

# Alexei Tolstoy
# PETER THE GREAT

"What attracted me to the idea of the epic *Peter the Great?* I was drawn by the sense of the fullness of the 'unkempt' and creative force of life when the Russian character was revealing itself with special vividness.

"There are four eras that I want to portray, and for the same reasons: those of Ivan the Terrible, Peter, the Civil War, and our own times, unexampled in its scope and significance... To understand the secret of Russian people with its greatness, one must know their past properly and in depth: the history, its main landmarks, the tragic and creative epochs in which the Russian character was moulded."

*Alexei Tolstoy*

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# Alexei Tolstoy

# PETER THE GREAT

## Volume 2

### Books Two and Three

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



RADUGA PUBLISHERS
MOSCOW

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Illustrated with early 18th-century engravings
from the collection in the Pushkin Museum of
Fine Arts, Moscow

Алексей Толстой
ПЕТР ПЕРВЫЙ
*Книги вторая и третья*
*На английском языке*

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# BOOK TWO

# *Chapter One*

## 1

The cocks were crowing in the turbid light of dawn. The February day was slow to begin. The night watchmen, hampered by the skirts of their sheepskin coats, were putting away their street barriers. The chimney smoke was sinking to the ground and there was a smell of warm bread in the crooked side-streets. A mounted patrol rode by, asking the watchmen: "Has there been banditry in the night?" "What else d'you expect!" replied the watchmen. "There's evil-doing everywhere..."

Moscow was awaking with reluctance. Bell-ringers climbed up the bell-towers, coughing and shivering, waiting for Ivan the Great to strike. The Lenten chimes floated slowly and heavily over the misty streets. Church doors creaked and opened. Licking his fingers, a sexton trimmed the icon lamps. Beggars, cripples and freaks wandered up to sit on the church porch. With no food in their bellies, they swore under their breath. Crossing themselves, they ducked at the warm candles in the darkness of the entrance.

Barefoot, stinking, his back bare, his hair bristling with burrs that had been left from summer, a divine fool came bounding up to the porch. There was a loud gasp: the blessed one was holding a slab of fresh meat. That meant he was going to say something, and the word would go all round Moscow. He sat down right in front of the entrance, digging his pock-marked nose between his knees and waiting for more people to gather round.

It was getting light enough to see outside. Gate doors banged. The market traders were on their way, sashes tied firmly round their middles. Shops were being opened without the old briskness. Crows sailed under the windy clouds. The tsar had kept them supplied with fresh meat all winter—the birds were flocking together from all directions, fouling all the domes.

The beggars on the porch said cautiously: "There shall be war and plague. For three and a half years, it is said, shall the false tsardom endure..."

In previous years, at this hour, Kitaigorod had been crowded and the air had reverberated with shouting and noise. Wagon trains of grain would have been arriving from beyond the Moskva River, poultry and firewood along the Yaroslavl highway, and merchants on troikas from Mozhaisk. Now they were actually bargaining over bad meat. Half the shops were boarded up. There was desolation in the suburbs on the other side of the Moskva River. Even the roofs had been ripped off the houses once occupied by streltsy.

The churches also were beginning to empty. Many people were turning away: the Orthodox priests had sold their birthrights for a mess of pottage – they were of the same mind as those who had been beheading and hanging in Moscow all winter. In a church, the priest refused to begin the service, throwing back his head with his beard thrust forth and shouting at the bell-ringer: "Strike the big one, you fool, harder." But whether you rang the chimes or not, the people walked past and refused to cross themselves with three fingers. The schismatics were teaching them: "With three fingers, it's the fig: poke your thumb through them. We know who teaches the sign of the devil."

The people were nevertheless appearing from somewhere and gathering on the streets: boyars' servants, spongers, various nocturnal revellers, nondescripts begging from house to house. There was a big crowd at the tavern waiting for it to open. They sniffed and smelt garlic and cheap Lenten pies. Wagon trains were coming from beyond the Neglinnaya River carrying gunpowder, iron cannon-balls, hemp and iron. Rolling from side to side over the potholes, they went down across the Moskva River to the Voronezh highway. Mounted dragoons, in new sheepskins, in foreign hats, mustachioed, not like Russians at all, swore horribly and brandished their whips at the carters. Some of the people were saying: "The Germans are egging our tsar on to war. He's in Voronezh, with German wenches; yes, he's started fraternising with the Germans!"

The tavern opened. Out on to the porch came the landlord, well known to all. Everybody froze and no one laughed, realis-

ing that this was a tragedy: the tavern-keeper's face was stark naked. The day before, in the municipal chambers they had shaved him in conformity with the tsar's Ukase. He tightened his lips, as if weeping, crossed himself at the five squat church domes, and said gloomily: "Come in..."

The divine fool was jumping up and down on the porch like a dog, shaking the meat between his teeth. Women and men ran up to marvel. It meant good luck to a church if a divine fool attached himself to it, but it could be dangerous too, with things as they were nowadays. They had been giving food to a divine fool of the old church of St. Pimen; he had gone into the church one day to the pulpit and begun making horns with his fingers, and howling at the people: "Bow down, don't you recognise me?.." Soldiers had arrested the divine fool, along with the priest and the deacon, and had taken them to the Prince-Emperor, Fyodor Yurievich Romodanovsky, at the Preobrazhensky Commission.

Suddenly, people began shouting: "Out of the way! Out of the way!" Above the crowd, hats with red plumes were bobbing, false hair, clean-shaven, bolt-upright animal faces—outriders. The people rushed to the fences and on the snowdrifts. A gilded carriage with glass windows swept by. In it, sitting bolt upright like a dummy, there was a rouged girl with a diamond-studded, beribboned felt hat perched on her upswept hair, her arms up to the elbows in a sable muff. All recognised the bitch: it was the Kukui tsaritsa, Anna Mons. She glided past on her way to the market. The merchants were already bustling about there, running up to meet her, carrying silks and velvets out to the carriage.

But the lawful tsaritsa, Evdokia Fyodorovna, had been taken away that autumn as soon as the roads were passable in an open sleigh to a nunnery in Suzdal, where she would shed tears for the rest of her life...

## 2

"Brothers, good people, buy me a drink... Truly, I'm done in... I gave my cross for a drink yesterday..."

"Who are you?.."

"An icon-painter from Palekh; we've been there since ancient times... It's the way things are nowadays—ruination..."

"What's your name?"

"Andrei..."

The man hadn't a hat or a shirt to call his own, just holes stitched together. His eyes were feverish, his features sharp, but polite. He went up respectfully to the table at which they were drinking wine. It was hard to say no to such a man...

"All right, have a seat..."

They poured him a drink and continued talking. A very crafty-looking peasant, weak-sighted and with a scrawny neck, was saying:

"They've executed the streltsy. All right. That's the tsar's affair. (He raised a crooked finger.) It's none of our concern... But..."

A flabby artisan in the caftan of a strelets drummed his nails on his pewter mug (many were now wearing second-hand caftans and bonnets—the womenfolk of the streltsy had been letting them go for a song):

"That's it... Mind what you're saying!"

The cunning muzhik wagged a finger at him:

"We keep our heads down... If the slightest thing happens in this Moscow of yours, it's the tocsin... It means there was something to hang the streltsy on walls for—to frighten the people... That's not what I'm talking about, city man. You, my dears, wonder why there aren't any supplies coming into Moscow? You needn't expect any... It's going to get worse... You don't know whether to laugh or cry now. I brought a barrel of salt fish with me today... I'd salted them for myself, but they went off. I set up at the market—I'll get flogged for this stinking fish, I thought; but I sold the lot in an hour or so... No, Moscow's deadly place now..."

"Oh, that's true!" snivelled the icon-painter.

The muzhik glanced at him and said in a matter-of-fact tone of voice:

"There's been a Ukase. The streltsy are to be taken off the wall and carted outside the city by Shrovetide. And there's about eight thousand of them. That's fine. But where are the carts? Does that mean the muzhik's got to suffer for it again?

What are the settlements for? Let the settlements do haulage duties."

The soft cheeks of the settlement dweller began to tremble. He shook his head reproachfully at the peasant:

"Now then, ploughboy... You haven't had to walk past the walls all winter... The blizzard would catch them and the bodies'd start swinging... We've had enough frights to be going on with..."

"Of course, it would be easier to bury them straightaway," said the muzhik. "On Shrove Sunday, we brought eighteen loads, and we'd hardly had time to unfasten them when the soldiers swooped on us: 'Unload!' 'How? What for?' 'Don't argue!' They threatened us with their swords and tipped the sleighs over. I'd brought a barrel of button mushrooms. They emptied it out, the devils. 'Go to St. Barbara's Gates!' they shouted. And there at the gates there were a good three hundred streltsy in a heap... 'Load them up, you so-and-so...' Nothing to eat, nothing to drink, no feed for the horses, and we carted those dead 'uns until nightfall... When we got back to our village, we were ashamed to look our own folks in the face."

A stranger walked up and banged a flagon down on the table.

"There's one born every minute," he said. He sat down boldly, poured out from the flagon to all present and winked with a roving eye: "Good health." Without wiping his moustaches, he began gnawing a clove of garlic. He had a tanned, feverish face and a curly pepper-and-salt beard.

The weak-sighted peasant carefully took a glass from him: "The muzhik's a fool, a fool, you know; but the muzhik understands. (He weighed his glass in his hands, drank up, and gasped with relish.) No, my dears... (Reaching for a clove of garlic.) This morning—maybe you saw it—a wagon train left for Voronezh. They're skinning the peasant like nobody's business. Pay your labour rent, pay your bondage debt, supply the boyar's table, pay hearth tax into the Treasury, pay for the roads, pay for travelling to market..."

Pepper-and-Salt Beard opened wide his toothy mouth and guffawed. The muzhik stopped short and sniffed.

"All right... Now it's hand over your horses for the tsar's

wagon train. And, what's more, they're getting our rusks off us... No, my dears... Count them up in the villages: d'you know how many houses are left empty? Where are the others? Try and find them... Nearly everybody's about to flee. The muzhik's a fool as long as he's got a good meal under his belt. But when they pull the rug out from under his feet (taking hold of his beard and bowing), the muzhik changes into new bast shoes and off he goes wherever the fancy takes him."

"To the north. To the lakes... Into the wilderness!" The icon-painter moved closer, his dark eyes drilling into the other's face.

The muzhik pushed him away: "Shut up a moment..." The artisan looked round and then leaned over, his chest pushing up against the edge of the table.

"Truly, lads," he whispered, "many people are afraid. They're going beyond Lake Byelo, Lake Vol, Lake Matka, Lake Vyg... It's peaceful there... (His flabby cheeks wobbled.) Only those who go away will survive..."

The pupils of the icon-painter's eyes dilated so much that they seemed to fill his eyes. He turned to one neighbour, then to the other...

"He's right... What he says is right... We painted six hundred icons for Lent in Palekh. That's not much compared with earlier years. Now we haven't sold a single one in Moscow. They're tearing their hair in Palekh. Why? We use bright colours, and we write Jesus' name in the new way. He blesses with three fingers. And we paint the cross with four points. All according to Orthodox practice. Understand? But the ones who buy icons from us—the market traders Korzinkin, Dyachkov and Vikulin—they tell us: 'Stop painting that way, you'll have to burn those icons, they're temptations. They've got the paw on them...' 'What d'you mean, the paw?...' (The icon-painter snivelled briefly. The artisan bent his head low over the table, his teeth chattering.) 'That way,' they say, 'it's *his* paw. Have you seen a bird's clawmark on the ground—four lines? Well, you've got the same thing on your icons...' 'Where?' 'Why, the Niconian cross...' You follow me? 'Don't you take these goods to Moscow,' they tell us. Now all Moscow's guessed where the stink's coming from..."

The muzhik blinked, and it was hard to tell whether he be-

lieved it all or not... Pepper-and-Salt Beard chewed garlic, grinning. The artisan kept nodding his head and assenting... Suddenly, looking over his shoulder, he pushed out his lips and whispered:

"And the tobacco? In what books has it been read that man should swallow smoke? Who has smoke coming out of his face? Eh? For forty-eight thousand rubles, all the rights on tobacco sales have been leased to the Englishman, Carmarthen. And there's a Ukase that they've got to smoke this noxious nicotiana weed... Whose handiwork is that? And the tea, and the coffee? And the potatoes? Ugh! May they be cursed! Potatoes, the lust of Antichrist! All those poisons are from abroad, and the Lutherans and the Catholics are selling them to us. Whoever drinks tea sheds tears, whoever drinks coffee coughs. Ugh, I'd rather give up the ghost than take such goods into my shop."

"What do you deal in?" asked Pepper-and-Salt Beard.

"What is there to deal in now? The Germans trade, and we just weep. Did you ever know Ovsei Rzhov and his brother Konstantin? They were streltsy in Hundertmark's regiment... I had my shop next door to their baths. Such people don't exist any more. Broken on the wheel, both of them... Ovsei said many a time: 'We're to pay for it all because back in eighty-two, in the Kremlin, we wouldn't listen to the elders. It was up to us streltsy to stand up for the old faith then... There wouldn't have been a single foreigner left in glory, and the people would have been well fed and content... But now we don't even know how to save our souls...' And those are the kind of people who swing from the walls all winter... There aren't any streltsy, so they can get us with their bare hands... We'll all have our faces shaved, we'll all be forced to drink coffee, just you wait and see..."

"We'll finish up the grain and clear off by spring," said the peasant firmly.

"Brothers!" The icon-painter stared longingly through the wet window. "Brothers, there are wonderful virgin lands in the north, peaceful refuges, a quiet life..."

It was becoming noisier and hotter in the tavern. The padded door kept banging. Some drunks were quarrelling. One of them was staggering about near the counter, stripped to the

waist, no cross round his neck, pleading to be allowed a glass on credit... One was dragged by his hair into the passage by others who beat him up, screaming their heads off—no doubt he deserved it.

A beggar, bent almost double, stopped at the table. Leaning on two crooks, his wrinkled face all smiles. Pepper-and-Salt Beard looked at him and knit his brows.

"Where did you blow in from, Hawkeye?" said the beggar.

"Mind your own business. On your way, what are you standing there for?"

"Gnol morf nod? *" asked the cripple in an undertone.

"Clear off, we're honest folk here..."

The crippled beggar asked no more questions and, thrusting forward his straggly beard, went into the depths of the tavern, his crooks tapping the floor. The artisan was frightened:

"Who... who's that?"

"A poor pilgrim," said Pepper-and-Salt Beard grimly.

"What language was he talking to you in?"

"Bird talk."

"He seemed to know you, lad..."

"Ask less questions if you know what's good for you... (He brushed the crumbs off his beard and put his big hands on the table.) Now listen... We're from the Don, on business".

The artisan moved up with alacrity, his eyes blinking:

"What are you buying?"

"Gunpowder. We need about ten barrels. Fifty poods of lead. Good cloth for tunics. Iron for horseshoes, and nails. We've got the money."

"I can get good cloth and iron... Lead and powder won't be that easy. Can't be got anyhow, except from the state."

"Exactly – you'll have to swindle the state."

"I know a certain under-clerk. He'll need presents."

"Of course..."

Hastily fastening the hooks on his sheepskin, the artisan said that he would try to fetch the under-clerk immediately. He hurried out. The muzhik wanted to join the business deal. He frowned and cleared his throat:

* A secret language used by the Vladimir pedlars, the schismatics, and sometimes by robbers. The words were spoken backwards.

"D'you need lambswool felt or hides, my friend? Well, say fifty poods of lead... Are you Cossacks going to war, or something?"

"We're going to shoot quail."

Pepper-and-Salt Beard turned away. The man bent double over the crooks was coming back to him again. Hat in hand, the cripple sat down next to the other and, without looking at him, said:

"How d'ye do, Ivan..."

"How d'ye do, Ovdokim," he replied, likewise not looking at him.

"It's a long time since we saw one another, ataman..."

"Are you out begging?"

"Yes, because I'm sick. In summer I went roving a bit in the forest—but I'm past it now. I've had enough. Time I kicked the bucket..."

"Wait awhile..."

"Why, has there been good news?"

Ivan, grinning, peered through the smoke at the drunken customers. Then his eyes went cold. Quietly, out of the corner of his mouth, he said:

"We're stirring up the Don."

Ovdokim peered down into his hat, counting up the coins in it.

"I don't know about that," he said. "I've heard the Don Cossacks have gone tame, they're settling on their farms, feathering their nests..."

"Lots of incomers, tough customers. If they start, the Cossacks will back them... If they don't, it makes no difference: they'll either have to go to Turkey or come under Moscow as serfs for good... They helped the tsar at Azov once, but now he's clamped down hard on the Don. There's orders out to hand over incomers. They've sent priests from Moscow, they're tearing up the old belief by the roots... So much for the quiet Don..."

"A big man is needed for a cause like that," said Ovdokim. "We don't want it to end up as it did with Stenka Razin..."

"We have a man, and he's not like Stenka, who hadn't the wit to keep his head on his shoulders. This one'll be a leader

pure and simple... The whole of the schism will rally round him..."

"You've upset me, Ivan, you've tempted me, Ivan. I was already about to give it all up..."

"Come in spring. We need old atamans. We'll go a-roving more merrily than we did under Stenka..."

"Hardly, hardly... Are many of our breed left from those times? You and I, maybe..."

The artisan returned, out of breath, his cheek twitching. Behind him, walking with an important air, came a bald under-clerk in a brown German coat with brass buttons and with battered felt boots on his feet. He had a goose quill stuck into a button-hole on his chest. Without a word of greeting, he sat squeamishly down at the table. His face was hungry-looking and his eyes were clouded; they were the eyes of Antichrist and you could see right up into his nostrils. The artisan did not sit down but whispered from behind into his ear:

"Kuzma Egorych, this is the man who..."

"Pancakes," said the under-clerk in a muffled voise, ignoring him. "Pancakes with smoked fish..."

## 3

Prince Roman, son of prince Boris Buinosov, called Roman Borisovich at home, was sitting in his underclothes on the edge of his bed, groaning and scratching his chest and armpits. He reached for his beard out of habit but pulled his hand away: shaven, prickly, disgusting. "Wa-ha-ha-ha..." he yawned looking at the small window. A murky, dismal day was beginning to dawn.

In former years at this hour, Roman Borisovich would have been putting his arms into a marten-skin coat, and pulling a beaver hat down over his eyes with dignity. He would have been proceeding with a massive staff along the creaking passages to the porch. About one hundred-and-fifty house servants, some holding the carriage horses, others running to the gates. Cheerly they would doff their hats and bow to the waist, and those standing near him would kiss the boyar's feet. With hands to assist him, he would climb into

the carriage. Every morning, whatever the weather, Roman Borisovich used to ride to the palace and wait till the tsar's august brow (and then tsarevna's radiant orbs) favoured him. Many a time he did not wait in vain...

All that was over now! You'd wake up in the morning, and saints!—was it really over? It was uncanny even to think about it! Once there had been peace and dignity... Look at that thing over there hanging on the wooden wall where there shouldn't be anything at all: a nasty Dutch girl, with her skirt hitched up, painted for the temptations of hell. The tsar had ordered it to be hung in the bedroom either for a joke or as a punishment. He would have to bear with it...

Prince Roman Borisovich looked gloomily at his clothes, flung on to a bench the evening before: women's woollen stockings with horizontal stripes, short breeches that were too tight before and aft, a green braid-trimmed caftan, stiff as tin. A raven-black peruke hung on a peg; you couldn't beat all the dust out of it, even if you used sticks. What was it all for?

"Mishka!" shouted the boyar angrily. (A nimble young lad in a long Russian blouse bounded through the low, red velvet-padded door. He executed a bow and tossed back his hair.) "Mishka, give me the washing things. (The young lad took a copper basin and poured some water in it.) Hold the basin properly... Pour it over my hands..."

Roman Borisovich spluttered into his hands rather than washed himself—it was revolting to wash anything so shorn and prickly... Grumbling, he sat down on the bed so that he could be helped on with his breeches. Mishka brought a dish with chalk and a clean cloth.

"What's that, then?" shouted Roman Borisovich.

"To clean the teeth."

"I shan't!"

"As you wish... The tsar our master said lately that teeth are to be cleaned. The boyaryna has ordered these to be brought in every morning..."

"I'll ram that dish in your face... You've started talking too much."

"As you wish..."

Once dressed, Roman Borisovich moved his body: everything felt cramped, tight, stiff. Why? But strict orders had been

issued for all nobility to report for service in German dress with a full-bottomed peruke. Patience! He took the wig down from its peg (goodness know what kind of woman the hair had come from) and donned it disgustedly. When Mishka wanted to straighten the tightly curled locks, Buinosov smacked him on the hand. He went out into the passage, where the stove was crackling. From below, from the kitchen (reached by a steep staircase) came the smell of something pungent and burnt.

"Mishka, what's that smell? Are they boiling coffee again?"

"The tsar our master has ordered the boyarynas and their daughters to take coffee in the morning, so we're boiling some..."

"I know... And you can take that smirk off your face..."

"As you wish..."

Mishka opened the padded door into the prayer room. Roman Borisovich crossed himself with dignity and went up to the pulpit. A wax-bespattered Book of Hours lay open on the velvet. He trimmed the candle, put on a pair of round iron spectacles, licked his finger, turned a page and went into a reverie, staring into a corner, where the icon frames glimmered faintly, a single green lamp burning before St. Nicholas the Miracle-Worker...

There was plenty to think about... After all, if matters continued like this, it would mean the ruin of all the great families, princely and noble alike, and this dishonour and profanity were too appalling to contemplate. "Look at you—you've undertaken to wipe out the nobility. All right, wipe them out. They tried just that under Ivan the Terrible—to wipe out the princely families. And all they got was decay and troubles. And there's going to be decay now too... We're the backbone of the state... Destroy us, and there won't be any state; there'll be nothing for it to live on. Who are you going to rule, tsar? Serfs? Rubbish! You're still young, you're weak in reason, and it looks as though you drank that away at Kukui as well..."

Roman Borisovich adjusted his spectacles and began reading in an ecclesiastical whine. Nevertheless, his thoughts ran ahead of the words on the page.

"Twenty house servants taken for the army... Five hun-

dred rubles taken for the Voronezh fleet. And in my Voronezh patrimony, they took grain for the state and paid coppers for it—all my granaries have been cleaned out. The wheat had been saved for three years—I was waiting for the price to go up... (A bitter taste came to his mouth at the sheer frustration of it.) Now I've heard the monasteries are going to have their lands taken away from them and all profits will go to the Treasury... Orders given for ten barrels of salt pork to be made ready. For God's sake, what do they want with salt pork?"

He went on reading. The morning sky was turning green in the leaded mica window. Mishka was bowing in the doorway...

"At pancake week, they dishonoured the great names! Three hundred men in disguise would swoop at midnight, sometimes even later. Terrifying! Faces smeared with soot. Drunk. No telling which was the tsar. Guzzling, drinking, befouling the place, lifting up the skirts of the maid-servants... Bleating like goats, crowing like cocks, twittering like birds."

Roman Borisovich shifted his weight from one foot to the other, remembering how, on the last day, they had got him blind drunk, debagged him and planted him on a basket full of eggs... And it hadn't been funny at all... His wife had seen, and so had Mishka... "Oh, Lord, why? What is it all about?"

Roman Borisovich cudgelled his brains to think of a reason for these calamities. Our sins, or something? They were whispering it about in Moscow that a Tempter had come to the world. The Catholics and Lutherans were his servants, and foreign goods all bore the mark of Antichrist. The end of the world had come, they were saying.

His ruddy face puckered in the light of the tiny candle, Roman Borisovich was having his doubts. "Unlikely... The Lord will not allow the Russian nobility to perish. Simply wait and have patience. Oh dear, oh dear..."

Praying fervently, he sat down under the vaulted window niche at a carpet-covered small table and opened a thick ledger in which was entered everything about what had been loaned to whom, what had been extracted from whom, what had been taken from which village in money, grain, or food. He turned the pages slowly, his shaven lips moving.

Into the room came the senior steward, Senka, released

from bondsmanship for his insinuating and great hatred of people. He was a pure watchdog: he screwed the boyar's money out of the peasants to the last copper coin. He stole, of course, but within reason and as far as his conscience allowed, and you could slit his throat before he would own up to his thefts. More than once, Roman Borisovich had seized him by the bushy beard on his fat jowls, hauled him about and banged the back of his head against the wall: "You've been stealing, you have, admit it..." Senka, never batting an eyelid, would stare ginger-eyed at the boyar as if he were God almighty. Only when the beating was over would he lift up the hem of his coarse caftan, blow his flabby nose and burst into tears.

"It's no use beating servants like that, Roman Borisovich. God'll forgive you, but I'm not guilty, I'm completely innocent..."

Senka sidled through the partly open door, made the sign of the cross to Nicholas the Miracle-Worker, bowed to his master and went down on his knees.

"Well, Senka, what have you to tell me?"

"Thank God, all's well, Roman Borisovich."

Remaining on his knees, his eyes upturned to the ceiling, he began reporting from memory: how much had been received from whom yesterday; what had been brought in and from where; who was still in debt. Two muzhiks, the vile debtors Fedka and Koska, had been fetched from the village of Ivankovo and had been under torture in the yard since the evening before...

Roman Borisovich was astounded and his jaw dropped. Had they really refused to pay up? He dived into his ledger. Last year, Fedka had borrowed sixty rubles to build a new hut, harness, a new ploughshare, and seeds... Koska had borrowed thirty-seven and a half rubles, but he'd been lying too when he had said that the money was for the farm.

"Oh, the scum, the swindlers! Have you had them caned?"

"Since yesterday evening," said Senka. "Two men to each, with orders to flog them without mercy... Why should you worry, master? Fedka and Koska won't pay up; we have bondsmen's deeds made out against their debts, so we'll take them both as bondsmen for ten years. We need slaves..."

"I need money, not slaves!" Roman Borisovich threw his

goose quill down on the table. "You give slaves food and drink and then tsar takes them for the army..."

"If you need money, do the same as Ivan Brovkin. He's set himself up a sailcloth factory in the Zamoskvorechye. Supplies the Treasury with sailcloth. Rolling in money..."

"Yes I've heard of that before... It's a pack of lies..."

Brovkin's factory had been ruining Roman Borisovich's peace of mind for a long time. Senka reminded him of it almost every day: he clearly wanted to make a good profit out of the enterprise. And then there was Lev Kirillovich Naryshkin, the tsar's uncle, who was acting more to the point: he was giving money to a certain Dutchman in the German quarter, van der Viek, who was sending it to the Stock Exchange in Amsterdam, and Naryshkin was getting six hundred rubles every year from ten thousand in percentage alone. Six hundred rubles clear!

"In our grandfathers' time, they had no cares," said Roman Borisovich. "But the state was stronger. (He slipped his arms into the sheepskin coat that Senka was holding up for him). They sat with the tsar, and they held council—such were our cares in those days... But now there's no point even in waking up in the morning..."

Roman Borisovich went up and down various staircases and along cold passages. On the way, he opened a jammed door. From inside came a smell of bitter, hot steam. In the depths, four men were dimly discernible by the light of a burning splinter, barefoot, in blouses, rolling wool.

"Work, work, and remember the Lord,"said Roman Borisovich. The muzhiks made no reply. Continuing further, he opened the door into the handiwork room. The girls and young women, about twenty of them, rose from their chairs and embroidering frames, bowing to the waist. The boyar wrinkled his nose.

"It's smelly in here too, girls... Work, work, and remember the Lord..."

Roman Borisovich also looked into the sewing-room and the tannery, where the hides were being steeped in vats. Sullen muzhiks were kneading the skins by hand. Senka lit a tallow candle in a round lantern with holes and removed the heavy locks on the closets and sheds in which the stores were kept.

Everything was in order. Roman Borisovich went down into the big yard. It was already light, but cloudy. The sheep were being watered at the well. Loads of hay were standing all the way from the gates to the loft. The muzhiks doffed their hats.

"Not enough hay in the carts, men!" shouted Roman Borisovich...

Everywhere from the ramshackle chimneyless huts and sheds came smoke that was dispersed by the wind and spread all over the yard. There were heaps of cinders and dung everywhere. Frozen cloths were flapping on lines. Near the stables, their face to the wall, two gloomy, hatless muzhiks were shifting from foot to foot. Seeing the boyar in the porch, two burly servants hastily ran out of the stables, snatched up sticks from the ground and began beating the muzhiks on the backsides and the calves.

"Ow, ow! Oh God what for?" groaned Fedka and Koska.

"That's the stuff, that's the stuff, serve you right. Lay on harder," encouraged Roman Borisovich from the porch.

The tall, pock-marked, red-faced Fedka turned round:

"Roman Borisovich, benefactor, we haven't got anything. Honest to God, we used up the corn before Christmas... Take our cattle, or something. How can we stand this treatment?"

"His livestock are undersized and scrawny," said Senka to his master. "He's lying... But you could take his daughter in payment for half the debt. He can work the rest off."

Roman Borisovich pulled a face and turned away.

"I'll think about it. We'll discuss it this evening."

A bell rang thinly somewhere beyond the smoke, beyond the bare trees. The rooks rose above the rusty domes. "Oh, grievous are our sins," muttered Roman Borisovich. He glanced round his establishment once more and went into the dining-room to drink coffee.

The princess Avdotia and her three daughters were seated at the end of the table on Dutch folding chairs. The brocade tablecloth had been turned back there to prevent staining. The princess was wearing a simple Russian long-sleeved gown of dark velvet and a foreign bonnet on her head. The girls were dressed in German robes with trains. Natalia was in peach, Olga in striped green, and the eldest, Antonida, in a colour

known as "memorable sunset". All had their hair piled up and dusted with flour. Their cheeks were heavily rouged, their eyebrows pencilled, and the palms of their hands were bright red.

Formerly, needless to say, Avdotia and the girls had never been allowed into the dining-room. They had been accustomed to sit in their own quarters at the windows doing embroidery, and in the summertime they had amused themselves on the swings in the garden. One day, the tsar arrived with a drunken crowd. He stood in the doorway and stared round the room with terrible eyes. "Where are your daughters? Sit them down at the table..."(The servants had run to fetch them. Terror, tears. The three silly girls were brought in, scared out of their wits.) The tsar chucked each of them under the chin: "Can you dance?... (Oh, dear... The girls burst into tears of shame.) Teach them! You're to dance the minuet, the polka and the country dance by Shrovetide..." He took prince Roman by the kaftan and shook him in real earnest: "Let's have la politesse in this house, and properly too. Remember, now!" The girls were sat down at the table and made to drink wine. Wonder of wonders, they drank it, the hussies... After a little while, they started giggling as if it were all a matter of course...

La politesse had to be done in the household. Princess Avdotia, in her stupidity, could only marvel at it all, but the girls at once became bold, brazen and capricious. Bring this, bring that. They didn't want to do needlework any more. They'd sit there throughout the whole morning, all dressed up and doing le plaisir—that is drinking tea and coffee.

Roman Borisovich went into the dining-room. He glanced at his daughters. They merely inclined their heads. Avdotia rose to her feet and bowed:

"Greetings, Father..."

"Sit down, Mutter," hissed Antonida.

Coming in from the cold Roman Borisovich would have liked a glass of spiced vodka with a bite of garlic. There was still vodka going, but garlic wasn't served at table any more...

"I somehow don't seem to feel like coffee this morning. Must have caught a chill on the porch or something... Mother, bring some of the strong stuff."

"You can only talk about one thing in the morning, Vater,

and that's vodka," said Antonida. "When will you ever learn?"

"Shut up, you little cow!" yelled Roman Borisovich, "or I'll tan your hide for you!"

The princesses tossed their heads. Avdotia brought up a glassful on a tray in the old style, with a bow, and whispered:

"You just drink, as much as you like, Father."

He drank up and gasped. He gnawed a gherkin, the liquid dribbling on to his shirt. No sauerkraut with bilberries on the table, or salted wild mushrooms with onion. Chewing a minute pasty with God knows what in it, he asked after his son:

"Where's Mishka?"

"He's studying arithmetic, Father. Goodness knows what it'll do to his head..."

The slightly pock-marked Olga, the one most fussy about la politesse, pursed her lips and said:

"Mishka's always knocking about with the muzhiks. Yesterday he was in the stables again, tinkling on the balalaika and playing cards for forfeits."

"He's young yet," moaned Avdotia.

They were silent for a time. Natalia, the youngest, easily amused and frivolous, leaned over to the window (glass panes had recently been put in instead of the old mica ones).

"Hey, girls! We have visitors!"

The girls fluttered, held up their hands and wiggled them to make them turn lily-white. The maids ran in to clear the table and rearrange the tablecloth. The major-domo (the erstwhile butler), a pious old footman, now shaved and decorated as if for Christmas, banged his staff on the floor and shouted that boyarina Volkova had arrived. Roman Borisovich reluctantly left the table to pay his respects to the visitor, which meant waving his hat in front of her and scraping his feet... And for whom did prince Buinosov have to put on airs? Seven years ago, that same boyarina Volkova was called Sanka and used to wipe her snotty nose on her torn petticoat. The daughter of an insignificant household peasant. Her father, Ivan Brovkin, had been a bonded farm labourer. The girl had been destined to slave at the kitchen stove till her dying day. And now look—there's a major-domo announcing her arrival... She's driven up in a gilded carriage! Her husband's in favour with

the tsar... (Her husband was prince Roman's nephew.) Her father had somehow had the luck of devil and had become a prosperous merchant. Now, it was said, he had been awarded all the army contracts.

The major-domo opened the door (still low and narrow, in the old style). There was the rustle of a pink and yellow dress. Dipping her bare shoulders, her impassive, beautiful face held up, her eyelashes lowered, boyarina Volkova entered the dining-room. She stopped in the middle. Her rings glittering, she took hold of her gorgeous rose-embroidered lace petticoats, put out one small foot in a satin slipper with a heel two inches high, and sank down in the full French manner without flexing her forward knee, her powdered head with its ostrich plumes turning left and right. On completing her curtsey, she raised her blue eyes and smiled, showing her white teeth.

"Bonjour, princesses!"

The Buinosov girls likewise sank down on to their haunches, their eyes devouring their guest. Roman Borisovich took his hat and flourished it, spreading out his legs and arms. The boyarina was invited to join them at table for a taste of coffee. They began asking after the health of her relatives and house staff. The girls studied her dress and the way her hair had been styled.

"Aha, a coiffure on whalebone, of course..."

"We get twigs and rags shoved under ours."

"It's sheer murder getting hold of a coiffeur," Sanka replied. "Only one for the whole of Moscow. The ladies had to wait a week at Shrovetide, and when it was done, they couldn't go to bed, they had to sleep sitting on chairs. I've asked Papa to bring a coiffeur from Amsterdam."

"Remember me to our esteemed Ivan Artemich," said the prince. "How is his little sailcloth factory doing? I keep meaning to have a look at it. It's a new thing, most interesting..."

"Papa's in Voronezh. And Vassily's in Voronezh, with the tsar."

"We've heard, indeed we have, Alexandra Ivanovna."

"I had a letter from Vassily yesterday." She slipped two fingers into her decollete corsage (Roman Borisovich blinked: the woman was going to strip at any moment) and took out

a pale blue letter. "They might be sending my Vassily to Paris..."

"What does he say?" asked the prince, coughing. "What does he write about the tsar?"

Sanka was a long time unfolding the letter, her brows knitted. Her cheeks and neck were suffused with a deep blush.

"I've not been able to read that long," she said in a whisper. "My apologies..."

Running her finger along the thick, sprawling script with its abbreviation signs and flourishes, she began reading, articulating each word slowly:

"Dear Sanka, be well, my darling, for many years to come... This is what is happening in Voronezh... We shall soon send the fleet down to the Don, and then our stay here will be over... I don't wish to frighten you, but I happened to hear that the tsar wants to send me and Andrei Artamonovich Matveyev to the Hague, and from there to Paris. I don't know what to think of this: it's a long way and somewhat frightening... We're all well, thank God. Herr Peter sends you his greetings—we were thinking about you not long ago at supper. He's busy at work every day. He toils at the shipyards like a common labourer. He forges his own nails and cramps, and he caulks the seams himself. He's too busy to shave off his beard: he's driving people too hard, they're at the end of their tether. But the fleet's been built..."

Roman Borisovich drummed his fingernails on the table.

"Yes... Of course, the fleet, yes... Does his own forging and caulking... Too much energy, that means..."

Sanka had finished reading. She wiped her lips slowly, folded up the letter and tucked it back into her corsage.

"The tsar will be back for Easter. I shall throw myself at his feet... I want to go to Paris..."

Antonida, Olga and Natalia threw up their hands: "Oh! Oh! Oh!" Princess Avdotia crossed herself.

"You've scared me, my dear! How awful! – Paris... It's a heathenish place!"

Sanka's blue eyes darkened. She pressed her rings to her breast.

"I'm so bored in Moscow. I'd love to fly abroad... The tsaritsa Praskovia Fyodorovna has a Frenchman staying at her

place. He teaches la politesse, and he gives me lessons too. He tells such stories (with a sigh). Every night I dream I'm in a low-cut robe and dancing a minuet. I'm dancing better than anybody else, my head spins, the cavaliers make way for me, and up comes King Louis and hands me a rose... It's getting so dull in Moscow. Thank God, they've taken the streltsy down, I'm scared to death of corpses..."

