become completely tame, as if someone had put the evil eye on them.

Then the rumour went round that some of those mounted roughnecks had been recognised: Stepan Odoyevsky, Mikhail Tyrtov who was living at his place as his lover, and Pyotr Andreyevich Tolstoy. The one in the white caftan was probably not even a boyar, but the under-clerk Matveika Shoshin, a man in the tsarevna's confidence. People shrugged their shoulders in bewilderment. What were they trying to achieve with these tricks?

The atmosphere in Moscow was ugly and frightening. Each night, a detail of five hundred men was sent into the Kremlin. They would come back drunk. Fires were expected. There were stories of ingeniously made hand-grenades, and how Nikita Gladky was secretly taking them to Preobrazhenskoye and scattering them on the roads over which the tsar Peter was to walk, except that they failed to go off. All were lying low in expectation of something.

After Peter's arrival, the guns at Preobrazhenskoye never stopped firing. On the roads behind chevaux-de-frise stood clean-shaven soldiers with women's hair, hats, and green caftans. Several times, crowds of idle people shouted themselves into a frenzy at the market and started out for Preobrazhenskoye to smash the barns; but before they reached the Yauza they came up against soldiers who threatened to shoot. Everyone was fed up: the sooner one side devoured the other, the better. It didn't matter whether Sophia swallowed up Peter or Peter swallowed up Sophia, just so long as at least some stability was achieved.

14

Vassily Volkov was making his way on horseback through the chevaux-de-frise on Myasnitskaya street. He was stopped at every step and invariably replied: "Tsar Peter's squire with a royal Ukase..." On Lubyanka Square, the light

of the campfires lit up the squat tower and the peeling battlements receding into the darkness towards the Neglinnaya. The sky seemed blacker because of the August stars, and the clumps of trees looked thicker behind the fences and stockades round the square. Crosses gleamed on the little churches. A great many trading booths were closed owing to the lateness of the hour. On the right, at the long hut of the Stremyanny Regiment, men were sitting with pole-axes.

Volkov had been sent on an errand to the Kremlin purely as a pretext to see what was happening in the city. The order had come from Boris Alexeyevich Golitsyn, who now spent his days and nights at Preobrazhenskoye. The dreamy life there was over. Peter had galloped back from Lake Pereyaslavskoye like one demented. There was not even a thought of the former distractions. On returning home, he raged so much on the feast day of Our Lady of Kazan that even sprinkling him with holy water only just brought him round. His intimates now were Lev Kirillovich and Boris Golitsyn. Closeted with him, they whispered all the time, and Peter listened to them. Rations were increased for the play troops, new sashes and mittens were issued. A loan was raised at Kukui to pay for all this. Peter never went out into the courtyard or the fields without a dozen armed squires. He seemed to be looking over his shoulder all the time as if he did not trust anyone and scrutinised each man intently. Today, when Volkov was mounting his horse, Peter had shouted through the window:

"If Sophia asks about me, say nothing... Even if they hoist you up with your arms behind your back—say nothing..."

With a glance round the deserted square, Volkov moved into a trot... "Halt! Halt!" came a terrible cry out of the darkness. A tall strelets ran across his path, drawing a harquebus from behind his back. "Where d'you think you're going, you son-of-a-bitch?" He seized the horse by the bridle.

"Now then, have a care, I'm a squire of the tsar..."

The strelets whistled through his fingers. Another five ran up...

"Who is he?..." "A squire?.." "Just the man we want!" "Came of his own accord..." They surrounded him and conducted him towards the hut. There, by the light of the campfire, Volkov recognised the tall strelets as Ovsei Rzhov.

He winced. This was going to be ugly. Said Ovsei, without releasing the bridle:

"Hey, whichever of you is the fastest, go and fetch Nikita Gladky..."

Two went off reluctantly. The streltsy rose and left the fire and the ledge round the assembly hut, or, throwing aside the bast matting, climbed out of the wagons. About fifty of them gathered round. They did not make any noise as they stood there, as if this business were none of their concern. Volkov plucked up courage:

"This is a bad way to behave, streltsy... You've only got one head to lose, each of you. I bear the tsar's Ukase—and you detain me. That's robbery and treason..."

"Shut up!" Ovsei brandished his gun.

An old strelets restrained him:

"Don't touch him, he's under orders."

"Exactly, I'm under orders. I'm a servant of the tsar. And whose servants are you? Mind you don't miscalculate, streltsy. Khovansky was a good fellow, and what did they do to him? You were fine fellows, but where's the column on Red Square and where are your privileges?"

"Stop drivelling, you son-of-a-bitch!" yelled Ovsei.

"I'm sorry for you, men. Haven't you had enough of Golitsyn dragging you across the steppe?.. Help him, go on, help him; he'll take you on a third campaign... You'll end up begging from house to house for a bite to eat... (The streltsy were even more gloomily silent.) Tsar Peter's no child now... The time's gone when he was scared of you... It's your turn to be scared of him... Oh streltsy—have done with trouble-making..."

"Aaaaah!" shrieked someone so savagely that the streltsy shuddered. Volkov gagged, threw up his arms and fell back. Nikita Gladky had leapt up from behind onto his horse, seized him by the neck and fell to the ground with him. He turned over and sat on him, hit him on the jaw, knocked off his hat and tore off his sabre. He jumped up and guffawed, brandishing the sabre—a broad-browed, pock-marked man with a big mouth.

"You saw that—here's his sabre... I'll do the same to tsar Peter... Seize him, take him to Fyodor Levontievich in the Kremlin..."

The streltsy lifted Volkov up and led him from the hill along Kitaigorod wall past the curly and ancient crooked

white willows dotted with crows' nests along the bank of the slimy Neglinnaya, past the gallows and the wheels on poles. Behind came Gladky, reeking of spirits. They entered the Kremlin through the Kutafya Tower. Campfires were burning inside the gates. Several hundred streltsy were sitting along the palace wall, lying on the grass or just wandering about. Volkov was taken along a dark passage and pushed into a low chamber illuminated with icon lamps. Gladky went away into the palace. At the door stood a mild old sentry with a wrinkled face. Resting his arms on his pole-axe, he said quietly:

"Don't take offence, we've nowhere to turn ourselves. If they order me to beat someone, I have to do it... We're starving, boyar... Family of fourteen... We used to trade as well once, but now we have to live on what they give us... Why should we be against tsar Peter?.. We don't care who our master is, that's the way things are nowadays..."

Sophia came in like a girl, bareheaded, in a black velvet gown trimmed with sables. She sat down glumly at the table. After her came the handsome Shaklovity, his white teeth gleaming as he smiled. He was wearing a nettle-green strelets caftan. He took his seat next to Sophia. Nikita Gladky, the faithful servant, humbly moved away to the door. Shaklovity was twisting in his hands Peter's letter, taken from Volkov's pocket.

"The tsarevna has read the letter and it is of no consequence. Why did they send you out at night-time so urgently?"

"A spy," said Sophia through her teeth.

"We are glad to talk to you, squire of the tsar. Is tsar Peter well? Is the tsaritsa well? Do they intend to be angry with us for long? (Volkov was silent.) Answer, or we'll make you..."

"We'll make you," repeated Sophia quietly, staring at him heavily, like a man.

"Do the play troops have enough stores? Aren't they in any kind of need? The tsarevna wishes to know everything," continued Shaklovity. "And why are you posting sentries on the highways? For amusement, or are you afraid of someone? Soon there will be no passage through to Moscow because of you... You take over grain wagons. What kind of a way is that to behave?.."

Volkov was silent, as ordered, with his head bowed. It

was terrible keeping quiet. But the more impatiently Shaklovity questioned him, the more grimly Sophia scowled, the more determinedly he compressed his lips. Nor was he happy at his own insolence. He had acquired considerable strength while hanging about at Preobrazhenskoye. And his heart was seething. Let them torture him, go on, let them! He'd say nothing... Let Shaklovity fly at him with a knife right this very moment and cut strips of flesh from his back—he'd look him boldly and cheerfully in the eye. And Volkov raised his head, and began to look boldly and cheerfully at his interrogators. Sophia turned pale, her nostrils flared. Shaklovity stamped his foot in a fury and jumped up:

"You want to be hoisted up with your arms behind your back before you answer?"

"I have nothing to answer to you," said Volkov (himself appalled at his own words). He put his foot out and shrugged his shoulder. "Go to Preobrazhenskoye yourself, you have enough streltsy to escort you, I should have thought..."

Shaklovity hit him with all his might in the chest. Volkov gasped, recoiled and saw Sophia rise from the table, her fat face quivering with fury:

"Cut off his head," she said hoarsely. Nikita Gladky and the sentry dragged Volkov outside into the yard. "Executioners!" yelled Nikita. Volkov slumped in their hands. They let him go and he fell on his face. A few streltsy came up and asked who it was and why he was being beheaded. Grinning, they began calling for a volunteer executioner in shouts that echoed all the way across the dark square. Gladky himself was going to draw his sabre. "Fancy you, Nikita Ivanych," they told him, "bloodying your sabre that way." He swore and hurried into the palace. Then the old sentry bent over and touched the rigid Volkov on the shoulder.

"Be off with you. Don't go through the gates, run along the wall and climb over it somewhere..."

The campfires on Lubyanka Square had gone out, though one of them was still smouldering. No one wanted to fetch firewood, no matter how much Ovsei stormed. Many streltsy went home in the dark. Others slept. About five men had withdrawn to the fence and were talking quietly in the shade of the overhanging lime-trees...

"Gladky was saying that Boris Golitsyn has sixty neck-

laces of jingling silver coins hidden away on his Ryazan property... We'll share them out, he says, and we'll sell them..."

"Gladky might be bursting to go looting, but he won't get many to join him."

"There's no trust: they steal and we pay for it."

"The squire was right; we might be frightened of the tsar ourselves one day."

"Could be..."

"As for her, that tsarevna of ours—she gives some of us money and the rest stand about day and night on sentry-go, and our businesses at home have gone to pot..."

"I wouldn't think twice about joining the play troops, not I..."

"Yes, he'll come out on top, lads..."

"Very likely..."

"We're waiting here for nothing... We'll get a noose round our necks in the end..."

They stopped talking and turned round. Someone was galloping up full pelt from the Kremlin. "Gladky again... What's got into him, the devil?.." Driving his horse drunkenly into the campfire, Gladky jumped down and yelled:

"Why haven't the streltsy assembled? Why haven't they been sent to the gates? They're ready in the Kremlin, and your campfires aren't even burning! Asleep! You devils! Where's Ovsei? Send out to the suburbs! As soon as we sound the bell in the Spasskaya Tower, all men are to stand to arms..."

His legs astraddle, Gladky ran into the hut, swearing. Then those standing under the lime-trees said to one another:

"Tocsin..."

"Tonight..."

"It won't work."

"No..."

"Friends, what if... Eh?" (Heads drew closer together, voices were almost inaudible):

"They'll thank us over there..."

"Of course..."

"A reward and all that goes with it..."

"It's a lost cause here, lads..."

"We know... Who'll go, boys? We need two men..."

"Well, who'll go, boys?"

"Well, who's going?"
"Dmitry Melnov, will you go?"
"Yes."
"Yakov Ladygin, will you go?"
"What, me? All right, I will..."
"Get through somehow—to him... Throw yourselves at his feet and so on and so on... There's a plot to murder you, Your Majesty... We, your loyal servants, we've taken the oath..."
"Don't teach your grandmother to suck eggs..."
"We'll tell him..."
"Off you go, lads..."

15

To put up a fight with two battalions, the Preobrazhensky and the Semyonovsky, was out of the question. Thirty thousand streltsy, life guards of the tsar, foreign infantry and General Gordon's regiment of soldiers would squash the play troops like flies. Boris Golitsyn insisted that they should wait quietly at Preobrazhenskoye until spring. Soon the roads would be impassable in the autumn rains and frosts and wild horses wouldn't drag the streltsy away from their stoves to fight. In spring the course would be clearer... Things wouldn't get worse, surely; it would be worse for Sophia and Vassily Vassilyevich. During the winter, the boyars would squabble amongst themselves and would begin migrating to Preobrazhenskoye. The streltsy would not get any pay, since the Treasury was empty. The people were starving, the artisans were ruined, the merchants were groaning under their burden. But if Sophia nevertheless roused her troops with the tocsin, they would have to leave with the play battalions for the Trinity-St. Sergius Laura and the safety of its impregnable walls. It was a tried and tested place, and they could hold out there for a year or more.

On Boris Golitsyn's advice, presents were secretly sent to Archimandrite Vikenty at the Trinity Laura. Boris himself went there twice and talked to him, asking for protection. Each day, General Sommer held reviews and exercises. Nearly all the palace windows were broken by cannon-fire. But when Peter started talking about Moscow, Sommer merely blew glumly into his moustaches: "Well, we're

going to defend ourselves..." Lefort came, but not often; sober, courteous, with a timorous smile. His appearance frightened Peter more than anything... He did not even trust Lefort any more. Often, in the night, Peter woke Sasha. They would pull on their coats and hurry out to check the sentries. Standing for a long time in the damp night on the bank of the Yauza, Peter would peer towards Moscow—darkness, not a light to be seen, and an ominous silence.

Shivering with cold, he would morosely call Sasha and go back to bed.

He only slept with his wife the first few nights after his return. Then he ordered his bed to be made up in a palace extension, a low room with a single small window, more like a closet, with himself on a bench and Sasha on the floor, on a felt mat. Evdokia had cried her eyes out, waiting for her sweetie. She was four months gone. He came at long last and again she could not keep her eyes dry. On meeting her husband, she wanted to rush to him, but the old women would not let her. She broke away and flung herself on her beloved spouse in the entrance hall. He walked in, tall, lean, aloof. She pressed her face, hands, chest and stomach up against him... The sweetie in the entrance hall kissed her with stiff lips—he stank all over of tar and tobacco. He merely asked, as he quickly ran the palm of his hand over her already rounded stomach: "Well, well, and why didn't you write about this matter?" and his face softened momentarily. He went with his wife to his mother and paid his respects. He spoke abruptly, incoherently, jerking his shoulder all the time and scratching. Natalia Kirillovna said towards the end: "Peter, my lord, we've had the bath-room ready since morning..." He gave her a strange look: "Mother, it's not the dirt that's itching." Natalia Kirillovna understood, and the tears trickled down her cheeks.

Only for three nights did Evdokia manage to get him into the bedchamber. How she waited, how she loved, how she hoped to caress him! But she became embarrassed, was more shy than on their wedding night and did not know what to talk to her sweetie about. She lay on the pearl-embroidered pillows like a fool. He went on twitching and scratching in his sleep. She dared not move. When he went away to spend the nights in the store-room, she did not know where to put herself for sheer shame in front of people. But Peter seemed to have forgotten about his wife. His

whole day went in worry, in dashing about, in whispered consultations with Golitsyn... That was how August began... The atmosphere was ominous in Moscow, and in Preobrazhenskoye all was fear and alertness.

16

"Myn Herz, supposing you write to the Emperor of Rome and ask him for an army?"

"Fool..."

"What, me?" Sasha jumped up on all fours on the mat. His eyes danced. "What I'm saying is anything but foolish, myn Herz. You should ask for a good ten thousand soldiers... No, more... Have a word with Boris Alexeyevich."

Sasha sat down at the head of the bench. Peter was lying on his side with knees drawn up and the blanket pulled over his head. Sasha chewed his lip.

"Of course, we haven't got the money for this, myn Herz... We need money... We'll trick him... D'you think we can't trick an emperor? I'd rush off to Vienna myself. And we'd move against Moscow and the streltsy, by God we would..."

"Go to the devil..."

"All right, then..." Sasha just as nimbly lay down under the sheepskin coat again. "I'm not telling you to go and bow to the Swedes or the Tatars... I understand, too. You know best, it's none of my business..."

Said Peter indistinctly under the blanket, through clenched teeth:

"You thought of it too late..."

They were silent. It was hot in the small room. A mouse was scratching about under the stove. From the distance came the cry, "Keep your eyes o-o-o-pen!" It was the sentries calling on the Yauza. Sasha's breathing became even.

Peter had been suffering from insomnia. As soon as his head began to sink down into the pillow, he would imagine a soundless wail: "Fire, fire!" His heart would tremble like a lamb's tail... There could be no hope of sleep. He would calm down, but then his ear would catch the sound of what seemed to be someone far away in the house weeping behind the log walls... He thought many things over during those nights... He remembered that although he had been under restraint and kept well out of the way, the years in Preobrazhenskoye had been spent free of care—happily,

noisily, aimlessly and altogether very foolishly... And now he was a stranger to everybody, a wolf cub ... the soldiers' pal. He had overdone the dancing and playing, and now there was a villainous knife at his heart...

Sleep would be banished again. Peter would curl up even more tightly under the blanket...

"Sister, sister... Shameless, bloodthirsty... Wide hips and a fat neck... (He remembered how she had stood under the canopy in the cathedral.) Mannish, rouged face. Murderous! Ordered them to scatter grenades on the road... Sent someone with a knife... A barrel of kvass turned up in the kitchen yesterday. A good thing they let the dog lick some first. It dropped dead..."

Peter brushed these thoughts away... The veins in his temples swelled with rage nevertheless... Take his life! Perhaps there was no beast, no human being with such a craving for life as Peter...

"Sasha... You're asleep, you devil; give me some kvass..." Sasha leapt dazedly from under the sheepskin coat. Scratching, he brought some kvass in a small pitcher, sipping some himself first. He yawned. They chatted a little. "Keep your ears o-o-o-pen!" came from somewhere in the distance...

"Let's get some sleep, myn Herz..."

Peter put his bare, thin legs down from the bench... He wasn't dreaming this time. Heavy footsteps were hurrying along the passages. Voices, cries... Sasha, in his underwear, was standing at the door with two pistols...

"Myn Herz, somebody's running this way..."

Peter looked at the door. They were almost here. They stopped at the door...

"Sire, wake up, trouble!.." said a trembling voice.

"Myn Herz, that's Alyosha."

Sasha drew back the bolt. Breathing heavily, in came Nikita Zotov, barefoot with white eyes; after him, Alyosha Brovkin and the moustachioed Bukhvostov of the Preobrazhensky Regiment. They dragged in two streltsy as if they were loose sacks, their beards and hair dishevelled, their lips pendant, their eyes blank.

Zotov, who had lost his voice with fright, said huskily:

"Melnov and Ladygin of the Stremyanny Regiment, from Moscow..."

The streltsy prostrated themselves as soon as they were over the threshold, their beards on the felt mat, and began shouting wildly and as terrifyingly as possible:

"Oi, oi, Sire, Lord, your life is in peril, oi, oi!.. Foul deeds are plotted against you, our own father! Numbers past reckoning are gathering together, the steel blades are being whetted, the tocsin booms on the Spasskaya Tower, the people run from all quarters..."

Trembling from head to foot, tossing his matted locks, scrapping the floor with his left foot, Peter shouted even more terrifyingly than the streltsy, pushed Nikita aside and ran just as he was, in his shirt, down the passages. Little old ladies stuck their heads out through doorways everywhere and froze with horror.

Terrified servants were milling about at the back door. They saw someone rush out, white, tall, stretching his hands out before him as if blind... "Lord, it's the tsar!" Some fainted with fright. Peter plunged through the crowd, snatched a bridle and whip from an officer of the guard, sprang into the saddle, his feet missing the stirrups and, lashing away, galloped off and vanished behind the trees.

Sasha was more calm. He found time to put on his coat and boots, shouted to Alyosha: "Get the tsar's clothes, catch me up!" and galloped off on another guard's horse after Peter. He only caught up with him, racing along without use of stirrups or reins, at Sokolniki Grove.

"Stop, stop, myn Herz!"

The stars were shining with autumnal clarity through the lofty tree-tops. There were rustling noises somewhere. Peter was looking all round him, in panic, urging the horse with his heels into a gallop again. Sasha got hold of his horse, repeating in an angry whisper:

"Wait, where d'you think you're going without your breeches, myn Herz?"

There was a loud cackling in the ferns. Its wings brushing the undergrowth, a black-cock flew up, fleeing like a shadow across the stars. Peter clutched at his bare chest over his heart. Alyosha and Bukhvostov galloped up with the tsar's clothes. The three of them hurriedly got him more or less dressed. About another twenty squires and officers galloped up. They made their way cautiously out of the grove. There was a faint red glow over Moscow, and they imagined they heard the tocsin tolling.

"To the Trinity Laura..." said Peter through his teeth.

They sped along country lanes and across empty fields until they came to the road to the Laura. Peter galloped along, not holding the reins. His tricorne was over his eyes. From time to time, he gave the horse's neck a savage cut of the whip. There were twenty-three others before and behind him. They went at full gallop over the dry road. Hills, dales, aspen and birch woods. The sky turned green in the east. The horses snorted, the wind whistled in the riders' ears. At one spot, a shadow darted away—they couldn't tell whether it were man or beast. It threw itself into the grass, out of its wits with terror.

They had to reach the Laura before Sophia. Dawn was breaking, yellow and desolate. Several horses dropped in their tracks. They changed mounts at the nearest post house and galloped on without stopping for a rest. Then, when the pointed roofs of the fortress towers rose up in the distance and the spreading dawn glow played on the cupolas, Peter stopped his horse, turned round and grinned... He entered the monastery gates at a walking pace. The tsar was lifted down from his saddle and carried, half-dead with shame and exhaustion, into the archimandrite's cell.

17

What had happened had not been expected either in Moscow or at Preobrazhenskoye. Sophia failed to rouse the streltsy, and the tocsin was never sounded on the Spasskaya Tower. Preobrazhenskoye was abandoned... All left for the Trinity Laura—Natalia Kirillovna and the pregnant daughter-in-law, the palace boyars, the squires, the house servants and menials and both play regiments with their guns, mortars and ammunition.

When, on the next day, Sophia attended service in the palace church, Shaklovity made his way through the boyars.

His face was terrible to see. Sophia raised her eyebrows in astonishment. He bent over to her with a wry smile.

"We've chased tsar Peter out of Preobrazhenskoye. He fled in his night shirt, the devil, and no one knows where..." Sophia pursed her lips and said drily:

"He's free to run away like a madman if he so wishes."

It was as if nothing important had happened. But that day it became known that Lavrenty Sukharev's regiment of streltsy

down to the last man had left for the Trinity Laura—there was no telling when he'd been enticed over there or by whom—it must have been Boris Golitsyn, Lavrenty's drinking companion. Moscow buzzed with rumours. At night, gates would creak, here and there a boyar carriage would drive out and, thundering over the timbered road, race at full gallop to the Yaroslavl highway...

Vassily Vassilyevich Golitsyn sat up at nights with Medvedev, trying to guess his fortune by magic. In the daytime, he wandered sleepily about the palace, agreeing to everything that was said. Shaklovity rushed round the regiments. Sophia, hiding her fury, waited...

Colonel Ivan Tsykler unexpectedly left for the Trinity Laura with his officers and some of the streltsy. Seven years previously he had dragged the tsaritsa's brother, Ivan Kirillovich, out of a secret hiding place under the church altar. He was in Sophia's confidence. But now, beseeching Peter's forgiveness, he naturally revealed all the tsarevna's plans.

On hearing about Tsykler, Sophia was distraught. Who could she rely on now when such faithful dogs were deserting? Couriers began to arrive from the Trinity Laura for all nineteen regiments of streltsy bearing letters (written in Boris Golitsyn's hand and signed "Ptr" slantwise, with ink blots), in which the colonels and constables were instructed to join tsar Peter without delay for a matter of great importance to the state...

The couriers were beaten up at the city gates and their despatches were confiscated; but several of them managed to gallop through to the regiments and read the Ukase. Then Sophia had an announcement made: "Whosoever dares to go to the Trinity Laura shall be beheaded." To this the colonels replied: "All right, we won't go." Vassily Vassilyevich had the idea of sending reliable people to those wives of the streltsy who had gone over to Peter and frightening them into writing to their husbands and asking them to come back. The results were negligible.

Patriarch Joachim was sent to the Trinity Laura to sue for reconciliation. The patriarch left willingly enough, but stayed there and did not even write back to Sophia. New letters came from Peter to the regiments, the merchant guilds, the suburbs and the artisan quarters... "Report to the Trinity Laura without delay, if anyone fails to do so,

he shall be put to death..." Which meant that if you stayed, you lost your head, and if you went there, you still lost it. Colonels Nechayev, Spiridonov, Normatsky, Durov, Sergeyev, five hundred constables and many rankers, and chosen representatives of the merchants and the artisans went to the Laura in great fear and trembling. Tsar Peter, standing on the porch in Russian costume and accompanied by Boris Golitsyn, both tsaritsas and the patriarch, regaled the new arrivals with a glass of vodka, and they set up a fearful howling, asking for the troubles to be stopped. That same day in the Sukharev Regiment they started shouting: "Let's go to Moscow and get those villains..."

Vassily Vassilyevich announced that he was ill. Shaklovity, now afraid to appear in public, skulked in the secret rooms of the palace. Gladky and his cronies hid in Medvedev's house.

All the Kremlin gates were shut. The guns were trundled out onto the walls. Sophia, completely at a loss, wandered about the deserted rooms. Her footsteps were heavy, her hands clasped under her bosom. Better open battle, an uprising, a massacre, than this deathly silence in the palace. As a dream departs from the memory, power was leaving and life was leaving with it.

But everything in the city outside seemed quiet. The squares and markets were noisy as usual. At night the noise of the watchmen's rattle and the crowing of the cocks could be heard. No one wanted to make war. All seemed to have forgotten about Sophia, who sat alone within the Kremlin walls.

Then she made up her mind and, on the twenty-ninth of August, accompanied by her maid Vera, left for the Trinity Laura in a carriage with a small escort.

18

Dust hung day and night over the Yaroslavl highway as people on foot and on horseback moved out of Moscow and the heavy carriages rumbled along. In front of the Laura walls, in the artisans' quarters and the fields, the baggage trains were crowded together and the campfires smoked. There was uproar and fighting almost every hour over space, over bread, over fodder for the horses. Such an invasion had not been expected in the Laura, the granaries soon emptied

and the ricks in the fields were pillaged. The streltsy and men-at-arms had to be fed properly. Foraging parties were sent to the nearest villages, and soon not so much as a chicken was left in them. But there was still a shortage of space and provisions at the Laura. Many high-ranking boyars were living in tents, some in the courtyard, some even out on the street. They waited for the tsar's processions, sitting right on the porch in the hot sun, and there they ate their cold snacks. After the quiet Moscow houses, which even a stray bird wouldn't bother to visit, it was hard to accept the bustle and crowding, but all understood that a great matter was at stake and power was changing hands. Only was it for the better? Things certainly couldn't be worse. All Moscow, all the people, all Russia was covered in sores, in scars, was beggared. In the evenings, sitting at their campfires or lying under the wagons, the men talked freely and at will. All the fields round the Laura buzzed with voices and glowed red in the light of the fires. Some muzhiks versed in magic appeared from somewhere. They would wink in an odd sort of way, shake the beans in their hats about, squat down on their haunches and lay out a small cloth on the ground. If anyone wanted, they spread out the beans, sorted them into three piles, ran their fingers through them and then quietly, without affectation, would foretell the future:

"You shall have what you've been wanting; have no doubts about what you are thinking of. Fear one who does not walk in bast shoes, does not wear sheepskins and is white of skin. Do not go past the third house; do not make water at three stars. You shall have what you are waiting for, perhaps soon, perhaps not. Amen. Do not say thank you. Pay with coins."

These sorserers sowed mystification as they crawled around in the shadows between the wagons.

"The tsarevna's backbone has failed her," they whispered. "Prince Vassily Golitsyn won't live to see the first snow... He was wise to leave them... Tsar Peter is still green, but the tsaritsa and the patriarch think for him, they are the ones who decide... They'll stand up for what counts... And what counts is this: they will forbid the boyars to ride in carriages and will leave each of them one house apiece to dwell in only. And the merchant folk and the elected artisans will go to the palace and say with assurance: "Do this, but

don't do that... All foreigners will be driven out of Russia and their houses will be handed over to be looted. Muzhiks and serfs shall be free to live where they will, without overwork, without levies..."

Thus spoke the sorserers and magicians, and thus thought those who listened to them. A festive sound of chiming bells hovered permanently over the Laura. The churches and cathedrals were open and ablaze with candles, the austere chanting of the monks could be heard day and night.

At the crack of dawn, Peter, with his mother the tsaritsa on his right and the patriarch on his left, would descend from the porch to attend service. Afterwards, going before the people, the tsaritsa herself offered the new-arrivals a glass of vodka each, and the patriarch, desiccated with church services and fasting, but elevated in spirit, would say:

"It is pleasing to God that you depart from the villains and you fear the tsar," and his eyes would twinkle at Peter. The tsar, in Russian costume and with a silk kerchief in his clean hands, was humble, his head bowed, his face drawn. This was the third week that he had neither put a pipe in his mouth nor tasted wine. He did as he was told by his mother, the patriarch or Boris Golitsyn and did not ride out of the Laura. After church, he sat in the archimandrite's cell under the images and held out his hand for the boyars to kiss. The hasty speech and the eye-rolling were gone. He answered discreetly and quietly, and not according to his own judgement, but according to the counsel of his seniors. From time to time, Natalia Kirillovna would say to the palace boyars:

"I can't thank the Lord enough; our sovereign's seen reason, he's become so good, so well-behaved..."

Of the foreigners, only Lefort was allowed near him, and then not to take part in processions or go into the refectory, but in the evenings, avoiding the patriarch's notice, he would visit the tsar in his cell. Peter would silently take him by the cheeks, kiss him and sigh with relief. He would sit beside his visitor. Lefort would tell him about this and that in a broken whisper, making jokes and cheering the tsar up, but slipping practical suggestions in between the jokes.

He realised that Peter was agonisingly ashamed of having fled in nothing but his shirt, and quoted examples from the "History" of Bronius about kings and great military leaders

who had saved their own necks by cunning... "One French duke had to get dressed in woman's clothes and lie in bed with a man, but on the next day he captured seven cities... The military leader Nectarius, seeing that his adversaries were winning, terrified the enemy with his bald patch and put them to flight, but subsequently did not avoid shame: his bold patch was adorned with horns, although his fame was not diminished," said Bronius. Laughing, Lefort would grip Peter's wax-splashed hands.

Peter was inexperienced and hot-headed. Lefort kept repeating that what was needed most was caution in the struggle with Sophia. He mustn't spoil for a fight: everyone was sick of fighting now—but, to the chimes of the Laura bells, he should promise peace and prosperity to the people swarming in from Moscow. Sophia would fall like a rotten pillar anyway.

"Be dignified, Peter," whispered Lefort. "Speak humbly, look meek, attend the church services as long as your legs can bear it and you'll be in favour with everybody. Look, they'll say, what a master God has sent us, with such a one we can breathe again. Let Boris Golitsyn do the shouting and fighting..."

Peter was amazed at the reasonableness of his dear friend Franz. "In French it is called la politique, or knowing what's advantageous to oneself," explained Lefort. "If he needed something of a peasant, King Louis XI of France even went visiting a common yokel, but he would cold-bloodedly behead a famous duke or count if necessary. He didn't make war so much as practise la politique. He was a fox and a lion, he destroyed his foes and he enriched the state..."

It was strange to listen to him: dancer, rake, wit; and now he was suddenly talking of things which the Russians wouldn't even dare to mention by name. "Here, each is pulling a different way, no one has time for the state. One minds his profits, another his honour, yet another simply wants to fill his belly... You'd be hard put to find such savages anywhere else, save in Africa, maybe. No trades, no army, no fleet... Only interested in bleeding the people white, and them with nothing left..."

He was very outspoken about such matters, not fearing that Peter would defend the Third Rome... He penetrated as if with a candle into the deep thickets of Peter's wild,

eager, troubled mind. The flame of the icon lamp before the image of St. Sergius would be licking at the green glass and the footsteps of the patrol would be dying away outside when Lefort, after making Peter laugh with a jest, would return again to his subject:

"You're a very intelligent man, Peter... Oh, I've knocked around the world a lot, I've seen many different kinds of people... I dedicate my sword and my life to you... (He looked affectionately into the brown protuberant eyes of Peter, who was so quiet and seemed to have lived a lifetime during these last few days.) You need trusty and intelligent people, Peter... Don't hurry, wait. We'll find new ones, the kind who will go through fire for the cause and at a word from you, sparing neither mother nor father... Let the boyars squabble amongst themselves for places and honour: you won't set new heads on their shoulders, and it's never too late to chop the old ones off... Wait, gain strength, you're still too weak to fight the boyars... We'll have merrymaking, noise, beautiful girls... Enjoy yourself while your blood is hot, there's enough money in the Treasury and you're the tsar..."

He whispered with his fine lips very close to Peter's ear so that his curled moustache tickled the tsar's cheek, and his eyes, now affectionate, now firm, twinkled with intelligence and merriment... Peter's best friend was reading his thoughts and expressing in words what was still only a vague desire straying through his mind.

Natalia Kirillovna never ceased to marvel at how sensible Peter had become and she could never rejoice enough at his deference. He respected his mother and the patriarch, listened to the palace boyars, slept with his wife and went to the bath-house. Natalia Kirillovna bloomed in the Laura like a rose in autumn. She had been neglected for fifteen years, and now high-born princes were jostling one another again to bow to the tsaritsa mother. The boyars and okolnichys hung on every word so that they might hurry off to carry out some duty or other. She attended service in the place of honour and the patriarch raised the cross to her first. During processions, the people prostrated themselves, while the God's fools, the cripples and the beggars whined their praises of her and strained to touch the hem of her gown. Natalia Kirillovna's speech became calm and measured, her look was regal. In her cell, on the benches and chests,

unable to move because of the heat, the boyars would sit in their best fur coats: Tikhon Nikityevich Streshnev, the closest of them, once a tutor to the infant Peter—a blissful smile on his face, his eyes hidden under overhanging brows, so that people could never be sure whether he was cunning, or shrewd, or what; Ivan Borisovich Troyekurov, severe, red-haired, with a broad face; her new relative by marriage Pyotr Abramovich Lopukhin, with his feverish skin stretched tight over his cheekbones and his red, lashless eyelids—so eager was that stunted, desiccated old man for a taste of power; and, leaning up against the stove, the hook-nosed, Gypsy-like Prince Mikhail Alegukovich Cherkassky, his hands meekly folded... In the middle of the month, Fyodor Yuryevich Romodanovsky arrived and also began sitting with the tsaritsa, stroking his moustaches, rolling his bulging eyes that looked as if they were made of glass, and sighing so that his enormous stomach heaved.

As she entered her cell, the tsaritsa would address each by his name and patronymic and would sit on an ordinary little chair, holding Communion bread in her hands. Beside her would be her brother, Lev Kirillovich, red-faced, fat and dignified. The boyars would chat to them unhurriedly about affairs of state: how to deal with Sophia, how to treat the Miloslavskys, which one should be exiled, which should be sent to a monastery, and which of the boyars should be in charge of which Commission.

Boris Alexeyevich Golitsyn rarely visited the tsaritsa, and then only in case of extreme necessity. He was ashamed for his cousin, and in any case he had no time to spare: he was writing day and night, negotiating with Moscow, winning the regiments over, carrying out interrogations, arranging food for the troops. He took no one's advice, being even more arrogant and proud than Vassily. In light gilt armour, in an Italian helmet with red plumes, resplendent, tipsy, his moustaches curled, he rode round the regiments on a mare as hot as fire whose mane and tail were plaited with gold laces. Leaning down from his velvet saddle, he would exchange kisses with the newly-arrived colonels. His hands on his hips, he would canter over to the streltsy, who would go down on their knees like a swath of mown hay.

"Greetings, lads!" he would shout in a throaty voice, and the bare patch on his chin would turn crimson. "God will forgive you, the tsar will spare you. Unharness the wagons,

cook your gruel, the sovereign treats you to a cask of wine..."

"He's cheerful, that Boris," the streltsy in the wagons would say to their women. "That means things are on the way up here. It's a good thing we changed sides."

Boris Golitsyn was doing the work of ten men. The boyars were happy not to be bothered; it was more comfortable to sit and think in the tsaritsa's cell. Only Yakov and Grigory Dolgoruky, living in a carpet tent in the metropolitan's courtyard, were bitter against Boris: "Seven years we suffered from Vassily, and now look—we've got Boris round our necks... We're going to be the losers." The patriarch didn't like him either, because of his drinking with Peter at Kukui, his Latin and his love for things foreign. But the patriarch too was keeping quiet until the appropriate time should come.

On the twenty-ninth of August, a strelets galloped up to the Laura gates, his caftan unbuttoned, only the whites of his bulging eyes visible on his dusty face. He canted the ragged wedge of his beard up towards the tower over the gates and shouted in a terrifying voice:

"Open in the tsar's name!"

The creaking gates opened and the strelets was lifted off his exhausted horse. He was a tough man, but could hardly walk, being in such a state as a result of speeding in the service of the tsar. He was supported under the arms and led with care to Boris Golitsyn. He walked along, twisting his head from side to side. When he saw Boris on the porch, he threw himself at the prince's feet.

"Sophia's ten versts away, at Vozdvizhenskoye..."

19

The advance patrol in the village of Vozdvizhenskoye stopped the regent Sophia's carriage. She opened the glass door a little way and, recognising several of the streltsy by their faces, shook her fist at them and began cursing them as traitors and Judases. The streltsy took fright and some of them removed their hats, but when the carriage moved off again, they barred the way with the shafts of their pole-axes and took hold of the horses. It was Sophia's turn to be frightened. She demanded to be taken to any house nearby.

Men and women peered out of the gates, little boys

climbed onto the roofs to stare and the dogs snapped their teeth at the carriage. Sophia threw herself back in her seat and sat there, white-faced and haggard with shame and fury. Vera fell at her feet. The dwarf Ignaty, just over two feet tall, in a fool's cap and falcon's bells, who had been taken on the journey to relieve the monotony, screwed up his face and wept. They were taken to a rich taverner's house. Sophia commanded the owners to keep out of the way and went into the best room where Vera immediately covered the bed, chests and benches with royal cloths. She lit the icon lamps. Sophia lay down. A presentiment of disaster was squeezing her head like an iron hoop.

Barely two hours had passed when hoofbeats were heard and the rattle of a sabre against a stirrup. Without asking permission, squire Ivan Ivanovich Buturlin walked in with his hands in his pockets and his bonnet on the back of his head, for all the world as if he were entering a tavern.

"Where's the tsarevna?"

Vera flew at him and pushed him back with splayed-out fingers.

"Get out, get out, you brute... She's asleep..."

"Oh, so she's asleep... Then tell the tsarevna not to come to the Laura..."

Sophia sat bolt upright. She glowered at Buturlin until he pulled off his hat...

"I'm going to the Laura... Tell my brother I'm coming..."

"That's your business. Except that the tsar has ordered you to wait here for an emissary, Prince Ivan Borisovich Troyekurov, and you're not to be allowed out of here until he arrives..."

Buturlin went out. Sophia lay down again. Vera covered her mistress with a fur coat to stop her trembling. The mica window-pane in the room was darkening. Outside, a herdsman's knout cracked, cows mooed, gates creaked. Then silence again. The bells on Ignaty's bonnet jingled pathetically; the little jester was sitting forlornly on a trunk with his feet dangling. "That one's getting ready for my funeral too..." Sophia quivered with fury... "I could reach out and knock him off that trunk..." But her hands lay as inert as lead...

"Vera," she called in a low-pitched voice. "Don't forget to remind me about Ivan Buturlin when I'm in the Laura..."

Vera's cold lips brushed the tsarevna's hand. In the grey

twilight, Sophia pictured Ivan's bare back, the blue arms fastened behind him, the axe flashing, the shoulder-blades jerking up and falling, a bloody bubble instead of a head... That'll teach him manners! Sophia breathed hard, trying to control her feelings.

Troyekurov was coming to her as emissary. Two weeks ago, she had sent him from the Kremlin to Peter. He had returned without having achieved anything. Sophia had refused to let him kiss her hand in her fury. Had he taken offence or turned coward? A boyar of middling intelligence but of formidable appearance. Sophia put her fat legs down from the bed and tugged the hem of her robe over the velvet shoes.

"Vera, bring me the casket..."

Vera laid on the feather bed a metal-bound casket, stuck a wax candle on one corner and spent so long striking the flint that Sophia's shoulders began to twitch again with irritation... The tinder began to smell; she lit a piece of paper and applied it to the candle. Sophia bent over the light, brushing away the hairs that fell across her cheek. She reread a letter from her sick brother, tsar Ivan. He had written to Peter suggesting that they should be reconciled: there must be no more bloodshed; he appealed to the patriarch for his gracious help in inclining the embittered hearts of Peter and Sophia towards love.

As she read this, she smiled maliciously. Either way, she would have to suffer this humiliation too. Just so long as the wolf cub could be lured out of the Trinity Laura... She became so engrossed in her thoughts that she did not notice the sound of someone riding through the gates. When Troyekurov's thick voice asked for her in the entrance hall, Sophia snatched a black shawl from the bed, threw it over her hair and met the prince standing. Entering sideways through the narrow door, he bowed till his fingers touched the floor and straightened up again. Coppery face, head almost touching the ceiling, eyes in shadow, only the big nose shining in the candle-light... Sophia enquired after the health of the tsar and tsaritsa. Troyekurov boomed that all were well, thank the Lord. He stroked his beard and scratched his chin, but still failed to ask after Sophia's own health. She realised what this meant and her blood went cold. She should sit down, not humiliate herself even further. Nevertheless, she remained standing.



Franz Yakovlevich Lefort (1654-1699),
the young Peter's mentor and favourite.
Engraving by P. Schenk. 1698.


TALIS APUD TROJAM DANAE
PRO NAVIBUS AJAX

Count Fyodor Alexeyevich Golovin (1650-1706).
Closely associated with Peter the Great during his first reforms and new foreign policy. Engraving by P. Schenk. 1706.

The foundation of St. Petersburg by Peter the Great.
Spring 1703. Workshop of A. Zatto.





Accustoming the boyars to the new fashion.
Shortening the caftans. Engraving by R. Philips. 1742.



Péter the Great's boat.
Engraving by I. Zubov. 1722.


Нарица тѣмъ сѣдно сіе БОТЪ АГЛИНСКОЙ
Ботъ понадъ своемъ между сѣднами
Аглинеконже плавъ и мѣръ аглинскои
Архитектуры Наученіе во выше помяну
того лѣта Іиператорскаго величества
Ижа вроссіи къ честнымъ иско
етвамъ надъ тогдашныи ѡбычаи
Быстро шохотнаго сѣдно сіе
Въ Англіи сдѣлано и отседъ
Вмоскву привезено


Въ семже 1722 году ботикъ
сей первѣе народу выставленъ
и презентованъ тогда ради понеже
Бго даннымъ имъ миромъ плоды
его паче извѣстны и крѣпко утвер
ждены стали и миръ сей плоды
его неложно нарещися може

"I wish to spend the night in the Laura," she said. "I am hungry and uncomfortable here." All the time, she was trying to peer into his eyes in the darkness. It hurt her pride that she, the regent, should be afraid of this dolt in three fur coats, and her head went down between her shoulders in fear.

"It was a mistake to leave without protection, tsarevna..." said Troyekurov. "The roads are dangerous..."

"It is not for me to be afraid. I have rather more troops than you have..."

"But what use are they?"

"That is why I ride without protection—I want no bloodshed, I want peace..."

"What bloodshed do you speak of, tsarevna? There shall be no bloodshed... Unless the traitor and mutineer Fyodor Shaklovity and his associates are still thirsting for blood, in which event we shall seek them out accordingly..."

"Why have you come here?" demanded Sophia, almost shouting... (Troyekurov drew from his pocket a scroll with a red seal attached to a cord.) "You have brought a Ukase? Vera, take the Ukase from the boyar... But my own Ukase is that the horses are to be harnessed. I wish to spend the night in the Laura..."

Pushing aside Vera's hand, Troyekurov unrolled the scroll and, taking his time over it, began solemnly to declaim:

"By Ukase of the tsar and grand prince, sovereign of all Great, Little and White Russia, it is ordered that you should return to Moscow without delay and there await His Majesty's pleasure, as he, the sovereign, shall say what you..."

"Dog!" Sophia snatched the scroll from him, crumpled it up and threw it away... The black scarf slid off her head. "I shall return with all my regiments, and your head shall be the first to roll..."

Troyekurov grunted, bent down, picked up the Ukase and, as if Sophia had never been raging at him, concluded grimly:

"But in the event that you should insist and press on to the Laura, the orders are to treat you without respect... So that's that."

Sophia raised her hands, dug her fingernails into the back of her neck and flung herself down on the bed. Troyekurov carefully laid the Ukase on the edge of the bench and scratched his beard again, wondering how he, as emissary, should behave in this case. Should he bow or not? He glanced covertly at Sophia; she was lying prone on the bed,

her feet in their velvet shoes protruding from under her petticoat as if she were a corpse. He slowly put on his hat and squeezed through the door without bowing.

20

"...Nor could there be anything worse than that you should tarry over a matter of such great moment..."

The letter trembled in Vassily Vassilyevich's hand. Moving the candle nearer, he peered at the hastily scrawled words. He read and reread them over and over again, trying to marshal his thoughts. His cousin Boris had written: "Colonel Gordon has brought the Butyrsky Regiment to the Trinity Laura and has been admitted to the royal presence. Peter Alexeyevich embraced him and kissed him many times with tears in his eyes, and Gordon swore to serve him to the death... Foreign officers, dragoons and cuirassiers have arrived with them... What are you left with now?... A small number of streltsy who are reluctant to leave their shops, their businesses and their commercial baths... Prince Vassily, it is not yet too late... Tomorrow it will be too late... Tomorrow we are going to put Fyodor Shaklovity to torture..."

Boris had written the truth. Since the day when Sophia had been refused permission to enter the Laura, no means had sufficed to stop the flight from Moscow of the men-at-arms and all kinds of civil servants. The boyars had been leaving brazenly in the bare light of day. Gordon, that stern and incorruptible warrior, had come to Vassily Vassilyevich and had shown him Peter's Ukase ordering him to report to the Laura...

"My hair is white and my body is covered with wounds," said Gordon, and he frowned, his clean-shaven cheeks furrowed with wrinkles. "I have sworn on the Bible, and I faithfully served Alexei Mikhailovich, and Fyodor Alexeyevich, and Sophia Alexeyevna. I am now going over to Peter Alexeyevich." Resting his hands in their leather gauntlets on the hilt of his long sword, he struck the floor in front of him with it. "I do not want my head to be chopped off on the block..."

Vassily Vassilyevich did not contradict him. It would have been useless. Gordon had grasped that in the confrontation between Peter and Sophia, it was Sophia who had lost. He left that same day with banners unfurled and drums beating.

This was the last and most powerful blow. Vassily Vassilyevich had already been living for several days as if in a drugged sleep. He saw Sophia's vain efforts and could neither help nor abandon her. He was terrified of public disgrace and felt that it was as near and inescapable as the grave. With his power as protector of the throne and as a chief military leader, he could have mustered at least twenty regiments and marched on the Laura to treat with Peter... But he was troubled by doubts. Instead of obedience in the regiments, he might be faced with shouts of "Traitor, mutineer!" As he was in doubt, he did nothing, avoided being left alone with Sophia, and to account for this, declared himself ill. He sent secret letters in Latin by a trusty person to his brother Boris in the Laura, asking him not to undertake military action against Moscow, suggesting various means of reconciling Sophia and Peter and magnifying his own services and sufferings for the tsar. It was all in vain. It was as in a nightmare, with someone tangible and incomprehensible pressing down on him: his soul moaned and cried out in horror, but he was powerless to move a limb.

A fly flew into the flame of the half-burnt candle. It fell down, wriggling. Vassily Vassilyevich put his elbows on the table and clutched his head in his hands...