Boyarina Volkova was driven away in her carriage. After remaining seated at the table for a while, Roman Borisovich sent for his carriage so that he could go to his duties at the Commission of the Grand Palace. All were now ordered to serve. As if there weren't enough people available at the Commissions in Moscow. The gentry had been made to sit down and scratch away with goose quills. The tsar himself, all covered with tar and tobacco, was hacking away with an axe and drinking cheap vodka with the muzhiks.

"Oh, it's too bad, it's such a bore," spluttered prince Roman Borisovich as he climbed into his carriage...

## 4

At the Spassky Gates, in a deep ditch where rotting piles protruded from the ice, Roman Borisovich noticed two sleighs covered with matting, the decrepit nags standing mournfully between the shafts. A muzhik on the slope was slowly digging out the frozen corpse of a strelets with a pick. It was a grey day. Even the snow was grey. Country folk were wandering with bowed heads across Red Square over the frozen dungheaps. The clock on the tower creaked and wheezed (it had once had beautiful chimes). Roman Borisovich felt depressed.

His carriage travelled over the rickety bridge to the Spassky Gates. In the Kremlin, people were walking about with their hats on as if it were a market-place. Open sledges were standing at a tethering posts much gnawed by horses... Roman Borisovich's heart ached. This place was deserted; there were no radiant eyes shining in yonder little window of the

tsar's like a lamp to the glory of the Third Rome. Now it was all so tedious!

Roman Borisovich stopped at the commission porch. There was no one on hand to help the prince of his carriage. He stepped down unaided. Puffing, he walked up the covered outer staircase. The treads were filthy with trodden snow and spittle. From above, all but barging into the prince, scurried some little men in sheepskin jackets. The one in the rear, a man with a pepper-and-salt beard, brazenly ran a scathing eye over the prince. Stopping on the landing, Roman Borisovich banged his staff in exasperation.

"Hats! Doff your hats!"

But he was shouting to the wind. Such were manners in the Kremlin nowadays.

In the Commission, in the low-ceilinged rooms, there were fumes from the stoves, smells, unswept floors. Elbow to elbow at long tables, the copy clerks were scraping away with their pens. Straightening his back, one would scratch his uncombed pate, the other his armpits. At small tables sat the crooked little under-clerks—you could smell the cheap pies a mile away—turning over the pages of ledgers and running their fingers over applications. A murky light filtered through the grimy windows. A senior clerk with spectacles on his pock-marked nose paced up and down amid the desks.

Roman Borisovich walked importantly through the rooms. There was a great deal of work to be done in the Commission of the Grand Palace, and it was all very complicated. They looked after the tsar's Treasury, the warehouses, the silver and gold plate; they collected customs dues and money from the Cossacks, the strelets tax, the coaching inn money and the quit rent from the villages and towns owned by the palace. Only the clerk of the Commission and the old departmental officials were able to cope with all this. The newly appointed boyars would sit all day in a small, overheated room, sweating in their tight-fitting German clothes and looking through the murky windows at the tsar's deserted palace where in bygone times at the Stewards' Porch, on the boyar's square, they had promenaded in sable coats, waving silken kerchiefs and passing judgement on matters of great import.

Many terrible deeds had been done on that square. It was

from that rickety porch, now boarded up, that Ivan the Terrible had left with his men-at-arms, according to tradition, from the Kremlin for the Alexandrovsky Settlement in order to vent his wrath and fury on the great boyar families. He had cut off heads, roasted men alive on gridirons and impaled them. He had confiscated patrimonies. But God had not permitted the ruination of the boyars. The great families had risen again.

It was from that wooden terem with the copper cockerels on the onion-domed roof from which the accursed Grishka Otrepiev, another scourge of the glorious Russian boyars, had thrown himself out. All that remained of the Moscow land had been wilderness, fires, human bones on the roads. But God had forbidden it to remain so; the great families had risen again.

Now there was another menace — for our sins... "Eh, eh, eh!" spluttered the boyars out of boredom at the tiny windows in the overheated room. The new broom was evidently going to make a clean sweep of it. All had had their beards shaven off, all had been ordered to serve. Their sons were being signed on with regiments and sent to foreign lands. "Eh-eh-eh! God won't permit it this time either..."

As he went into the room, Roman Borisovich noticed that new orders had come down from above again. The aged prince Martyn Lykov's effeminate cheeks were quivering. Junior member of the Duma Ivan Endogurov and dapifer Lavrenti Svinyin were haltingly reading a paper. They looked up, and all they could say was "Oh dear, oh dear!"

"Sit and listen to this, prince Roman," said prince Martyn almost in tears. "What's going to happen next? Anybody will be able to abuse and dishonour us... We had one right of redress, and now even that's being taken away."

Endogurov and Svinyin resumed reading the tsar's decree. It said that he, the tsar and grand prince, etc. etc., was being sorely importuned by the princes, boyars, Duma and Moscow nobility with their complaints of disrespect. On such a day, he, the tsar, etc., had received a complaint from prince Martyn Grigorievich Lykov to the effect that he had been abused and insulted at the Stewards' Porch; and he had been abused and insulted by Alexei Brovkin, a subaltern of the Preobrazhensky Regiment... As he entered the porch, he shouted to him, prince

Martyn: "What are you looking at me in that ugly way for? I'm not your serf now. You were a prince once, but now you don't exist, you're just a figment..."

"A whipper-snapper, a yokel, a country bumpkin," said prince Martyn, his cheeks wobbling. "I was so upset I forgot what he shouted next, but it was horrible..."

"And what did he shout at you next, prince Martyn?" insisted Roman Borisovich.

"I don't know... Well, he shouted 'Martyn the marmoset!', and many people heard him."

"Oh dear, oh dear, most offensive!" Roman Borisovich shook his head. "Isn't that Alexei, the son of Ivan Artemich Brovkin?"

"The devil knows whose son he is..."

"The tsar and great prince, etc.," continued Endogurov and Svinyin, "that he might not be importuned at so difficult a time for the state, because of importunity and annoyance has ordered that the complainant, prince Martyn, should pay the sum of ten rubles, the said money to be distributed to the needy, and all complaints of disrespect are henceforth forbidden..."

They finished reading and wrinkled their noses. Said prince Martyn again:

"A figment! Touch me — what sort of figment am I? Our family is descended from prince Lychko. In the thirteenth century, the prince set forth from the land of Ugor with three thousand pikemen. And from Lychko came the Lykovs and the princes Bryukhaty, and the Taratukhins, and the Suponevs, and from the youngest son came the Buinosovs..."

"Nonsense! That's a real figment of the imagination, prince Martyn!" Roman Borisovich twisted right round on the bench, his eyebrows beetling, his eyes flashing (oh, if it hadn't been for the naked cheeks and the bare, curved mouth, prince Roman would have been of truly formidable aspect)... "The Buinosovs were higher placed than the Lykovs ages ago. We trace our line back to the Chernigov princes by name. You Lykovs wrote yourselves into the nobility under Ivan the Terrible... I'll give you 'prince Lychko set forth from the land of Ugor'..."

Prince Martyn's eyes rolled, the bags under his eyes wob-

bled, and the face, with its protruding upper lip, quivered, as if shaken by a fit of weeping.

"The Buinosovs? Wasn't it in Tushino, in a camp, that the traitor of Tushino bestowed your estates on you?"*

Both princes rose from their benches and began looking one another up and down from head to foot. There would have been great shouting and tumult, had not Endogurov and Svinyin intervened. They brought the princes to their senses and calmed them down. Wiping their brows and necks with their handkerchieves, the two sat down on different benches.

To relieve the tedium, Endogurov talked about what the boyars were discussing in the Tsar's Duma. They were throwing up their hands in despair, poor fellows; the tsar and his cronies in Voronezh only wanted to know one thing: how to get money, and then more money. He had picked up as his advisers our own and foreign merchants, nonentities with no family background, carpenters, smiths, mariners, mere striplings, fit only to have their nostrils torn out by the executioner. The tsar was giving an ear to their seditious counsel. The Tsar's Duma was really in Voronezh. It was to Voronezh that complaints were streaming in from all the towns, from the artisans and merchant people. They'd found their true master... And with that rabble they wanted to beat the Sultan of Turkey. A member of Prokopy Voznitsyn's embassy wrote to Moscow from Karlowitz. The Turks, he said, were sneering at the Voronezh fleet, it would never sail further than the Don estuary, since all the vessels would be grounded on the sandbanks.

"Lord, we should keep humble. What do we want to annoy the Turks for?" said the quiet Lavrenti Svinyin. (Three of his sons had been taken into the regiments, the fourth was now a sailor. The old man was feeling lonely.)

"What do you mean, 'humble'?" demanded Roman Borisovich, staring at him with menacing, wide-open eyes. "You should have the manners not to barge into the conversation in front of your seniors, Lavrenti. First (slapping his calf), what

* A reference to Dmitry I, the false pretender to the throne. *Tr.*

do you mean 'humble' in front of the Turks and in front of the Tatars? Why did we send prince Golitsyn to the Crimea twice?"

Said prince Martyn, watching the stove:

"Not all of us have patrimonies beyond Voronezh and near Ryazan."

Roman Borisovich's nostrils twitched, but he disdained to say more.

"In Amsterdam, they pay a gulden for a pood of Polish wheat. In France, it costs more. In Poland, the gentry are rolling in money. You talk to Ivan Artemich Brovkin —he'll tell you where the money is... But I sold last year's grain round the distilleries for a song; three kopecks and a dengi for a pood... It's upsetting for me: the Vorona River isn't far away, then there's the Don, and my wheat could go by sea... It would be a great thing if God helped us to beat the Sultan... 'Humble,' you say! We need one little town by the sea, Kerch, or some such place... And then again, as the Third Rome, shouldn't we be concerned about the Holy Sepulchre? Or have we lost all conscience?"

"We won't get the better of the Sultan, no. We're getting too sure of ourselves," said prince Martyn with relief. "And if we have a glut of corn, well, thanks be to God. We won't starve to death. If only our daughters didn't have to hang trains on to the skirts of their gowns and start doing la galanterie at home."

After a moment's silence, looking through his open knees at a knot in the floor, Roman Borisovich said:

"Good. But just who's hanging those trains on our daughters' gowns?"

"Of course, no peasant will provide food for the idiots that still buy coffee in the German suburb for as much as two- and three-quarter of a ruble a pound." Prince Martyn, glancing at the stove, his flabby chin quivering, was clearly about to fly off into another tirade...

The door was thrown violenty open. Into the stuffiness out of the cold there bounded a round-faced, ruddy-complexioned officer with a turned-up nose; he was wearing a straggly peruke. The small tricorne flattened down over his ears, the heavy thigh-boots and the green coat with its red cuffs were all dust-

ed with snow. He had evidently just galloped hell-for-leather across Moscow.

When he saw the officer, prince Martyn's jaw dropped. This was the fellow who had insulted him; this was Preobrazhensky subaltern Alexei Brovkin, one of the tsar's favourites.

"Boyars, leave your duties..." (Alexei was in such a hurry that he stood holding the door wide open.) "Franz Yakovlevich is dying..."

He shook his wig, flashed his eyes brazenly (like all Peter's low-born upstarts) and flounced off — high heels, spurs and all — over the rotting floors of the Commission building. The bald-headed officials glared after him: "Less noise, you oaf. This isn't the stables."

## 5

The week before, Franz Lefort banqueted in his own palace with the Danish and Brandenburg envoys. The thaw had begun and the eaves were dripping. It was hot in the banqueting hall. Franz sat with his back to the blazing logs in the fireplace and talking with inspiration about great projects. Becoming more and more heated, he kept raising his coconut-shell goblet and drinking to the fraternal alliance of tsar Peter with the King of Denmark and the Elector of Brandenburg. In front of the windows, twelve cannons on bright green carriages simultaneously (when the major-domo signalled with his handkerchief at the window) thundered out a salute. Puffs of white powder-smoke spread over the sunny sky.

Lefort was leaning back in a gilded chair, his eyes wide open, the locks of his peruke sticking to his cheeks, which were unusually pale.

"Most timber forests murmur by the great rivers in this country... We could feed all the Christian countries with fish alone. We shall sow thousands of versts of flax and hemp at the very least. Then there's the wild country, the southern steppes, where the horseman is hidden by the grasses! We shall drive the Tatars out of there, our cattle shall be as the stars in the skies. When we need iron, the ore lies under our feet. There are mountains of iron in the Urals. What can the European

countries do to surprise us? You have the manufacturies? We shall send for Englishmen and Dutchmen. We shall make our own people learn. Before you know where you are, we shall have manufacturies of every kind. We shall teach the science and arts to the artisans. We shall rise the merchant and the artisan to heights they have never dreamed of!"

Thus spoke the tipsy Lefort to the tipsy envoys. They were stupefied by the wine and his words. It was stuffy in the hall. Lefort ordered the major-domo to open wide both windows and he drew the cold air with relish into his nostrils. He emptied goblet after goblet in honour of great projects until the sun went down. In the evening, he called on the Polish ambassador and danced and drank there till morning.

On the next day, Franz Yakovlevich felt uncommonly tired. He put on a hareskin coat and bound his head with a foulard, giving instructions that he was not to be disturbed. He began a letter to Peter, but was unable to continue even that. He started shivering in his fur coat by the fire. Pollicolo, the Italian doctor, was fetched. He sniffed the urine and fluids, clicked his tongue and stratched his nose. The admiral was given a purgative and blood-letting. Nothing helped. That night, in a high fever, Franz Yakovlevich lost consciousness.

Holding the ciborium over his head and following a novice who was ringing a little bell, Pastor Strumpf squeezed his way with difficulty into the big hall. Lefort's palace was buzzing with voices. All Moscow had arrived. Doors banged, draughts flew. Distracted servants rushed about, some of them already drunk. Lefort's wife, Elizaveta Franzevna, met the pastor at her husband's bedchamber door. Her faded face was disfigured by red blotches, her nose was swollen with weeping, her mulberry dress had been laced up in a hurry, and there were damp wisps of hair peeping from under her wig. She was frightened to death at seeing so many distinguished personages arrive. She hardly spoke Russian at all, having spent her whole life in the back rooms. Pressing her clasped hands against the pastor's chest, she said in German:

"What am I going to do? So many guests... Herr Pastor Strumpf, advise me; should I serve something to eat, perhaps?

All the servants are like maniacs, no one will listen to me. The storehouse keys are under poor Franz's pillow. (The tears streamed down from her pale-yellow eyes. She fumbled behind her bodice, took out a damp handkerchief and thrust her nose into it.) Herr Pastor Strumpf, I'm scared to go into the hall, I'm always at a loss... What's going to happen? What's going to happen, Pastor Strumpf?"

In the light baritone voice he used for such occasions, the pastor spoke consoling words to the admiral's wife. He ran his hand over his blue-shaven face to wipe all earthly cares from it and went into the bedchamber.

Propped up on pillows, Lefort was lying on a wide, rumpled bed. The stubble had grown on his sunken cheeks and long skull. His breathing was rapid and wheezy, and his yellow collar-bone protruded as if he were still trying to thrust himself into life, as into a horse-collar. His open mouth was parched with fever. Only his eyes, black and fixed, showed signs of life.

Doctor Pollicolo took Pastor Strumpf aside and frowned significantly, and his cheeks gathered into wrinkles.

"The dry veins," he said, "by which, as is known to our science, the soul is conjoined with the body, are filled with such strong fluids in Monsieur the Admiral that with every passing minute the soul is flowing to the body along ever-narrowing channels, and we must expect these to be fully closed by the fluids."

Pastor Strumpf sat quietly at the head of the dying man's bed. Lefort had recently recovered consciousness and was noticeably worried about something. On hearing his name, he tried hard to turn his eyes on the pastor and again began staring at the fireplace in which a grey log lay smouldering. There, over the stone volutes, was a recumbent Neptune, the god of the seas, with a trident; golden water streamed in golden whorls from a gilded vase under his elbow. A log was blazing in the middle, in a black cavity.

Trying to draw the admiral's eyes to the crucifix, Strumpf spoke of the hope for eternal salvation which is denied to no one among the living... Lefort muttered something incoherent... Strumpf bent close to his blue lips.

"Don't say much..." said Lefort, gasping for breath.

The pastor fulfilled his duty nevertheless: he administered

the Holy Sacrament to the unresponsive dying man. When he went out, Lefort lifted himself up on to his elbows. It was realised that he was asking for the major-domo. They ran and found the old man weeping in the kitchen. His eyes swollen with tears, in a hat adorned with ostrich plumes and with his baton, the major-domo stood at the foot of the bed. Franz Yakovlevich said to him:

"Call the musicians... My friends... Wineglasses..."

The musicians tiptoed into the bedchamber, not in full dress but in whatever they happened to be wearing. Glasses of wine were brought in. The musicians stood round the bed, applied their horns to their lips, and sixty silver, copper and wooden instruments struck up a minuet.

Deathly pale, Lefort let his shoulders sink back into the pillows. His temples became hollow, like those of a horse. His eyes blazed indefatigably. He was brought a goblet of wine, but he could not lift his hands and the wine dribbled down on to his chest. He fell unconscious again to the sound of the music. His eyes glazed.

Lefort was dead. Moscow was beside itself with joy. This meant an end to foreign power at last and to the Kukui quarter. The accursed adviser had breathed his last. All knew, all had seen: he had been making the tsar drink noxious potions, but no one had been able to say anything about it. The sufferings of the streltsy had been avenged. Lefort's palace, that nest of Antichrist, would succumb to the weeds for all time.

They told how, as he lay dying, Lefort ordered the musicians to play, the jesters to tumble, the dancers to dance, and how he himself, green of complexion and already a corpse, jumped out of bed and galloped about the room. The foul fiend had begun a-howling and a-whistling in the palace attic.

For seven days, the boyars and all kinds of government servants paid their respects at the admiral's coffin. Hiding their joy and terror, they went into the big, spacious hall. The coffin, half covered with a black silk cloak, stood in the middle on a catafalque. Four officers with drawn swords stood by the coffin, and four more below, at the platform. The widow in mourning sat before the platform on a folding chair.

The boyars went up on to the catafalque, turning their noses and lips to one side so as to evade evil spirits, and ap-

plied their cheeks to the blue hand of the devil's admiral. Then, going up to the widow, they bowed to the waist, and hurried out.

On the eighth day, Peter arrived post-haste from Voronezh. His leather carriage, drawn by a team of six, raced across Moscow straight into the courtyard of Lefort's palace. The horses were of different colours and their wet flanks were heaving laboriously. A hand emerged from the hood and felt for the strap to unfasten it.

Just at that moment, Alexandra Ivanovna Volkova came out of the palace. There was, as it happened, no one but her on the porch. She thought that some low-born person had arrived, judging by the horses. She was annoyed at having her way barred by this vehicle.

"Get those nags of yours out of here! What are you blocking the way for?" she said to the tsar's coachman.

The protruding hand, unable to find the fasteners, angrily tore back the strap of the hood and there alighted a man in a velvet peaked cap with ear-flaps, a grey cloth sheepskin coat and felt boots. He stepped down—a very tall man indeed. Sanka looked at him and jerked her head back. The round, haggard face, the puffy eyes, the dark, upturned moustaches. O Saints, it was the tsar!

Peter stretched his benumbed legs one after another, and his eyebrows met. He recognised the girl whose marriage he arranged. His small mouth crept into a smile.

"It's a tragedy, a tragedy," he said in a hollow voice. He went into the palace, the sleeves of his sheepskin coat flapping. Sanka followed him.

When the widow on her chair saw the tsar, she was dumbfounded. She jumped up. She wanted to fall at his feet. Peter put his arms round her, hugged her and looked over her head at the coffin. Servants hurried up. They took his sheepskin coat. Clumsily, in his felt boots, Peter went to say farewell. He stood for a long time with his hand on the edge of the coffin. He bent over and kissed his dear friend's chaplet, brow and hands. His shoulders began to quiver under the green caftan; the nape of his neck stiffened.

As Sanka watched his back, her eyes filled with tears. Holding her cheeks like a peasant woman, she began wailing

in a soft, thin voice. She felt so sorry for him... He came down from the catafalque, snivelling like a little boy. He stopped in front of Sanka. She bowed her head in sympathy.

"There'll never be another friend like that," he said. (He put his hands up to his eyes and shook his dark, curly hair, matted after the long journey.) "Joys together, cares together. We were of one mind..." Suddenly, he lowered his hands from his face, glanced round and his tears dried. He now resembled a cat. About ten boyars entered the hall, hastily crossing themselves.

In order of seniority, they reverently approached Peter, kneeled and, placing their hands palms down on the floor, solidly beat their brows on the oak floor-blocks.

Peter did not assist a single one of them to his feet again. He did not embrace them or even nod his head, but stood there, alienated, aloof. The nostrils of his snub nose flared.

"You're glad, glad, I can see that!" he said in a strange voice and went out of the palace back to his carriage.

## 6

In the German suburb, a brick house was built next to the Lutheran church that summer in the Dutch style with eight windows looking out on to the street. It was put up hurriedly, in two months, by the Commission of the Grand Palace. Anna Ivanovna Mons, her mother and her young brother Willim moved into it as soon as it was finished.

The tsar drove over quite openly and often stayed there for the night. In Kukui (and in Moscow too) it came to be called the tsaritsa's house. Anna Ivanovna introduced a note of ceremony: a major-domo and liveried footmen, two teams of six costly Polish horses in the stables, and carriages for every conceivable occasion.

There was no turning off towards the light of the tavern to visit the Mons family, as before, for a mug of beer. "Hee-hee!" recalled the Germans. "It's a long time since the blue-eyed Anna in a little white apron carried the mugs to the tables and blushed like a sweet-briar if one of the good menfolk

spanked her on her maiden backside and said: 'Come, little one, sip up the froth, flowers for you and beer for me!'"

The Mons family now entertained only the respected merchant and manufacturing members of the community, by invitation, on festival days, for dinner. They cracked jokes, of course, but with circumspection. Pastor Strumpf always sat on Anna's right hand. He loved telling amusing or edifying anecdotes from Roman history. The red-faced guests thoughtfully up-ended their mugs of beer and sighed complacently about the transience of things. Anna was particularly anxious for decorum in the house.

During these years, she had become a ripe beauty, with dignity in her gait and with repose, kindness and melancholy in her eyes. And yet however low people might bow after her glass carriage, the tsar went there to sleep with her and that was all. What next? The Estates Commission granted Anna Ivanovna some small villages. For balls, she could don jewellery second to none, and on her breast she hung a cameo of Peter the size of a small saucer and set in diamonds. She needed nothing and was refused nothing. But that was apparently as far as matters went.

Years passed. Peter spent more and more time at Voronezh or being rushed by post-horses from the southern sea to the northern. Anna sent him letters and, each time she had the opportunity, oranges and lemons (half a dozen of each delivered from Riga), sausages spiced with cardamon and herb cordials. But could you hold a lover for long with billets-doux and presents? Supposing some woman attached herself to him and got a hold on his affections? Anna would spend the night tossing and turning on her featherbed. Everything was uncertain, vague, ambiguous. Enemies, enemies everywhere, just waiting for the Mons woman to trip up.

As soon as Anna steered the conversation round to whether her Peter would go on living his disorderly, bachelor life for long, even Lefort, her closest friend, would laugh and answer vaguely, affectionately pinching Anna's cheek: "A watched pot never boils..." Ach, no one understood: she didn't even want the throne or power, for power was uneasy and unreliable... No, she just wanted stability, propriety, decency...

There was one last resort, and that was spells and witch-

craft. On her mother's advice, Anna once got out of bed while Peter was fast asleep and sewed a tiny scrap of cloth soaked with her own blood into the corner of his shirt... He had gone to Voronezh, leaving the shirt in Preobrazhenskoye, and had never put it on since. Old Frau Mons brought peasant witches into the back rooms, but mother and daughter were both afraid to reveal whom they wanted bewitched. Prince-Emperor Romodanovsky could have you hoisted up by the wrists for that sort of thing.

If any ordinary man (with a sufficiency) were to fall in love with Anna Mons, she imagined she would give all this up for the quiet life. A clean little cottage without a major-domo, the sun shining on the waxed floor, the fragrance of jasmine on the windowsills, the soothing aroma of roast coffee coming from the kitchen, the bell chiming on the roof of the kirche and the respectable people going past, bowing their heads politely to Anna as she sat at her needlework by the window...

With Lefort's death, a black cloud seemed to descend over Anna's head. She wept so much during the seven days before Peter's arrival that old Frau Mons sent for Doctor Pollicolo. He prescribed lavement and a purgative to dispose of the excess fluids which had appeared in the blood as a result of grief. Without knowing why, Anna waited uneasily for Peter's return. She remembered his earthy face and his cheek swollen with toothache when, after the most terrible of the streltsy executions, he had been sitting at Lefort's place. There was a fixed fury in his staring eyes. His hands, red from the cold outside, lay before an empty plate. He had not eaten or listened to the jests at table (those jests had been made with chattering teeth). Without looking at anyone, he had suddenly begun incoherently:

"Not four regiments, but hosts of them. They laid their heads on the block crossing themselves with two fingers... For olden times, for beggarliness... To flaunt their nakedness like divine fools... Townsfolk! I should have started in Moscow, not in Azov."

Ever since, Anna had trembled each time she remembered Peter at that moment. She felt that this man who caused her such anguish was driving her away from her quiet place at the

window. Why? Was he really Antichrist, as the Russians were whispering? In the evening, in bed, by the timid light of the wax candle, Anna would wring her hands and weep with despair:

"Mama, Mama, what am I to do with myself? I don't love him. He comes to me, always in a hurry... I can't respond... Maybe it would be best for me to go to my grave, like poor Franz."

One morning, her hair untidy, her eyes swollen, she looked through the window and unexpectedly saw the tsar's carriage stop on the pot-holed street on the other side of the fence. She did not rush around getting ready this time: let him see her as she was, in nightcap and woollen shawl. Walking across the little garden, Peter saw her at the window, and nodded unsmilingly. In the passage, he wiped his feet on the rug. He was sober and subdued.

"Hullo, Anna," he said softly. He kissed her on the forehead. "We've suffered a great loss." He sat down by the wall near the clock with the laughing copper face on its slowly swinging pendulum. He spoke in a quiet voice, as if amazed that the death had made so unreasonable a mistake. "Franz, Franz... He was a bad admiral, but worth a whole fleet. It's a tragedy, a tragedy, Anna... Remember how he brought me to you the first time? You were still just a little girl, you were scared I might break the music box... Death's taken the wrong one... No more Franz! It doesn't make sense..."

Anna listened, wrapping herself up to the eyes in her shawl. She was unprepared for this and did not know what to answer. The tears trickled down under her shawl. On the other side of the door there was a discreet rattle of crockery. Sniffing, her nose full of tears, she murmured that Franz was most likely better off with God. Peter looked at her strangely...

"Peter, you've had nothing to eat after your journey. Please stay for a snack. It's your favourite fried sausages..."

Sadly, she saw that even sausages could not tempt him this time. She sat beside him, took his hand that smelt of sheepskin, and began kissing it. With his free hand, he stroked her hair under the nightcap.

"I'll drop in for an hour or so this evening. There, there,

that's enough... You've wet my hand all over. Bring the sausage and a glass of vodka. Come on, come on... I have a lot to do today..."

## 7

Lefort was buried with great pomp and ceremony. Three regiments marched with guns and dipped colours. Behind the hearse, drawn by sixteen jet-black horses in tandem, his hat, sword and admiral's spurs were borne on cushions. Holding an inverted torch, a horseman rode along in black armour and plumes. Then came the ambassadors and envoys in mourning. After came the boyars, the nobility of Moscow and of the Duma, up to a thousand all told. Military trumpets played and the drums beat a slow march. Peter walked in front with the first company of the Preobrazhensky regiment.

Observing that the tsar was not nearby, one or two of the boyars trotted ahead of the ambassadors in order to be at the head of the cortege. The ambassadors shrugged their shoulders and whispered among themselves. At the cemetery, they were completely brushed aside. Roman Borisovich Buinosov and the very foolish prince Stepan Beloselsky floated along by the wheels, holding onto the hearse. Many of the Russians were merry; they had assembled at the crack of dawn for the carrying-out of the coffin. Feeling hungry, without waiting for the wake, they had crowded round the tables and had helped themselves to food and drink.

When the coffin was laid down on the frozen clay that had freshly been thrown up out of the grave, Peter went up to it quickly. He glared at the shaven, suddenly timid faces of the boyars and bared his teeth so malevolently that some of them hid behind the others. He summoned the portly Lev Kirillovich with a nod.

"Why have they sneaked in before the ambassadors? By whose orders?"

"I've already scolded them. They wouldn't listen," Lev Kirillovich answered softly.

"Dogs! (Louder.) Dogs, not human beings!" His neck jerked, his head twisted round and the sole of his thigh-boot scraped the ground. The crowd of boyars made way for the am-

bassadors and envoys as they squeezed through to the grave where the tsar was standing alone, near the open coffin, hostile to all and shivering with cold in a short thin caftan. Everybody wondered in terror what he would come out with this time. Plunging his sword into the ground, he kneeled down and pressed his face to what was left of the clever friend, adventurer, debauchee, tippler and loyal comrade. He rose, angrily wiping his eyes.

"Close it up... Lower away..."

The drums rolled, the colours were dipped, the cannons thundered, ejecting puffs of white smoke. One of the gunners did not jump clear in time and his head was blown off by the blast. That day, they said in Moscow:

"They've buried one devil, but the other's still here. Seems he hasn't destroyed enough people yet."

## 8

Leaving their sleighs at the gates and removing their hats, the good tradespeople and manufacturers were climbing the long covered staircase that began nearly in the middle of the courtyard and led into Preobrazhensky Palace. The government traders and merchants of the guild were arriving on troikas or on carpeted sleighs and were going in quite unabashed, wearing coats of Hamburg cloth trimmed with sable or fox fur. The ramshackle old palace was badly heated. Glancing briskly at the cracked, rotting ceiling and at the moth-eaten pink cloth on the benches and doors, they said:

"Not much of a building... You can tell the boyars are responsible. A pity, a pity..."

The tradespeople had been summoned in haste from the rolls. Some failed to turn up, fearful of being compelled to share their meals with Nikonians and smoke tobacco. Those arriving knew why the tsar had called them to the palace. Recently, on Red Square, the Clerk of the Duma had read out a great Ukase to the beating of a drum: "Whereas it has come to the knowledge of the tsar that traders, members of the merchant guilds, and all artisans and merchant people and manufacturers are *being subjected to great losses and depreda-*

*tions* in many of their dealings and in trade and in all manufactories by town governors, Commission officers and various other ranks of people as a result of official procrastination... The sovereign in his mercy has decreed as follows: all their suits for damages, court cases, petitions and merchant affairs and the collection of state incomes *are to be handled by their representatives, and these representatives are to be elected each year by them* from good and righteous people among themselves, whomsoever they choose. And of these, one man is to be the first and is to sit for a month as president..." In the cities and suburbs they were ordered to elect for court cases and suits for damages and the collections of taxes, municipal representatives from the best and most righteous people, and for the collection of customs duties and liquor incomes to elect customs and tavern representatives, whomsoever they wished. The representatives were to *sit in council* and deal with trade and manufactory cases in a special Chamber of Merchants, which could by-pass the Commissions over disputes and petitions and could approach the tsar direct.

The old building of the tsar's palace near the Church of St. John the Baptist, with cellars for a treasury, was set aside for the Chamber of Merchants.

The Moscow merchants did not begrudge any money for so honourable a purpose (they had been going about bareheaded in the Kremlin for a long time, and even then with apprehension; but now they were established there themselves). The ramshackle palace had been re-roofed with silvery tin, painted outside and inside, and the mica windowpanes had been replaced with glass. They posted their own sentries outside the cellars.

In return for deliverance from depredations by the governors and from the irregularities of the Commissions, the merchants now had to pay double the former tax. A definite gain to the Treasury. But to the merchants? Well, it was hard to say...

Indeed, life had become impossible because of the governors and the Commission officers and their minions. They were as rapacious as wolves: if you didn't watch out, they'd have you by the throat. In Moscow, they'd drag you round the courts and strip you of all you had; in the towns and suburbs

they'd beat you senseless in the governor's house. It was undoubtedly so...

But many—the shrewder ones, of course—minded their p's and q's and didn't have too bad a life. They paid their respects to the governor with a ruble, sent sugar, cloth and fish to the under-clerk, and invited the departmental head to dinner. There were some rich merchants—the devil himself could never find out how much they had in the way of goods and money, let alone the governor or the Commission people. Of course, such big birds as Mitrofan Shorin, the first merchant of merchants' guild, or Alexei Sveshnikov had it all sewn up. Even the metropolitan used to visit their homes. They were glad to pay as much as triple tax to the Chamber of Merchants, where they had status, influence and order. But what of, say, Vassily Revyakin senior? In his shop in the hardware row, he hadn't more than three altyns worth of stock in hand, and he'd sit there wiping his eyes with a rag. People in the know, however, were saying that he had at least three thousand bondsmen to his name. Never mind the muzhik or the townsman, there were few merchants who did not owe him a substantial amount, and there was no town or artisans' suburb where Revyakin did not keep a hardware storehouse and shops, all registered in the names of relatives and agents. There was no pinning him down by any means: he was as slippery as an eel. To him, the Chamber of Merchants spelt ruin: he wouldn't be able to hide from his own kind.

While waiting for the tsar to come out, the older merchants were sitting on benches, the younger ones were standing. They gathered that the tsar needed money and wanted to have a sincere talk with them. It was long overdue, that heart-to-heart talk... Those attending for the first time kept looking, not without apprehension, at the doors painted with lions and birds near the place for the throne (there was no throne, only the canopy remained).

Peter entered unexpectedly by a little side-door. He was in Dutch dress, red-faced and obviously tipsy. "Greetings, greetings," he kept saying amiably, shaking hands with some, clapping others on the back or on the head. With him were Mitrofan Shorin and Alexei Sveshnikov (in Hungarian caftans); the brothers Osip and Fyodor Bazhenin, grave and impressive,

with upturned moustaches and wearing foreign clothes that were a tight fit round the shoulders; the short and important-looking Ivan Artemich Brovkin, nouveau riche, clean-shaven, a chestnut-brown peruke down to his midriff; the stern Clerk of the Duma, Lyubim Domnin, and one nondescript—his dress suggested a common artisan—whom no one knew, with a gypsy beard and big bald brow. He was evidently extremely shy and came last of all.

Peter sat on a bench and rested his elbows on his outspread knees. "Sit down, sit down," he said to the merchants as they moved closer. They hesitated. He jerked his head to indicate that it was an order. The elders sat down at once. The Clerk of the Duma, Lyubim Domnin, remained standing, took out from behind his pocket a paper folded into a cylinder and worked his dry lips. The brothers Osip and Fyodor Bazhenin jumped up immediately, holding their English hats to their stomachs, and lowered their eyes solemnly. Peter nodded to them again.

"We could do with more like those two here... I want to reward Osip and Fyodor before all present... In England and Holland, people are rewarded for good trade dealings and for good manufactures, and we are going to introduce the same custom here. Do I speak fairly? (He looked to the right and then to the left. His eyebrows went up.) What are you hesitating for? Afraid I'm going to ask you for money? We've got to start living in a new way, merchants, that's what I want..."

Momonov, a rich draper, bowed and asked:

"What does it mean, 'living in a new way', Sire?.."

"It means learn not to live on your own... My boyars sit at home like badgers. You mustn't, you're tradespeople... You must learn to trade in companies, not singly. The East Indies Company in Holland now there's something! Jointly they build ships, jointly they trade. They accumulate huge profits... We are to learn from them... They have academies for the purpose in Europe. If you want, we could build a bourse no worse than Amsterdam's. Form companies, open manufactories. But you people only have one rule: if you don't cheat, you don't sell..."

A young merchant of middle degree, looking infatuatedly at the tsar, suddenly slapped his hand with his hat:

"That's true, that's how it is with us..."

The others started dragging him back into the crowd by the skirts of his coat. Twisting his head round, he shrugged his shoulders.

"Well? Isn't it the truth? We live by deceit and nothing else. We give false weight and false measure..."

Peter burst out laughing (mirthlessly, in a bass voice, his mouth a round O). Those standing nearby also laughed politely. He broke off in mid-laugh and said grimly:

"You've been trading for two hundred years and you still haven't learnt... There's wealth right under our very noses... And still the same squalor and poverty. You make a kopeck, and off to the tavern you go. Isn't that right?"

"We're not all like that, Sire," said Momonov.

"Oh yes you are! (His nostrils distending.) Go abroad. Look at the merchants there. They live like kings! We haven't time to wait for you to learn... Some pigs need their snouts ramming into the trough. Why won't the foreigners leave me alone? They want me to contract this out to them, then that... Timber, ore, industries... Why can't our own people cope? One worthy came to visit us in Voronezh—the devil knows where he was from—and he proposed such a tralala, such projects! 'Yours is a golden land,' he said, 'yet you're a poor people... Why is that?' I kept my mouth shut... I ask you, have we got the wrong people living in this land of ours? (He surveyed the merchants with bulging eyes.) We got to manage with what the Lord has sent us. There are times when the Russian people stick in my craw... They really stick in my craw.'" (His ear twitched and the vein in his neck throbbed.)