The previous night, he had ordered his son Alexei and his wife Evdokia (long consigned to neglect and oblivion) to leave without delay for the estate of Medvedkovo outside Moscow. The house was left empty. The shutters and porches were nailed up. But he himself stayed behind. There was one day when it seemed that his luck might turn. Sophia returned from near the Trinity Laura, didn't wash, didn't eat, but ordered the heralds and criers to call the streltsy, the merchants and clothiers' guilds, the artisans and all good people to the Kremlin. She led tsar Ivan out onto the Main Porch. He was unable to stand and sat down near a column, smiling pathetically (he was clearly not long for this world). Sophia herself, a black shawl on her shoulders and with her hair dishevelled, just as from the journey, began addressing the people:

"Peace and love are dear to us above all things... Our letters are not read at the Trinity Laura, our emissaries are sent away... And so I prayed, and summoned a carriage, and I rode away to treat lovingly with my little brother Peter... I was only allowed as far as Vozdvizhenskoye... And there

they put me to shame and dishonoured me, calling me a wench, as if I were no tsar's daughter. I do not know how I came back alive... In a day and a night, I have eaten only a piece of a Communion bread... In the villages all round, everything has been plundered by orders of Lev Naryshkin and Boris Golitsyn... They have befuddled my brother Peter with drink... He sleeps it off in his closet all day... They want to come and attack Moscow and cut off prince Vassily's head. Our days are numbered. Say that you do not need us, and my little brother Ivan and I will go somewhere far away and find sanctuary in a monastery cell..."

Her eyes streamed with tears... She could not speak any more, took the cross containing the relics and raised it over her head. The people looked at the cross, at the tsarevna, who was sobbing loudly, and at tsar Ivan who bowed his head and lowered his eyes... Some removed their hats; many sighed and wiped their eyes... When the tsarevna asked: "Will you not come to the Trinity Laura, may I count on you?", they shouted: "Yes, yes, we won't give you up..."

They dispersed. Remembering what the tsarevna had been saying, they wrinkled their noses. Of course, they shouldn't hand her over to be insulted but—what else could they do? There was not enough grain in Moscow, the wagons were turning off for the Trinity Laura and there was banditry and disorder in the city. It was no time for trade at the markets. Everything was at a standstill, in confusion. They were fed up. The time had come to put a stop to all this. As for Vassily and Boris Golitsyn, one was no better than the other.

That day, some ten thousand people had swarmed into the Kremlin waving copies of Peter's proclamation in which it was said that the troublemaker and traitor Fyodor Shaklovity and his cronies were to be seized and taken in chains to the Laura. "Give us Fyodor!" they shouted, climbing up to the windows and onto the Main Porch, as many years before. "Give us Nikita Gladky, Kuzma Chernyy, Obrosim Petrov, the priest Silvester Medvedev!".. The sentries threw down their arms and fled. The palace servants, women and girls, jesters and dwarfs hid under the staircases and in the cellars.

"Go out and tell the brutes we won't hand over Fyodor Levontievich," said Sophia breathlessly and she pulled Vassily Vassilyevich by his sleeve to the door... He never remembered how he got to the Main Porch. The mob crowd-

ing right up to the porch breathed heat, hatred and garlic; the levelled points of pikes, sabres and daggers glittered before his eyes... He shouted something, he couldn't remember what, and retreated back into the entrance hall... The door immediately began to crack under the weight of the shoulders piled up against it. He caught sight of Sophia, pale-faced, her eyes fixed and staring. "We can't save him, hand him over," he said. The door opened with a crash and the people swept in... Sophia pushed her back up against him, the weight of her body pressing him harder and harder. He wanted to pick her up. She uttered a low-pitched wail, pushed him away and fled... When both were standing in the Faceted Hall, they heard a terrible cry from Fyodor Shaklovity... He had been caught in the tsarevna's bathhouse.

Vassily Vassilyevich delayed his flight notwithstanding. The travelling carriage had been waiting at the back porch since evening, the steward and several old servants were dozing in the passage. Vassily Vassilyevich sat in front of the candle, his head clutched in his hands. Its wings burnt, a fly lay with its feet in the air. It was deathly quiet in the enormous house. The signs of the Zodiac on the ceiling glimmered faintly and the Greek gods stared at the prince through the semi-darkness. The only things alive were the regrets tormenting Vassily Vassilyevich. He could not understand why everything had happened like this. Who was to blame for it? Ah, Sophia, Sophia!.. He did not hide it from himself any more: from the forbidden recesses of his being rose the heavy, unlovable face of a plain woman, an avid mistress—imperious, harsh, terrifying... The face of his glory!

What would he say to Peter and what answer would he give to his foes? He had slept himself into power with a woman, he had shamed himself in the Crimea, and he had written a book: "On the Civil Life, or the Amelioration of All Matters Appertaining to the People". Pulling his hands from his head, he banged the table. Shame! Shame! Of the recent glory, nothing was left but shame!

A dull glow was reddening in a chink in the shutters... Was it really dawn? Or had a bloody moon risen over Moscow? Vassily Vassilyevich rose, looked round the sparkling twilight of the vaulted ceiling with the signs of the Zodiac overhead... The astrologers, magicians and wizards had tricked him... There would be no mercy... He slowly pulled

his hat down over his eyebrows, put two pistols in his pocket and watched as the candle burned down in its holder. The wick fell into the molten wax and went out with a faint sputter...

People were hurrying with lanterns about the dark courtyard. Dawn was just breaking through the red glow in the distance. Seated in his travelling carriage, Vassily Vassilyevich handed the key to the steward.

"Bring him here..."

Cases were being loaded into the carriage and chests lashed on behind. The steward returned propelling Vaska Silin in front of him, his chain rattling. The sorcerer was groaning loudly, crossing himself to all four quarters and to the stars. The servants booted him into the carriage so that he fell at Vassily Vassilyevich's feet.

"Gee-up, come on!" said the coachman in a quietly impressive voice. The six waiting greys set off at a smart trot onto the road. They turned uphill along the Tverskaya. The streets were still quiet. A cowman was playing a horn as he wandered through the dust past some gates, from which the lowing cattle were emerging. The frozen beggars woke up on the church porches, scratching themselves and cursing one another. Here and there a yawning sexton opened the low church doors. In a side-street, a muzhik on a cart of cinders was shouting: "Throw out your slops!" Women were emptying slops out onto the street, scattering cinders and staring open-mouthed at the swift, snow-white horses, at the riders with their peacock plumes as they galloped in their high saddles, at the pug-faced coachman with twelve white silk reins in his massive outstretched hands; at the two giants with bared sabres on the footboard of the carriage. The women dropped their buckets, passers-by pulled off their hats and some, to be on the safe side, went down on their knees...

It was the last time that Vassily Vassilyevich was to gallop through Moscow in such style. What would happen tomorrow? Banishment, a monastery, torture? He buried his face in the collar of his sheepskin travelling-coat. He seemed to be dozing. But when Vaska Silin tried to move, the prince kicked him with all his might...

"So that's how it is..." Vaska was amazed. One of the prince's cheeks was twitching under the closed eye. When

they came to the city gates, Vassily Vassilyevich said quietly:

"Lies, villainy, brigandage, that's what your witchcraft is... Dog, son of a serf, swindler... Flogging would be too good for the likes of you..."

"Have no doubts, master, everything, everything will come true for you, and—the tsar's crown..."

"Shut up, shut up, you whoreson traitor!"

Vassily Vassilyevich threw himself on the sorcerer and stamped on him until he groaned aloud...

A verst from Medvedkovo, the peasant look-out, on seeing the carriage, waved his hat; a second responded on the fringe of a birch grove, and a third did likewise on a hill beyond the gully. "He's coming, he's coming!.." The prince was met by about five hundred servants on their knees, bowing down to the grass. They helped him out of the carriage, kissing the hem of his sheepskin coat... Frightened faces, inquisitive stares. Vassily Vassilyevich ran his eye coldly over the servants. They were bowing damned low, they were in too much of a hurry, too eager... He looked at the many panes of the six windows in the log house under the four-pitched Dutch roof, with the open porch and the two semi-circular staircases... Round the spacious yard stood stables, cellars, a linen mill, greenhouse, chicken runs and dove-cotes...

"Tomorrow," he thought, "the under-clerks will come flocking, they'll make an inventory, seal everything up, and ruin me... Everything will turn to dust..." With solemn dignity, Vassily Vassilyevich entered the house. His son Alexei rushed to meet him in the hall. He took after his father in manners and face, which was covered with the first down. He applied trembling lips to his father's hand—his nose was cold. In the dining-room, Vassily Vassilyevich, sour-faced, crossed himself reluctantly and sat down at table opposite the Venetian mirror which reflected the planed wooden walls, the tapestries and the shelves loaded with expensive tableware... All would go like dust!.. He poured a glass of vodka, broke off a piece of rye bread, dipped it in the salt cellar, but neither ate nor drank—he had already forgotten. He leaned on his elbows and bowed his head. Alexei stood beside him, holding his breath, eager to tell him something...

"Well?" asked Vassily Vassilyevich sternly.

"Father, they've already been here..."

"From the Trinity Laura?"

"Twenty-five dragoons with a lieutenant and the squire Volkov..."

"What did you say?"

"That my father was in Moscow and had no thought of coming here... The squire said: 'Let the prince make haste to the Trinity Laura unless he wishes dishonour'..."

Vassily Vassilyevich smiled wrily. He drank up his glass and chewed some bread, but everything was tasteless. He saw that his son was bursting to say something. One shoulder drooping, his feet turned in like a slave's, a floorboard shaking slightly under him. Vassily Vassilyevich was going to snap at his son, but he looked into his frightened eyes and felt sorry for him:

"Stop trembling at the knees and sit down..."

"They ordered me to go to the Laura with you, Father..."

Vassily Vassilyevich flushed at this and half rose, but his pride got the better of him. He merely lowered his eyes. He poured himself another glass and cut off some meat-jelly spiced with garlic. His son hurriedly pushed the vinegar cruet towards him...

"Get ready, Alexei," said Vassily Vassilyevich. "I'm going to have a rest. We'll leave at night... God is merciful... (His thoughts were bitter as he ate. Suddenly, beads of sweat broke out on his forehead, his eyes darted about.) One thing you must do, Alyosha. I brought a muzhik with me... Go and see that they take him down to the bathhouse by the river, lock him up and keep a close watch on him so that he doesn't get away..."

When Alexei had gone out, Vassily Vassilyevich let fall the knife with the piece of meat-jelly trembling on it and slumped in his seat. His face sagged into wrinkles, the pouches under his eyes sagged, his nether lip drooped...

Vaska Silin was sitting in the little bathhouse by the river at the foot of a cliff. He had been shouting and yelling all day for something to eat. But the bushes rustled desolately round him, the roach splashed in the stream as they fled from a pike, and a flock of starlings, getting ready for migration, were flying hither and thither in the blue sky that he could

see through the little sliding window. The birds became weary and perched on a nut-tree, twittering and whistling, not in the least dismayed by the sighs of the human being...

"My native Poltava," whispered the seer, "the devil brought me to that accursed Moscow! Pox on you, may you all split asunder in all directions, may all your cities fall one by one..."

The setting sun flooded the narrow window with light and sank down behind the tree-tops. Vaska Silin realised that he was not going to be given any food and lay down on the cold shelf, putting a birch switch under his head. He dozed off, then suddenly sat bolt upright, his beard protruding in his terror. Vassily Vassilyevich was standing in the doorway. He was wearing a black tricorne and a black foreign suit under his sheepskin travelling coat; his sword stuck out behind him like a tail...

"What have you to say now, seer?" asked the prince in a strange voice.

Vaska Silin committed a bad blunder: he started shivering and shaking... He should have realised that the prince still had some faith left in his powers of divination... He should have gripped Golitsyn by the arm and howled: "You are going to the tsar for the torments of death! Go, fear not... Four beasts have unsheathed their claws... Four ravens have flown hence... Death has retreated... I see, I see all..." Instead of this, Vaska, out of fear and hunger, started babbling about the royal crowns again, burst into tears and began pleading:

"Let me go to Poltava for Christ's sake... I shan't do any harm or tell any tales..."

Vassily Vassilyevich stared at him with demented eyes from the doorway. Suddenly he ran out, jammed the changing-room door shut with a log and fastened the lock... He got busy round the bathhouse. Vaska suddenly realised that he was piling up brush-wood. "Don't," he shouted... "You know too much," replied the prince. "You have to go!" And, coughing, he blew on the kindling. There was a smell of burning. Vaska picked up the water bucket and smashed it on the door, but failed to break it open. He poked his head sideways out of the vent, started screaming, and choked on the fumes... The brushwood crackled and roared as it burst into flames. The chinks between the beams glowed. A booming wall of fire rose up. Vaska crawled under the shelf

to escape the heat. The roof buckled. The walls burst into flame...

In the windless night, the flame danced high over the river, outshining the stars in the sky. For a long time, the ruddy shadows of the six grey horses and the black leather-covered carriage, as they sped towards the Yaroslavl highway, flew over the stubble fields, now spreading out into the depths of a damp gully, now leaping up the hill-slopes, now breaking up as they skimmed over the tree-trunks in a birch grove...

"Where's the fire? Father... Isn't it on our land?" asked Alexei several times.

Dozing in a corner of the carriage, Vassily Vassilyevich did not answer...

21

In the palace cattle-yard, in the basement, where there had been a gunpowder magazine during the Time of Troubles and there were now cellars for the monastery stores, the carpenters had cleared a space under the narrow vaults, fixed up a crossbeam with block and noose between the brick pillars, and, under it, on the ground, a beam with a collar—the rack. They had set up a bench and table for the clerks taking down the depositions, and a second bench, covered with red cloth, for the authorities. They had repaired the steep staircase that led from the cellar up to the stone barn at ground level where Fyodor Shaklovity had been held since the day before.

The investigation was being conducted by Boris Alexeyevich. They had fetched for the Criminal Commission in Moscow a master torturer, Emelyan Svezhev, famous for extracting a confession at the first stroke of the whip. Administering punishments for minor offences he could flog with mercy at the pillar, but if he beat unsparingly, he would expose a man's backbone with the fifteenth stroke.

All different kinds of people had been interrogated, while others had voluntarily come forward with denunciations and testimony. They managed to catch Kuzma Chermny. By cunning, they got hold of a man near to Sophia, the constable Obrosim Petrov, who twice beat off pole-axes and pikes with his sabre. But Nikita Gladky and Medvedev had escaped and warrants for their arrest had been sent out to all provinces.

It was now Fyodor Shaklovity's turn. Yesterday, during interrogation, he had replied angrily to all the charges read to him from the denunciations: "False testimony; my enemies want to destroy me. I am not guilty of any crime..." This time, they had prepared Emelyan Svezhev for him, but he did not know this and was going, as before, to hold that he had not instigated any mutiny and had no designs against the sovereign...

Peter did not attend the interrogations at the beginning of the enquiry. Boris Alexeyevich and the clerk would visit him in the evenings, and the latter would read the interrogation rolls. When, however, Chermny and Petrov were arrested with their cronies Ogryzkov, Shestakov, Evdokimov and Chechetka, and when his mortal enemies began to talk, Peter wanted to hear in person what they had to say. A chair was brought down to the cellar for him, and he sat apart, under the mouldy vault. His elbows on his knees, his chin propped on his fist, he asked no questions and merely listened. When the machine creaked for the first time and Obrosim Petrov was hoisted up, naked to the waist, broad-chested and muscular, his pock-marked face grey, his teeth bared and grinding with pain—Peter quickly moved his chair into the shadows behind a brick pillar and, without stirring, sat there throughout the torture. He was pale and thoughtful all that day. But after a while he became used to it and did not hide any more.

On this particular day, Natalia Kirillovna delayed him at matins. The patriarch made a speech congratulating him on the successful end of the troubles. True, Sophia was still in the Kremlin, but already powerless. The regiments which had remained in Moscow were sending spokesmen to bow to tsar Peter and ask for forgiveness and clemency. They were ready for anything—to be sent to Astrakhan or even farther afield, so long as they were left alive with their families and businesses.

Peter left the cathedral on foot. The cattle-yard was full of streltsy. They started shouting: "Sire, leave Fyodor to us, we'll talk to him ourselves..." Bowing his head and hastily waving his arms, he ran past them to the dilapidated barn and, his feet slipping on the steps, went down into the damp darkness of the cellar. There was a smell of hides and mice. Making his way through the bales, sacks and barrels, he pushed open the low door. The candle on the table at which

the clerk was writing cast a yellow light on the cobwebs in the vaults, on the rubbish on the earth floor, and the freshly-hewn beams of the torture machine. The clerk, and those sitting near him on another bench—Boris Alexeyevich, Lev Kirillovich, Streshnev and Romodanovsky—bowed solemnly. When they sat down again, Peter noticed Shaklovity. He was on his knees a pace away from them, his curly head bent, his costly caftan—the one he had been wearing when seized in the palace—torn under the armpits, his shirt stained. Fyodor slowly raised his drawn face and met the tsar's eye. His pupils dilated, the fine lips widened and shook as if with a soundless sobbing. He lunged forward with his whole body, not taking his eyes off Peter. Boris Golitsyn also glanced at the tsar and smiled cautiously.

"Do you command us to continue, Sire?" said Streshnev through his thick moustaches.

"You commit crimes and you should know how to answer for them. Why are we wasting so much time on you? The tsar would know the truth..."

Boris Alexeyevich raised his voice:

"He gives but one answer: he never uttered such words and never did such deeds... But according to the investigation, he's in it up to the eyebrows. He will have to be tortured..."

Shaklovity, as if propelled from behind, crawled out of the way on his knees, like a mouse. He wanted to take cover behind the piles of hides and the barrels that stank of salt fish... But he fell and lay still. Peter stepped up to him and saw Shaklovity's fat, clean-shaven neck at his feet. He thrust his hands into his caftan pockets. Gravely contemptuous, he sat down and said in a youth's voice that was on the point of breaking:

"Let him tell the truth..."

Boris Alexeyevich called:

"Emelya..."

From behind the machine under the vault there emerged a tall, narrow-shouldered man in a red Russian blouse that came down to his knees. Shaklovity could not have been expecting him so soon. He sat back on his heels, drew his head down between his shoulders and looked at Emelyan Svezhev's impassive, horsey face with virtually no forehead, only the eyebrow ridges and a massive jaw. He walked over, picked up Shaklovity as if he were a child, shook him and stood him on his feet. Carefully and skilfully he tugged at

the sleeves and pulled off the caftan, unfastened the gem-studded collar, ripped the white silk shirt open to the navel, tore it off, and bared the prisoner to the waist... Shaklovity wanted to shout, but what came out was hoarse and incoherent:

"God, I'll tell everything..."

The heads, beards and cheeks of the boyars on the bench moved. Emelyan drew Fyodor's hands behind his back, tied them at the wrists, attached the leather loop and pulled on the other end of the rope. Shaklovity stood bewildered. The block squeaked, and his arms began to rise behind his back. His muscles tensed, his shoulders rose and he bent over. Then Emelyan gave him a rough push in the small of the back, bent his knees, and tugged. Fyodor's arms were jerked out of his shoulders and hoisted over his head. Fyodor gasped, and his body, with the mouth wide open, the eyes dilated, the stomach contracted, hung toes inwards a yard above the ground. Emelyan secured the rope and took a short-handled knout from a nail...

At a sign from Boris Alexeyevich, the clerk put on his iron spectacles and, bringing his dry nose nearer to the candle, began reading:

"And later in the questioning, the said Captain Filipp Sapogov stated: 'Last year, in July (he does not recall the date) Her Majesty Sophia Alexeyevna came to the village of Preobrazhenskoye, and at that time His Majesty Peter Alexeyevich was not at Preobrazhenskoye, and the tsarevna stayed until noon only. And with her was Fyodor Shaklovity and many people of diverse regiments, and Fyodor had brought them to beat Lev Kirillovich and murder Her Majesty, Natalia Kirillovna. At the same time, he, Fyodor, came out of the palace into the hall and said to him, Filipp Sapogov: 'Listen until you hear the shouting in the palace rooms...' And at that moment the tsaritsa was abusing the tsarevna, and there was a great shouting in the rooms... 'When the noise begins, be ready, all of you,' he said, 'and beat to death all whom we send to you out of the rooms...'"

"I never spoke such words, Filipp is lying," said Shaklovity in a strangled voice.

At a sign from Boris Alexeyevich, Emelyan stepped back, looked round to make sure there was nothing to impede him, raised his whip and, lunging forward, brought it whistling down. A tremor ran over Fyodor's yellow and tender body.

He cried out. Emelyan struck him a second time. ("Three," said Boris Alexeyevich quickly). A third time. Shaklovity shouted in agony, the saliva dribbling from his mouth:

"I was drunk, I was talking in drink, I didn't know what I was saying..."

"And further," continued the clerk when Shaklovity had stopped shouting, "he said wild words to Filipp about the tsar Peter Alexeyevich: 'He drinks and goes to Kukui, and by no means can be brought to peace, because he drinks until he is drunk... And it would be a good idea to plant hand grenades secretly in his royal hallway, so that he would be slain by them..."

Shaklovity was silent. "Five!" commanded Boris Alexeyevich stiffly.

Emelyan raised the seven-foot whip and brought it savagely down again. Peter quickly bounded up to Shaklovity—their eyes were on the same level, Peter was so tall—and looked into the other man's crazed eyes. His back, arms, and the nape of his neck were twitching...

"Tell the truth, dog, dog... (seizing him by the ribs). So you are sorry you didn't cut my throat when I was small? Am I right, Fyodor, am I right?.. Who wanted to cut my throat? You? No? Who?.. Did you send someone to plant the grenades? Who? Name him... Why didn't you kill me, why didn't you cut my throat?.."

Fyodor began mumbling excuses at the tsar's round, blotchily red face with its small, twisted mouth, and his veins swelled with the strain...

"...some words I truly remember: 'Why didn't they get rid of the tsaritsa and her brothers at the time?..' But the business about the knife and the grenades—there was none of that, I don't remember it... Evil things were said about the tsaritsa by Vassily..."

No sooner had he begun naming Vassily Vassilyevich than Boris Alexeyevich leapt up from the bench and shouted furiously at the executioner:

"Flog him!"

Taking care not to catch the tsar, Emelyan brought the four-sided end of the knout down between Fyodor's shoulder-blades and then drew on it, laying bare the raw flesh... Shaklovity screamed, his Adam's apple bulging. At the tenth stroke, his head jerked weakly and lolled on his chest.

"Take him down," said Boris Alexeyevich, wiping his lips

with a silk handkerchief. "Take him carefully upstairs, bathe him with vodka and look after him as if he were a little babe so that he talks tomorrow..."

...When the boyars emerged from the cellar into the cattle-yard Tikhon Nikityevich Streshnev said in Lev Kirillovich's ear:

"Did you see him, Lev Kirillovich—Prince Boris?"

"No. What?"

"Jumped up off the bench... To shut Fyodor's mouth..."

"Why?"

"Fyodor said too much, and they're related, are Boris and Vassily... Goes to show that blood means more to them than the tsar's business..."

Lev Kirillovich stopped dead on a pile of dung, he was so astounded. He waved his hands and beat himself on the haunches.

"Oh dear!.. And we trust Boris..."

"Trust him, but watch out..."

"Oh dear!"

22

The stove was burning in the chimneyless hut and the smoke was so thick that a man was visible only up to the waist and nothing at all could be seen on the shelves under the ceiling. The light from the taper glowed fitfully, the cinders hissed as they fell into the water pan. Snotty-nosed little children were running about with bare tummies and dirty bottoms, falling down and bawling from time to time. A big-bellied woman with a length of bast twine round her waist shouted, as she dragged them out, one by one, "Blast you! I'm sick to death of you little heathens!"

Vassily Vassilyevich and Alexei had been sitting in the hut since the day before. They had not been allowed through the monastery gates. "His Majesty commands you to wait in the settlement until sent for..." They were attending their fate. They couldn't swallow food or drink. The tsar did not want to hear excuses. Vassily Vassilyevich had been expecting anything; he had been preparing himself for the worst during the journey, but not a chimneyless hut.

Colonel Gordon dropped in that afternoon. Cheerful, honest, he expressed his sympathy, clicked his tongue and patted Vassily Vassilyevich's knee as if they were equals. "Neffer

mind," he said, "don't vorry, Prince Fassily Fassilyevich, it'll come out all right in the end." He went out, a free and happy man, his big spurs jingling.

There was no one he could send to make enquiries at the Laura. The people would not even raise their hats to the tsarevna's former lover. He felt ashamed to go outside. His head reeled with the stench, the children's squealing and the smoke stung his eyes. For some reason he kept remembering the confounded seer; his scream still sounded in his ears (from the window through the flames): "Open the do-o-o-or, or else you're doomed, you're doomed!.."

Late that evening, a constable barged into the hut with a guard, coughed in the smoke and said to the pregnant woman:

"Have you a fellow named Golitsyn staying here?"

The woman motioned with her ragged elbow:

"That's him sitting over there."

"You are commanded to go to the palace. Get ready, Prince."

On foot, like common labourers, surrounded by the guards, Vassily Vassilyevich and Alexei went through the monastery gates. The streltsy recognised the prince, ran up and roared with laughter. Some tipped their hats over their eyes, some clutched their beards, some obscenely planted their legs apart: "Here's a laugh! The military leader's riding on two hooves... But where's his horse? Between his legs... Oh, what if the general falls flat on his face in the mud..."

They got past the jeerers. Vassily Vassilyevich actually ran onto the metropolitan's porch. But to meet him out of the door there came a poorly dressed clerk he had never seen before. He held up his index finger to stop Vassily Vassilyevich and, unrolling a scroll, read it out slowly and loudly, hammering every single word home:

"...for all his afore-mentioned crimes, Their Majesties tsar Peter Alexeyevich and Ivan Alexeyevich order that you, Prince Vassily Golitsyn, be stripped of your rank and noble title and be sent with your wife and children to permanent banishment in Kargopol. And your estates, patrimonies, Moscow households and livestock are to be made over to Their Majesties. And your servants, bondsmen and serfs, but not peasants and peasants' children, are to be freed..."

After finishing this long reading, the clerk rolled up the paper and, for the benefit of the constable, pointed to Vassily

Vassilyevich who was hatless and barely able to stand. Alexei supported him by the arm...

"Put him under guard and carry out the instructions..."

He was taken away. Behind the church courtyard, father and son were put into a cart, on bast matting. The constable and a dragoon jumped up behind. The carter, in a torn peasant coat and bast shoes, flourished the reins, and the decrepit little horse drew the cart at a walking pace from the Laura out into the fields. It was night and the stars were hazy in the damp air.

23

The Trinity campaign ended. Exactly as seven years previously the Laura had beaten Moscow at the waiting game. After thinking it over, the boyars, with Natalia Kirillovna and the patriarch, wrote in Peter's name to tsar Ivan:

"...And now, my brother, tsar, the time has come for us both to rule over the tsardom entrusted to us by God, inasmuch as we are come to the measure of our age; but the third person, our *reprehensible* sister, we forbid to participate with us in titles or in the management of affairs..."

Sophia was transferred without any particular fuss from the Kremlin to the Novodevichy Convent. Shaklovity, Chermny and Obrosim Petrov were beheaded and the other miscreants were flogged with a knout on the square, their tongues were cut out and they were permanently banished to Siberia. Medvedev the priest and Nikita Gladky were eventually caught by the governor of Dorogobuzh. They were horribly tortured and then beheaded.

Awards of land and money were granted. To the boyars, three hundred rubles each; to the stewards two hundred and seventy; to the boyars of the Duma, two hundred and fifty. The squires who had gone to the Laura with Peter were granted thirty-seven rubles each; those who arrived subsequently, thirty-two rubles, those who arrived before August 10, thirty rubles; and those who came on August 20, twenty-seven rubles. The city nobles were awarded, on the same scale, seventeen and sixteen rubles respectively. The rank-and-file of the streltsy received a ruble without land for their loyalty.

Before returning to Moscow, the boyars parcelled out the Commissions amongst themselves. The first and most

important, the Ambassadors' Commission, went to Lev Kirillovich, but without the title of Protector. With the passing of military and other urgencies, Boris Alexeyevich Golitsyn might have been dispensed with completely—the patriarch and Natalia Kirillovna could not forgive him many things, especially his saving Vassily Vassilyevich from the knout and the block; but the boyars considered it would be indecent to deprive so high-born a family of its honour: "If we go that far, they'll soon knock the Commissions from under our feet too. Merchants, low-born clerks, foreigners and other scoundrels are worming their way into tsar Peter's favour for booty and position..." Boris Alexeyevich was awarded the Kazan Palace Commission for sustenance and honour. On learning about this, he spat, got drunk that day, and shouted: "To hell with them, I already have everything I need." He galloped off, drunk, to his Moscow country patrimony to sleep it off.

The new ministers, as the foreigners now began to call them, expelled the former clerks and under-clerks from the Commissions, put others in their places, and began thinking and ruling according to the former ways. No particular changes occurred, except that Lev Kirillovich, and not Ivan Miloslavsky, walked about the Kremlin palace wearing black sables, slamming doors importantly and banging his heels...

These were old and well-known people, nothing was to be expected of them but ruin, corruption and disorganisation. In Moscow and at Kukui—merchants of all the guilds, tax-farmers, tradespeople and artisans in the settlements, foreign merchants and ships' captains, whether Dutch, Hanoverian or English—all waited with great impatience for new ways and new faces. Various rumours went round about Peter, and many put all their hopes on him. Russia was a gold mine lying under a centuries-old layer of ooze... If the new tsar wasn't going to better life, who would?

Peter was in no hurry to go to Moscow. He left the Laura with the army for a campaign to the Alexandrovskaya suburb, where the rotting timbers of Ivan the Terrible's palace were still standing. Here General Sommer organised a mock battle which lasted a whole week until the gunpowder ran out. It was here that Sommer's services came to an end: the unfortunate man was crippled by a fall from his horse.

In October, Peter went with the play regiments to Moscow.

He was met ten versts away in the village of Alexeyevskoye by huge crowds of people. They bore icons, church banners, and loaves on dishes. Along the roadside lay logs and execution blocks with axes driven into them, and on the damp ground lay streltsy with their necks on the logs. These had been specially chosen from among those who had not gone to the Trinity Laura... But the young tsar cut off no heads; he did not give vent to his wrath, though he was not at all friendly either.

Chapter Five

1

Lefort was becoming a big man. The foreigners at Kukui and those arriving on business from Arkhangelsk and Vologda treated him with great respect. The agents of the Amsterdam and London trading houses wrote home about him, advising that if they needed his help, they should send him small presents, preferably good wine. When he was given the rank of General for the Trinity campaign, the residents of Kukui contributed to present him with a sword. As they walked past his house, people would wink significantly at one another and say: "Oh, yes..." His house was now crowded, there were so many who wanted to shake his hand, exchange a few words, or simply be remembered. Although it was late autumn, hurried work began on extensions to the house. A stone porch was put up with side entrances, the façade was decorated with columns and moulded muzhiks. In place of the courtyard, where formerly a fountain had played, a lake was being dug for water pageants and firework displays. Guard-houses for the musketeers were built on either side.

Lefort himself would probably have not decided on such expenditures, but it was what the young tsar wanted. During the waiting period in the Laura, Lefort had become as necessary to Peter as a wise mother to her child. He understood the young tsar's desires at a word, protected him from danger, taught him to see the pros and cons of a question and, it seemed, came to like the tsar immensely. He was constantly in Peter's company—not to ask for villages and serfs, like the boyars, tediously banging their foreheads on the floor, but for their common business and common diversion. Elegantly dressed, talkative, as good-natured as the morning sun through the window, he would present himself, all bows and smiles, in Peter's bedchamber, and so the day would begin with merriment, cheerful concerns and happy expectations. For Peter, Lefort meant foreign lands, beautiful cities and harbours with ships and intrepid sea

captains who smelt of tobacco and rum—everything that the tsar had dreamed of since boyhood on seeing the pictures and printed sheets from abroad. Even the smell of Lefort's clothes was not Russian, but different and altogether agreeable.

Peter wanted his favourite's house to be an island of this alluring foreign world; Lefort's palace was being decorated for the tsar's amusement. He begrudged no money that could be extracted from his mother and Lev Kirillovich. Now that his own kinfolk were established in Moscow, Peter abandoned himself to his pleasures without demur. His passions broke loose, and here Lefort was particularly necessary to him. Without him, Peter wanted something, but did not know how to achieve it... After all, what counsel could his own people, the Russians, give him? Hawking, or blind muzhiks whining their wretched songs... Pooh! Lefort understood his needs at a glance. He was like a hop leaf in the dark beer of Peter's passions.

In the meantime, work was renewed on the capital city of Pressburg. The fortress was being prepared for the spring war games. The regiments were kitted out with new uniforms: the Preobrazhensky in green caftans, the Semyonovsky in bright blue, and Gordon's Butyrsky Regiment in scarlet. The whole autumn passed in banqueting and dancing. The foreign merchants and manufacturers, in between amusements, pursued their own lines of business in Lefort's palace...

2

The newly-built ballroom was still damp; the high semicircular windows sweated in the heat of the two enormous fireplaces, and opposite, on the blank wall, were mirrors fashioned in imitation of windows. The floor of wooden blocks had been freshly waxed. In their wall brackets, the three-branched candelabra with their reflectors had been lit, although dusk was only just beginning to fall. It was snowing lightly. Sleighs were arriving in the courtyard through the snow-covered heaps of builders' clay and chips: Dutch, in the form of a swan painted black and gold; Russian —long, like boxes, piled high with cushions and bearskins; heavy leather carriages drawn by six horses in pairs, and simple cab sleighs in which some foreigner sat laughing

with his knees drawn up, having hired a muzhik for two kopecks from Lubyanka to Kukui.

In the stone porch, on carpets covered with trampled snow, the guests were met by two jesters, Tomos and Seka, one in a black, waist-length Spanish cape and a straw hat with crow's wings, the other dressed as a Turk in a high bast turban with a pig's ear sewn on the front. The Dutch merchants were particularly delighted by the jester in Spanish costume, gave him a fillip on his nose and asked after the King of Spain's health. In the bright entrance-hall, where the oak walls were decorated with dark-blue dishes, the guests handed their fur coats and hats to liveried lackeys. The visitors were greeted at the entrance door by Lefort in a white satin coat shot with silver, and a peruke dusted with silver powder. The guests went up to the blazing hearth to drink Hungarian wine and light their pipes.

The Russians were embarrassed by their inability to converse (few of them could speak Dutch, English or German yet) and arrived later, when it was time to sit at table. The guests freely warmed their behinds and tight-stockinged calves at the fire and talked business. Only their host flitted about like a butterfly from guest to guest, the flared skirts of his coat flapping, made introductions, enquired about their health and journey—were they staying in comfortable lodgings?—and warned them against robbery and violence.

"Oh yes, I've heard much about the Russian rabble," the guest would reply. "They're very much disposed to rob and even murder rich travellers."

Sidney, an English timber merchant, said through his teeth:

"A country where the population derives its sustenance from knavery is a bad country... Russian merchants pray to God that he help them swindle more skilfully; this they call shrewdness. O, I know this damned country only too well... One should only come here with a gun under one's coat..."

A native of Kukui, Hamilton, a none too rich merchant and a grandson of the peer of that name who had fled to Moscow from the horrors of Cromwell's time, drew respectfully nearer to those engaged in the conversation.

"Even for one who has had the misfortune to be born here, it is hard to become accustomed to the rudeness and dishonesty of the Russians. As if they were all possessed by demons!.."

Glancing casually at this expatriate who spoke a coarse

kind of English and was dressed out of fashion, Sidney curled his lips with disdain, but nevertheless answered Hamilton out of respect for the house:

"We do not intend to live here. But for the extensive wholesale trade in which we are engaged, the dishonesty of the Russians is of little concern..."

"You deal in timber, Sir?.."

"Yes, I deal in timber, Sir. We have acquired a considerable timber concession near Arkhangelsk."

On hearing the words "timber concession", a Dutchman, Van Leyden, brought his face closer— lashless eyes, a pointed Spanish beard, purple complexion, three chins chafing on the enormous starched collar.

"Oh, yes," he said, "the Russian forest—that is good; but those devilish winds in the Arctic Ocean and those Norwegian pirates—they are not so good." He opened his mouth and went an even deeper shade of purple. Two tears oozed out of his squinting little eyes as he burst out laughing.

"Never mind," replied the tall, bony and sallow-faced Sidney, "timber for spars costs us twenty-five kopecks, and we sell it for nine shillings in Newcastle... It's worth the risk..."

The Dutchman clicked his tongue: "Nine shillings for a piece of timber!" He had come to Muscovy to buy hemp yarn, canvas, tar and potash. Two of his ships were laid up in Arkhangelsk for the winter. Business was sluggish, the tsar's trades—the big Moscow merchants who bought goods for the state—learned about the two ships and pushed up their prices to absurd levels: goods from the small private second-hand dealers were never any good. But this Englishman had evidently done good business, if he wasn't lying. Most mortifying. Glancing sideways out of the corner of his eye to make sure no Russians were in the offing, Van Leiden said:

"The Russian tsar owns three quarters of the whole world's tar, the finest mast timber and all the hemp... But it is as difficult to get as if from the moon... Oh no, Sir, you won't make much profit out of your concession... The north is deserted, unless you can teach bears to fell trees... Moreover, out of three of your ships, Sir, two will be sunk by the Norwegians or the Swedes and the third will be crushed by the ice floes..." He laughed again, conscious that he had discomfited this supercilious Englishman. "Yes, yes,

this country is as rich as the New World and richer than India; but while it is governed by the boyars, we shall suffer losses and yet more losses... In Moscow they do not understand their own advantages; the Muscovites trade like savages... Oh, if they only had harbours on the Baltic Sea and convenient roads, and if they took up trade like honest burghers, then one could make big turnovers here..."

"Yes, Sir," replied Sidney importantly. "I have listened to you with pleasure and I agree with you... I do not know how it is with you, but I believe that in your country, as in England, small seagoing ships are no longer being built... Work has began on vessels of up to four and five hundred tons in our English shipyards... We now need five times more timber and flax. We need no less than ten thousand yards of sailcloth per ship..."

"O-o-oh!" was the astonished exclamation from all who had been listening to this conversation.

"But hides, Sir; you have forgotten the demand for Russian leather," interrupted Hamilton...

Sidney looked at this oaf in exasperation. The wrinkles gathering on his bony chin, he stared for a few moments into the fire through half-closed eyes.

"No," he replied, "I have not forgotten about Russian leather, but I don't trade in that... Leather is being exported by the Swedish merchants... Thank the Lord, England grows rich and we must have large quantities of building materials... The English have what they wanted... And we shall have them..."

He finished talking, sat down in an armchair and, resting the thick sole of his shoe on the fire grate, paid no more attention to anyone else... Lefort flew up with Menshikov in tow. Sasha was wearing a dark-blue cloth coat with red lapels and brass buttons, enormous silver spurs on his thigh-boots, a luxuriant, lightly powdered peruke and a lace cravat with a diamond pin. His merry, clear eyes surveyed the guests without embarrassment. He bowed nimbly, shrugged his powerful shoulders as if chilled, stood with his back to the fire and took a pipe.

"The tsar will be here in a moment..."

The guests began whispering, and the more important of them came forward so that they were facing the doors. Sidney, who had not understood Menshikov, even dropped his jaw and scrutinised in amazement this young fellow who

had inconsiderately crowded respectable people away from their places by the fire. Hamilton whispered to him: "A favourite of the tsar's, recently promoted to officer rank from that of batman. He's going to be very useful." Sidney, the wrinkles round his eyes gathered in a friendly smile, turned to Sasha:

"I have long dreamed that I might have the happiness of seeing your great sovereign... I am no more than a poor merchant and I thank the Lord for this unexpected occasion about which I shall tell my children and grandchildren..."

Lefort translated. Sasha replied:

"You'll see him, you'll see him," and he revealed his even white teeth in a smile. "If you can drink and jest, then you shall enjoy yourself with him. You will certainly have something to tell your grandchildren about (to Lefort). Ask him what he deals in. Ah, timber... He's probably come to ask for men-woodcutters, eh?.. (Lefort translated the questions, Sidney nodded with a smile.) Why then, if the tsar gives a note to Lev Kirillovich... Let him try..."

Peter appeared unexpectedly in the doorway in a Preobrazhensky coat like Sasha's, narrow in the shoulders and chest and all sprinkled with snow. There were dimples in his ruddy cheeks; his mouth was compressed tight, but the dark eyes were laughing. He removed his tricorne and stamped the snow off his square-toed, coarse boots that reached above the knees.

"Guten tag, meine Herrschaften," he said in a young man's bass. (Lefort was already flying towards him, slightly bent over, one hand extended, the other executing an outward flourish.) "I'm hungry... Come on, let's go to the table..."

With a wink at the foreigners, who held their breath, he turned away—stooping, nearly as tall as the door—and proceeded through the entrance-hall into the Speisesaal, or banqueting chamber.

3

The faces of the guests were already flushed and wigs had slipped awry. Sasha, his scarf off, had performed a lively *trepak* and was drinking again, but the wine was only making him pale in the face. The jesters, pretending to be more drunk than anybody else, were playing leapfrog, biffing the guests on the head with bull's bladders filled with dried

peas. All were talking at once, the candles were burnt halfway down. The ladies of Kukui were due to arrive soon for dancing.

Sidney, straight-backed and self-restrained, but with his eyes now red and half-closed, was saying to Peter (with Hamilton standing behind their chairs and translating):

"Sir, tell His Majesty that we English believe that the good fortune of our country depends on successful sea trading... War is a costly and sad necessity, but trade is the blessing of the Lord..."

"Quite so, quite so," agreed Peter. He enjoyed noise and argument, and especially these strange reasonings by foreigners about the state, about trade, about benefits and damage... "Good fortune! Wonderful! Go on, go on, I'm listening..."

"His Majesty the King of England and the respected lords will never pass a bill in Parliament if it can do any harm to trade... That's why His Majesty's Treasury is full... The English merchant is a respected person in his country. And we are all ready to shed blood for England and for our king. Let His Majesty the young tsar be not angered if I say that in Russia there are many bad and useless laws. Oh, a good law is a great thing! We have stern laws, but they are useful to us and we respect them..."

"Hark at him!" laughed Peter, upsetting a tall wineglass with a base in the form of a chicken's foot. "He should talk like that in the Kremlin... Why, Franz, they'd all swoon... Very well, then, tell us what's bad here. Hamilton, translate..."

"This is a very big question and I'm tipsy," replied Sidney. "If His Majesty permits, I could tomorrow, in full possession of my faculties, talk about the bad Russian customs, and also why a state grows rich and what it needs to do so..."

Peter stared at the other's tipsy, foreign eyes. Was it his imagination, or was this merchant laughing at the Russian dolts? But Lefort, stooping quickly over Peter's shoulder, whispered:

"It would be interesting to hear this philosophy of how to make the country rich..."

"Very well," said Peter, "but let him say what he thinks is bad here."

"Right you are," said Sidney, sobering down slightly. "On

the way to our kind host, I drove past some square or other with a gallows. A small space has been cleared of snow and there's a solitary soldier standing guard there."

"Beyond the Pokrovskiye Gates," prompted Sasha, drawing up his chair a little way.

"Anyway... Suddenly, I see a woman's head sticking out of the ground and it blinks its eyes. I am very frightened, and I ask my travelling companion: 'Why is that head blinking?' And he says: 'She's still alive. That is a Russian mode of punishment. For murdering her husband, his wife is buried in the ground and after a few days, when she dies, she is suspended upside down...'"

Sasha grinned: "Wow!" Peter looked at him and at the sweetly smiling Lefort.

"What of it? She murdered someone, after all... They've been punished like that for ages... Should she be pardoned for it?"

"Your Majesty," said Sidney, "ask this unhappy woman what drove her to such an appalling crime, and she will surely mollify your beneficent heart. (Peter smiled.) I have heard and seen a few things in Russia. Oh, the eye of the foreigner is sharp... The segregated life of the Russian woman in the household is like that of the animals... (He passed his handkerchief over his perspiring brow, feeling that he was talking too much; but pride and drink had already loosened his tongue.) What sort of example is it to the future citizen when his mother is buried in the ground and then shamelessly hung up by the leg? William Shakespeare, one of our writers,touchingly described in a wonderful comedy how the son of a rich Italian merchant killed himself for love of a woman by taking poison... But Russians beat their wives almost to death with knouts and sticks, and this is even encouraged by the law... When I return to my home in London, my esteemed wife welcomes me with a kind smile and my children rush to me without fear, and I find peace and good order in my home. It would never occur to my wife to kill me, for I treat her so well."

The Englishman, deeply moved, fell silent and bowed his head. Peter gripped him by the shoulder.

"Hamilton, translate this to him... (And he began shouting into Sidney's ear in Russian.) "We see everything ourselves... We don't boast that things are good here. I was telling my mother that I want to send about fifty of the more

able squires abroad to study under you... We need the ABC that's what we must start learning with... You keep harping about savages, us being half-starved fools, beasts... I know! But just you wait, just you wait..."

He rose, hurling his chair away.

"Sasha, send for the horses."

"Where to, myn Herz?"

"The Pokrovskiye Gates..."

4

The head slowly raised its eyelids... "No, this is not death... An earthy chill crushing the body... Can't warm the earth... Can't move in the grave... Buried up to the ears... (A light snow was falling on the upturned face.) If only sickness could veil the eyes, I wouldn't feel so sorry for myself. People are beasts, oh, they're such beasts...

"...Once there was a girl like a little wildflower... Dasha, little Dasha, that's what my mother called me... Why did she bear me?.. To be buried alive... It wasn't my fault... Can you see me, Mother, can you see me?"

The head forced its lips apart, it called in a dry voice: "Mama, Mama, I'm dying..." The tears flowed. Snowflakes settled on the eyelashes.

...Behind the head, a noosed rope creaked on the gallows. "Even when you die, there'll be no peace. They'll hang your body... It hurts, it hurts, the earth's pressing down... The lumps of soil are sticking into my back... Oh, the pain, here it comes, the pain!.." (The head opened its mouth wide and flung itself back.) "Lord, protect me... Mama, tell Him, Mama... It wasn't my fault. I was out of my mind when I killed him... A dog bites too... Even a mare does..." She couldn't scream. The pain was so bad. The eyes widened and went blank. The head lolled sideways...

"...Again... Snow... Still no death... Soon it'll be the third day... The wind, the wind makes the rope creak... The cow hasn't been milked for more than two days... What's that, a red light? Oh, horror... Torches... A sleigh... People... Coming this way... More torment?" She wanted to thrash her legs —they were crushed under mountains of earth—she couldn't even move her toes...

"Where is she? I can't see her," said Peter loudly. "Have the dogs eaten her head off or something?"

"Sentry! Are you asleep? Hey, guard!" shouted the men by the sleigh.

"He-e-e-ere!" replied a drawling voice. The watchman came running through the snow, his movements hampered by his sheepskin coat... Still running softly, like a bear, he threw himself at Peter's feet, bowed and remained on his knees...

"Is the woman buried here?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Is she still alive?"

"Yes, Your Majesty..."

"What is she being punished for?"

"She stabbed her husband to death."

"Show me..."

The watchman ran over, squatted down and, with the skirts of his sheepskin coat, carefully brushed the snow from the woman's face and frozen, matted hair...

"She's alive, she's alive, Sire. She's blinking..."

Peter, Sidney, Sasha and about five of Lefort's guests walked over to the head. Two musketeers, their iron helmets shining, held the torches high in the air. The white flat face stared up at them from the snow with huge, sunken eyes.

"Why did you kill your husband?" asked Peter.

Silence.

The watchman touched her cheek with the tip of his felt boot.

"It's the tsar himself that's asking you, fool!"

"What did he do—beat you, torture you? (Peter bent down to her.) What's her name? Darya... Come, Darya, tell us what happened..."

She said nothing. The anxious watchman squatted down and said into her ear:

"Confess, maybe you'll be pardoned... You're letting me down, woman..."

Then the head opened its black mouth wide and said in a hoarse, hollow, hate-filled voice:

"I killed him... And I'd do it to him again, the brute..." She closed her eyes. No one spoke. The pitch fell hissing from the torches. Sidney quickly began saying something, but there was no interpreter. The watchman prodded her again with his felt boot. Her head jerked like that of a corpse. Peter coughed and went to the sleigh...

"Tell them to shoot her," he said quietly to Sasha.

5

Silent and cold, he returned to Lefort's brilliantly lit house. The music was playing in the ballroom gallery. Colourful dresses, faces, candles, all doubled in the mirrors. Through the warm haze, Peter at once saw the fair-haired Anna Mons... She was sitting by the wall, pensive of face, her bare shoulders bowed.

At that moment the music, a slow dance, streched its brass trumpets over the gallery and sang to him about Anna, about her full pink dress, about the innocent hands resting on her lap. Why, oh why was his heart rent by such despairing sorrow? As if he himself were buried in the ground up to the neck and calling to his love through a blizzard from impossibly far away!

Anna's eyes lit up; she had seen him in the doorway before anyone else. She rose and flew over the waxed floor... And the music was already singing merrily about good old Germany,where the pink almond-tree blossoms in front of such clean little windows, and kindly Mama and Papa smile benevolently upon Hansel and Gretel standing under the almond-tree, which signifies that love is forever, and when their sun sinks into deep blue shades, both will go to their graves with a gentle smile... Oh, so impossibly far away!..

Peter put his arms round Anna and felt her warmth under the pink silk. He danced silently and so long that the musicians went out of tune.

"Anna?" he said.

Trustingly, clearly, chastely, she looked up into his eyes.

"You are upset today, Peter!"

"Anna, do you love me?"

At this, Anna merely bowed her head quickly; she was wearing a velvet band round her neck... All the ladies, whether seated or dancing, guessed what the tsar had said and how Anna Mons had answered him.

Peter said:

"My happiness is with you..."

6

The patriarch was led in, supported under the arms. Blessing the old tsaritsa, her brother and the boyars, he sternly poked his bony, dry old fingers at their lips. Tsar Peter had

not yet arrived. Joachim sat down on a hard, high-backed chair and bowed so low that his tall hood obscured his face. Sunbeams beat down through the deep-set windows under the colourful vaults of the Faceted Hall. All were silent, their arms folded, their eyes downcast. The quiet was disturbed only by the winged shadow of a dove sitting outside on the snowed-up windowledge. The blue glazed stove was emitting waves of heat and there was an odour of incense and candle wax. This was the first and most important business of all: to sit thus in pious silence and to maintain decorum and custom. Let the tide of human troubles dash itself in vain against this immutability: vanity of vanities, all is vanity. There were enough temptations and novelties. The bulwark of Russia was here; let us be a little poorer, but at least true to the faith... As for the rest, God would be our aid...

They were silent, awaiting the arrival of the tsar. Natalia Kirillovna had blissfully dozed off; she had put on weight in the last few months and her health was none too robust. Grunting slightly, Streshnev carefully picked up her rosary, which had fallen from her knees onto the carpet. When Sophia had been regent, there had been a grandfather clock here. It had been removed: its ticking had irritated, and, in any case, it had been said: "Let no one know the hour." To measure time is to deceive oneself. Let it fly more slowly over Russia...

Doors slammed in the entrance hall, frozen voices violated the long drowsy silence and the tsaritsa, stifling a yawn, made the sign of the cross in front of her mouth. The bodyguard, a quiet young man, humbly announced the tsar's arrival. The boyars unhurriedly removed their fur hats. Natalia Kirillovna peered uneasily at the door; but, thank God, Peter was in Russian dress, had suppressed his laughter behind the door and made a dignified entry... "Legs as long as a crane's; it's hard for him to look dignified, poor dear," thought the tsaritsa, beaming in welcome. He went up to be blessed by the patriarch and enquired about the health of his sick brother...

He was urgently in need of money, which was why he had obediently come to hear Joachim in response to a letter from his mother. He sat on the throne and, sinking into the drowsy silence of the hall as if into cushions, he put his elbows on the arm-rests and covered his mouth with his

hand in case a yawn should break out.

With a senile, shaking hand, Joachim took out an exercise-book from under his black cape, slowly turned up a page, lifted up his eyes, for a long time applied his fingers to the eight-tipped cross on his hat, crossed himself and began reading quietly, with slow monotony:

"...Flatter not yourselves that having extirpated sedition you bring peace to people and villages... My soul grieves, seeing neither unanimity nor prosperity among the people. Capital city! Vagrant monks and nuns, priests and deacons, without dignity or grace, and also diverse folk, their name is legion, having tied up their arms and legs, and others having bound up their eyes or keeping them shut, roam about the streets asking for alms under false pretences... Is this the flowering vineyard? And I see more: there is drunkenness in the home, the dreaming of dreams and witchcraft and debauchery. The husband tears out his wife's hair and drives her naked through gates, and the wife murders the husband, and the children, as if demented, grow up like the weeds of the field... Is this the flowering vineyard?.. And I see more: the boyar, and the artisan, and the peasant take cudgels and, setting fire to their own homes, flee to the forests in their madness. Peasant, where is your plough? Trader, where is your measure? Boyar, where is your honour?"

And so he read on about the evil being done everywhere. Peter forgot to yawn. Natalia Kirillovna looked in anguish at her son and the boyars by turns. But they, as was proper, were silent, their beards on their chests. All knew that the affairs of the state were in a very bad way, but what could they do about it? Have patience, that was all... Joachim continued reading:

"We, in our miserable mind, have decided to tell you, great sovereigns, the truth... There will be no order and abundance in the land while godlessness and the filthy Latin, Lutheran, Calvinist and Jewish heresies proliferate... We suffer because of our sins... Once we were the Third Rome; now we have become the second Sodom and Gomorrah... Great sovereigns, we must not allow those of foreign faiths to build their temples here, and those already built must be destroyed... Forbid the accursed heretics to be commanders in the regiments... What help can they be expected to give to the Orthodox warrior?.. They only bring down the wrath of the Lord... The wolves lord it over the

lambs! The Orthodox believers must be forbidden to associate with the heretics... Introduce no foreign customs and changes of dress... And, recovering little by little and upholding the spirit of Orthodoxy, drive the foreigners hence from Russia and burn down the German quarter, that is a Gehenna and a temptation!"

The patriarch's eyes were blazing and his face quivering, as were the narrow beard and the blue hands. The boyars bowed their heads. Joachim had gone to extremes; one should not try to make such a clean sweep in a matter of this kind...

Romodanovsky's eyes were bulging like those of a crayfish. Natalia Kirillovna had not understood anything, and at the end of the reading she was still nodding her head and smiling. Peter was slumped back in the throne, pouting like a little boy. The patriarch put away the exercise-book and, passing his fingers over his eyes, continued:

"Let us make a small beginning in this big matter... Under Sophia Alexeyevna, at my tearful request, the foul heretic Quirin Kuhlmann was arrested at Kukui... At interrogation, he said that someone had appeared before him in Amsterdam in white raiment and had bidden him go to Moscow, where people were perishing in the darkness of unbelief... (Joachim was silent for a moment in agitation.) 'And you,' said he at the interrogation, 'are blind. You see not that my head is in radiance and that the Holy Spirit speaks through my lips...' And he quoted texts from the seductive teachings of Jakob Böhme and Christophor Bartut*... And, what is more, he seduced in Moscow a girl, Maria Selifontova, and dressed her, being afraid, in man's attire, and she lives in his closet... Both are drunk all day, and they play the fiddle and cymbals, and he puts his head out of the window and screams in a demented voice that the Holy Spirit has descended up on him... And he prophesies to those who visit him and bids them kiss him on the nether part of the stomach... My Lords, how can we know a moment's peace when Satan runs wild here amongst us? I beseech the great sovereigns to put an end to Quirin Kuhlmann with a Ukase—burn him alive and his books with him..."

All heads turned to Peter, and he grasped that the case of

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* Jakob Böhme and Christophor Bartut—the authors of mystical works. —*Ed.*

Quirin Kuhlmann had long been decided. He read it in his mother's calm eyes. Only Romodanovsky's moustaches twitched disapprovingly. Peter sat up straight and raised one hand—to bite his finger-nail. And so for the first time in his life, he was called on to settle an affair of state. He felt terrified, but already a chill of rage had reached his heart. He remembered the recent conversation in Lefort's house, the intelligent and dignified faces of the foreigners... Polite contempt... "Russia has been an Asiatic land too long," Sidney had said (the next day). "You fear the Europeans in this country, but you are your own worst enemies..." He remembered how ashamed he had felt as he listened... (He had ordered that Sidney should be presented with a sable coat and that he should not go to Lefort's house any longer. Let him repair to Arkhangelsk.) But what would the Englishman say if he heard these speeches? Tear down the chapels and churches at Kukui? He remembered how, in summer, the trembling chimes of the German church bell had come floating through the wide-open windows... There was honesty in these early chimes, and order, the smell of the clean little houses in Kukui, the lace curtains in Anna Mons' window... You'd burn her alive too, you corpse, you black raven! You'd leave heaps of ashes at Kukui! (Peter's eyes were already drilling into the patriarch.) But more powerful than rage (was this not because of Lefort's teaching?) stubbornness and cunning welled up in him. All right, the ruling boyars were a lot of old greybeards! As soon as you shout at them, they'd grovel on the carpet, mother would bursted into tears, the patriarch would dig his nose into his knees, but they'd still do things their own way, and, what was more, they would tighten their purse strings...

"Most holy father," said Peter with restrained fury (Natalia Kirillovna's eyebrows went up in astonishment). "It grieves me that we are not of the same mind... We do not meddle in your Christian affairs, but you are meddling in our military concerns... It may be that our plans are great; but do you know what they are? We wish to conquer the seas... We hold that the good fortune of our country is in successful sea trading. Such is the blessing of the Lord. I cannot manage in military affairs without foreigners... Try and touch their chapel and church—they will all flee... What is this? (He began looking at each of the boyars in turn.) Would you clip my wings?"

The boyars were astounded that Peter should speak so manfully. "Oho," they said to themselves, exchanging glances, "so that's what he's like!.. A tough one!..." Romodanovsky nodded his head: "That's right, that's right." The patriarch leaned forward, his thin nose pointing at the throne, and cried out in a great passion:

"Great sovereign! Do not take from me Satan's heretic, Quirin Kuhlmann..."

Peter frowned. He felt that he must make a concession to the greybeards on this point... "Sire, my lord!" murmured Natalia Kirillovna clasping her hands imploringly... He glanced at Romodanovsky, who shrugged his shoulders slightly...

"We are not concerned with Kuhlmann," said Peter. "I leave him to you. (The patriarch sat down and closed his eyes in exhaustion.) And now, boyars, I need eight thousand rubles for military and shipbuilding requirements..."

...As he left the Faceted Hall, Peter invited Fyodor Yuryevich Romodanovsky to join him in his sleigh and went to his house on the Lubyanka to dine.

7

Vorobyikha was fetched from the village of Mytishchi to the Kremlin Palace for the young tsaritsa. Evdokia was so delighted that she had the woman conducted into her bedchamber straight from the sleigh. The tsaritsa's bedroom with its two tiny windows curtained to keep out the sun was in the timbered extension. On the hot stone shelf lay a midwife spending all her time dozing in felt boots and a fur jacket. Evdokia was due to give birth at any time now and she had not risen from her swansdown bed for several days. She would, of course, have liked to enjoy a breath of fresh air and go for a sleigh-ride round snowy Moscow with its blue haze, low sun, and weeping silver branches from the side-streets catching the shaft-bow... But the old tsaritsa and all the women around were horrified: "God preserve us, a sleigh-ride indeed! Stay there, don't move, take care of your belly. After all, it's the royal seed that you're carrying..." She was only allowed to listen to fairy-tales with a divine ending... Even weeping was forbidden: the child would be upset in the womb...

Vorobyikha made a reverent but brisk entrance. The wom-

an was clean, wearing new bast shoes and carrying a bunch of sage tied under her linen petticoat to keep her fresh. Soft lips, mousey eyes, the face of an old woman, but rosy-cheeked. She never stopped talking. As soon as she crossed the threshold, she looked keenly round her and noted everything, then prostrated herself before the bed. The young tsaritsa stretched out her moist hand in greeting.

"Sit down, Vorobyikha, and tell me stories... Amuse me..."

Vorobyikha wiped her clean mouth and began with a preamble about an old man and an old woman, about the priest's daughters, about the goat with the golden horns...

"Wait, Vorobyikha." Evdokia half sat up and looked to make sure that the midwife was not awake. "Tell my fortune..."

"Oh, my precious, I don't know how..."

"You're fibbing, Vorobyikha... I won't let anyone know; just tell my fortune, even if only with beans..."

"Oh, they flay you alive with a knout nowadays for those beans... Perhaps oat flour mixed with holy water."

"When will my time come? Soon? I'm scared... In the night my heart gets weaker and weaker and then stops... I jump up—is the baby alive? Oh God!"

"Does it kick? Whereabouts?"

"It kicks me with its foot—here... It turns over as if it was rubbing its knees and elbows gently against me..."

"Does it turn with the sun or contrarywise?"

"Both ways... It's playful..."

"It's a boy."

"Oh, is that true?.."

Her mousey eyes narrowing, Vorobyikha whispered:

"What else can I foretell? I see beauty, beauty beyond compare, the secret hovers on the tip of the tongue... Whisper it in my ear, tsaritsa..."

Evdokia turned to the wall, a blush suffusing her face with its brown patches on the forehead and temples and its puffy mouth...

"Whether it's that I've become ugly, or what, I don't know..."

"But such beauty beyond compare..."

"Oh, get away with you..." Evdokia turned round, her brown eyes brimming with tears. "Does he care for me, does he love me? Tell me... Get your oats..."

As it happened, Vorobyikha had everything she needed

with her in a bag: a clay saucer, a phial of water and some dark powder... ("Fern seeds gathered on mid-summer's eve," she whispered.) She mixed them, put the dish on the bench at the bedside, took Evdokia's wedding ring from her while chanting something incomprehensible, dropped it onto the saucer and told the tsaritsa to look:

"Think about your secret thoughts or say them out loud. What's troubling you?"

"Since he came back from the Laura, he's changed," said Evdokia, her lips hardly moving. "He doesn't listen to what I say, as if I were the biggest dunce on earth... 'You ought to read history... Learn Dutch and German...' I've tried, and I can't understand anything. Wives get loved without books, don't they?"

"Have you not been sleeping together for long?"

"This is the third month... Natalia Kirillovna forbade it, for fear of harming the womb..."

"Look into the ring, angel—can you see something blurry?"

"It looks like a face..."

"Look closer. A woman's?"

"It could be a woman's..."

"That's her." Vorobyikha tightened her lips knowingly. Evdokia, breathing heavily, half sat up and her hand slid from her rounded belly up to her chest where her heart was fluttering like a snared bird...

"What do you know? What are you hiding from me? Who is she?"

"A snake in the grass, a German girl... All Moscow's whispering about it, but they're too scared to say it outright... They get him drunk in the German quarter with a love philtre... Don't get upset, kitten, it's too early to grieve... We'll help you... Take this needle (Vorobyikha briskly pulled a needle out of her headdress and gave it to the tsaritsa). Hold it with your fingers, there's nothing to be afraid of... Say after me: 'Begone, begone, evil, wild snake, Anna, shifty-eyed, squint-eyed, withered and rheumaticky, begone, without looking back, beyond Mount Tabor, where the sun never rises, the moon never shines, the dew never falls—and sink into the damp earth, six foot under—there for you, evil, wild snake Anna, let there be an empty space until the end of the world. Amen...' Stick, stick the needle into the ring, stick it into her face..."

Evdokia stabbed until the needle broke on the saucer. She

threw herself back, covered her eyes with her elbow, her puffy lips quivering as she wept...

In the evening, the wet nurses, the nannies, the midwives and the female palace fools rushed around in excitement, making the doors and floorboards squeak: "The tsar's arrived..." Vorobyikha threw a grain of incense into the candle-flame to freshen the air and scuttled off... Peter ran up the stairs, three at a time. He smelt of the cold and wine when he bent over his wife's bed.

"Greetings, Dunya... Haven't you delivered yet? I thought..."

He smiled—distant, cheerful, his round eyes estranged from her... Evdokia felt a chill in her breast.

"I would be glad to oblige you..." she said distinctly. "I can see you're all sick of waiting... I'm sorry..."

He frowned, trying to fathom what was wrong with her. He sat down and took hold of the bench, and one of his spurs raked the carpet...

"I've been dining with Romodanovsky... They say it was due at any moment... I thought it had started..."

"I shall die in childbirth; you'll find out... People will say..."

"Women don't die of that... Chuck it..."

With all her strength, she threw back the blankets and sheets and pushed out her stomach.

"Look at that... I'm the one that has to suffer and scream, not you... We don't die? You'll be the last to find out... Laugh, amuse yourself, drink wine... Ride away, ride away to that damned foreign quarter of yours... (His chin dropped and he looked at her hard.) I'm ashamed in front of everybody, they all know about it already..."

"What do they all know?"

He drew up his feet—angry, cat-faced. But she didn't care any more...

"About your heretic, the German girl!" she shouted. "The tavern wench! What's she been giving you to drink?"

He flushed so violently that he broke out into a sweat. He hurled back the bench. He was so terrifying that Evdokia involuntarily raised her arm to shield her face. He stood there, his demonic eyes riveted on his wife...

"Fool!" was all he said. She threw up her hands and clutched her head, shaking with silent sobs. The baby softly and impatiently turned over in her womb. Pain—tearing,

dragging, terrifying—girded her loins with incomprehensible force...

Hearing the low, animal-like wail, the wet nurses, nannies, midwives and fools came running into the young tsaritsa's aid. She was screaming, her eyes demented, her mouth hideously wide open... The women got busy... They took down the icons and lit the icon lamps. Peter went out. When the first cramps were over, Vorobyikha and the midwife led Evdokia by the arms into the warmly heated bathhouse to bear the child.

8

As if scared by something, a white-eyed jackdaw flew out from under the thatched roof, sat on a tree and scattered a shower of hoarfrost. One-eyed Gypsy lifted his head. The winter dawn was spreading in a mulberry-red stain across the sky behind the snowy branches. The smoke was rising slowly from the chimneys; the housewives were lighting their stoves. The sound of felt boots crunching everywhere; coughing; wicker gates squeaking, an axe thudding. The steep roofs stood out more clearly among the silver birches. The whole of the Zarechye was being enveloped in rosy mists: the sturdy houses of the streltsy, the high barns of the merchants, the little houses of various settlement folk: tanners, stocking-knitters and kvass-brewers.

The busy jackdaw jumped from branch to branch, and the snow drifted into Gypsy's face. He shook his mitten at the bird. Pulling the ice-covered bucket up from the well, he poured the fragrant water into the trough. A bitter canker was gnawing at his heart, although it was such a fresh Sunday morning. "Damn my bad luck, they've made a bondsman out of me... I'm a beast of burden, not a man... I could strut round the farm as well as any of them..." The iron on the bucket clanged, the winch squeaked, the broken wheel on the end of it began to wobble round.

Ovsei Rzhov, the owner, came out onto the porch with a scarlet woollen sash round his sheep-skin jacket. He grunted at the frost, pulled his bonnet down over his ears, drew on his mittens and rattled his keys.

"Have you poured out the water?"

Gypsy's one eye merely glittered; his bast shoes were slithering over an icy knoll by the trough. Ovsei went to

open the barn door: the good master should water the cattle himself. On the way, he poked his felt boot—white with red spots—at a pole lying out of place on the ground.

"I ought to bring that pole down on your back, you swine. You've scattered everything all over the yard again..."

He unlocked the door, propped it open with a wooden stake, led out two well-fed geldings by their manes, gave them a slap, whistled, and they drank the ice-cold water, raising their heads and looking up at the dawn while the water streamed from their warm lips. One neighed, its sides heaving.

"Steady, steady," said Ovsei quietly. He drove the cows and the blue bullock out of the barn. The sheep came crowding after them, their hooves crunching.

Gypsy kept pouring out the water with much effort, slopping it over his breeches. Said Ovsei:

"There's little good in you and much evil... You must be more careful with the cattle. All you do is fix them with that eye of yours. I don't know what to make of you..."

"D'you want blood?.."

Ovsei grinned unpleasantly. "Indeed?.." He ordered Gypsy to give the horses their feed with him there and to spread fresh litter. Ten times Gypsy went to the far end of the yard to the snow-covered ricks where the sparrows were busy on the loose chaff. He chopped and fetched the firewood. The snowy tops of the birches against the blue sky were caught by the sun. The church bells were ringing. Ovsei gravely crossed himself. A little girl with a round face and the pale blue eyes of a jackdaw skipped out onto the porch:

"Hurry up for breakfast, Dad!"

Ovsei stamped the snow off his felt boots and went inside, slamming the low door in true boss fashion. Gypsy was not called. He waited, blew his nose, spent some time wiping it with the skirt of his torn coat and then, without being sent for, went into the warm, dim semi-basement where the owners were having breakfast. At the door, he edged sideways onto a bench. There was a smell of cabbage soup with meat. Ovsei and his brother, Konstantin, also a strelets, were supping from a wooden bowl. A tall, grim old woman with dead eyes was waiting on them at table.

The brothers ran a birch-bark shop, commercial baths on the Balchug and a windmill. They had also leased twelve dessiatines of ploughland and hayfield from prince Odoyev-

sky. At first, they had done the work themselves (they had not been on the Crimean campaign), but now tsar Peter gave them no rest: each day they either had to perform some task or carry out military duties. Streltsy were forbidden to keep shops or bath-houses. The manual labourers could not be depended on; the work had to be done by wives and sisters—in a word, the womenfolk. The men's energies were being expended on the tsar's games.

"How we're going to get the harvest in this summer I can't imagine," Ovsei was saying. He pressed a loaf to his chest so that it scratched his canvas shirt and cut off slices for his brother and himself. They sighed, bit off a mouthful and, shaking the meat in their spoons, attacked the cabbage soup again.

"It's become dangerous with the labourers," said Konstantin. "There's been a new Ukase... All vagrants are to be turned in without fail—anyone living without a testimonial in the suburbs or in the taverns, the baths, or the brickyards..."

"What if he's doing a job?"

"Answer for him, same as for a robber... Did you get a testimonial out of Gypsy? Who is he?"

"The devil knows... He doesn't say anything..."

"Shouldn't we just let him go?"

When Gypsy went inside and, plucking the ice from his beard, stared fixedly at the two brothers with his one eye, Ovsei said loudly:

"I'm fed up with him anyway..."

Silent, they went on eating. Gypsy felt faint at the smell of bread and cabbage soup. Throwing an icicle towards the doorway, he said huskily:

"So you're talking about me, then?"

"It could even be about you." Ovsei put down his spoon. "You've been eating our bread for six months and then some, and the devil only knows who you are... There's a lot of you nameless ones kicking about from door to door."

"How d'you mean nameless?.. Have I been stealing from you?" asked Gypsy.

"I don't know yet..."

"I should think you don't."

"Maybe it would be better if you did steal. Why have two of my sheep died? Why are the cows miserable, and their milk smells so that you can't drink it?.. Why?" Ovsei moved

over to the end of the table and banged it with his fist. "Why were our womenfolk down with bad stomachs all autumn?.. Why? Because you're a jinx! You've got the evil eye!.."

"Stop raving, Ovsei," said Gypsy wearily. "You're a clever one, after all."

"Konstantin, did you hear that? He's abusing me! 'Raving'?" Ovsei got up from the table, working his fingers and balling his hand into a fist. Gypsy was in no positon to argue: the brothers were tough and they'd just had breakfast. He rose warily to his feet.

"If you don't like me, well, you don't like me, that's all... I've broken my back in your household. Ovsei, thank you... (He bowed.) Think badly of me if you like, I don't care. Just pay me the money I've earned..."

"What money might that be?" Ovsei turned to his brother and to the old woman, who was watching the quarrel with blank eyes. "Did he give us some for safekeeping, or what? Or did I take some off him?"

"Ovsei, be fair—half a ruble a month: that's two and a half rubles I've earned..."

Ovsei bounded up to him and yelled furiously:

"Money? For you? You want to get out of here alive? You whoreson dog, you'll get nothing!" Yelling with rage, he seized Gypsy by his coat collar and dealt him a blow on the ear. If Gypsy had not ducked the second swing, he would surely have been killed. Konstantin restrained his brother, seizing him by his shoulders, which were heaving convulsively. Gypsy staggered out. Konstantin caught him up and propelled him outside with a shove in the back. For a long time, Gypsy transfixed the gates with his one eye; he would have loved to drill them right through...

"Just wait, just you wait!" he said savagely. He ran his hand over his cheek: blood. People passing by turned round and laughed. He held his head up and, his bast shoes slapping over the ground, wandered off—somewhere.

9

"Push, go on, push, shove..."

"Where's everybody running to?"

"To see a man burnt..."

"Is it an execution, or what?"

"He didn't exactly ask for it..."

"There's some that burn themselves alive..."

"They do it for their faith—they're Old Believers."

"What's this one being burned for?"

"He's a German..."

"Thank the Lord for that, they've got round to them at last..."

"And about time too, the damned tobacco-fiends. They've grown fat on our sweat."

"Look, it's smoking already..."

Gypsy went with them to the river bank where the suburb people were milling about on heaps of cinders. Two vagrants like himself had caught his eye some time ago, and he liked the look of them. He kept close to them: maybe something by way of a meal would come of it. They were men who had evidently been through hell. One, with a pock-marked face, had his cheek bound up with a rag to hide a brand. His name was Judas. The other, Ovdokim, was bent almost double and leaned on two short crooks, but moved nimbly enough, his beard thrust well forward. He had merry eyes. He was wearing a bast matting over his patched peasant's coat. Gypsy really took to him. Ovdokim soon noticed that a dark, one-eyed man with a battered face was hanging about in the offing. He pulled himself upright on his crooks and said kindly:

"You'll get nothing by hovering around us, dear fellow, we do our own pinching..."

Judas, his mouth twisted, said aside through his clenched teeth:

"One like that wormed his way into our company from the Secret Chancellery. He got shoved down in an ice-hole in the river..."

"Aha," thought Gypsy, "we have some real bold ones here..." And he felt even more inclined to join them...

"Death doesn't want me, blast her," he said, blinking his frost-fringed eyelids. "So I have to manage somehow, whether I like it or not... You lads could let me join your gang... Many hands make light work..."

"Isn't that the evil eye, eh?" said Judas through his teeth to Ovdokim.

"No, no, it doesn't look like it," intoned Ovdokim, twisting his head round and peering up into Gypsy's eye...

They said no more. Below, on the ice, the streltsy, frozen

to the marrow, stamping their boots and slapping their mittens, were standing round a crudely knocked-up wooden frame that had been piled high with firewood. The whipping post stood nearby. White smoke was rising from the fire in which a branding iron was heating up. The people were frozen with waiting...

"They're coming, they're coming! Push, shove!.."

Horse dragoons appeared from the direction of the city. They rode down onto the ice. Following them, in an ordinary sleigh, their backs to the horses, sat the German and a girl in a man's hat. Next, on horseback, came a boyar, squires and a clerk. A cumbersome black leather carriage brought up the rear.

The streltsy moved aside to let the procession through. The clerk dismounted. The carriage drove up and turned sideways, but no one alighted... All stared at it, and an astounded whisper went round among the people...

Emelyan Svezhev walked out from behind the wooden frame in a red bonnet with a knout over his shoulder. His assistants took the girl out of the sleigh, booted her up to the post, pulled her fur jacket off and tied her hands so that she was embracing the post. The clerk read loudly from an unfolded scroll, the seals shaking as he did so. His voice was almost inaudible in the bitter cold, and all the listeners managed to distinguish was that the girl's name was Maria Selifontova, and the German's Kulkin, or something like that... They could see his hunched shoulders and bald head above the back of the sleigh.

There was a fixed smile on Emelyan's horse-like face. He went slowly up to the post. He took the knout from his shoulder. There was a sharp whistle and an oblique red weal appeared on the girl's bare back... She squealed like a sucking pig. She was given five strokes, and only moderate ones at that. Then she was untied from the post and led staggering to the fire. Emelyan took the branding iron out of the coals and applied it to her cheek. She screamed and fell to the ground in convulsions. She was picked up, dressed, put into the sleigh and taken away at a walking pace to a nunnery somewhere along the Moscow River.

The clerk was still reading the sentence. They now proceeded to deal with the German. He got out of the sleigh, squat and sturdy, and walked of his own accord up to the frame. Suddenly, he placed the palms of his trembling

hands together, lifted up his puffy face with its dark, new-grown stubble and, the German son-of-a-bitch, jabbered and jabbered and then began sobbing loudly... He was picked up and dragged to the frame. Emelyan stripped him naked, threw him down, put the heretical volumes and exercise-books on his pink, fat back and set them alight with a brand from underneath... So it had been ordered in the sentence: the volumes and exercise-books were to be burned on his back...

There were shouts from the bank where Gypsy was standing.

"Warm yourself, Kulkin..."

But the crowd murmured against the shouter, a young man with fat lips:

"Shut up, you swine! Try warming yourself that way..."

Fat Lips vanished at once. Grey smoke billowed from the frame, which had been kindled on all four sides. The streltsy rested on their pikes. It was quiet. The smoke drifted slowly skywards.

"He'll choke to death first, the firewood's damp..."

"He may be a German, but to be burned alive... Oh, God..."

"He learned reading and writing, he wrote exercise-books, and look where it got him..."

A dead face that might have come from an ancient icon was staring—everybody could see it now—through the little window of the leather coach at the smoke and the lapping tongues of flame...

"Look, his eyes are glittering. It's enough to give you the creeps..."

"It's not the patriarch's job to come and watch executions..."

"Burning people for their faith... Oh, those shepherds!.."

It was Ovdokim who said this in a fearless, ringing voice... All those standing near him edged away; only Judas and Gypsy didn't clear off... He went on, tapping his crooks:

"What if he's a heretic?.. He only believes as he can... He can't fit into our ways, maybe... And for that he gets burned... We live in anguish and torture..."

The great bonfire roared and crackled, the sparks and smoke whirled upwards. Several people thought they could see the German still moving behind the flames. The carriage left at a trot. The crowd slowly dispersed.

"Let's go, Ovdokim," said Judas again.

"No, no, my lads..." (His eyes were laughing, but his face, red and clean as if just from a bath, was the picture of grief and his goatee beard was quivering.) Seek not the truth... Clergy and tax-gatherers, torturers, jingling their gold—all have donned the robes of their savagery... Flee, my boys, tortured, burned, broken on wheels, flee in your terror into the deep forests..."

It was some time before they finally managed to get Ovdokim away. The three of them went up a side-street to an eating-house.

10

At last Gypsy picked up the spoon, his hand trembling as he carried the meatless cabbage soup to his mouth, catching the spilt drops on a slice of bread. He had been very much afraid that they would not let him into the eating-house, and on the way there he had bewailed his lot, wiping the tears away with his mitten. Ovdokim, saying nothing, had scuttled along on his crooks like a cockroach. At the gates, he had suddenly asked:

"Can you steal?"

"Yes, if I'm with a gang—I don't mind going into the forests with a cudgel..."

"Oho, we have a lively one here..."

"Who d'you suppose we are?" asked Judas.

Gypsy felt scared: "They want to get rid of me..." He looked dolefully at the leaning gates, at the snowdrift turned to ice by the slops in the yard and at the matting-draped doorway from which came such an appetising odour that his head reeled. He said quietly:

"You people are absolutely in the right... What if you do steal? It's because of misery, not because you're a criminal... Half the people are off into the forests these days... My dear fellows, don't drive me away; at least give me something to eat..."

"Sir, sometimes we are merciful and sometimes merciless," said Ovdokim. "So watch it!" Taking both crooks in his left hand, he shook his finger at Gypsy: "You've latched onto us, so don't back out... Judas, my dear, have you any loot on you?"

Judas pulled a pouch out of his pocket and shook some coppers onto the palm of his hand. The three of them counted

up the stolen money. Ovdokim said cheerfully:

"Birds reap not, nor do they sow, but the Lord feeds them. We do not ask for much—just enough for grub... Come with us, One-eye."

They sat down in a far corner of the eating-house almost out of range of the light from the tallow candle on the counter. There were quite a few customers; some were making a drunken noise, their sheepskins unbuttoned, others were asleep on benches. Ovdokim ordered half a flagon and a pot of cabbage soup. When it was brought, he banged his spoon on the table:

"Eat, One-eye, it's from the Lord..."

He drank from the flagon and munched rapidly, like a hare. His eyes were twinkling with merriment.

"Let me tell you a parable, lads... D'you care to listen? There were two men: one was merry, the other was miserable... The merry one was poor: all he possessed had been taken away from him by boyars, clerks and magistrates; they'd tortured him for various pranks and broken his back on the rack so that he went around bent double... Anyway, the miserable one was a boyar's son, and rich, a real skinflint. His servants left him because they were starving, and the yard was overgrown with goosefoot... He'd just sit day after day alone on a chest full of silver and gold... That's how they lived. The merry one had nothing—he washed himself with dew and made the sign of the cross at a tree stump; if he felt hungry, he stole, or he begged for alms. The poor always give generously; they understand... And he wandered about, the merry one, without a care in the world, and he jested all the time... But the miserable one spent all his time worrying about how not to lose his money... And he was afraid of dying, lads... Oh, it's horrible to die rich, after all... And the more treasure he had, the more unwilling he was... And he set up giant candles and donated money to the church. He thought that God would put off the hour of his death..."

Ovdokim laughed, his beard brushing the table-top. Reaching out his long arm, he spooned up some cabbage soup, nibbled for a while like a hare, and continued:

"But this rich one was the very man who had tormented the merry one and sent him out begging... So one day the merry one dropped in on him to steal, and he took a cudgel with him... He wandered about the rooms, and there was Money-

bags sleeping on a bench with the chest underneath it. Not noticing the chest, he seized the rich one by the hair: 'You,' he said, 'once stole everything I had, so give me something to keep body and sole together.' The rich one was in terror of death, but he begrudged the money, so he said he hadn't got anything... Then the merry one picked up the cudgel and started belabouring him about the ribs and face... (Judas bared his teeth and cackled with glee.) Well, all right, he walloped and walloped away until he saw the funny side of it himself... 'All right,' he says, 'I'll come another night, so have a hatful of money ready for me...'

"The rich man, who was no fool, wrote to the tsar, and the tsar sent him a guard... But the merry one was artful... He still managed to fox the guard, got through to Moneybags and grabbed him by the hair. Had he got the money ready? The other trembled and swore he hadn't anything... So again the merry one began belabouring him with the cudgel, and nearly knocked the rich one's soul out of his body. 'All right,' says he, 'I'll come on the third night, so have a chest of money ready...'"

"That's fair," said Gypsy.

"He'd already thrashed the hell out of him," said Judas, laughing.

"Anyway... This time the tsar sent a regiment to protect the rich one... What could anyone do about that? But the merry one was a cunning fellow. He dressed up as a strelets, went to the rich one's house and asked: 'Guard, whose property are you protecting?' And they said: 'The rich man's, by Ukase of the tsar.' 'And have you been well paid for this?' They said nothing... 'Well,' said the merry one, 'you're fools; you're guarding other people's wealth for nothing, and the rich one will die like a dog on that treasure, and you'll look a real bunch of fools.' And he stirred them up, and those soldiers went and wrenched the locks off the cellars, and started eating and getting drunk, and of course, they turned bitter. They broke open the door during the night and saw Moneybags trembling on his chest, all battered and filthy. Whereupon our nimble strelets grabbed him by the hair: 'You didn't hand it over when I asked for what was mine, so you'll give it all up now...' And he threw him to the soldiers, and they tore him to pieces... And the merry one took what he needed to keep himself going and slipped quietly away..."

People had been coming and sitting at Ovdokim's table,

listening approvingly to his story. One man, who might have been drunk or was perhaps not quite in his right mind, kept snivelling, throwing up his hands and clutching his big, bald forehead... When they let him speak, he was in such a hurry that he could only splutter and nothing made sense... Everybody laughed:

"Kuzma went to the boyars... They knocked some sense into his back entrance..."

The candle on the counter was trimmed so that all could see better what they were laughing at. Kuzma's snub-nosed face with its tufted beard was all puffed and swollen; the poor wretch had obviously been drinking without cease. He was wearing nothing but breeches and a torn, unbelted blouse.

"He's even drunk up his cross."

"He's been hanging around here all week."

"Where else can he go, barefoot in this frost?.."

"Here's where it hurts, here!" yelled Kuzma, clutching his breeches. "Boyar Troyekurov laid hands on me!" He pulled down his breeches and displayed swollen buttocks covered with blue weals and bruises... Everybody guffawed. Even the tavern-keeper trimmed the candle-wick with his fingers again and leaned over the counter.

"Ever heard of Kuzma Zhemov, the blacksmith? With the forge near the Church of St. Barbara the Great Martyr?" said Kuzma, pulling up his breeches."I was there fifteen years. Zhemov the blacksmith! There wasn't a thief on this earth who could pick one of my locks... My sickles went as far as Ryazan. Who made that sickle? Zhemov... No bullet ever went through my armour... Who shoes horses? Who pulls teeth for the men and women? Zhemov... Did you know that?"

"We knew, we knew!" they shouted, laughing. "Tell us more..."

"But here's something you didn't know. Zhemov doesn't sleep at night... (He clutched his bald skull.) Zhemov has a daring mind. In any another country, I'd have been praised to the skies... But here they feed the swine with my brains... Mark my words!.. (Bunching up his hefty fist, he shook it at the weeping window with its four panes; as if threatening something out there in the winter's night.) The nettles will grow all over your graves... But they'll never forget Zhemov..."

"Wait, Kuzma—what did they flog you for?"

"Tell us, seriously..."

Amazed, as if only just noticing, he began to look at the shining noses crowding in on him, the tangled beards, the gaping mouths ready to laugh at any moment, the eyes hungry for spectacle. Everything was evidently blurred and confused in front of him...

"One condition, lads; don't laugh.... I'm feeling so sick at heart..."

He spent some time extracting a folded paper from a pouch. He spread it out on the table. (A candle was brought from the counter.) He stabbed his finger-nail down on the sheet of paper at the spot where two wings were drawn, like those of a bat, with loops and levers. He inflated his swollen cheeks.

"An amazing, marvellous machine," he began proudly. "Wings of mica, each three arshins long and an arshin and twelve *vershki* across... They flap like bats' wings by means of levers—just by the effort of the feet and the arms... (With conviction.) Man can fly! I'll escape to England... I'll make these wings there... I'll jump from a belfry and I won't be hurt... Man shall fly like a crane! (Again, frenziedly—at the wet window.) That boyar Troyekurov made a mistake!.. God made man to crawl first; I shall teach him to fly..."*

Ovdokim reached over and patted him affectionately.

"Tell us properly, my dear fellow. How did they offend you?"

Kuzma frowned and breathed heavily:

"I made the wings too heavy; I made a slight mistake... I'm a poor man... I'd made me some small wings out of anything I could get—tree-bark, hide... I jumped off a hut against the wind and was carried a good fifty paces... I couldn't stop now... Some people told me what to do. I went to the Streltsy Commission and shouted: 'Help!..' They seized me and were going to beat me, of course... 'No!' says I, 'don't thrash me, take me to the boyar, I have something to say on a matter of state!' So they take me to him... He's sitting there, the devil. A face like a monkey's arse. That's Troyekurov... I says to him... 'I can fly like a crane. Give me twenty-five rubles or so, let me have mica, and in six weeks I'll fly...' He doesn't believe me... 'Send the under-

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* The incident described here actually took place in 1694, in Moscow. — *Ed.*

clerk to my house,' says I, 'I'll show him the little wings, but it wouldn't be right to fly with them in front of the tsar.' They had to do something about my call for help... He curses me, grabs me by the hair, orders me to kiss the Bible and swear I'm not going to swindle him. He coughed up eighteen rubles. I finished the wings ahead of time... They came out too heavy. It hit me in the tavern, when I was drunk, that's when it hit me! Mica's no use, what's wanted is parchment on a wooden frame! I brought them to the Kremlin to try them out... Well, I flew all right—like a brick. So I says to Troyekurov: 'The trial didn't succeed, give me another five rubles, and cut my head off if I don't fly...' The boyar doesn't believe a word: 'Thief!' he shouts. 'Swindler! Heretic! You want to be cleverer than God!...' He orders me to be given two hundred strokes of the cane in front of him... I stick it out, lads, all two hundred of them—but you should have heard my teeth grinding... And they order reimbursement of the eighteen rubles I've spent, and they sell my forge, tools and house... What am I to do now? I've got nothing left: go into the forests with a cudgel?"

"It's all you can do, you poor fellow," said Ovdokim quietly and distinctly.

Kuzma Zhemov joined Ovdokim's gang. They bought him felt boots and a coat at the market. The four of them began roaming around Moscow together: to the markets, to the public baths, up the narrow side-streets of Kitaigorod. Judas picked pockets. Gypsy was taught how to roll his eye so that the pupil disappeared in a ghastly manner and to whine for alms. They put a rope round Kuzma's neck and Ovdokim led him about as if he were a lunatic with convulsions: "Something to feed the madman! Mind out, mind out, my dears, he might fly at you!.." They collected enough in a day for food and sometimes for a flagon as well. It was hard work, and dangerous too, because there was a Ukase from the tsar that such people as themselves were to be rounded up and taken to the Criminal Commission.

Lent was nearly over. The spring sun rose higher and higher over Moscow. Wherever it shone, water dripped, snow thawed, and streets began to stink. The mingled dung and snow did not squeak under the sleigh runners any longer. One evening, in the eating-house, Ovdokim said:

"Isn't it time we hit the road, lads?.. We've nothing to gain here... Let's go a-roving as soon as the ground's dry."

Judas was inclined to disagree:

"There aren't many of us and we haven't the weapons: we'll die of hunger in the forests..."

"Yes," said Ovdokim, "but we'll tackle a spot of dirty work before we leave. (They looked at him apprehensively.) We'll get everything we need... One more sin won't make our sufferings any worse. But if it does, then there's no justice even in the Scriptures... Don't get the shakes, my dears, I'll answer for everything."

11

It began in spring: a real cat-and-mouse game, with Peter as the cat and the boyars as mice. War was declared by two monarchs: the King of Poland and the King of the Capital City of Pressburg. The play troops, the Butyrsky Regiment and Lefort's Regiment went to the King of Pressburg, and the best of the streltsy—those commanded by Stremyanny, Sukharev, Tsykler, Krovkov, Nechayev, Durov, Normatsky and Ryazanov—went to the King of Poland. Fyodor Yurievich Romodanovsky was installed as King of Pressburg with the name of Friedrichus. The King of Poland was Ivan Ivanovich Buturlin, a malicious and venal drunkard, but always game for fun and rowdy revels. His capital city was the Falcon Court on Semyonovskoye Field.

At first, these were thought to be Peter's usual pranks. But each day brought a Ukase more worrying than the last. The boyars, okolnichys and squires were appointed to court ranks under the two kings. Peter was beginning to go too far with his games. Many of the boyars were outraged. Never before had it been known for a joke to be made of the higher ranks... They went to tsaritsa Natalia Kirillovna and complained discreetly about her son. She could only wave her podgy hands, unable to make sense of it all. "What can we do?" Lev Kirillovich would say in exasperation. "A Ukase has come from the sovereign, with seals... Go to him yourself and ask him to rescind it..." People were chary of going to Peter himself. They thought they might get away with it. But there was no getting away with it where Peter was concerned. Some of the boyars were unexpectedly descended on in their homes by soldiers, ordered to dress for court and taken away to Preobrazhenskoye to serve in the play troops. The aged prince Priimkov-Rostovsky lost

the use of his legs. Some tried to plead sickness, but in vain. There was nowhere to hide. They had to go and face humiliation and shame...

In Pressburg—visible from a long way off with its octagonal wooden towers, grassy slopes, the guns mounted on them, and white tents all round—a Russian could go out of his mind. It was like a ghastly nightmare, a game that was really in earnest. King Friedrichus lolled in a painted chamber on a gilded throne under a crimson canopy, wearing a copper crown on his nob, a white satin coat dotted with stars, a hareskin cloak over it, jingling spurs on his thigh-boots, and with a tobacco pipe clenched between his teeth... His eyes glittered without a trace of mirth. Take another look, and it was Fyodor Yurievich. You'd feel like spitting, but you daren't. Zinovyev, a nobleman of the Duma, did so in disgust, and that very day he was stripped of his rank and carted off on a peasant's wagon into banishment... Natalia Kirillovna had to go to Preobrazhenskoye in person and appeal for him to be pardoned and brought back...

As for tsar Peter, all you could do was throw up your hands in despair. No rank, and in a soldier's uniform, too! Approaching Fridrichus' throne, he would bend the knee, and that hellish king might even shout at him as if he were a commoner. The boyars and okolnichys sat and deliberated in the sham chamber, received ambassadors and, burning with shame, announced the Pressburg Ukases... During the nights, there was banqueting and tippling in Lefort's palace, where the master of the nocturnal revels reigned supreme, the Lord's Disappointed, the man it was a disgrace to set eyes on, Nikita Zotov, Grand Jester and Prince-Pope on Kukui.

Then—presumably in order to wreak total ruin at the instigation of those damned foreigners—they rounded up a good thousand clerks and under-clerks in Moscow, took them from the Commissions, armed the younger ones, sat them on horses and taught them the art of warfare without mercy.

As Friedrichus said in the Duma:

"We'll soon get hold of them all... Those cockroaches aren't going to skulk in their cracks much longer. They'll all eat our soldiers' grub with us..."

Peter, standing in the doorway (he did not dare sit in the King's presence), laughed loudly at these words. Friedrichus furiously stamped his spurred boot at him and the tsar shut

his mouth... This was a time to weep, to remember all one's sins, to pray all together, to throw oneself down at the tsar's feet: "Cut off our heads, torture us, if you can't live without games... But you are the heir of the Byzantine emperors. See into what an abyss you are dragging the land of Russia... Is not the shadow of Antichrist behind your shoulder?.." But they hadn't the nerve to say this and so they held their tongues.

The King of Poland had a similar court. Ivan Buturlin reigned at Semyonovskoye. But at least you didn't have to knock yourself out there, the duties were peaceful; the boyars and okolnichys, sitting in the sham Duma on benches along the walls, yawned into their sleeves until dusk turned the windows dark-blue, then rode back to spend the night in Moscow. Out of malice and mischief, the King, that highway robber, wanted to make them all speak Polish, but he failed to break the stubbornness of the boyars, and in any case he was himself sick of playing with them, so he left them to doze as they felt inclined.

Hardly had they had time to get used to this when there was another upheaval. Just as the forests were beginning to clothe themselves in a green mist, Buturlin sent to King Friedrichus an ambassador to declare war on him and then advanced on Pressburg with the regiments, the baggage trains and the boyars. The streltsy went on this campaign in a sour mood; it was time for sowing, every day was precious, and the devil had put it into the tsar's head to amuse himself.

Orders were given that the siege should be carried out according to all the rules; dig trenches and saps and storm the enemy's defences. It proved to be anything but light entertainment. Gunpowder was not spared. The mortars fired earthenware pots that exploded like bombs. The defenders poured mud and water mixed with dung down from the fortress, lunged with poles tipped with blazing tow and hewed away with blunt sabres. Faces were scalded, eyes knocked out, bones broken. This cost only a little less than a real war. And so it went on for weeks—all through the spring. During the breaks, both kings feasted with Peter and his cronies.

The summer was passing by. Buturlin, on failing to take Pressburg, retired thirty versts into the forest and dug himself in there in an encampment. Friedrichus, in his turn, began

attacking him. The streltsy, maddened by this life, fought in real earnest. There were dozens of fatalities. General Gordon had his head cracked open by a pot from a mortar and was laid up for some time. Peter's face and eyebrows were singed, and he went about stuck all over with plasters. Half the troops were afflicted with bloody diarrhoea. Only when all the powder was used up, the soldiers and streltsy were practically in rags, and Lev Kirillovich came to the camp with a letter from the old tsaritsa and begged him with tears in his eyes not to draw any more money, for the Treasury was already empty—only then did Peter calm down, and the kings dismissed their troops to their homes.