Ivan Artemich Brovkin, who was sitting next to him, said good-naturedly, in a sing-song voice:

"The Russians have always been thrashed, they've been thrashed out of their minds, and it's made monsters of them."

"Fool!" yelled Peter. "Fool!" And he gave Brovkin a jab in the ribs with his elbow.

Said Ivan Artemich, even more fatuously:

"That's exactly what I'm saying..."

Peter stared for a moment at Brovkin's shining, foolishly puckered face with its daft smile and then smacked him on the forehead:

"Listen, if I want you to play the fool, I'll tell you to."

But he clearly realised that there was no sense in flaring up and losing his temper in front of the merchants. These men weren't boyars, who had nowhere to go and couldn't take their estates away in their pockets. The merchant was like a snail; at the least thing he'd pull in his horns and hide away with his capital. Indeed, the atmosphere in the room was subdued and estranged. Brovkin glanced at Peter through the cunning slit of one eye.

"Read, Lyubim," said Peter to the clerk.

The Bazhenin brothers again bowed their heads deferentially. Lyubim Domnin read slowly and drily, in a high-pitched voice:

"...this gracious Charter has been bestowed for care, diligence and zeal in ship-building... Last year, in the village of Vovchug, Osip and Fyodor Bazhenin built after the German model a water-driven sawmill without foreign craftsmen, themselves, so that timber could be sawn up into planks and sold in Arkhangelsk to foreign and Russian traders. And they sawed up the timber, and transported it to Arkhangelsk, and despatched it over the seas. And they purpose to build ships and yachts at their mill for the carriage of planks and other Russian goods over the sea. And we, the great sovereign, have rewarded them; we have bidden them build ships and yachts in the said village, and no tax shall be levied on whatever supplies shall be brought from over the sea for the said ship-building work, and the craftsmen, foreign and Russian, may be hired by them, without impediment, from their own profits. And when those ships shall be ready, they are to keep guns and powder on board, as defence against pirates, in distinction from certain foreign merchantment..."

The clerk was a long time reading the Charter. He rolled it up into a scroll with its seal dangling, and, holding it on the upturned palms of his hands, presented it to Osip and Fyodor. On accepting it, the brothers went up to Peter and silently bowed down to his feet with all due ceremony and solemnity. He raised them up by the shoulders and kissed both, only not in a tsar's manner this time, brushingly on the cheek, but firmly on the mouth.

"The great thing is, we've made a start," he said to the

merchants. With restless eyes, he sought out the stranger with the gypsy beard and the receding hair. "Demidych!" (A man pushed his way vigorously through the crowd.) "Demidych, bow to the merchants... This is Nikita Demidych Antufyev, a smith of Tula. He makes pistols and muskets no worse than the English ones. He casts iron and he mines ore. But his wings are short. Talk to him, merchants, and think about it. I am his friend. If need be, we shall grant him land and villages. Bow, Demidych, bow; I shall vouch for you..."

## 9

"Who are you? What are you here for? Who d'you want to see?"

The grim, broad-shouldered woman surveyed Andrei Golikov, the Palekh icon-painter, with a disapproving eye. He was shivering with cold and his skin was blue under the coarse, tattered brown garments. A damp March wind was blowing. Naked bushes whistled on the dilapidated wall of Bely Gorod. The crows cawed in alarm, flying up shaggy and hungry over the garbage heaps. The unscalable fences of Vassily Revyakin, merchant, stretched along Moscow's walls that met at an angle there. It was a sinister place; the back-streets were narrow and deserted.

"From the elder Avraamy," whispered Andrei, and he firmly pressed two fingers to his brow. Behind the woman, in a yard churned up by wheels, skinny chained dogs reared up on their hind legs by the lop-sided sheds... Andrei was frozen stiff, but his eyes were burning. After a moment's hesitation, the woman let him into the yard and indicated that he should go over some duckboards lying on the mud to a long, high building innocent of steps or porch. The shutters over the mica windows banged under the eaves.

They went down into a dark passage that smelt of tubs. The woman gave Andrei a push.

"Wipe your feet on the straw, this isn't a barn." She waited a moment and added in the same unfriendly tone of voice: "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost."

She opened a low door into the basement. It was warm

down there; in the corner, the dark icons gleamed in the light of the embers in the stove. Andrei spent a long time crossing himself before the terrible eyes of the ancient countenances. He remained timidly in the doorway. The woman sat down. He could hear the muffled sound of many voices singing on the other side of the wall.

"What did the elder send you for?"

"Self-sacrifice."

"What kind?"

"To the elder Nectarius, for three years."

"To Nectarius," said the woman slowly.

"He sent me to you to be told the way to Nectarius. I want to retreat from this world, my body's starving, my soul's in terror. I'm frightened. I seek the wilderness, the life of paradise... (Andrei snivelled.) Have pity, Mother, don't turn me away."

"The elder Nectarius will make a wilderness for you," said the woman enigmatically. Her eyes narrowed in the light of the embers.

Andrei began telling her his story. For over half a year now he had been begging from door to door, dying of hunger and freezing to death in the cold. He had been mixed up with all kinds of people and had been incited to take part in seditious deeds. "I can't do it, my soul is in terror." He told her how he had spent the nights under the thin roofs of the city wall in the blizzards that winter. "I'd get some straw and cover myself with matting. The blizzard howled, the snow whirled, the dead streltsy danced on the ends of their ropes and bumped against the wall. During those nights, I longed for a quiet refuge, the secluded life."

After questioning him in detail about the elder Avraamy, she rose to her feet with a sigh. "Follow me." She led Andrei down the dark passage again and down some steps. Ordering him to stay in the beggars' place, she went into the cellar where the voices were singing. There was a hot smell of wax and incense. Thirty or more people were kneeling on the well-scrubbed floor. Behind the velvet-draped pulpit, a man with deformed shoulders in a black cassock and skull-cap was reading aloud. Turning over a tattered page of the handwritten prayer-book, he raised his wispy beard to the candle lights. All over the wall, and even on the floor, there were candles burn-

ing before large and small icons of the ancient Novgorod school of painting.

There was no priest officiating at the service. The chanting was gloomy and nasal. The small, goatee-bearded Vassily Revyakin was kneeling on the right of the elder in front of the congregation. He was counting the knots of a leather rosary, now looking up at the faces on the icons, now half turning, so that when they caught his eye, the worshippers performed their obeisances so much more fervently that they even hurt their foreheads.

The elder with the deformed shoulders closed the book, held it over his head and turned round: a tuft of beard, a far from senile face with a broken nose. Staring with dilated pupils as if at a terrifying vision, his gap-toothed mouth wide open, he intoned:

"Let us remember the words of the righteous Hippolytus, Pope of Rome: 'When the time of Antichrist shall come, the church of God shall sink down and bloodless sacrifice shall be forbidden. Temptation shall have its way in the cities and in the villages, in the monasteries and in the wilderness. And none shall be saved, but for a few'..."

Terrible was the sound of his voice. The worshippers prostrated themselves, their shoulders quivering. The elder stood with the upraised book until the whole congregation was weeping.

"Brethren, I say unto you..." said the elder (winding up the service and taking hold of the wooden cross on his breast). "The grace of God was upon me. The Lord led me to Lake Vol, to the wilderness, to the elder Nectarius. I bowed to the elder, and he asked me: 'What is your wish: to save your soul or to save your flesh?' I said: 'My soul, my soul!' And the elder said: 'Blessings upon thee, my child.' And I saved my soul, but I mortified my flesh... In the wilderness, we ate grass and ferns instead of bread, and wood-sorrel and acorns; and we stripped the bark from the pine-trees and dried it, and we pounded it with fish, and that was our nourishment. And the Lord spared us. And I endured much at the hands of my master from the very first days: I was beaten twice every day. And on Sunday

I was beaten twice. And for two years there were counted unto me, at two times each day, one thousand four hundred and thirty strokes. And there were more wounds and blows each day from his venerable hands than ever I could count. The shepherd mortified my flesh: whatever came to hand, with that he rewarded me, his orphan child and fledgeling. He instructed me with the crook and with the pestle that is used for grinding in the mortar, and with the poker, and with the pans in which food is cooked, and with the spoon with which dough is mixed. And my master wounded my body that my dark soul might be illuminated... With the wooden yoke for carrying pails of water he beat my leg to a pulp, that my legs might be ready for obedience. And not only with wood of all kinds, but with iron, and with stone, and with tearing out of the hair, and sometimes he even humbled my body with a brick. That was why the fingers of my hand were dislocated, and my ribs and bones were broken. And the Lord spared me. Now I am weak in body, but radiant in soul... Brethren, be not idle about your souls."

"Be not idle about your soul," wailed the elder three times, his eyes drilling mercilessly into the abashed flock. Among the congregation were all the relatives, in-laws, and serfs of Vassily Revyakin; also his agents and his warehouse and shop supervisors. As they listened, they sighed dismally. Some could not withstand the elder's fanatic stare. Andrei Golikov was bent double with sobs; clutching his cheeks, he wept, and through his tears the yellow beams from the candles fluttered like angels' wings all over the prayer-room.

The elder bowed to the waist before the flock and departed. Vassily Revyakin took his place; short in stature, white-haired, and, instead of eyes, two slits in which the pupils darted elusively about. Counting the knots of the rosary, he began speaking quietly and in a friendly voice:

"My dear ones, my unforgettable ones... It is terrifying! Beloved ones, it is terrifying! The day was bright, a cloud came and covered all our life with darkness... (He glanced over his right and then his left shoulder as if someone were standing behind him. He stepped softly forward in his light felt boots.)

The Antichrist is already in our midst. You hear? He bestraddles the domes of the Nikonian Church. His seal is three fingers; for those who cross themselves thus there can be no salvation. They are already devoured... And for those who drink and eat with them, there is no salvation. Those who take the sacrament from the priest, for them there is no salvation: their communion bread is branded and their sacredness is a fiction... How are we to save ourselves? We have heard how they save themselves. I withhold none. Depart, my dear ones, accept torment, and you shall see the light. All the more shall you be intercessors for us, the sinful and the weak. I may even go away myself... I shall close my warehouses and shops, I shall distribute my goods and my gains to the needy. There is only one salvation, and that is the faith of our fathers, obedience and fear of God... (Sadly he wagged his beard and wiped his eyelashes with his sleeve. The flock fell silent. They held their breath and did not stir.) Blessed be the one who shall be admitted... But he who is not admitted, let him not despair... The elders will pray. Fear only one thing more than death — that the adversary might jog your elbow... These are not the old times: his invisible minions have gathered round each of you, and this is all they are waiting for: for you to sin, to play false, to withhold kopeck from your master... A trifle, you think? A kopeck? No... They'll hurl themselves upon you, and you are lost to eternal torment... Fear lest the elders should cease to pray for you... (Taking another step forward and slapping his calf with the leather rosary.) See what temptation there is: the Chamber of Merchants!.. That's where hell is, the real hell... Since times of old, merchants have paid taxes to the Treasury, and anything beyond that had been my private affair, what I trade in, and how. If the Lord has bestowed good sense on a man, there's your merchant for you. But a fool will shiver all his life as a common farmhand. Elect your representative, and he can poke his nose into my chests... Tell him everything, show him everything... Why? Who needs that? They're casting the toils of Antichrist over the merchants... And now the post. What for? I send a trusty man to Veliky Ustyug, he'll get there faster than the mail and he'll do what's needful, and in private... But the post... How am I to know what sort of person is going to carry my letter? We don't need

any post, and we don't need any representatives; we won't pay double taxes, and we won't smoke tobacco with foreigners and Nikonians. (In spite of himself, he lost his temper. He dug a trembling blue hand into his pocket, took out a handkerchief and wiped his face. He shook his head, looking at the quivering candles which were now burning low. He sighed heavily and finished.) Let's go and have supper..."

All in the prayer-room went through the passage and the adjacent kitchen into the basement. They sat down at a wooden table covered with a dyed linen cloth in the special place where Vassily Revyakin and his three tried and trusted agents, who were also his cousins, used to have supper. They were going to invite the elder to join them under the icons, but he suddenly spat noisily and went to the doorway where the beggars were sitting on the floor. Andrei was there with them.

A tallow candle was burning in the middle of the table. The grim woman appeared out of the darkness with full bowls. Sometimes a cockroach fell from the ceiling. They ate in silence, chewing solemnly, putting their spoons down quietly. Andrei moved up closer to the elder. Holding a bowl on his knees, bending over, dribbling on to his clumpy beard, the elder was eating convulsively and scalding himself. He chewed the bread a little piece at a time. When he had finished and had said a prayer, he folded his hands on his stomach. It was obvious from his dreamy eyes that he was in a better mood.

"Father, I want to go to elder Nectarius. Let me go," said Andrei quietly to him.

The elder's breathing quickened, but his eyes went blank again:

"As soon as they've gone to bed, come into the prayer-room. I'll put you to the test."

Andrei shuddered and, in his anguish and sense of doom, he began rubbing the back of his head on the rough edges of the timbered wall.

## 10

A warm wind was blowing from the south, from the Dikoye Polye. A week later, the snow melted away. The spring

sky shone blue in the waters flooding the valley. The brooks were swollen and the ice on the Don started moving. One night, the Voronezh burst its banks and inundated the shipyards. From the town to the River Don, ships, brigantines, galleys and boats lay rocking at anchor. The still wet tar dripped from their sides and the silver-and-gold painted faces of the Neptunes shone in the sun. The sails flapped, hoisted up to dry. The last ice floes rustled as they nosed down in the turbid waters. Above the fortress walls, on the right bank of the river opposite Voronezh, puffs of gunsmoke flew up to be torn to shreds by the wind. Cannon shots skimmed over the water; it was as if the earth itself had swollen up and bubbles were bursting on the surface.

Work went on in the shipyard day and night. They were finishing the forty-gun *Krepost*. With her high carved poop and three masts, she lay rocking gently by the fresh piles of the jetty-side. From time to time, she was visited by lighters coming across the river loaded with powder, salt pork and biscuits, and tying up at her black sides. The current tightened the moving ropes and made the timbers creak. On the quarter deck, on the bridge, outshouting the rumble of barrels being rolled over the deck and the squeal of sheaves, the swarthy, pug-faced Captain Pamburg swore in Russian and Portuguese — moustaches curled, eyes of a crazed ram, thigh-boots plastered with mud, a coat of sheepskin over his caftan, head bound in a red silk bandana. "Drones! Sons-of-bitches!" The sailors were working like fury, loading bales of biscuits, casks, crates — rolling them up to the holds at the double hatches where bos'uns' mates in tall felt hats and baggy brown breeches stood snarling away like watch-dogs.

On a hill overlooking the river rose the crooked outlines of pointed log-built towers, and the rusty domes of churches could be seen behind the ramshackle walls. The hillslope in front of the old town was dotted with the clay-walled huts and wooden sheds of the labourers. Nearer the river were the log cabins of the newly appointed Admiral Golovin, Alexander Menshikov, Apraksin, head of the Admiralty, and Rear-Admiral Cornelis Cruys. Beyond the river, on the low bank strewn with wood shavings and gouged by wheels, were the smoke-blackened, earth-roofed smithies, the ribs of unfinished

ships, half-submerged bundles of planks, rafts heaved out of the water, casks, ropes and rusty anchors. Cauldrons of pitch belched black clouds of smoke. The thin wheels of the rope-spinning machine squeaked. Standing on high trestles, the sawyers worked their shoulders. The lumbermen ran barefoot through the mud, hooking with their poles any beams that had been carried away by the tide.

The main work was done. The fleet had been launched. There was only the *Krepost,* which was being finished with particular care. The admiral's flag was to be hoisted on her in three days' time.

From time to time the door was flung open and more people came in. Without bothering to take off their coats or wipe their feet, they sat on the benches, while the more important ones went straight to the table. Eating and drinking went on twenty-four hours a day in the tsar's cabin. Candles were burning, stuck into empty flagons. Perukes hung on the timber walls; it was hot inside. The pipe smoke hovered in layers.

Rear-Admiral Cornelis Cruys was asleep at the table, his face buried in his gold-braided sleeves. The *Schoutbijnacht* * of the Russian fleet, the Dutchman Julius Rees, a dashing sea rover with a price of the two thousand English pounds on his head for sundry doings on the high seas, was drinking anisette, his one-eyed, ferocious face scowling at the candle. Shipwrights Joe Nay and John Day, the stubble of several feverishly busy days on their chins, were puffing their pipes and winking mockingly at Russian artisan Fedosey Sklyaev. Fedosey had just arrived, had unwound his scarf and unfastened his sheepskin coat, and was eating pork noodle soup.

"Fedosey," said Joe blinking his red eyelids. "Fedosey, tell us how you feasted in Moscow".

Fedosey made no reply and continued eating. He was bored stiff. He had returned from abroad in February, and had been obliged, thanks to a letter from the tsar, to leave for Voronezh. The devil had got into him. He had started on a whirl of visits to his friends, and that had done it: three days in

* The Dutch equivalent of Rear-Admiral.

a haze of pancakes, cold dishes, desserts and vodka. It had all ended up as was only to be expected—at the Preobrazhensky Commission.

On learning that his long-awaited favourite Fedosey was in the custody of the Prince-Emperor, the tsar sent a messenger to Moscow with a letter for Romodanovsky:

"Myn Herr Konig... Why are you holding our comrades Fedosey Sklyaev and others? I am very sad. I was especially waiting for Sklyaev, since he is the best shipwright, and you have seen fit to detain him. God be your judge. I truly have no one to help me here. It is not, I think, a matter of state. For God's sake, release him and send him here. Peter."

The reply from the Prince-Emperor was brought ten days later by Sklyaev himself.

"His felony is as follows: he was travelling drunk with comrades and got into affray at the barriers with the soldiery: there are wrongs on both sides. I investigated and flogged Sklyaev for his folly, and I likewise flogged the soldiers who complained and with whom the dispute began. Do not be angry with me on the score. I am not in the habit of overlooking folly, no matter what the person's station might be."

Very well. Let that be an end of it. On meeting Sklyaev, the tsar embraced him, made a fuss of him, slapped his thighs, and did not merely burst out laughing, he guffawed until the tears came to his eyes. "Moscow isn't Amsterdam, you know!" And he read out the Prince-Emperor's letter at supper.

On finishing his noodles, Fedosey pushed back his bowl and reached across to Joe Nay for some tobacco.

"All right, you've had your laugh, you devils," he said roughly. "Did you go down into the hold in the stern today?"

"We did," replied Joe Nay.

"Oh no, you didn't..."

Slowly taking out a clay pipe, his straight mouth drooping at the corners, John Day said in Russian through his clenched teeth:

"Why are you trying to make out that we didn't go down into the hold, Fedosey Sklyaev?"

"Here's why... Instead of blinking at me, you could take a lantern and go down there."

"A leak?"

"I'll say there's a leak. When we started loading the barrels of salt pork, the ribs parted and there's water slapping about down below."

"It can't be..."

"Oh yes, it can. I've already told you about that: the stern reinforcement is weak."

Joe Nay and John Day looked at one another. Slowly, they rose to their feet and donned hats with ear-flaps. Fedosey also stood up, angrily wound his scarf round his neck and picked up a lantern.

"A fine lot of generals you are!"

Tired, tar-stained, mud-splashed officers, sailors, and artisans were taking their seats at the table. Helping themselves to a glass of fiery vodka from a clay pitcher, they reached out for whatever came their way: roast meat, suckling pig, sheep's lips in vinegar. After eating hastily, many again went out without crossing their foreheads or even saying thanks...

At the partition, a sleepy-eyed sailor in a high cloth hat down over one ear lay with his broad shoulder against the lintel of the door. A length of knotted rope hung round his sinewy neck. He gave a taste of it to anyone who deserved it. To all who came up to the door, he said quietly and casually:

"Where d'you think you're going, you son-of-a-bitch?"

The government people were sitting behind the partition, in the bedroom half of the hut: Admiral Fyodor Alexeyevich Golovin, Lev Kirillovich Naryshkin, Fyodor Matveyevich Apraksin, head of the Admiralty, and Alexander Danilovich Menshikov, who, immediately after Lefort's death, had been appointed Major-General and Governor of Pskov. Peter had said, on returning to Voronezh after the funeral: "I had two hands, and now there's only one left; and although it's a thieving one, at least it's loyal."

Menshikov, in a fine caftan, elegantly tied with a Preobrazhensky sash, and a peruke, his narrow chin buried in lace, was standing by the hot brick stove. Apraksin and the portly Golovin were sitting on the unmade bed. Naryshkin was at the table, his brow resting on the palm of his hand. They were listening to the Clerk of the Duma and high ambassador, Prokofy Voznitsyn. He had just returned from a congress at Karlowitz on the Danube, from where the Austrian, Polish, Vene-

tian and Muskovite ambassadors had been negotiating peace with the Turks.

He had not yet seen the tsar. Peter had given orders for the ministers to meet and debate, and he would arrive later. Voznitsyn had on his knees a notebook covered with inscriptions in cypher. His eyeglasses had slipped down to the tip of his dry nose and he was telling his story:

"With the Turkish ambassadors, Reis-Effendi Rami and Privy Counsellor Mavrocordato, I have arranged an armistice. It was impossible to achieve more. Judge for yourselves, Ministers: they're cooking up a porridge in Europe that could spread over the whole world. The King of Spain is tottery, he could die without issue any day now. The King of France is trying to put his grandson Philippe on the Spanish throne. He's already married him off, and is keeping him at hand in Paris, ready for a coronation at any moment. Whereas the Emperor of Austria wants his hands free to put his son Charles on the Spanish throne..."

"Yes, yes, we know all that," interrupted Menshikov impatiently.

"Just have patience, Alexander Danilovich, I'm speaking as best I can (Voznitsyn levelled a heavy, grey stare over his spectacles at the popinjay). A great dispute is being decided between France and England. If Spain goes to a French King, the French and the Spanish fleets together will dominate all the seas. If Spain goes to the Emperor of Austria, then with the French fleet alone the English will cope in that case. European politics are being stirred up by the English. They are the ones who brought the Austrians and the Turks together at Karlowitz. The Emperor of Austria must have his hands free if he is going to fight. And the Turks are only too glad to make peace, to rest, to regain their strength. Prince Eugene of Savoy has taken from them much land and many cities for the Emperor in Hungary, in the land of Semigrad and in Morea, and the Emperor's people already have their eyes on Tsargrad itself... * The Turks' chief concern is to recover what belongs to them...

* Eugene of Savoy — an Austrian military leader; the land of Semigrad, or Transylvania — the eastern part of present-day Romania; Morea — the southern part of Greece; Tsargrad — the old Russian name for Constantinople.

They have no thought at present of going to war a long way from home with the Poles or with us... As for Azov, to them it isn't worth the price they would have to pay to win it back."

"Is the Sultan of Turkey as weak as you try to assure us he is? I doubt it," said Menshikov. (Golovin and Apraksin grinned. Lev Kirillovich, seeing that they were amused, also shook his head with a smile.)

"But if he's weak, why didn't you sign a permanent peace with him?" said Menshikov, his calf quivering, his spurs jingling. "Or did you forget to tell the Reis-Effendi that we have forty thousand city marksmen wintering in the Ukraine and, what's more, Shein's big cavalry regiment is assembled in Akhtyrka and the vessels in Bryansk are ready for the crossing. We didn't send you empty-handed... Armistice, indeed!"

Prokofy Voznitsyn slowly took off his spectacles. It was hard to get used to the new ways; how dared a young upstart of low birth speak like that to a high ambassador. His hand trembling with anger as he passed it over his face, Prokofy collected his thoughts. Nothing was to be gained by abuse.

"That is why an armistice has been signed, and not a peace, Alexander Danilovich... The Imperial ambassadors, without consulting us, or the Poles, or the Venetians, have been negotiating secretly with the Turks. And the Poles negotiated without our cognizance. We were the only ones left out. The Turks, having settled things with the Austrians to their satisfaction, did not even want to talk to us at first, they were so arrogant... Had it not been for my old acquaintance Alexander Mavrocordato, we wouldn't even have had an armistice... You sit here, Ministers, and you think that all the eyes of all Europe are on you... No, to them we are minor politique —it might even be said, no politique at all."

"Oh well, that remains to be seen."

"Wait, don't lose your temper, Alexander Danilovich," said Golovin, stopping him gently.

"They gave us the worst place in the ambassadorial camp. They mounted guard over us... We were forbidden to go anywhere, to meet the Turks or to exchange messages. While still in Vienna, I took on a doctor, a worldly-wise Pole. I started sending him to Mavrocordato in the Turkish camp. I sent him once. Mavrocordato returned the greetings and announced

that he was feeling the cold. I was delighted. I took my caftan of mulberry cloth lined with black fox-fur and sent the doctor to him with it and with instructions to ride round the ambassadors' camps in the open steppe. Mavrocordato accepted the caftan. The next day he sent me tobacco, two good pipes, a pound of coffee, and some writing-paper. Aha, I thought, so he's sending return gifts... And again I sent him a load of pressed roes, choice cuts of sturgeon, five big beluga bellies and various cordials... Yes, and I went out at night to the Turkish camp, alone, in a commoner's clothes. And on that day the Turks signed their peace with the Emperor..."

"Blast!" Menshikov stamped his foot so that his spur jingled.

"Mavrocordato said to me: 'There won't be any satisfaction for either of us unless you return us the Dnieper forts so that we can blockade the river and bar your way to the Black Sea forever; and you'll have to give up Azov, and pay tribute to the Crimean Khan as in the old days...' That, Alexander Danilovich, is how arrogantly the Turks have treated us since the very first talks. I was on my own, after all. The allies finished their business and departed... I threatened the Turks with the Voronezh fleet, but they just laughed: 'This is the first time we've ever heard of ships being built thousands of versts away from the sea. Sail down the Don on them, but you'll never get across the estuary.' I reminded them about the Ukrainian army too, and they reminded me about the Tatars: 'Look, the Tatars' hands aren't tied any longer; mind they don't do to you what they did under Devlet-Girei.' * If the Turks didn't have their worries, they'd swoop a war on us... Really, Alexander Danilovich, if I had had my wits about me I would have achieved more, but at least an armistice is not a war..."

There were still many minor matters to be dealt with. There was a shortage of nails. Owing to the thaw, part of the sleigh train with iron from Tula had arrived only the day before. Work went on in the smithies all night. Every day was

* During the reign of Ivan the Terrible, the Grimean Tartars burned Moscow, and about half a million people were slain or taken away into captivity.

precious. They must be in time to move the big ships during high water to the Don estuary.

All the forges were ablaze. The smiths in singed aprons and sweat-soaked shirts, the lusty strikers stripped to the waist and with scorched skins, the smoke-begrimed little boys pumping the bellows — all worked until they could hardly stand on their feet, their arms ached and their faces turned blacker and blacker. Those resting (there were several shifts during the night) stayed on the spot, some chewing dried fish at the open doors, others sleeping on a pile of birch-wood charcoals.

Foreman Kuzma Zhemov, sent by Lev Kirillovich from his factory in Tula (where Zhemov had been taken from the gaol for a lifetime's labour) had injured his hand. Another foreman had been poisoned by stove fumes and was now lying on damp boards by the smithy and groaning in the night breeze.

They were welding the flukes on the big anchor for the *Krepost*. The anchor itself, suspended by block and tackle from the ridge pole, was inside the furnace. Brushing off the sweat, their lungs wheezing, the blowers were pumping the levers of six bellows. Two strikers stood by at the ready, the heads of their long-handled hammers resting at their feet. With his fit hand (the other was bandaged with a piece of cloth) Zhemov was stoking up the coals and saying:

"Don't be lazy, don't be lazy, keep pumping."

Peter, in a dirty white blouse and canvas apron, his drawn face black with soot, his mouth pursed into a chicken's rump, was carefully turning the anchor fluke in the furnace with a pair of long tongs. It was a responsible and tricky job, welding on such a big part...

Zhemov turned to the labourers standing at the ropes of the block:

"Take hold... Get ready... (And, to Peter.) Right away, or we'll overheat it... (Peter, his bulging eyes riveted on the coals, nodded and moved the tongs.) Quickly, heave away... Come on!.."

Hastily, hand over hand, the workers hauled away at the rope. The block screeched. The forty-pood anchor began rising out of the furnace. Sparks whirled like snowflakes across the workshop. The white-hot anchor fluke hung over the anvil,

its scale crackling. Now it had to be bent over and fitted firmly in place.

Zhemov, in a whisper this time:

"Bend over, put it down... Put it on firmer... (The anchor lay on the anvil.) Knock off the scale. (They began brushing the scale with a switch that immediately burst into flames.) The fluke! (Turning to Peter, he shouted frenziedly.) What's the matter with you? Come on!"

"Aye, aye!"

Peter heaved the tongs out of the coals and swung them round over the anvil, nearly dropping the red-hot fluke as he did so. Half-squatting and grimacing with the effort, he put the fluke on the anchor.

"Tighter!" shouted Zhemov and signalled to the strikers with a glance. Grunting heavily, they began swinging back, up and over with a slight lag. Peter held the fluke steady. Zhemov kept signalling with a small hammer: tap-tap-tap, tap-tap-tap. The burning scale showered into their aprons.

They welded it on. The strikers, puffing hard, went away. Peter threw the tongs into the vat. He wiped his face with his sleeve. His eyes were cheerfully narrowed. He winked at Zhemov, whose whole face was creased with wrinkles.

"Never mind, Peter Alexeyevich... Only next time, don't swing the tongs about; you could catch a man that way and the workpiece could miss the anvil. I've been thumped for such things in my time too..."

Saying nothing Peter washed his hands in the vat, wiped himself with his apron and put on his caftan. He went out of the workshop. There was a sharp smell of spring damp. Under the huge stars the ice-floes were rustling on the river, which seemed grey in the far distance. The mast light of the *Krepost* swayed from side to side. Thrusting his hands into his pockets and whistling softly, Peter walked along the bank, right at the water's edge.

On seeing the tsar, the sailor at the partition ducked his head through the narrow door and informed the Ministers. But Peter did not go through immediately; he wrinkled his nose with relish at the warmth and the tobacco smoke, bent over the table and surveyed the dishes.

"Listen," he said to a round-bearded man with eyebrows raised in a permanent look of astonishment (bright blue eyes in the small face — this was Aladushkin, the famous ship's carpenter). "Mishka, pass me that over there." He pointed over the table to some roast beef garnished with steeped apples. He sat down on the bench opposite the sleeping Rear-Admiral and slowly, as a tired man drinks, he drained a glass. The vodka worked like a charm. He chose the firmest apple he could find. As he munched, he spat a pip at Cornelis Cruys' bald patch.

"What's the matter? Are you drunk, or something?"

The Rear-Admiral raised his crumpled face and said in a bass voice thick with cold:

"Wind sou'-sou'-west, one point. Pamburg's on duty on the captain's bridge. I'm having a rest." And he dug his nose into his gold-braided sleeves again.

After eating, Peter said:

"Why are you all so glum in here?" He rested his fists on the table, waited a moment, then straightened his back, walked through the partition and sat on the bed. (The Ministers were standing up respectfully.) He thumbed some Dutch tobacco tightly into the bowl of his pipe and lit it at a candle brought to him by Menshikov.

"Well, greetings, high ambassador."

Voznitsyn's senile legs quivered in their thick stockings, the stiff skirts of the French jacket were rucked up as he executed a big, sweeping bow, swinging the curls of his peruke within inches of his sovereign's mud-caked shoes. He waited for Peter to raise him up.

"Sasha," said Peter, reclining with one elbow on the pillow, "assist the high ambassador to his feet... Don't be cross, Prokofy, I'm a bit tired... (Voznitsyn, waving Menshikov away, stood up, his feelings hurt.) I've read your letters. You write that I should not be angry. I am not angry. You've done your job honourably, in the old style. I believe you... (He bared his teeth maliciously.) Austrians! Englishmen! Very well, that's the last time we go asking for favours like that... Sit down and tell me all about it."

Voznitsyn again began describing the insults and great difficulties encountered at the ambassadorial congress. Peter al-

ready knew this from the letters and sucked his pipe absent-mindedly.

"Your humble servant, Sire, in the poverty of his mind has judged that if we do not annoy the Turks, the armistice can be prolonged considerably. We should send them someone clever and cunning... Let him negotiate, postpone the final date, play for time over and promise concessions at times. After all, Sire, it's no sin to deceive the Mahommedans — God will forgive us."

Peter grimaced. Half his face was in shadow, but his round eye, caught by the candle-light, was stern.

"What else have you to say, boyars?" (He took his pipe out of his mouth and spat through his teeth a whole sazhen's distance.)

The horned shadows of Apraksin's and Golovin's perukes stirred on the wall. It was, of course, difficult to give an answer just like that, on the spot... Peter did not like the old custom of beating about the bush in the Duma with a lot of high-flown oratory. Menshikov's lips curled as he rubbed his shoulders up against the hot stove.

"Well?" asked Peter.

"Prokofy has suggested spinning things out after the manner of our grandfathers. That isn't appropriate for us now..."

Breathless with anger, Lev Kirillovich said:

"It was God himself who would not let us sign a peace with the Turks. The Patriarch of Jerusalem has written to us with tears in his eyes: 'Save the Holy Sepulchre.' The lords of Moldavia and Wallahia implore us on their bended knees. 'Save us from Turkish enslavement.' And we? Oh God!" (Said Peter mockingly: "Don't start weeping!.." Lev Kirillovich stopped short, his eyes and mouth wide open, and then continued.) "Sire, we cannot do without a Black Sea! Thank God, we have the strength now, and the Turks are weak... We should not go to the Crimea like Vassily Golitsyn, we should sail down the Danube to Tsargrad and raise the cross on Hagia Sophia."

The horned perukes stirred in alarm. Peter's eye was still glittering unfathomably; his pipe gurgled from time to time.

"Peace is better than war," said the meek Apraksin quietly. "War is costly, Lev Kirillovich. We should make peace with the Turks for twenty-five years, or for at least ten, without sur-

rending Azov or the Dnieper forts — that would be best." (He glanced sideways at Peter and sighed.)

Peter stood up, but there was not enough room for him to pace about, so he sat on the table.

"I have to keep looking back at you, the nobility, at the landowners. Noblemen's levy! They clamber up on to their horses, all sleek and glossy, the devils, but they don't know which is their sabre hand. Parasites, real parasites. You might try talking to the traders... Arkhangelsk is a one escape hatch at the back of nowhere. The English and the Dutch get what they want and pay for it with coppers... Mitrofan Shorin was telling me eight thousand poods of hemp were rotting in the sheds; he waited three navigation seasons for the price to go up. These foreigners just walked past and jeered at him... And the timber? They need timber abroad, we have it all, and we're bowing to them and imploring them to buy from us... Canvas! Ivan Brovkin says: 'I'd do better to burn the warehouses down in Arkhangelsk before I sell at such a price...' No! The Black Sea isn't our worry... We need our ships on the Baltic."

He had said his piece... Towering, grimy, he looked down from the table with protuberant eyes at the Ministers. They frowned. Fighting the Tatars and even the Turks was a difficult business, but at least they were used to it. But conquer the Baltic Sea? Do battle with the Livonians and the Poles? Fight the Swedes? Crawl into the European stew? Lev Kirillovich fumbled with a podgy hand along the flared skirt of his caftan, took out a kerchief of hazelnut-brown silk and wiped his face. Voznitsyn shook his head in doubt. Peter took a tobacco pouch from his breeches pocket.

"We're going to seek peace with the Turks, only in a different way, and not like Prokofy... We're going there, only not just with a fox-fur caftan..."

"Of course!" exclaimed Menshikov and his eyes sparkled.

## 11

Its striped canvas billowing in the warm breeze, the fleet was sailing over the turgid waters of the Don, which was in full spate. Eighteen two-decker ships and, preceding and following

them, twenty galliots, twenty brigantines, and also galleasses, yachts and galleys: eighty-six warships and fifty boatloads of Cossacks in all were strung out far along the winding river.

From the high decks could be seen the steppes, already beginning to turn green, and the rippling surface of lakes on the flood-plain. Flocks of birds were flying north. There was an occasional glimpse of chalk gleaming whitely ahead. A contrary south-easter had been blowing at first, and a lot of hard work been needed until they turned westwards down the Don: the sails had begun flapping, the ships had drifted and the captains had shouted frenziedly through their copper speaking-trumpets. The order for the fleet was as follows:

"No one shall dare to fall behind the commander's vessel, but must follow in its wake. If anyone shall be three hours late, a quarter of his year's wages shall be deducted; if six hours — two-thirds; if twelve hours — a whole year's wages."

After they turned the south-west, it was plain sailing. Gorgeous, humid sunsets spread over the steppe. A shot would boom out from the admiral's ship. The time was struck in bells, nautical style. Lights crawled up to the mast heads. Sails were furled and anchors cast with a splash. Fires were lit on the darkling banks and the long, sustained cries of the Cossacks could be heard.