The people talked a great deal about the play campaigns. "It stands to reason, they wouldn't pay out so much money just for the fun of it. Somebody's up to something. Peter's still young and foolish; he's doing as he's told... Someone obviously wants to profit by this waste..."

12

Life was wretched and tedious. In Sophia's time, there had still been some kind of restraint; but now the powerful and the middling powerful were cracking down on the weak. There were unfair rulings from the judges, and there was much bribery and embezzlement by the state. Many people fled into the forests to steal. Others quit their accursed life for the wilds, for the northern rivers, so as not to bend their backs for governors, landowners, clerks, under-clerks, taverners and magistrates who thirsted for blood and knew neither the law nor mercy. There, in the north, people dwelt in oblivion, living off the rivers and the forests. They uprooted the tree stumps in the glades and sowed barley. They built huts of age-old pines on stilts. Roomy inside and a good distance from one another, they were veritable palaces. Into this solitude from the places they had left forever they brought with them only fairy-tales, folk epics and mournful songs. They believed in the house spirit and the wood-goblin. They went to pray with the stern Old Believers who administered a holy sacrament made of flour and bilberry juice. "Antichrist is in the world," the old men told them. "Only those who have fled the tsar and the patriarch shall be saved..."

It so happened, however, that the servants of Antichrist

even penetrated as far as the dense backwoods, the very end of the world, sent to seek out the intransigent and the calumniators. Then the men with their wives and children left their homes and cattle and gathered in the elder's house or in the church and fired on the soldiers. If they had no arms, they simply shouted abuse and refused to obey and, rather than surrender, burned themselves alive in their homes or in the church, screaming wildly and howling their hymns...

People who had nothing to lose were fleeing from want and enslavement into the forests to practise robbery as a trade. They gradually made their way to the Volga and the Don where it was warmer and the living was better. But even there it still felt like Russia; the tsar's Ukases flew in, the Orthodox priests were very militant, and many vagrants wandered in their armed gangs still further east to Daghestan and Kabarda beyond the Terek, or sought service with the Tatars in the Crimea under the Sultan of Turkey. In the open spaces of the south, they believed less in the sinister house demon than in the curved sabre and the good steed.

The land of Russia was not kind or cosy: it was worse than the most bitter captivity. For thousands of years it had been trodden by bast shoes, picked over by the ploughshare with frustration, and strewn with the ashes of devastated villages and with forgotten graves. Hopelessness. Barbarism.

13

"Dad, what's that? The chimes sound all wrong..."

"What d'you mean, sound all wrong?"

"Oh Dad, they're all wrong... They ring slowly nowadays, but that noise... Dad, maybe something's happened, maybe we should clear off..."

"Wait, you fool..."

Ivan Artemich Brovkin (people had forgotten the time when they called him Ivashka) was standing in the porch of an ancient little church on Myasnitskaya Street. He was wearing a bulky new sheepskin coat covered with dark blue cloth, new felt boots straight from the last, and a new woolen scarf wound round his neck so that he had to keep his chin up. A piercing wind blew, stinging the face. The grainy snow sped rustling down the dark street, filling the

icy wheel-ruts. Many people stood by the shops, listening. All the churches were beginning to ring their small bells, and the sound was discordant; they were clashing away as if out of spite...

Sanka Brovkina (now turned seventeen), well dressed, beautiful, her hand much sought in marriage, tugged her father by the sleeve again to make him go. She was seldom in Moscow, and when she was, her heart used to beat very fast; she was afraid she might be knocked down. Today she had come with her father to buy down for the featherbed as part of her trousseau. The matchmakers were positively swarming round Brovkin's house, but the longer the bargaining went, the more Ivan demanded. His son Alyosha was already a senior bombardier close to the tsar. Volkov's bailiff used to visit the Brovkins in their rich new house. Ivan Artemich had leased meadows and ploughland from Volkov. He also traded in timber, had recently built a mill, had his own private herd of cattle and carted meat and poultry to Preobrazhenskoye for the tsar's table. The whole village bowed low to him, all owed him money. He made allowances for some, but not for others: about ten muzhiks were working for him as bondsmen.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" asked Sanka.

At that moment, Filka, the ginger-bearded priest, came up to the church porch. (He had put so much weight these last ten years that his fur cassock was all but bursting at the seams.) He was propelling a tottery little sexton with a dejected nose:

"Get moving, you damned rake, get moving, Beelzebub..."

The sexton stumbled, grabbed the lock, and began opening the church doors. Filka gave him a shove.

"Your hands are shaking, you rotten drunk... Last night, last night, last night (hitting the round-shouldered sexton on his back) you were told to go and ring the bells... I'm in trouble again because of you..."

The sexton insinuated himself through the half-open leaf of the iron doors and climbed up to the belfry. Filka remained in the porch. Ivan Artemich took off his hat and, holding it in his brand-new leather mittens, bowed solemnly.

"Would it be some kind of feast today? My daughter and I were wondering... Be so kind as to tell us, Sir ..."

Filka peered down the street, his beard quivering in the snowy wind and said loudly, so that many heard:

"It's the coming of Antichrist."

Ivan Artemich buckled at the knees until he was actually sitting on the tops of his new felt boots. Sanka clutched at her breast, crossed herself and turned pale; she understood only that it was something dreadful. A crowd was rolling up from the Myasnitskiye Gates, shouting. They could hear whistling and wild guffaws. The bystanders looked on in silence. The shops were being shut up. Ragged beggars came crawling from somewhere, shaking, naked to the waist, noseless... Rattling the chains and padlocks on his breast, a white-haired God's fool wailed, "Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar!"

Ivan Brovkin's heart went into his felt boots. "Ai-ai-ai," whispered Sanka and sank back against the grilled church window under the icon-lamp. The girl was too jittery.

And then they saw... All the way down the street, wagons were being slowly drawn along by teams of swine, six to each one; sleighs drawn by tarred and feathered cows; little two-wheelers pulled by goats or dogs. In the sleighs, wagons and carts sat people in tree-bark hats, shaggy coats of bast and straw boots, with mouse-skin mittens on their hands. Some were wearing patchwork coats with cat's paws and tails.

Knouts cracked, pigs squealed, dogs barked, the people in fancy dress caterwauled and bleated—all were red in the face and drunk. In the middle of procession, piebald nags with bath switches on their necks were drawing the tsar's golden carriage. Through the windows could be seen Bitka the young priest, Peter's drinking companion, sitting in front... He was asleep, his head lolling forward. Two others were sprawled on the back seat: a big-nosed man in an expensive fur coat and a bonnet adorned with peacock feathers; beside him was a round, fat little woman, all rouge and kohl, hung with earrings and sables and holding a bottle in her hands. These were Yakov Turgenev, the tsar's new jester, one of Sophia's former squires who had exchanged disfavour for the fool's cap, and Shushera, a sexton's widow. Two days previously, Turgenev and Shushera had been married and were being taken visiting without a moment's respite.

After the carriage came the two kings, Romodanovsky and Buturlin, and, between them, the Prince-Pope, "His Holiness Janikita of Pressburg", wearing a tin mitre and a red cloak,

and holding two pipes in the form of a cross. Next came a group of boyars and stewards from both royal palaces. The Sheremetevs were recognised and also the Trubetskoys, Dolgorukys, Zinoviev and Boborykin... There had never been such shamelessness in the history of Moscow. The people pointed at them, marvelled, cried out, were appalled... But others went up closer and bowed with mockery to the boyars.

Behind the boyars came a ship on wheels, the blizzard shaking its masts. In front of the horses marched Peter in a bombardier's coat. He was beating a drum, his jaw jutting out, his round eyes rolling at the spectators. They were afraid to bow to him; what if it was forbidden. The God's fool, seeing him with the drum, again howled: "Nebuchadnezzar!", but he was hastily pulled back into the crowd and hidden. Standing on the ship in Dutch naval uniform were Lefort, Gordon, the mustachioed Pamburg, Timmermann and the newly promoted Colonels Weide, Mengden, Krage, Bruce, Livingstone, Salm, Schlippenbach... They were laughing, glancing down from time to time, smoking pipes and stamping their feet in the cold.

As Peter drew level with the little church, Ivan Artemich tugged at the lifeless Sanka and flopped down on his knees. "Bow, you fool," he whispered urgently. "This thing's above me and it's above you."

Filka opened his big mouth and roared with laughter in his bass voice (the tsar even turned to look at him); as he laughed, he lifted up his arms, turned his back on the procession and went into the church with his arms still upraised.

The procession was over, Ivan Artemich rose to his feet and jammed his hat down over his eyes.

"Yes," he said pensively, "of course... Yes... And yet... Oh, dear... Well, all right!" And, angrily, to Sanka: "Come on, that's enough, pull yourself together... Now let's go and buy some down..."

14

It baffled everybody where the devil got all his drive. Another man, more mature than him in years and strength, would have been six foot under long ago. About twice a week he was sure to be driven back drunk from the German quarter. He would sleep about four hours, then come to, and

in no time at all already be trying to think up the next escapade.

At Christmas he had the idea of riding round to visit the houses of nobility with the Prince-Pope, both kings, the generals and the palace boyars (he'd summoned them again with a harsh Ukase). All were dressed up and wearing masks. As master of ceremonies, they appointed Vassily Sokovnin, a Moscow nobleman and a nasty, foul-mouthed piece of work. They dubbed him "Prophet", and he was dressed up as a Capuchin with a slit in the rear. Christmas saw the final outraging and abuse of the noble houses, especially those of the princes and the elderly boyars. About a hundred men would burst in whistling and yelling dementedly, carrying domras, pipes, and kettledrums. The hair of the God-fearing owner would stand on end when he saw the leaps, the bounds, the grinning masks. They recognised the tsar by his stature and his Dutch skipper's costume—baggy knee-length breeches, woolen hose, clogs and a round, Turkish-looking hat. His face would be masked with a coloured handkerchief or he would be wearing a long false nose.

Music, stamping of feet, laughter. The whole company, heedless of precedence, rushed to the tables and demanded cabbage, baked eggs, sausages, vodka with pepper, and girl dancers... The house shook, there were clouds of tobacco smoke, the guests drank themselves into a stupor in the fug, and the host drank twice as much; if he couldn't, he was forced to...

The more nobly-born the owner, the more appalling were the outrages perpetrated on him. For his intractability, Prince Beloselsky was stripped naked and jammed on a basket full of eggs. Boborykin, in mockery of his corpulence, was dragged between chair-legs which would have stopped a much thinner man. They stuck a candle up Prince Volkonsky's rear passage, lit it, and sang hymns until all rolled with laughter. Some they smeared with soot and tar, then stood them on their heads. Nobleman Ivan Akakievich Myasnoi was pumped up through his rear passage with bellows, as a result of which he died shortly afterwards...

The Christmas japes were so harrowing that many prepared for that season as if for death...

Only in spring could they breathe more easily. Peter dashed off to Arkhangelsk. The Dutch merchants Van Leyden and

Heinrich Poltenburg arrived again that year. They bought twice as much merchandise as the year before: from the state they purchased pressed caviar, frozen salmon, various furs, fish glue, raw silk and, as before, tar, hemp, canvas and potash... From the artisans they obtained Russian leather goods and articles of carved bone. Lev Kirillovich, who had bought the Tula Arms Factory from the foreigner Marselis, tried to sell the Dutch various chased arms but pushed the prices up so high that they refused.

Six ships were loaded by spring. They were only waiting for the ice to go in the North Sea. Unexpectedly, Lefort (on the prompting of the Dutch) hinted to Peter that it would be a good idea to take a trip to Arkhangelsk and see some real sea-going ships... The very next day, spare horses and constables with letters for the governors set off at a gallop along the Vologda road. Peter left with the same company—Prince-Pope Janikita, both kings, Lefort, the boyars of both kings; but they also took business people with them—Clerk of the Duma Vinius, Boris Golitsyn, Troyekurov, Apraksin, brother-in-law of the late tsar Fyodor, and about fifty soldiers led by the dashing Alexander Menshikov.

They rode on horseback to Vologda, where the clergy and merchants came to meet them outside the city. Peter rushed everybody, however, and on the same day they boarded seven transports, sailed along the Sukhon to Ustyug Veliky, and from there by the Severnaya Dvina to Arkhangelsk.

For the first time Peter saw the great rivers in full spate and the might of the vast forests. The land unfolded before the eyes, and there was no end to it. The clouds sailed overhead in dull, serried ranks. Flocks of birds flew up in front of the transports. The rough waves beat the sides, the sails billowed in the full wind, the masts creaked. The bells of the monasteries on the banks chimed. And from the forests, hidden in the thickets, the ever-vigilant eyes of the Old Believers followed the boats of Antichrist.

15

Two candles were melting down on a carpet-covered table. Drops of resin oozed down the freshly-hewn timber walls. There were damp footsteps on the clean floorboards from corner to corner, to the window, to the bed. One muddy shoe lay on the floor in the middle of the room, the other under

the table. Outside, in the starless dusk of the white night, an unfamiliar damp wind was blowing and the waves were lapping on the nearby shore.

Peter was sitting on the bed. His underpants were wet up to the knees, his bare toes turned in. Resting his elbows on his knees, his small chin glued to his fists, he was staring out of the window with unseeing eyes. Behind the partition, the two kings were trying to outsnore one another. Throughout the house, hastily erected on Masevev Island for the tsar's arrival, all were sleeping like logs. Peter had driven them hard that day.

...At dawn, they had sailed up to Arkhangelsk. Nearly all of them were seeing the North for the first time. Standing on the decks, they watched as a fantastic dawn spread behind the layers of gloomy cloud... A sun of incredible size had risen over the dark fringes of the forests; its rays had darted across the sky, impinging on the bank, the rocks, and the pines. Beyond a bend in the Dvina, towards which the transports were sailing, the rowers straining at the oars, there was a long building like a fortress, with six towers and a palisade. This was the foreigners' compound. Inside the rectangle were solid barns, clean little houses with tiled roofs, and unicorns and mortars mounted on the ramparts. There were jetty walls on piles along the bank, wooden embankments, mountains of bales, sacks and barrels under awnings. Rolls of cable. Stacks of timber. About two dozen sea-going ships were moored at the walls and three times as many were at anchor out in the river. The enormous masts with their spider's webs of rigging towered overhead, the high, elaborately carved poops rocking gently. The flags hung almost down to the water—Holland, England, Hamburg. Guns poked out of the open ports in the tarred sides with the broad white stripe running from bows to stern...

The bells started ringing in welcome on the east bank. Over there, it was the same old Russia—belfries, bell-towers, log cabins scattered here and there as if by the hand of bored idleness, fences and dung heaps. There were hundreds of boats and barges loaded with raw materials and covered with bast matting. Peter glanced sideways at Lefort (they were standing together on the poop). Lefort, elegantly dressed as always, was tapping his cane, a sweet smile behind his moustache, a smile under his puffy eyelids, a dimple on his powdered cheek... Content, merry, happy...

Peter snorted. He dearly wanted to give his good friend Franz a clout on the chops... Even the shameless Sasha, sitting at Peter's feet, shook his head and said "Oh, dear, oh, dear". Rich, important, formidable with its gold and its guns, the European bank of the river had been staring for over a century in contemptuous incomprehension at the east bank as a master looks at his slave.

A puff of smoke had burst from the side of the nearest ship, and the ensuing boom had drowned the chiming of the bells. Peter had dashed forward from the poop, treading on the feet of the rowers as he did so, run to the three-pounder, and seized the slow match from the gunner. A shot had rung out; but could it have rivalled the boom of a ship's cannon? In response to the tsar's salute, all the foreign ships were wreathed in smoke. The river banks had seemed to rock... Peter's eyes had shone. "Good, good," he had kept saying. It was as if the pictures of his childhood had come to life... When the smoke had drifted away, the foreigners could be seen waving their hats on the left bank, on the jetty wall... Van Leyden and Poltenburg... Peter had doffed his tricorne, had waved cheerfully in reply and had shouted his greetings... But on noticing the tense expressions on the faces of Apraksin, Romodanovsky and the shrewd clerk Vinius, he had turned angrily away...

...Now, on his bed, Peter stared at the grey twilight outside the window. In Kukui the Germans were friendly and tame. But here there was no knowing who was master. And the home-made boats suddenly seemed so pathetic as they sailed past the towering sides of the ships... Shame! They were all feeling it: the suddenly morose boyars and the amiable foreigners on the bank, and the captains, and the seasoned, weather-beaten sailors drawn up on the quarter-deck... It was ludicrous ... shameful... The boyars (and perhaps even Lefort, who had understood what Peter was feeling) wanted nothing so much as to preserve their dignity. The boyars puffed themselves up arrogantly as though wanting, even if only this way, to show that the tsar of Great, Little and White Russia was not really interested in staring at these paltry merchant ships... Given the necessity, he would build his own—a simple matter... And if he should forbid these same ships to enter the White Sea in future, they could do nothing about it; it was our sea, after all.

Had not Peter arrived on shoddy boats, perhaps he too

would have been infected with arrogance. But he could not forget, and again could see, the proud contempt masked by the amiable smiles of all these people from the West, from the white-bearded, gap-toothed mariner to the merchant tricked out in Spanish velvet... Over there, by the lantern on the high poop stood a burly, brown, grim man wearing gold braid, a hat with ostrich plumes and silken hose. He was holding a spy-glass pressed to his side, his right hand resting on the top of a cane... This was a captain who had fought the corsairs and pirates of the seven seas. He was looking calmly down at the lean, gawky youth in the clumsy boat, at the tsar of the barbarians... In much the same way, he had looked down from above in Madagascar, in the Philippines, giving the order for the guns to be loaded with grapeshot...

With Asiatic cunning, Peter realised how he must present himself to these people and the only way he could get the better of them... They must be so amazed by a person the likes of whom they had never seen before that they would talk at home about the incredible tsar who didn't care two hoots about being tsar... Let the boyars puff themselves up—that was even better; but he, Peter Alexeyevich, second skipper of the Pereyaslavl Fleet, would act as follows: "We," he'd tell them, "are working people; we're poor but we've got brains; we've come to pay our respects to you out of our incompetence. Please, show us how to hold an axe..."

Peter had the boats rowed straight to the bank. He was the first to jump out and land up to his knees in water. He clambered up the jetty wall, embraced Van Leyden and Poltenburg, shook hands warmly with the others and clapped them on the back. In a mixture of German and Dutch, he told about his journey and pointed laughingly at the boats on which the boyars were still standing like statues... "I warrant you've never seen such tubs in your wildest dreams." He went into excessive raptures over the ships with their many guns, stamped his feet and slapped his lean thighs: "Oh, we could do with at least a couple like that!.." He let drop that he was going to build a shipyard in Arkhangelsk without delay: "I'll do the carpentering myself and I'll make my boyars hammer the nails in..."

Out of the corner of his eye he could see the faked smiles fading and the respectable merchants beginning to marvel. They had indeed never seen the likes before... He got him-

self invited to dinner with them, saying with a wink: "You entertain well, and you won't regret it when we talk business." He jumped down from the jetty wall into the boats and sailed to Maseyev Island, to quarters only just put up for him, where he was met by the terrified governor Matveyev... To him Peter talked in a very different tone, and half an hour later, kicked him furiously outside. (He had already, en route, received a denunciation of Matveyev for extortion from the foreigners.) Then he went with Lefort and Sasha under sail to inspect the ships. In the evening, they feasted in the foreign compound. Peter danced so enthusiastically with the English and Hanoverian ladies that the heels flew off his shoes. Yes, it was the first time the foreigners had seen anyone like him...

And now—a sleepless night... He'd managed to shake them up a bit, but what of it? Russia was still just as she had always been—sleepy, poor, sluggish. Why should she feel ashamed? Shame was for the rich and the powerful... And here he couldn't imagine what forces it would take to get people moving, make them open their eyes... Were they human beings, or, weeping, shedding their blood for a thousand years, despairing of truth and happiness, had they gone as rotten as a tree that has toppled over onto the mosses?

What a curse to be born tsar in such a land!

He remembered how, one autumn night, he had shouted to Sasha, gasping for breath in the icy wind: "Better to be an apprentice in Holland than a tsar here..." And what had he achieved in the years since then? Not a thing. He'd been having a good time! Vassily Golitsyn had been building stone houses, had gone to make war, albeit ingloriously, had made peace with Poland... It was as if talons were rending his heart, he was so tormented by remorse and by fury at his own people, the Russians, and envy of the self-satisfied foreign merchants. They would unfurl their free sails, and voyage home to wondrous countries... As for him, he must go back to Moscow and its beggarliness. Should he issue a terrible new Ukase? Hang? Flog?..

But whom? Whom? The enemy was invisible, unencompassable, the enemy was everywhere, the enemy was within him...

Peter hurled open the little door into the next room:

"Franz!" (Lefort jumped up from the bench, his swollen eyes popping.) "Are you asleep? Come in..."

Lefort, in his shirt, sat on Peter's bed.

"Are you feeling bad, Peter? Perhaps you should make yourself throw up..."

"No, it's not that... Franz, I want to buy two ships in Holland..."

"That's good..."

"And then we'll build more here... We'll have our own carrying trade..."

"Very good."

"What else would you advise?"

Astonished, Lefort looked into his eyes and, as always, more easily than Peter himself, sorted out the tangle of the tsar's impetuous thoughts. He smiled:

"Wait, I'll put on my breeches and bring the pipes..." as he was getting dressed, he said from his little room in a strange voice: "I've long waited for this moment, Peter... You are at the age for great deeds..."

"What deeds?" shouted Peter.

"The Roman heroes, from whom we take our examples to this day. (He came back, straightening the curls of his peruke; Peter followed him with eager eyes.) ...Those heroes staked their glory on war..."

"With whom? Go down to the Crimea again?"

"You can't do without the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, Peter... Poltenburg's been whispering in my ear and asking if the Russians really are still paying tribute to the Crimean Khan. (Peter's eyes flickered and stopped like gimlets on his favourite friend.) And you cannot manage without the Baltic Sea either... If you don't do something about it, the Dutch will force you to... They keep saying they'd be exporting ten times as much if you would only open up the ports in the Baltic Sea..."

"Fight the Swedes? You're mad... Are you jesting, or what? No one in the world can beat them, and you..."

"I don't mean tomorrow, Peter... You asked me a question, and this is my answer: aim for the big things; it's no use breaking your knuckles over small ones..."

16

"The traders, merchant guilds, all artisans and merchants are suffering in their commerce and all trades from losses and ruination as a result of much procrastination by the

governors, officers of the Commissions and various other ranks. Like lions or like wolves, they are devouring us with their fangs. Have pity on us, Great Sovereign..."

"More complaints against the governors?" asked Peter.

He was eating at the end of the table. He had just returned from the shipyard and had not even rolled down the sleeves of his tar-stained canvas shirt. Dipping pieces of bread into an earthenware dish of roast meat and eating hastily, he kept glancing alternately at the frothing ripples of the leaden-hued Dvina and at the blond-bearded, white-faced, portly clerk Andrei Andreyevich Vinius, who was sitting at the other end of the table.

Andrei Andreyevich was reading the mail from Moscow, round spectacles perched on his hard nose, light-blue cold, intelligent eyes spaced well apart. He recently had begun to acquire influence, especially when, after that nocturnal chat with Lefort, Peter had the Moscow mail read out to him. All this paper work had formerly been handled by Troyekurov. Peter had not interfered, but now he wanted to hear it all himself. The mail was read to him at dinner. There was no other time available; he spent all day at the shipyard with the foreign craftsmen borrowed from the ships... He carpentered and forged, to the amazement of the foreigners, voraciously extracted out of them everything he could, swore, and fought with everybody. There were already over a hundred workers at the shipyard. They were being sought out in all the suburbs and settlements. They were taken on hire, and if they were at all recalcitrant, they were taken on anyway, but in chains...

At dinner time, Peter, ravenously hungry, would sail back to Maseyev Island. Vinius would read in an important voice the Ukases sent for the tsar's signature, appeals, complaints, letters... There was an ancient tedium in these flowery missives; and the piteous groans of slaves could be heard in the complaints. The ancient Russian officialdom lied, stole, forced, justified itself in laborious script, in the old uncials, while, infested with lice and cockroaches, the intractable multitudes sweated and groaned.

"Yes, a complaint against the military governor," replied Andrei Andreyevich. "Stepan Sukhotin again."

He adjusted his spectacles and continued reading the tearful complaint about the governor of Kungur... He was ruining trade with levies that went into his own pocket,

and he kept the merchants and artisans in a closet and caned them, as a result of which one innocent man had died. He was extorting dues from the commercial wagon trains and pocketing the proceeds too; eight altyns from each wagon in winter, an altyn from each boat in summer. He had kept Zmiev, a rich manufacturer, locked in a trunk boring holes in the lid so that he wouldn't die... And he was appropriating public funds and tax money and threatening to ruin the whole of Kungur if anyone complained about him.

"Hang him on Kungur market place, the dog!" yelled Peter. "Write that down!" Vinius regarded him sternly over his spectacles.

"Hanging's easy; but you won't knock much sense into people that way... I've been saying for a long time now, Peter Alexeyevich, that the governors shouldn't hold the same post for more than two years. They get used to it, they learn all the moves in the game... A new governor doesn't embezzle so much... Peter Alexeyevich, look after the tradespeople above all. They'll let you have the shirt off their backs just so long as you free them from their impossible burdens... A man is afraid to take two pairs of bast shoes to market—they seize him, beat him and grab his money off him... Who else can you get rich on if not the merchants? There's nothing to be gained from the nobility, they're gobbling it all up themselves. And the peasant's been destitute for a long time. Listen to this."

Vinius rummaged around in a heap of papers and read:

"...And by God's will we always have poor crops, our fields are always being attacked by frosts, and now we have neither grain, nor firewood, nor cattle. We are perishing of starvation and freezing to death... Take heed, Sire, of our plight and our poverty, put us on quit-rent... We no longer have the wherewithal to supply the landowner with pork, and beef and poultry and other goods for the table. We are eating goosefoot, our bodies are swelling up... Have pity..."

As he listened, Peter angrily began striking the steel on a piece of flint until his thumb bled. He lit his pipe and inhaled deeply... Stick-in-the-mud existence!.. The sun was shining through the flying clouds and dancing on the river, now dark-blue in colour. The ribs of a ship under construction were rising on the stocks. Axes thudded, saws whined... Over yonder there were smells of tobacco, tar, wood shavings and ships' hawsers... The wind from the sea cut through

to the marrow... That night, Lefort had said: "The land of Russia is terrifying, Peter... It must be turned inside out like a fur coat and made anew..."

"They don't steal abroad and they don't plunder," said Peter, peering at the ripples on the surface of the water. "Are they of a different breed there, or what?"

"They're the same, Peter Alexeyevich, but it doesn't pay them to steal. The more honest they are, the more they gain by it... They look after the merchant there, and the merchant looks after himself... My father came here during the reign of Alexei Mikhailovich and he set up a factory in Tula. He wanted to work honestly, but they wouldn't let him; they ruined him by sheer dilatoriness... Here, if a man isn't a thief, he's a fool, and honour is not honoured; the only honour is in getting the better of others. But we have reasonable people amongst us too... (Andrei Andreyevich's pudgy white fingers seemed to be weaving a spider's web, the sun glinted on his spectacles, and he spoke softly, smoothly.) Only encourage the tradespeople, pull them out of the mire, give them strength, and the merchant's honour will be in his word of honour. Don't be afraid to rely on him, Peter Alexeyevich..."

Sidney, Van Leyden and Lefort had all said the same thing. They had given Peter a feeling of a kind he had never experienced before, as if he had his finger on the nation's pulse. This was no longer a matter of three play regiments, but of the masses, of a mighty force... Resting his elbow on the window-sill, he looked at the oily sunlight glittering on the waves, at the shipyard, where a sledgehammer silently descended onto a pile and a long time afterwards the sound of the impact arrived... He blinked and blinked, his heart pounded, self-confidently, with a disturbing sense of happiness.

"Vologda merchant Ivan Zhigulin has personally brought a petition and begs to be admitted to your presence," said Andrei Andreyevich, enunciating the words with particular clarity.

Peter nodded. Vinius, his corpulent body swaying slightly, went to the door, called someone and sat down briskly in his place again. After him came a broad-shouldered merchant, his hair trimmed Novgorod style with a fringe on the forehead, a strong face, and keen eyes under the brows. He crossed himself with sweeping movements and bowed low.

Peter pointed at a chair with his pipe:

"Sit down, that's an order... (Zhigulin's eyebrows shot up; he sat down gingerly.) "What do you ask?" (Zhigulin glanced sideways at Vinius.) "Speak up..."

Zhigulin had evidently sensed that this was not the occasion to bang his head on the floor. He must show his worth. He parted his whiskers with dignity, looked down at his goatskin boots and coughed thickly.

"I bow to the great sovereign... When we learned that you are building ships on the Dvina, by the Saints, there was great joy! We want to be forbidden to sell goods to the foreigners... Truly, we gain nothing for what we give, Sire... Blubber oil, sealskins, salted salmon, walrus tusks, pearls... Bid us carry them to your own ships... The English have completely ruined us... Have pity on us! And we shall serve our tsar rather than the foreign kings."

Peter looked at him with shining eyes. He drew himself up, slapped the other on the shoulder and showed his teeth in a delighted smile:

"I shall have built two ships by autumn, and a third has been bought in Holland... Carry the goods, but no trickery, mind!"

"But Lord, Good Lord, we..."

"Will you sail with the merchandise yourself?.. Will you be the first Kommerzienrat, and sell in Amsterdam?.."

"I am not versed in foreign tongues... But if you so command, then why not? We'll trade in Amsterdam too, we won't permit ourselves to be cheated."

"Good fellow!.. Andrei Andreyevich, write out a Ukase... To the first merchant-navigator... What's your name?— Zhigulin, Ivan—but what about your patronymic?"

Zhigulin's jaw dropped and he rose to his feet, his eyes bulging, his beard jutting forward.

"Are you going to use our patronymic when you write our names?.. Why, for that we will do anything you ask!"

And, as if before the Saviour to whom he had been praying for success in his ventures, he threw himself at the tsar's feet...

Zhigulin had left. Vinius scratched away with his quill. Peter was smiling as he ran up and down the room. He stopped.

"Well, what else have you got there?.. Make it short..."

"Brigandage again. A wagon train carrying cash was pillaged on the road to the Trinity Laura; two were murdered... In the course of the enquiry, Stepan Odoyevsky, Prince Odoyevsky's youngest son, was taken from his house and conveyed in an open cart to the Criminal Commission and there he confessed, and his sentence was pronounced: to be flogged with the knout in the Commission cellar, and his house in Moscow and four hundred peasant homes to be confiscated in perpetuity. His father, prince Semyon, has put up bail for him. And of the said Stepan's house servants, fifteen have been hanged..."

"There's your princes and boyars for you, Andrei Andreyevich. They've taken up cudgels, they've turned robbers..."

"They have indeed, Peter Alexeyevich."

"Parasites! Vultures!... I know them, I remember... Each one of them has a knife ready for me... (He jerked his head round.) But I have an axe ready for each of them... (He spat; his leg twitched. He splayed out his fingers, dug them into the tablecloth and pulled it. Vinius hastily held onto the inkwell and papers.) I have power now... If we clash, they'll get no mercy..." (He went to the door.)

"Excuse me, Peter Alexeyevich, two more letters... From the tsaritsas..."

"Read them out..."

He turned to the window and poked about in the bowl of his pipe. Vinius half-bowed and read:

"...God bless you, my joy, my father, tsar Peter Alexeyevich, for many years to come... (Peter turned round to Vinius, one eyebrow raised in astonishment.) Your little son Alyosha asks blessings of you, light of my joy. Come to us, our joy, Sire, and tarry no more... I ask you this favour, for I see my grandmother in great sorrow... Do not be unhappy, my joy, Sire, that this is but a poor little letter... I have not yet learned how to write..."

"In whose hand is this?"

"Written by Natalia Kirillovna in a shaky hand, almost indecipherable."

"Well, write some sort of reply... Say I await ships from Hamburg... I am well, I don't go to sea, let them not pine... but they mustn't expect me home soon, d'you hear?"

"Tsarevich Alexei Petrovich has marked this letter with his little thumb-print," said Vinius with a gentle sigh.

"All right, all right, 'his little thumb-print'..." Peter

snorted and took the second letter from Vinius. 'His little thumb-print'!"

He read the letter from his wife in the boat. A fresh breeze from the sea filled the sail, the ramshackle little craft plunged and rose like a living thing, the foaming waves beat on the side and the spray flew from her bows. Sitting at the tiller, Peter read the splashed letter, holding it pressed down on his knee.

"God bless you, my Lord, for many years to come... Please, my dearest, have pity on me, give me joy, my Lord, and write of your health, that I may rejoice, unhappy as I am, in my sorrows... My dear, since you have departed from me you have not even written a single line... I am wretched and unhappy, since you do not favour me with a letter about your health. Write to me, my joy, and tell me when you will come and see me... Little Alyosha and I are well..."

The dinghy suddenly shipped water. Peter hastily pulled the tiller hard over to port. A big wave, foaming noisily, washed up against the side and drenched him from head to foot. He roared with laughter. The futile letter, snatched up from his knees by the wind, fluttered high into the air and fell into the waves somewhere far away.

17

Natalia Kirillovna finally saw her son on the day when she felt as if a nail had lodged in her heart. Lying well propped up on swansdown pillows, she stared with dilated pupils at the wall, at a gold whorl on the stamped leather. She was terrified to take her eyes off it or to make a move. There was an emptiness in her chest that tortured her more than any thirst. She wanted air, but as soon as she tried to breathe in, her eyes bulged in horror.

From time to time, Lev Kirillovich would tiptoe in and ask the boyarinas of the bedchamber:

"Well, how is she?.. My God, let it not be that..."

Swallowing, he would sit on the bed... He would begin talking, but his sister would not answer. The whole world seemed a mirage to her... She was conscious only of her heart with the nail piercing it...

When signallers galloped into the Kremlin on lathered horses, yelling: "He's coming, he's coming!" and when the sextons, crossing themselves, climbed up the bell-towers,

when the doors of the Archangel and Dormition cathedrals opened and the archpriests and deacons hastily straightened their hair from under their vestments; when the palace dignitaries crowded the porch, and the barefooted runners raced all over Moscow crying out that the boyars should be informed, Lev Kirillovich bent over his sister with a sigh:

"Your darling is here..."

Natalia Kirillovna gulped in air, her pudgy hands tore at her chemise, her lips turned blue, she threw her head back... Lev Kirillovich stood with his mouth open, at his wits' end. The boyarinas rushed out to find the father confessor. The cripples and jesters began moaning in the dark corners and in the closets... The whole palace was thrown into turmoil.

But now Ivan the Great spoke in his bronze voice, the cathedrals and monasteries began ringing the chimes, the servants started jabbering, and amid all the uproar and shouting could be heard the stiff voices of the German officers: "Achtung! Order muskets! Halt!" Carriages and coaches raced past the troops and the people at full gallop up to the Main Porch. The onlookers searched among the rich caftans, generals' cloaks and plumed hats, but they could not see the tsar.

Peter ran straight to his mother. People in the passages only just managed to scuttle out of the way in time. Suntanned, lean, his hair close-cropped, in a tight fitting black velvet jacket and baggy trousers, he raced up the staircases. Some of those he passed thought that this was the physician from Kukui (they realised afterwards who it had been and crossed themselves in terror.) They did not expect him to tear open the door and rush into the low-ceilinged, stuffy little leather-lined bedchamber... Natalia Kirillovna half rose from her pillows and her eyes brightened when she saw the lean Dutch sailor...

"Mum!" he cried, as if back in his childhood again. "My dearest..."

Natalia Kirillovna stretched out her arms:

"Peter, my dearest, my son..."

Braced by maternal pity, she overcame the nail piercing her heart and did not breathe until he fell on his knees at her bedside and kissed her shoulder and face; only when something seemed to snap in her breast did she unclasp her hands and let her head fall back...

Peter jumped up and looked almost with curiosity at her eyes, of which only the whites were showing. The boyarinas, scared of wailing, stuffed their handkerchiefs into their mouths. Lev Kirillovich was trembling. But Natalia Kirillovna's eyelashes fluttered. Peter said something hoarsely that no one could understand, rushed over to the window and shook the lead frame so that the round bottle-glass panes flew out.

"Get Blumentrost from Kukui!" and when they could not understand him again, he seized a boyarina by the shoulders, shouted "Get the physician, fool!" and propelled her through the door.

Half-swooning and clucking like a hen, the boyarina clattered down the stairs.

"The tsar bids! The tsar bids!.." But she did not manage to articulate what he had bidden...

Natalia Kirillovna recovered her breath and by the third day was already attending service and eating well. Peter left for Preobrazhenskoye where Evdokia lived with tsarevich Alexei (she had moved there in spring to be farther away from her mother-in-law). She had not been expecting her husband to arrive so soon and was not ready or properly attired when Peter suddenly appeared on the sandy path in the garden where, under the shade of a limetree, they were making jam with Antonovka apples. Pleasant to the eye, all of them attractive, with their long plaits, chaplets of flowers and pink gowns, the maids were coring the apples under Vorobyikha's supervision; others were fetching firewood for the oven on which a copper bowl was simmering sweetly; others were playing on a carpet with the tsarevich, a thin little boy with a big brow, dark, unsmiling eyes and a fretful mouth.

No one could understand what he wanted. The fatbottomed maids miaowed like cats, barked like dogs, crawled on their hands and knees, laughed themselves silly, but the child stared at them malevolently, about to burst into tears at any moment. Evdokia was angry:

"Your minds aren't on what you're doing, you fools... Steshka, what are you sticking your backside up for? You ought to be given one on it... Vasyonka, wiggle your fingers... Find a beetle, stick a straw through it for him, use your

heads... I have to feed a crowd like you and you can't even amuse a child..."

Evdokia felt hot and the autumn flies were pestering her. She took off her headdress and bade the girls comb her hair. It was a crystal-clear day, and the sky over the lime-trees was a windless azure blue. If it hadn't been after St. Elijah's Day, this would have been a good moment to run down the river for a swim, but the reindeer had already dipped his horns in the water, so she mustn't, because it was a sin...

Suddenly, on the path, there was this tall swarthy man, all in black. Evdokia's hands flew to her cheeks. Her heart thudded so violently that she could not think properly... The girls cried out and, their plaits flying, raced pell-mell into the cover of the lilac and sweetbriar bushes. Peter walked up, held Evdokia under the armpits and kissed her crushingly on the mouth... She closed her eyes and did not respond. He began kissing her damp breast through the unbuttoned dress. Evdokia gasped, blushed with shame and trembled... Little Alexei, sitting alone on the carpet, began crying in a thin voice, like a leveret... Peter picked him up in his arms, tossed him up, and the little boy began howling his head off.

The meeting went badly. Peter asked her something, and Evdokia answered irrelevantly... She was bareheaded and untidy. The child was smeared with jam... Not surprisingly, hubby hung on for a while and then off he went. He was surrounded at the palace by craftsmen, merchants, generals, and drinking cronies. His abrupt laughter could be heard a long way off. Then he went to the river to inspect the Yauza fleet. From there to Kukui... Ah, Dunya, Dunya, you've missed your happiness!

Vorobyikha said that the matter could be put right.

She set about it briskly. She sent the girls to heat up the bathhouse. She ordered the wet nurses to take Alexei away, wash him and tidy him up. To the tsaritsa she whispered:

"Don't be shy at night, my swan. We'll steam you in the bath our way, the peasant way, we'll pour kvass on the coals, we'll wash you with benjamin—you'll smell delicious all over. It's the scent that counts most with the menfolk... And you, my lovely, keep laughing at everything he says, so that you shake all over, laugh quietly, quickly, with your bosom... That can drive a dead man out of his mind."

"He's gone to his German wench, Vorobyikha..."

"Oh, tsaritsa, forget her. She's not worth the trouble...: flighty, selfish, black-hearted, sticky skin... But you're as gorgeous as a swan; greet him in bed, all tender and merry—what will he want with the German girl then?.."

Evdokia saw the point and got busy. They heated the bath up really hot for her. The girls and Vorobyikha laid the tsaritsa on the shelf, fanned her with switches and sprinkled her with mint and benjamin. They led her, relaxed and languid, to the bedroom, combed her hair, made up her face with rouge and kohl, put her to bed and drew the curtains. Evdokia waited...

Mice rustled. Night fell, the palace went silent, the watchman banged his rattle sleeplessly in the courtyard, her heart pounded in her pillow... But still her Peter did not come... Remembering what Vorobyikha had said, she lay smiling in the dark, although her stomach was quivering and her legs were like ice, such was her hatred for the German girl.

Now the watchman had stopped banging, the mice were silent... She'd even be ashamed to show herself in front of the maids tomorrow!.. Evdokia still held herself in check, but then she remembered how she and Peter had eaten chicken on their first night. She pressed her face into the pillow and sobbed till it was wet with her tears...

She was woken by someone's hot breathing. She sat up: "Who is it? Who is it?.." Still half-asleep, she could not grasp who had blundered into bed with her. When she realised, she groaned with the still living hurt and pressed her fists to her eyes... Peter was not human any more: drunk, reeking of tobacco smoke, straight from the German wench to her, who had been waiting for him... He did not caress her, he took her, silently, terribly... So much for a benjamin bath...

Evdokia moved away to the edge of the bed. Peter muttered something and fell asleep, like a drunken muzhik in a ditch... It was turning dark blue between the curtains. Embarrassed by Peter's long bare legs, she covered him up, weeping softly. Vorobyikha's counsel had been wasted...

A courier galloped in from Moscow. Natalia Kirillovna's condition had deteriorated again. They rushed off to find the tsar. He was sitting in the new Preobrazhenskaya suburb

in a house belonging to a soldier named Bukhvostov at a christening party. They were eating pancakes. Only his cronies were there: Sasha Menshikov, Alyosha Brovkin, recently taken on as batman by Peter, and the Prince-Pope. They were larking about and having fun. Menshikov was telling how, twelve years ago, he and Alyosha had run away from home and lived at Zayats's place, had gone roving and stealing; how they had met the little Peter by the Yauza and had taught him to draw a needle through his cheek.

"So it was you?.. You?" exclaimed Peter, astounded. "I hunted for you for half a year after that... I love you for that needle, Sasha," and he kissed him on the mouth.

"Do you remember, Peter Alexeyevich," asked the Prince-Pope, wagging his finger. "Do you remember my whip and how I used to thrash you for your pranks?.. And you were a naughty boy too. Once..."

And Nikita Zotov began telling how Peter, though hardly weaned and only so high, already had the mind of a statesman..."He'd ask the boyars a question, and they'd think and think but couldn't find the answer, and then Peter would wave his little hand just like that and *hey presto!*—the answer... Wonderful!.."

All at the table, their mouths agape, listened to these marvels, and although he did not remember doing anything of the kind, Peter nodded his agreement since the others believed it all...

Bukhvostov kept refilling the glasses. He was a rather crafty man, but honest and unselfish at first glance. He understood Peter drunk or sober, but could not, of course, hope to outstrip Sasha Menshikov; he was older and rather dull-witted. So he just smiled, looked after the guests and did not barge into the conversation.

"And now," Menshikov was saying, his crimson gold-braided cuffs brushing the tablecloth (he was sitting erect and eating little; the wine did not go to his head, it only made his eyes seem more intensely blue), "and now we hear that Alexei Brovkin, the tsar's batman, has a beautiful sister of marriageable age... We should intervene in this matter..."

The staid Alyosha blinked and suddenly went pale... They questioned him, Peter most vigorously of all, and Brovkin confirmed it. True, his sister Alexandra, or Sanka, was ready for marriage, but there was no suitable prospective bridegroom. His father, Ivan Artemich, had become so proud

that he did not even want to hear about merchants of the middle rank. He had acquired guard dogs; people were afraid to walk past the house. He was sending the matchmakers packing. He had reduced Sanka to such a state that she was in tears night and day. She was in the bloom of her youth, and was afraid that instead of a wedding it would all end in a nun's coif because of her father's arrogance...

"What do you mean, no suitor?" said Peter hotly. "Lieutenant Menshikov, kindly get married..."

"Not me, I'm too young to cope with a woman, myn Herz..."

"What about you, Anikita, Your Holiness? Want to get married?"

"I'm a bit on the old side for a young girl, my son! I prefer harlots these days..."

"All right, you drunken devils... Alyosha, write to your father, I'm going to be a matchmaker myself..."

Alyosha doffed his huge black peruke and gravely executed a low bow. Peter wanted to ride off straightaway to the Brovkins in the country, but a courier from the Kremlin came in with a letter from Lev Kirillovich. The tsaritsa had passed away. All rose from the table and took off their perukes while Peter read the letter. His lips sagged and trembled... He picked up his hat off the window-sill and jammed it down over his eyes. The tears were trickling down his cheeks. He left without saying a word and walked through the streets, his shoes raising the dust. He was met halfway by a carriage. He climbed in and was driven to Moscow at a gallop.

While the others were arguing and debating about what was going to happen next, Alexander Menshikov was already at Lefort's with the great tidings. Peter was to become the sole master. The overjoyed Lefort embraced Sasha, and they whispered in secret how Peter must now stop wriggling out of the affairs of state; the whole Treasury and the whole army were in his hands, and no one should meddle in his will except his intimates. The Great Court must be transferred to Preobrazhenskoye. And Anna Mons must be told that she should not put on airs any longer; she should give herself unselfishly to the tsar... It had to be that way...

Natalia Kirillovna was not touched until after the tsar had arrived. Her face was blue and had an astonished look, her

eyelids were shut tight and there was a little icon in her swollen hands.

Peter looked at that face... She seemed to have gone so far away that she had forgotten everything... He looked to see if there was some love left at the corner of the mouth at least... No, no... Never had those lips been so unnaturally and tightly closed... And yet in the morning she had still been calling breathlessly: "Bring Peter ... to be blessed..." He felt that he was now alone in this world, among strangers... He felt mortally sorry for himself, abandoned...

He hunched his shoulders uneasily. In the bedchamber, apart from the tear-stained boyarinas, were the new patriarch, Adrian—small, fair-haired, looking with stupid curiosity at the tsar; and Peter's sister, tsarevna Natalia Alexeyevna, an affectionate, cheerful girl, three years older than her brother. She stood there mourning like a peasant woman, her cheek resting on the palm of her hand, her eyes brimming with maternal compassion.

Peter went up to her.

"Natasha... I'm sorry about Mother..."

Natalia Alexeyevna took his head and pressed it to her breast. The boyarinas wailed quietly... Patriarch Adrian, in order better to see the tsar weeping, turned his back on the tsaritsa, his mouth half-open... Lev Kirillovich came in unsteadily, his beard wet, his cheeks swollen like raw meat. He prostrated himself before the dead woman and lay still, only his posterior quivering.

Natalia Alexeyevna took her brother upstairs to her room while the deceased was being washed and dressed. Peter sat at the little coloured window. Almost nothing had changed here since he had been a child. The same trunks and rugs; the silver, glass and stone animals on stands; the heart-shaped mirror in its Venetian frame, the illuminated pages from the Holy Scriptures, the sea-shells from foreign strands...

"Natasha," he asked quietly, "can you remember, you had a Turk with terrible eyes?.. His head was broken off."

Natalia Alexeyevna thought for a moment, opened a small trunk and took out the Turk and his head from the bottom of it. She showed it to her brother, and her eyebrows quivered. She sat next to him and hugged him tight. Both burst into tears.

By evening, Natalia Kirillovna, arrayed in gold robes, lay

in the Faceted Hall. Peter stood by the coffin, stooping over the lectern between the candles and reading aloud in a muffled bass voice. Two bodyguards in white with axes on their shoulders stood at each of the two doors, silently shifting their weight from one foot to the other. At the foot of the coffin was Lev Kirillovich on his knees... All the others in the palace were exhausted and had gone to sleep.