From the dark hulk of the *Apostle Peter* (the tsar was on board in the capacity of commander), a rocket would soar up into the starry sky like a witch's tail, hissing and frightening the quails. The officers assembled for supper in the wardroom. During these nights, drunken enough as they were, there would be visits by admirals, captains and high-ranking boyars from the nearest ships.

Near the Divnogorsky Monastery, six vessels built by prince Boris Alexeyevich Golitsyn's company joined the fleet. They dropped anchor by the chalky bank for this occasion and feasted two days out of doors in the monastery garden. The monks were tempted by the horn music and the double entendres and were frightened by the thunder of the eight hundred ships' guns.

Once again, sails billowed all along the river. They went past high banks, past forts ringed with wattle and earth ramparts, past new boyar and monastery estates and fisheries. On

the left bank near the town of Panshino, they saw hosts of mounted Kalmyks with long lances, and on the right bank, Cossacks with their wagons formed into a square and with two guns. The Kalmyks and the Cossacks had moved up against one another for battle, having failed to agree over sharing out the herds of horses and the sturgeon spawning grounds.

Shein set off a ship's boat to visit the Kalmyks, while Boris Alexeyevich Golitsyn went to the Cossacks. They effected a reconciliation. On this occasion, they caroused on the green hills under flying caravans of cranes. Cornelis Cruys, who was tipsy, gave orders for tortoises to be caught, and cooked a soup. Peter followed suit; gave orders for tortoises to be caught and regaled the boyars with a marvellous dish. When they had all eaten, he showed them the tortoises' heads. Shein felt sick. There was much laughter.

On the twenty-fourth of May, under a blazing noonday sun, the bastions of Azov materialised in the south out of the heat-shimmer over the sea. The Don widened out here considerably, but was still too shallow for the passage of the forty-gun ships across the firth.

While the Rear-Admiral was sounding the Kutyurma, a tributary of the Don, and while Peter was visiting Azov and Taganrog by yacht, the Khan's embassy arrived from Bakhchisarai on fine horses with a train of pack animals. They put up carpet tents and, on the hill, planted a *bunchuk*, that is, a horse's tail and a half moon on a long lance, and sent an interpreter to find out whether the tsar would accept greetings and gifts from the Khan. The ambassadors were told that the tsar was in Moscow, but his representative there was Admiral Golovin with the boyars. For three days the *bunchuk* fluttered on the hill. The Tatars galloped up and down on lathered horses before the muzzles of the Russian guns. On the fourth day, the embassy went aboard the admiral's ship. They put down a white Anatolian carpet and laid out the presents: a wrought-iron pommel for a saddle, a sabre, pistols, a knife, and harness — nothing very special, of silver and decorated with cheap gem stones. Golovin sat importantly on a folding chair, the Tatars on a carpet with their legs tucked underneath

them. They talked about the armistice signed by Voznitsyn, about this and about that, pinching their sparse forked beards, darting their eyes in all directions like dogfish and clicking their tongues.

"Moscow good, fleet good... But your hopes are in vain, you will not get through down the Kutyurma with your big ships. Not so long ago, the Sultan's fleet tried to sail up the Don and returned empty-handed to Kerch..."

Everything indicated that the Tatars had only come to reconnoitre. In the morning, there was no *bunchuk* and there were no horsemen on the hill.

Soundings showed that the Kutyurma was low. The high waters of the Don were falling daily. They could only hope for a strong sou'-wester that would drive the sea into the estuary.

Peter returned from Taganrog. His mood darkened when he learned about the low water. The wind was blowing slackly from the south. A heatwave set in. The tar dripped from the sides of the ships. The timbers, badly dried out during the winter, were cracking. Water was being pumped out of the holds. The ships lay in the motionless heat-haze, their sails furled.

Orders were given to jettison ballast. Barrels of gunpowder and salt pork were brought up out of the holds, loaded on to boats and taken to Taganrog. The ships were lighted, but the level of the Kutyurma continued falling.

On the twenty-second of June at dinner-time, Rear-Admiral Julius Rees, emerging red-faced and ponderous from wardroom that was as hot as a steam-bath (in order to relieve himself over the side), cast a rolling eye at a grey cloud rapidly growing in size in the south-west. He looked at the cloud again, went back to the wardroom, picked up his hat and sword and said loudly:

"Storm blowing up."

Peter, the admirals, and the captains dashed from the table. The clouds were racing up into the heavens and darkness was rising from the whitish strip of water. The sun was ablaze with a steely light. The flags, the pennants and the sailors' washing hung limp on the shrouds. The bo'suns on board

the ships piped all hands on deck. The sails were furled and the storm anchors were cast.

The cloud now covered half the sky. The waters darkened. There was a broad glimmer of light from behind the fringe. The wind whistled louder and more alarmingly in the rigging. The pennants started snapping. The wind tore with all its might in the whirling, spinning, scattered fragments of darkness. The masts creaked, underpants were snatched from the shrouds and flew through the air. The wind churned up the waters and tore at the ropes. The sailors clutched convulsively at them on the yards. The captains stamped their feet trying to outshout the rising storm. Foaming waves dashed themselves against the sides. The skies were riven by the deafening thunderclaps, and the reverberations never ceased. Columns of fire fell from the sky.

Hatless, the skirts of his caftan flying up in the wind, holding on to the taffrail, Peter stood on the rising and falling poop. Deafened and blinded, he opened his mouth wide, like a fish. The lightning seemed to be falling all round the ship into the crests of the waves.

"This is nothing!" roared Julius Rees in his ear. "The real storm'll be here any moment!"

The storm passed after doing considerable damage. Two sailors ashore had been killed by lightning. Anchor cables had snapped, several masts had been broken off and swept ashore, and a number of small craft had sunk. Even so, a strong sou'-wester had set in, and that was exactly what was needed.

The waters of the Kutyurma rose quickly. They began taking the ships out at dawn. Fifty rowing boats led the *Krepost* first on long tow-lines. From buoy to buoy, without her keel grating once on the river bed, she went down the Kutyurma into the Sea of Asov, fired a cannon and hoisted Captain Pamburg's own colours.

On the same day, they towed out the lower-lying *Apostle Peter, Voronezh, Azov, Goed Dragers* and *Vijn Dragers*. On the twenty-seventh of June, the whole fleet lay at anchor before the bastions of Taganrog.

Here, in the shelter of the mole, they began recaulking, tar-

ring and painting the warped timbers, mending the rigging and taking on ballast. Peter spent whole days dangling in a cradle on the side of the *Krepost,* whistling and hammering oakum into the seams. Or, his posterior protruding in his greasy breeches, he would climb up the shrouds to the mast to make fast a new yard. Or he went down into the hold where Fedosey Sklyaev was at work (after an exchange of shouted obscenities with John Day and Joe Nay). He was ingeniously reinforcing the ribs.

"Pyotr Alexeyevich, for God's sake don't get in my way," said Fedosey crossly, "or these fixings of mine won't be any good. Cut my head off if you want, but don't keep meddling..."

"All right, all right, I'll just give you a hand..."

"Go and help Aladushkin over there, or else you and me'll end up swearing..."

They worked all July. Rear-Admiral Julius Rees gave continual instruction to the ships' crews taken from the Preobrazhensky and Semyonovsky regiments. There were many of the gentry's sons among them who had never set eyes on the sea in their lives. Rees, a true mariner in choler and daring, instilled a zeal for seamanship into the sailors with a rope. He made them stand on the royal yards twelve sazhens above the water, or dive overboard fully clothed: "Anybody who drowns is no sailor." His feet planted wide apart on the captain's bridge, a cane in his hand behind his back, his bulldog jaw jutting out, the old pirate saw everything with his one eye: anyone who fumbled while undoing a knot or who made fast a line the wrong way got a taste of the rope. "Hey, you there on the topmast staysail, filthy slob! Is that how to pay out a line?" He would stamp his foot: "All hands on deck! Start again!"

The newly appointed ambassador, Emelyan Ukraintsev, the most experienced of the officials in the Ambassador's Commission, arrived from Moscow with the clerk Cheredeyev and interpreters Lavretsky and Botvinkin. They brought sables, walrus tusks and a pood and a half of tea for presentation to the Sultan and the Pashas.

On the fourteenth of August, the *Krepost* set sail and, accompanied by the whole fleet, stood out to sea on a west-sou'-westerly course with a strong nor'-easter blowing. On the se-

venteenth, the slender minarets of Taman appeared to port on the Nogai side. The fleet crossed the bay and, with guns firing, sailed past in full view of Kerch in clouds of smoke and dropped anchor. The city walls were very ancient and the high rectangular towers had collapsed in some places. There were no forts or bastions. Four ships were close in to shore. The Turks had evidently been caught napping; they had never expected or imagined that they would see the whole bay filled with sails and gun-smoke.

Murtaza, the Pasha of Kerch, a sleek and lazy Turk, looked with fright through a window in one of the towers. He had sent constables to the Muscovite admiral's ship to ask why such a big convoy had arrived. A month ago, the Khan's Tatars had reported to him that the tsar's fleet was negligible, totally without guns, and would never negotiate the shallows of the Sea of Azov.

"Ai-ai-ai... Ai-ai-ai..." moaned Murtaza faintly, pushing aside the branch of a shrub in the window for a better view. He tried counting the ships and gave up. "Who believed the Khan's scouts?" he yelled at the officials standing behind him on the tower platform which had been much soiled by the birds. "Who believed those Tatar dogs?"

Murtaza stamped his slippered feet. The officials, overfed and underworked in this quiet, out-of-the-way spot, pressed their hands to their hearts and shook their fezzes and turbans in dismay. They knew that Murtaza would have to write an unpleasant letter to the Sultan, and they knew how it would end: the Sultan, although the Prophet's most illustrious delegate, was temperamental, and there had been occasions when the more important Pashas had been impaled.

The lateen sail of a felucca with constables on board detached itself from the admiral's ship. Murtaza sent an official down to the beach to hurry up the emissaries and began counting the ships again. The constables, two Greeks, appeared, rolling their eyes, drawing their heads down between their shoulders and clicking their tongues. Murtaza furiously stuck out his fat neck towards them. They told him:

"The Muscovite admiral bids us convey his greetings to

you and tell you that they are escorting their envoy to the Sultan. We told the admiral that you cannot permit the envoy to proceed by sea, he is to travel, as all do, across the Crimea to Baba. The admiral said: 'If you won't let us go by sea, we shall escort our envoy all the way to Constantinople with the whole fleet.'"

The next day, Murtaza Pasha sent important Beys to the admiral. And the Beys said:

"We are sorry for you Muscovites; you do not know our Black Sea. In times of need on it, the hearts of men are black, wherefore it is called black. Listen to us and proceed overland to Baba."

Admiral Golovin merely took offence: "They think we're scared." A tall man with twinkling eyes and dressed in Dutch costume was standing nearby. He burst out laughing, and all the Russians followed suit.

What was to be done? How could they refuse to let them through when, as soon as the morning breeze sprang up, the Muscovite ships set sail and performed manoeuvres in accordance with all the rules of seafaring, sailing about the bay and firing at targets that consisted of sails mounted on floats. Try refusing such braggarts! Placing his trust in Allah alone, Murtaza Pasha spun out the parley.

The boat sailed up to the Turkish flagship. Cornelis Cruys climbed aboard with two oarsmen in Dutch sailor's costume — Peter and Sasha. The Turkish crew on deck saluted the Moscow Rear-Admiral. Admiral Hassan Pasha emerged importantly from his cabin in the bows. He was wearing a white silk robe and a turban with a diamond crescent. He ceremoniously touched his forehead and breast with his fingers. Cornelis Cruys doffed his hat, stepped back, and flourished the plumes before Hassan Pasha.

Two chairs were brought up. The admirals sat down under a sailcloth awning. The cook, a fat little eunuch, brought a tray bearing dishes of sweetmeats, a coffee pot and cups only a little larger than a thimble. The admirals began ceremonious conversation. Hassan Pasha inquired after the tsar's health. Cornelis Cruys replied that the tsar was well and himself asked

after the health of the Sultan. Hassan Pasha bowed low over the table: "Allah guards the days of His Majesty the Sultan..." Looking sad-eyed past Cornelis Cruys, he said:

"We do not keep a big fleet in Kerch. We have no one to be afraid of here. However, we have mighty ships in the Sea of Marmora. The guns on them are so big that they can even fire stone shot three poods in weight."

"Our ships do not use stone shot," said Cornelis Cruys, sipping his coffee. "We fire eighteen- and thirty-pound iron cannonballs. They go in one side of an enemy ship and come out the other."

Hassan Pasha's fine eyebrows rose very slightly.

"We were not a little surprised to see that Englishmen and Dutchmen are industriously serving in the Russian tsar's fleet, they being Turkey's best friends."

Said Cornelis Cruys, with a radiant smile:

"Oh, Hassan Pasha, men serve those who pay most. (Hassan Pasha gravely inclined his head.) Holland and England are engaged in profitable commerce with Muscovy. With the tsar it is more advantageous to live in peace than at war. Muscovy is richer than any other country in the world."

Hassan Pasha, pensively:

"How did the tsar acquire so many ships, Rear-Admiral?"

"The Muscovites themselves built them in two years..."

"Ai-ai-ai..." Hassan Pasha shook his turbaned head.

While the admirals were conversing, Peter and Sasha regaled the Turkish seamen with tobacco and amused them in various ways. Hassan Pasha kept stealing an occasional glance at the two tall young men. They were far too inquisitive. Why, one had climbed up the mast into a barrel. The other was looking intently at an English rapid-firing gun. Hassan Pasha remained silent out of politeness, even when the Turkish sailors took the Muscovites down to the lower deck.

Cornelis Cruys asked permission to go ashore to buy fruit, sweatmeats and coffee. After a moment's thought, Hassan Pasha said that he could personally sell the Rear-Admiral some coffee.

"Do you need much?"

"Seventy gold pieces' worth."

"Abdul Allah!" shouted Hassan Pasha, stamping his foot.

Up waddled the cook. He listened and returned with a pair of scales. Behind him came seamen with sacks of coffee. Hassan Pasha moved his chair up for comfort, checked the scales and took some amber counting beads out of his bosom to add up the measures. He ordered the bag to be untied. Letting the beans trickle through his sleek fingers, he said: "This is from the best coffee harvest on Java. You'll thank me for this, Mister Rear-Admiral. I can see you're a good fellow. (Bending over to whisper.) I mean you no ill, but dissuade the Muscovites from going by sea. There are many submarine rocks and dangerous shoal waters by the coast. We fear those places ourselves."

"Why sail along the coast?" replied Cornelis Cruys. "Our ships can set course straight across the bay, given a fair wind."

He counted out seventy gold coins. They took leave of one another. As he went to the gangplank, Cornelis Cruys shouted sternly:

"Ahoy, there, Peter Alexeyevich!"

"Aye, aye, Sir!" responded a voice hastily.

Peter, with Sasha behind him, jumped up out of the companion-way. Both were wearing red fezzes. The Rear-Admiral waved to the Turkish admiral with his hat, took his seat at the tiller, and the boat pushed off to the shore. Pulling on the oars so hard that they bent, Peter and Sasha showed their teeth in cheerful grins.

The boat rode up onto the shingle with a surf wave. The constables and the Beys hurried down from the fortress gates past rotting boats and green piles to ask them not to go into town on any account. If they needed anything, merchants would bring an assortment of wares out to the boat. Peter's eyes rolled and his cheeks flamed with fury, Sasha, holding his oar upright, said:

"Myn Herz, just give the word... We'll bring the fleet up to within gunshot range... Really..."

"They have a right not to admit us: it's a fortress," said Cornelis Cruys. "We'll take a stroll along the beach past the walls and we'll see all that's necessary."

## 12

Murtaza Pasha could not think of anything else to do: let them sail and Allah be with them. Peter returned with the fleet to Taganrog. On the twenty-eighth of August, the *Krepost*, having received on board the ambassador, the clerk and the interpreters, and accompanied by four Turkish men-of-war, sailed round the Cape of Kerch and set off in a fair breeze along the southern shore of the Crimea.

The Turkish ships followed them with the waters foaming in their wake. The constable was on the leading one. Hassan Pasha remained in Kerch. At the last moment, he had asked for written confirmation that the tsar's emissary was travelling on his own volition and contrary to his, Hassan's advice. But even this request was refused.

In sight of Balaclava, the constable got into a boat, drew level with the *Krepost* and asked them to put into Balaclava to take on fresh water. He waved the sleeve of his robe desperately at the russet hills.

"A beautiful city, let's put in, please."

Captain Pamburg, his elbows resting on the taffrail, said from above in his bass voice:

"As if we didn't realise that the constable needs to go to Balaclava to collect good baksheesh from the locals for the ambassador's food supplies. Hah, our water casks are full."

They refused the constable's request. The wind was freshening. Pamburg glanced at the sky and ordered more sail to be put on. The heavy Turkish ships began to fall back noticeably. A signal fluttered on the leading vessel: "Reduce sail." Pamburg peered though the spy-glass. He swore heartily in Portuguese. He ran down into the ward-room, richly decorated with walnut. There, at the table, suffering from the pitching and tossing of the ship, sat the ambassador, Emelyan Ukraintsev. His eyes were closed; he had taken off his peruke and was gripping it hard in his fist.

"Those devils have ordered me to reduce sail," said Pamburg in a fury. "I refuse. I'm standing out to sea."

Ukraintsev could only wave feebly at him with his peruke. "Go anywhere you like."

Pamburg climbed up to the captain's bridge on the poop.

He curled up his moustaches so that they would not muffle his voice.

"All hands aloft! Hear my orders! Set fore-royal mainsail! Mainsail! Mizzen royal! Fore-topmast staysail, fore-staysail! Bear to port. Steady."

The *Krepost*, creaking and listing, bore round, picked up the wind with full sails, left the Turks standing and headed out across the Euxine Sea straight for Tsargrad.

The ship raced with a heavy list over the dark-blue sea in a north-easterly wind. The waves seemed to lift their foaming crests as if to see whether they would have long to roll through the watery wastes to the sun-baked coast. The sixteen men of the crew, Dutchmen, Swedes and Danes, sea-rovers all, stared at the waves and smoked their pipes. It was plain sailing. But half the military crew, the soldiers and gun-layers, were lying down below in the hold among casks of water and salt pork. Pamburg had ordered all the seasick men to be issued with vodka three times a day: "They'll have to get used to the sea."

A day passed, then a night, and on the second day the sails were reefed, since the *Krepost* was shipping water and the spindrift was flying all over the deck. Pamburg kept blewing the droplets out of his whiskers.

The high embassy in particular was suffering from the pitching and rolling. Ukraintsev and the clerk Cheredeyev, lying in the stern closet, a tiny, freshly painted cabin, kept lifting their heads from their pillows and looking at the little square porthole... It would slowly sink down into the depths, and the hissing green waters would rise up to the four little glass panes and then, with a heavy splash, would blot out the light in the closet. The ambassador and the clerk would groan and cover their eyes.

On a clear morning on the second of September, the lookout up in his crow's nest shouted "Land-ho!" The pale-blue, undulating outlines of the coast of the Bosphorus were drawing near. There were lateen sails in the distance. Seagulls flew up, circling and screaming over the high carved poop. Pamburg ordered all hands piped on deck. "Wash. Clean caftans. Wear perukes."

At midday, the *Krepost* under full canvas rushed past the ancient watch-towers at the gates of the Bosphorus. Signals were run up on the mast on the fortress rampart: "Whose ship?" Pamburg ordered the following reply: "You ought to know the Moscow flag." From the shore: "Take a pilot." Pamburg signalled back: "Proceeding without pilot."

Ukraintsev put on a mulberry caftan trimmed with gold braid and donned a plumed hat. The clerk Cheredeyev (bony, beaky-nosed, rather like one of the holy martyrs on a Suzdal icon) put on a silver-trimmed green caftan and, likewise, donned a plumed hat. The gun-layers stood by their guns, the soldiers formed up on deck with their muskets.

The ship glided over the mirror surface of the bay. To port, amid the dry hills, lay the still unharvested fields of maize, water-towers, sheep on the slopes and fishermen's stone huts thatched with straw. On the opposite side were luxuriant gardens, white walls, tiled roofs, stairs leading down to the water's edge... Black-and-green cypresses, tall and shaped like spindles. A ruined castle overgrown with bushes. Behind the trees, a round dome and a minaret... As they sailed nearer to shore, they could see wondrous fruits on the tree branches. There was a fragrance of olives and roses. The Russians were astounded at the luxury of the Turkish land.

"Everybody says they're skin-headed Mahommedans, but look how they live!"

A golden sunset was spreading out far away, as if at the very ends of the world. Quickly turning purple, it faded, staining the waters of the Bosphorus with blood. They dropped anchor three miles from Constantinople. Huge stars, like nothing to be seen in the Moscow sky, began to twinkle in the deep blue of the night. The Milky Way showed up as a band of mist.

None of them felt like sleeping on board ship. They looked at the now silent shores, listening to the creak of a well and the dry rustling of the cicadas. Even the dogs here barked differently. Strange, phosphorescent fish were borne along by the current in the depths of the water. Sitting quietly on the guns, the soldiers said: "A rich land; they must have an easy life here..."

Glancing reflectively from time to time at the candle whose light outshone several big stars in the little black window of the stern cabin, carefully dipping his goose quill pen in the inkwell and looking to make sure there wasn't a hair on the end (in which event he cleaned it by using his wig as a penwiper), Emelyan Ukraintsev was writing a letter to Peter in cypher:

"We have been waiting here some twenty-four hours... On the third of the month, the belated Turkish ships arrived. The constable reproached us with tears in his eyes for hastening ahead, for which the Sultan would have him beheaded, and he asked us to wait here. He himself would inform the Sultan of our arrival. We instructed him that our reception by the Sultan must be ceremonial, with all honours. Towards evening, the constable returned from Tsargrad and announced that the Sultan would receive us with honours and would send sandals, as they call their boats here, to pick us up. We declined the offer and said that we would proceed in our own ship. And so we argued, and agreed to go in sandals, but only on condition that we were preceded by the *Krepost*.

"On the next day, they sent three of the Sultan's sandals with carpets. We sat in these boats and the *Krepost* moved off ahead of us. We soon saw Tsargrad, a city worthy to marvel at. Although of ancient construction, the walls and towers are mighty. The whole city is roofed with tiles, the white-stone mosques are truly wondrous and truly magnificent, while Hagia Sophia is of sandstone. You can see Stambul and the suburb of Pera as if they were on the palm of your hand. There was gunfire from the shore on our advent, and Captain Pamburg answered by firing all our own guns. We stopped opposite the Sultan's seraglio, where the Sultan was watching us from the wall, while being kept cool with a big fan that was being waved over his head.

"We were met on shore by a hundred mounted lifeguards and two hundred janissaries with bamboo canes. Richly caparisoned horses were brought for myself and the clerk. As we stepped out of the boats, the commander of the lifeguards

asked after our health. We mounted the horses and set off for the palace by many extremely crooked and narrow streets. The people ran alongside.

"Your ship has been the cause of much amazement here: who built it, and how did it leave the Don through the shallows? They asked whether you had many ships and how big they were. I replied that you had many, and they were not flat-bottomed, as they falsely aver here, but are altogether seaworthy. Thousands of Turks, Greeks, Armenians and Jews are coming to stare at the *Krepost*, and the Sultan himself came and sailed three times round her in a boat. They especially praise the sails and ropes for their durability and the wood used for the masts. Some grumble that she is unsoundly built. Forgive me, but this is what I think: as we sailed across the sea, the wind was not of the strongest, but the *Krepost* creaked a great deal, had a heavy list and kept shipping water. The builders, Joe Nay and John Day, are not, I think, without self-interest. A ship is no small matter and costs as much as a good city. They're inspecting her here, but they're not bargaining and there's no purchaser for her... Forgive me, but I'm writing as best I can.

"The Turks build their ships with great thoroughness and make them to last. Their craft sit lower than ours, but they do not ship water.

"One Greek was telling me that the Turks are afraid Your Majesty might blockade the Black Sea. It would mean food shortages for Tsargrad, since grain, oil, timber and firewood are brought here from the Danube port cities. There is a rumour here that you have already been to Trebizond and Sinop with your entire fleet. I was asked about this, and I replied that I didn't know, I had not myself witnessed anything of the kind."

Pamburg and the officers called on several European ambassadors in the suburb of Pera to pay their respects. The Dutch and French ambassadors gave the Russians a cordial welcome, thanked them, and toasted the tsar's health in wine. Their third visit was to the English embassy building. They dismounted at the main entrance and knocked. Out came

a six-foot-tall flunkey with a fiery-red beard. Holding the door, he asked what they wanted. Pamburg, his eyes flashing, explained who they were and why they had come. The flunkey slammed the door and took his time coming back, although the Muscovites were waiting out in the street, and said jeeringly:

"The ambassador is dining and has instructed me to say that there is no point in his meeting Captain Pamburg."

"Then you can tell the ambassador I hope he chokes himself to death on a bone!" shouted Pamburg. He leapt furiously on to his horse and galloped down the narrow brick steps past the street traders, naked urchins and dogs down to Galata, where he had seen some old cronies of his in the kebab and coffee houses and at the doors of the brothels.

Here, Pamburg and the ship's officers drank Greek Ouzo wine until they were half seas over, made a scene and challenged some English sailors to a fight. Pamburg's friends arrived on the spot, long-haul navigators, famous corsairs, hiding in the slums of Galata, all kinds of nondescripts. Pamburg invited them to banquet on board the *Krepost*.

On the next day, the sailors of various nations began coming up to the ship in rowing boats: Swedes, Dutchmen, Frenchmen, Portuguese, Moors, some carrying swords and wearing perukes and silken hose, others with their heads bound in red bandanas, barefooted, in slippers, with pistols trust behind their cummerbunds, some in leather jackets and sou'westers that smelt of salt fish.

They sat down to a repast on the open deck under the mild September sun. They could see, behind its wall, the Sultan's palace, a gloomy building with close-meshed grilles over the windows. On the other side of the bay were the luxuriant groves and gardens of Scutari. The men of the Preobrazhensky and Semyonovsky regiments played horns and spoons, sang dance-songs and imitated various bird-calls.

Pamburg, his peruke dusted with silver powder, in a mulberry jacket trimmed with ribbons and lace, a glass in one hand, a handkerchief in the other, said heatedly to his guests:

"If we need a thousand ships, we'll build a thousand ships... We've already laid the keels of eighty-gun and hundred-gun men-of-war. Next year, you can expect us in the Me-

diterranean and you can expect us in the Baltic. We'll sign on all the famous mariners. And we'll go out on to the high seas..."

"Hurrah!" shouted the flushed sailors. "Hurrah for Captain Pamburg."

They struck up some sea shanties and stamped their feet to the rhythm. The pipe smoke hung in layers over the deck in the windless air. They did not even notice the sunset and the Attic stars begin to shine down on that extraordinary banquet. At midnight, when half the sea rovers were snoring away, some under the table, some with their storm-bleached hair among the dishes, Pamburg rushed up to the bridge.

"Bombardiers and gunlayers to your stations! Load charges! Ram charges! Light slow matches! Port and starboard broadsides... Fire!"

Forty-six heavy guns belched flame at the same instant. It was as if the skies had fallen in because of the thunder over sleeping Constantinople... The *Krepost*, wreathed in smoke, fired two more simultaneous broadsides...

Emelyan Ukraintsev wrote in cypher:

"...and a great terror came on the Sultan himself and all the people. Pamburg had been drinking all day with the sailors on board, and he drank too much, and discharged all the ship's guns at midnight, and more than once. And because of that gunfire, uneasy rumours went round Tsargrad that he, the captain, was signalling with that gunfire in the night to your convoy that was sailing on the Black Sea for it go into the firth...

"That night, the Sultan took fright and ran out of his bedchamber in his night attire, and many Ministers and Pashas took fright, and because of the captain's unprecedented gunfire in the night two of the Sultan's wives from the upper of the seraglio who were pregnant had miscarriages. And for all this, the Sultan was mightily angry with Pamburg and bade us be informed that we should dismiss that captain from the ship and cut off his head. I replied to the Sultan that I did not know why the captain had discharged the guns, but I would ask him, and if the firing was an inconvenience to the Sultan, I would

order the captain to desist in future, and would be very strict about it; but I was not empowered to dismiss him from the ship. And with that the matter ended.

"The Sultan will receive us on Tuesday. The Turks are awaiting the arrival of Captain Medzomort Pasha, a former Algerian pirate, for consultation on whether to make peace with you or war."

# *Chapter Two*

## 1

The September sun hung low over the forest-clad shore. Day after day, the further north they went, the more desolate the terrain became. Strings of birds flew up from the tranquil river. Fallen trees, swamps, desolation. From time to time, a fisherman's mudhut could be seen, or a boat pulled up on to the bank. It was another week to Lake Beloye.

Fourteen men were hauling a heavy barge laden with grain. They pushed their chests against the straps, their heads bowed, their arms dangling in front of them. They had come all the way from Yaroslavl. The sun would go down behind the black serrations of the fir-trees, and for a long, long time would languish in the gloomy radiance. From the barge would come the shout: "Hey, tie her up!" The haulers would drive in a stake or twist the rope round a tree. They would light a fire. A fir grove slowly drowning in the milky mist on the swampy bank. The long-necked shadows of ducks flying past in the sunset. Fallen branches and twigs snapping underfoot, elks as big as horses coming down to the river. The forest was full of wild creatures that had not learned to fear man.

Oars would splash in the river. The owner, Andrei Denisov, and elder, would be going to the bank from the barge, taking rusks, millet, fish occasionally, and on meat days, salt pork. He would make sure that the barge was tied fast. His hands thrust behind his leather belt, he would stop by fire, a fresh-faced, curly-bearded, clear-eyed man in cassock and skull-cap.

"Well, brothers, are you all alive?" he would ask. "Work hard, for God loves hard work. Enjoy yourselves, all shall be accounted unto you. We are fortunate in one thing; we have escaped from the Nikonian murk. But as soon as we come to Lake Onega, that will be the land! Truly a paradise..."

Taking his hands from behind his belt, he would sit on his

haunches in front of the fire. The weary men would listen in silence as he spoke.

"An elder lived in yonder land on the Vyg River... He also had fled the temptation of the Antichrist. He had once been a big merchant with a house, and shops, and warehouses. And he had a vision of a fire, and a man in the fire, and a voice saying: 'I have fallen into temptation and am perishing forever...' He gave everything away to his wife and sons. He left. He built himself a retreat. He began a new life there, partook of his burning desire alone, and he ploughed the soil with a poker and sowed two hatfuls of barley. He put on an untreated goatskin, and it dried on him, and so he wore it winter and summer. His only possessions were a wooden cup and a spoon, and a prayer book in the ancient script.And soon he acquired such strength over the demons that they were no more than flies to him... People began coming to him, and he gave them the sacrament with a tree leaf or a berry. He taught that it is better to burn alive in the flames than to accept eternal torment. People began settling near him in a year or two. To burn the forest down, plough the scorched soil, slay beasts, catch fish, gather mushrooms and berries. All communally, and with the storehouses in common. And he separated the women from the men."

"That's good," said a stern voice. "Women are evil, the snare of the Devil."

There was a twinkle in Denisov's eyes as he peered through the darkness at the speaker.

"At the elder's prayers, even the beasts would come to hand, and many a time fish were landed that were a marvel to behold! They harvested mushrooms and berries. He pointed his finger, and they found copper and iron ores, and built forges... It became a true holy abode, the quiet life..."

Andrei Golikov rose from behind the brushwood, squatted down near Denisov and began looking into the other man's eyes. Golikov had gone with the haulers on oath. (Back in Revyakin's house, the elder had given Andrei confession, beaten him with the rosary and commanded him to go to Yaroslavl and await Denisov's grain barge.) Here, of fourteen men, nine, like him, were on oath or atoning for their sins.

Denisov went on with his story:

"At the hour of his death, the elder blessed us two brothers, Semyon and myself, Andri, to be the seniors in the Vyg reteat. He gave us the sacrament and we departed. His cell was a little distance away, in a gully. As soon as we had gone some distance, we looked round and saw light. The cell was on fire like the burning bush. I wanted to run, but Semyon seized my hand: 'Stop!' We could hear the sound of sweet song coming from the fire... And above, in the smoke, devils as black as soot were whirling around and screeching... In the morning we went to that spot, and a bright spring was flowing from under the ashes... We built a little head for the spring and a shrine for an icon... But we could not find an icon-painter, and we so much wanted to have an image."

Golikov sobbed, Denisov lightly stroked his shaggy hair. "There's one disaster, my friends; there's a bad harvest every third year. Last summer, everything was soaked by the rains and even the straw wasn't gathered. The grain will have to be brought from a long way away. But it's a sacred cause, my children. Your labours are not in vain."

Denisov continued talking a little while. He recited the common prayer. He got into the boat and rowed across to the barge through the dull band of the sunset glow on the river. The nights were cool and it was chilly sleeping in thin clothes.

At the first glimmer of dawn, Denisov would again row ashore and wake the men. They would cough and scratch themselves. After saying their prayers, they would boil buckwheat porridge. When the chilly sun hung like a lustreless bubble in the mist, the haulers got into their straps and moved off, their bast shoes slapping over the soggy riverside. Verst after verst, day after day. Serried ranks of clouds crawled up from the north, a keen wind sprang up. The Sheksna overflowed its banks.

The clouds were now sweeping low over the troubled waters of Lake Beloye. The barge turned westwards, towards Belozersk. The waves raced up on to the desolate beach, knocking the haulers off their feet. It became difficult to steer the barge. At meal times, they would dry out in a fisherman's mud hut. Two hired men had a row with Denisov over the food, collected their wages of three quarters of a ruble each, and disappeared.

The barge was lying at anchor among submerged rocks opposite a town. The wind was freshening, it chilled you to the marrow. Despair set in at the mere thought of towing further north. The hired men constantly quarrelled with Denisov and drifted off to the fishing villages. As for the others, one ran into someone he knew and joined him, another dithered around for a while and disappeared...

On the bank, on an upturned boat between the wet rocks sat Andrei Golikov, Ilya Dekhtyarev (a runaway peasant from Kashira) and Fyodor, nicknamed Wash-in-Mud, a stooping fellow, a wanderer who had been a monastery peasant and had been knocked about and tortured many times. They were looking all round them.

Everything here was gloomy: the turgid strip of the lake with snow-white waves, the clouds crawling up in serried ranks from the north. Beyond the dyke lay a flat plain and on it, almost lost in cloud, a ramshackle wooden town: holed roofs on the towers, churches with rusty onion domes, tall huts with the roofs fallen in. On the bank, poles for fishing nets swayed in the wind. There was no sign of human beings. A bell tolled mournfully...

"Denisov's clever at feeding you with words. By the time you get to that paradise of his, though, there'll be nothing left of you but your soul," said Wash-in-Mud, picking with his finger-nail at a callosity on the palm of his hand.

"Just have faith,"said Golikov to him with venom. "Just have faith!" And he looked longingly at the white waves. Inhospitable, lonely, cold... "It must be a long way to the Lord here, too..."

Slowly and quietly, Ilya Dekhtyarev (a big-mouthed, massively built muzhik with merry eyes) began telling his tale:

"...So I ask him, this fellow: 'Why is it so empty in your town?' Says he: 'Because the monks are up to no good... We've sent lots of petitions to Moscow, but it looks as though they haven't got time for us... What didn't they do in Holy Week, those monks! I don't know how to describe it. They come rolling up ten sleighs with holy icons, some to the town, some to the suburbs, some to the villages... They go into the huts and

shove a cross in your face: 'Cross yourself with three fingers, kiss the Nikonian cross!' And they demand bread, and sour cream, and eggs, and fish... They clean the place out... Then they ask for money... 'You're a dirty schismatic,' they say. 'Where are your old printed books?' And they haul the man to the cellar, chain him up and torture him."

Wash-in-Mud suddenly threw back his head and laughed hoarsely.

"Look at them eat, look at them drink! Ach, there's no getting rid of them!"

Dekhtyarev nudged him with his knee. A monk with a gypsy beard was coming towards the boat against the wind, holding down his fluttering cassock. He glanced with wild eyes at the barge creaking on the waves, and then at the trio on the bank.

"Where's that barge from?"

"From Yaroslavl, Father," replied Dekhtyarev in a friendly, casual sort of way

"What's it carrying?"

"We haven't been told."

"Grain?"

"I suppose so..."

"Where are you taking it?"

"Who knows? Wherever we're told to..."

"Lies, lies, lies!" The monk hurriedly pushed up his right sleeve. "That's Denisov's barge. You're bound for Povenets. You're taking bread to the Old Believers' retreats, you fellows..."

He made a rush, grabbed Ilya Dekhtyarev by the chest, and gave the cowed muzhik a good shaking. Then turning towards the settlement, he shouted at the top of his voice:

"Help!"

Andei Golikov shot off the boat and raced along the waterside towards the fishermen's mud huts.

"Help!" yelled the monk again and stopped short. Wash-in-Mud grabbed him by the hair, pulled him away from Ilya, knocked him off his feet and began groping over the ground for a stone. The monk nimbly sprang to his feet and flew at him from one side, but Fyodor was blind with fury, did not flinch, grabbed his hair again, bent him over and hit him on

the neck. The monk gasped. Four men with stakes came running from a side-street down to the bank.

Andrei Golikov peered out in horror from behind the fisherman's mud hut. Wash-in-Mud was fighting the five of them. He tore one man's stake from him and charged, shrieking frenziedly. Andrei had never seen such fury in a man before... "A demon, a real demon!" Then Dekhtyarev joined in the fray; he deftly clouted the monk on the ear, and the latter went down for the third time. His assistants began retreating. Here and there, townspeople came out of the gates, and egged them on.

Ilya and Fyodor had beaten their adversaries and were about to chase them, but they quickly returned to the bank instead and, spitting blood, went straight to the hut behind which the trembling Golikov had taken refuge.

"We ought to teach you a lesson too, in all conscience," said Wash-in-Mud to him. "You're a fool, and yet you want to go to paradise..."

A tousled head, with a smoky beard that began right under its owner's eyes, poked through the door of a mud hut with its back to the sea. Blinking, a burly, soot-blackened, barefoot man crawled out. He glanced in the direction of the town, where there was not a soul to be seen any more.

"Come in," he said, and crawled back into the hut. Lit by a crack over the door, it smelt of fish. Half the place was piled with fishing tackle. As they went in, Ilya, Andrei and Fyodor crossed themselves with two fingers. The fisherman said to them:

"Take a seat. D'you know who you were beating up just now?"

"People have beaten me all my life and nobody ever asked me who I was," said Wash-in-Mud.

"You were beating up Feodosy the sacristan of the Krestovozdvizhensky Monastery. A ruffian, oh, he's a ruffian, the devil. Raving mad!"

Seeing that these were people of his own kind, the fisherman sat with them on the bench, hugged himself under the armpits and said, rocking himself from side to side:

"These are fine fishing grounds... It could be a good life. But

I'm leaving... It's hopeless now that devil's taken over the whole lake... Listen to what we've given the monks: in winter, a quarter of the smelt catch, and we give something from each season. But that's not enough for him. If he sees a sail, he runs down to the bank and only leaves enough fish for a snack. If you refuse, he wants to know how you cross yourself. You commit a sin, of course, and do it with three fingers. 'No, you're faking it. Follow me!' And if you follow him, you're sure to end up in the monastery cellar on a chain. And the nets he's torn! And the boats he's ruined! We went to the governor and complained. The governor was interested to see what was in it for him. That monastery's got a Charter from the Metropolitan, you see: the Old Believers are to be rooted out. You'd better make yourselves scarce as soon as you can, brothers!"

"Oh no, we're with Denisov," said Golikov, looking in fright at Ilya and Fyodor.

"Denisov'll buy his way out of it. He's a powerful man... Fire wouldn't burn him... He sails from the north with furs and tusks and copper, and he buys himself out of it. He sails back, and buys himself out of it again. Not just once, either... He has his own people everywhere, brother."

Said Wash-in-Mud with a grin:

"He's a sweet-talker! Feeds us all the way on rusks and fools us into thinking we've been eating chicken!"

Golikov's face was wreathed in smiles while they were talking about the Lake Vyg elder. He remembered how Denisov had affectionately stroked his head and said: "Well, laddie, is your soul still alive? That's good..." He remembered what fascinating talks he used to give by the fire; how he would get into a boat and how his skull-cap showed black against the sunset water. That is how saints were depicted in boats on the ancient icons. Andrei would willingly have burned himself alive in straw for him right this minute.

They sat there on the bench, wondering what to do and where to flee. Go north just the same? The fisherman advised them against it; to go north to Vyg on foot with no boat would mean two months in the forests, and they'd lose their way...

"You should head for easier country—the Don, or somewhere like that..."

"I've been on the Don," wheezed Wash-in-Mud. "There's

none of the old freedom there any more. The station Cossacks turn in vagrants to the authorities. They clapped me in irons twice and sent me to the tsar's works in Voronezh."

"We haven't thought of anything sensible," they said to Andrei and told him to go and find Denisov and see what he had to say.

Andrei was in panic. No sooner had he gone as far as the ramshackle town gates than there were shouts of "Stop! Stop!" Some ragged, barefoot people were running away. One or two of them clambered over the fence. Holding on to their hats, two soldiers in green caftans were running in pursuit. Panting, they disappeared down a crooked alleyway. A respectable-looking little old man at the gates said: "They've been rounding them up for two days." Golikov asked him if he knew the merchant Andrei Denisov and if he had seen him at all. The little old man thought for a moment.

"Go to the square and look for Denisov at the governor's house."

The small square was piled with dung-heaps, the rows of shops were boarded up, the posts were askew, the roofs were sagging. Two or three shops were doing business in buns and mittens. The walls of the ancient cathedral were cracked and there was no fence round it. Outside its low-covered entrance, beggars in rags were asleep on the grass and a divine fool, with three pokers laid beside him, yawned till his eyes watered and shook his head. Life was evidently not much fun in this place.

In the middle of the square, near the whipping post, a sentry with a pike was shifting from one foot to the other. Golikov went up to him warily. A merchant, a real foxy one, poked his head out of a shop and said in a dulcet tones:

"Lovely poppy seed cakes!"

Bowing humbly to the sentry, Golikov asked him which was the governor's house. The short-legged sentry, who was wearing a patched strelets caftan that came down to his heels, turned round with a scowl. A proclamation on a tin sheet bearing an eagle was nailed to the post.

"Clear off!" shouted the sentry.

As he went away, Andrei looked round him. Rotting fen-

ces, tumbledown huts... The clouds were catching on the crosses atop the churches. A man in felt boots was approaching; he had a belt tied low round his middle and his fat, chapped lips were thrust greedily forward. The sentry at the whipping post and the merchants in their shops watched to see what was going to happen.

"Where are you from? What's your name? Loitering about the houses?" The man breathed a stench of garlic straight into Golikov's face. Golikov could only stammer, tongue-tied with terror. The man seized him by the collar.

"That's one of Denisov's," came a shout from one of the shops.

"He's taking nine of them to be burned alive," said a thin voice from another one.

The man gave Andrei a shake:

"Haven't you read the tsar's proclamation on that pillar? Come along with me, you son-of-a-bitch..."

The man dragged him (although Andrei was not putting up any resistance) to the end of the square and into the governor's house.

Dressed in his best clothes, his hair combed, Andrei Denisov, holding a marten-fur hat on his knee, was sitting in the chamber of the governor, an impoverished squire named Maxim Lupandin. The governor sadly noted the fine Morocco shoes and the mouse-grey caftan on pink silk from Hamburg, or perhaps it was even English fabric. The governor himself, sitting in a shabby squirrel coat, was weedy, balding and pimply. Under the late tsar Fyodor Alexeyevich, he had been a squire; under Pyotr Alexeyevich, he had managed to get himself this living in Belozersk.

They were beating round the bush: Denisov was not pushing his point, neither was the governor. "What a caftan," thought Lupandin. "Would he let me have it?" He had covertly sent a servant to the Krestovozdvizhenky Monastery for Father Feodosy, but Denisov also had something up his sleeve.

"It's the weather, the weather, confound it," Denisov was saying. "If the wind changes, we'll cross the lake under can-

vas... If it doesn't, we'll get there somehow round the shore. It'll be rough going to Kovzha, but we'll get men there go to as far as Povenets..."

"Of course, that's your problem," replied the governor evasively, still with half an eye on the caftan...

"Maxim Maximych, do me a kindness and don't detain my barge and my men..."

"If it weren't for the Ukase, there'd be no problem..." The governor took the tsar's rolled-up Ukase out of his pocket and his beard travelled over it as he read it half blindly: "...By Ukase of the great prince and tsar of all... It says here... Spongers and loafers being fed by the monasteries, and all monastery servants are to be taken for soldiers..."

"The monasteries are no concern of ours; we're traders..."

"Wait... '...stablehands, boyars' servants drifting from house to house, beggars and runaways are also to be taken for soldiers...' What I am to do about you, Andrei? I can't imagine... If some under-clerk had brought this proclamation... But it was delivered by Alexei Brovkin, a subaltern of the Preobrazhensky Regiment with some soldiers. Do you know how to talk to subalterns these days?"

Denisov turned back the skirt of his caftan and the silver jingled in his pocket. The governor took fright in case he might make a bad bargain and he began looking round at the door; mightn't that be Feodosy coming? The fat-lipped tavern lout entered instead, propelling Andrei Golikov in front of him. He doffed his hat and bowed to the waist:

"Maxim Maximych, I've caught another of 'em..."

"On your knees!" shouted the governor furiously. (The lout gave a push and Golikov's bony knees banged on the floor.) "Whose son? Whose serf? Where did you escape from? (To the lout.) Vanka, bring pen and ink..."

"Leave him alone, Maxim Maximych," said Denisov quietly, "he's my agent."

The governor's eyes lit up. He snapped open the lid of the copper inkwell, and, coughing, fished out a fly with his pen nib. "Oh, will that sacristan never come?" he thought. Just at that moment, the floorboards creaked in the passage. Vanka opened the door and the monk with the gypsy beard walked in

furiously. One of his eyes was badly swollen. On seeing Denisov, he banged his staff on the floor.

"Those people beat me up and nearly killed me," he said in a loud voice. "And you've got him sitting with you, Maxim! D'you know who he is? An accursed schismatic! Hand him over to me, hand him over, Governor, I insist!"

He rested his hands on his high staff, his wild eyes now drilling into Denisov, now into Maxim Maximych. Golikov crawled into a corner, out of his wits with terror. Vanka was eagerly awaiting the sign to throw himself on the victim and twist back his elbows. "The caftan's mine," thought the governor.

"Who you are to come in and shout, monk, I don't know and I don't care," said Denisov. He rose. (Feodosy's hand turned blue on top of the staff.) Denisov unfastened his shirt and took a small pouch from the Orthodox cross. "I wanted to deal honestly with you, Maxim Maximych, and reward you out of my poor gains...This means that our conversation has come to nothing..."

He took a folded paper from the little pouch and carefully opened it out:

"This Charter has been granted by the Chamber of Merchants to us, Andrei and Semyon Denisov, that we may trade wheresoever we desire, and that no one may dare to inflict loss or damage upon us... Signed with his own hand by the President, Mitrofan Shorin..."

"Who's Mitrofan to me?" shouted Feodosy, snatching one hand from his staff. "That's for your Mitrofan—the fig!"

"Oh dear!" groaned the governor weakly.

A flush came to Denisov's cheeks.

"You make that sign against the President, who is one of the elect Moscow merchants? That is sedition!"

"I hope you choke on him, blast you!" continued Feodosy dementedly. His beard jutting forward, he grabbed Denisov by the Old Believer's copper cross. "I'll have you burned for this, you priestless dog! I have a more powerful proclamation against your weak one..."

"Oh dear, make your peace," groaned the governor. "Andrei, give the monk twenty rubles, he'll lay off..."

But the monk and Denisov, ignoring him, were inflating

their nostrils. The lout began sidling towards them. Then Denisov, snatching his cross from the sacristan, rushed to the window, raised the sash and shouted into the yard:

"Mister Subaltern, I invoke the tsar's protection!"

Everyone fell silent in the room; the snorting stopped. Spurs jingled in the passage. Alyosha Brovkin came in, wearing jack-boots, a white sash and a sword. His youthful cheeks were ruddy, and he had a three-cornered hat pulled down over his eyes.

"What's all the shouting about?"

"Mister Subaltern, the sacristan Feodosy and the governor are shouting unwarranted insults at the President's Charter and are making the sign of the fig, and they've torn my clothes and they've threatened to burn me alive..."

Alyosha opened his eyes wide and stared grimly, just like the tsar. He looked over the monk, the governor (who was resting his hands on the bench in the act of rising to his feet). He banged his stick and said to a soldier who came in at the double:

"Put them both under arrest..."

## 2

The residents of Kukui suburb used to say of Anna Mons: "Amazing! Where did the young girl get such sense? Anyone else would have lost her head long ago. Anna's just like her late father."

On returning from the Black Sea, Peter was very generous.

"Dear heart," Anna frequently said to him in gentle reproach, "you're teaching me to waste money on silly clothes. It would be more reasonable if you allowed me to write to Revel. I've heard you can buy at a fair price cows that yield two pails of milk every twenty-four hours. You would come sometimes for breakfast to my nice, clean little farmhouse and eat whipped cream..."

The farmhouse was in a birch grove on a narrow wedge of land that ran from the gates of the back yard and along the tiny Kukui to the Yauza. Here stood a small house, painted so

that from the distance it looked as if it were built of real bricks, with cattleyards with tiled roofs, a threshing floor and barns. Bridled cows grazed on the sloping river bank; each was named after one of the Greek goddesses. There were merino sheep, pigs from England and poultry of all kinds. Foreign vegetables and potatoes grew in the kitchen garden.

At the first light of dawn, Anna, dressed in a woollen headscarf and a plain fur coat, walked along the sandy path to the farm. She supervised the milking of the cows and feeding of the poultry, counted the eggs, herself cut the lettuce for breakfast. She was strict with the farm people and was hard on slovenliness. When the time came to chop the cabbages, such heads had never been seen before, not even in Pastor Strumpf's kitchen gardens. The Germans came to marvel: "You could send a head of cabbage or a turnip like that to the *Kunstkammer* in Hamburg." They joked: "Anna probably knows some prayer that makes the fruits of the earth flourish on this former wasteland."

Singing as they worked, some Russian girls were chopping cabbage in a brand-new limewood trough. Anna had taken the healthiest and most cheerful girls from villages owned by Menshikov or Admiral Golovin (whose new estates, houses and palaces stood not far from the German quarter). The choppers thudded, and a fragrance of fresh cabbage stumps came from the rosy-cheeked girls. The grass, on which lay the long shadow of the barn, was still white with frost. Snow-white geese waddled importantly out of the poultry-house to the newly dug lake. Smoke rose into the blue autumn sky over the farmhouse roof. Two smartly dressed bakers were carrying a basket of freshly-baked fancy loaves across the well-swept yard.

Anna was happy; as she stamped her cold feet, she couldn't have enjoyed this good fortune more. But it came to an end, alas, as soon as she went back home. Not a day's peace, always waiting for Peter's next brainwave. Either she was bored to distraction by drunken Russians dirtying the floors, smoking, smashing glasses, scattering ash in the flowerpots or, like it or not, she had to dress up and be driven to some official occasion to dance her heels off.

Occasional banquets and balls were all very well during the long autumn evenings or winter festivals; but the Russian

high-ups guzzled and danced nearly every day. What annoyed Anna most of all was the waywardness of Peter himself. He never warned her that he would dine or have supper at such and such a time, or how many guests he was bringing. Sometimes, at night, a whole wagon train of gluttons would draw up at the house. She had to boil and roast on the off-chance a vast quantity of good things, and it made her sick at heart, for very often it all had to be thrown to the pigs.

Anna once cautiously asked Peter: "Angel, there will be fewer needless expenses if you care to warn me each time before you came." Peter stared at her in astonishment, frowned, said nothing, and everything continued as before.

The sun had risen over the birches, now speckled with yellow. The girls went into the kitchen. Anna glanced into the barn where the geese poked their heads out of the canvas bags in which they were hanging. For two weeks before being slaughtered, they were fed with nuts; Anna herself gave a nut in its shell to each goose, poking it down the bird's gizzard with her little finger. She looked in to make sure that the fowls were having their feathered legs washed properly —this had to be done every morning. In the sheepshed, she would pick up the lambs in her arms and kiss their curly foreheads. Then she reluctantly went back home. Sure enough, there was a carriage at the door. The butler met Anna on the back porch and announced in whisper: "Konigseck, the Saxon ambassador."

That was all right... Anna smiled, picked up her petticoats and ran up the narrow steps to change.

Konigseck was sitting with his leg tucked under his chair, a snuff-box in his left hand, his right hand free for elegant gestures and, sprinkling his German with occasional words of French, was chatting about this and that; of amusing adventures, of women, of politics, of his master, Augustus, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland. His peruke, perfumed with musk, was almost wider than his shoulders. His hat and gloves lay on the carpet. He wrinkled his snub nose amusingly at his jokes while his bold, watery eyes caressed Anna. She was sitting opposite him by the blazing log fire, upright in a stiff corsage, her hands resting plams upwards. She listened with her head bowed, and the corners of her lips turned up cunningly, as was demanded by la politesse.

The envoy was saying:

"...You have to admire him. He is handsome, amiable, bold... King Augustus is a divinity in human form... He is indefatigable in his passions and diversions. If he is weary of Warsaw, he flies to Cracow, and on the way he hunts wild boars and feasts in the castles of the great, or at night on the hay he bestows the kiss of Phoebus on some distraught maid. He gives orders for a safe conduct to be made out for a person named Winter and, in the guise of adventurer, crosses Europe and turns up in Paris. With this rapier I have more than once parried blows aimed at his breast during nocturnal affrays at street corners in Paris. We gallop to Versailles to a night festival, and King Augustus is dressed as a roving officer. Ah, Versailles! Ah, you must see that earthly paradise, Fraulein Mons... The enormous windows are illuminateed by a million candles, the flames of lampions shimmer on the facade. Ladies and cavaliers promenade on the terrace past the shrubbery. Chinese lanterns hang from the trees like fruits of paradise. Rockets fly up on the far shore of the lake and their sparks fall into the water on which harps and viols make music in barges. Fountains splash, moths flit through night. The marble statues look through the foliage like gods come to life. Louis, that most Christian of kings, sits in an armchair. His heavy face is shaded by the peruke, but I am still able to glimpse his haughty profile with the out-thrust lower lip and the thin moustache familiar to the whole world. Resting her elbow on his chair is a lady in a black domino with the hood down over her eyes. This is Madame de Maintenon. On his right hand sits his grandson, Philippe of Anjou, the future King of Spain, who is downcast with melancholy... All around are thousands of faces in halfmasks; the palace and the whole park seem irradiated with the gold of glory..."

Anna's fingers twitched, the rounded breasts rose out the confines of her corsage.

"Ach, it is hard to believe that isn't a dream... But who is this Madame de Maintenon standing behind the King's chair?"

"She is his favourite... A woman before whom ministers and envoys have trembled... My lord and master, King Au-

gustus, walked past her several times and was noticed by her..."

"Herr Envoy, why does King Louis not marry Madame de Maintenon?"

Konigseck was somewhat taken aback, and for a moment his mobile hand dangled helplessly between his parted knees. Anna bent her head still lower and a fold settled in the corner of her lips.

"Fraulein Mons... Can the importance of a queen really compare with the power of a favourite? The queen is merely a victim of dynastic liaisons. People bow the knee to the queen and hasten to the favourite, because life is politics, and politics means gold and glory. It is not the queen's bed-curtains that the king draws at night. Amid embraces on the hot pillow... (A faint blush spread over Anna's cheeks. The envoy brought his scented peruke nearer.) On the hot pillow, the most intimate thoughts are confided. The woman who embraces the King hears the beating of his heart. She belongs to history."

"Herr Envoy," said Anna, raising her glistening blue eyes. "The most precious thing of all is to know that happiness is enduring. What are these robes and these costly mirrors to me if there is no certainty... Let there be less glory, let God alone have power over my little happiness... I am sailing in a sumptuous but fragile boat..."

She slowly drew a lace kerchief out of her corsage, shook it weakly and applied it to her face. Her lips quivered under the lace like those of a child...

"You need a trusty friend, my enchanting child." Konigseck squeezed her elbow affectionately. "You have no one into whom to confide your secrets... Entrust them to me... I give myself to you with rapture... All my experience...The eyes of Europe are on you. My gracious monarch inquires in every letter after the 'nymph of the Kukui stream'..."

"In what sense are you offering yourself? I don't understand..."

Anna lowered her kerchief and moved away from her excessively dangerous proximity to the envoy. She was suddenly afraid that he would throw himself at her feet... She rose abruptly and all but tripped over the hem of her dress.

"I don't even know whether I ought to listen to you..."

Deeply troubled, Anna went over to the window. Clouds had spread over the recent blue, a wind had sprung up, raising the dust on the street. There was a trained quail, a gift from Peter, in a gilded cage between the geraniums on the window-sill. Anna made an effort to collect her thoughts, and probably because Konigseck, without moving, was staring at her back, her heart was thudding in alarm... "Oh, how silly! What is it all about?" She was terrified to turn round. It was well that she refrained from doing so. Konigseck's eyes were glittering as if he had only just seen the girl... The slender waist above the frothing petticoats, the milky softness of the shoulders, the up-swept ash-blond hair, the nape of the neck made for kisses...

He did not lose his composure: "A little more wit and ambition from that nymph and one could make history with her."

Anna suddenly stepped back from the window and her eyes rested distractedly on Konigseck.

"The tsar!"

The envoy picked up his hat and gloves and straightened the lace frills on his shirt front. A trap drew up behind the garden fence and Peter alighted, scowling because of the dust. After him came a big leather-covered coach. He shouted something towards it and began walking in the direction of the house. Two figures got out of the coach. Shielding themselves with their cloaks from flying dust, they hurried across the garden. The trap and the coach drove off.

Anna had never seen these two before. They bowed ceremoniously. Peter himself took their hats. One was tall, with an evil, arrogant face. Peter seized him by the shoulders, shook him and clapped him on the back.

"Make yourself at home, Herr Johann Patkul... We're going to dine..."

Peter was sober and in a very cheerful mood. He pulled a peruke out of his red cuff:

"Take a comb and dress it, Anna. I'll have my hair on at table, as you command... I sent a soldier especially to fetch it." Then, to his other guest, General Karlowicz, a man with purple cheeks: "Put on any kind of wig you like, but you won't

beat King Augustus; his is the most magnificent of all... As for us, we spend our time in the forge and the stables..."

His jack-boots were covered with dust and his caftan reeked of horse sweat. As he went away to wash, he winked at Konigseck:

"I see, you've started courting my woman, Herr Envoy..."

"Your Majesty," said Konigseck flourishing his hat, taking a step back and going down on one knee. "Mortals are not to be condemned for bringing doves and flowers to the altar of Venus..."

While Peter was washing and cleaning himself up, Anna entertained the guests. She presented each one with a glass of caraway vodka on a tray, asked him about his health, and "Have you been in Moscow long and is there anything you need?" She remembered what Konigseck had been telling her, put out the square toe of her slipper and spread her petticoats on either side of her chair.

"People who have just arrived from Europe find it dull here at first. But if God grant that we soon make peace with the Turks, we shall all wear Hungarian and German dress, the streets will be paved with stone, and we shall be rid of bandits."

Johann Patkul answered her in an icy voice, hardly opening his thin lips. He had arrived in Moscow from Riga the previous week. He was staying not at the ambassadors' house, but at the home of Rear-Admiral Cornelis Cruys together with Major-General Karlowicz, who had arrived a little earlier from Warsaw on a mission for King Augustus. They were in no need of anything at present. Moscow was indeed unpaved and dusty, and the people were ill clad.

"I managed to notice," said Patkul with a sneer, glancing at Karlowicz, who was wheezing slightly owing to his corpulence and the tightness of the military coat belted with a broad sash round his large stomach, "I have noticed the artful tricks by which the Moscow rabble earn a few kopecks for vodka. When you buy something from one of them and ask for your change, he deliberately short-changes you and then asks you to verify. When you reckon up, you tell him that the account

is wrong. He swears by God that you are in error, begins counting the change again, crosses himself looking at the church domes, and swears that the sum is correct. I count the change again for a second and third time, and he disputes it and again counts it up himself. And so he carries on ten times running, until you get fed up and go away, overlooking the swindle."

"You should order your servant to haul such a man off to the municipal chambers. He'd get a good thrashing there," said Anna Ivanovna firmly.

Patkul shrugged one shoulder contemptuously.

Peter came in, looking fresh and wearing a dressed peruke. Anna hurried up to him with a glass of *Kummel* vodka... He drank it down, pursed his lips and gave her a smacking kiss on the cheek. The major-domo opened the door and struck the floor with his staff. They entered the dining-room, where cupidons frolicked among the clouds on the vaulted ceiling and the plaster walls were hung with Flemish tapestries. There was a picture by the celebrated Snyders over the glazed fireplace, an abundance of game birds and the fruits of earth.

Peter sat with his back to the blazing fire. Patkul was on his right, Karlowicz and Konigseck were on his left, and the solicitous Anna sat opposite him. The glasses on the coloured linen tablecloth had already been filled with Hungarian wine, while black pudding, pork and liver sausages lay in the middle of the table. There was a smell of spices. Outside, a stinging dust was blowing in the wind and the naked branches bobbed up and down in the window. Inside, it was warm. The beautifully laid table, the contented faces of the guests and the flames in the fireplace were all cosily mirrored by the reflectors of the candelabra on the walls.

Peter raised his glass to the amiable friend of his heart, Augustus, King of Poland. The guests tossed the ringlets of their perukes on to their shoulders and began eating.

"Sire, we ask for secrecy, since the matter is most secret," said Johann Patkul after the fourth course, goslings garnished with walnuts.

"Very well," said Peter with a nod. Pushing aside the pewter dishes with his elbows, his face creased in a smile, he kept glancing at the slightly tipsy Anna's cheeks. He jested all

through dinner, made fun of Anna's housewifely thrift and winked at Konigseck for her benefit. "Wasn't the sauce on the table made out of the doves that he brings to your Venus's altar?" It was impossible to tell whether he really wanted to hear the extremely important message with which Johann Patkul and Karlowicz had come post-haste to Moscow.

Until today, they had only seen Peter once and that had been at the Rear-Admiral's home. Peter had been friendly but had avoided talking. Today, he had himself summoned them to his mistress's house for a secret supper. Patkul observed this Asiatic with a respectfully cold eyes. It was a matter of urgency to talk to him. The embassy of Charles XII, the young King of Sweden, had been in Moscow for a long time, having talks with Lev Kirillovich and the boyars about eternal peace with Sweden. The Swedes had not yet seen the tsar, but they were expecting a reception any day and the presentation of credentials in the Kremlin.

"Herr Karlowicz and the envoy will confirm that my words are in full accord with the heartfelt wishes of his Majesty, King Augustus. I speak sincerely in the grief of my heart. All the Livonian knights and all the eminent merchants of Riga are praying, Sire, that you will lend them an ear."

Patkul's big forehead was all wrinkles. He spoke slowly, swallowing his fury from time to time:

"Unhappy Livonia seeks peace and quiet. We were once part of the Rzecz Pospolita, we retained our freedoms, and the city of Riga was the glory of the entire Baltic Sea. But the hearts of men are black with envy. The Rzecz Pospolita reached out its hand for our wealth, the Jesuits launched the persecution of our faith, our tongue and our customs. God darkened many minds during that ill-fated time. The Livonian knights voluntarily put themselves under the protection of the King of Sweden. From the talons of the Polish eagle they rushed into the jaws of the lion."

"That was imprudent," said Peter. "All the world knows what predators the Swedes are." He took a short-stemmed pipe out of his pocket. Konigseck, rising hastily, began striking a light. He took the piece of smoldering tinder to Peter on a plate. Johann Patkul waited politely until the tsar had lit his pipe.

"Sire, you have doubtless heard about a Bill on Reduction passed in the Swedish Senate and confirmed by the late King Charles XI. That was twenty years ago. The Swedish senators—burghers and evil-minded tradesmen—used I don't know what potion to incite the king to unbelievable villainy: to take from the nobility all the lands bestowed on them by former kings. The earls and barons were forced to leave their castles and peasants began ploughing the lands of the high-born. We Livonian knights were solemnly promised that the Reduction would spread no further. But eight years later the king notwithstanding commanded the Reduction Committee to seize for the Treasury lands that had been granted by former sovereigns. The right to the ancient lands of the knights, Grand Masters of the Order and bishops had to be proved by ancient deeds, and if none such were forthcoming, those lands went to the Treasury... Since the times of Ivan the Terrible and Stefan Batory, Livonia has been devastated by war. Our deeds have been lost and we cannot prove our ancient rights... I wrote a petition against the villainies of the Reduction Committee and, on behalf of all the knights of Livonia, presented it to the King of Sweden... But all I achieved was that the Senate condemned me to the cutting off of the right hand with which I had written the petition, and to the cutting off of the head (Patkul raised his voice, his ears drew back, his thin lips turned white) ... and to the cutting off of the head that would not bow to villainy. Sire, the Livonian knights are ruined. Nor is it any easier for our merchants... (At this point, Peter began listening very intently.) The Swedes have imposed heavy duties on everything that is carried in or out of the port of Riga. Their greed and venality are such that they are preparing their ruin and not merely ours. Foreign ships now by-pass Riga and put in at Konigsberg, and all the grain from Poland is drawn to the Elector of Brandenburg. Our fields are overgrown with weeds. The port is empty, the city is like a cemetery. Even worse things have been done by the Swedes in Revel. We are faced either with total ruination or with war. It's now or never, Sire. All the knights will mount their horses. King Augustus swears to take us under the mighty wing of Poland..."

Patkul looked hard at General Karlowicz and transferred

his yellowish eyes to Konigseck. Both men gravely bowed their perukes. Chewing at his pipe-stem, Peter said:

"You don't want to jump out of the frying pan into the fire again... King Augustus has a light hand, but the Polish nobility have greedy claws. That's a big morsel you're letting go to them—Riga and Revel..."

"Poland is no longer what it was under Stefan Batory. Poland does not seek our destruction," said Patkul. "We have the same foe on land and sea. The Rzecz Pospolita has no designs on our freedom or our faith..."

"God grant it so, God grant it so... The Sejm decrees one thing today and something else tomorrow—whatever enters the head of the nobility... If King Augustus were the absolute monarch, we could rely on him. But what about the nobles?.. (Peter was arguing amiably, puffing at his pipe. The bones of Patkul's face were standing out under the skin, so intently were his eyes fixed on the tsar.) Will the Polish nobility want to make war?"

"Sire, the Saxon army of King Augustus, which he alone commands, has been ordered to take up winter quarters in the Schawli and Birshi districts near the Livonian frontier..."

"How big is this army?"

"Twelve thousand picked Germans."

"Somewhat small for such a task."

"But as many Livonian knights will assemble outside Riga. The Swedish garrison is small. We shall take Riga by storm. As soon as the war begins, the Polish nobility themselves will take up sabres. The other ally in this coalition is King Christian of Denmark. Sire, you know how he burns with hatred for the Duke * and the Swedes. The Danish fleet will be our defence from the sea..."

Patkul had come to a sore point. One arm dangling, the tsar drummed his fingers on the table and his round face expressed neither eagerness nor opposition. Dusk was falling, the wind was rising outside and making the shutters creak. Anna wanted to light the candles. "Don't!" said Peter through his teeth.

* Frederic IV, Duke of Holstein-Gotorb, married to Charles XII's sister. The duchy was part of Denmark.

"Sire, there was never so opportune a time for you to consolidate yourself on the Baltic and recover your ancestral patrimonies of Ingermanland and Karelia from the Swedes. By defeating the Swedes and consolidating yourself on the seaboard, to achieve world fame, open up trade with Holland, England, Spain and Portugal, with all the northern, western and southern countries and do that of which not a single monarch in Europe is capable—to open up a trade route through Moscow between the East and West. To enter into contact with all the Christian monarchs, to have a say in the affairs of Europe... By maintaining a formidable fleet on the Baltic, to become the third strongest sea power in the world. And by all this to become glorious in the world more quickly than by subduing the Turks and the Tatars. It is now or never..." Patkul raised his hand as if summoning God as his witness. Konigseck repeated in a whisper: "Now or never." General Karlowicz grunted significantly...

"What's the hurry? Is the house on fire? Fighting the Swedes is not going to be an easy matter," said Peter, chewing his pipe-stem. (The eyes of his interlocutors glittered watchfully in the firelight.) "Twelve thousand Saxons is a goodly force. The Danish fleet... Hm... Knights and Polish nobles? It's in the lap of the gods. And the Swedes, the Swedes... The finest army in Europe... It's hard to know what counsel to give you..."

He resumed drumming his fingers on the table.

Said Patkul with restrained fury:

"You could take on the Swedes now with your bare hands. Charles XII is a little boy and a fool... A king, forsooth! Dresses up like a girl and only knows how to hold banquets and gallop after hares in the forest! He's drained the Treasury of all its money for masked balls. A lion with no teeth... Not for nothing has the Swedish embassy been waiting in Moscow since spring to sue for eternal peace... They're a standing joke! All Europe knows they haven't a decent pair of silk stockings among them. They've exhausted their funds and they're living on peas. Why, Sire, General Karlowicz was in Stockholm last year and he had a good look at the king... General, be good enough to tell us about it..."

Karlowicz stuck his neck out of his collar a little way:

"I was indeed there... Not a big city, but impregnable from

sea and land... A true lion's den. I left the ship under an assumed name, dressed as a private person. I went to the market place and was amazed: it was as if the city were under enemy occupation. The shutters were being put up outside the shops and houses and the women were hastily picking up their children. I questioned a passer-by. He waved his hand and ran off: 'The king!'

"I've seen everything on my campaigns and in cities where I was quartered, but never have I seen people flee their own king as if he were the plague, running indoors, beside themselves with terror... I looked, and down a forested hill came galloping, if I am not mistaken, no less than a hundred hunters with horns slung behind their backs and hounds on leashes. They galloped over the stone bridge into the city. The market place was already deserted. In front, on a black steed, rode a youth of about seventeen in soldier's jack-boots and a plain shirt. He was galloping along without holding the reins: King Charles XII... The lion cub... The hunters behind him were whistling and laughing like devils out of Hell. They tore across the market square. It is a good thing that people had cleared the place, otherwise they would have been trampled down.

"Being curious, I asked one acquaintance to take me to the palace under the guise of a merchant selling Arabian perfumes. It was early, but they were already feasting in the palace. The king was amusing himself. In the banqueting hall, the walls were bespattered with blood to the height of a man and rivulets of blood were running on the floor. There was a horrible stench, and there were drunks lying about on the floor. The king and those still on their feet were beheading ewes and rams and calves—ten Swedish kronor for doing it with one stoke of the sabre. I couldn't help but admire the king's skill. The stablehands prodded a calf up to him, the king ran past and, describing a circle in the air with his sabre, cut off the calf's head, neatly skipping out of the way so that the blood would not splash his jack-boots.

"I bowed politely. The king threw his sabre on to the table and proffered a stained hand for me to kiss. On learning that I was a merchant, 'You couldn't have chosen a better time,' he said. 'Could you lend me five hundred Dutch gulden?' I was given a seat at table and made to drink immoderately. One of

the courtiers whispered: 'Don't contradict the king, he's been drunk three days and nights running. Yesterday, they stripped one respectable merchant naked, smeared him with honey and rolled him in feathers.' To avoid dishonour, I promised the king five hundred gulden, which I didn't possess, and remained at the table until nightfall, feigning drunkenness. The courtiers kept walking up, drinking, eating, roaring songs, emptying their plates over the heads of the lackeys and going under the table again.

"At night, the king and a crowd of his cronies left the palace to smash windows and frighten the sleeping citizenry. I availed myself of the darkness and escaped. The whole city is groaning under the burden of the king's mad escapades. In three churches, the preachers addressed the people from the pulpit in my presence: 'Woe to the land where the king is young.' The townspeople sent their best people to the palace to ask the king to have done with dissipation and busy himself with affairs of state. The petitioners were kicked out. Earls and barons, ruined by the late king, hate the ruling dynasty. They still hold on to the king in the Senate, but they are already putting financial restrictions on him. He, however, doesn't care. He is mad!

"Not so long ago, arriving at the Senate, he demanded two hundred kronor flat with no obligation to pay back. The Senate unanimously refused. The king broke his cane in a fury: 'That's what shall happen to all who are against me...'" On the next day, he and his hunters burst into the Senate hall—they let half a dozen hares out of a sack and set the hounds on them... (Peter suddenly threw back his head and burst out laughing.) The senators climbed on to the window-sills, and some had their coats torn by the dogs. He's a jester king, no more. So what's so frightening about the lion cub?"

General Karlowicz tugged a foulard handkerchief out of his sleeve and wiped his face and his neck under the peruke. Peter, his elbows on the table, was still laughing. To the surprise of all, Anna spoke up with contempt:

"Some king, to be sure! We could seize that Charles with our Preobrazhensky Regiment alone!"

All turned their heads to look at her. Konigseck applied his handkerchief to his mouth. Said Peter quietly:

"That, Anna, is not your concern. You'd better order them light the candles."

The candles were lit in their wall candelabra before the reflectors. Wine was poured into the crystal goblets. Even Johann Patkul's face was softened by the warm lighting. Anna brought a small music box, wound it up, opened the lid and set it down on the mantel-piece. The box tinkled a German song telling how all was well in this world in which there is food on the table, and the candles shine, and blue eyes sparkle—so let the wind howl outside the window... Smiling, Peter nodded his head and tapped his toe in time to the music. He never said another word about politics that evening.