At the dead of night, the door creaked and Sophia entered the hall in a stiff cloak and nun's coif. Without looking at her brother, she applied her lips to Natalia Kirillovna's blue brow and also went down on her knees. Peter turned over the pages—they were stuck together with candle-wax, and went on reading in a low bass voice. At long intervals, the clock was heard chiming. Sophia kept stealing a glance at her brother. When the window began to turn blue, Sophia softly stood up, went up to the lectern and said in a whisper:

"I'll take over... Have a rest..."

His ears involuntarily moved back at the sound of that voice. He went away with a twitch of the shoulder. Sophia continued reading from where he had left off, and, as she read, snuffed a candle with her fingers. Peter leaned against the wall, but his head felt uncomfortable under the vault. He sat down on a trunk, bent over and covered his face with his hands. He thought: "I still won't forgive her..." So passed the last night of the old long-bearded Russia in the Kremlin palace....

On the third day, Peter went straight from the funeral to Preobrazhenskoye and retired to bed. Evdokia arrived later. She was escorted by a train of boyarinas. She did not even know their first names. They were now calling her the tsaritsa-mother, fawning, asking her to do them the favour of letting them kiss her hand... She couldn't shake them off. She went in to see Alyosha, then into the bedchamber. Peter was lying fully dressed on the white satin bed, except that he had taken off his dusty shoes. Evdokia frowned. "Oh, those Kukui habits; they get drunk and go to bed with their clothes on..." She sat down at the mirror and began undressing for a rest before dinner... She could not get the palace boyarinas and their flattering speeches out of her mind. And suddenly she realised it: she was now the absolute tsaritsa... She narrowed her eyes and tightened her lips in a regal

manner... "Anna Mons to Siberia for life: that was the first thing... She must take her husband in hand... Of course, her late mother-in-law, that viper, had done nothing but put nasty ideas into his head. Things were going to be different now. Yesterday she had been Dunya; today she was the tsaritsa of All Great, Little and White Russia... (She imagined herself coming out of the Cathedral of the Dormition ahead of the boyars to the chiming of the bells, out to the people—she caught her breath.) She must have a grand tsaritsa's gown specially made. She wouldn't put on Natalia Kirillovna's cast-offs... Peter was always away, she would have to rule instead... And why not? Sophia had ruled, and she wasn't much older. If she had to think, well, that's what the boyars were for—thinking... (Suddenly she smiled, seeing Lev Kirillovich in her mind's eye.) Previously, he had hardly taken any notice of her, always looking straight past her; but today, at the funeral, he had been supporting her by the arm all the time and currying favour with his eyes... Ugh, the fat fool!"

"Dunya..." (She started and looked round.) Peter was lying on his side, propped up on one elbow. "Dunya... Mum's dead... (Evdokia's eyelashes fluttered.) I feel empty inside... I've just had a nap... Oh... Dear Dunya..."

He seemed to be expecting something of her. His eyes were pathetic; but she was carried away and emboldened by her own thoughts:

"It means God wanted it so... No use complaining... We've wept, and that's that. After all, we are royalty. And we have things to attend to... (He slowly straightened his arm and sat up with his legs over the edge of the bed. There was a hole in his stocking near the big toe...) And another thing—it's improper, it's not nice to get onto a satin coverlet in your clothes... You're with soldiers and peasants all the while, but it's about time..."

"What, what?" he interrupted, and his eyes were alive again. "Are you going funny in the head or something, Dunya?"

She cringed at his stare, but went on, although in a different tone of voice, with the same nonsense that he could not understand. When she blurted out: "Your mother always hated me, ever since the wedding, she cost me I don't know how many tears," Peter bared his teeth abruptly and started putting on his shoes...

"Peter, it's got a hole in it—look, change your stockings for God's sake..."

"I've known some silly women, but one like you... Oh, well... (His hands were shaking.) You're going to regret this, Dunya ... Mother's death. Once in my life I asked you... I shan't forget..."

As he went out, he slammed the door. Evdokia winced. For a long time she sat baffled in front of her mirror... What on earth had she said wrong? The man was crazy, just crazy...

Lefort had long been waiting for Peter in the hallway outside the bedroom. (They had seen one another from a distance at the funeral.) He eagerly took Peter's hands in his own:

"Oh, Peter, Peter, what a loss... (Peter was still in a prickly mood.) Permit me to sympathise with you in your grief... *Ich kondoliere, ich kondoliere... Mein Herz ist voller Schmerzen...* Oh!.. My heart is full of Schmerzen... (As always, when agitated, he began mixing the two languages, and this had a particularly moving effect on Peter.) I know condolences are so empty... But take, please take my life and do not suffer, Peter..."

Peter embraced him with all his strength and applied his cheek to the scented peruke. This was a true friend... Lefort said in a whisper:

"Come to my place, Peter... Banish your sorrow... We shall divert you a little, if you wish... Or—*zusammen weinen...* Weep together..."

"Yes, yes, let's go to your house, Franz..."

Everything was ready at Lefort's place. The table had been laid for five in a small room with door overlooking the garden, where the musicians were hidden in the shrubbery. The guests were served by the two dwarfs, Tomos and Seka, in Roman dress and maple-leaf crowns. The whole room was decorated with garlands of roses. They sat down at table—Peter, Lefort, Menshikov and Prince-Pope. There was no sign of vodka or the customary snacks that go with it. The dwarfs came in with pies of sparrows and roast quails on gilt dishes held high over their heads.

"Whose is the fifth plate?" asked Peter.

The corners of Lefort's mouth curved up in a smile.

"Today we are having a Roman supper in honour of the Goddess Ceres, so famous for the consoling story of her

daughter Proserpine..."

"What story?" asked Sasha. He was sitting in a silk coat and a peruke with curls down to the waist and was looking extremely languid. Anikita was similarly dressed.

"Proserpine was carried away by Pluto, God of the underworld," said Franz, "and her mother mourns her... That would seem to be the end of it. But no, there is no death, there is eternal growth... The ill-fated Proserpine grew up through the ground into the miraculous fruit of the pomegranate and thus appeared to her mother as a consolation..."

Peter was subdued and sad. It was black and damp in the garden. The stars shone through the open door. From time to time, a dry leaf fell in the beam of light from the room.

"Who is that place laid for?" asked Peter again.

Lefort raised his finger. Sand crunched in the garden. Anna entered in a full dress, bearing ears of corn in her left hand while with her right hand she held to her side a dish of carrots, lettuces, radishes and apples. Her hair was gathered into a big knot and there were roses in it. Her face was bewitching in the candle-light.

Peter did not rise, but merely sat erect, clutching the arm of his chair. Anna placed the dish before him and curtseyed... She had evidently been taught a speech for the occasion, but she said nothing, became flustered, and so it turned out even better as a result...

"Ceres brings you fruits, and this means that there is no death... Take them and live!" cried Lefort and he moved up Anna's chair for her. She sat down next to Peter. Their glasses were refilled with foaming Sekt. Peter could not take his eyes off Anna. But the atmosphere was still strained at the table. She laid her fingers on his arm:

" *Ich kondoliere, Herr* Peter. (Her big eyes were brimming with tears.) I would give anything to console you..."

He was warmed by the wine and Anna's nearness. The Prince-Pope was already winking. Sasha had an urge to make merry. Lefort sent one of the dwarfs into the garden, and the strings and tambourines struck up. Anna's dress rustled, her eyes cleared like the sky after rain. Peter shook off his sorrow.

"Sekt, Sekt, Franz!"

"That's it, my son," said Anikita, his face creased with wrinkles. "It's more easy-going with the Greek and Roman gods..."

18

In the dense forests beyond the Oka River (where they had been living all summer), the cripple Ovdokim was in his element—successful and daring. He had picked out a small gang from hardened muzhiks who had been through hell in their time: they feared neither blood nor death and did not commit foolish excesses. The hideout was in a bog on an island inaccessible to man and beast except by one water-logged footpath. There they carried all their booty: grain, meat and poultry, wine, clothing, looted silver from churches. They lived in pits covered with tree branches. In a centuries-old pine-tree there was a look-out post up to which Judas climbed to survey the surroundings.

There were nine robbers altogether on the island, and the two most desperate ones roamed about as scouts round the taverns and along the highways. If a merchants' wagon train was travelling from Moscow to Tula, or a boyar was leaving for some village, or a drunken taverner boasted of a buried pot of treasure, a country urchin with a knout or a basket went into the dark forest and then ran as fast as his legs would carry him to the island. He would whistle. Judas would whistle in reply from his crow's nest. Bent double, Ovdokim would crawl out of his dugout. The little boy would be led across the bog to the island and questioned there. Ovdokim had messengers like him in all the settlements near the highway. They could be trusted. Carve them up piecemeal, but they'd keep their mouths shut... Ovdokim would be nice to them, feed them, give them a kopeck and ask after Dad and Mum. But children and adults alike were afraid of him: he was tempered and cheerful, but even his friendliness induced horror.

It was a dismal life in the bog. The mists would rise in the evening like milk. Bones felt the damp and old wounds ached. Ovdokim forbade the lighting of fires at night... Once, one of the robbers made a scene: the night was pitch dark—"As if we hadn't had enough from the governors and the landowners, we've been saddled with another devil." He began blowing up a fire. Ovdokim went up to him in an amiable sort of way, took both crooks in his left hand and gripped the man by the throat. His tongue and eyes protruded. They threw him into the bog.

A yellow sun would rise, giving no warmth; the tree tops

were half shrouded in the miasmic mist. The robbers coughed, scratched their much-flogged rumps, changed their footwear and put their cooking-pots on the fire.

There was no real work to do. It was a relief if a whistle came from the forest. Otherwise, it was lie on your side until you were in a stupor. To relieve the monotony, they told fairy-tales or sang heart-rending convict songs. About themselves they reminisced seldom and sparingly. Apart from Judas and Zhemov, all were runaways from landowners: they had been caught, put in irons, and had escaped from the prisons again.

Sitting on a mossy stone, Ovdokim often began spinning yarns. They listened gloomily to him in the drowsy silence of the forest. It was hard to fathom what Ovdokim was driving at. He'd have done better to tell obvious lies, like the others. "One of these days, lads, they'll find the tsar's golden letter, and everybody will have freedom. You'll be able to live as you like, in peace, with plenty to eat, in oblivion..." It was a fairy-tale, of course, but it was sweet to think about it to the damp rustling of the pines... But no, Ovdokim never resorted to such consolations...

"There was a time, boys, though it's long past now—but it's not over yet... I roamed about in a fine caftan with a sharp sabre at my side and letters of enticement in my hat... That time will come back, boys, and that's why I'm keeping you in the forest... The poor all gathered together, the vagabonds flocked together like ravens, hosts of them, without number... They had a golden letter with them, it was sewn in the Cossack Stepan Timofeyevich's caftan... That letter was written in blood; they took the blood from our wounds, they wrote it with a sharp knife... It said in that letter that there was to be no mercy; all the rich and all the nobility with their estates, their cities and their settlements, and with the capital city of Moscow, were to be laid waste... And a free Cossack community was to be set up on the empty places... Oh, we didn't succeed, my dears... But it will come, yes, it will... So it is written in the Book of Wisdom..."

Resting his beard on his crook, he looked with watery eyes at the rippling swamp, quietly swatted a mosquito on his cheek and smiled timidly.

"We'll live here till Intercession; there's plenty of mushrooms about... But when the first snow falls, I'll take you,

boys, only not to Moscow this time... Things are hard there now... Prince Romodanovsky has been put in charge of the Criminal Commission, and they say that on the days when he drinks someone's blood, then he's merry; but on the days when he doesn't drink someone's blood, he can't swallow his bread either... No, I'll take you to the Vyga River, into the deep forests, to the Old Believers' retreat. There's a great cell there with shelves close to the ceiling, and windows from which they can defend themselves against the people sent by the tsar. Plenty of harquebuses and powder. There's a monk lives in that cell, he's not a tall man, he's white-haired and old. He has with him about two hundred souls, Old Believers that are scattered along the Vyga... They have houses on stilts, and they plough without horses, and whatever the monk tells them to do, they do it, and their number multiplies unceasingly. And no one can conceal anything about himself; every week they confess to him, and he takes bilberries and rye or barley flour and mixes them together, and gives them the sacrament. I'll lead you to that twilit vineyard by secret pathways, and there, my lads, we shall rest from evildoing..."

The robbers sighed when they heard about the Vyga, but few believed that they would ever get there alive. It was just another fairy-tale.

Ovdokim did not often go out on a job, staying alone on the island, cooking and doing the laundry. But when he went out himself with an iron bludgeon tucked behind his sash, they knew that there was particularly nasty work afoot. For all his deformity, he was as nimble as a spider when, whistling at night so that your hair stood on end, he rushed at the horses and hit them on the head with his bludgeon. If a rich and distinguished traveller was on the road, he showed no mercy and finished the victim off himself. He would frighten subordinates and let them go, but it went badly with anyone who recognised him.

These doings on the Tula highway were known about in Moscow, and several times, soldiers under command of a lieutenant were sent to wipe out the gang. None of them ever returned from the forests; only the quagmires into which Ovdokim had lured the soldiers could tell about their horrible end.

At least they didn't starve. At the end of the summer, Ovdokim collected up some odds and ends and sent Gypsy,

Judas and Zhemov to the big market in Tula to sell some of their loot.

"Come back with some cash, my dears, and don't fall into temptation. Otherwise you won't have long to live... I'll hunt you down..."

A week later, only Judas came back. His head was caked with blood and he had neither goods nor money. The island was deserted—only cold ashes from the campfire and rags lying scattered about on the ground. He waited and called. No answer. He started trying to find the place where Ovdokim had buried the money and silver bars, but he never found any treasure.

The forest was yellow and red, spider's filaments floated in the air, the leaves were falling. Judas felt sick at heart. He picked up some dry crusts of bread and set off for somewhere, perhaps Moscow. Immediately beyond the swamp, amid the russet columns of a pine forest, he found one of his comrades, a peasant bondsman of Naryshkin's named Fyodor Fyodorov.

Fyodor had been a quiet man, the father of a big family, and docile as a horse. He had paid a heavy quit rent and, it could be said, he fed his countless children with the sweat of his brow. One thing had led him astray: spirits had given him a sense of injustice. He had gone about the village with a stake, threatening to break Naryshkin's bailiff in two. Whether it was he who had killed the bailiff or not, Fyodor had sworn to his children that his conscience was clear before God and had then fled. And there he was, hanging from the branch of a pine tree, his elbows tied behind his head on one side. Judas did not look at his face... "Oh, comrade, comrade!" He wept and left those parts, keeping well away from all human habitation...

19

If the high boyars, deliberating in the Kremlin Palace, still hoped to live by God's will ("The young tsar will outgrow his folly, things will shape out, there is no need for alarm; whatever happens, the peasants will keep us in food"); if in Preobrazhenskoye, Peter, with all kinds of new greedy merchants and nobles who had exchanged the dignity of their ancestors for an extra-long peruke, was without the slightest restraint draining the Treasury for military and other

games and for building ships, soldiers' suburbs and palaces for his favourites, if he caroused and made merry without a care; if the state, as before, floundered like a wagon in a bog—in the West (in Venice, the Roman Empire, in Poland) things were taking such a turn that Moscow's sloth and duplicity could no longer be tolerated. The Swedes lorded it in the North Sea and the Turks in the Mediterranean, secretly supported by the King of France. The Turkish navy was seizing Venetian merchant ships. Turkish janissaries were devastating Hungary. The Crimean Tatars, the Sultan's subjects, were on the rampage in the southern Polish steppes. But the state of Moscow, obliged by treaty to make war on the Tatars and the Turks, simply invented excuses, temporised and evaded the issue: "We have twice sent troops to the Crimea, but our allies did not support us, and now the harvest is bad, we ought to wait until next year. We are not refusing to fight, but we are waiting for you to make a beginning, and then, by God, shall help you."

The ambassadors of the Crimean Khan in Moscow were generous with their gifts to the boyars, urged the conclusion of eternal peace with the Crimea, swore not to devastate the land of Russia or demand the former humiliating tribute. Lev Kirillovich wrote to the Russian ambassadors in Vienna, Cracow and Venice that the promises of the Roman Emperor, the King of Poland and the Doge of Venice were not to be trusted and that they themselves should be evasive in their own commitments. They had now been stalling for over two years. The Turks were threatening to burn their way all across Poland and to raise the Crescent over Vienna and Venice. And so Johann Curtius, the Emperor's ambassador, arrived in Moscow from Vienna. The boyars were frightened—they would have to make a decision. They received the ambassador with great pomp, drove him through the Kremlin, accommodated him in rich chambers, allotted him twice as much provender as to the other ambassadors and began to confuse, lie and spin things out, using it as their pretext that the tsar was on a play campaign and they could not make any decisions without him.

But they still had to say something. Johann Curtius pinned the boyars down with the old treaty and got them to ordain that there was to be a war, and on that they kissed the cross. Curtius left, overjoyed. Moscow was sent letters of thanks from the Emperor of Rome and the King of Poland in

which the tsar was styled "Majesty", with his full titles, even up to "Lord of the Lands of Iberia, Georgia and Kabarda, and the regions of Dedich and Otchich". After that, Moscow managed to delay for a while longer; but it was already clear that war could not be avoided...

20

After Shrovetide, when the chimes of Lent floated over a Moscow mellowed in the gentle sunrise, all started talking about war in all the markets, in the suburbs and in the settlements. As if overnight, the whisper went round: "There's going to be a war. Something's going to happen. The Crimea will be ours and we'll trade with the whole world... The sea's huge, even the tramp there will live on the fat of the land."

Peasant farmers and impoverished gentry turned into peasants on their own land arriving with wagon trains of wheat from round Voronezh, Kursk and Belgorod told how, in the steppes, war with the Tatars could not come too soon for them... "Our steppe runs for thousands of versts to the south and the east. The steppe is like a ripe girl: just shake your breeches over it and you'll soon be walking up to your neck in corn... The Tatars won't let us go there... How many of our people have been driven off to captivity in the Crimea!.. And there's no end to the steppes, they go on forever! Not like what you Muscovites have..."

The arguments were particularly heated in Kukui. Many did not approve: "We don't need the Black Sea, you won't carry tar and blubber and timber to the Turks or to Venice... We should conquer the northern seas..." But the military people, especially the young ones, were passionately in favour of war. That autumn they went with two armies to the village of Kozhukhovo, and there, as distinct from other years, they fought according to all the rules of the art of war. Of the regiments of Lefort and Butyrsky and of the play Preobrazhensky and Semyonovsky troops, now called the Leibgarde, the foreigners said that they were in no way inferior to the Swedes or the French. But the glory of the Kozhukhovo campaign was limited to banquets, to an accompaniment of toasts, kettledrums and salvoes of gunfire. Officers wearing raven-black perukes, silk scarfs down to the ground and enormous spurs more than once heard behind their backs:

"The Kozhukhovo heroes! Brave at fighting with paper bombs. You try the Tatar bullets..."

Only those closest to Peter vacillated—Romodanovsky, Artamon Golovin, Apraksin, Gordon, Vinius and Alexander Menshikov: the venture seemed terrifying... "What if we're beaten? Then we're done for, the outraged mob here will sweep everybody away. But if we don't start a war, it will be even worse, and the rumour's already going round that the tsar's fallen into the clutches of the Germans: they've corrupted his soul, masses of money are going on entertainment, people are suffering and there is no sign of great deeds."

Peter said little. To discussions about war he answered ambiguously: "All right, all right, we had some fun at Kozhukhovo. Now we'll go to the Tatars and play with them..." Lefort and Menshikov alone knew that Peter was hiding his terror, the same terror as on that memorable night of the escape to the Trinity Laura. But they also knew that he would settle for war in the end.

Two black-faced monks came from Jerusalem with a letter from Dosifei, patriarch of Jerusalem. He wrote tearfully that the French ambassador had arrived in Adrianopolis with a letter from the King about the Holy places and had presented the Grand Vizier with seventy thousand gold pieces, and the Crimean Khan, who happened to be in Adrianopolis at the time, with ten thousand. He had asked the Turks to hand over the Holy places to the French... "And the Turks have taken the Holy Sepulchre from us, the Orthodox, and have given it to the French, and have left us only twenty-four icon lamps. And the French have taken from us half Golgotha, all the Church of Bethlehem and the sacred cave, have destroyed every single deesis, have dug up the Refectory where we distribute holy light, and have done worse in Jerusalem than the Persians and the Arabs. If, divine Moscow monarchs, you abandon the Holy Church, what praise will be due to you?.. Do not conclude a peace with the Turks; let them return to the Orthodox all the Holy places. And should the Turks refuse, begin a war. Now is a suitable time: the Sultan has three big armies in Hungary fighting the Emperor. First take the Ukraine, then Moldavia and Wallachia; take Jerusalem also, and then conclude a peace. After all, it was you who asked God that the Turks and Tatars should have a war with the Germans and whose

request was granted: now the time is very favourable, but you do not bother. See how the Moslems laugh at you: the Tatars, they say, are a mere handful of people, and they boast that they exact tribute from you; but the Tatars are subjects of the Turks, so it follows that you too are subjects of the Turks..."

This letter made painful reading in Moscow. A big boyars' Duma assembled. Peter sat on the throne in gloomy silence, attired in the tsar's robes and scapular. The boyars, in rhetorical speeches, referred to the ancient chronicles and deplored the desecration of the shrines. Evening was beginning to turn blue in the windows; the lamp-light streamed onto the faces from the corner. The boyars, rising according to rank and place, threw back their heavy sleeves, and talked, and talked, and talked, wiggled their white fingers—proud foreheads beaded with perspiration, grim eyes, sleek beards and empty speeches going round and round like a toy wheel in the wind. All this set Peter's teeth on edge. No one spoke directly of war, but, glancing covertly at the clerk of the Duma, Vinius, taking down their speeches with two under-clerks, they beat around the bush... They were terrified of uttering the word "war", of upsetting their tranquil existence. Troubles and devastation all over again? They waited for the tsar to speak and, evidently, whatever he said they would approve.

But Peter also had his qualms about shouldering the responsibility of such an important decision: he was still young and had been terrified in childhood. Knitting his brows, he bided his time. Finally, those in Peter's confidence spoke, and quite differently this time—straight to the point. Said Tikhon Streshnev:

"Of course, it is as the sovereign wills... But we boyars must lay down our lives for the desecrated Sepulchre of the Lord and for the honour of the sovereign... They are already laughing in Jerusalem; could any shame be worse? Boyars, ordain that a levy be raised..."

In the timidity of his mind, Lev Kirillovich began to go back even further, to the conversion of Russia to Christianity under Vladimir, but after a glance at the sour expression on Peter's face, he waved his hands:

"We have nothing to fear, boyars... Vassily Golitsyn burned his fingers in the Crimea. But what was the levy fighting with? Wooden stakes. Now, thank God, we have enough

arms. There's my factory in Tula, for instance—we're casting cannon no worse than the Turks. And my harquebuses and pistols are even better. If the tsar so commands, by the month of May I shall deliver at least a hundred thousand spear points and sabres... No, we cannot back out of a war..."

Romodanovsky, his throat hoarse, said:

"If we were on our own, we would think on it further. But the eyes of Europe are upon us. We cannot bide our time, this will mean our unavoidable ruin. This is not the age of Gostomysl, harsh times are upon us. First and foremost we must beat the Tatars."

Silence fell under the low red vaults. Peter chewed his nails. Boris Alexeyevich Golitsyn came in, his head shaven but in Russian dress and looking cheerful. He handed Peter an unfolded sheet of paper. It was a petition from the Moscow merchants: they asked him to defend Golgotha and the Holy Sepulchre, clear the Tatars off the routes to the south and, if possible, found cities on the Black Sea. Vinius, lifting his spectacles to his brow, read the paper aloud in a clear voice. Peter rose so that the Cap of Monomakh all but touched the ceiling.

"Well, boyars—what is your decision?"

He had an ugly look on his face, his mouth was pursed into a chicken's rump. The boyars rose to their feet and bowed:

"As you will, great Sire, raise a levy..."

21

"Gypsy... Listen to me."

"Well?"

"Tell him you were my apprentice in the smithy... And swear by it on the cross."

"Will it be worth it?"

"Of course. We've a lot to look forward to."

"I'm sick of it, Kuzma. I wish they'd get it over with soon."

"They will! Wait and see... They'll tear our nostrils out, flay us alive, and then off to Siberia."

"But that... Maybe... That's terrible..."

"Lev Kirillovich's bailiff was in Moscow and he got a warrant authorising him to look for people he needed in the

gaols and take them to the factory. And that just happens to be my trade—so I talked about it. They remember me... Ah, my friend, you don't forget someone like Kuzma Zhemov in a hurry... They gave me cabbage soup with beef... No beatings, only strict rules. If they call you, say you were my assistant..."

"Cabbage soup with beef?" echoed Gypsy after a moment's thought.

He and Zhemov were talking in a cellar of the Tula gaol. They had already been there nearly a month. So far they had only been thrashed once: that was when they had been caught at the market with stolen goods. (Judas had managed to escape.) They were expecting interrogation and torture. But the governor of Tula with his clerks and under-clerks had themselves ended up under investigation. The prisoners had been forgotten. The gaoler took them out every morning, with their legs still in wooden stocks, to the market to beg for alms. This kept them in food and their gaoler too. And then the unforeseen: instead of Siberia, Lev Kirillovich's arms factory. So their nostrils would remain in one piece after all.

Gypsy said of himself what Zhemov had told him. They were driven from the gaol in their stocks out of town to the Upa River, where some low brick buildings surrounded by a fence stood on the riverside, and the wheels of watermills creaked in a ditch that ran from the river. It was cold, and clouds were trailing up from the north. On the clayey bank, a crowd of convicts was unloading logs, cast iron and ore from boats. There were tree stumps, naked bushes and lifeless fields everywhere. An autumn wind. There was despair in Gypsy's one eye when they went up to the wrought-iron gates at which watchmen stood with poleaxes... As if it wasn't enough that he had been beaten and chased like a wild beast over the land and had the spirit knocked out of him—as if that wasn't enough for him! Now it was to be work, work, work... They wouldn't even let you die in peace.

They were led through the gates into a black yard littered with iron. A rumbling noise, the whine of a saw, the ringing of hammers. Through the smoke-blackened doors could be seen the sparks from the forge. Here, men stripped to the

waist rhythmically swinging their hammers back, up, over and down as they forged a bar; there, a massive hammer driven by a mill-wheel falling on to a billet, sparks spraying into the leathern aprons; over there, fitters standing at the benches. One after another, hand barrows of coal were being carried from the gates over planks to the roof of the squat blast furnace: fire and black smoke were belching out of it. Zhemov gave Gypsy a nudge:

"They'll learn what Kuzma Zhemov can do..."

Some distance from the smithies, in a neat little brick house, a face, clean-shaven, pink as after a bath and surmounted by a bonnet, was looking through a window. This was the factory manager, a German named Kleist. He rapped his tobacco pipe on the window. The guard hastily led Zhemov and Gypsy up to him and explained who they were and from where. Kleist raised the lower sash, put up his head and compressed his lips, his pom-pon dangling down in front of his full face. Gypsy looked at the pom-pon with hostility and terror... "Oh, a killer!" he thought.

The clean table behind Kleist was laid with roast beef, brown rolls and a gilded cup of coffee. The pleasant pipe smoke floated through the window. His stare, cold as ice, froze the very depths of the Russian soul. After having given both prisoners a sufficient looking over, he said slowly:

"If anyone fools me, he'll regret it. Zey're sending me goot-for-nothing mushiks... Zey can't do anysing, ze riffraff. If you're goot smith—well enough... But if you deceive, I can hang you..." (He rapped his pipe on the windowsill.) "Yes, I can hang you. I have ze legal right... Watchman, put ze fools under lock and key..."

On the way, the watchman said to them:

"You see, lads, you have to watch it with him... One slip—oversleeping or laziness—and he shows no mercy."

"We didn't come to stand and stare!" said Zhemov. "We'll show your German a thing or two yet..."

"And who might you be? You're supposed to be thieves and bandits, aren't you? Just what are you in for?"

"Me, my dear fellow, and One-eye here, were on our way to the holy life with the schism, but the devil led us astray..."

"Ah, well, that's another kettle of fish," replied the watchman, undoing the lock on a low door. "We have our routine here, and it goes like this... Go inside, I'll light a candle...

(They went down into a basement. Thin rays of light shone through the holes in the iron lantern and crept over the bunks, wooden tables, a smoke-begrimed stove, and rags hanging on washing lines.) Now here's the routine... At four in the morning, I beat the drum—prayers and go to work. At seven, the drum means it's breakfast time—half an hour... I carry a watch on me, see? (He took out a copper watch as big as a fair-sized turnip and showed it to them.) Then back to work. Dinner at noon and an hour's sleep. Supper at seven—half an hour, and at ten o'clock—to the barracks..."

"Don't people collapse?" asked Gypsy.

"Well, of course, it happens to some. But after all, my dear fellow, this is penal servitude. If you hadn't gone thieving, you'd be lying on your stove at home... We have fifteen free men here: they go back to their huts at seven and sleep there, and they go home for feast days."

"Well, then," asked Gypsy even more hoarsely as he sat on a bunk, "are we in this for good?"

Zhemov, his eyes fixed on the bright holes in the round lantern, began coughing lightly. The watchman mumbled something into his moustaches. He picked up the lantern as he went out.

22

His respectable, pepper-and-salt beard properly combed, his hair greased with butter, a silk belt bearing the names of the forty saints bound under his paps over the pink shirt... Yet it was not even at this, but at the round, well-filled belly of Ivan Artemich Brovkin that the men, his former mates, were staring. But former was the word... Ivan Artemich was sitting on a bench, his hands tucked under his backside. His eyes were stern and unblinking, his breeches of fine cloth, his boots particoloured, of Kazan workmanship and with turned-up toes. But the muzhiks were standing at the door on fresh matting so that their bast shoes would not mark the clean floor.

"Well, now," Ivan Artemich was saying to them, "I'm not against you men. I do what I can, and if I can't do something, don't be angry..."

"We've nowhere to let our chickens out, Ivan Artemich."

"It's no use telling the cattle, they misbehave anyway; they stray onto your hayfield."

"The whole village will thrash the herdsman, if you like."

"That's right, that's right," repeated Ivan Artemich.

"Let us have our cattle."

"Things're too hard for us..."

"I gain little profit from you, muzhiks," replied Ivan Artemich and, taking his hands from under his behind, he folded them with interlaced fingers on his stomach. "I value order, men... I've given you a lot of money—oh dear, such a lot, too..."

"You have, Ivan Artemich. We remember, we remember..."

"Out of the goodness of my heart... Me being a native of these parts. My father died here. So that God is my benefactor, as I am yours. The interest I take from you is a joke... A *grivna* a year from a ruble. Oh dear, oh dear... Not for profit, but as a matter of form..."

"We thank you, Ivan Artemich..."

"Soon I shall leave you altogether... I'm taking on big things, big things... I shall be living in Moscow... Oh, well... (He sighed and closed his eyes.) If I had to live on you alone, I would live badly, badly... For old time's sake, for the good of my soul, I do you a kindness. And what do you do? How do you thank me? With trespass. With abuse. Oh dear, oh dear... Well, all right, then... An altyn for a cow, a *denga* for a sheep, and you can take your cattle..."

"Thank you. May God give you good health, Ivan Artemich..."

The men bowed and went out. He wanted to say more. He was in a good mood today. Through his son Alyosha he had been able to see Alexander Menshikov and pay his respects with two hundred rubles. Menshikov had introduced him to Lefort. Brovkin had never moved in such exalted circles; he had turned shy on seeing the small man with the hair down to his waist, all in silk and velvet, with rings on his fingers that shimmered with lights... Stern, nose in the air, eyes like needles... But when Lefort learned that this was Alyosha's father, and, what was more, with a letter from Menshikov, he smiled and clapped the other on the shoulder... And so Ivan Artemich obtained a commission for the delivery of oats and hay to the army...

"Sanka," he called, when the men had gone. "Put away the matting... Our friends have soiled it..."

There were wrinkles of amusement in the corners of Ivan Artemich's eyes. A rich man can afford to laugh, after all.

He had not been able to do so from the time when he had been a child at the breast until his beard had already turned grey. Sanka came in wearing a grass-green buttoned-up silk gown. Her fair braid, as thick as your arm, came down to her calves; her stomach protruding slightly, her breast very full—it was embarrassing. Her eyes were dark-blue and foolish...

"Ugh, they've dirtied it with their bast shoes!" She averted her beautiful face from the matting, took it by the corner with her fingers and threw it into the passage. Ivan Artemich eyed his daughter craftily. He wouldn't be ashamed to give that one away to a king.

"I mean to put up a stone house in Moscow... We're going to join the First Merchant Guild... Sanka, listen to me. It's a good thing we didn't rush you. We shall be in with big people. What are you looking away for? Fool!"

"Oh dear!" Sanka's plait bobbed across the room, her eyes glittered at her father. "Leave me alone..."

"What d'you mean, leave me alone? I'll do as I like... If you annoy me, I'll marry you off to a herdsman."

"Better pasture the swine with someone than die a slow death because of your block-headedness..."

Ivan Artemich threw the wooden salt cellar at her. He couldn't be bothered to get up and beat her... Sanka wailed, but shed no tears. At that moment, someone banged on the gates so loudly that Ivan Artemich's jaw dropped. The guard dogs began barking.

"Sanka, take a look..."

"I'm scared. Go yourself..."

"I'll deal with those rowdies..." Ivan Artemich picked up a broom in the passage and went down into the yard. "I'll fix you, you brutes. Who are you? I'll set the dogs on you..."

"Open," yelled somebody furiously on the other side of the gates.

Brovkin took fright. His hands shaking, he ran to the gates. Hardly had he slid back the bolt when they flew open and in rode men on horseback, richly dressed and with unsheathed sabres. Behind them was a gilt carriage and four with Arab dwarfs on the footboard. Behind them, in a trap, came tsar Peter and Lefort in three-cornered hats and cloaks to protect them from the mud on the road... Trampling, laughter, guffaws, shouts.

Brovkin's legs gave way under him. While he was on his

knees, the riders dismounted and the Prince-Pope alighted from the carriage, puffy-faced, sleepy, dressed in German style. After him came a young boyar in a silver caftan. As he went up onto the porch with Lefort, Peter shouted in a deep voice:

"Where's the owner? Bring him here alive or dead!"

Ivan Artemich wet his breeches. At this point, Menshikov and Brovkin's son Alyosha noticed him, dashed up, seized him by the arms and dragged him to the porch. They held him up to stop him going down on his knees. Instead of giving him a thrashing or worse, Peter doffed his hat and gave him a low bow:

"Greetings, kind sir... We hear you have beautiful wares for sale... We've brought a merchant... We won't be stingy..."

Ivan Artemich stood there speechless with his mouth open... Crazy thoughts flitted through his mind: "Has some swindle been found out? I must keep quiet, I must keep quiet..." The tsar and Lefort guffawed and the others choked with laughter. Alyosha managed to whisper to his father: "They've come with a suitor for Sanka." Although Ivan Artemich had already guessed from the merriment that they wished him no harm, he went on pretending to be an oaf... He was a man of considerable acumen... And so, seemingly out of his wits with terror, he went with the guests into the best room. He was made to sit down under the icons with the tsar on his right and the Prince-Pope on his left. Brovkin covertly tried to see who the bridegroom was. Suddenly, he froze: between the bridegroom's men, Alyosha and Menshikov, sat his former master, Vassily Volkov, in a silver coat. Ivan Artemich had long since paid off his bondsman's deed and could now have bought his master up with all his patrimony and serfs... It was not his spirit that was afraid, it was his whipped posterior.

"Is the bridegroom not to your liking then?" asked Peter suddenly. More guffaws... Volkov's lips writhed under the curled moustaches. Menshikov winked at Peter:

"Has he remembered some old grievances, perhaps?" (With a wink at Brovkin.) "Did the bridegroom once pull your hair, maybe? Or break his knout on you? Forgive him, for Christ's sake... Be reconciled..."

What answer could he give to that? His arms and legs were shaking... He looked at Volkov, who was pale and submissively meek... Suddenly, he remembered how Alyosha had

interceded for him in the courtyard at Preobrazhenskoye and how Volkov had run over the snow after Menshikov, and had beseeched him, had clutched at him, had all but burst into tears...

"Aha," thought Ivan Artemich, "the real fool here isn't me, that's plain..." He glanced at Volkov and was so delighted that he had nearly ruined the whole thing... But now he knew what was expected of him: dangerous sport, walking the tight rope over a chasm... Very well, then...

All eyes were on him. Ivan Artemich covertly made the sign of the cross over his navel under the table and bowed to Peter and the Prince-Pope.

"Thank you for the honour, matchmakers... For Christ's sake, forgive us country bumpkins if we unwittingly offended you in any way... We are, of course, trades-people, rude unlettered peasants. We put things simply. Our girl has waited too long, that's the trouble... We'd be glad to marry her off to the next drunk that comes... (He glanced at Peter in horror, but it was all right: the tsar spluttered with laughter.) We can't understand why the suitors avoid our house. The girl's beautiful, a bit blind in one eye, but the other's all right. And some imp's blasted her face with peas; but a face can be covered with a kerchief... (Volkov glared darkly at Ivan Artemich.) She drags one leg, her head shakes, and her side's twisted... But that's all... Take her, dear matchmakers, take my darling child... (Brovkin was so carried away that he snivelled and wiped his eyes.) "Alexandra, child," he called in a pathetic voice. "Come and join us... Alyosha, go fetch your sister... She may be sitting in the earth closet—she has a bad stomach. Excuse me, I should have mentioned that before... Bring the bride..."

Volkov was about to rush out from behind the table. Menshikov held him down by force. No one laughed, but Peter's chin trembled.

"Thank you, dear matchmakers," said Brovkin. "We have taken a great liking to the suitor. We shall be as a father to him: pat him on the head and smack him if he is naughty. If I lash you with the knout or grab you by the hair, don't be cross, son-in-law; we're taking you into a peasant's family..."

The whole table roared, clutching their sides in their merriment. Volkov gritted his teeth, his cheeks burned with shame and his eyes filled with tears. Alyosha pulled the

resisting Sanka in from the passage. She hid her face with her sleeve. Peter jumped up and pulled her arms away. The laughter died down, Sanka was so beautiful: brows as straight as arrows, dark eyes, downy eyelashes, tip-tilted nose, trembling, child-like lips, even teeth chattering, apple cheeks... Peter kissed her on the lips and on the flaming cheeks.

"Sanka, it's the tsar himself, mind how you go..." shouted Brovkin.

She threw back her head and looked Peter in the face. Her heart was beating audibly. Peter took her by the shoulders, led her to the table and pointed at Vassily Volkov.

"Well, have we brought you a bad bridegroom?"

Sanka forgot herself: she should have been shy, but she fixed her blazing eyes on the groom like a lunatic. Suddenly, she sighed and said in a whisper: "Oh, Mother..." Peter seized her again to kiss her...

"Hey, matchmaker, that won't do," said the Prince-Pope. "Let the girl be..."

Sanka hid her face in the hem of her skirt. Alyosha, laughing, took her away. Volkov was pinching his moustaches, clearly, his mind was now at ease.

"Those who abide in our father Bacchus shall love one another, brethren," intoned the Prince-Pope. "We ask for wine and snacks..."

Ivan Artemich jumped and bestirred himself with alacrity. The labourers were catching chickens in the yard. Alyosha, smiling guiltily, laid the table. Sanka's broken voice was heard: "Matryona, get the keys—they're in the best room under the icon of Forty Martyrs..." Peter shouted to Volkov: "Be thankful for the girl, Vaska." And Volkov, bowing, kissed his hand... Ivan Artemich himself brought in the scrambled eggs on a frying pan. Peter said to him, seriously this time:

"Thank you for the entertainment, it's been fun. But Ivan, remember your place and don't overstep the mark..."

"As if I would dare did you not wish it. I've been out of my wits with fear all the time."

"Oh, yes, we know you, you devils... But make haste with the wedding. The bridegroom must be off to the wars soon. Hire a girl from Kukui to teach your daughter la politesse and dancing... When we come back from the campaign, I shall take Sanka to my court..."

Chapter Six

In February 1695, from the Postelny Porch in the Kremlin, Vinius, clerk of the Duma, announced to all squires, life guards, scriveners, nobles of Moscow and nobles of the towns that they should assemble in Belgorod and Sevsk with their men-at-arms and bodyguards under boyar Boris Petrovich Sheremetev for a campaign against the Crimea.

Sheremetev was an experienced and cautious military leader. In April, having mustered a hundred and twenty thousand serving troops and having joined forces with the Little Russian Cossacks, he slowly moved off towards the lower reaches of the Dnieper, where stood the ancient fortress of Ochakov and the Turkish fortified towns of Kizikerman, Arslan-Ordek, Shakhkerman and—on an island in the Dnieper estuary—Sokoliny Castle, with iron chains stretched from it to the banks to bar egress to the sea.

The huge Moscow army advanced on these towns and laid siege to them all that summer. There was not enough money; there were not enough arms and not enough cannon, and there was a long correspondence with Moscow over all kinds of trivialities. They nevertheless managed to take Kizikerman by storm in August and two other small towns as well. There was a great feast in Sheremetev's camp to celebrate the occasion. The guns were fired in the trenches with each toast, to the terror of the Turks and the Tatars. When the Russians wrote of the victory to Moscow, they began saying with relief in the capital: "At last! We've only bitten a piece back off the Crimea, but at least that's something to be proud of!"

In the spring, secretly, without any announcement, twenty thousand of the best troops—the Preobrazhensky, Semyonovsky and Lefort's regiments, the streltsy, the soldiers and the companies of clerks—boarded galleys and boats at All Saints Bridge on the Moskva River and to music and

cannon fire the convoy, many versts long, set off for the Oka River, to proceed from there to the Volga to Tsaritsyn.

General Gordon, with a detachment of twelve thousand men, moved off over the steppe towards Cherkassk.

Both armies were heading for the Turkish fortress of Azov on the sea of that name. It was here that the Turks held the trade routes to the east and to the grain-growing steppes of the Kuban and the Terek. The move against Azov was decided on at a council of war by Lefort, Gordon, Artamon Golovin and Peter. In order to avoid publicity and to cheat the Turks of a great honour, it was ordered that Peter should be addressed in the army as Bombardier Peter Alexeyev... (which also meant less humiliation in the event of a fiasco). They debated a great deal at the Council about who should be left in charge of Moscow. The people were restless. Gangs of robbers were loitering about very close to the capital and it had become so dangerous to travel that the roads were overgrown with grass. The dreaded enemy, Sophia, was in the Novodevichy Convent. True, she was lying low and keeping quiet... But would it be for long?

One man could be relied on without hesitation, one man was loyal without cunning, one man could frighten the people. This was Fyodor Yurievich Romodanovsky, the Prince-Emperor of the play campaigns and the all-clownish assembly. It was he who was left to govern Moscow. And in order that people should not snigger into their sleeves because of his past, it was ordained that he should be addressed as Prince-Emperor and His Majesty in real earnest. The boyars remembered that there had been a similar case a hundred years before, when Ivan the Terrible, on leaving for the Alexandrovsky settlement, installed in Moscow as "tsar of all Russia" the half-buffoon, half-scarecrow Tatar Prince Simeon Bekbulatovich. They remembered and submitted. But the people did not care whether he was the Prince-Emperor or the Devil incarnate; they knew only that Romodanovsky was ruthless and had no qualms about spilling blood.

Bombardier Peter Alexeyev sailed at the head of the convoy on Lefort's many-oared galley. They had a taste of trouble en route. The boats and barges, which had been built by the merchants and the tsar's traders, sprang leaks and sank. In the foggy spring nights they lost their way in the shallows and ran aground. They had to transfer to Volga barges at Nizhny Novgorod. Peter wrote to Romodanovsky:

"Myn Herr König... For Your Sovereign mercy we must shed our blood to the last drop, which is indeed why we were sent... Concerning matters here, I report that your servants Generals Artamon Mikhailovich and Franz Yakovlevich, with all their troops are well, by God's grace... And are resolved to set out tomorrow... We have waited for some vessels which were three days coming... The vessels built by the traders are very poor, and some barely got here... Of the soldiery, a small number have died to this date... Wherefore I throw myself on the protection of your generosity... Ever Your Most Illustrious Majesty's slave Bom Bar Dier Peter."

They sailed without stopping past Kazan, where the river washed the white city walls. They passed Simbirsk with its high banks, and the little town of Samara ringed with a wooden stockade on earth ramparts as a defence against the nomads. After Saratov, the grassy banks were lost in the shimmering heat-haze, the pale-blue river flowed sluggishly, the steppe gave off waves of heat like an oven.

Peter, Lefort, Sasha, and the Prince-Pope (who had been taken on the campaign for sport and drunken entertainment) smoked their pipes all day on the high poop of the galley. When they looked at the miles-long convoy of vessels glittering with the strokes of the oars, it seemed that this was a continuation of the same merry military games. What sort of fortress was Azov? How could it be taken? They didn't really know; that would be clearer when they were on the spot. The Prince-Pope, tipsy and mellow, would say, as he scratched the peeling skin from his nose:

"We've lived to see the day, sonny... It doesn't seem long since I was teaching you figures... Now we've sailed to war... Ah, my dear fellow..."

Lefort marvelled at the luxurious splendour of the river: it seemed to have neither end nor limits.

"What price the King of France, what price the Emperor of Austria?" he said. "Oh, if only you had a little more money, Peter... You could hire more engineers from Europe, more officers, more brainy people... What a great country, what a wild and desolate country!"

The convoy anchored at Tsaritsyn. And here the mishaps began. It turned out that there were only five hundred horses. The soldiers, their hands raw with rowing, had to manhandle the guns and wagon trains. There were shortages of bread,

millet and oil. For three days, the tired, famished troops crossed the steppe, heading for the little town of Panshino on the way to the Don, where the main provision warehouses were. Many collapsed. They had thought of resting in Panshino. But from there a letter was sent by the boyar Tikhon Streshnev who was in charge of supplies for the whole army:

"Mister Bombardier... We have suffered grievously because of thieving contractors. Traders Voronin, Ushakov and Gorezin undertook to deliver 15,000 buckets of mead, 45,000 buckets of vinegar and as many of vodka, 20,000 salt sturgeon and as many bream, perch-pike and pike, 10,000 poods of ham, 5,000 of oil and lard, 8,000 of salt... The contractors received thirty-three thousand rubles. Of that sum, they have embezzled half. There is not a pound of salt. The fish stinks so much that you cannot enter the ware house... The grain is mouldy. Only the oats and the hay are in good condition—these having been delivered by the merchant Ivan Brovkin... This robbery must cost you much chagrin, Sire, and our soldiers, much distress. Now only God can ensure that you are not delayed in your military enterprise..."

Peter and Lefort left the army and galloped on ahead to Panshino. The small Cossack village on the island in the middle of the Don was surrounded by wagon-shafts as if by a burned-out forest. Long-horned bullocks were lying on the ground everywhere, and hobbled horses were out at pasture. But there was not a soul to be seen anywhere. Sentries, watchmen, wagoners and soldiers were all asleep in the post-prandial hour. The hoof-beats of the riders alone rang out desolately over the Don. In reply to a frenzied shout from Peter, a tousled head bobbed up out of the hemp from behind a wattle fence. Scratching himself, the peasant led them to the hut in which the boyar had his quarters... Peter tore open the door and there was a buzz of startled flies. Streshnev, his head covered, was asleep on two benches drawn up together. Peter tore off the blanket. He clutched the terrified boyar by his thin hair and, speechless with rage, spat in his face, dragged him down onto the earth floor and kicked the old man again and again in his soft sides with his thigh-boots.

Breathing heavily, he sat down at the table and ordered that the shutters be opened. His eyes were bulging. His haggard, sunburnt face was blotchy with rage.