## 3

Every Sunday, Ivan Artemich Brovkin entertained his daughter Alexandra and her husband to dinner at his new brick house on Ilyinka Street. Ivan Artemich was a widower. His elder son, Alyosha, was now away on tour collecting men for the soldiers' regiments. Under a recent Ukase, thirty such regiments—that is, three divisions—had to be recruited. A new Commission, the Provisions Department, had been set up under a Quartermaster General. He himself, of course, was unable to obtain oats, hay, rusks and other victuals on the strength of departmental papers alone. The chief procurer was still Brovkin, although he had neither position nor title. His affairs were on the upgrade and many eminent merchants were his business associates and agents.

Of the other sons, Yakov was serving with the fleet at Voronezh and Gavrila was studying at the shipyards in Holland. Only the youngest, Artamon, just turned twenty, stayed with his father to write letters, keep the accounts and read various books. He had a fluent command of German and translated for his father works on commerce, and, for amusement, Pufendorf's *History*. As he listened, Ivan Artemich would sigh: "Lord, and we live at the world's end, like pigs."

All the children — a year apart in age—were clever, and that one was pure gold. Evidently, their late mother had done everything humanly possible so that her children might be

happy. During the winter nights, in the smoky hut, she would make the spindle buzz and would look at the light, a burning wooden taper, with eyes as terrible as abysses. The little ones would be asleep on the stove while the cockroaches rustled in the cracks and the wind howled over the thatched roof about the inhumanity of life... "Why should innocent children suffer?" She never lived to see her fortune change. Ivan Artemich had been too busy to feel sorry for her; but now, with old age coming on, he kept thinking about his wife. Dying, she had enjoined him: "Don't take a stepmother for the children." He had not remarried.

Brovkin's house was built in foreign style: apart from the customary three rooms—bedroom, prayer-room and dining-room, there was a fourth, the drawing-room, in which the guests were kept until dinner, and not on benches along the walls while they yawned into their sleeves with boredom, but on Dutch chairs in the middle of the room round the table covered with patterned velvet. To amuse the visitors, there were diverting printed sheets, a calendar that told fortunes, a music box, chess, pipes and tobacco. There were no chests or caskets containing all kinds of old junk along the walls, as was usual among the nobility who still lived in the old way; there were, instead, enormous cupboards, and the doors were opened when guests were present so that the costly dinner service could be seen inside.

All this had been introduced by Sanka. She also kept an eye on her father, making sure that he dressed decently, shaved regularly and changed perukes. Ivan Artemich understood that he must obey his daughter in these matters. In all conscience, however, he found it rather a boring life. There wasn't even anyone left before whom you could put on airs now—he shook hands with the tsar himself. At times, he had wanted to sit in a tavern on Varvarka Street with the market traders and listen to the squabbles and give his own tongue a bit of practice... But he didn't go—it would be beneath him to do so. He would have to put up with boredom.

Ivan Artemich was standing by the window. He could see Sveshnikov's agent running down the street. He was in a hurry, the son-of-a-bitch. A shrewd fellow. He was late, bless him—we got there first for the flax in the morning. There was

Revyakin in new felt boots; he had just turned his eyes away from Brovkin's house. He was certainly coming from the Courts Commission... Don't you go to law against Brovkin...

In the evening, when Sanka was out, Ivan Artemich would remove his wig and caftan of Spanish velvet and go down to the kitchen into the basement for supper with the agents and peasants. He would have cabbage soup and crack jokes. He loved it particularly when his old village mates dropped in with the latest news from the country—the ones who still remembered Ivan Brovkin, the poorest of them all. One of them would look into the kitchen and, on seeing Ivan Artemich, would be mortally terrified and would not know whether to bow low to him or what, and would hum and haw, too shy to sit down at table. Of course, he would gradually get talking, approaching in a roundabout way the matter about which he had called...

"Oh, Ivan Artemich, if it weren't for your voice, I wouldn't have recognised you. But all we have now in the village is talk. As soon as the men get together, off they go. In those days, remember, you only had one horse, and you were up to your ears in debt to the landlord, but you were a fine fellow..."

"Three rubles, three rubles, that's what I started out with. Yes indeed, Konstantin."

The peasant's eyes widened sternly and he shook his head emphatically.

"It's God that marks a man out and gives him a push in the right direction. Yes... (Then softly and gently.) Ivan Artemich, you're thinking of Konstantin Shutov, not me. I'm not Konstantin. He lived opposite you. I was more to the left, to one side. A miserable little hut..."

"I forgot, I forgot."

"No use, that hut," said the peasant with a tear in his husky voice this time. "It'll collapse any moment. The shed caved in the other day—it's all rotten. The heifer was crushed to death. I don't know what to do."

Ivan Artemich understood what to do, but he did not at once say: "Go to my agent tomorrow, I'll let you off till Intercession." Before his yawns got the better of him, he asked who was still living there and how he was getting on, and who had died, and who had grandchildren... "You just wait," he joked. "I'll come at Eastertide to find myself a bride."

The peasant stayed in the kitchen for the night. Ivan Artemich climbed upstairs and went into the hot bedchamber. Two serfs in livery, long asleep on a felt mat by the door, jumped up and helped to undress his squat and podgy form. Having duly performed the necessary number of bows to the icon lamp, he would scratch his sides and stomach, push his bare feet into shortened felt boots and go to the chilly toilet. His day was done. Lying on his feather-bed, Ivan Artemich would invariably heave a profound sigh: "Day is done." There weren't so many of those days left. It was a pity; this was the very time when he could really have started living... He began thinking about children and business affairs, but sleep blurred his thoughts.

Important guests were expected that day after church. Sanka arrived first with her husband. Vassily Volkov, without bowing at all, kissed his father-in-law and sat down glumly at the table. Sanka, having given her father a perfunctory kiss, rushed to the mirror and began turning her bare shoulders and her petticoats this way and that as she looked over her new dress.

"Dad, I want to have a talk with you about something... A very serious talk." She raised her bare arms and straightened the silk flowers in her powdered hair. She could not tear herself away from the mirror: blue-eyed, languorous, with the small mouth. "A very serious talk..." (She curtseyed and cooled herself with a folding feather fan.)

Said Volkov glumly:

"She's gone crazy. She's got a bee in her bonnet about Paris... She just can't wait till she gets there... We're not sleeping together any more."

Ivan Artemich, who was sitting by the Dutch stove, laughed:

"Ai-ai-ai, you'll have to teach her a lesson."

"Try teaching her yourself. She sets up such a screeching, she wakes the whole house up. At the least thing, she threatens me: 'I'll complain to Pyotr Alexeyevich.' I don't want to take her to Europe. She'll go off her head."

Sanka left the mirror, frowned and shook her finger: "You'll take me. Pyotr Alexeyevich told me to go himself. You're an ignoramus."

"Father, did you hear that? What does it mean?"

"Ai-ai-ai..."

"Dad," said Sanka, spreading out her gown and sitting down beside him. "Yesterday I had a talk with the youngest of the Buinosov sisters, Natalia. The girl is absolutely ready. They haven't married off the eldest yet, so, when it will be her turn? Natalia is in her bloom, a real beauty. She understands la politesse and court etiquette no worse than I do..."

"What's the matter, are prince Roman's affairs going badly, or something?" asked Ivan Artemich, scratching his fleshy nose. "He's the one that keeps talking about the flax mill..."

"Things are bad... Princess Avdotia's been so fretful. And he goes about like a thundercloud..."

"He poked that clever nose of his into the military orders, but our people put it out of joint for him..."

"A distinguished family, the Buinosovs, Dad... It would be quite an honour to welcome a princess like that into the family. If we don't press too hard over the dowry, they'll let her go. I'm talking about our youngest, Artamon. (Ivan Artemich meant to scratch the back of his head but was prevented from doing so by his peruke.) The main thing is to get Artamon and Natalia married off before I leave for Paris. The girl is fairly pining away. I was telling Pyotr Alexeyevich about it."

"You were?" Ivan Artemich suddenly stopped rubbing his nose. "And what did he have to say?"

"'How nice,' he said. We were dancing at Menshikov's yesterday. He tickled my cheek with his moustache and said: 'Arrange the marriage, and as soon as possible.'"

"Why as soon as possible?" Ivan Artemich rose and looked intently up at his daughter (she was taller than he was).

"War, or something... I didn't ask, there wasn't time. Yesterday everybody was saying there's going to be a war."

"Who with?"

Sanka merely pouted. Ivan Artemich put his short arms behind his back and started walking up and down, swaying from side to side as he did so—in white hose and square-toed shoes with big silk bows and red heels.

A carriage rumbled outside the door. The guests were driving up.

Depending on who the guest might be, Ivan Artemich either met him up above in the doorway, sticking out his paunch in its silk coat, or went down to the porch. Prince Roman Borisovich, who arrived in a carriage with serfs on the footboard, he greeted halfway up the stairs and good-naturedly slapped hands with him. Holding up their petticoats, Antonida, Olga and Natalia galloped up the cast-iron stairs after prince Roman. Ivan Artemich, letting Natalia go first, ran his eyes over her. She was indeed a ripe-looking wench.

The Buinosov girls sat down noisily at the table in the middle of the drawing-room. Taking Sanka by the bare elbows, they started chattering about one thing and another. In order to avoid stepping on the trains of the girls' dresses, president Mitrofan Shorin, Sveshnikov and Momonov went to the stove and studied the scene sideways from under their brows. "It was the tsar's will that they should strive to catch up with Europe, but it wasn't good for the girls to be taken all over the place."

Sanka was showing them some etchings by wonderful Dutch masters; they had just been brought from Hamburg. The girls breathed through their noses into their hankies as they scrutinized the naked gods and goddesses... "And who's that? And what's he got there? And what's she doing? Ooh!"

Sanka explained with irritation:

"That's a muzhik with cow's feet, he's a satyr... It's no use pulling a face, Olga, he's wearing a fig-leaf—they're always painted like that. Cupid is pricking her with an arrow... She's weeping, she's unhappy, she's miserable. The friend of her heart has made amour to her and has sailed away—you see, there's the sail... It's called *Ariadne Abandoned*... You all ought to learn all about it. The cavaliers these days keep talking about the Greek gods. The times have changed... I wouldn't advise you to go dancing with foreigners yet..."

"We'd have learned how, but we haven't got the books... We can't screw a kopeck out of father for anything," said Antonida. The pock-marked Olga bit the lace on her sleeve out of chagrin. Sanka suddenly embraced Natalia and whispered

something. The round-faced, fair-haired Natalia blushed like the dawn...

Artamon, in a brown German coat, meekly and respectfully entered the drawing-room—lean-faced, rather like his sister, but with darker brows, down on his lip and limpid blue eyes. Sanka pinched Natalia to make the girl look at Artamon. Embarrassed, she bent her head and stuck out her elbows so that she couldn't be turned round...

Artamon bowed waist-low to the esteemed guests and went up to his sister. Sanka, her lips compressed, bobbed a curtsey and said quickly:

"Allow me to present my youngest brother, Artamon."

The girls languidly nodded their high powdered coiffures. Artamon, in accordance with etiquette, stepped back, stamped his foot and waved his hand with a flourish. Sanka introduced them: "Princess Antonida, princess Olga, princess Natalia." Each girl rose and ducked; Artamon flourished his hand before each of them. He sat down carefully at the table. He clamped his hands between his knees. Patches burned on his cheek-bones. He raised his eyes mournfully and looked at his sister. Sanka knitted her brows ominously.

"How often do you *faire le plaisir*?" he asked Natalia, stammering. She whispered something inaudible. Olga replied briskly:

"We danced at the Naryshkins the day before yesterday, and we changed our gowns three times. It was such a *succès,* and fearfully hot. But why are you never to be seen?"

"I'm still too young."

Sanka said:

"Dad's afraid he'll get spoiled. We'll marry him off first and then he can spread himself... But he's a wonderfully supple dancer... Didn't take any notice of his shyness... He only has to start speaking French and you won't know where to put yourself..."

The esteemed guests kept throwing curious glances at the young ones... "Well, the children are smart nowadays!" Mitrofan Shorin asked Brovkin:

"Where did your son get the edges rubbed off him?"

"He has tutors; we can't manage otherwise, Mitrofan Ilyich. We're in the public eye. They're not chosen for their

birth. They've got to distinguish themselves in some other way..."

"True, true... You've got to crawl out of your holes..."

"And the tsar takes offence. 'Come on,' he says, 'you're making pots of money, so you can put yourself out a bit...'"

"Of course. The expenses are justified."

"Sanka alone costs goodness knows what. But the girl's in the public eye."

"She's a lively one. Only mind out, in case..."

"Of course, she could be given a taste of the whip and made to sit at the lace bobbin in her room upstairs in the women's quarters," anwered Ivan Artemich thoughtfully after a pause. "But what's the sense of that? That her husband won't worry? Oho, I understand her; she's so close to temptation. Lord, it's a fact... You can see the mischief sparkling in her eyes. Mitrofan Ilyich, the times have changed. In England—have you heard this?—Marlborough's wife has the whole of Europe under her thumb... A right fool you'd look trying to stand over her with a whip in your hand..."

Alexei Sveshnikov, a stern-faced, bushy-browed merchant (in a loose-fitting Hungarian coat with laces) with a streak of grey in curly black hair innocent of a peruke, was twiddling his fingers behind his back, waiting for the president and Brovkin to stop talking trivialities.

"Mitrofan Ilyich," he said in his deep voice, "I'm raising the same matter again. We must make haste with our little transaction. There's a rumour that someone might beat us to it."

The president's sharp-nosed, clean-washed, cunning face lit up with a honeyed smile.

"Alexei Ivanovich, ask what our benefactor, Ivan Artemich, makes of it."

Brovkin also began twiddling his fingers behind his back, his short legs planted wide apart as he looked up at the important ones, Shorin and Sveshnikov... He realised at once that they were in a hurry, the rascals, which meant they'd heard something special... (The day before, Brovkin had spent all day in the granaries and had seen none of the highups.) Not answering, and putting on airs, he tried to guess what this

could be. He withdrew his hands from behind his back to scratch his nose.

"Well, there's rumour that cloth will fetch a good price now... We can talk."

Sveshnikov's gypsy eyes bulged:

"So you know about yesterday too, Ivan Artemich?"

"We know something... It's our business to know and hold our peace..." (Ivan Artemich gripped his chin with his hand: "What the devil is it? What have they found out?")

With a sideways glance at the other guests, he backed away behind the tiled stove. Sveshnikov and Shorin followed him. There, standing close together, they began talking warily round the subject.

"Ivan Artemich, all Moscow's talking..."

"Yes, they're saying something..."

"But with whom? Is it really going to be the Swedes?"

"That's the tsar's concern..."

"Even so... Will it be soon? (Sveshnikov dug his fingernails into his wiry beard.) This is just the time for us to build a cloth factory. What matters to the tsar isn't that it should be cheaper than Hamburg cloth, but that it should be homemade. They could close the frontiers, but here the cloth would be of our own make... It could be a gold-mine. Everybody's agog at the news, even Martiessen..."

"So that's what they've sniffed out!" Ivan Artemich understood at last and smiled behind his hand.

Martiessen, a foreigner, had recently visited Brovkin with the interpreter Shafirov and had suggested building a cloth factory. Part of the money would come from the tsar, part from Brovkin, while he, Martiessen, would reap a third of all the profits, for which he undertook to obtain looms and first-class weavers from England, and to get the whole enterprise going. Sveshnikov and Shorin, for their part, had long ago offered Brovkin an interest in the setting up of a cloth factory. So far, it had all only been talk. Yesterday, evidently, something had happened—most likely Martiessen had got through to the tsar.

"Should we really let such an important business go to foreigners?" said Sveshnikov, his eyes blazing.

President Shorin frowned and said with a sigh: "And yet we're ready to lay down our lives and sacrifice everything..."

"We'll have a talk tomorrow." Ivan Artemich hurried from the stove to the door. Into the drawing-room came a man whom no one greeted. Small in stature, with a blue, clean-shaven chin and an aquiline nose with a broad bridge, he was wearing a black coat and dusty shoes. His dark eyes skimmed restlessly over the faces of the guests. Seeing Brovkin, he bared his teeth in a smile and stretched out his short arms in un-Russian style:

"My most esteemed Johann Artemyevich," he intoned, went over to embrace the host and kissed him three times as if it were Easter, the crank. Then, tossing the curls of his fiery-red peruke, he whispered: "There's nothing doing with Martiessen for the time being. Alexander Danilovich will arrive presently."

"Delighted to see you, delighted, Pyotr Pavlovich. Do come this way..."

This was Shafirov, the interpreter from the Ambassadorial Commission, and a Jew. He had travelled abroad with the tsar but had remained in the background until this autumn. Now, while seconded to the Swedish embassy, he saw Peter daily and was already being regarded as a man of some influence.

"Come to the Kremlin tomorrow, Johann Artemyevich, to the palace... The tsar has ordered ten from the Chamber of Merchants to be present. We are receiving their credentials from the Swedes..."

"Have they come to terms?"

"No, Johann Artemyevich; the tsar is not going to kiss the Bible for the King of Sweden..."

Brovkin caught his breath and made the sign of the cross over his paunch.

"So that means the rumours are true, Pyotr Pavlovich?"

"We'll see ... in due course. Great things are afoot, Johann Artemyevich, great things..." He turned to the Buinosov girls and kissed their fingers in foreign style.

Prince Roman Borisovich was sitting gloomily on his chair by the wall. There was no prestige in visiting such houses. He kept looking darkly at his daughters: "Silly little magpies! Who's going to take them? Lord, what desperate times!

Money, money! It's as if the wind blows it out of your pocket... You rack your brains from the moment you get up in the morning, worrying how to manage, how to go on living like this. Everything's been squeezed out of the villages, and even that isn't enough: Why? There was plenty before... Ah, before—you could sit at the window and if you wanted you could munch an apple, and if you wanted, you could listen to the church-bells chiming... Peace for all unto eternity... Now a whirlwind's come, people have crawled out like ants smoked out of an ant-hill. It doesn't make sense... And money, money. Factories or something, companies."

Sitting next to prince Roman, an elderly merchant, Evstrat Momonov, one of the leading members of the guild, was saying quietly but pointedly:

"It's impossible, prince Roman Borisovich, that's how we merchants see it. We're being squeezed out and it's impossible; the foreigner's beating us down just as he feels inclined... He won't take goods from us, and he sends the mail first, and in eighteen days his letter's in Hamburg, and in another eighteen days he gets his answer: Bourse prices for the goods... But our damn fools stick to the same price for a year or even two, although it's long ceased to be current. The foreigners drove a window through from our land long ago. But we're sitting at the bottom of a pit. No, sir, there's no way of avoiding a war... Just for one little town—Narva, say, the tsar's old patrimony."

"You merchants are stacked with money and still want more," said Roman Borisovich contemptuously. "War! Eh! War is an affair of state and it's not the business of lowborn people like you to crawl into that mess..."

"True, true, sir," echoed Momonov promptly. "We drivel away because we haven't got enough sense..."

Roman Borisovich turned the veined whites of his eyes on him. Look at him, plain clothes, common face, and pots of money hidden away in the cellar...

"Have you many sons?"

"Six."

"Single?"

"Married, sir, all married."

A carriage rattled over the timber road outside. Ivan Ar-

temich hurried to the entrance and some of the guests went to the windows. The talking stopped. Spurs jingled over the iron steps. Preceding the host, Major-General Alexander Menshikov, Governor of Pskov, entered in a caftan with red cuffs — as if his arms were dipped in blood up to the elbows. He surveyed the guests from the threshold with a chilly, blue eye of state severity. Removing his hat, he bowed sweepingly to the princesses. He raised his handsome left eyebrow, went up to Sanka with a languid smile, kissed her on the forehead, shook her hand by the fingertips, then turned and greeted the guests with a curt nod.

The dining-room doors were thrown open. Alexander Danilovich clapped Brovkin on the shoulder and stooped to whisper in his ear:

"Have nothing to do with Sveshnikov and Shorin... Martiessen will be given nothing by us. We must get on with it ourselves, yes, ourselves... Now talk it over with Shafirov."

## 4

The Swedish embassy left the Ambassadors' Courtyard in fourteen coachers-and-four. The route all along Ilyinka Street and across the square to the Kremlin walls was lined with soldiers carrying rifles and dressed in three-cornered hats, short caftans and white stockings. The banners and the emblems on the pikes fluttered in the October wind. The Swedes looked gravely through their carriage windows at these new troops.

As they rode through the Spassky Gates, they saw mounds of cannon-balls half-covered with snow and the muzzles of bronze mortars gaping up at the sky: at each one stood four six-foot-tall mustachioed gunners with cleaning rods and smouldering slow-matches. In front of the Main Porch stood old General Gordon on a fiery-red Don foal. His scarlet cloak billowed in the wind, the hail rattled on his helmet and armour. When the ambassadorial cortege halted, the general raised his hand, the guns thundered and smoke veiled the church domes and the low windows of the Commissions.

The ambassadors handed over their swords on the porch at the request of the squires. A hundred soldiers of the Semyo-

novsky Regiment bearing the royal gifts and presents of silver bowls, goblets and ewers, stood on the porch and in the passage, and raised in its sumptuous wooden frame a life-size portrait of the young King of Sweden, Charles XII. Removing their hats in the doorway, the Swedes proceeded at a stately pace into the banqueting hall.

The four walls were lined with boyars, the Moscow nobility, the tsar's merchants and the best tradespeople, all seated on benches. All were in simple costume and many were in foreign attire. At the far end of the vaulted hall, its walls and ceiling painted with knights, beasts and birds, on a throne of walrus tusks and silver, Peter sat like an idol, his eyes bulging in a fixed stare. He was bareheaded and wigless, in a caftan of grey cloth lined with lynx fur. On his left stood Lavrenty Svinyin with a golden bowl; on his right, Vassily Volkov was holding a towel draped over his outstretched hands.

The ambassadors approached and kneeled on the carpet in front of the throne. Svinyin brought up the bowl. Staring in front of him, Peter dipped his fingers in the water. Volkov wiped them, and the ambassadors went up to the tsar's rough, bristly hand. After this, Peter stood up, his head touching the canopy, and said in Russian, his throat distended, in the old style:

"King Carolus of Sweden is well?"

The ambassador, applying his hand to his breast and inclining to one side the horned sheaf of his peruke, replied that, by the grace of God, the king was well and asked after the health of the tsar of All Great, Little, White and so forth. Interpreter Shafirov, dressed, like the Swedes, in a short cloak and silk breeches with ribbons and slashes on the thighs, loudly translated the ambassador's reply. The boyars listened attentively with lips parted and eyebrows warily raised, watchful for the slightest trace of an insult. Peter nodded: "I am well, thank you." Taking a scroll — the credentials — from the secretary's velvet cushion, the ambassador offered it to Peter on one knee. The tsar took the credentials and, without looking, thrust them at the first minister, Lev Kirillovich Naryshkin, who, unlike all the others, was gorgeously dressed in white satin and was glittering with gemstones. Without unfolding the

scroll, Lev Kirillovich loudly announced that the reception was over.

The ambassadors bowed their way backwards as far as the doors.

The ambassadors had clearly been expecting that the question would be raised here, at the grand reception, concerning the chief matter for which they had been languishing half a year in Moscow — the kissing of the Bible by the tsar Peter in confirmation of the peace treaty with Sweden. A week passed, however, before the Moscow ministers called the ambassadors to a conference at the Commission for Foreign Affairs. Prokofy Voznitsyn announced in reply to the Swedes that the former peace treaties with Sweden had been confirmed by tsar Peter *with his soul* and he would not kiss the Bible a second time, since he had once already sworn an oath to the father of the present king. But the young King Charles must kiss the Bible, since he had not sworn any oath to the tsar Peter. Such was the sovereign's will; it had been announced to the ambassadors and could not be revoked.

The ambassadors lost their tempers and argued, but their words bounced off the self-important Muscovites like peas off a wall. The ambassadors said that without the royal permission, they could not possibly accept such a final treaty for eternal peace, and they would write to Stockholm. Prokofy Voznitsyn replied with a sarcastic twinkle in his old eyes:

"You know the road to Stockholm — you'll get no reply for at least four months and you'll have to live in Moscow to no good purpose, and at your own expense."

It was exactly the same at the second conference and at the third. The Ambassadorial Commission even stopped issuing hay for the horses. The ambassadors sold various odds and ends — perukes, hose, buttons — in order to buy food. In the end, they gave up. Tsar Peter, sitting as before in a lynx-fur caftan on the throne, in the Kremlin, handed the unkissed final treaty to the undernourished ambassadors.

One foggy November morning, a leather carriage plastered with mud drew up at the back porch of Preobrazhensky Palace. Its bizarre roofs were enveloped in a murky gloom. Ale-

xander Danilovich was impatiently stamping his jack-boots on the porch. Noticing a serving wench making her way somewhere across the courtyard with a peasant's coat slung over her head, he shouted: "Get away from here, you slut!" Terrified out of her wits, the girl ran away, her bare feet slithering over the wet leaves.

The Polish General Karlowicz and the Livonian knight Patkul alighted from the carriage.

"Thank God," said Menshikov, shaking them by the hand.

They made their way up by deserted passages and staircases that smelt of mice. Alexander Danilovich knocked cautiously at a low door.

It was opened by Peter. Unsmiling, he silently bowed his head. He conducted the guests into a smoky bedchamber with a single mica window that barely admitted the foggy light.

"Well, well, delighted, delighted," he muttered, returning to the window. The small bare table, the window-sill, and the floor were littered with sheets of paper, books and goose quill pens. "Danilych!"

Peter sucked an ink-stained finger.

"Danilych, I'll tear that under-clerk's nostrils out, you can tell him that from me. All he does is sharpen quills and sleep all day, blast him... Oh, people, people! (Patkul and Karlowicz stood waiting for him to finish. He suddenly remembered himself.) Danilych, bring chairs for our guests, take their hats... Just look at this... (He stabbed his finger at sheets of paper scrawled higgledy-piggledy all over.) I have to teach them their ABC... There are peal dolts growing up in the Moscow households, six-foot tall. You need a club to knock anything into them at all... Oh, people, people! Well, Mister Patkul, the Englishmen Farquarson and Grains—are they famous scholars?"

"I heard about them while in London," replied Patkul. "They are not too famous, nor are they philosophers; they are more inclined to the practical sciences..."

"Just so. We're lousy with divinity. Navigational and mathematical sciences, mining, medicine—that's what we need... (He picked up some sheets of paper and threw them down on the table again.) The trouble is, everything is being done so sloppily..."

He sat down and crossed his legs. He smoked, resting his elbow on his knee. Brimming with health and breathing loudly, Karlowicz blinked at the tsar. Patkul stared gloomily down at the ground. Alexander Danilovich coughed discreetly. Peter's hand, the one in which he was holding his pipe, jerked suddenly.

"Well, have you written it? Have you brought it with you?"

"We have written a secret treaty and we have brought it with us," said Patkul firmly, looking up, pale-faced all of a sudden. "Ask Mister Karlowicz to read it out."

"Read."

Menshikov tiptoed right up to the others. Karlowicz took out a small sheet of a pale-blue paper, held it well away from his eyes, and, very tense, began reading:

"For assistance to the Russian tsar in the conquest from Sweden of the lands wrongfully appropriated from Russia and for the firm establishment of Russian domination on the Baltic Sea, the King of Poland shall commence war with the King of Sweden by the invasion of Livonia and Estland by Saxon troops, promising to bend the Polish Rzecz Pospolita to separation also. The tsar, for his part, shall commence military actions in Ingermanland and Karelia immediately on the conclusion of peace with Turkey not later than April 1700, and meanwhile, in the event of need, he shall send to the King of Poland an auxiliary army disguised as mercenaries. The allies agree not to enter into separate negotiations with adversary and not to betray one another. The treaty to be kept absolutely secret."

"Is that all?" Peter asked, licking his dry lips.

"That is all, Your Majesty."

"On obtaining Your Majesty's consent," said Patkul, "I shall leave for Warsaw tomorrow and hope by mid-December to bring the authentic signature of King Augustus."

Peter looked into Patkul's hard yellow eyes so intensely that his own eyes watered. His lips writhed in a grin:

"A matter of great import... Oh, well... Off you go, Johann Patkul..."

# 5

Twelve boomed out from the cathedral tower. Respectable burghers were preparing for the midday meal. Senators were leaving their chairs in the assembly hall. Tradesmen were locking the doors of their shops. As he put away his tools, a workshop foreman said to his apprentices: "Wash your hands, sons, and go to your prayers." An old aristocrat took off his spectacles and, wiping his sad eyes, solemnly proceeded into the dining-hall, dark with the smoke of bygone glory. Merry bands of soldiers and sailors were making for the eating-houses where wondrous-smelling sausages or smoked hams hung over the doors.

There was probably only one person in the city who did not heed the voice of reason, and that was King Charles XII. A cup of chocolate was getting cold on the table at his bedside among bottles of golden Rhenish wine. The purple curtains had been drawn open across the high windows. In the garden, the snow was falling on the still green bushes, clipped in the form of spheres, pyramids and cubes. The mirror over the fireplace reflected the snowy light and the two candelabra with the wax drippings from the burnt-out candles. The firewood crackled in the hearth. The king's breeches were draped round the head of a golden Cupid at the foot of the bed. Silk petticoats and feminine undergarments were strewn over the fancy chairs.

His elbows on a pillow, the king was reading Racine aloud. Between passages, he would reach out his hand for a glass of fragrant Rhenish. Beside him, wrapped in a blanket up to the tip of her nose, slept a black-haired woman. Her locks were dishevelled, there was no more rouge on her cheeks, her face seemed almost as yellow as the wine in the glass.

This was the flighty Athalia, Countess Desmont, famous for her adventures. Her career had been as erratic as the flight of a bat. She could wear, with equal elegance, court dress, the costume of the actress and the jerkin of the guards officer. She could climb out of windows on rope ladders to escape the importunate curiosity of the imperial or royal police. She had sung in Viennese opera, but had lost her voice under mysterious circumstances. She had danced before Louis XIV in a pan-

tomime staged by Molière. Disguised as a musketeer, she had accompanied the Marshal of Luxembourg during the siege of the Flemish cities. It was said that after the fall of Namur, her field pack had been stuffed with valuables. Evidently on the insistence of the French court, she had turned up in London and had astounded the English with her horses and her toilettes. Several English peers had fallen victim to her charms and, finally, the brave and handsome Duke of Marlborough. But the countess was informed that the duchess advised her to leave London on the first ship. Finally, the wind of adventure blew her into the King of Sweden's bed.

"Love, love," said Charles, reaching for his bottle, "and more love... You get sick of it in the end. Racine is a bore. Pyrrhus, king of the Myrmidons, was doubtless not a bad warrior, but for five acts he jabbers the most dismal rubbish. I prefer Plutarch's *Lives* or Caesar's *Commentary*... Some wine?"

Without opening her eyes, the countess replied:

"Leave me, Your Majesty, my head's splitting. I don't think I'll get through the day alive."

Charles smiled and sipped at his glass. Someone was tapping at the door. He dug his nose into Racine and said casually:

"Come in."

Smiling, his silks rustling, Baron Bjorkenhjelm, Gentleman of the Bedchamber, made his entrance. The uptilted nose with a small mole on it seemed to express an eagerness to communicate the very latest news.

He bowed low to the king's breeches and in pleasant terms began to describe various trivial occurrences in the palace. Nothing could escape his inquisitive mind, not even such a trifle as a suspicious noise at night in the bedroom of a virtuous lady of the court, Anna Bostrom. Athalia groaned, turning over on to her right side:

"My God, my God, what rubbish..."

The baron wasn't embarrassed; he evidently had something vitally important to say.

"Today, at nine o'clock in the morning, the shopkeepers submitted a new petition to the Senate for a review of the Civil List... (Charles snorted.) The greed of these burghers knows no bounds. I have only just seen the French ambassador. He was out riding with some magnificent English hounds, to hunt

hares on first snow. What a foal he has! He won it at cards from Rhenskjold... I tell the ambassador all about it — he shrugs his shoulders: 'Obvious scheming by the Huguenots (his own words). Those shopkeepers and artisans have spread all over Europe. They took sixty million livres with them out of France... Those heretics refuse to give up, they're undermining the very principle of royal power. They're all implicated in secret conspiracies in Switzerland, England, Holland and here... They avail themselves of every opportunity to inspire the burghers with hatred for the nobility and the kings...'"

"What else did you learn?" asked Charles gloomily.

"I was, of course, in the Senate... Today's petition is only one of the pretexts. I exchanged a few words with various people in the corridors. They are preparing a bill for the limitation of the monarch's right to declare war."

Charles furiously snapped Racine's *Andromache* shut and hurled the book away from him. He sat upright, pulling the blanket with him.

"I'm asking you what you learned today! (Bjorkenhjelm pointed at the countess's curly head.) Nonsense. There are no unwanted ears here. Speak!"

"Yesterday a certain nobleman arrived from Riga on a merchant ship... I have not yet had the chance to see him... He says — if only he can be believed — that Patkul has suddenly turned up in Moscow..."

The countess's head rose from the pillow. Charles bit his nether lip.

"Ask Count Piper to come here."

Bjorkenhjelm flapped his hands in their lace cuffs as if they were wings and flew across the carpet. Charles looked at the snow falling outside the window. The narrow face, with its high forehead, feminine lips and long nose, was as colourless as the winter day. He did not notice the ironic, mocking eye of the countess peeping at him from behind a lock of hair. As he watched the snowflakes, he was studying new emotions deep down within him: a mounting, burning wrath and calculating caution. When heavy footsteps were heard outside the door, he snatched up a pillow and threw it so that it covered the countess's head.

"Keep out of sight, I must be alone."

He straightened his nightshirt, picked up the long since cold cup of chocolate (after the tradition of the French court, royalty was served chocolate in bed).

"Come in."

Karl Piper came in, a privy councillor, recently elevated to the rank of count —tall, fat-legged, carefully and unimpressively attired, with the crumpled, wary face of the experienced official.

"I am obliged to find out the news from court gossips," said Charles, coldly looking him up and down.

"Sire, they learn that from me." Piper never smiled and never lost his composure. His burgher's legs could withstand any shock. "But they only find out what I deem it necessary to release for tittle-tattle at court."

"Patkul is in Moscow? (Piper remained silent. Charles raised his voice.) If the king pretends that he is alone, that means he is alone, devil take it."

"Yes, Sire, Patkul is in Moscow with the notorious adventurer, General Karlowicz."

"What are they doing there?"

"One can only guess. I have no detailed information for the time being."

"But our embassy is in Moscow..."

"... sent at the Senate's insistence. The Senators want peace in the East at all costs, so let them achieve it at their own expense. In any case, we have not disbursed a single farthing from your Treasury for the purpose."

"I would like to scrape up that same farthing out of my own Treasury for myself," said Charles. "Have you heard about the latest petition? Have you heard what the Senators have been cooking up for me? (Piper shrugged his shoulders. Charles hurriedly replaced his cup on the table.) Are you aware that I do not want to play the docile donkey any longer? It was for the sake of those wretched skinflints that my father ruined the nobility. Now these 'Huguenots' want to turn me into a speechless puppet... They are mistaken!.. (Nodding his narrow face at Piper.) Yes, yes, they are mistaken! I know everything you are going to say, Count Piper. I have a crazy head, an empty pocket and a vile reputation... Caesar subdued Rome by victories in Cisalpine Gaul. No less than I, Caesar

loved women, wine and every kind of disgracefulness. Calm yourself, I do not intend to take our most respected Senate with a cavalry charge. There is room enough in Europe for glory... (Biting his lips.) If Karlowicz is in Moscow, does that mean we are dealing with King Augustus?"

"Not with him alone, as I think."

"Meaning?"

"There is a coalition against us, if I am not in error..."

"So much the better... Who?"

"I am gathering information..."

"Excellent. Let the Senate think their way, and we shall think ours. You have nothing further to communicate? Thank you, I shall detain you no longer..."

Piper bowed awkwardly and went out, somewhat shaken. There was no knowing whom the king would embarrass next with his sudden twists and turns of thought. Piper was carefully preparing the ground for a struggle with the Senate, which feared military expenditure above all things on this earth. After a short interim, the acrid reek of war had been sensed in the air from the Rhine to the Baltic countries. War was the only road to power. Charles understood this, but he was wont to burst too rashly and prematurely into the fray: temperament alone was not enough.

In the corridor outside the bedroom door, Count Piper took Bjorkenhjelm by the elbow and said anxiously:

"Try to divert the king. Arrange a big hunting expedition, leave Stockholm for several days... I shall get the money..."

Charles was still sitting up in bed, the pupils of his eyes dilated like those of one who is seeing visions. Athalia angrily threw the pillow off her head and, holding up her shift between her teeth, straightened her hair. She had beautiful arms and swarthy shoulders. The scent of musk finaly caught the king's attention.

"Have you ever known King Augustus?" he asked. (Athalia stared blankly at him with round, dark eyes.) "He is averred to be the most brilliant cavalier in Europe, a true darling of fortune. He has spent as much as four hundred thousand zloty on masked balls and fireworks. Piper swore to me that Augustus once said of me that I wasn't big enough for my father's

boots and I ought to be pulled out of them by the scruff of the neck and given a good spanking..."

Athalia let the lace of her shift fall from her teeth and merrilly, somewhat huskily, burst into a peal of carefree laughter. Charles's eyelid quivered.

"But I maintain that Augustus is witty and brilliant. He has ten thousand Saxon foot in his own army and he has ambitious plans. Especially since Sweden, with such a king in his father's boots, is as defenceless as a little lamb... I still want to allow myself the pleasure of reminding Augustus of these words when my dragoons bring him to my tent with his hands bound behind his back..."

"Bravo, my boy!" said Athalia. "To the success of all beginnings!" She drained the glass of wine and wiped her lips with the lace border of a sheet.

Charles jumped up out of the blanket, barefoot, in his ankle-length nightshirt, ran to the secretaire and took a box out of a secret drawer. It contained a diamond diadem. Sitting down on the edge of the bed, he placed the precious object on Athalia's dark curls.

"Will you be true to me?"

"In all probability, Your Majesty. You are almost half my age. Sometimes I feel like a mother to you." She kissed him on the nose (since it was the most accessible part of him) and, smiling gently, turned the diadem round and round.

"Athalia, I want you go to Warsaw... The *Olaf* sets sail in a few days; she's a splendid ship. You will embark in Riga. Horses, carriages, servants, money —everything will be arranged in advance. You will write to me with each mail..."

Athalia looked intently and curiously into the boyish eyes: they were clear, hard and — the devil alone knew — there was a reckless determination concealed somewhere behind those Nordic, watery grey orbs. The little boy inspired hope. According to an old habit (acquired before her campaigns with the Marshal of Luxembourg) Athalia whistled softly:

"Your Majesty, you wish me to go to bed with King Augustus?"

Charles immediately walked over to the fireplace and rested his hands on his hips. His eyes were half closed, as if in languor:

"I shall forgive you any treachery... But if that should happen, I swear by the Holy Bible that wherever you may hide, I shall seek you out and kill you."

## 6

They could talk about nothing else but the Brovkins in Kitai-gorod. Peter had, as usual, had a brainwave: to marry off the young princess Buinosov — her family descended from Rurik — to Artamon Brovkin. He abandoned all matters of state. The ministers would arrive at the palace in vain; it was always the same answer: "No one knows where the tsar is."

One evening, when they had already begun putting the barriers up on the streets, he drove up to the Brovkins' house. Ivan Artemich was sitting down below in the basement with the muzhiks and was playing a card game — *duraki* — by the light of a taper. He liked to amuse himself this way for old time's sake. Suddenly, a bowed head in a three-cornered hat poked through the narrow doorway. At first, they thought it was a soldier on guard duty outside the warehouses who had come to warm himself. Then they sat rigid with terror. Peter grinned as he surveyed the host, a not very impressive figure in his short, worn hareskin coat and with his greying head between shoulders hunched in sheer fright.

Peter asked for kvass. He sat down on a bench in front of Brovkin's household and said: "Ivan, I've been matchmaker for you once before. I want to do it again. Bow down."

Ivan Artemich, all servility, promptly flung himself down on the earth floor at the tsar's feet.

"Ivan," said Peter, "fetch your son."

Artamon was already in the room, behind the stove. Peter stood him between his knees and looked him over quizzically.

"Ivan, why have you been hiding this fine young man from me? I'm beating my brains out to find the likes of him, and they're here all the time... (To Artamon.) Can you read and write?"

Artamon paled slightly and, without faltering, rattled off in French:

"I understand French and German, and I can read and

write with ease..." (Peter gaped: "Holy Mother! Go on, then!") Artamon said the same in German, squinted at the candle and carried on in Dutch, but falteringly this time.

Peter began kissing him, clapping him with his hand, punching him, drawing him closer and shaking him.

"Well I never! Oh, he's a fine lad! Yes, indeed! Thank you for the gift, Ivan. You're going to lose the boy, my friend, but you won't regret it. You wait and see; I'll be making counts of men with brains..."

He bade supper be served. Ivan Artemich beseeched him to go upstairs into the best room; it was unseemly down there! Hastily, behind the stove, he donned his peruke and slipped into his coat. He secretly sent a man to fetch Sanka. The major-domo stationed himself in the doorway with a silver-topped staff. Peter merely laughed.

"I won't go upstairs. It's warmer here. Cook, let's have whatever's going."

He sat Artamon next to him and talked to him in German. He cracked jokes. He treated the company to wine. He ordered them to sing songs. Elderly muzhiks, standing at the door they had no alternative — began singing in bear-like voices. Suddenly Sanka flew into the kitchen, powdered, half-naked, dressed in silk. Peter took her hands and sat her down on his other side. Not in the least shy, she joined the muzhiks in a sustained, tender voice, moved the candle closer to her face, and kept glancing slyly and saucily at Peter... They continued amusing themselves till after midnight.

In the morning, Peter and the groom's men left for prince Buinosov's to arrange Natalia's marriage. And so he travelled here and there, matchmaking for a whole week, now to the Brovkins, now to the Buinosovs, with a party of some fifty men. They negotiated and feasted at stag parties and others for the bride's girl-friends, and a noisy wedding was held on the day of the Intercession. The ceremony cost Ivan Artemich a pretty penny.

Two weeks later, Sanka and her husband left for Paris.

They travelled slowly with sledge trains as far as Vyazma. It took a long time to feed the horses at the coaching-stations.

Plenty of snow had fallen, the weather was fine and the road was easy going.

Alexandra Ivanovna quarrelled with her husband at the coaching-station in Vyazma. Vassily intended to have a rest there, go to the baths and, in the morning, after church, visit the governor, a remote kinsman, for dinner. Oh yes, and reshoe the horses, and so on and so forth.

"I want to go fast. This road's sheer torture," she said. "We can have a rest in Riga."

"But Sanka! I keep telling you there's dirty work afoot after Vyazma. Trains of up to five hundred sledges at a time are being formed so that they can get safely through these parts..."

"I don't want to know anything about it..."

They were having supper upstairs in a clean room lit by oil-lamps: Vassily, in an unbuttoned sheepskin travelling coat, his wife in a russet velvet dress with long sleeves and a woollen headscarf, her fair hair gathered up in a braid round her head. She hardly ate anything—just broke off little pieces from a loaf. Her face was hollow and there were shadows under her eyes—all because of impatience. Lord, what a woman!

Said Volkov, reluctantly chewing salt ham:

"Tell me, what sort of a person are you? What am I being punished for? No peace, no quiet; doesn't sleep, doesn't eat, doesn't talk like a human being... Takes you to the ends of the earth. Why? To dance those what-d'you-call-'ems, minivets, with kings? If they can be bothered?.."

"I'm only listening to you because this happens to be a coaching-station."

Vassily lowered his fork with a piece of ham on it and looked for a long time at his wife's forehead with the high-arched brows knitted in yearning and dreams and at the dark-blue eyes wandering the devil knew where...

"Oh, Alexandra, I'm a quiet person, I'm patient, but..."

"Shout if you want, it makes no difference to me..."

Vassily shook his head reproachfully. He felt ashamed, but, though she wasn't worth it, he loved his wife. During their quarrels, when she showered him with hurtful words, he would be at a loss. So it was now: he knew that he would give in, al-

though only a hopeless madman would decide to ride through the forests from Vyazma to Smolensk without reliable travelling companions. Terrible tales were told about those parts. The ataman Esmen Sokol was slaughtering travellers. You'd be riding along in the afternoon, say. Suddenly, there'd be a man standing on the road in a tall bonnet and bast shoes with a knife in his belt. A mouth stretching from ear to ear and big teeth. He'd give a whistle and the horses would go down on their knees. And then it was say your last prayers...

"If I was scared of robbers, I'd have stayed in Moscow," said Alexandra. "We have good horses, they'll stand the pace. And it's all to the good anyway. There'll be something to talk about. It'll be no fun for me to tell people how you snore at the coaching-stations."

She pushed back her plate and called the Kalmyk maid, ordering her to bring a notebook and make the bed. The book, written by her brother Artamon, was a translation from Samuel Pufendorf's *History*, the chapter about the Gauls. She rested it on her knees, and, her head bent low, began reading. Vassily, propping up his cheek with his hand, stared at his wife's beautiful head and the nape of her neck with the ringlets of hair. A queen from a magic country. And yet not so long ago she had been mowing hay and carting manure. Now she would roll into Paris without a qualm and would say all sorts of frivolities to the king... Ah, Sanka, Sanka, you should settle down and become big with child, and then we'd live happily at home together.

Her lips moving, Alexandra was reading:

"...Moreover, the French are people of merry thoughts and quick, ready and sociable in all things, most of all in the external adornment and movement of the body, and they make a show of natural beauty. Many of them attribute the lust of Venus as an accomplishment for themselves and the embraces of fair persons of the female sex, and all this they do most laudably. But when other peoples try to imitate and follow them, they disgrace themselves and make themselves look ridiculous..."

"Instead of just sitting there like that (she raised her head, and Vassily, who was about to yawn, started) ... you could be practising sword-play while we're on the road."

"What for?"

"You'll see what for when you get to Paris..."

"Oh, to the devil with you, really!" Vassily lost his temper, rose from the table, put on his hat and went outside to look at the horses. A misty moon hung high over the snowy barn roofs. There was not a star in the sky, only needles of snow were twinkling as they fell. The mild air all but froze the hairs in his nostrils. The horses were champing away under the roof in the dark shadows. The village watchman near the neighbouring church drowsily sounded his clapper.

A dog came up to Vassily, sniffed his high felt boot and, raising its muzzle and eyebrows, stared as if in the amazed expectation of something. Suddenly, desperately, Vassily did not want to leave this homely peace for Paris... His boots crunching, he went dismally back inside and climbed upstairs. A wan light was filtering through the mica window in the timbered room. Sanka was reading Pufendorf... There was nothing he could do about it, he was doomed.

A crimson sunset suffused with a wild radiance was visible through the tree-tops. Tree-trunks and upended roofs flew past; heavy, purple-hued branches kept brushing the carriage roof and scattering it with snow dust. Vassily, his upper half exposed, was holding the reins and yelling at the top of his voice. The driver, who had been thrown off his box, was lying far beyond the last bend in the road... The good horses, harnessed in tandem — a black, rime-covered leader, a chestnut number two and a blue-grey, evil mare for wheeler — were galloping along and snorting. The coach lurched violently over the holes in the road. Behind, strung out one after another, raced the robbers. Voices were whooping and yelling all over the forest.

Some five minutes previously, before the bend, where the highway was crossed by the country road, about ten men had appeared from behind one of last year's hayricks — big fellows armed with axes and stakes. The driver, in a fright, had begun reining back. Four of them had rushed at the horses and shouted "Stop, stop!" in terrifying voices, others had run up to the coach, their feet clogged in the snow. The coachman had

thrown down the reins and had brandished his mittens at the highwaymen. They had hit him on the head with a stake.

It had all happened in the twinkling of an eye. The mare had saved them: she had reared, hoisting up two of the muzhiks on the bridle, and had begun kicking out with her forelegs. Sanka had thrown back the rug. "Hold the reins!" She had pulled a pistol out from her husband's bosom and had fired at a bearded face. The muzhiks had jumped back at the fiery blast — mainly because they were startled that it should have come from a woman... The horses bolted. Volkov snatched up the reins and away they went. Sanka relentlessly kept hitting her husband on the back with the pistol butt: "Faster, faster!"

The robbers gave up the chase. Steam rose from the horses. They saw the tail-end of a big train of sledges in front. Volkov eased the horses down to a walking pace. He looked round for his hat in the coach. On seeing Sanka's round eyes, he said:

"Satisfied? Didn't believe me about Esmen Sokol! Oh, you benighted fool! Brains of a hen... What are you going to do without a coachman? It's a pity, he was a good fellow... And all because of your damfool female stupidity..."

Sanka didn't even notice that she was being scolded. That had been real living just now, not daydreams and boredom...

## 7

Every day, long trains of sledges were driving through all the city gates into Moscow with men for the regular army, some bound like thieves, but many coming of their own free will to escape the harshness of their lives. In the squares, proclamations written on tin were nailed up on posts: volunteers were being recruited direct for regular army. The soldier was promised eleven rubles a year, victuals and feed rations and an allowance of wine. Serfs, bonded servants half-starved in the overcrowded boyars' households, after quarrelling with the bailiff or throwing their hats down at the feet of the boyar himself, were leaving for Preobrazhenskoye. Up to a thousand men were being assembled there every day.

The men often waited till dusk out in the freezing cold until

the officers on the porches called them out from lists of names. They were taken into the palace basements. Mustachioed men of the Preobrazhensky Regiment would sternly order them to strip. The man would feel embarrassed, and, stripping himself completely naked, would go into the room, covering his privates with his hand. Between the flickering candles sat long-haired officers in felt hats, staring at the new entrant like hawks. "Name? Nickname? Year of birth?" But they did not ask if the man was a fugitive or a thief. They measured his height, checked his teeth and demanded to see his privates. "Fit. To such-and-such a regiment."

The newly built soldiers' quarters extended into the snowy fields beyond the palace courtyard. The recruits were crowded into huts. They were packed full of people inside. Each had a chief, a junior NCO with a cane. He would say to the new arrivals: "Obey me as if I was God. I won't say anything twice, I'll flay you alive. I'm your God, your tsar, and your father." They were fed as much as they needed, but were allowed no freedom. It was not like being in the streltsy regiments in the old days. Regulars!.. They were awakened by the drum. They were stood in line and taught the difference between left and right. Some peasants had never even given a thought all their lives to which was which. Memory was driven home with a cane. An officer would turn up, usually some foreigner and often half-drunk. He would stand in front of the line, his crazy eyes bulging at the peasant coats, sheepskin jackets, bast shoes, felt boots, and sheepskin hats. He would puff out his cheeks and begin shouting in a foreign language. He expected to be understood and brandished his cane menacingly. From bitter experience, they gradually began to understand. *Marschieren* was to walk. *Halt* meant stop. *Schwein* or *russischen Schwein* meant he was swearing... After breakfast, it was out into the field again. They had dinner and went out for the first time that day to learn how to walk with sticks or muskets. They were taught to march in close order, as in the Prince of Savoy's army, to keep in step, to fire together, and to charge with fixed bayonets. Those who made mistakes were flogged mercilessly in front of the ranks with their breeches down in the snow.

The Articles of War were hard: "Load musket!" You had

to remember it in the right sequence: "Open pan. Sprinkle powder on pan. Close pan. Take out cartridge. Bite off cartridge. Put in muzzle. Take out ramrod. Ram charge. Cock trigger. Take aim..." They fired by platoons: one rank loading on their knees while the others fired standing up; and they fired from the lying position, when all ranks, except one, fell prone in turn.

Military training was in the hands of a general of the Austrian army, Brigadier Adam Ivanovich Weide. He, General Artamon Mikhailovich Golovin and Prince Anikita Ivanovich Repnin, were commanded to form three divisions of nine regiments each.

## 8

In the North, Subaltern Alexei Brovkin collected five hundred men fit for the regiments and handed them over either to the voyevoda or to the Landrat (formerly the district head) for transfer to Moscow. He was now proceeding further beyond Povenets into the depths of the forests. It was said that many fugitives and loafers were hiding in the Old Believers' retreats. The well-informed tried to dissuade him from travelling so far. "There are rumours round the monasteries and Old Believers are on the alert. There are many of them, and you are only ten on three sleighs... You'll vanish without a trace."

The people were tough in those parts — trappers and woodsmen. They lived in huge long houses with the cattleyard and threshing floor under the same roof. The villages were called *pogosty*, or hospices. It took days on foot through trackless forests to get from one habitation to another. Alexei realised that he had a hard mission ahead of him. But nothing venture, nothing win. In any case, if he were to report to Peter that he had reached the North and then lost his nerve, the tsar would look down on him like a crane with a voracious look in his eye and would turn away with a jerk of the shoulder: that was too awful to contemplate and would mean the end of his luck, though he might crawl on his hands and knees for forgiveness. Alexei was young, hot-headed, and determined. He never forgot in his dreams how he had once arrived in Moscow with

a coin in his mouth: he had torn his white officer's sash from fate with his bare teeth.

Alexei met a trapper, Yakim Krivopalov, at the market in Povenets and took him on as a guide. Yakim had already been working for some twenty years for the Revyakins. He shot foxes, martens, squirrels and had once hunted sables too, but they had been exterminated in those parts. He would sell his pelts in Povenets to the agent and go on a spree until he had drunk everything except the cross on his chest. Revyakin's agent would give him fresh clothes, a harquebus and a supply of powder. Hunting that autumn had been bad, and the accounts showed that not only had Yakim nothing due to him, but it would take him two winters to clear his debts. He had a row with them and got drunk. Alexei Brovkin picked him up off the snow outside the tavern, beaten up and half-naked. Yakim proved worth his weight in gold, so long as he knew that there was a flagon of wine under the box in the sleigh.

Yakim raced ahead of the sleighs on short skis to show the way. The forests were wonderful and terrifying. Through the tree-trunks they would see enormous rocks overgrown with trees. They would emerge on to the shore of a deserted lake and their eyes would ache at the sight of the smooth snowy expanses. Sometimes there would be the muffled roar of falling water. Yakim would sit down on the ledge of the sleigh:

"They've never counted the people here. There are some places so wild, I'm the only one who knows how to get through. But the folk are savage here, they'll be hard to get."

They usually turned off for the night into a winter shelter or new settlement on the bank of a stream, where felled trees lay ready for the spring burning. They unharnessed their horses by a lopsided hut. The soldiers cut fir branches and dragged them into the hut. They kindled a fire on the earth floor. The gentle smoke would roll out of the crack under the roof and rise over the forest into the grey sky. Yakim fussed about until he had been given his glass of vodka. Calming down, he would sit on the branches nearer the fire, bearded, with fleshy lips, a fat neck and round eyes — the eyes of a forest-dweller. He was himself pure wood-demon, and would begin telling stories:

"I've been everywhere, you understand. I've wandered all over Lake Vyg, I've lived for weeks at a time in the Vyg re-

treat, I know wildernesses with only one path leading into them, and you only take that one in fear and trembling. I can't find out where the elder Nectarius is living. They're keeping quiet about him, they won't talk. One word about him to any Old Believer and you can slit his throat before he'll talk. But he could be useful to you. He'd let you have a couple of hundred lusty young lads in no time... Oh, he's a power in the land..."

"What's he to them?" asked Alexei. "A patriarch, or something?"

"He's their elder. The Archpriest Avvakum blessed him before he was executed in Pustozersk... He burned two and a half thousand Old Believers in the Paleostrov Monastery. Twelve years ago, they came over the frozen lake at night, broke down the monastery gates, locked the monks and their Father Superior in the cellar and broke into the storehouses. He gave them all enough to eat and drink. They took the Treasury. Washed all the icons in the church with holy water. Lit candles and started holding a service after their own fashion. There weren't so many men with him, but oh, those poor women and children!.. The governor was on the way over from Povenets with some streltsy. "Surrender!" For three days, the men threatened battle, but the streltsy had a gun. The Old Believers carried hay, tar and saltpetre into the church and during the night — it was actually Christmas Eve — they set themselves on fire. Even so Nectarius got away, and some of the men with him. Three years later, he burned one and a half thousand people alive in the Pudozh hospice. There was a burning not long ago near Lake Vol in the forests. They say it was him. Now there are rumours of war and conscription. There's going to be a great fire soon... Believe me. So many people are joining him."

Alexei and the soldiers marvelled as they listened. Burn oneself alive of one's own free will? Where could such people come from?

"It's very simple," said Yakim. "People under quit rent, land dues and deeds of bondmanship are fleeing their houses and possessions: they're leaving their villages near Novgorod and Tver, and Moscow and Vologda. The human bones in the forests here — my God! There's thousands of them coming.

How are they going to be fed? They've got no cornfields of their own. They start groaning and losing faith. That they may not fall into a sin, Nectarius packs them straight off to Paradise."

"You must be lying."

"Alexei Ivanovich, I never tell lies. Living people get into their own coffins — there are such folk... Yonder, towards the White Sea, there's a little old man who gives the holy sacrament with a raisin, and if he puts one in somebody's mouth, it means that person's been blessed to lie down in the coffin alive..."

"Oh, to hell with you and your bedtime stories." Alexei rolled himself up in his sheepskin on the branches by the fire. "Yakim," he said a little later, "we must get hold of that elder Nectarius..."

Two on skis emerged from the forest into a moonlit glade. Smoke was rising from the winter shelter. Covered with matting, the horses stood by the sleighs with their heads down, and a soldier on guard was leaning against the front of a sleigh, the sleeves of his sheepskin coat hugging his musket. The two on skis glided silently round the shelter. They stood and listened, leaning on their boar-spears. The moon was ringed with a faint halo and there was not a sound in the rime-covered forest... A muffled sound of murmuring inside the cabin. A horse heaved a sigh with its whole belly. The sentry lay as if turned to stone, his mustachioed face showing in the moonlight.

One of the skiers said:

"Shall we tie him up? He's fast asleep. We could throw him into the fire with a prayer afterwards."

The other, his beard jutting forward, looked closely and said:

"If we tie him up, we'll make a noise and he'll shout. There's ten of them in there."

"What are we going to do, then?"

"Stick him with the boar-spear. Then jam the door."

"Oh, Pyotr, Pyotr." The first man shook his hat with its dangling ear-flaps. "Who's putting ideas into your head? We

are all of one blood—a man's not a beast... It is said that a man shall undergo baptism by fire... And you want to use a boar-spear! You'll be damned for eternity..."

"I'll take the sin upon myself..."

"Don't think of it. And don't tempt me, for Jesus' sake..."

"But it would be a neat job: quick, and nobody'll even know..."

"Father Nectarius'll have something to say to you for such thoughts."

"I'm only trying to do what's best..."

They stopped talking. They were considering the next move. The shadow of an owl glided erratically over the pale-blue snow. A hen-harrier sensed its prey and circled round and round, the cursed one. The cabin door suddenly creaked and Yakim's wood-demon head emerged, evidently owing to a natural necessity... He saw the two men, gasped, dashed back inside and raised the alarm. The two glided behind the snow-covered branches and began running on their skis. A shot rang out behind them, violating the silence of the night.

They ran for a long time, deliberately circling round to confuse their tracks. They made their way through the fir thickets to the bed of a stream. It was already near dawn, the moon was high in the sky. Not far away someone was banging slowly and persistently on a sheet of iron.

Andrei Golikov was ringing for early service. He was wearing a tattered fox-fur jacket, but his feet were bare. Shifting from one blue, snow-scorched foot to the other, he kept repeating in a sing-song voice Avvakum's dictum: "With the martyrs to glory, with the apostles into battle, with the saints to the heavenly choir" and clang!—he struck with a stick the iron sheet, hung in lieu of a bell on a post under the roof opposite the gates of the retreat. This penance had been imposed on him by the elder because the day before, a fast day, he had thirsted after kvass and had drunk his fill.

The men and women assembled at the sound. They came out of their cells, the men and women separately. Ringed by a palisade, the retreat was not very big. Many lived in the vicinity, on the banks of a stream or on the edge of a swamp island. They

were making their way to the retreat by forest tracks. Those who lived further away hastened for fear of being late: the elder was inclined to be strict.

In the middle of the retreat, amid close-packed heaps of straw, stood the prayer-house, a low, log-built hut with a wide four-pitched roof and a single tent-shaped cupola on an octagonal drum.

As they went through the gates, the men and women walked timidly, their heads bowed, their hands pressed to their chests. The men were young or middle-aged; the women wore canvas shrouds over their lambskin coats and headscarfs low over their faces. Muffled, reverberating with the woes of the fleshly existence, the cast-iron gong throbbed in the misty moonlight and the snow creaked under the bast shoes.

At the doors, the people crossed themselves with two fingers and meekly entered the prayer-house with its rime-coated timber-walls. Tiny candles were burning before the faces on the ancient icons. It was like a miracle, a candle in the forest wilds. The men kneeled down on the right, the women on the left. Between them, a parchwork curtain hung from a length of bast twine.

Panting heavily, the two on skis raced through the monastry gates and shouted to Andrei:

"Stop ringing. Trouble!"

"Tell the elder, let him come out to us..."

Andrei's nerves were as taut as bow-strings — from fasting, from nights of vigil, from eternal terror. Terrified, he dropped the stick and began trembling and gasping for breath. But not for nothing had Nectarius taught him to prevail over the demons (and there were millions of them, as many as there were thoughts in the mind). He cried our inwardly: "Get thee behind me, Satan the adversary..." He picked up the stick again and struck the gong under the roof, shaking his head as if to say: stop interfering, get ye hence...

"Andrei, we're telling you, that officer and the soldiers — they're only five versts from here..."

"At least don't ring so loud, or they'll hear... Yakim's with them. He'll bring them straight here by the sound..."

Said Andrei, his teeth chattering:

"The elder's still in his cell. Go straight to him."

The two men took off their skis and went away. Both of them, Stepan Barmin and Pyotr Kozhevnikov, were from the Povenets settlement and lived by fishing and trapping... The governor of Povenets had robbed and beaten them many times for crossing themselves with two fingers. For two years their wives and children had lived in hiding in the Vyg retreat, and they themselves had been in various places — wherever was most suitable for hunting and fishing, and as far out in the wilds as possible. When the rumour got round that an officer and soldiers were riding towards the retreats (clean-shaven meat-eaters; you could smell the stink of tobacco a mile off), Nectarius ordered Stepan and Pyotr to follow them, divert them if possible, but without committing any sin to get rid of the servants of Antichrist completely.

It was not easy gaining admittance to the elder Nectarius. A novice came out into the cold passage. The elder had two of these: Andrei, and this one, the lame Porfiry, a consumptive stripling with lunatic eyes. They told him the news in a whisper. Porfiry held his head on one side and said with a sigh: "Come in..." Doffing their hats, the forest men tried to shrink somehow as they walked from the passage into the cell. They were in an immoderately rude state of health and the elder had no sympathy for the turbulent flesh.

Standing at the lectern, small, bent, in a black homespun cloak of an ancient cut, Nectarius glanced sideways at Stepan and Pyotr. His narrow beard hung almost down to his knees and there were blazing coals, not eyes, under the black brows. A candle, stuck to the worm-eaten book cover, was sputtering softly — a sign of the approaching frosts... The stove, built of lakeside boulders, was giving off waves of heat. The long walls had been scrubbed clean. Bundles of dry herbs hung from the ceiling on bast twine.

The icicles began sliding off the whiskers of the two men, but they were too scared to brush them off or even to move at all until the elder had finished. He was reading in a menacing voice. Lying on his side, a possessed muzhik bound with a chain passed across his body and fixed to an iron peg in the wall was watching him from a dark corner. Dough was rising by the stove in a baking trough covered with a tattered cassock.

"Well, what do you want?" Nectarius turned, thrusting his grey beard at the two men. They were not afraid of bears, they could tackle an elk single-handed, but they were naturally shy in front of this man. Stepan began giving an evasive account of what had happened. Pyotr echoed him shamefacedly.

"This means," said Nectarius softly, "this means that you, Pyotr, wanted to stab that soldier with a boar-spear, and you, Stepan, were affrighted?"

Stepan replied in a passion:

"Father, we've been tracking them for two weeks. Yakim, blast the man, knows these parts and he's bringing them straight here. We've been racking our brains for some way of catching them unawares. They're on their guard, otherwise it would have been easy to jam the door with a prop and set the hut on fire... I'd have prayed for them and done them in... That would have been best for them and best for us... But it didn't work out that way... As for bloodshed — God forbid... But for once we were almost tempted..."

"Did I give you my blessing for such a burning?" asked the elder. (The men looked in astonishment at him and did not answer.) "It means that your prayer is hot, Stepan — is that how it was to be — you were going to murder ten men in the flames? Oh, oh! Who gave you such powers? You see, a demon tempted Pyotr, but you prevailed over it. Oh, holiness! Oh, power!"

Stepan knitted his brows. Pyotr blinked incomprehendingly at the elder.

"Porfiry, my dear, put a coal in the censer, fan it up with a little prayer," said the elder. The lame Porfiry took the censer from its wooden peg, poked about in the stove, blew up a smoldering cedar resin and, kissing the elder's hand, gave him the ember. With his long arm, Nectarius, almost scraping the bottom of the censer along the floor, began wafting the two men with smoke in the face and from the sides, walking round behind them, whispering, bowing. He handed the censer back to Porfiry, took a plated rosary from behind his leather belt, struck Stepan, then Pyotr, so hard on the face that it hurt. The men sank to their knees. Whispering "Pride, accursed pride" with his blue lips, he flew into a rage and hit them on the cheeks. The possessed muzhik suddenly whined at the top

of his voice and began tearing at his chain like a dog straining at the leash:

"Beat them, old 'un, beat the demon out of them!"

The elder became tired and stepped away, breathing heavily.

"You will understand afterwards what that was for," he said coughing. "Jesus be with you."

The men carefully went out of the cell. The moonlight had faded, dawn was beginning to break beyond the prayer-house, beyond the black forest. It was bitterly cold. The two men threw up their hands. What had they done? Why they had been punished? Why? What was to be done now?

"We've walked a long way and we haven't eaten much," said Pyotr quietly.

"How are you going to ask him now?"

"Will he give us bread, perhaps?"

"Better keep clear of him. Let's go back to the same place. We'll kill a squirrel and have something to eat..."

Andrei Golikov climbed up on the stove, trembling from head to foot. (The elder, going into the prayer-house, had asked him to stop ringing and had not admitted him to Mass: "Go and put the loaves in the oven.") His frozen legs ached on the hot stones and he was dizzy with hunger. He lay prone and bit the bedding between his teeth. To prevent himself from crying out, he kept mentally repeating passages from the writings of Avvakum: "Man — thou art rottenness and thou art excrement... It is good for me to live with dogs and swine, they stink likewise, as does my soul, with an evil stench. I reek of sins like a dead dog..."

The possessed muzhik, stirring on his chain in the corner, said:

"The old 'un was eating honey again last night..."

This time, Andrei did not shout at him "Stop gibbering!" but bit the bedding even harder. He no longer had the strength to suppress the terrible demon of doubt within him. That demon had entered into Andrei over a petty incident. All three of them, Nectarius and his novices, had been fasting for forty days, not eating, drinking only water, and only a sip of that.

So that Andrei and Porfiry should not stagger when reading the Rules, he had ordered them to wet their mouths with kvass and keep their chests warm. Of himself he said: "I have no need of that, the angel refreshes my lips with the dew of paradise." And — wonders! Andrei and Porfiry were all but gibbering with weakness — there was nothing left of them but their eyes — but he was as right as a trivet.

One night, however, Andrei saw the elder quietly climb down from the stove, scoop up a spoonful of honey from the jar and consume it with unblessed Communion bread. Andrei's blood turned cold: he would rather have seen a man's throat slit than this. He did not know whether to keep it to himself or tell about it. In the morning, however, he burst into tears and came out with it. Nectarius choked with rage:

"Dog, fool! That was a demon, not I. And you were overjoyed! That's the accursed flesh for you! You would sell the kingdom of heaven for a spoonful of honey!"

He began beating Andrei with one of the iron forks used for putting pots into the stove and knocked him out of the cell into the snow with nothing on but his blouse. Andrei's thoughts calmed down for a while. But once, when there happened to be nobody in the cell, the possessed muzhik (who had been kept there on a chain since autumn, but in the warmth, thanks be to God) said to Andrei:

"Look, there's honey on the spoon, and it was washed last night. Lick it clean."

Andrei cursed the muzhik. Another night, the elder again secretly ate honey, smacking his laps rapidly, like a hare. At dawn, when all were still asleep, Andrei took a look at the spoon. There was honey on it! And a grey hair sticking to it...

His soul was ravaged by great doubts. Who was lying? Were his eyes deceiving him about the honey on the spoon and the grey hair? (It couldn't be a demon's hair!) Or was the elder lying? Whom could he believe? At one point he nearly went out of his mind with bewilderment and despair. Nectarius kept saying: "Antichrist has come to the gates of the world, and the skies are filled with his brood. And there is a great devil in our land. His deserts shall be the depths of Hell." If this was so, then was he to believe that Nectarius himself was the fiend? A devil could give your back a drubbing with an oven fork

too. Everything was ambiguous, everything was as shaky as a mossy quagmire. There was only one way out: not to think of anything, to hang one's head like a whipped cur and believe, believe with one's guts. And if he could not believe? If he thought? Thoughts are not to be suppressed or extinguished; they glimmer like summer lightning. Were they from Antichrist too? Were thoughts the summer lightning of Antichrist? And then Andrei's insides would turn to water: where could he go, what was going to become of him — insignificant, poor, wretched as he was... He should fall at the elder's feet: 'Teach me, save me!' But he could not; he kept seeing in his mind's eye a beard with honey on it... He had come to the wilderness in search of the untroubled life and had found doubt instead...

Then physical weakness undermined Andrei's spirit; his thoughts became dull and subdued. He bore the daily beatings as if he were merely being tickled. The elder raved at him more and more savagely every day. To the other, it was: "Porfiry, my dear." But Andrei was being treated worse than a horse. He should go... But where? True, Denisov had told Andrei (when they had delivered grain by sleigh to the Vyg Monastery at the end of December): "Live with us, work on decorating the church. When the ice breaks up, I'll send you with merchandise to Moscow. I trust you." Andrei had refused; he wanted peace and compassion, not all that... He had imagined a recluse in the forest, a little old elder in a skull cap sitting on a rock by a stream and talking about the other world to his dear acolytes, and the wild beasts coming out of the forest to listen, and the birds singing in the trees, and the northern sun beaming mildly on the tranquil surface of the faraway stream... He had found tranquillity, no mistake! He had never known such turmoil of mind even when, in the nocturnal blizzards, he had shivered in a crevice in the Kitai-gorod wall while the frozen streltsy kept bumping into one another and the gallows creaked...

Said the possessed muzhik, glancing at the stove where Andrei was lying on his face,

"You won't last long here, you're frail. The old man'll beat the hell out of you — you've rubbed him up the wrong way. Oh, he's a masterful old man, he's proud. The saints won't

give him no peace. He reads the Chetyi Minei and off he goes to play his trick. He would spend ten years sitting aloft in a pine-tree if it weren't for the harsh winters. And he burns people for the same reason, he loves power! King of the forests... I can see right through him, brother, I'm cleverer than he is, by God... I'm cleverer than the lot of you. Truly, I've three demons in me... The first demon is the falling sickness, he's a powerful little fellow... The second demon is my sloth... If it weren't for sloth, I'd hardly be sitting chained up here like this... The third demon is that I'm uncommonly clever, dreadfully clever! Just before I have a fit, I understand everything. I get angry, everything sickens me... I know about every man, and where he hails from, and what sort of a fool he is, and what he's hoping for... And I talk gibberish on purpose, in jest. I gnaw my chain and I throw myself about — it's comical, they think I mean it... And the little old 'un stares at me with his eyes wide open. He's scared of me, brother. I'll leave him again in spring... But he'll beat your liver out of you with an oven fork, Andrei, and you'll just pine away. Most likely of all, you'll be the first to burn at the first burning."

"Oh, be quiet, please..."

Andrei got down off the stove, washed his hands, rolled up his sleeves and took the lid off the kneading trough. In the other cells, they made the dough with one-third flour and two-thirds ground tree-bark. Here, the dough was of pure flour and it had risen like a bonnet. The possessed muzhik strained to see. He tore at the chain, and pulled it out of the wall with its peg. Andrei would have been frightened but the other rolled up sleeves and said:

"It's all right... I often do that. When the elder comes back, I'll push the peg back in again and I'm on the chain..."

He also washed his hands. The two of them began kneading Communion bread and putting it in the oven.

"It's boring all the same, Andrei... We ought to get a woman in..."

"Be quiet... Ugh!" (Andrei wanted to cross himself at such talk, but his fingers were covered with dough.) "Truly, I'll complain to the elder..."

"I'll give you complain!... You fool, d'you think the women are got pregnant by the wind in the monasteries? There

are thirty of them in the Vyg retreat; they go about like so many pregnant cows... So much for the strictness there!"

"It's all lies."

"I can see that's a joy you haven't tasted yet, Andrei, eh?"

"I'll stay chaste till I die..."

"Send for a comely woman and make her wash the floors. She washes away, you're sitting on a bench looking at her and you catch fire... It's stronger than wine..."

Andrei hastily scraped the dough off his fingers. He went out of the cell to stand in the cold for a while... The morning glow had spread far beyond the forest and the sun would be up any moment now. The tracks on the snow were filled with warm shadow, the snowdrifts looked like mounds of sugar near the huts, the summits of the enormous fir-trees were dark-green against the sky. A nasal sound of chanting came through the door of the prayer-house. Stepan and Pyotr raced past Andrei on their skis again and shouted:

"They're coming! Bar the gates!.."

Alexei Brovkin sent Yakim to talk to the Old Believers and find out what kind of people they were, how many of them there were and why they refused to open the gates to an officer of the tsar. They left the horses on the road in the forest, while he and the soldiers, their muskets loaded on his orders, went up to the retreat. Behind the tall palisade, caps of snow sparkled on the roofs and the eight-pointed cross on the prayer-house was dark-blue. They were still chanting inside, although service had long been over.