"Report!.. On your feet!" he shouted at Streshnev. "Sit

down. Have you hanged the contractors? No? Why?"

"Sire..." (Peter stamped his foot.) "Mister Bonbandier... (Tikhon Streshnev was afraid to groan with pain and afraid to bow.) "Let the contractors first deliver what they should according to the list, since we can't hope for anything from the dead..."

"Not so... Fool... Why doesn't Ivan Brovkin steal? My people don't steal, but yours steal all the time?.. All the contracts are to go to Brovkin... Clap Ushakov and Voronin in irons and send them to Romodanovsky in Moscow..."

"So, goot," said Lefort.

"What else? Are the boats not ready?"

"Mister Bonbandier, all the boats are ready...The last ones were sent from Voronezh some time ago."

"Let's go to the river..."

In his Morocco leather house shoes and unbelted blouse, Streshnev set off at a shaky trot after the tsar, who stalked along as if on stilts. More vessels than could be counted were lying in rows at a mirror-smooth bend in the Don River: boats, punts, Cossack boats with reed floats, long-nosed galleys with oars in the forward half, with a square-rigged sail and a deck-house on the poop... All were straight from the shipyard. They were rocking slightly in the current. Many had shipped water. The flags hung limply. The unpainted timbers creaked under the hot sun and the tarred sides glistened.

Lefort, one leg forward in its yellow thigh-boot, peered through a spy-glass at the convoy.

"Sehr gut... Enough vessels there..."

"Goot," repeated Peter abruptly. His begrimed hands were shaking. And, as always, Lefort put the tsar's thoughts into words.

"This is where the war begins."

"Don't be angry, Tikhon Nikityevich." Peter pecked the snivelling Streshnev on the beard. "The troops are to embark on the boats immediately. No delay... We'll take Azov by storm..."

At dawn on the sixth day, in Streshnev's cabin, a letter was written in the tobacco smoke to the Prince-Emperor:

"Myn Herr König... Your father, the Great Lord and His Holiness Janikita, Archbishop of Pressburg and Patriarch of All the Yauza and Kukui, likewise your humble vassals. Generals Artamon Mikhailovich and Franz Yakovlevich and

their comrades are in good health, and we are now sailing from Panshino on our voyage in equally good health... We toil without cease in the yoke of Mars. We drink vodka to your health and even more beer..." The signatures underneath were almost indecipherable: "Franchishka Lefort... Oleksa – shka Menshikov... Fetka Troyekurov... Petrushka Alexeyev, Artamoshka Golovin... Varenoi Madamkin..."

For a week they sailed past the Cossack townships on the islands in the middle of the Don. They went past Goluboi, Zimoveisky, Tsimlyansky, Razdory, Manych... On the high right bank of the river they saw the ramparts, wattle fences and oak walls of Cherkassk. Here they cast anchor and for three days waited while the dilatory punts caught up with them.

Having pulled the convoy together, they moved off towards Azov. The night was mild, visibility was nil, there was a smell of rain and grass. The grasshoppers chirruped. Strange were the cries of the night birds. On the leading galley, Lefort's, no one slept, or lit any pipes, or cracked jokes. The oars splashed slowly.

For the first time Peter felt the eeriness of danger all over his skin. Darkness glided nearby along the bank. Vague outlines. If he listened, he could hear the rustling of leaves. At any moment, a Tatar bowstring could twang in the gloom! He curled up his toes. Far to the south, the lightning of a storm flickered in the clouds. The sound of the thunder did not reach them.

"We'll hear General Gordon's cannon in the morning," said Lefort.

The sky cleared towards daybreak. The Cossack helmsman steered his galley, and the whole convoy after it, up the Koisoga River. The Don now lay to starboard. A hot sun rose, the river seemed to swell, the banks receded, the gloom dissolved over the water meadows. The shining ribbon of the Don reappeared in front of them, beyond the sands. Canvas tents, wagons and horses could be seen on the slopes. Flags fluttered. This was the main army camp, pitched by Gordon at Mitishi Jetty, fifteen versts from Azov.

Peter himself fired the cannon in the bows and the ball skipped over the water. There was rifle and cannon fire all along the convoy. Peter shouted, his bass voice breaking: "Row, row!" The oars bent into arcs, the soldiers pulled away with bowed heads.

The troops disembarked at Mitishi Jetty. The exhausted soldiers began falling asleep where they were on the sand, but the NCOs got them to their feet with sticks. Soon, white tents mushroomed and the smoke of camp fires drifted towards the river. Peter, Lefort and Golovin galloped with three Cossack detachments over the hills to Gordon's fortified encampment halfway to Azov. The general's many-coloured tent could be seen on a kurgan from afar.

On the way, they saw broken wagons and horses, pierced with arrows, lying on the ground. A little Tatar, naked to the waist, the back of his head covered with coagulated blood, lay with his face in the wormwood. Peter's mount snorted and rolled its eyes.

"As soon as our wagon trains left Mitishi," the Cossacks told him, "the Tatars came at us in swarms. These parts are the worst. Look!" and they pointed with their whips. "They're lurking behind the hills... That's where they are... They'll be coming at us any moment now..."

The riders spurred their horses on towards the kurgan. Gordon was standing outside his tent in steel armour and a plumed helmet with a spy-glass held against his side. His wrinkled face was stern and grave. The bugles sounded and the cannon thundered. From the kurgan, as on the palm of one's hand, could be seen the bay illumined by the setting sun, the slender minarets and the greyish-yellow walls of Azov; a fire on the site of the settlement burned by the Turks on the day of the Russian approach; the broken lines of the trenches and the pentagons of the redoubts ran over the dark brown hills in front of the fortress. Tall ships armed with many guns stood far out in the windless bay, their sails hanging limp. Gordon pointed to them:

"Last week, the Turks brought one and a half thousand janissaries from Kafa by sea. The same ships have just arrived with troops... We took a prisoner and questioned him yesterday. He may or may not be lying; anyway, he says there are about six thousand men in the fortress and there's the Tatar horse in the steppe. They're not short of anything—the sea's theirs... We won't starve the fortress into submission..."

"We'll take it by storm," said Lefort, with a flick of his glove.

Golovin chimed in confidently:

"Do or die... What's it to us?"

Peter stared enchanted at the strip of the Sea of Azov, at the walls, at the crescents glittering on the minarets, at the ships, at the gorgeous light of the sunset. It was as if his favourite childhood pictures had come to life: here it was—the unknown land!"

"Well, what do you think, Pyotr Ivanovich? Why don't you say something? Shall we take Azov?"

"We must," replied Gordon, the lines deepening grimly at the corners of his mouth.

A map was fetched from the tent and spread out on a drum. The generals stooped over it. Peter marked with his thumbnail the places where the troops were to take up position. Gordon in the middle, about five hundred paces from the fortress, Lefort on the left, Golovin on the right.

"The breaching battery will be here, and the mortars—here... We'll bring up the approach trenches from here... Is that right, Pyotr Ivanovich?"

"You can do that all right," replied Gordon, "but we'll still have the Tatar horse in our rear."

"We'll have to smash them... We'll throw the Cossacks against them..."

"Yes, we could smash them... I tell you, it's going to be difficult delivering provisions from Mitishi Jetty. It won't be easy, sending a large body of troops with each wagon train..."

"Listen, generals, why shouldn't we deliver the supplies on boats?"

The generals lowered their perukes over the map.

"It would be even more difficult on boats," said Gordon. "The Don is barricaded with chains. There are two watch-towers there with very heavy guns in the estuary."

"Seize the towers! Well, generals?"

"Two towers!" laughed Golovin and he screwed up his fine, slightly stupid eyes as he stared at the visible top of a circular, crenellated tower in the west beyond the hills.

"Why not?" replied Gordon after a moment's thought. "We could take the towers..."

"Well, good luck, Pyotr Ivanovich!" Peter pinched Gordon's cheeks and kissed him. "Strike camp tomorrow and move up to the fortress. And we'll leave with the whole army immediately. We'll bombard Azov for a day or two, and then we'll attack..."

The faint sound of a horn came from the Turkish ships. They were announcing sunset. The evening shadows were creeping across the bay. The tops of the minarets still glowed red, but they also faded soon. Only the dry chirping of the grasshoppers could be heard in the air. Peter stepped into the tent; two candles were burning on a well-laden table. They sat down on drums. There was a steaming bowl of mutton. Peter hungrily plunged both hands into it. Lefort took off his armour so as to enjoy himself in comfort and poured Hungarian wine into the pewter mugs. When the red-faced Golovin croaked: "To the first bombardier!" "A toast! A toast!" ran from the tent into the darkness along the thin line of soldiers. The candle flames quivered at the gunfire. "Good!" shouted Peter. Lefort laughed as he filled the mugs:

"This is a good life, Peter..."

"Have you any girl sutlers with you in the camp?" asked Golovin, also unfastening his armour. Lefort and Peter roared with laughter.

"Varenoi Madamkin's the one to fix you up there!"

"Send a rider for Varenoi..."

The next morning, Gordon moved off towards Azov with two regiments of streltsy as reinforcements. The advance Cossack troops moved up at a trot on to a brown height in front of the fortress and began the siege there and then. Several Cossacks galloped back to the infantry who were marching up in four columns and shouted: "Tatars!.. Watch out! Bring out the guns!" The Tatar horse fanned out into a crescent on the right of the height. There were up to ten thousand of them. They were gathering speed and the dust was rising more and more thickly. Arrows flew. The Cossack detachments were thrown into confusion. Some riders, bending low over their mounts, galloped back. In vain did the colonels order them to wave their standards: the whole Cossack host headed back at a gallop without drawing their sabres. But the Tatars were already outflanking them on the right; the little horses swarmed over the steppe, the curved sabres whirled overhead. Yelling. Dust. Some of the Cossacks turned round—to hack away. Confusion and collisions. The infantry came up at the double and formed rectangles. The streltsy hauled the guns up with ropes. The Tatar crescent was closing in. There were ragged salvoes.

The height was screened by layers of smoke. A maddened horse rushed past. A Tatar rolled over and over on the ground. A cannon ball whistled. Ragged volleys were fired. Men discharged their muskets and shouted frenziedly. The officers rushed about. All this noise was blotted out by the thunder of the breaching guns. No one could understand clearly who was fighting whom. Then something happened and things became easier.

The smoke drifted away and there was no sign of Tatars or Turks. Only fallen horses, their legs thrashing, and many human bodies, motionless or twitching, lay scattered over the brown earth. Ahead, on a hill, General Gordon was sitting on a black horse. His iron back glittered. His spy-glass was held against his side. His little white-haired head protruded like a ball from his armour, his helmet having been knocked off. He slowly waved his sword and started off down the hill at a walking pace towards Azov. From among the troops came shouts of "Forward! Forward! Bravely!"

Gordon's detachment was digging in, surrounding itself with trenches and setting up chevaux de frise close to the fortress. The Turks were firing their cannon from the walls at the camp and causing great terror. Whenever a bomb landed and began hissing and spinning, the colonels, officers, squires and various courtiers would fall on their faces and cover themselves with their cuffs... These bombs were not toys, they were not pots filled with peas. They burst with a great noise and a column of earth would shoot up, so that the white-faced troops could only cross themselves, incapable of doing anything else... Only Gordon, stern and imperturbable, walked up and down the camp, not turning round at the ugly whistle of the shells and shouting to the soldiers that they should not bow down to the Turkish balls:

"I'll have you punished for bowing. It's not good to be a coward. *Eine Schande, eine Schande!* Shame! And a Russian soldier, too..."

As he had predicted, things turned out badly with food supplies, and especially the drinking water. In a series of savage forays, the Tatars smashed up the wagon trains moving up from Mitishi Jetty. There was no hope of overcoming the enemy on their light mounts: they showered arrows on the Russians without engaging battle and rushed away into the steppe. Finally, work on the camp finished and the men took shelter from the shells in the deep trenches.

Only on the fourth day did the troops of Lefort and Golovin move up to their positions with music, drums, and banners flying.

Peter strode importantly in front of the Bombardier Company. With it, as rankers, marched Menshikov, Alyosha Brovkin, Volkov, and the Dutchman Jakob Jansen, recently taken into service as a skilled gunner. In front of Peter, an enormous man with a bear's nose and thick lips was strutting along and clashing a pair of kettledrums. This was the tsar's latest drinking companion, a drummer named Varenoi Madamkin, a terrible rascal and tippler.

Peter proceeded into Gordon's camp with some of the bombardiers. (Lefort's troops on the left flank and Golovin's on the right were hastily digging in.) The redoubts, surrounded by fascines and sandbags, had been moved some five hundred paces nearer the stone walls of the fortress. There, in the embrasures, could be seen the fezzes and keen eyes of the Turkish sharpshooters. Leaning on Sasha's shoulder, Peter jumped up onto the fascines. Gordon rushed to pull him back:

" *Achtung!* Look out!"

A long musket barrel in an embrasure emitted a puff of smoke and the spy-glass shot out of Peter's hand. He jumped back into the trench and bent down. The others rushed up to him. He bared his teeth in a sickly smile.

"Damn! The dogs!" he said with an effort. "Give me a slow-match..."

The bombardiers trundled up a squat brass mortar, its muzzle pointing at the sky. Skilfully (glancing at the soldiers) Peter thrust in a bag of powder, tossed and caught a twenty-pound bomb in his hands, straightened the fuse, then rolled the bomb into the mortar. He squatted down and set the sights.

"God bless you, number one... Off you go!"

The mortar belched a fiery cloud. The round bomb curved high into the air and fell near the fortress wall. The Turks stuck their heads through the embrasures and shouted something obscene. Peter went red in the face. Another mortar was wheeled for him.

Under the high walls of Azov they felt ashamed at the very thought of their recent bravado about taking the for-

tress by storm. The besieging army, after building batteries and redoubts, spent two weeks hurling bombs. Fires broke out in the town. One of the watchtowers collapsed. (There was revelry in Peter's dugout on this occasion.) But twenty galleys brought the Turks reinforcements from the sea. The fires were being put out. In the nighttime, the janissaries crawled up like serpents with their curved knives and stabbed the sentries. The walls still stood, hopelessly impregnable. Things were particularly bad with deliveries of food supplies. The generals at a council of war decided to call for volunteers and promised ten rubles to each man if the watchtower was taken. About two hundred Don Cossacks responded. They were given a regiment of foot as reinforcements. At night, working their way up to the tower, which was on the left bank, they tried to blow up the gates but failed, then breached the wall with crowbars and burst in. There were about thirty Turks inside. Four were cut down, the others were tied up. The Cossacks seized the fifteen guns and fired them across the Don at the other tower so fiercely that the Turks fled from there too. It was a great exploit: the Don was free. Thanksgiving services were held in the camps and the Prince-Pope came to the feast from Mitishi.

Then disaster struck. A hot spell set in that lasted for days. By noon, the men were wandering about completely enervated, looking for shade. They had no will to fight, no spirit. Cabbage soup with dried fish was distributed in cans and a glass of vodka was issued per man. An intolerable heat came from the shaggy sun, the grasshoppers chirped, the flies stuck to the skin, there was a stench of excrement, and the walls and towers of Azov seemed to quiver in the heat. In accordance with the time-honoured custom, all lay down for a rest in the camp after dinner and then dozed off, so that the whole Russian army was snoring, from the general all the way down to the cook. The sentries nodded at their posts.

It was during one of these siestas that the Dutch bombardier Jakob Jansen disappeared. The first to miss him was Peter when, between one and two in the afternoon, he crawled out of the dugout, yawning and squinting in the white daylight. They had intended to knock down the minaret with three bombs. Jansen had wagered that he would do it...

"Has the Devil carried him off, or what?" croaked Peter.

They searched the whole camp high and low. One soldier said that he had seen a man in a red coat with a sack and other things running towards the fortress. Peter lost his temper and hit the soldier on the chin. But there was, indeed, no sign of Jansen's possessions in the dugout. Had he gone over to the Turks? Orders were given for anathema to be pronounced on the accursed Dutchman in all the regiments. Gordon, deeply upset by this treachery, demanded a council of war and announced that the defence works in the camps of Golovin and Lefort were being carried out sloppily and irresponsibly, there were no communication trenches between the camps, and if the Turks made a sortie, the outcome could be disastrous.

"War is no joke, Generals... We are responsible for the men's lives. But you people here are all playing games and joking..."

Lefort's lips went white with rage. Golovin glared at Gordon like a bull. But Gordon insisted that the defence line should be put into order at once:

"In war, one must above all fear the enemy, Generals."

"We should fear *them*?"

"We'll squash them like flies..."

"Oh, no, Generals, Azov is no fly..."

The generals began to curse Gordon, calling him a coward and a dog. Without Peter there, they would have torn his peruke off his head.

That day, when the whole army was fast asleep after lunch, the Turks opened the fortress gates and raced noiselessly to those very uncompleted trenches in the zone between the two camps.

Half the streltsy were cut down while still asleep. Others, throwing away their pole-axes and muskets, ran to the sixteen-gun battery, also only half-fortified. They did not have the chance to fire the guns: the Turks overtook the streltsy as they ran, climbed into the redoubt with their curved yataghans, heads bent, and hurled themselves yelling into a huddled bench of gunners, where Gordon's son, Colonel Yakov, was brandishing a cleaning-rod.

There was confusion and firing in the camps. Peter stood on the roof of the dugout, his fists clenched, spluttering with agitation... It was useless to shout or give orders. The still sleepy men were dashing about as if crazed. He saw Gordon climb over the rampart with levelled pistols

and trot with an old man's gait to the redoubt to try to save his son. After him surged a disorganised mass of green, red and blue coats. The banner was being waved frantically on the rampart of Lefort's camp, from which a tightly packed bunch of men had also made a dash to the rescue. The whole field was covered with soldiers. The captured redoubt was veiled in smoke: the Turks were firing to cover their retreat, taking the cannon away with them and running back up the incline to the fortress. They slithered down the ramparts of the redoubt, beating off the Russians, firing back, their red pantaloons flashing. The Russians, who were scattered all over the field, were now closing up into a ragged line which quickly moved off towards the fortress after the Turks. From the dugout in which Peter was watching, it all looked like a game... Ours are winning! The Turks, with the Russians in pursuit, slithered down into the fortress ditch.

"A horse!" yelled Peter. "Charge! Buglers!"

He stamped his feet. But no one listened to him. Sasha Menshikov galloped past, his eyes glazed. He belaboured his horse with the flat of his sword and sailed over the ditch... "Hurraaah!" roared his open mouth. The drums rolled. And suddenly something happened. The Turks ran up to the walls. The gates opened. Out streamed a mob of janissaries; someone riding a white horse and dressed all in scarlet and with a big turban on his head, threw up his hands... Such a terrifying shriek came through the shouting that Peter shuddered... The Russians were already running back again with Turkish horse and foot in pursuit... Men were falling, more and more of them. Peter clutched his head in his hands... He caught sight of Sasha again; he was racing towards the one in the red robes and the big turban. They collided... Wreaths of gunsmoke... Bombs bursting... Maddened horses. People grew taller as they came running back, their faces distorted with horror... They scrambled over the breastworks into the trench. Beaten... Beaten...

This fiasco cost nearly five hundred men, one colonel, ten officers and an entire battery. For several days, Peter did not even look at the fortress on which the Turks were grinning down at them. Only Sasha could swagger about

with his bloodied sword; he was a hero, after all... The men in the camps were in low spirits... That was a right nap, that was! Lefort and Golovin kept out of the way, and all that could be seen in their camps now was the soil flying from the spades...

Peter was staggered by the disaster. He went about gloomy and uncommunicative, as if he had suddenly grown up these last few days. It was an obsession with him now: even if it meant bringing Russia to the end of her tether, Azov would be taken! In the evenings, sitting and smoking under the stars outside his dugout, he questioned Gordon about warfare, about good fortune, about famous military leaders. Gordon said:

"The military leader is fortunate who fights with porridge and a spade, who is stubborn and careful... If the zoldat has faith in his leader and that zoldat is well fed, he fights bravely..."

Peter no longer wasted time firing the guns at the fortress. He spent his days on the earthworks and in the approach trenches which the troops were bringing nearer foot by foot to the fortress. Throwing off his coat and peruke, he would dig, weave fascines and eat with the soldiers.

As seen from the river, Azov stood on a low hill. Gordon advised building earthworks with batteries opposite the fortress on the island. The man who undertook this dangerous venture was the evil-tempered and obstinate Yakov Dolgoruky. He was prepared to lose his life in quest of honour. He occupied the island at night with two regiments and dug in. In the morning, the Turks realised the danger and a strong detachment with Tatar horse began to cross over to the right bank of the Don in order to drive the Russians off the island from there. Gordon sent both generals a request to go and rescue Dolgoruky. Without waiting any longer, he moved off with his guns and cavalry, halting behind the chevaux de frise below the island.

The Turks took fright and stopped. And so there they stood, Gordon on the left bank, Dolgoruky, terrified, on the island, and the Turks, also dismayed, on the right bank... Lefort and Golovin temporised, then decided not to leave their camps at all: Gordon had rubbed them both the wrong way. "Let him manage on his own..."

Peter watched the troop movements from the height of the redoubt and, like everybody else, could not understand

what was happening. He was afraid to intervene. Suddenly, the Tatar horse headed for the bank, plunged into the water and began swimming across with the janissaries holding onto the animals' tails. The Tatars went off into the steppe and the Turks returned to the fortress. Gordon marched back with band playing and banners flying. The battle had been won without a shot fired.

Bombs began landing from the island on Azov which could be seen as on the palm of the hand, destroying houses and starting fires. The inhabitants could be seen running to the shelter of the walls. There was merrymaking in the Russian camp. They began to talk about storming the fortress again. But this time, too, Gordon restrained them from a foolhardy escapade; he suggested that they try and see if Murtaza Pasha, the commandant of the fortress, would surrender on favourable terms. After a fierce bombardment, when the whole of Azov was smoking, two Cossacks were sent with a letter for the Pasha. All watched to see what would happen. The Cossacks went up to the walls, waving their hats and the letter. They were admitted through the gates, but a short while afterwards were unceremoniously ejected. The tsar's emissaries! They brought the letter back. Ugly Russian words had been written on it in Jakob Jansen's hand.

In Golovin's tent, Gordon vainly tried to convince the others that, by the rules of warfare, they should first bring approaches up to the walls and make a breach; only then could they storm the fortress. No one wanted to listen. The generals sat with tumblers of wine in front of them. Peter, his head in his hands, was scratching the back of his neck and staring at the candles: he was already imagining the sounds of victorious bugles on the walls of Azov. Gordon banged his sword:

"The illustrious Marshal Condé always had the custom..."

"Condé, Condé," interrupted Golovin with a snarl. "You can have your Condé!.. We've simply wasted time with you and besmirched the sovereign's honour."

Lefort smiled insolently straight in his face. Peter obstinately pressed for an immediate attack. The day for the storming of the Azov was decided: the fifth of August.

Volunteers were called for. Officers were promised twenty-five rubles each and soldiers ten for whoever took a cannon.

At service, the regimental priests called on the men for sacrifice. No volunteers were found among the streltsy and the soldiers. They turned their backs sullenly: "A right lot of fools we'd be to go on that lark..." But the Don Cossacks sent officers to Peter: two and a half thousand of their men were prepared to scale the walls and, if necessary, more could be found, on condition that Azov was handed over to them for at least one day's looting.

Peter, and the generals after him, embraced the officers and promised to leave the fortress to them for three days. They were given five thousand streltsy and soldiers to help them. On the night before the assault, Gordon went into the dugout where Peter, by the light of a molten candle stump, was sucking his pipe over a military map.

"Have you talked to the soldiers? Well, Pyotr Ivanovich, shall we trust in God and go ahead?"

Gordon sat down, holding his helmet on his knees. The old man was tired. There was a white stubble on his sunken cheeks. He breathed with difficulty, revealing his big yellow teeth with two front ones missing. He looked at the self-confident stripling with affectionate sadness. Perhaps it was right that youth should go in bull-headed...

"In winter, we're going to build a big fleet in Voronezh," said Peter, looking up with reddened eyes. "Tomorrow we must take Azov, Pyotr Ivanovich. (He pointed his pipe-stem at a small bay west of the mouth of the Don.) Look... We'll build a second fortress here. The Turks won't be able to get through to the Sea of Azov this winter, and in spring we'll sail here with a big fleet... See, we'll build a fortress in the straits near Kerch, and the whole sea will be ours... We'll build sea-going ships that'll give us access to the Black Sea. (The pipe-stem sped over the map.) Here we'll have room. We'll attack the Crimea from the sea. The Crimea is ours. Next come the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. By hook or by crook, we'll break through to the Mediterranean Sea. We'll give them silk and wheat galore... Look at the countries here: Venice, Rome... And look—Moscow: we'll carry merchandise by waterway as far as Tsaritsyn, and here, where we went as far as Panshino by portage, we'll dig a canal to the Don... Moscow to Rome direct. How about that? Then we'll be merchants... Pyotr Ivanovich, shall we take Azov?"

Gordon considered a moment and answered:

"I don't rightly know... I've seen the men... Many of them are very stupid. They think you can go into the assault without ladders. I've seen regret on many faces, even distress. But I said: 'You've made your bed, now lie on it. All who volunteered shall go. I'll have any cowards shot.' Incidentally, everything's ready: ladders, fascines, and hand bombs. We'll pray to God for help..."

Peter felt uneasy. He woke Menshikov after midnight and they galloped over to the Cossack encampment. It was quiet there. The Cossacks were sleeping unconcernedly in their wagons. They were met by the ataman, a strong-faced man with a shaven skull and shifty eyes. He invited Peter to sit on a saddle by the fire and himself squatted down Turkish fashion. The Cossacks crowded round. Dried fish and vodka were brought. The talk began—bold and derisive. The Cossacks were clearly not afraid of the devil himself. Squeezing up to the fire that cast a red light on their black beards and bold faces, they said, grinning:

"The real strength, the real human sap is the Cossacks. What do they know about us in Moscow? We're supposed to be robbers... Fancy that!.. If they sent us a governor, he'd do more robbing than us... It's as well you came to us, Sire. Have a good look at us. Do we really seem such bad eggs? Us Cossacks are eagles! Ho-ho! We must be looked after..."

When the sky began to turn green in the east, subdued shouts ran round the camp. Hundreds of Cossacks began crawling over the earth rampart and vanished like cats in the dark field, making for the fortress wall by the river. Others boarded river boats. They took ropes with hooks and light ladders. The camp silently emptied.

The stars were shining in a vast sky. The cocks in the baggage train began crowing. The early morning breeze blew chill on the shoulders. There was a brief flicker of light in the north, and a gun spoke. It was General Gordon's Butyrsky and Tambov regiments going into the assault.

Only the Butyrsky and Tambov men managed to scale the walls. The streltsy following behind them heard a frenzied slaughter and the clash of cold steel. They took fright and hid in the cherry orchards of a fire-gutted suburb. The Cossacks were attacking desperately from the river, but the ladders proved too short and the Turks were rolling boulders

off the walls and pouring down molten pitch. The Cossacks returned to their camp empty-handed. The attack had been repulsed.

When the sun rose, many dead could be seen near the fortress. The Turks were swinging the Russians over the parapets and the corpses were tumbling down into the ditch. Over one and a half thousand had lost their lives. The soldiers in the trenches sighed:

"We were having a good laugh with Vanka only yesterday; now look at the birds pecking him..."

"What do we want to go to the Turks for? Haven't we seen enough here already?.."

"Only the generals'll get back to Moscow..."

The generals assembled in Golovin's tent. Gordon was sad and silent. Lefort kept suppressing yawns of boredom and avoided looking anyone in the eye. Golovin, his face drawn, nodded drowsily from time to time. Only Menshikov, who arrived with the tsar, held his hands jauntily on his hips. His head was bandaged with a piece of cloth. His sword was bloody again: he had been on the walls... He had a charmed life, the devil...

Peter sat wrathfully upright. The generals stood.

"Well?" he asked. "What have you to say, Generals?" (Lefort slyly squeezed Gordon's elbow, Golovin wiggled his fingers hopelessly.) "Have we not thoroughly disgraced ourselves this time? What are we to do—raise the siege?"

No one answered. Peter drummed his fingers and his cheek twitched. Menshikov went up to the table, his eyes brazen... He stretched out his hand:

"Peter Alexeyevich, permit me... It is out of order for me to talk here... But as I was up on the wall myself... I stuck one Aga with my sword, of course... Let me tell you about their ways... For every one Turk, we must reckon to need five of our soldiers. Those Turks are so savage, it's terrifying... Why, that Aga—I had him spitted, but he was screaming with fury like a hog and snapping with his teeth at my blade. And their arms are more effective than ours. Those yataghans are like razors. You go for a Turk with a sword or a battle-axe and he can cut your head off three times over... We won't beat them till we've breached the walls. We've got to smash those walls. And instead of long weapons, the soldiers should be given hand bombs or Cossack sabres..."

Sasha, his eyebrows working, stepped back with an air into the shadows.

"The young man has put it to us very well," said Gordon. "But we can only breach the walls with mines. Which means we must dig saps... And that is a long and very dangerous task..."

"Our grain's running out, too," said Golovin. "All the supplies are low."

"Perhaps we should postpone it until next year," said Lefort thoughtfully.

Leaning back, Peter surveyed his recent boon companions with glazed eyes.

"...your mothers, Generals," he snarled, going red in the face. "I'll command the siege myself. Myself! Start digging the saps tonight. There'd better be some bread... Or I'll be hanging somebody... The war begins tomorrow... Sasha, fetch the engineers."

Into the tent came an older-looking and fatter Franz Timmermann and the foreigner Adam Weide, a tall, bony young man with an intelligent, open face.

"Engineers!" Peter smoothed the map with the flat of his hands and moved the candle nearer. "The walls must be blown up by September. Look, and think... I'm giving you a month to dig the saps..."

He stood up, lit his pipe at the candle and went out of the tent to look at the stars. Sasha whispered something behind his shoulder. The generals were left standing in the tent, baffled by the strange behaviour of the Bom Bar Dier...

The siege continued. The Turks, cheered by the failure of the assault, gave no peace by night or day and kept destroying the earthworks and bursting into the trenches. Time and again the Tatar horse swept right up to the camps in clouds of dust. They wrecked the wagon trains. Many Cossacks perished in clashes with them. The Russian army was melting away. There wasn't enough of one thing and another. Clouds came up from the Black Sea, bringing storms such as the Moscow people had never seen before; the lightning came down in blazing columns of fire, the earth shook at the thunder, torrential downpours flooded the trenches and saps. After the thunderstorm, autumn sneaked up unexpectedly with its cold, grey days. There were no reserves of warm

clothing in the army. Diseases broke out. Murmurs of discontent travelled round the streltsy regiments... And, day after day, sails grew on the cooling strip of sea: reinforcements were still coming to the Turks.

A number of times, Lefort tried persuading Peter to raise the siege. But Peter's will seemed to have turned to stone. He had become harsh and abrupt. He had lost so much weight that his green coat hung in folds about him as on a pole. He had stopped cracking jokes. When the Prince-Pope turned up in camp drunk, the tsar thrashed him with the handle of a spade.

No one thought it would have been possible to work as intensively as Peter demanded. But it turned out that it was. In the middle of September, engineer Adam Weide reported that he was now under the bastion itself and the men working in the sap could hear noises. Were the Turks counter-mining? That would mean that the whole operation had failed. Peter crawled along with a candle-stump into the underground tunnel and also heard noises. It was decided on the spot not to delay any longer but to detonate at least one mine. Eighty-three poods of powder were planted. The troops were ordered to prepare for an assault. The soldiers and workers were warned with three gunshots. Peter lit the slow-match and, followed by Sasha and Varenoi Madamkin, ran back into the camp. The Turks rushed away from the walls and went behind the inner fortifications. It became uncannily quiet. Only the crows cawed as they flew over the Don. Suddenly, a mound of earth rose up under the fortress wall. There was a heavy boom and, from the mound as it flew apart, there rose a shaggy column of flame, smoke, earth, stones and beams. A moment later, it all began to land in the Russian trenches. A scorching whirlwind blew up. Blazing beams flew hissing as far as the centre of the camp. Varenoi Madamkin fell with his skull cracked open three paces away from Peter. Up to a hundred and fifty soldiers and streltsy, two colonels and a lieutenant-colonel were killed or wounded. Indescribable horror fell on the troops. When the dust had blown away, they saw the fortress walls intact and the Turks laughing uproariously at them.

No one dared approach Peter. He personally wrote (all over the page, spattering it with ink and missing out letters) the order that there was to be a general assault by land and water not later than the end of the month. The two undamaged saps were nearly finished. The troops were ordered to confess and receive communion. All prepared themselves for death.

Peter was now constantly seen riding round the camp on a shaggy little horse. The grass lashed at his thin legs. He wore a felt tricorne, russet with rain, squashed down over his ears. Menshikov with pistols thrust under his sash, and Alexei Brovkin with bugle and musket invariably rode behind him. The soldiers hid from them in the trenches: you didn't even have to grumble about something, they only had to see a glum look on your face and those three devils would pick on you, call an NCO and you'd be interrogated. You could be flogged for next to nothing. When several streltsy, talking among themselves, were heard to say, "What are we here for—to feed the Turkish ravens with Russian meat or what?", Peter struck them on the face and had them hanged in the baggage train on uptilted wagon-shafts.

On the night of the twenty-fourth of August, Peter crossed over to Yakov Dolgoruky on the island to follow the progress of the battle from there. None of the troops slept in any of the camps. The regimental priests sat by the fires as ordered and NCO's did the rounds. In the chilly dawn, the regiments moved out into the plain. There were two explosions. A sombre flame illuminated minarets, forts, hills and river... Human faces, their eyes staring with horror... The Russians went into the assault...

The Butyrsky Regiment burst through a breach in the wall and fought at the inner palisades under a hail of hand bombs.

The men of the Preobrazhensky and Semyonovsky regiments sailed up in boats, set up scaling ladders and climbed onto the walls. The Turks transfixed them with arrows and stabbed them with pikes. Men fell from the ladders in hundreds. Maddened, they kept climbing up, gasping, swearing horribly. They climbed in. Murtaza Pasha himself and his janissaries, shrieking inhumanly, hurled themselves into the mêlée...

The rest of the regiments came up to the walls, shouting and milling around, but lacking the courage to die. They

did not attempt to climb the ladders. Again the streltsy got no farther than the rampart. Gordon then ordered the retreat to be sounded. Only half of the Butyrsky Regiment got out of the breach alive. The play troops fought for over an hour, pushing back Murtaza Pasha, bursting into narrow streets where arrows, bombs and stones flew from behind the cover of scorched ruins. But no one came to their aid. Peter stormed with rage on the island and sent horsemen to bring the soldiers back and throw them against the walls again. Lefort, in gold armour and plumes, galloped with a captured Turkish banner through the disordered regiments. Golovin, as if blind, belaboured men with a broken lance... Gordon, alone on the rampart under the arrows and bullets, shouted hoarsely for help... The troops got as far as the ditch and then backed off. Many, throwing down their rifles or pikes, sat down on the ground and covered their faces with their hands as if to say: "Kill us, but we won't go, we can't..." Once again, the drums beat the retreat.

Everything went quiet in the fortress and in the camps. The birds gathered on the piles of dead bodies. The siege was raised on the third night. Without lighting their fires, without making any noise, the Russians harnessed up the guns and moved off along the left bank of the Don. In front were the baggage trains, after them the remnants of the army, and Gordon's two regiments brought up the rear... Three thousand soldiers and Cossacks were left in the fortified watchtowers.

A hurricane blew up from the sea in the morning. The Don darkened and swelled... They tried to cross over to the Crimean side, but many carts and people sank. They continued along the Nogai bank in sight of the Tatars. Gordon had to keep beating off their attacks by turning the guns round, forming a rectangle and firing volleys. Even so, Svert's regiment of soldiers lost its way in the night and perished under the Tatar sabres, losing its colonel and the regimental colours. Those still alive were carried off into captivity.

The Tatars fell back after Cherkassk. The army was now crossing the bare, desolate steppe. They were down to the last of their dry bread. There was nothing with which to light a fire and nowhere to take shelter from the nocturnal cold. Autumn clouds moved up in serried ranks. A north wind rose, bringing sleet. The earth turned to ice. The snow

came down, a blizzard sprang up. The soldiers, barefoot and in summer caftans, wandered over the dead, whitened plains. Those who fell did not rise again. In the morning, many were left lying on the camp site. Wolves followed the army, howling through the snowstorm.

In three weeks, they got through to Valuiki with only a third of the army left. From there, Peter and his entourage rode ahead to Lev Kirillovich's arms factory in Tula. Two Turkish prisoners and a captured banner were brought after him.

On the way, Peter wrote to the Prince-Emperor:

"Myn Herr König... On returning from Azov, which we failed to take, I was instructed by a council of war of the generals to build ships, galleys and other craft for the next war. On the which work we shall henceforth be engaged without respite. Concerning matters here, I inform you that Your Majesty's father, the most holy Janikita, Archbishop and Patriarch of Pressburg and All the Yauza and All Kukui with his serfs, as God has willed, is in good health. Peter."

Such was the inglorious end of the first Azov campaign.

Chapter Seven

1

Two years went by. Whoever blabbed had to bite his tongue. Whoever laughed had to be quiet. Great and terrible deeds were afoot at that time. The Western infection penetrated irresistibly into the dreamy tenor of life. The cracks in it deepened, the irreconcilable forces became alienated still further.

The boyars and the landed gentry, the clergy and the streltsy were terrified of change (new measures, new people) and hated the speed and cruelty of all the innovations... "It's not a state, it's a tavern; they're all smashing things up, they're stirring everybody up... Low-born merchants are reaching for power... They don't live, they rush around in a hurry. The tsar has handed the state over to be ruled by lecherous bribe-takers who have no fear of the Lord... We're rushing headlong into the abyss..."

But the low-born hustlers who wanted change and who were drawn as if by magic to Europe in the hope of picking up at least a grain of the gold dust that veiled the occidental countries—these people said they were not mistaken about the young tsar: he was proving to be just the kind of man they had been waiting for. After the fiasco and humiliation of Azov, the Kukui rake had suddenly grown up, failure had bridled him with savage halters. Even his intimates hardly recognised him; he was a changed man—bitter, stubborn, business-like.

After the failure to take Azov, he only appeared once in Moscow (where all sniggered: "That was no Kozhukhovo game"), and immediately departed for Voronezh. Workers and artisans began to be sent there from all over Russia. Wagon trains were strung out along the autumn roads. Centuries-old oak-trees began to sway under the blows of axes in the forests along the Voronezh and the Don. Shipyards, warehouses and barracks were built. Two ships, twenty-three galleys and four fire-ships were laid in the stocks. The winter was a cold one. There wasn't enough of

anything to go round. People died by hundreds. There was oppression as never before; runaways were caught and clapped in irons. Frozen corpses swayed on the gallows in the howling blizzard. Some desperadoes set fire to the forests round Voronezh. Peasants travelling with the wagon trains murdered the military escort, looted as much as they could and vanished into nowhere... Rather than face going to Voronezh, people in the villages maimed themselves by chopping off their fingers. The whole of Russia resisted—truly the times of Antichrist had come: as if the former oppression, bondsmanship and corvée had not been enough, people were now dragged off to new and incomprehensible work. The landowners swore as they paid money for shipbuilding and groaned as they looked at the unsown fields and the empty granaries. The celibate and married clergy murmured disapprovingly: the power was only too obviously being taken away from them and given to the foreigners and to all manner of local new-found and low-born riff-raff...

It was a grim start to the new age. Even so, the fleet had been built by spring. Engineers and regimental commanders were fetched from Holland. Large reserves of food were set up at Panshino and Cherkassk. The troops were replenished. In May, Peter appeared near Azov at the head of the fleet on a new galley, *Principium*. The Turks, beset from sea and land, defended themselves frantically and beat off all assaults on the fortress. They surrendered unconditionally when all their grain and gunpowder were exhausted. Three thousand janissaries left the devastated Azov with Bey Hassan Araslan.

This was, above all, a victory over the domestic opposition. Kukui had beaten Moscow. High-flown missives were promptly despatched to the Emperor Leopold, the Doge of Venice and the King of Prussia. Portals, or triumphal gates, were erected on the Moskva River at the entrance to the city from Kamenny Bridge thanks to the efforts of Andrei Andreyevich Vinius. Over them, among the banners and arms, sat a twin-headed eagle, and under it was the inscription:

"God is with us, no one is against us."

The roof of these gates was supported by a gilded Hercules and a gilded Mars, each worthy a good three *sazhens* tall. Under them, in painted wood, were the Pasha of Azov in chains and a Tatar murza, also in chains, with the following inscription underneath them:

"Lords of the steppes, we barely escaped from the Muscovites with our lives this time."

At the sides of the gates were big canvases painted with pictures: Neptune, God of the sea, with the inscription: "I hereby congratulate you on the taking of Azov and I submit to you..." and, on the other side, a picture of the Russians beating the Tatars; "Alas, we lost Azov and thereby brought calamity upon ourselves..."

At the end of September, crowds of people flocked the river banks and the roofs of the houses: the Azov army was marching from the Zamoskvorechye across the bridge and through the triumphal gates. In front rode the Prince-Pope with a sword and a shield in a carriage of six. He was followed by singers, pipers, dwarfs, clerks, boyars and troops. Next came fourteen richly caparisoned horses belonging to Lefort. He himself, in armour, with a map of Azov in his hand, rode standing in the tsar's gold sleigh over the black ice. Then more boyars, clerks, soldiers, sailors, and the new vice-admirals, Lima and de Losiere. Next, with great pomp, surrounded by thundering kettledrummers and riding in a Greek chariot, burly, squat, looking very important, his face swollen, came boyar Shein, Generalissimo—awarded this honour before the second Azov campaign in order to make the boyars keep their mouths shut. Behind them, sixteen Turkish banners were trailed over the ground. The Tatar giant Alatyk was led along next: he peered with slant eyes at the crowd and bared his teeth ferociously. The crowd were hooting him. After the Preobrazhensky Regiment came a gibbet on a cart drawn by four horses and under it stood the traitor Jakob Jansen with the noose round his neck, while two executioners, one on each side of him, clicked their torture tongs and brandished their knouts. There were engineers, shipwrights, carpenters and blacksmiths. Following the streltsy came General Gordon on horseback, then the Turkish captives in shrouds. Eight greys drew a gold carriage in the form of a ship. In front of it walked Peter in a sailor's coat and a velvet tricorne with an ostrich plume. All marvelled at his round face and great stature: he was taller than seemed human, and many crossed themselves as they remembered the terrible and mysterious rumours about this tsar.

The troops marched across Moscow to Preobrazhenskoye. Soon, the boyars were ordered to assemble there in council.

At the Great Duma, where, contrary to all custom, foreigners, generals, admirals and engineers were present, Peter told the boyars in a manly voice:

"Since Fortune gives us the slip, who was never so near to the south, happy is he who seized her by the hair. Wherefore, boyars, decree that the destroyed and fire-gutted Azov be rebuilt and garrisoned with many troops, and that not far from there, where I have founded the fortress of Taganrog, a fortress be built and garrisoned there likewise... And it is also needful—since it is more suitable for us to wage war at sea than on land—to build a fleet of forty or more vessels... The ships to be fully furnished with cannon and small arms that they shall be fit for war. And this to be brought about as follows: from the patriarch and from monasteries with eight thousand peasant households—one ship; from the boyars and all service ranks with ten thousand peasant households —one ship. Merchants and merchant guilds and artisans' quarters to build twelve big ships. Wherefore boyars, clergy and service and tradespeople are to form companies, that is to say, associations, making thirty-five companies in all."

The boyars decreed accordingly, although the eyes of many were bulging and their fur coats were damp with perspiration. Orders were given to form the companies by December under pain of the reassignment of patrimonies, estates and houses to the tsar. Each company, apart from the Russian carpenters and sawyers, was to maintain at its own expense foreign craftsmen, interpreters, good blacksmiths, one woodcarver, one joiner, one painter, and a physician with his pharmacy.

Furthermore, Peter ordered the levying of a special tax for the construction of a Volga-Don canal and for the said canal to be dug without delay. All threw up their hands and decreed accordingly without demur. This haste was a sore trial to the boyars, but they realised that whether they agreed or not, Peter had already made up his mind. He did not speak from the throne, he barked orders... His clean-shaven generals merely shook their wigs... Oh, it was hard! The area round Preobrazhenskoye was a military camp—bugles, drums, soldiers' songs. It all meant, in fact, that the councils in the boyars' Duma were merely sweating away for the sake of the old order; the tsar could dispense with it at any moment.

Indeed, a very important move was made not by boyars'

decree, but without any formalities at all. The clerk of the sovereign's personal chancellery and the Prince-Pope wrote out and sent with some soldiers a royal Ukase to the fifty best Moscow nobles instructing them to make ready to go abroad and study mathematics, fortification, shipbuilding and other sciences (without which, praise the Lord, they had lived since the time of Saint Vladimir). There was weeping and wailing in many Moscow households, but they were fearful of asking for a repeal or pleading incapacity. The young people were assembled, blessed, and shriven as if before death. Each was assigned a soldier for services and reports back to Moscow. They set off during the spring thaw on their journey for remote, magic lands.

One of these squires was Pyotr Andreyevich Tolstoy, Troyekurov's son-in-law. He was ready at any cost to atone for his part in the mutiny of the streltsy.

2

The taking of Azov was an extremely irresponsible and dangerous act. The Russians brought down on themselves a major war with the whole Turkish Empire. But they only had just enough forces to cope with one small fortress, and Peter and his generals became well aware of this in the battles for Azov. There was not a trace left of the former Kozhukhovo swagger. Nor was there any thought now of conquest—solely of surviving in the early stages should the Turks want to wage war on Russia by sea and land.

The Russians needed to seek out allies, to improve and equip the army and the navy with all speed, restructure the hopelessly rusty state machinery on new, European lines, and obtain money, money, money...

All this could only come from Europe. Men had to be sent there, and sent in such a way that they would obtain money. A tricky, pressing and vital task. Peter and his intimates solved it with Asiatic cunning. They would send in all pomp a great mission and he would travel with it himself, dressed as if for a masked ball, in the guise of Pyotr Mikhailov, constable of the Preobrazhensky Regiment. The line was to be as follows: "You thought us stick-in-the-mud barbarians, and though we are the tsar, etc. and victors over the Turks at Azov, we are not arrogant people, but are simple, easy-going, and we may be less hidebound than you are: we can

sleep on the floor and eat with muzhiks from the same bowl. But we have one concern: to banish our ignorance and stupidity, to learn from you, our benefactors..."

Peter's calculations were, of course, correct. Had they brought a mermaid with them to Europe, they could not have caused more astonishment... They remembered that Peter's brother had been treated as a kind of god... But this one, seven feet tall, a handsome man troubled by a nervous tic, spurned the tsar's majesty out of interest in trade and the sciences... It was incredible, it was amazing.

The high ambassadors chosen were Lefort, Fyodor Alexeyevich Golovin, the governor of Siberia, a man of keen wit and a knowledge of languages, and Prokofy Voznitsyn, clerk of the Duma. With them were twenty Moscow nobles and thirty-five army volunteers, Sasha Menshikov and Peter himself among them.

Departure was delayed owing to a sudden unpleasantness. A plot was uncovered among the Don Cossacks, and the ringleader proved to be Colonel Tsykler, the one who, during Peter's stay at the Trinity Laura, had been the first to join him with a regiment of streltsy. Peter could never forget that Tsykler had been one of Sophia's most loyal servants and he mistrusted the colonel's flattery. After the fall of Azov, he sent Tsykler to build the fortress of Taganrog. To an ambitious man, this was tantamount to banishment. In Taganrog, Tsykler found the Cossacks in a ferment because of the compulsory labour, their freedom to roam the steppes was perishing under the harsh hand of the tsar. Out there, Tsykler began addressing the Cossacks in seditious terms:

"There is much ill feeling in the state now because the sovereign is going abroad and is sending as high ambassador our enemy, the accursed foreigner Lefort, and on that mission he is taking much treasure... The tsar is stubborn, he will listen to no one; he lives in shameful merrymaking, brings sorrow and grief down on all heads, and only drains the Treasury to no purpose... He fares abroad alone at night to visit the German wench, and it would be easy to ambush him and cut him to pieces with knives. If you kill him, no one will get in your way, Cossacks; do as Stenka Razin did... And when you do, you may choose me as tsar: I am for the old rites and I love simple, common folk."

To this the Cossacks shouted: "Just wait, when the tsar

goes to the Germans, we'll act like Stenka Razin..." Strelets officer Elizaryev galloped post-haste to Moscow and reported this sedition. During the investigation, it transpired that Moscow nobles Sokovnin and Pushkin were in contact with Tsykler and were keeping in touch with the Novodevichy Convent. Peter personally tortured Tsykler who, frantic with pain and the fear of death, revealed much fresh information about the former murderous plans of Sophia and Ivan Mikhailovich Miloslavsky (who had died three years previously). The sinister ghost of Miloslavsky, terrifying to Peter since his childhood years, was rearing up again; the not yet fully slain and abominated past was coming to life...

The family burial vault of the Miloslavskys in the Donskoi Monastery was broken open, the coffin containing Miloslavsky's remains was taken, put on an open sleigh and drawn by twelve hump-backed, long-snouted hogs squealing under the knout through dung-stained puddles all the way across Moscow to Preobrazhenskoye. The people followed in crowds, uncertain whether to laugh or to scream with horror.

On the square of the soldier's quarter at Preobrazhenskoye, they saw a rectangle of troops holding their muskets in front of them. The drums rolled. In the centre was a platform with a block, and nearby were the generals with Peter on horseback in a black cloak and tricorne. He was tugging at the reins with one hand, yet his horse was quiet, while his foot had slipped out of stirrup and was jerking spasmodically. His white face was twisted to one side and he had thrown his head back as if he were laughing. But he was not. The coffin was opened. The blue skull and the bones of the hands lay on the half-rotten brocade. Peter rode up and spat on Miloslavsky's remains. The coffin was dragged under the wooden platform. Broken by torture, Tsykler, Sokovnin, Pushkin and three strelets constables were brought up. The Prince-Pope, drunk to the wide, read out the sentence...

Tsykler was dragged first by the hair up the steep ladder to the platform. His clothes were ripped off his body and he was thrown down naked onto the block. The executioner, with a sharp grunt, cut off his right hand with the axe and then his left. They were heard dropping onto the planks. Tsykler's legs began thrashing; the executioners flung themselves on him, pulled them straight and cut them both off at the pelvis. He began screaming. The executioners lifted his torso with its tangled beard over the platform, threw

it down onto the block and cut off the head. The blood ran through the cracks in the platform and dripped down into Miloslavsky's coffin...

3

The state was left to the boyars under Lev Kirillovich, Streshnev, Apraksin, Troyekurov, Boris Golitsyn and the clerk Vinius. Moscow, with all its violence and brigandage, was left in charge of Romodanovsky. In the middle of March, the high mission with Pyotr Mikhailov left for Courland.

On the first of April, Peter wrote in sympathetic ink:

"Myn Herr Vinius... We arrived in Riga yesterday, in good health, thank God, and the ambassadors were received with great honours. Twenty-four guns were fired as we entered and left the castle. We found the Dvina still icebound, wherefore we are obliged to bide here some time... Greetings to all our acquaintances... In future I shall be writing in invisible ink; hold it over a flame and you will be able to read it... But for appearances' sake, I shall write in black ink, where appropriate, the following words: 'Please, convey greetings to my lord general and beseech him to do me the kindness of not leaving my little house...' All the rest will be in invisible ink, since folk here are mighty inquisitive..."

Vinius replied:

"...Since the first mail arrived from the Lord High Ambassador with his comrades, I fell in with company at those hours, and we drank so generously to the health of the ambassadors and brave cavaliers, and even more to our sovereign's health, that Bacchus and his grandson Ivan Khmelnitsky nearly died of laughing. The generals and colonels and other important people, constables and all the soldiers send you their humble greetings. Drummer Luka has died in the first company. Hannibal, the Arab, is now tame, thanks be to God, has been unchained and is learning Russian... All is well in your houses."

A week later, second letter arrived in Moscow:

"Herr Vinius... Today I rode from here to Mitau... We have been living beyond the river, on which the ice broke on Easter Day... We have lived here in slavish manner and only our vision has been sated. The tradesfolk here go about in mantles and all seems very fair, but when they are

bargaining over sleighs with drivers, they swear horribly and yell blue murder over a kopeck. They give ten kopecks for a horse and sleigh. But whatever we ask for, they treble the price...

"Please convey greetings to my Lord General and beseech him to do me the kindness of not leaving my little house... (The rest was in invisible ink). And when we were leaving Riga and going across the city to the castle, the soldiers, of whom there were at least two thousand, were standing on the walls... The town is heavily fortified, but the work is not finished... They are very timid here, and will not admit anyone into the town or other places even under escort, and they are hardly pleasant... And there is much hunger in the land because of a bad harvest."

And, three weeks later:

"Today we sail hence to Königsberg by sea... Here, in Libau, I saw a wonder that they say in Russia is but fantasy... A certain man in a pharmacy has a salamander in spirit in a glass jar; I took it out and held in my hand. It is, word for word, as it is described: the salamander is an animal and lives in fire... All the drivers have been dismissed from here. And those that fled are to be found and thrashed soundly with the knout round the market place and money is to be taken from them so that others will not commit similar crimes in future."

4

A favourable wind was swelling the four large square-rigged sails on the fore- and main-masts and the two square-rigged sails at the end of the long bowsprit... Listing slightly to port, the ship *St. George* glided over the sunny grey spring-time sea. Brittle ice-floes could be seen here and there, surrounded by foam. The flag of Brandenburg hung on the tower-like poop. The deck had been scrubbed clean and the polished copper shone. The merry waves struck the oaken Neptune and a rainbow mist flew up under the bowsprit.

Peter, Sasha Menshikov, Alyosha Brovkin, Volkov and Bitka the priest, seedy-looking with his trimmed beard and large head—all dressed in grey German cloth suit, in cotton hose and shoes of Russian leather with iron buckles, were sitting on coils of tarred rope and smoking pipefuls of good tobacco.

Peter, in a cheerful mood, his knees drawn right up, his elbows resting on them, was saying:

"Frederick, the Elector of Brandenburg, whom we are sailing to visit in Königsberg, is one of us. You just see the welcome we get... He needs us badly... He lives in terror: the Swedes are pressing him on one side, the Poles on the other... We found all this out in advance. He will ask us for a military alliance, just you see, my lads."

"We'll think that over too," said Sasha.

Peter spat into the sea and wiped the mouthpiece of his pipe on his sleeve: "That alliance is certainly no use to us. Prussia isn't going to fight the Turks. But don't get up to any mischief in Königsberg, my lads, or I'll have your heads... Let there be no ill fame about us."

"Our conduct is always decent," said Bitka the priest with tipsy overemphasis. "There's no need to threaten us... But we've never heard of such a rank as Elector."

"Below king, higher than duke," replied Sasha. "That means he's an Elector. But, of c-o-o-o-urse, this one's country is ruined—it's living from hand to mouth."

Alyosha Brovkin listened, his bright eyes and his mouth wide open... Peter blew some smoke into his face. Alyosha coughed. They all laughed and began digging him in the ribs... Alyosha said:

"Oh, come off it!.. It scares you, though. All of a sudden, us going to them."

The old captain, a Finn, kept looking at them in amazement as they larked about among the ropes. He couldn't believe that one of those merry youths was the tsar of Moscow... But wonders never cease...

A sandy shore was gliding past far to port. A sail could be seen very occasionally. A ship under full canvas was going over the horizon, westward bound. This had been the sea of the Vikings and Hanseatic merchants: now it was the domain of the Swedes. The sun was going down. The *St. George* slackened her sheets and, gurgling softly over the waves, sailed towards the long shallows that separated the closed bay of Frische-Haff from the sea. The beacon and the low towers of Pillau fortress that guarded the passage into the bay rose up before them. As they sailed in, they fired the cannon and cast anchor. The captain invited the Muscovites to supper.

5

They went ashore next morning. There was nothing remarkable there: sand and pine-trees. A couple of dozen fishing boats, nets drying on stakes. Low, windblown huts; but there were white curtains in the windows... (Peter remembered Anna with a twinge of nostalgia.) There were women at their domestic tasks in linen mob-caps at the well-swept thresholds, and there were men in leather hats—sou'-westers—cheeks clean-shaven, bearded only under the chin. They walked more stiffly than our own people, perhaps, but each was obviously about some business or other and they were friendly without being shy.

Peter asked where their tavern was. They sat down at clean oak tables, marvelling at the tidiness and the pleasant smell, and began drinking beer. Here Peter wrote a letter to the Elector Frederick suggesting that they should meet. Volkov, with a soldier from the fortress, took it to Königsberg.

Fishermen and fishwives were standing at the door and peering through the windows. Peter winked cheerfully at these good people, asked them their names and if they'd had a good catch, then invited them all over to his table and stood them beer.

In the middle of the day, a gilded carriage with ostrich plumes on its roof rolled up to the tavern and out nimbly jumped Kammerjunker von Prinz, powdered and in pale-blue silk. Thrusting aside the fishermen and their womenfolk, a frightened look in his face, he pushed his way through to the Muscovites, who were banging their pewter mugs on the table. Three paces from the table, he doffed his broad-brimmed hat and swept the plumes over the floor, putting one foot back and flexing his knee while his hand described a sweeping curve.

"His Serene Highness Frederick and my lord, the Grand Elector of Brandenburg, has the pleasure of asking Your..." (At this point he stumbled as Peter shook his finger at him in warning.) "...asking the distinguished and long-awaited visitor to proceed from this wretched hovel to decent quarters set aside for him as more suitable to his station..."

Sasha Menshikov's eyes were riveted on the pale-blue cavalier. He kicked Alyosha under the table:

"That's it—la politesse... He's standing on tiptoe—

what a picture! Look, he's wearing a short wig, and ours are down to our belly buttons... Ooh, the son-of-a-bitch!"

Peter got into the carriage with von Prinz. The others followed behind in an open cart. A merchant's house had been set aside for the guests in the best district of the town, in Kneiphof. They rode into Königsberg at dusk, the wheels rumbling over clean road. No walls or fences: it was amazing! The houses gave directly on to the street, and only just above ground level there were long windows with leaded panes. Welcoming lights everywhere. The doors were open. People were going about without fear... It made you want to ask, "But how can you not be afraid of burglary? Do you really have no robbers here?"

Once again, in the merchant's house at which they stopped nothing has been put away; fine things were lying about in the open. Only a fool wouldn't help himself. Looking over a dark oakwood dining-room richly furnished with pictures, plate and aurochs horns, Peter said quietly to Sasha:

"Give strict orders to everybody; if anyone casts an eye on the slightest thing, I'll hang him in the gateway..."

"And rightly so, myn Herz. I even feel scared myself... I'll order them all to sew up their pockets until they're used to it... God forbid that they should steal when they've had a few..."

Von Prinz returned with the carriage and Peter rode with him to the palace...

They walked in through a secret gate and across a garden where a fountain plashed and the lawns were dotted with dark bushes trimmed to the shape of spheres, cocks or pyramids. Frederick met his guest in the garden in a glass doorway, proffering him fingertips half-covered by lace cuffs. A silky peruke framed an extremely shrewd face with a sharp nose and a big, dented brow. The pale-blue riband across his chest sparkled with diamond stars.

"O my brother, young brother of mine," he articulated in French, repeating it in German. Peter looked down on him from above like a crane and did not know how to address him. Brother? Wouldn't suit his rank... Uncle? Awkward. Highness, or something? There was no telling, and the Elector might take offence.

Not letting go of his guest's hands as he retreated, the Elector led him over the carpet into a small chamber. Peter's

head whirled; it was as if one of his favourite childhood pictures on the wall in Preobrazhenskoye had come to life. Over the cheerfully blazing marble fireplace, a clock of wondrous workmanship decorated with a celestial sphere, stars and moon, was swinging its pendulum from side to side. Three-branched candelabra with reflectors softly illumined the tapestries on the walls, the fragile little chairs and many beautiful and amusing knick-knacks for which it would be difficult to find any practical use. Sprays of apple and cherry-blossom in goblets as delicate as soap bubbles.

The Elector toyed with a snuff-box, his shrewd eyes amiably half-closed. He sat his guest by the fireplace on such a delicate little gilded chair that Peter tried to shift his weight onto his legs, afraid of breaking it... The Elector spoke in a mixture of German and French. Finally, he mentioned a military alliance. At this point, Peter understood. His shyness abated somewhat. He explained in Dutch-German sailor's slang that he was there incognito and was not talking business, but the high ambassadors would arrive in a week's time and they were the ones with whom peace should be discussed.

The Elector clapped his hands. What Peter had taken to be a window opened silently—it was a mirror door—and red-liveried flunkeys brought in a table laden with food and drink.

Peter's guts contracted with hunger and he brightened up immediately. But there was almost disappointingly little to eat: a few slices of sausage, a roast pigeon, a pastry and some lettuce leaves... With a graceful gesture, the Elector bade his guest sit at table, tucked a starched napkin into his shirt collar and said with a faint smile:

"All Europe is following with rapture the brilliant successes in arms of Your Majesty against the adversaries of Christ. Alas, I am constrained only to applaud you like a Roman from a seat in an amphitheatre. My unhappy country is surrounded by enemies, the Poles and the Swedes. While those bandits of Swedes are lording it in Saxony, in Poland, in the Baltic, and in Livonia, the nations cannot flourish. My youthful friend, you will soon understand that our common enemy, sent against us by God for our sins, is not the Turks, but the Swedes... They extort dues from every ship on the Baltic Sea. We all work, and they live by plundering like hornets. It is not only we who are suffering, but the

states of Holland and England... But the Turks, the Turks! They are strong only because they are supported by France, that insatiable tyrant who reaches out his usurping hand for the Spanish crown of the Hapsburgs... Dear friend, you will soon witness a great coalition against France. King Louis the Fourteenth is old, his illustrious marshals are in their graves, France has been ruined by excessive taxation... She won't find the strength to help the Sultan of Turkey... Turkey's card will be trumped in the international game... But Sweden—ah, Sweden is a most dangerous foe behind Muscovy's back."

His elbows lightly resting on the table, the Elector was fingering the petals of an apple-blossom. His watery eyes glistened. Illumined by the light of the candles, his clean-shaven face was diabolically cunning.

Peter sensed that this German would run rings round him.

He drank a big glass of wine.

"I would like to study gunnery with your engineers..."

"The entire park is at Your Majesty's disposal..."

"Danke..."

"Try a sip of this Moselle wine..."

"Danke. It's still rather early for us to crawl into the European hurly-burly; the Turks are a great thorn in our flesh..."

"As long as you do not count on the help of Poland, my young friend. They dance to the Swedish tune there..."

"This Moselle is good..."

"The Black Sea will give you precisely nothing for the development of trade... Whereas a few harbours on the Baltic coast will open up inestimable wealth to Russia."

The Elector was biting the petals of an apple-blossom; his steely gaze slid with an invisible sneer over the Muscovite's embarrassed face...

6

Until the arrival of the mission, Peter spent all the following week out in the country at gunnery practice. He received a testimonial from the chief artillery engineer, Steitner von Sternfeld:

"...Herr Peter Mikhailov to be recognised and honoured as accomplished in the casting of bombs and, both in the theory of science and in the practice, as a careful and skilful artist

of firearms, and in view of his excellent knowledge, all possible assistance and consideration should be shown to him..."

The high ambassadors drove into Königsberg with unprecedented pomp and ceremony. In front of the procession, horses were led arrayed in costly blankets and saddlecloths; after them came Prussian guards, pages, cavaliers and knights. The Russian trumpeters played deafeningly. After them marched thirty volunteers in green coats embroidered with silver thread. The ambassadorial staff followed on horseback in crimson coats with gold coats-of-arms on their chest and backs. The three ambassadors—Lefort, Golovin and Voznitsyn—rode in a wide all-glass carriage. They were in white satin coats with sables and with twin-headed diamond eagles on their beaver stove-pipe hats. They were leaning back in their seats, rigid as statues, the rings glittering on their fingers and on top of their canes. After the carriage came Moscow nobles dressed in everything costly they had been able to find...

While receptions and talks with the Elector were in progress, Peter went sailing in a dinghy on the Frische-Haff. There was no business here: however cunning the Elector might be, an alliance with Poland was needed more than one with him. The high ambassadors, as distinct from former times, did not commit themselves in word or letter, were accommodating in their attitude but did not want to kneel and kiss the Elector's hands because, as they saw it, he was not yet a king. They offered alliance of friendship, not a military one, and there they dug in their heels. The Elector began trying to win them round. The ambassadors said: "Very well, let there be a military alliance, but let there be war on those powers that back out of war with Turkey." This decision was likewise objectionable to the Elector. He went to see Peter in the dinghy and spent the night talking to him. But the stripling merely bit his dirty fingernails. Finally, he said:

"Yes, all right... Only we're not going to sign any paper... If you have the need, Elector, we'll help you. Cross my heart... Do you trust us?"

After concluding a secret verbal treaty of alliance (which had to be confirmed on paper after all), the high mission prepared for departure, but had to stay for three weeks in Pillau as a result of extremely important news; elections for the new king had begun in Poland. At the Sejms, big and

small, the gentry hewed with their sabres and discharged their pistols in defence of their candidates. Over ten of these had been found, but the most likely were Augustus, Elector of Saxony, and Prince Conti, brother of the King of France.

A Frenchman on the Polish throne meant that Poland would drop out of the alliance against the Turks and there would be war with Muscovy. It was only here, on the shores of Europe, that Peter grasped what the game of politics meant. He sent a courier to Vinius from Pillau with orders to write the Poles a letter that would frighten the French prince's party as much as possible. A letter was sent from Moscow to the Cardinal and Primate of Gnesen. It contained the following: "...Were a Frenchman to become King in the state of Poland, then not only would the alliance against the enemy of the Holy Cross be gravely jeopardised, but so would eternal peace with Poland... For which reason, we, the great sovereign, who maintain constant friendship for the kings of Poland, as also for the gentry, the Rada and the Rzecz Pospolita, do not wish to have such a king on the French and Turkish side..." The letter was affixed with sables and gold coins. Gold was also sent from Paris. The bustling Poles chose both Augustus and Conti as their kings. Troubles flared up. The gentry armed their servants and peasants, sacked one another's estates and burned villages down. Peter wrote in alarm to Moscow for an army to be moved to the Lithuanian frontier to help Augustus. Augustus himself, however, turned up in Poland with an army of twelve thousand troops to ascend the throne. The French party was beaten. The nobility dispersed back to their castles and the petty nobility to their taverns. Prince Conti, as it became known in Europe, after only getting as far as Boulogne, shrugged his shoulders and returned to his diversions. King Augustus swore to the Russian resident in Warsaw that he would be at one with Peter.

The great mission was successfully accomplished. The ambassadors and Peter left Pillau with the volunteers.

7

Peter rode post horses, without stopping, ahead of the mission through Berlin, Brandenburg, and Halberstadt. He only turned off their main route for the famous iron works near Ilsenburg. Here, Peter was shown the manufacture of cast

iron in a blast furnace, the smelting of iron in crucibles, the forging of musket barrels from thin sheet iron, and grinding and drilling operations with lathes driven by water-wheels. The workshop craftsmen and apprentices worked in their own smithies and workshops. The products were taken to Ilsenburg Castle: muskets, pistols, sabres, locks and horseshoes. Peter tried to persuade two good craftsmen to come to Moscow, but the workshop would not release them.

They travelled along roads flanked with pear- and apple-trees, and none of the inhabitants stole the fruit. All around were oak groves, the rectangles of cornfields, gardens behind stone walls, with slate roofs and dovecotes among the greenery. There were fine, well-fed cows in the glades, brooks glittering between low banks, ancient oak trees, watermills. Every two or three versts there was a little town; a pointed kirch, a cobbled square with a stone well-head, the steep roof of the town hall, the quiet, clean houses, the amusing beer-house signs, the barber's copper bowl over the doorway. People with friendly smiles on their faces, in knitted bonnets, short jackets, white hose... Good, old Germany...

One warm July evening, Peter and Sasha in the leading dormeuse rode into the village of Koppenbrügge near Hanover. Dogs barked, windows shone onto the road, folk were sitting down to supper in their houses. A man in an apron appeared in the illuminated door of a tavern under a sign: "To the Golden Piglet", and shouted something to the coachman. He reined in the weary horses and turned round to address Peter:

"Your Highness, the tavern-keeper has slaughtered a pig and he has pork sausages going today... We won't find a better place for the night."

Peter and Menshikov alighted from the dormeuse and stretched their legs.

"What d'you think, Sasha: will we ever be able to have a life like this back home?"

"I don't know, myn Herz; certainly not overnight..."

"It's a lovely life... Listen, even the dogs here bark without malice... It's sheer paradise... When I think of Moscow, I feel like burning it down..."

"It's a cattle-shed, that's true..."

"They sit there on the past and their bottoms have rotted... They haven't learned how to plough the land properly in a

thousand years... Why so? The Elector Frederick's a clever man: we've got to break through to the Baltic Sea, that's what it amounts to... And build a new city there, a real paradise... Look, the stars here are brighter than ours..."

"But our lot, myn Herz, they'd make a mess all over the place."

"Just wait, Sasha, I'll go back. I'll knock the stuffing out of Moscow."

"That's the only way..."

They went into the tavern. Hams and sausages hung over the big hearth and from the oak beam under the ceiling. The copperware shone in the light of the blazing fire. The tavern-keeper bowed low, all smiles, his face as red as a copper pan. They asked for beer, and just as they had settled down for a snack, a cavalier made his entrance.

He was wearing a high conical broad-brimmed hat and a cloak that kept catching on his spurs. He motioned to the landlord as a signal for him to leave, performed a kind of hop, took his hat by the front of the brim and proceeded to execute a bow, his sword catching his cloak as he sailed across the kitchen. Peter and Sasha watched him open-mouthed. Said the cavalier in a soft dialect:

"Her Highness Sophie, Electress of Hanover, her daughter Sophie Charlotte, Electress of Brandenburg, and her son Crown Prince George Ludwig, most august heir to the English throne, and the Duke of Celle, also the court cavaliers and ladies of Her Highness, have left Hanover and hastened to meet Your Royal Majesty with the sole intention of recompensing themselves for the exhausting journey and the discomforts of the night's lodgings by making the acquaintance of the remarkable and illustrious tsar of Muscovy..."

Koppenstein, for such was the cavalier's name, invited Peter to supper: the Electress and her daughter had not taken their seats at table, since they were awaiting their guest... Peter only understood half of this and was so frightened that he all but fled out into the street...

"I can't," he stammered, "I'm in great haste. And it's late... On the way back from Holland, then perhaps..."

Koppenstein's cloak and hat sailed round the kitchen again. He insisted, not in the least put out. Sasha whispered in Russian:

"You won't get rid of that one in a hurry... Better drop in for an hour, myn Herz. The Germans are touchy..."

Peter was so exasperated that he wrenched a button off his waistcoat.

He agreed on condition that he and Sasha should be taken there through the back entrance, without others present, and that only the Electress should be at table, with her daughter if absolutely necessary. He crammed his dusty tricorne down over his eyes and glanced regretfully at the sausages hanging over the hearth.

A carriage was waiting outside.

8

The Electress Sophie and her daughter Sophie Charlotte were sitting at a table laid for supper in front of a fireplace hung with Chinese fabric to camouflage its ugliness. Mother and daughter were courageously bearing up despite all the discomforts of the medieval castle put at their disposal by a local landowner. Several contemporary tapestries and carpets barely covered the peeling brick walls, where, high under the vaulted ceiling, there were sure to be owls. The little silk armchairs, hastily obtained by the owner, stood on the flagstones of a floor which had been worn by the boots of red-bearded knights and the hooves of their stallions. There was a smell of mice and dust everywhere. The ladies shuddered at the thought of the crude customs which, thanks to the Creator, had vanished forever. Their gaze was comforted by a big picture hanging on a rusty hook originally intended for shields and suits of armour. It depicted luxurious abundance: a counter piled with fishes and lobsters, bundles of birds, vegetables, fruit and speared hogs... The colours were a sunnily radiant...

Paintings, music, poetry, the play of wit aspiring to all that was refined and graceful—such was the sole worthwhile content of this ephemeral life, so mother and daughter thought. They were two of the most cultured women in Germany. Both were in correspondence with Leibnitz,* who said: "The minds of these women are so curious that one sometimes has to capitulate before their profound questions." They patronised literature and the arts. Sophie Charlotte had founded an Academy of Sciences in Berlin. One day, the

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* Leibnitz, Gottfried-Wilhelm—famous German philosopher, mathematician, physicist, historian and diplomat.—*Ed.*

Elector Frederick told them with good-natured wit in a letter about his impressions of the tsar of the barbarians, who was travelling in the guise of a carpenter: "Muscovy is evidently awakening from its Asiatic slumbers. It is important that its first steps should be guided in a beneficial direction." Mother and daughter had no love for politics; they had been drawn to Koppenbrügge by the most noble-minded curiosity.

Clutching the arm rests on her chair with thin fingers, the Electress Sophie listened intently. Through the open window, which overlooked the nocturnal garden, she thought she could hear the rumble of wheels through the rustle of the leaves. The strings of pearls trembled on her white wig, drawn over a frame of whalebone and so high that, even if she had stretched up her hands, she could not have touched the top. The Electress was thin, her face was wrinkled all over, the gap in her bottom teeth was plugged with wax, the lace on the decolletage of her lilac dress concealed what could no longer seduce. Only the big dark eyes glittered with lively cunning.

Sophie Charlotte, with dark eyes like her mother, but more sedate, was beautiful, majestic and white-skinned. An intelligent brow under the powdered wig, glistening shoulders and the bosom, bare almost to the nipples, fine lips, a strong chin... Her somewhat tip-tilted nose made one look intently into her face in search of hidden flightiness.

"At last," said Sophie Charlotte, rising. "They're here."

Her mother went ahead of her. Both of them, their silks rustling, went up to the deep window niche that was as thick as the wall itself. A tall shadow was striding urgently along the garden path followed by another in a cloak and a cone-shaped hat, and, finally, a third.

"It is he," said the Electress. "God, he's a giant..."

Koppenstein opened the door.

"His Royal Majesty, the Tsar!"

An awkward leg appeared in a dusty shoe and a woollen stocking: Peter sidled through the door. On seeing the two ladies in the candle-light, he muttered *"Guten Abend..."*, raised his hand to his forehead as if to wipe something off, completely lost his nerve and covered his face with his hand.

The Electress Sophie took three paces forward, raised her dress with the ends of her fingers and, with an ease untypical of her years, performed a curtsey.

"Good evening, Your Royal Majesty."

Sophie Charlotte likewise, going up to her mother's place, swept her beautiful arms out with a swan-like movement, lifted her frothing petticoats a little way and curtseyed.

"Your Royal Majesty will forgive us the understandable impatience with which we have been striving to see the young hero, the lord of countless peoples and the first of the Russians to destroy the pernicious prejudices of his forebears."

Removing his hand from his face, Peter bowed, folding up like a pole, and realised that he was so funny that the ladies were indeed on the verge of dissolving into hurtful laughter. His embarrassment was acute and the German words escaped his memory.

" *Ich kann nicht sprechen...* I cannot speak," he muttered in a crestfallen voice... But he did not need to say anything. The Electress Sophie asked a hundred questions without waiting for an answer, about the weather, about the road, about Russia, about war, about his impressions of the journey. She put her hand under his elbow and led him to the table. All three sat down facing the gloomy hall with its dark vaults. The mother served roast pigeon, the daughter poured wine. Both were fragrant with sweet perfume. As she talked, the old lady, affectionately, in a motherly way, kept touching with her dry fingers his hand, still balled convulsively into a fist, for he was ashamed to let his nails be seen on the snowy table-cloth among the flowers and the crystal glassware. Sophie Charlotte served him with pleasing courtesy, half-rising to reach for the dipper or the dish and turning round with a charming smile:

"Taste this, Your Majesty... Really it's well worth trying..."

Had she not been so beautiful and bare, had it not been for the rustling of her scented gown, she might have been one of his own family. Even their voices were like those of his nearest and dearest. Peter relaxed and began answering questions. The Electresses told him about the famous Flemish and Dutch painters, about the great playwrights at the French court, about philosophy and beauty. Much of it was completely beyond his ken; he asked questions himself and marvelled...

"Sciences and the arts in Moscow?" he said, his leg jerking under the table. "Myself, I've only seen them here

for the first time... They haven't started on them back there, they've been afraid... Our boyars and nobles are uncouth: they sleep, guzzle and pray... Ours is a savage country. You'd be afraid to stay there even for a day. I sit here with you and it's frightening just to look back on it... There are thirty thousand brigands outside Moscow alone... They say of me that I shed much blood, according to the notebooks they pass round in secret, and that I am a torturer..."

His mouth twisted, his cheek quivered, his protuberant eyes went glassy for a moment, as if it was not a table loaded with edibles that he could see in front of him but a windowless hut reeking with blood in the Preobrazhensky suburb. His neck and shoulder jerked violently as he shook off the vision... Both women watched the changing expressions on his face with frightened curiosity...

"But don't you believe that... I love building ships above all things... The galley *Principium* was built from mast to keel by me with these two hands" (he finally unclenched his fists and showed them his callouses)... "I love the sea and I love setting off fireworks. I know fourteen trades, as yet badly; that's what I've come here for... As for my being evil and bloodthirsty, they're lying... I'm not evil... But just you live for a while with our people in Moscow—you'd go crazy... In Russia, everything will have to be smashed, everything will have to be built anew. Except that our people are so stubborn! Even though the flesh is taken off their bones with the knout..." He faltered, looked into the women's eyes and smiled apologetically. "But being a king here is a most pleasant business. As for me, my dear,"—he took the Electress Sophie by the hand—"I need to learn carpentering first."

The Electresses were enthralled. They even forgave him for his dirty nails, for wiping his hands on the table-cloth, smacking his lips when eating, using nautical lingo when talking about Moscow customs, winking a round eye and, to make his point, attempting more than once to nudge Sophie Charlotte with his elbow.

Everything, even his apparent cruelty and virgin incomprehension of certain manifestations of human kindness, seemed to them, though somewhat appalling, nonetheless captivating. Peter exuded a primitive freshness, like a

powerful beast. (Subsequently, the Electress Sophie wrote in her diary: "He is a very good and yet a very bad man. In the moral sense, he is a full representative of his country.")

What with the bubbling wine and the proximity of such intelligent and attractive women, Peter cheered up. Sophie Charlotte wanted to present her uncle, her brother and the court to him. Peter dived into his pocket for his pipe, a strange smile on his little mouth, and nodded: "All right, trot them in..." First came the Duke of Celle, a dry old man with a white Spanish beard of the kind no longer worn and the curled moustaches of a ladies' man and a duellist; then the Crown Prince, a flabby, thin-faced youth in black velvet; colourful, gorgeous ladies and cavaliers; Sasha, the broad-shouldered beau surrounded by ladies-in-waiting—he was entirely at home here, that one—and the ambassadors: Lefort and Golovin, the portly governor of Siberia. (They had caught up with the tsar's dormeuse into Koppenbrügge and, on learning where he was, in great terror, without having eaten or changed, had rushed to the castle.)

Peter embraced the Duke, took the future King of England under the armpits, lifted him up and kissed him, then crooked his arm and bowed nimbly to the courtiers. The ladies curtseyed all together and the cavaliers executed a bound with their hats.

"Sasha, shut the door tight," he said in Russian. He poured out a glass of wine, nearly a quart, summoned the nearest cavalier with a jerk of his head and said, again with a strange smile:

"It is forbidden by Russian custom to refuse the tsar's cup. All must drain the cup dry, ladies and cavaliers alike..."

In a word, the merrymaking had started, as at Kukui. Italian singers appeared with their mandolins. Peter wanted to dance, but the Italians played too quietly and too slowly. He sent Sasha back to the tavern to fetch his own musicians from the baggage train. The Preobrazhensky pipers and horn-players arrived, all in crimson blouses and with pudding-basin haircuts. They stood ranged like statues along the walls and played spoons, cymbals, cow horns, wooden whistles, and brass pipes... Such diabolical music had never been heard before under the medieval vaults. Peter stamped his feet to the rhythm and rolled his eyes:

"Burn them up, Sasha!"

Menshikov shook his shoulders, wiggled his eyebrows, put on a sad expression, and began alternately going up on his toes and sinking back on his heels. Sophie wanted to see Peter dance. He took the old lady lightly by the fingers and glided off with her. Then, after seeing her to her seat, he chose a podgy woman who was somewhat younger and began to caper about with her. Lefort took charge of the dancing. Sophie Charlotte chose the podgy Golovin. The volunteers hastened in from the garden, sorted out their partners and went down onto their haunches, kicking out their feet and uttering savage Tatar whoops. Petticoats whirled and perukes were disarranged. They certainly got those German ladies going. Many of the Russians were puzzled: how was it that the ladies had such hard ribs? Peter also questioned Sophie Charlotte about this. The Electress could not understand what he meant at first, but then she laughed until the tears came to her eyes:

"They are not ribs, but the springs and bones in our corsets."

9

They separated at Koppenbrügge. The high ambassadors set off for Amsterdam by a circuitous route. Peter headed straight for the Rhine with a small party of volunteers and, just short of the city of Xanten, they embarked on boats and sailed down the river. The longed-for Holland began after Schenkenschanz. They turned off along a right branch of the Rhine and at the village of Fort went through the locks into the canals.

The flat-bottomed boat was towed by two massive, dark-bay horses in high collars, gravely shaking their heads as they walked along a sandy towpath on the grassy bank. The canal ran in a straight line across a plain, patterned like a map with kitchen gardens, pastures, flower beds and a network of ditches and channels. It was a hot day, slightly misty. Stocks, hyacinths and narcissi had already shed their petals; the remainder were being cut on their blackened beds and put into baskets. But the tulips—black-and-lilac, flame, crimson, pied and golden—covered the ground like velvet. Windmills could be seen everywhere, their sails revolving in the idle breeze, farmhouses, farms, cottages with steep tiled roofs, storks' nests, and ranks of low wil-

lows along the ditches. Through the pale-blue haze could be seen the outlines of towns, cathedrals, towers, windmills, windmills, and yet more windmills.

A boat carrying hay was moving along a ditch past the kitchen gardens. A sail appeared from behind the roof of a farmhouse and glided slowly through the tulips... At a slime-covered lock, Dutchmen in baggy, barrel-like trousers, tight-fitting jackets and clogs (their boats, loaded with vegetables, were lying in a ditch that ran towards the mistily shining sun) placidly smoked their pipes as they waited for the lock to open.

In some places, the boat sailed along at a higher level than the fields and buildings. Below could be seen the fruit on trees with their branches trained up against a brick wall, laundry on the line, and peacocks strutting about on the sand in clean little courtyards. The Russians could only gape on seeing the real live birds. This land was a dream come true, a paradise wrested by miraculous labour from the sea. They honoured and cherished every patch of earth here... "Not like us in the wild steppe!" said Peter to the volunteers as he smoked his clay pipe in the bows:

"We have more space in some Moscow courtyards... But to take a besom, and sweep that yard, and plant such a pleasant and useful garden—no one ever even imagines doing as much... A building's falling down, and you, you devils, can't even be bothered to climb down off the stove to shore it up. I know you! When nature calls, you're too lazy to go to the proper place, you make a mess right outside the door... Why is it so? We have such vast open spaces and we're beggars... It's a great annoyance to us... The land here has been brought from the sea bottom: every tree has to be brought here and planted. They've set up a true paradise for themselves..."

The punt went through locks from the big canal into the small ones. They poled it along, constantly meeting and passing heavily loaded boats. The milky-grey strip of the Zuyder Zee could be seen towards the east. More and more sails were appearing on it. There were more people about. Evening drew on; they were approaching Amsterdam. Ships and still more ships on the strip of sea that was now beginning to turn rosy red. Masts, sails aflame in the glow of the sunset, sharp roofs of cathedrals and buildings... Purple clouds as high as mountains rising up beyond the sea; but

the light quickly faded and they turned to ashes. Lights appeared on the plain and glided along the canals.

They stopped for supper on the bank in a cosily lit tavern. They drank gin and English ale. From here, Peter sent all the volunteers with interpreters to Amsterdam. He himself, Menshikov, Alyosha Brovkin and Bitka the priest transferred to a boat and sailed further (by-passing the capital) to the little village of Zaandam.

Peter was burning with impatience to see the place that he had loved since childhood. He had been told about it by an old friend, the blacksmith Gerritt Kist (when they were building play ships on Lake Pereyaslavskoye). Kist, after making some money, had returned to his homeland, but other smiths and ship's carpenters had arrived (at Arkhangelsk, then Voronezh) and had said: "If there's one place where they build really good ships, Peter Alexeyevich, why, it's Zaandam; light, manoeuvrable, durable—ships to beat all ships."

About ten kilometres north of Amsterdam, in the villages of Zaandam, Koog, Oostzaan, Westzaan, and Zaandijk, there were no less than fifty shipyards. The work went on day and night at such a pace that a ship would be ready in five or six weeks. In the vicinity were many factories driven by windmills, manufacturing everything necessary for the shipyards: machined parts, nails, cramps, cables, sails and utensils. Medium-sized merchantmen and whalers were built in these private shipyards. The warships and the big merchantmen which sailed to the colonies were built in Amsterdam on the two Admiralty shipways.

All night, as the boat sailed along the deep and narrow bay, the passengers could see lights on the banks and hear the thud of axes, the creak of beams and the clang of iron. By the light of a campfire they could see the ribs and poops of ships on the stocks, the wooden machine that lifted heavy beams and bundles of planks by block and tackle. Boats scurried about with lanterns. Hoarse voices rang out. The air smelt of pine shavings, tar and river damp... Four sturdy Dutchmen rowed away with creaking oars, sucking at their dangling pipes.

In the middle of the night, they dropped into an eating-house for a rest. The oarsmen were changed. Morning dawned damp and grey. Houses, windmills, boats, long barrack huts—everything that had seemed so enormous on

the banks at night had dwindled in size and was covered with a silvery dew. The weeping willows drooped over the misty water. Where was the celebrated Zaandam?

"That's it—Zaandam," said one of the oarsmen, nodding towards a cluster of houses—some wooden and some of dark brick—with steep roofs and flat fronts. The boat sailed past them along a rather dirty canal as down a street. People in the village were waking up, fires were already burning here and there in the grates. The women were washing the little square windowpanes that were rainbow-coloured with age and were cleaning the copper door handles and hinges. A cock crowed on top of a turf-roofed barn. It was becoming light and the water in the canal was smoking. Washing was hung across it on lines: huge breeches, linen shirts, woollen stockings. As they sailed along, they had to duck their heads.

They turned off up a side canal past rotting piles, chicken coops, barns with earth closets attached to them, and hollow-trunked willows. The canal ended in a small backwater, in the middle of which a man was sitting in a boat... He was wearing a knitted bonnet and was fishing for eels with his head down between his shoulders. Peter looked harder, jumped to his feet and shouted:

"Gerritt Kist, blacksmith, is that you?"

The other pulled out his line and only then did he take a look. He was evidently startled, although he was a sanguine enough fellow: in the approaching boat stood a young man dressed like a Dutch labourer—in varnished hat, red jacket and linen trousers... But he knew no other such face—masterful, frank, with crazed eyes... Gerritt Kist took fright—the tsar of Moscow in a misty morning had sailed out of a ditch in a common boat. The fisherman blinked his red eyelashes; it really was the tsar, and he hailed him...

"Hey, is that you, Peter?"

"Greetings!"

"Greetings, Peter..."

Gerritt Kist carefully pressed the tsar's hand with stiff fingers. He noticed Sasha:

"Eh, so it's you, laddie?.. I thought it might be the two of you... How wonderful that you've come to Holland..."

"For the whole winter, Kist, to carpenter in the shipyard... We're going to buy tools today."

"You can buy good tools, and cheap ones too, from Jakob

Oom's widow. I'll have a word with her..."

"Even back in Moscow, I thought of staying with you..."

"It'll be cramped in my place, Peter. I'm a poor man, my house is in a bad way..."

"Yes, but they won't be paying me high wages on the shipyard either..."

"Eh, you're still the same young wag, Peter..."

"No, we haven't time for jokes now. In two years we must build a fleet and become clever people instead of fools! Let there be no idle hands in our state."

"That's a good idea you've had there, Peter."

They floated up to the grassy bank on which stood a little wooden house with a sagging tiled roof, two windows and an outbuilding. Smoke was rising from the flat, high chimney into the branches of an old maple-tree. At the lop-sided door, with its barred window over the lintel, there was a clean mat for clogs, since in Holland people enter the houses in their stockinged feet. A thin old woman, her arms tucked under a neat apron, watched them from the doorway as they glided up in the boat. When Gerritt Kist called to her as he threw the oars onto the grass, "Hey, these people have come from Muscovy to see us," she gravely inclined her starched, winged bonnet.

Peter took a great liking to the house, and he rented a room with two windows, a small, dark closet with a bed for himself and Sasha, and for Alyosha and Bitka the attic, reached from the room by a movable ladder. On that same day he bought from the Jakob Oom's widow some good tools, and as he was bringing them back home in a barrow, he met Rensen the carpenter, who had spent one winter working in Voronezh. The fat, good-natured Rensen stopped, gaped, and suddenly turned white: this young man pushing a barrow, a varnished hat on the back of his head, reminded Rensen of something so terrible that his spirit quailed... He could see it in his mind's eye: snow flying, a red glow, and the corpses of Russian workers swaying in the blizzard.

"Greetings, Rensen!" Peter put down his barrow, wiped his sweaty brow with his sleeve and put out his hand. "Yes, it's me... How are you? You shouldn't have run away from Voronezh... I start work at Lynst Rogge's shipyard on Monday. Mind you don't talk too much... I'm just Peter Mikhailov here." And again there was the glow of Voronezh in his intent, bulging eyes.

"Myn Herr König... The navigators sent on your instructions to study have all been assigned to their places... Ivan Golovin, Pleshcheyev, Krapotkin, Vassily Volkov, Vereshchagin, Alexander Menshikov, Alexei Brovkin, and Bitka the priest who is drunk every day—all those, among whom I include myself, have been sent, some to Zaandam, others to the yard at Oostzaan for shipbuilding work... Alexander Kikin and Stepan Vassilyev—to make masts; Yakim the painter and the embassy chaplain Krivosykhin—to make all kind of watermills; Borisov and Uvarov—boat-building; Lukin and Kobylin—to make blocks; Konshin, Skvortsov, Petelin, Mukhanov and Sinyavin have gone on board various ships as mariners; Archilov has left for the Hague to learn gunnery... But the squires, who were sent ahead of us, after learning only how to read the compass, wanted to go to Moscow; they thought they had done everything here. We changed their minds for them and ordered them to go as labourers to the shipyard at Oostzaan, to sweat their guts out.

"Mister Jacob Bruce has arrived and has delivered the letter from Your Illustrious Majesty. He showed his wounds, which have not yet healed, and complained that he received them from Your Illustrious Majesty at a banquet... Beast! How long are you going to maim people? Some you hurt have even got as far as here. Stop associating with Ivan Khmelnitsky... You'll have your face smashed in because of him... Peter..."

"...I have received your letter to me, in which you write, Sir, that I am associating with Ivan Khmelnitsky, but that is not true, Sir Jacob, an out-and-out Moscow drunk, went to you and spoke in a stupor... I have no time to associate with Ivan; we always swear and shout at one another, and we draw blood every other day... You can afford to keep up the acquaintance with Ivan, but we haven't time... As I wrote to you, Sir, eight men of the same band have been caught, and these robbers are from among the tradespeople, butchers, coachmen and boyars' servants Petrushka Selezen, Mitka Pichuga, Popugai, Kuska Zaika, and Mishka Tyrtov, a nobleman. Their robbers' lair and hoard were beyond the Tverskiye Gates... As for Bruce or any others who may

come and complain about me—it's all said in drink... Yours respectfully, Fetka Romodanovsky..."

"...Myn Herr König... The state letter has been conveyed to me in which you write about the foreigner Thomas Fadenbracht: how is he to deal in tobacco henceforth? A Ukase was already proclaimed about this in winter to the effect that in the first year he should trade for himself, in the second—for himself, but paying tax, and in the third year he should hold an auction and sell to the highest bidder... I am much amazed; surely Your Majesty's boyars themselves could think of something? It would seem a commonplace matter, after all... For your state service, 15,000 guns have been bought here and 10,000 ordered, and 8 howitzers and 14 mortars have also been ordered for your service. I have spoken many times about the iron smelters here, but we still cannot find any; the good ones stand firm and we do not need bad ones... Please convey my respects to my general and beg him not to leave my little house... (The rest in invisible ink.) The news here is as follows: the King of France is preparing a fleet again in Brest, but where for no one knows... Yesterday the news came from Vienna that the King of Spain has died... And you know yourself what will happen now that he is dead...*

"You also write about the great rains that we are having just now. It amazes us that you have such mud even in your rich Moscow houses... Here, we live below water level, and it is dry nevertheless... Peter..."

Vassily Volkov who, by order of Peter, was keeping a diary, wrote as follows:

"In Amsterdam I saw an infant of the female sex, one-and-a-half years old, covered all over with shaggy hair and very fat, the face incredibly wide. It had been brought to a fair. Here, too, I saw an elephant which played miniwets, blew a trumpet Turkish fashion, fired a musket and has befriended a dog which lives with it—truly a most wondrous and marvellous thing...

"I saw a man's head fashioned out of wood: it speaks! It is wound up like a clock, and whatever you say, the head repeats it after you. I saw two wooden horses on a wheel; you sit on them and you can ride fast anywhere you want through the streets... I saw a glass through which you can

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* The war for the Spanish succession.—*Ed.*

melt silver and lead; they burned wood under water with it—there were about four fingers of water, the water started boiling and the wood was burnt up.

"I saw an anatomy at a doctor's: all the innards taken apart—the human heart, lung, kidney, and how the stone is born in the kidneys. The lung lives on a tube, and it looks like an old rag. The tubes that dwell in the brain are like threads... Very wonderful...

"The city of Amsterdam stands by the sea on low-lying terrain, canals have been dug alongside all the streets and are so big that ships can go down them. On either side of the canals are wide streets: two carriages could ride along them abreast in some places. On both sides there are great trees by the canals with lanterns between them. There are lanterns along every street, and each has to light the lantern outside his own house. On the streets I have mentioned there is a plaisir, or great promenade.

"The merchants that live here are considered the richest in Europe, and the tradespeople are also very rich. They dress up as nowhere else. The Bourse, which is built entirely of white stone and is faced inside with alabaster, is a truly wondrous place... The floor is like a chessboard, and each merchant stands on his square... And every day there are many people here, so that the whole place is very crowded... And there is great shouting... Some people, poor Jews, go about among the merchants and offer them a pinch of snuff if the excitement makes them need it, and that is how they earn their living..."

Jacob Nomen, an inquisitive Dutchman, wrote in his diary:

"...The tsar managed to live incognito for no more than a week; some who had been to Muscovy recognised his face. The rumour of this has spread quickly all over our country. At the Amsterdam Bourse, people have staked big sums of money and wagered whether this is truly the great tsar or only one of his ambassadors... Herr Houtman, who has traded with Muscovy and who has often entertained the tsar in Moscow, came to Zaandam to pay his deep respects to the tsar. He said to him:

"'Your Anointed Majesty, is it indeed you?'

"To this, the tsar replied somewhat sternly:

"'As you see.'

"After this, they talked for a long time about the difficulties of the northern route to Muscovy and about the

advantages of the Baltic ports, and all the time Houtman dared not to look the tsar straight in the face, knowing that this could only anger him: he could not abide people looking him straight in the eye. Once in the street, a certain Alderston Block looked the tsar very boldly in the eye—in a word, as if there was something altogether amusing and astonishing in front of him. For this, the tsar struck him very hard on the face with his hand, so that Alderston Block was hurt and fled in shame while the passers-by laughed at him:

"'Bravo, Alderston, you've been knighted!'

"Another tradesman wanted to see the tsar at work and asked a foreman at the shipyard to satisfy his curiosity. The foreman warned him that the man to whom he said: 'Peter, carpenter of Zaandam, do this or that' would really be the tsar of the Muscovites... The curious merchant went to the shipyard and saw several workers carrying a heavy beam. Then the baas, or foreman, shouted:

"'Peter, carpenter of Zaandam, why don't you give them a hand?'

"Then one of the carpenters, almost seven feet tall, in tar-stained clothing, with curly hair plastered down on his forehead, drove his axe in and, running up obediently, put his shoulder under the beam and carried it off with the others to the considerable wonderment of the aforesaid tradesman...

"After work, he visits a common harbour tavern where, sitting with a jar, he smokes his pipe and chats cheerfully with the roughest of people and laughs at their jokes, not in the least concerned about respect for himself on such occasions. He often visits the wives of the workers serving at present in Muscovy, drinks gin with the women, claps them on the shoulder and makes jokes... The following occurrence points to certain of his oddities. He bought some plums, put them in his hat and, holding it under his arm, ate them on the street as he walked across the dam to the Zuidijk. A crowd of little boys tagged on behind. He liked the look of some of them and said:

"'Want some plums, little fellows?'

"He gave them several. Then others came up and said: 'Give us some plums too, or something.' But he pulled a face at them and spat out a stone, amused that he had annoyed them. Several little urchins were so cross that they

began pelting him with rotten apples, pears, grass and various garbage. He went away from them, smiling. One of the boys hit him in the back with a stone and hurt him, and at this he lost patience... Finally, at the lock, a lump of earth hit him on the head and he shouted in a fury:

"'Is there no burgomaster here to keep order?..' But this didn't frighten the little boys in the least...

"On feast days, he goes round the bay in a sailing boat purchased from Harmensen the painter for forty guldens and a jar of beer. Once, when he was sailing along the Kerkrak, a passenger vessel approached his boat with many people gathered on deck and burning with curiosity to get a closer look at the tsar. The vessel came right up, and the tsar, not wanting to be importuned in this way, seized two empty bottles and hurled them one after another straight into the crowd of passengers. Fortunately, he did not hit anyone...

"He is extremely curious and invariably asks: 'What is that?' When he receives an answer, he says: 'I want to see it.' And he studies it and asks questions until he understands. In Utrecht, where he went with some of his travelling companions to meet the Dutch Stadholder, William of Orange, King of England, he insisted on being shown round the orphanages, hospitals, and various factories and workshops. He particularly enjoyed a visit to the dissecting room of Professor Ruysch. He was enthralled by the excellently prepared corpse of a baby, who was smiling as if alive, so that the tsar kissed it. When Ruysch took the sheet off another corpse, dissected for anatomical purposes, the tsar noticed revulsion on the faces of his Russian travelling companions and, upbraiding them angrily, ordered them to tear the muscles off the corpse with their teeth.

"I have written all this down from the accounts of various people, but yesterday I managed to see him myself. He was coming out of the shop of Jakob Oom's widow.

"He was walking quickly and waving his hands about, and in each of them he was holding a new axe-handle. He is a man of tall stature, impressive, strongly built, lively and agile. His face is round, with a stern expression; his eyebrows are dark, his hair short, curly and darkish. He was wearing a serge coat, a red shirt and a felt hat. Thus he was seen by the hundreds of people who gathered on the street, including my wife and daughter..."

"Myn Herr König... Yesterday, the Emperor's ambassadors sent from Vienna to our ambassadors a nobleman with the tidings that the Lord God bestowed victory over the Turks on the troops of the Emperor Leopold, so that the Turks in their three trenches could not hold out, but were driven out of them and beaten. They fled across the bridge, the Turks began jumping into the water, but the Emperor's men began hewing them to pieces from behind and so they thoroughly beat the Turks and captured the baggage train. In that battle, 12,000 Turks were slain, including the Grand Vizier, and they say that the Sultan was killed too.

"The Generalissimo of the Emperor's troops was the brother of the Prince of Savoy, Eugene, a young man. They say he is 27 years old and that this is his first battle...

"Having reported this, and congratulating you on this triumph, Sire, we request that all merrymaking should be accompanied by cannon and musket fire... From Amsterdam, this 13th day of September... Peter..."

11

In January, Peter went to England and settled within three versts of London in the town of Deptford at a shipyard, where he saw what he had so vainly tried for in Holland: shipbuilding according to all the rules of science, that is to say, the geometric proportions of ships. For two and a half months he studied mathematics and draughtsmanship. For the foundation of a navigation school in Moscow, he took into his service a professor of mathematics, Andrew Farquharson, and a lock expert, Captain John Perry, to design the canal between the Volga and the Don. He could not beat down any of the English mariners; they pushed their prices up too high and there was little money in the Embassy treasury. From Moscow came constant deliveries of sables, brocades and even items belonging to the tsar: goblets, necklaces, and China cups; but none of these were enough to pay for the big orders and the hire of personnel.

The amiable Lord Peregrine of England, Marquis of Carmarthen, came to the rescue. He suggested being given full rights to all the tobacco trade in Muscovy and, for the right to import three thousand barrels of that same nicotine herb, each weighing five hundred English pounds, he

paid twenty thousand pounds Sterling in advance... It became possible to take into service Cornelis Cruys, the famous Dutch deep sea captain, a proud and intractable man but a skilful sailor. He was offered a salary of 9,000 gulden (3,600 efimki in our currency), a house in Moscow and full board, the rank of Vice-Admiral and the right to claim three per cent of war booty and, should he be taken prisoner, his ransom at the Treasury's expense.

Foreign commanders, navigators, bosuns, doctors, sailors, cooks, master gunners and shipwrights kept arriving in Moscow via Arkhangelsk and Novgorod. In accordance with the tsar's Ukases, they were billeted in the houses of the nobility and the merchants, so that Moscow became badly overcrowded. The boyars did not know what to do with this host of foreigners.

Wagon trains kept arriving with arms, sailcloth, various tools for working wood and iron, whalebone, cartridge paper, cork, anchors, ashwood, pieces of marble, boxes containing infants and monsters in spirit, dried crocodiles, stuffed birds... The people were living from hand to mouth, Moscow was full of beggars; there were robbers about, and even they were bloated with hunger, yet wagon train after wagon train kept coming. Smooth-faced, insolent foreigners were swarming into the city from all directions. Had the tsar really gone over the borderline?

A rumour had been going round the Moscow markets that tsar Peter had been drowned abroad (some said that he had been crammed into a cask), and Lefort, so the story went, had found a certain German who looked like the tsar, was passing him off as Peter, was now going to rule in his name and would persecute people and eradicate the old rites. Constables arrested such rumour-mongers and hauled them up before the Preobrazhensky Commission. Romodanovsky interrogated them in person with knout and fire, but it was impossible to find the nest in which these evil rumours had been hatched. The guard was reinforced in the Novodevichy Convent so that there should be no communications from tsarevna Sophia. Romodanovsky invited the boyars and high nobility to feasts at his place and did not spare the wine. Musketeers were posted at the doors to make the guests keep their seats. They feasted for a whole day and night and more. Dwarfs and jesters crawled about under the tables, eavesdropping on the conversations. A

trained bear went about among the tipplers, held out a goblet of wine in his paws to make the guest drink, and if anyone declined, the bear, throwing down the goblet, clawed him, fell upon him and began sucking his face. The Prince-Emperor,portly and tired, snoozed half-drunk on his throne, listening artfully and keeping a sharp look-out. But even in their cups the guests said nothing untoward, although he knew of many who were only waiting for the ground to start shaking under the feet of Peter and his cronies...

The enemy soon came out into the open. About a hundred and fifty streltsy turned up in Moscow, all deserters from the army at the Lithuanian frontier. Four regiments of streltsy —those of Colonels Hundertmark, Chubarov, Kolzakov and Chermny had been sent to help the governor there, Prince Mikhail Romodanovsky. These were the regiments which, after the fall of Azov, had remained on fortification works in Azov and Taganrog and had mutinied with the Cossacks the previous autumn, threatening to follow the example of Stenka Razin. They were fed up to the teeth with their hard service conditions and wanted to return to Moscow, to their womenfolk, to quiet small trading and crafts, but instead of being allowed a rest, they had been herded off to the Lithuanian frontier like common soldiery where it was damp and food was in short supply.

The streltsy, evidently, were expected by someone in Moscow. Their petition immediately reached (through a palace serving-woman) the Kremlin women's quarters, where Sophia's sister, tsarevna Marfa, was not in close confinement. There was a quick reply from Marfa through the same serving-woman.

"Things have become confused up above: certain boyars, who often ride over to Kukui and are very thick with the foreigners, want to strangle tsarevich Alexei. We put another boy in his place, so they flew into a rage and slapped the young tsaritsa on the cheeks. We don't know what is going to happen next... As for the tsar, we don't know whether he's alive or dead... If you, streltsy, do not hasten to Moscow, you will never see it at all, for a Ukase has already been written about you..."

The streltsy ran about the squares with this letter and, where necessary, shouted: "Tsarevna Sophia used to feed three hundred people eight times a year, and her sisters, the tsarevnas, gave out food too; they gave the common

people beef tongues on meat days and jellied meat, geese, chicken in *kasha* and ham-and-egg pies, and then they served spiced salt pork, and choice fish, and smelt, and wine a-plenty, and double-strength mead... See what tsars we once had... But now only the foreigners eat well, and you can all die of starvation, they're robbing you to buy crocodiles overseas." They went to the Streltsy Commission to shout in protest. They were not even afraid of boyar Ivan Borisovich Troyekurov, and when several of them were seized and about to be marched off to prison, the others rescued their comrades...

The Prince-Emperor summoned generals Gordon and Artamon Golovin, and it was decided to expel the runaway streltsy from Moscow forthwith. Fyodor Yurievich Romodanovsky, deeply alarmed, rode off to check the royal guards and ordinary foot regiments, but it was quiet and peaceful everywhere. They picked out a hundred men from the Semyonovsky Regiment and summoned volunteers from among the merchants. At night, without making any noise, they entered the suburb where the houses of the streltsy stood and began breaking down the gates and ejecting the streltsy one by one. None of them offered any resistance. "Ah, it's you Semyonovites... What's all the fuss about? We'll go quietly anyway..." They took a sack of pies and a rifle wrapped in a cloth, and so they left, smiling complacently as if they had already achieved what had brought them to Moscow...

The streltsy took a letter from tsarevna Sophia back to the Lithuanian frontier. That day, Marfa sent a dwarf with their petition in a pie to Sophia at the Novodevichy Convent. The tsarevna sent her reply back with the dwarf.

"Streltsy... I have been apprised that a small number of your regiments are come to Moscow... All four of your regiments are to camp by the Devichy Convent and appeal for me to go to Moscow and take over power... And if the soldiers who stand by the convent should not let you go through, deal with them, beat them and allow us to proceed to Moscow... And if anyone stands in your way—people or soldiers—then you are to fight them..."

This was an order to take Moscow by force of arms. When the runaways returned to the Lithuanian frontier with the tsarevna's letter to the regiments, the mutiny began there and then.

12

Neither Peter nor the high ambassadors were particularly conversant with European politics. For Muscovites, to make war meant to protect the steppes from the nomads, suppress the predatory raids of the Crimean Tatars, secure the land and water routes to the east and break through to the sea.

To them, European politics seemed a murky business. They firmly believed in written treaties and oaths of kings. They knew that the King of France and the Sultan of Turkey were hand in glove, and that William of Orange, as King of England and Stadholder of Holland, had promised Peter that he would help in the war with the Turks. Suddenly, out of the blue, came the staggering news (it was brought from Poland by a nobleman from Augustus) that Leopold, Emperor of Austria, had entered into peace negotiations with the Turks, and particular interest in this move was being shown by William of Orange, who had consulted neither the Muscovites nor the Poles.

What about his recent protestations of concern for the successes of Christian arms over the enemies of the Holy Sepulchre? What could it mean? He had presented Peter with a yacht, had called him brother... They had feasted together... What was to be thought of this now?

It was understandable that Emperor Leopold should be talking to the Turks about peace: a war was about to begin between him and the King of France for the Spanish succession, that is (as the ambassadors understood it), which of them would put his son on the throne in Madrid as king... A great matter, of course, but what had England and Holland to do with it?

Peter and the high ambassadors found it hard to grasp that the English and Dutch trading and industrial people had long been deeply in favour of a war for the destruction of France's commercial and military domination of the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, that the Spanish succession was not the throne for this or that king's son, not the precious crown of Charlemagne, but free routes for ships loaded with cloth, iron, silks and spices, rich markets and free ports, and that the Dutch and the English found it more convenient not to fight a war themselves, but to incite others to do so... It seemed even more weird that the English and the Dutch, while striving to untie the hands

of the Austrian Emperor for war with France—should be so anxious for the Russians to continue fighting the Sultan... So much for two-faced European high-politics...

Peter returned to Amsterdam. The burgomasters, when asked about the unpleasant rumours from Vienna, replied evasively and steered the conversation round to matters of trade. They likewise avoided another subject of importance to the Muscovites... That year, in the Urals, a blacksmith named Demidov had found a magnetic iron ore... Vinius had written to Peter:

"...There cannot be better iron than that and there never has been anywhere in the world, it being so rich that a hundred pounds of ore yield forty pounds of cast iron. Please, pester the ambassadors to find good foundrymen who can make steel..."

The English and the Dutch listened very closely to this talk of magnetic iron in the Urals, but when it came to finding good craftsmen, they said: "You won't cope with such foundries yourselves. We'd better come over and have a look on the spot. We might take it on ourselves..." So no foundrymen were to be hired in England or Holland.

On top of all these alarms came the news of the sedition of the streltsy in Moscow. A secret agent wrote from Vienna to the high ambassadors and told them that it was already known about even there, in Vienna: a Polish clergyman was babbling all round the city that there had been a mutiny in Moscow, Prince Vassily Golitsyn had been brought back from banishment, tsarevna Sophia had been restored to the throne and the people had sworn allegiance to her...

"Myn Herr König... In your letter of state you announce that the streltsy have mutinied and that the men have been pacified by your government and troops. We are trulie overjoyed. Save that I am much annoyed at you—why, in this matter, did you not start an enquiry and why did you let the traitors get away to the border? God be your judge... That was not what was agreed in the entrance hall of the country palace...

"If you think that we are lost because the mail from here was delayed, well, thanks be to God, not one man has died here, all are alive... I do not know why you have

these womanish fears... Pray do not be angry: I write trulie out of the sickness of my heart... We shall depart hence this week for Vienna... All they can talk about there is our missing... Peter..."

13

It was a clear, quiet Trinity Day and the streets had been swept. Birch branches hung at the gates. If anyone was to be seen at all, it would be a watchman with his club or spear in front of shops secured with massive padlocks. All Moscow was in church. The hot, incense-laden air floated from the low doors decorated with birch fronds. There were crowds of beggars on the church steps but even they were half-dazed by the chiming of the bells. A festive sun warmed the tousled heads and the bodies under the rags... There was a faint smell of wine in the air...

This blissful tranquillity was rudely violated by the rattle of wheels. A fine cart thundered madly on iron rims over the wooden paving of Nikolskaya Street, the sturdy horse racing at full gallop. A rich merchant was bounding up and down in it—hatless, in a dusty, dark-blue coat, his eyes bulging as he lashed the horse... All recognised Ivan Brovkin. On Red Square, he left his panting horse to the beggars who scampered up to him. Hot, red-faced, he dashed into the Kazan Cathedral, where the boyars were attending service... Pushing aside people whom, in the normal way of things, he would have been terrified to touch, he finally caught sight of the burly, brocade-clad back of the Prince-Emperor. Romodanovsky was standing in front of all the others on a carpet before the ancient Holy Gates in the centre of the iconostasis, his yellowish, fat face sunk deep in his pearl-studded collar. Brovkin pushed his way through, bowed low to the Prince-Emperor and looked boldly into his clouded eyes, terrible with their wrathfully swollen eyelids...

"Sire, I have galloped all night from Sychevka, my village near New Jerusalem... Dreadful news..."

"From Sychevka?" Romodanovsky stared hard and uncomprehendingly at Brovkin. "Are you drunk? Have you no respect for your superiors?" His neck began to swell with wrath, his drooping moustaches quivered. Nothing daunted, Brovkin leaned forward and said in Romodanovsky's ear:

"Four regiments of streltsy advancing on Moscow. Two

days' march from Jerusalem... Proceeding slowly, with baggage trains... Forgive me, Sire, for importuning you with such news..."

Pulling his staff towards him, Romodanovsky seized Brovkin by the hand, gripped it tightly and, his face turning purple, looked back at the sumptuously attired boyars, at their inquisitive stares... All eyes were lowered before the Prince-Emperor. With a slow nod, he summoned Boris Alexeyevich Golitsyn:

"Come to me after the service... Bid the archimandrite make haste... Tell Artamon and Vinius that they should come to me immediately..."

Again conscious of the boyars whispering behind his back, he half-turned round and his eyes cleared. Those present were so frightened that they even forgot to cross themselves... There was no sound save for the censer jingling and a pigeon flapping its wings under the vault in the dusty window.

14

Four regiments—those of Hundertmark, Chubarov, Kolzakov and Chermny—were camped on the low, damp ground under the walls of the Resurrection Monastery, known as New Jerusalem. A star was twinkling in the green sunset sky behind the stepped Babylonian bell-tower. The monastery was in darkness and the gates were locked. It was also dark on the low ground; the campfires had been stamped out. Carts creaked and grim voices could be heard—the streltsy wanted to cross the narrow Istra River at night with their baggage trains and proceed onto the Moscow highway.

They had been held up by lack of fodder at the monastery and in the village of Sychevka. The scouts just back from Moscow said that there was great panic there; the boyars and the big merchants were fleeing to the villages and their patrimonies. The suburbs were waiting for the streltsy and as soon as they approached, the guards would be killed at the gates and the regiments admitted into the city. Generalissimo Shein had mustered about three thousand play troops, men of the Butyrsky and Lefort regiments. He would put up a fight; but all the people would most probably help the streltsy, and their wives were already sharpening lances, pikes and axes, running about the suburb as if crazed,

waiting for their husbands, sons and brothers...

The argument lasted all day in the regiments. Some wanted to burst straight into Moscow, others said that they must by-pass the city, stay in Serpukhov or Tula, and from there send couriers to the Don and to the Ukrainian cities to appeal to the Cossacks and streltsy for help.

"Why go to Serpukhov?.. Let's go home, to our suburbs..."

"We don't want to lay siege... What's Shein to us?.. We'll rouse all Moscow..."

"We didn't manage once before... It's a risky business..."

"They have Gordon and Colonel Krage with their army... And they mean business..."

"And we're tired... We haven't enough powder... Better to lay siege..."

Ovsei Rzhov climbed up onto the cart. He had recently been promoted and was now commander of five hundred men. Back in Toropets, where the mutiny had begun, they had thrown out all the officers and colonels. Tikhon Hundertmark had only escaped because he had been on horseback. Kolzakov, with his skull cracked open, had barely managed to get across the river over the bridge. The streltsy had then summoned a council and had elected their commanders... Ovsei, straining his voice to the utmost, shouted:

"Who has a shirt on his back? Mine's gone rotten. I haven't combed my beard since last year and I haven't seen the inside of a bath-house either... Whoever has a shirt, let him lay siege... But all we want is to go home!.."

"Home, home!" shouted the streltsy, climbing onto their carts. "Have you forgotten what Sophia wrote to us? We must go and rescue her now. Otherwise our cause is lost, we're done for... If we don't hurry, we've got Lefort round our necks for good. Better to fight now so's we can put Sophia on the throne... Then we'll have pay, and food, and freedom. We'll set up a pillar on Red Square again. We'll chuck the boyars down from the belfry, we'll share out their houses, we'll sell off, and the tsaritsa will give us everything... As for the German quarter: people will forget it was ever there..."

Streltsy ringleaders Tuma, Proskuryakov, Zorin and Yorsh jumped up and joined Ovsei on the cart, rattling their sabres in their scabbards...

"Start crossing the river, lads!"

"If any won't come to Moscow, plant them on spears..."

Many ran to their carts, yelling wildly at the horses. The baggage train and the crowds of streltsy moved off down to the smoking river... But on the other bank, in the obscurity of the thickets, somebody waved something, as if giving a signal, and a desperate voice called out:

"Stay, stay!.."

They stared harder and made out a man in armour and a plumed helmet at the other side of the river. They recognised Gordon. There was a sudden hush.

"Streltsy!" they heard him cry. "I have with me four thousand troops loyal to their sovereign... We have taken up an excellent position for battle... But I am very loth to spill the blood of my brothers. Tell me, what are you thinking of and where are you going?"

"To Moscow... Home... We're starving... We're in rags..."

"Why did you drive us into the wild forests?.."

"As if there weren't enough of us killed at Azov... As if we didn't eat enough carrion when we came away from Azov..."

"We've been broken by slave labour..."

"Let us through to Moscow... We'll spend three days at home, then we'll surrender..."

When they had finished shouting, Gordon cupped his hand to his mouth:

"Very goot... But only fools cross a river at night! Fools! The Istra is deep, you'll lose your baggage trains... Better wait on that bank and we'll wait on this one. We'll talk tomorrow..."

He mounted his big horse and galloped away into the nocturnal gloom. The streltsy stood around for a while, talking excitedly, then began making campfires and cooking *kasha*...

When the sun rose above a cloudless horizon, they saw the level ranks of the Preobrazhensky Regiment on the other side of the Istra on a hill, and, above them, twelve brass cannon on green carriages, with slow-matches smoking beside them. On the left wing stood five hundred dragoons with field-badges. On the right, barring the Moscow road, the rest of the troops were formed up behind chevaux de frise and the cover of the terrain.

The streltsy started shouting, hastily harnessed up their horses and formed their wagons into a rectangle, Cossack fashion... Gordon descended the hill at a walking pace with

six dragoons and rode up to the river. His black steed sniffed the water and bounded across to the other side. The streltsy gathered round the general...

"Listen..." (Raising his hand in its iron gauntlet...) "You are good, sensible people... Why should we fight? Hand over all the ringleaders, all the traitors who fled to Moscow."

Ovsei dashed forward to Gordon's horse, his beard ragged, his eyes red:

"We have no traitors here... It's you that's calling the Russian people traitors, you scum! We all wear the cross round our necks... So Franchishko Lefort doesn't like this cross, eh?"

The streltsy moved towards him, buzzing excitedly. Half-closing his eyes, Gordon remained seated on his horse without stirring.

"We won't let you into Moscow... Listen to an old soldier; stop this mutiny, it will go badly for you..."

The streltsy flared up, shouting obscenities this time. The tall, dark-haired, hawk-eyed Tuma climbed onto a cannon and brandished a piece of paper.

"All our grievances are written down here... Let us across the river—even if only just three of us, and we'll read the petition in the big regiment..."

"Let him read it now... Listen, Gordon..."

Stumblingly, pummelling the air with his clenched fist, Tuma read:

"...Being at Azov, the heretic Franchishko Lefort, that he might inflict great embarrassment on Russian propriety, led the best of the Moscow streltsy, did this Franchishko, under the walls at the wrong time, and, by putting them where the greatest bloodshed took place, did slay a great many... And by his contrivance, a sap was dug, and with that sap he slew three hundred streltsy and more!"

Gordon spurred his horse and tried to snatch the letter away. Tuma backed off. The streltsy howled wildly.

Tuma continued reading:

"And by the contrivance of this same Franchishko, all the people are being made victims of arrogance, beard-shaving, and the smoking of tobacco in flagrant violation of the ancient proprieties."

Gordon lost all hope of outshouting the streltsy, reared his horse up on its haunches and galloped towards the river, with the crowd making way for him. They saw him jump

down at the tent of the Generalissimo. Soon, the priests' cassocks shone in the slanting rays of the sun. Then the streltsy likewise gave orders for prayers to be said before battle. They covered a gun-carriage with a horse blanket and stood beside it a bucket of water for sprinkling. They doffed their hats. The barefoot, ragged priests zealously commenced the service... "Grant us, O Lord, victory over the heathens and the savages and the infidels..."

On the other side, by Shein's tent, they were already going up to kiss the cross while the streltsy were still on their knees, singing, then, crossing themselves, they went for their arms, bit off cartridges and loaded their muskets. The priests rolled up their tattered stoles and went behind the carts. Then, on the hill, all twelve cannon fired at once... Balls flew hissing over the baggage train and began exploding under the monastery walls, throwing up gouts of earth...

Ovsei Rzhov, Tuma, Zorin and Yorsh brandished their sabres:

"Brothers, let's charge them!.."

"To Moscow! To Moscow!"

"Fall in by companies!.."

"The guns, roll out the guns..."

The streltsy ran into ragged company formation, threw their hats into the air and shouted the pre-arranged battle-cry:

"Sergiev! Sergiev!"

Colonel Krage ordered the sights to be lowered and the battery sent its shot into the baggage train. Splinters flew and horses thrashed their legs. The streltsy replied with musket volleys and bombs from the four cannon. For the third time, the battery on the hill fired into the thick of the regiments. Some of the streltsy rushed to the chevaux de frise, but they were met there by men of the Butyrsky and Lefort regiments. For the fourth time the guns roared and the hill was swathed in dense smoke. The streltsy companies were thrown into confusion, turned round and took to their heels. Flinging down banners, arms, caftans and hats, they fled in total disorder. The dragoons forded the river and galloped in pursuit, rounding up the fleeing streltsy and driving them back to the baggage train as dogs will herd a flock of sheep.

On that day, Generalissimo Shein moved his camp up to the monastery walls and began an investigation. Not one of

the streltsy betrayed Sophia or mentioned her letter. They complained, showed their campaign wounds, shook tattered uniforms, said that they had marched on Moscow in a terrible fit of uncontrollable rage, but had now come to their senses and could see for themselves that they were guilty.

Tuma, hanging by his wrists, his back cut to ribbons by the knout, never said a word and only glared malevolently into the eyes of his interrogators. Tuma, Proskuryakov and fifty-six of the most dangerous streltsy were gibbeted on the Moscow highway. The rest were sent to gaols and monasteries under guard...

15

Never in their lives had the Russians met such shifty people and such liars as those at the imperial court in Vienna... Peter was received with honours, but as a private person. Leopold amiably called him "brother", but only in private, and came to the evening meetings incognito, in a half-mask. In conversations about peace with Turkey, his Chancellor agreed to everything, denied nothing and promised all, but, when it came to a decision, squirmed out of it as if soaped. Peter told him: "The English and the Dutch are only worried about their trade profits, and they mustn't be listened to on every count. We have had a letter from the Patriarch of Jerusalem saying that we should protect the Holy Sepulchre... Does the Emperor not value the Holy Sepulchre?.." The Chancellor replied: "The Emperor fully endorses these lofty and worthy thoughts, but such countless sums have been expended on the fifteen-years'war that the only dignified act is peace at the present time..."

"Peace, peace," said Peter. "But you intend to fight the French, so what do you really mean?"

In reply, the Chancellor merely looked at Peter with his cheerful, watery and uncomprehending eyes. Peter said that he needed the Turkish fortress of Kerch, so let the Emperor, when signing a peace with the Turks, demand Kerch for Moscow. The Chancellor replied that undoubtedly these claims being welcomed with delight by the whole Viennese court, but he foresaw great difficulties in the matter of Kerch, for the Turks were not accustomed to surrendering fortresses without a fight...

In a word, nothing tangible was gained from the visit to

Vienna. Even the ambassadors were not granted a ceremonial reception for the presentation of credentials and gifts. They had already agreed to go through the rooms of the knights without hats and to limit themselves to forty-eight common citizens for the bearing of gifts; but they stubbornly insisted that when they entered the hall, the Ober-Kammerherr should loudly announce the tsar's titles, even if in abbreviated form, and that the presents from the tsar should not be laid on the carpet at the Emperor's feet... "We're not Chuvashes and we don't owe tribute to the Emperor. We are a nation of equal worth..." The Minister of the Court smiled and threw up his hands: "It is absolutely impossible to meet these unheard-of demands..."

Here, even more bitterly than in Holland, they learned the meaning of European politique. To cheer themselves up, they went to the opera and marvelled. They visited country castles. They attended a great masked ball at the court...

Peter was just about to leave for Venice when letters came from Romodanovsky and Vinius in Moscow about the mutiny of the streltsy at New Jerusalem.

"...Myn Herr König ... I have received your letter written on 17th day of June in which you write, Sire, that the seed of Ivan Miloslavsky is germinating; wherefore I ask you to be firm, otherwise it will never be possible to put out this fire..

"Although we much regret abandoning the present useful business, we shall for this reason be with you when you least expect it... Peter..."

16

At the service in the Cathedral of the Dormition, the Prince-Emperor, after reverently kissing the cross, went up to the pulpit, turned round to face the boyars and struck his staff a ringing blow on the flagstones:

"The Great Sovereign Peter Alexeyevich is now on the way to Moscow."

He waddled through the crowd, climbed into a gilded carriage with two giant, bestial-looking lackeys on the footboard and rattled off across Moscow.

This news was like a bolt from the blue to the boyars. In a year and a half, they had become settled, they had be-

come accustomed to peace and contentment. Now the big man himself was coming. This meant goodbye to slumbers and dreams; put on the masks again! And be held responsible for the mutinies of the streltsy? For the ill-fated war with the Tatars? For the empty Treasury? For all the business which they had been intending to take up at any moment, but somehow hadn't got round to doing? Saints, we're in for it now!

There was no time now for rest or idleness. The tsar's Great Duma assembled twice daily. All the shop owners were ordered to shut up their premises and go to the Commission of the Great Treasury to count the coppers so that everything should have been reckoned up in three days. The clerks of the Commissions were summoned... For Christ's sake, the boyars pleaded, if there are any irregularities in the Commissions, restore order somehow. Don't let the petty clerks and scribes go home for the night these few days, and hobble the restive ones to their desks...

The boyars made themselves ready to be received by the tsar. Some ransacked their chests for the abominable German clothes and perukes sprinkled with mint as a precaution against moths. They had superfluous icons removed from the palace chambers and anything available by way of mirrors and portraits hung on the walls. Evdokia, with the tsarevich and Peter's favourite sister, Natalia, hastily returned from the Trinity Laura.

On the fourth of September, towards evening, two dusty carriages pulled up outside the iron gates of the Prince-Emperor's house. Out stepped Peter, Lefort, Golovin and Menshikov. They knocked. Fearsome dogs began baying in the yard. The soldier who opened the gates did not recognise the tsar. Peter pushed him in the chest and walked with his ministers across the muddy yard to the low lead-roofed porch on spheres and spiral columns, where a trained bear sat by the doorway on a chain. Above, raising the window sash, Romodanovsky looked out, his podgy features wobbling with joy.

17

From Romodanovsky's, the tsar went to the Kremlin. Evdokia already knew about his arrival and was waiting for her husband, all dressed up, her cheeks flushed. Vorobyikha,

in a neat jacket, with her eyes screwed up and a smile on her face, stood on watch in the tsaritsa's side porch. Evdokia kept glancing out of the window at Vorobyikha, on whom a beam of light fell from a crack in the door, waiting for her to wave her handkerchief. Suddenly, Vorobyikha glided into the bedchamber:

"He's arrived!.. He got out right at the tsarevna's porch. I'll run and find out..."

Evdokia bowed her head; she had evil forebodings. Suddenly weak, she sat down. Outside, it was a starry autumn night. In a year and a half of absence, he had not written even a brief note to her. On arrival, he had rushed straight to Natalia... She wrung her hands... "We were living in God's peace, in unceasing joy... Now he's blown in to torment us!"

She jumped up... Where was little Alyosha? She should run with him to his father... In the doorway, she bumped into Vorobyikha. The woman whispered loudly:

"I saw him with my own two eyes... He went in to Natalia... He embraced her, and she wept!.. But his face is grim... His cheeks are trembling... His moustaches are turned up... A foreign coat, grey, with a handkerchief and a pipe sticking out of his pocket. Huge boots, not our workmanship..."

"Fool, fool, what's been going on..."

"And he says to her: 'Dear sister, I want to see my only son...' And then she turns round and she brings out Alyosha..."

"She's a viper, that Natalia, a viper," whispered Evdokia, her lips quivering.

"And he seizes Alyosha, and hugs him, and begins kissing and caressing him. And then he sets him down on the floor, and he pulls his foreign hat all over his ears. 'I'm going to spend the night at Preobrazhenskoye,' he says..."

"And he left?" (Clutching her head.)

"He left, Tsaritsa-Mother, angel of meekness, he left, he left, maybe to spend the night somewhere, maybe in the German quarter..."

18

By the first light of dawn, a long string of carriages, coaches and horsemen was moving down the road to Preobrazhenskoye... Boyars, generals, colonels, the patrimony-

owning nobility, the clerks of the Duma—all were hurrying to greet their newly-returned master. Squeezing through the packed entrance hall, they would ask apprehensively: "Well? How's the tsar?" They would be answered with strange leers: "The tsar is in good cheer..."

He was receiving in a big, newly-decorated room at a long table set with flasks, glasses, mugs and cold snacks. Tobacco smoke swirled in the sunbeams. The tsar's appearance was somehow un-Russian. A foreign caftan of fine cloth, feminine lace round his neck, his face drawn-looking with the dark moustaches curled up, and a silky peruke on his head, he was sitting with one stockinged leg bent foreign-style under his chair.

In their long fur coats, their beards protruding, their eyes rolling, the boyars came up to the tsar and bowed to the feet or to the waist according to rank. Only then did they notice at Peter's feet those two abominations unto the Lord, the dwarfs Tomos and Seka, each holding a pair of sheep-shears.

Acknowledging the bow, Peter raised some up and kissed them, or slapped others on the shoulder, saying merrily:

"Look at that—he's grown such a beard! My dear sir, they laugh at beards in Europe... Pray allow me the pleasure of its company..."

Boyar, prince, governor, old and young, all stood rigid with horror. Tomos and Seka reached up on tiptoe and with their sheep-shears snipped off the combed and well-groomed beards. The antique beauty fell to the ground at the tsar's feet. Shaking, the cropped boyar silently covered his face with his hand, but the tsar personally brought him a more than generous tumbler of triple-strength pepper vodka:

"Drink to our health for many years to come... Samson had his hair shorn too... (Looking round with shining eyes at the courtiers and raising his index finger.) Whence comes this beard-shaving? It is agreeable to the fair sex for it comes from Paris. Ha, ha! (Twice, with a wooden laugh.) If you miss your beard, have it buried with you in your grave; it will attach itself again in the next world..."

Had he been stern or wrathful, shouted, pulled those same beards, threatened with everything under the sun, he wouldn't have been as terrifying as he was now. Unfathomable, utterly alien, a different person altogether, he smiled in a way that made one's blood run cold...

At the end of the table, a little Polish barber was busy soaping the shorn beards and shaving them off... He'd hold up a mirror, blast him, so that the mangled boyar could look at the twisted little childish mouth in the shamefully naked face... The drunken ones who had been shaved wept right there at the table... Only by their clothes was it possible to recognise Generalissimo Shein, boyar Troyekurov, the princes Dolgoruky, Beloselskys and Mstislavskys... The tsar pinched the shorn ones by the cheek with two fingers:

"Now you could even go to the Emperor's court without feeling ashamed..."

19

Peter went to Lefort's for dinner. His amiable friend Franz was barely awake at midday and was sitting yawning in front of the mirror in a spacious, sunny bedroom lined with gilded leather. The servants were busy round him, dressing, curling and powdering his peruke. Two dwarfs, one male, one female, brought specially from Hamburg, were frolicking on the carpet. The steward, the head groom, the butler and the officer of the palace guard stood at a respectful distance. Peter walked in. Pressing down on Franz's shoulder to prevent him from rising to his feet, he looked at him in the mirror.

"That was no investigation; just sheer criminal connivance and self-indulgence... Shein's just told me about it; he doesn't even realise he was holding the thread in his hands, the dolt... When they were taking strelets Falaleyev to be hanged, he shouted at the soldiers; 'You've eaten the pike, but its teeth are still there...'"

Peter's wild eyes darkened in the mirror. Lefort turned round and ordered everybody out of the room...

"Franz... The sting hasn't been drawn!.. I shaved the boyars today, and I was seething all over inside... When I think about those bloodthirsty locusts... They know, they all know, but they're keeping quiet, they're lying low... That was no common mutiny, they weren't just going to see their womenfolk... Terrible things were brewing this time... The whole state is riddled with gangrene... Festering limbs must be amputated with steel... And the boyars, the bearded ones, must all be implicated in the bloody task. Miloslav-

sky's seed! Franz, send out Ukases today: the streltsy are to be brought to Preobrazhenskoye from the monastery prisons."

20

He seemed to cheer up a little at dinner. Some noticed a new trait in him: a dark, intent stare. Amid the chatting and joking, he would suddenly fall silent and rivet somebody or other with an impenetrable, quizzical, inhuman glare... His nostrils would twitch and then he would smile again, drink, laugh woodenly...

The foreigners—military men, seafarers, and engineers—sat there enjoying themselves and very much at their ease. The Russians found this dinner heavy going. Music was playing and they waited for the ladies so that the dancing could begin. Sasha Menshikov kept glancing at Peter's hands as they lay on the table: he kept clenching and unclenching them. Lefort was telling various curious anecdotes about the mistresses of the King of France. It was getting noisier. Suddenly, crying out in a high-pitched, cock-like voice, Peter jumped up, leaned furiously over the table and yelled at Shein:

"Traitor, traitor!"

He threw back his chair and ran out. Embarrassed, the guests rose to their feet. Lefort hurried about, calming everyone down. The music thundered from the gallery. The first ladies appeared in the hall, straightening their wigs and gowns... All eyes were attracted by a gorgeous, blue-eyed beauty with her ash-grey hair piled high on her head. She was wearing huge silk skirts trimmed with gold lace; her shoulders and arms were white and alluring in the extreme. Without so much as a glance at anyone, she made her entrance slowly, as to the manner born, dropped a curtsey, and then stood looking upwards, a rose in her hand.

"Who is she?" the foreigners asked eagerly. It turned out to be Alexandra Ivanovna Volkova, daughter of Brovkin, rich and poweful merchant. Kissing the tips of her fingers, Lefort invited her to dance. The couples moved off, scraping their heels and bowing... Then there was another scene. Peter returned, his nostrils flaring. His eyes sought out Shein. He drew his sword and slashed the air in front of the recoiling Generalissimo. Fragments of glass flew. Lefort

bounded up. Peter jammed an elbow into his face and for the second time brandished his sword at Shein.

"I'll cut your whole regiment to pieces, you, and all your colonels, you traitor, you whoreson dog, you dolt..."

Menshikov left his partner and, unafraid of the sword, boldly went up to Peter, took him by the shoulders and whispered something in his ear.

"The scum, oh, the scum," breathed Peter into Sasha's wig. "He's been selling promotions..."

"Never mind, myn Herz, it'll pass. Have some Hungarian wine..."

It passed. He drank some of the wine, after which he shook his finger at Shein. He called Lefort over and kissed him on his swollen nose:

"Where's Anna? Have you enquired? Is she well?" His compressed mouth twisted, he looked through the big windows at the orange sunset. "Wait, I'll go for her myself..."

In the widow Mons' cottage they were running around with candles and slamming the doors. The widow herself and the serving-maids were in confusion. Disaster: Anna was in a temper because her petticoats had not been properly starched and had to be starched and ironed all over again. She was sitting upstairs in a powdered wig, wearing only a powder mantle and mending a stocking. That was how Peter found her when he ran upstairs past the terrified widow and the maids.

Anna rose, threw her head back and gasped weakly. Peter hungrily seized hold of her, half-undressed and desirable as she was. Her heart thudded audibly in the low-ceilinged little room.

21

The streltsy were brought in irons from everywhere to Preobrazhenskoye and put under guard in huts and cellars.

The investigation began at the end of September. The interrogation was conducted by Peter, Romodanovsky, Tikhon Streshnev and Lev Kirillovich. Campfires burned all night in the suburb before the houses where the men were being tortured. In fourteen rooms, streltsy were hoisted up by their wrists, flogged with the knout, taken down, dragged out into the yard and held over burning straw. Many were revived with vodka and again hoisted up by their

twisted arms with the aim of extracting the names of the ringleaders.

After two weeks, a clue was found... Ovsei Rzhov, unable to withstand the pain and self-pity when they began breaking his ribs with red-hot pincers, told them about Sophia's letter, and how they had marched on her orders to the Novodevichy Convent to put her on the throne. Ovsei's brother Konstantin, after the third drawing of blood, said that they, the streltsy, had buried Sophia's letter in the dung under the middle tower of New Jerusalem. The complicity of tsarevna Marfa, Avdotia the dwarf, and Vera, Sophia's confidante, was brought to light.

Very few talked under torture, however. The streltsy only confessed to an armed mutiny, but not to a plot... Peter felt the full force of the bitterness against him in this deadly stubbornness.

He spent his nights in the torture-chambers and his days on business with foreign engineers and craftsmen and at troop reviews. Towards evening, he would go to dine at Lefort's place or with some ambassador or general. After nine, amid the laughter and music, and buffoonery of the Prince-Pope, Peter would rise, straight-backed, his head between his shoulders, and he would stride from the banqueting hall into the dark courtyard and, shielding his face from the freezing wind with a knitted scarf, would ride in a trap over the ice road to Preobrazhenskoye, visible from afar by the dull glow of the campfires...

A secretary of the Emperor's embassy wrote down in his diary what he saw and heard during these days...

"...The officials of the Danish envoy," he wrote, "went out of curiosity to Preobrazhenskoye. They walked round various prison structures, going to where the most anguished screams indicated that the tragedy was at its most grievous... They had already looked, shuddering with horror, round three buildings where there were pools of blood on the floor or even in the passages, when screams more piercing than the former ones and unusually agonised groans aroused in them the desire to catch a glimpse of the horrors being perpetrated in the fourth building...

"As soon as they entered, however, they left in terror, for they had bumped into the tsar and the boyars. The tsar,

standing before a naked man who had been hoisted up towards the ceiling, turned round to look at the newcomers, clearly most displeased that foreigners should have found him engaged in such a pursuit. Naryshkin, running out after them, asked: "Who are you? What are you doing here?.." Since they made no reply, he announced that they should immediately leave for Prince Romodanovsky's residence... But the officials, considering themselves immune, ignored this somewhat arrogant order. However, an officer came after them, intending to intercept them and stop their horse. But the power was on the side of the officials: there were many of them and they were more cheerful in spirit... Noticing, however, that the officer intended to take decisive measures, they fled to a safe place... I subsequently found out the name of this officer: he is Menshikov, the tsar's favourite and is not to be trifled with..."

"...A new monetary impost has been fixed: for each person serving in the Commissions, a tax has been levied according to the post held...

"In the evening, various lavish entertainments were provided in Lefort's palace. The gathering admired a firework display. The tsar ran like a fire demon about the garden, which was bare of foliage, and lit transparencies and fountains that threw out showers of sparks. Tsarevich Alexei and tsarevna Natalia were also watching the spectacle, but from a special room... At the ball that followed, Anna Mons was unanimously held to be the most beautiful of the ladies. They say she has replaced the tsar's lawful spouse, whom he intends to send to a distant nunnery..."

"...On the tenth of October, when setting about the executions, the tsar invited all the foreign ambassadors. There is a raised square adjacent to the row of barrack huts in Preobrazhenskoye. This was the place of execution: there were usually punishment stakes here with the heads of the executed impaled onto them. This hill was surrounded by a fully-armed guards regiment. There were many Muscovites who had climbed up onto the roofs and the gates. The foreigners, who were among the common spectators, were not permitted to come near the place of execution.

"The blocks were ready. A chill wind was blowing, all had cold feet, for they had been waiting a long time... Finally, His Royal Majesty drove up in a carriage with the said Menshikov and, after alighting, stood near the execution blocks. Meanwhile, the crowd of condemned filled the ill-omened square. A scribe, getting up onto a bench placed there for him by a soldier in the square, read the sentence on the mutineers out to the public. The people were silent and the executioner began his work.

"The hapless ones had to observe order; they stood in line to be executed... No sorrow was visible on their faces, no fear of impending death. I do not regard such impassivity as courage; it did not come from strength of spirit, but purely from the fact that, remembering their cruel tortures, they no longer cared about themselves—life had become abominable to them...

"One of them was accompanied to the block by his wife and children: they uttered piercing screams. He calmly gave them his mittens and a coloured kerchief as keepsakes, and then laid his head on the block.

"Another, passing close to the tsar as he went to the block, said:

"'Out of my way, Sire, I'm going to lie down here.'

"I was told that the tsar complained that day to General Gordon about the obstinacy of the streltsy, refusing to confess their guilt even under the axe. Russians are certainly stubborn in the extreme..."

"At the Novodevichy Convent, thirty gibbets were erected in a rectangle and 230 streltsy were hanged on them. The three ringleaders who had submitted the petition to tsarevna Sophia were hanged on the monastery wall before the windows of Sophia's own cell. The one in the middle had the petition tied to his dead hands."

"His Royal Majesty was present at the execution of the priests who had joined the mutiny. The executioner broke the arms and legs of two with an iron crowbar, and then they were placed alive on wheels, the third being beheaded. While still alive, the two priests complained in a malevolent whisper that the third of them escaped with so quick a manner of death..."

"Evidently desiring to show that the walls of the city, through which the streltsy had intended to penetrate by force, are sacred and inviolable, the tsar had beams pushed through the embrasures. Two mutineers were hanged on each one. In this way, over two hundred men were hanged that day... It is unlikely that so uncommon a palisade has ever girt a city as the one formed by the streltsy hanging all the way round Moscow."

"...27 October... These executions were markedly different from the previous ones. They were carried out by various means, almost incredible... Three hundred and thirty men stained Red Square with their blood at the same time. These mass executions could be carried out only because all the boyars, the senators of the tsar's Duma, and the clerks—by order of the tsar—had to perform the duties of headsmen themselves. His suspiciousness is exacerbated to the extreme. He apparently suspects everybody of sympathising with the mutineers who are being executed. It was his idea to implicate all the boyars in this bloody task... All these high-born personages appeared on the square, trembling with terror at the thought of the forthcoming ordeal. A criminal was placed in front of each one, who had to pronounce sentence on the man standing before him and then carry it out, beheading the victim with his own hands.

"The tsar sat in a chair brought from the palace and watched this appalling butchery dry-eyed. He is unwell: both his cheeks are swollen with toothache. He was furious when he saw that the hands of nearly all the boyars, who are unused to the duties of headsman, were trembling...

"General Lefort also was invited to perform the function of executioner, but he excused himself on the grounds that this was not done in his homeland. Three hundred and thirty men were flung down onto the block almost simultaneously and were beheaded, but several not altogether successfully. Boris Golitsyn struck his victim not on the neck, but on the back: the strelets, thus severed almost in two, would have suffered incredible agonies had not Menshikov, with a deft stroke of the axe, hastened to detach the unfortunate's head. He boasted that he had cut off thirty heads that day. With his own hands, the Prince-Emperor despatched four. Several boyars had to be helped away, they were so white-faced and unnerved."

The torturing and executions lasted all winter. In response, rebellions flared up in Arkhangelsk, in Astrakhan, on the Don and in Azov. The dungeons filled up, and thousands more corpses swung from the walls of Moscow in the blizzards. The whole country was gripped with horror. The old life crawled off into dark corners. Byzantine Russia was nearing its end. In the March wind, there were visions of ghostly merchant vessels beyond the shores of the Baltic Sea.

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