Yakin knocked for a long time at the side-gate. He climbed up on the palisade, looked to see if there were any dogs and jumped down into the yard. To inspire awe, Alexei donned his three-cornered hat and belted a sash and a sword over his sheepskin jacket — here, evidently, you could do well out of people if you put the wind up them. It was unlikely that such an out-of-the-way place had been visited by offcials or commissaries from the Chamber of Merchants collecting a double tax from the sectarians. Time passed. The soldiers were glancing at the low sun — they had not eaten since morning. Alexei kept coughing angrily into his mitten.

Finally, Yakim climbed back over the palisade.

"We're in luck, Alexei Ivanovich: Nectarius is here..."

"Why doesn't he open the gates, the old devil? My men'll freeze out here."

"Alexei Ivanovich, the people have locked themselves in the prayer-house. It's a bad business, as you can see. I've just met someone I know. There's a muzhik from Novgorod on a chain... He says the congregation here is two hundred, and there are men fit for the army, but it won't be easy to get them. The elder wants to burn them..."

Alexei stared incredulously and sternly at Yakim.

"What do you mean, burn? Who gave him the right? We won't allow it. The men belong to the tsar, not him."

"Ah, but that's the whole point: in the forests, he's the one who's tsar..."

"That's enough of that nonsense!" Frowning, Alexei called the soldiers and they came up reluctantly, realising that something untoward was afoot. "We're not going to spend much time talking. Break the gates down, lads..."

"You'll have to be more careful, Alexei Ivanovich. The prayer-house is stacked round with sheaves, and they've got straw, tar and a barrel of powder inside... It would be better if I called the elder out somehow. He knows it himself, persuading two hundred people to burn themselves alive isn't that easy. Show some respect for him, Alexei Ivanovich, he's a bossy old man — you should talk friendly-like and get on the right side of him..."

Alexei pushed the garrulous Yakim out of the way. He went up to the gates and tried them to see if they were firm.

"Fetch a beam, lads..."

Yakim stood aside. Blinking, he watched curiously to see what would happen next. The soldiers swung the beam and drove it into the frozen timbers of the gate. After the third blow, the distant chanting of the Old Believers stopped.

"Go into the prayer-house..."

"I won't, I tell you, get away," repeated the possessed muzhik ominously...

Nectarius had come in from the yard, out of breath, with

long drips of wax on his beard. The pupils of his now pale eyes had contracted to poppy seeds: perhaps he was trying to frighten them, or, more likely, was beside himself with fury. He howled in a strangled voice:

"Yevdokim, Yevdokim, the Day of Judgement has come... Save your soul! One hour is left before eternal torment... Oh, horror! See how the demons exult in you! Save yourself!"

"Into the bog with you!" shrieked Yevdokim, frenziedly shaking his head. "What demons? I've never had any in me since I was born. Go and put on a show before the fools yourself..."

Nectarius raised his rosary. The possessed muzhik bent over and gave the elder such a look from under his eyebrows that the latter quailed and sat on the bench. They were silent...

"Where's Andrei?"

"The devil knows where your Andrei is..."

"No, accursed one, for you there is no salvation..."

"All right, only don't chant at me..."

The elder left his seat abruptly to see if his novice was hiding behind the stove in fear of his life... Something thudded and cracked in the yard.

"They're breaking down the gates," said the muzhik, baring his teeth.

Before he reached the stove, Nectarius lost his footing and began trembling violently. His cloak billowed like a sail as he hastened into the yard. He left the door wide open.

"Andrei," called the muzhik. "Shut the door, it's cold."

No one answered. He pulled the peg out of the wall, swearing, went over to the door and slammed it shut.

"No good'll come of staying here. Must get away."

He looked behing the stove. Andrei Golikov was standing in the space between the wall and the stove, white as a sheet and clearly out of his wits with terror. He was having an attack of the hiccups. Yevdokim tugged him by the hand.

"You don't want to die, isn't that it? If you don't want to, you don't have to. You'll manage without fire... Find the key, d'you hear? Where did the old man hide the key? I want to get this chain off. Andrei, pull yourself together..."

All were on their knees. The women were weeping silently, hugging their children close to them. Some of the men, their hair hanging down, had covered their faces with their horny palms, others stared dumbly at the burning candles. The elder had not left the prayer-house for long. They were enjoying a respite — they had been in anguish for many hours. It had meant nothing to him that they were all as meek as little children... He had screamed terrifyingly from the pulpit: "I shall spew heat from my lips! I want it hot! Not sheep do I herd into paradise, but burning bushes!.."

It had been hard to do as he had demanded and burn within. The people had all been through it, having left their hard country life, places where they weren't allowed to get a foothold: a man was shorn naked as a sheep. Here they sought peace. They little minded being swollen with marsh damp or eating bread with pounded bark; they were still their own masters in the forest and the fields... But peace evidently was only to be had at a price. Nectarius was a harsh shepherd to his flock. He had unremittingly fanned up hatred for Antichrist, the lord of the world. Those reluctant to hate, he punished, and sometimes he had driven them away altogether. Since times immemorial, the peasant had been accustomed to obeying orders. If he was told that soul should burn with faith, there was nothing he could do about it; it must burn...

The elder had been particularly harsh this time — evidently he himself had been exhausted... In the choir, Porfiry was reading in a high, impassive voice. The steam of the congregation's breath hung under the wooden cupola. The ceiling was dripping.

The elder suddenly returned sooner than expected.

"Hearken!" he wailed in the door. "Hear ye not the minions of Antichrist?"

All could hear the heavy blows at the gates. He rushed down the prayer-house, the hem of his cloak brushing the heads of the kneeling worshippers. Lifting up his beard, he bowed sweepingly three times to the black visages of the icons, then turned to face his flock so wildly that the children began screaming. He had an iron hammer and some nails.

"My soul, my soul, arise! Why sleepest thou?" he howled. "It hath come to pass. The end is nigh... There is no place left

for us on earth — only these walls. Let us soar up, my children... In the fiery flames. Over the church, verily, I just beheld a great hole. The angels are coming down to us, my dear ones, they are rejoicing..."

The women, their eyes uplifted, burst into tears. One or two of the menfolk also sniffed noisily...

"Why wait for some other time? The very kingdom of heaven is falling into your hands... Brethren, sisters! Hearken — they are breaking down the gates... A host of demons has beset this isle of salvation... Outside these walls there is darkness, a foul whirlwind..."

Raising up the hammer and nails, he went to the door where three planks had been set aside. He ordered the men to help and himself began nailing the planks across the door. He was gasping for breath. The worshippers stared at him in horror. One young woman in a white shroud cried out to the whole prayer-house:

"What are you doing? My friends, my dears, you mustn't..."

"We must!" shouted the elder and again he made for the pulpit. "Shall a Christian not go into flames? We shall burn, but shall live forever. (He stopped and slapped the young peasant woman on the cheek.) Fool! You have a husband, you have a house, you have a chest of goods... And what's next? Is it not a grave? We took pity on you, senseless ones. We cannot wait any more. The foe is without... Antichrist, drunk with blood, waits astride a red beast. Savage, he holds a cup in his hand full of filth and excrement. Partake of it! Partake of it! Oh, horror!"

The woman buried her face in her knees and began shaking and shrieking, her voice rising to an ugly crescendo. The others covered their ears or clutched at their throats to stop themselves screaming...

"Go, go outside... (More blows and a sound of splintering wood.) Listen! It is the tsar Peter, Antichrist in the flesh... His minions are battering at our souls... Do you know what hell is?.. Hell was created in the void over the firmament... An abyss surpassing deep, gloom, and murk, and pitch darkness. The planets sail round it, there is savage and unbearable cold down there... There blazes the inextinguishable fire ... worms

and bogies... Burning pitch... The kingdom of Antichrist! You would go down there?..."

He began lighting candles, snatching them in bundles from the church box, nimbly running to stick them on the icons, whichever came to hand. A yellow radiance flooded the prayer-house...

"Brethren! We are sailing away! To the kingdom of Heaven... Bring the little ones closer, it will be better for them here, the smoke will send them to sleep... Brethren, sisters, rejoice... Rest our souls with the saints," he chanted, spreading out his cloak with his elbows.

Their eyes on him, their beards upthrust, the men crawled nearer to the pulpit on their knees. The women began crawling too, hiding their children's heads under their shawls...

The walls of the prayer-house shook: the boarded-up doors were being battered by something outside. The elder climbed on to a bench and applied his face to the vent over the doors:

"Don't come nearer... We shan't be taken alive..."

"Would you be the elder Nectarius?" asked Alexei Brovkin. (They had opened the gates and were now battering down the door of the prayer-house.) A white, senile face was looking down at him through the vent. "Are you all going mad in there?" demanded Alexei furiously.

With an effort, the old man pushed his hand out of the window and crossed the tsar's officer with two fingers. A hundred voices behind the walls groaned: "May the Lord rise again." Alexei became even angrier:

"Stop waggling your fingers about! I'm not the devil and you mean nothing to me! Come out, all of you, or I'll smash the door in!"

"What kind of people are you?" asked the elder in a strange, mocking voice. "What have you come to this wild forest place for?"

"We're the kind of people who have a Charter from the tsar. Obey, or we'll tie you all up and take you to Povenets."

The old man's head disappeared without answering. What was to be done? Yakim was whispering desperately: "Alexei Ivanovich, so help us, they'll burn themselves alive..." Again they struck up the hymn for the departed inside. Snorting with

chagrin, Alexei stamped his feet in front of the door. How could he possibly leave? It would get round all the monasteries that they'd chased an officer away. He took off his mittens, jumped, grabbed the window-ledge, pulled himself up and saw, in the blazing light of many candles, terrified, bearded faces turned towards him. They were protecing themselves with the sign of the cross and hissing:

"Begone, begone, begone!"

Alexei jumped down again:

"Have another go at the door..."

The soldiers struck once. They waited. Then three men crawled out of the dormer window. Yakim recognised Stepan Barmin and Pyotr Kozhevnikov. Two had hunting bows in their hands and a spare arrow behind their belts. The third was carrying a harquebus. They crawled out on to the roof and stared at the soldiers.

"Get away, or we'll fire," said the man with the harquebus grimly. "There are plenty of us."

Alexei Brovkin was taken completely aback at the sheer effrontery of it. Had they been townsfolk of some kind, they need not have parleyed long. But these were tough peasants, and he knew how stubborn they could be. The one with the harquebus was the spitting image of his late godfather – fat-legged, low-belted, tangled beard, the eyes of a bear... He couldn't fire at his own kind. Alexei merely threatened him, and Yakim chimed in:

"What's your name?"

"Osip," replied the man with the harquebus reluctantly.

"Well, Osip, can't you see the officer himself is only obeying orders? You should talk to him friendly-like and come to an agreement."

"What does he want?" asked Osip.

"Give him ten or fifteen men for the army and let our soldiers warm themselves. We'll leave at night."

Pyotr and Stepan listened, squatting on their haunches on the edge of the roof. Osip thought for some time.

"No, we shan't give them."

"Why?"

"You'll send us out to the old villages, into bondage. We won't be taken alive. We want to die for the old prayers, for

making the sign of the cross with two fingers. There's nothing more to be said..."

He raised the harquebus, blew on the pan, sprinkled some powder on to it out of a horn and stood there, a burly figure over the door. What was to be done now? Yakim advised ignoring all this humbug: there was no breaking Nectarius.

"He's stubborn, but I'm stubborn too," replied Alexei. "I won't leave without some men. We'll take them by siege."

Two soldiers were sent to unharness and feed the horses, four to warm themselves in the cell. The others were to be on the look-out to prevent food and water being smuggled into the prayer-house. Day was ending. It was getting colder. The Old Believers were chanting funereally. Pyotr and Stepan sat whispering on the roof and realised that this was going to be a long business.

"We need to relieve ourselves. It's a sin to do it on a roof. Allow us to jump down."

"Jump, we won't touch you," said Alexei.

Osip suddenly shook his great beard at them terrifyingly. Pyotr and Stepan quailed, but went round behind the cupola nevertheless and jumped down on the straw.

The elder Nectarius evidently also realised that he was well and truly under siege. Twice he brought his face near to the window and peered blindly into the twilight. Alexei tried to talk him round, but the elder merely spat each time. And again his hoarse voice was heard coming from the prayer-house, drowning out the singing, the praying and the crying of children. Something ugly was brewing in there.

When the sunset had given way to darkness, about ten hatless peasants climbed out on to the roof through the dormer window. Waving their hands about as if demented, they shouted:

"Get away, get away!"

They all hurriedly began taking their clothes off, removing sheepskin coats, felt boots, blouses, breeches...

"There you are!" They snatched up their clothes and threw them down to the soldiers. "There you are, persecutors! Cast lots for those. Naked we were born, naked we shall depart..."

Stripped, blue with cold, they threw themselves prone on the roof, rubbed their faces with snow, spluttering, shouting,

jumped up, raised their hands and, beards matted with snow, climbed back through the dormer window. Only Osip stayed behind. Not letting anyone near the doors, he aimed his harquebus at the soldiers... Alexei had been very frightened by the naked peasants. Yakim tearfully shouted up at the window:

"At least spare the children. Brothers! At least spare the women!"

Screaming began in the prayer-house, not loud, but enough to make all want to stop their ears. The soldiers drew nearer and their face were grave.

"Mister Officer, things are getting bad. Let Osip fire at us, but we'll break the door down."

"Break it down, then!" yelled Alexei, clenching his teeth.

The soldiers briskly grounded their arms and picked up the beam again. The cupola, its cross scarcely visible in the sunset, suddenly rocked. The earth shook violently, there was the roar of an explosion and a blast of air struck everybody in the chest. Smoke escaped through the gaps under the roof, began billowing out and was then illumined by a red glow... Tongues of flame licked between the beams...

When the doors gave way under a blow, a man with a charred head jumped out all in flames and began writhing on the snow like a worm. The interior of the prayer-house was an inferno of smoky flames, people on fire were leaping about everywhere. The conflagration was forcing its way up through the floor. Smoke was already billowing from the piles of straw round the prayer-house.

The soldiers backed away from the intolerable heat. It was impossible to save anyone. They took off their three-cornered hats and crossed themselves. Some of them were weeping. In order not to see anything or hear the inhuman screams, Alexei walked out through the wrecked gates. He felt weak at the knees and thought he was going to be sick. He leaned against a tree and sat down. He took off his hat, cooled his head and ate snow. The glow of the fire was illuminating the snowy forest more and more brightly. There was no escaping the smell of roast flesh.

Not far away, making their way through the purple snow, he saw three men. One had fallen behind, and, apparently wringing his hands, was watching as the fiery tongue from the

billowing smoke over the monastery soared higher and higher over the forest and the vortex of sparks leaped into the sky... The other, the possessed muzhik, was dragging by the hand a little long-bearded old man with a sheepskin jacket over his cloak.

"He got away, he got away, the son-of-a-bitch!" yelled the possessed muzhik, hauling the little man up before the tsar's officer. "He ought to be torn to pieces... He crawled away from the fire out of the cellar... He wanted to burn me and Andrei alive, the damned fiend!"

## 9

The tsar's Ukase ran as follows: "After the example of all Christian peoples, the years are to be reckoned not from the Creation, but from the eighth day after the birth of Christ, and the New Year is so to be reckoned not from the first day of September, but from the first day of January in this year 1700. And to mark this goodly beginning and the new Century, all are to wish each other Happy New Year. Decorations of pine, fir- and juniper-trees and branches are to be put up in carriageable and main roads, after the models, as has been done at the lower apothecary in the Gostiny Dvor. Poor folk should at least put up a tree or some branches over their gates. In the courtyards of civil servants and of military and merchant folk, small guns and muskets should be fired and rockets dicharged, as many as are to hand, and lights are to be lit. And of the small households, five or six should join together and light empty tar barrels after filling them with straw or brushwood. There should be firing and illuminations in front of the Chamber of Merchants, at their discretion."

Such a chiming of bells had never been heard in Moscow before. It was said that the patriarch Adrian, not daring to contradict the tsar in any way, had distributed a thousand rubles and fifty barrels of strong patriarchal home-brew. The bell-ringers went down on their haunches as they rang the chimes in the belfries and bell-cotes. Moscow was swathed in smoke

and the steam given off by horses and people. The frosty snow whined under the sleigh runners. The trees were bowed down with rime. The taverns, open day and night, stood wreathed in clouds of smoke. Behind the smoke rose a ruddy and incredible sun, and the broad blades of the pole-axes held by the watchmen at their fires glittered in its light.

Musket shots rattled and cannons belched in their bass voices through the chiming of the bells all over Moscow. Dozens of sleighs swept past, full of drunks and people got up in fancy dress, smeared with soot and wearing their fur coats inside out. They kicked their legs in the air, brandished flagons, roared, raved, and tumbled down in heaps at the feet of the common folk, who were stupefied by the chimes and the smoke.

Moscow boomed and roared; fires broke out all through the week before Epiphany. Fortunately, there was no wind. Many robbers from the surrounding forests sneaked into the city. As soon as smoke began billowing up somewhere beyond the snowy roofs, the criminals galloped up in their sleighs wearing dried sheeps' muzzles and in mummers' bonnets. They broke down the gates and burst into the burning house to loot and smash everything to pieces. Some were caught, some were crushed to death by the people. There was a rumour that Yesmen Sokol himself was roaming about Moscow.

The tsar did the rounds of the notable houses with his cronies, the Prince-Pope, that old rake Nikita Zotov, and with all the jester archbishops in archdeacons' chasubles hung with cats' tails. Though drunk and gorged to repletion, they still descended like locusts and did not so much eat as throw food about, roar hymns and urinate under the tables. They plied their hosts with drink until they were out of their minds and then moved on. In order not to have to drive from various parts of the city to reassemble, they would doss down for night in someone's house. They went merrily all round Moscow, wishing everyone a Happy New Year and a Happy New Century.

The citizenry, quiet and God-fearing, lived during these days in fear and trembling and were afraid to put their heads out of their own doors. They couldn't understand the reason for so much abandon. Had the Devil incited the tsar to upset

the people and destroy the old customs, the very mainstay of their lives? Although things were tight, they lived honestly and saved their kopecks. They knew what was what. Everything they did went wrong.

Those who refused to acknowledge the Nikonian cross and the three-fingered sign of the cross gathered in cellars for all-night vigils. Again they started whispering that they only had until Shrovetide to live. The Last Trump would sound at midnight on Saturday. A stranger turned up in the Bronnaya quarter, assembled an audience in a bathhouse, whirled round, struck himself on the face with the palms of his hands, shouted in a sing-song voice that he was the Lord of Hosts, and fell down in a foaming fit... Another man, shaggy, naked, and terrible of aspect, appeared before the people with three pokers in his hand and prophesied incoherently, warning of disasters to come.

A second tsar's Ukase was nailed up on the gates of Kitai-gorod and Bely-gorod: "Boyars, courtiers, and service people in the Commissions and the trade shall henceforth, without repeal, go about in Hungarian dress, and in spring, when the frosts abate, they shall wear coats as worn in Saxony."

These caftans and hats were hung up on hooks for display. The soldiers guarding them said that soon the wives of all merchants, streltsy, artisans, priests and deacons would have to go about bareheaded in short German petticoats and attach whalebone to their hips under their dresses... Crowds stood at the gates, dismayed and vaguely frightened. It was passed round in a whisper that a stranger with three pokers had flung excrement at one such caftan on a hook and had shouted: "Soon we'll be forbidden to speak Russian, just you see! The Roman and Lutheran priests will descend on us and re-baptise all the people. The atrisans will be handed over to the Germans into eternal bondage. Moscow will have a new name — Devilsburg. It is revealed in the ancient books that the tsar Peter is a Jew of the tribe of Dan."

It was hard not to believe such words when, on the eve of Epiphany, the merchant Revyakin's agents began suddenly telling, as they ran along the rows of shops, about a great and terrible martyrdom that had taken place to absolve the world from Antichrist. Several hundred of the two-finger worship-

pers had burned themselves alive near Lake Vyg. The heavens had parted over the blaze, and a firmament of glass and a throne resting on four beasts had been seen, and on the throne sat the Lord, and on his left hand and on his right hand were twice twelve elders, and there were cherubim all round him — "with two wings they flew, with two they covered there eyes, and with two they covered their legs". A dove had flown down from the throne, and the fire had gone out, and there had been a sweet fragrance on the site of the burning.

In the Post Commission, a man of ordinary height and appearance threw a letter on the floor and went away. "What have you dropped there, eh?" someone shouted. He took to his heels in fright and vanished. The sealed letter was inscribed: "To be taken to the Great Sovereign with the seal intact." The hands of the clerk, Pavel Vassilievich Suslov, shook so much that he barely managed to push them into the sleeves of his fur coat. Threatening the driver that he would tan his hide, he galloped to Preobrazhenskoye.

The officer of the guard at the palace entrance looked the clerk over contemptuously from his bald head down to his fine leather boots: "You can't see the tsar." Faint with excitement, Pavel Vassilievich sat on a bench. There were crowds of people milling about inside: insolent soldiers — Russians, all of considerable height, broad-shouldered, fit as oxen; foreigners — smaller in stature, but with more pleasant faces (many of the hapless wretches had recently been sacked from service for stupidity and drunkenness); crafty petitioners from Vladimir, Yaroslavl, and Orel, manufacturers and merchants; next to them were two high-born boyars, one of them with a bandaged head, the other with a black bruise under his eye — they had come to lodge complaints against each other after an affray; with his hands behind his back, in a short brown coat, in a cotton wig, a foreigner was pacing up and down without looking at anyone, a man with a kindly, hungry face and spectacles — a mathematician, a chemist and the celebrated inventor of a perpetual motion machine in the form of an eternal waterwheel, and of a copper automaton that played chess and disgorged wine or beer according to choice. He was offering the

tsar over a hundred patents that could enrich the Russian state.

Nikita Zotov burst from the courtyard into the entrance, drunk, with a man of incredible obesity: "Don't be shy, he loves freaks, he'll pay you a fortune." The Prince-Pope dragged the fat man into the tsar's chambers. Burning with zeal, Pavel Vassilievich went up to the officer on duty and said straight in his face: "Treason!" The whole entrance hall went quiet at once. The officer pulled himself up to attention and drew his sword, breathing fast: "This way."

The letter delivered into the tsar's own hand by Pavel Vassilievich (Peter had a splitting headache and he greeted the clerk with an impatient frown) was opened by him at once. It was signed by Aleshka Kurbatov, a house servant of prince Pyotr Petrovich Sheremetev. Peter read it quickly and dug his nails into his chin: "Hm!" He read it again and threw back his head: "Ha!" Forgetting Suslov, he walked urgently into the banqueting hall, where his intimates were languishing in expectation of dinner.

"Ministers!" Peter's eyes were clear. "I feed you and give you plenty to drink, but do I gain much profit from you? Look at this! (He brandished the letter.) A poor little man, a bondsman, but he had an idea! Enrichment of the Treasury... Fyodor Yurievich (he turned to prince Romodanovsky, who was dozing off), have Kurbatov found and brought here immedately. We shan't sit down to dine without him... That's the answer, Ministers: paper bearing the eagle must be paid for. Paper with a coat of arms for all deeds of possession and petitions is to cost from one kopeck to ten rubles. You follow me? No money for war? That money's here, right here!"

# *Chapter Three*

## 1

Dawn was not yet breaking, but all over the house doors were banging and staircases were creaking as the maids dragged boxes, bundles and travelling chests out into the yard. Prince Roman Borisovich was helping himself from a collation on the table by the light of a candle. As he sipped some cabbage soup, he looked round in annoyance.

"Avdotia... Antonida... Olga... O Lord!"

Hitching up his belly, he reached for the flagon. The major-domo had disappeared somewhere too. But suddenly someone came clattering noisily down the stairs.

"Quiet, you devils... O Lord!"

A distraught Antonida ran in, her hair in a mess. She was wearing an old fur coat of her mother's.

"Sit down, Antonida, have something to eat..."

"Oh, Dad..."

She snatched up her woollen shawl and rushed into the passage. Roman Borisovich began looking for something else to eat. Overhead (in the upstairs room) something was dragged along and then dropped; dust filtered through the cracks in the wooden ceiling. What was going on? Were they breaking up the house?.. He twisted his head round and deposited several slices of sturgeon in his mouth.

Princess Avdotia rushed through the door in fur coat and several warm headscarfs and slumped on to a Venetian chair by the wall. She was haggard with fright. She had only twice left Moscow in her life — for the Trinity Laura, and to visit New Jerusalem. And now, suddenly, this long journey, and in such haste, too.

"What are you all wrapped up in headscarfs for? Unwind yourself and eat. There'll be no food in the way, and then you'll be sorry."

"Is it a long journey, Roman Borisovich?"

"To Voronezh."

"Oh, saints alive!"

She whimpered, but did not shed any tears. From above came Olga's screechy voice: "Mother, where have you put the wigs?" Light as a leaf, Avdotia rose from her chair and swept through the doorway.

Roman Borisovich had one consolation; he knew that a simmilar rush was under way all over Moscow. The day before, the Prince-Emperor, the master and scourge of the capital, had proclaimed a Ukase of the tsar: government service people with their wives and children, leading merchants and distinguished people from the German quarter were to go to Voronezh for the launching of the ship *Predestinatsia*, which was so big that there were few of her size to be seen even abroad. Owing to the imminent thaw, they were to leave without delay while the sleigh route was still useable.

Roman Borisovich, although with an effort, was now beginning to understand something of politics. In January, after the noisy festivities, letters had come from Emelyan Ukraintsev, the high ambassador in Constantinople. The Turks had been all in favour of eternal peace, but they had been asking for some minor concessions so that wounded sensibilities might be healed, and Emelyan Ukraintsev had disposed them to accept the idea that we undeviatingly upheld the principles laid down at the Congress of Karlowitz: "Let he who owns something, own it." Suddenly, however, something had happened in Tsargrad; an enemy had intervened in the negotiations and the Turks had become more arrogant than initially, demanding the return of Azov and the town of Kazykerman with the Dnieper forts, and demanding, as before, that the Moscow tsars should pay tribute to the Crimean Khan. They did not even wish to hear about the Holy Sepulchre.

On receiving this news, Peter hastened to Voronezh. Menshikov, after sweating out the last traces of his post-festival hangover with a birch switch in the baths, left in a sumptuous carriage to call on the rich merchants. He told them earnestly: "You must save us. If we fail to intimidate the Turks with a great fleet by spring, there can be no peace. All our initiatives will be dust."

Lev Kirillovich Naryshkin, in his turn, addressed the states-

men in the Kremlin with tears in his eyes: "Can we bear dishonour? Pay tribute to the Crimean Khan as before and wait each spring for the Tatar hordes to invade our finest lands? Can we tolerate any longer the desecration of the Holy Sepulchre by the Turks and the Catholics? As in the times of Minin and Pozharsky, we shall sacrifice our all to build a great fleet in Voronezh."

The ship-building companies had to unite their purse strings again. Ugly rumours went round Moscow about the imminent war. Nearly all the countries in the world, it was said, were rising up in arms against one another. Foreigners, scurrying to and from Moscow like mice, were spreading the news all over Europe that Moscow was not what it had been before, a peaceful abode of true Christianity, but was swarming with soldiers and guns; the young tsar was filled with overweening pride and his counsellors were arrogant... Moscow, it was said, was going to make trouble...

A little while ago, Roman Borisovich had impulsively promised in the Kremlin to deliver a full year's supplies of provisions to the *Predestinatsia*. Purple with anger, he had shouted at Lev Kirillovich: "I'll mount a horse myself, but the sovereign must not find himself dishonoured." And even when, going downstairs at night with a candle to his secret cellar, he pulled a pot out of the damp earth in a corner of the cellar and counted out in kopecks a hundred and fifty rubles for a company — his own share — even then, alone in the cellar, feeling each kopeck in the faint light, he did not let himself fall prey to mutinous thoughts. Prince Buinosov was a changed man; he'd had the edges knocked off him. He suppressed the mutinous thoughts in his mind and put them away under lock and key. For similar thoughts, prince Lykov was now stuck in his village, in disgrace. Drunk during a banquet at the Prince-Emperor's, the foolish prince Stepan Beloselsky had started shouting: "Do you forbid me to think my own thoughts even in my dreams? I've shaved my cheeks, I wear French breeches, but you won't get at my soul, so there!.." and he made the sign of the fig. The Prince-Emperor merely smiled malevolently. On the next day, a Ukase came out for prince Stepan to go to Pustozersk as governor...

Roman Borisovich had plenty of sense. But there was no

knowing any longer what kind of sense was needed to keep up with the whims of the tsar. It was as if he couldn't sleep at night, contriving how to destroy everybody's peace of mind. The whole of Moscow was to gallop to Voronezh... What for? To spend the time sitting on benches in wretched hovels, overcrowded, and without enough to eat? To drink vodka with seamen? And why drag the womenfolk all the way out there?..

Roman Borisovich drank another glass to quell his anguished thoughts. It was getting light in the window. Jackdaws had perched on the bare tree under the window. Let the tsar disturb our peace as much as he liked, but the green light of morning was still the same as in the time of our forefathers, and with the same pink clouds behind the domes... Roman Borisovich groaned from the depths of his being. He heard a sleighbell jingling outside in the yard and the grooms shouting at the horses as they harnessed up...

They left in a train of two coaches with yet another three sledges carrying household utensils and live poultry. The bells jingled with the sadness of departure. The road to Kolomna was well worn, but there were many pot-holes. Every verst, a red post loomed up amid the recently planted birches. Antonida and Olga counted the posts and the birches (there was nothing else to distract them on the journey in the March sunshine, with an icy crust on the road and brown woods in the distance). Counting the crows in the trees by the wayside, the girls predicted lovers' trysts. In the other coach, Roman Borisovich snored softly, his shoulder resting heavily against princess Avdotia and his lips wobbling as the carriage went over the pot-holes.

They were to stop for a meal at the village of Ulyanino, fifty versts from Moscow. Before the thatched roofs began to rise out of the valley, a high leather carriage drawn by six bay horses with two drivers raced past the Buinosovs' train. A languid beauty swathed in black sables glanced indifferently through the little glass window at the girls, who were twisting round in their seats with curiosity.

"The Mons woman, the Mons woman!" exclaimed Antonida, all of a flutter and craning her neck out of her mother's fur coat.

"Olga, look, she's got a cavalier with her..." (Inside the

passing carriage they did, indeed, glimpse a smooth-shaven face and a hat trimmed with gold braid.)

"Konigseck, I'll be blowed!"

Antonida threw up her mittened hands.

"You don't say!.. Oh, has she no shame?"

"Oh, come now... She's a real mare, that German girl... All Moscow's whispering about Konigseck. Only the tsar is blind..."

"She should have her hide tanned on the square..."

"That's what it'll come to."

There were sleigh trains standing in nearly every yard in the village, and boyars' carriages could be seen through the open gates. The village women were running over the frozen dung-heaps, catching chickens. Roman Borisovich lost his temper with Avdotia.

"So much for your damfool preparations! We should have left before daybreak... Now try and find a house with any room in it."

He ordered them to press on to the tsar's house. These coaching-stations with four windows and a main porch with five steps had been put up at every stage as far as Voronezh. The commandants had been ordered to lay in stores of food and drink and had been enjoined, under great terror, to get rid of the cockroaches, because the tsar was afraid of the creatures.

The commandant ran out on the porch with sword and wig and waved the new arrivals away. "Full up, full up! You can't come here!" Roman Borisovich importantly pushed him aside and went into the passage, followed by the princess and the girls, the commandant spluttering in despair behind them. Indeed, in both rooms — to the left and right of the passage — there wasn't an inch of room to spare. Fur coats, felt boots, hats and swords lay piled on the floor, maidservants were bustling about and there was a smell of cabbage soup.

"Dad, it's the bigwigs in there," whispered Olga.

He could see for himself that he would have to leave without any fuss. Suddenly, in the room on the right, where some cavaliers in perukes were laughing, a German voice said in Russian:

"Princess Olga, princess Antonida, pliss to choin us at the table."

The wigs moved aside. Anna Mons in a red dress and in a travelling bonnet was sitting at the laid table. Holding a tall glass of wine in her hand, she turned round, inviting them with a smile... Her escorts — Konigseck, the Saxon envoy, Karl Knipercron, the nephew of Knipercron, the Swedish resident in Moscow, and a Frenchman the girls did not know — jumped up to help the princesses off with their furs. "Oh, it's all right, we can manage." The girls hastily pulled off their mother's shabby coats and pushed them into a pile of someone's fur coats. ("Just you wait, Mother, we shan't forget this humiliation.") They went in escorted by the cavaliers, stopped in their tracks, and curtseyed, their hearts in their mouths...

A dark-haired little boy with big eyes and his mouth half open was sitting on a bench with his back to the sweating window. His weak head almost resting on one shoulder, he looked wearily at the red-faced and well-fed grown-ups, who were obviously deafening him with their talk and loud laughter.

He was wearing a bright green Preobrazhensky caftan and a little sabre on a cross-belt. His feet in their soft white felt boots did not reach the floor.

Roman Borisovich whimpered in the doorway, reverently went up to the ten-year-old boy, threw himself down with his forehead touching the floorboards and splutteringly asked of the grand prince and heir to the throne, the tsarevich Alexei Petrovich, for permission to kiss his hand.

"Offer it to him, Alexei, offer him your hand," said the rosy-faced tsarevna Natalia Alexeyevna in a cheerful singsong. (Ever since the tsaritsa Evdokia had been taken away to Suzdal, his aunt Natalia had been a mother to him.) The little Alexei looked at her slowly and meekly offered prince Roman his fingers, half-covered by his lace cuffs. The prince applied his fat lips to them. The tsarevich tried to pull his hand away. Olga and Antonida, with full politesse, swirled out their petticoats in front of him, while the tall cavaliers tossed their wigs, stamped their feet and joined the Buinosov family in bowing. The tsarevich's dark eyes filled with tears...

"Come to me, come to me, dear... Oh, they've crowded you." Full-breasted, fair-haired, with a round face like her

brother's and a chin that dimpled when she smiled. Natalia drew the boy to her and covered him with the end of her fluffy shawl. "Never mind, we'll wait; he'll grow up and it'll be his turn to frighten people... Isn't that right, Alexei?" The tsarevna kissed him on the temple, took a fancy honey gingerbread from a plate, bit it with her beautiful teeth and offered it to the tsarevich. "Do sit down and have something to eat, princesses... And you, prince Roman, stay with the cavaliers. You'll be served after us..."

Apart from Natalia and Anna Ivanovna, there was also sitting at the table a gangly girl with an intelligent, somewhat sallow face and eyebrows and lashes the same colour as her complexion. Her flaxen hair was gathered into a tight bun on the crown of her head. She had already eaten, had pushed back the plate and the half-emptied glass and, with a smile on her face, was quickly crocheting something with coloured wool. This was Amalia Knipercron, daughter of the Swedish resident and a friend of the tsar.

"Alexei Petrovich, let's have your pretty little face," she said affectionately in broken Russian, and she applied her knitting to the little boy's neck. "Oh, you shall pe wearing this scarf..."

The little boy unsmilingly rubbed his cheek against her big, mannish hand. Anna Mons, sitting politely erect, her mouth turned sweetly up at the corners, said — also in Russian:

"The tsarevich was sick in the carriage. But we are convinced that the tsarevich ees a brave Soldat... How dashingly he carries his little sabre..."

The little boy glared balefully at the white-faced German woman from under his aunt's elbow and the fluffy shawl. The cavaliers standing behind their chairs averred that the tsarevich would truly acquit himself as one who showed all the signs of a brave warrior.

"Our master, our sovereign, our hope..." intoned Roman Borisovich suddenly, and, his bottom protruding, he flexed his knees, looking straight into the little boy's face. "Mount a goodly steed, take a sabre and smite the countless hosts of our adversaries.. Defend Holy Russia; she is alone in this world, Sire..."

He wanted to kiss the boy on the head but did not dare and simply applied his lips to the tsarevich's shoulder. Then, very pleased with himself, he straightened up, rubbing himself in the small of the back... Natalia Alexeyevna looked at him apprehensively for some reason. Anna Mons shrugged one shoulder and said with a condescending smile:

"With whom are you so angry, prince Roman? We have no foes save the Turks... And with them we desire peace... We are not contemplating war..." (She glanced significantly at Amalia Knipercron.)

"How can you say that, my dear Anna Ivanovna?.. As soon as the roads are dry, we shall rise up and go forth on a great campaign... Not for nothing are we mustering troops armed with Liege muskets. Not for mere amusement..."

Amalia Knipercron lowered her knitting; her eyes widened in astonishment, and she pulled a long face. The cavaliers exchanged glances and listened as Buinosov, carried away by his own braggadocio, described the military preparations. The Saxon envoy Konigseck took a snuff-box out of his coat pocket and thrust it at Roman Borisovich in alarm. "You and your tobacco — wait a moment," said the prince, and then continued.

"Oh no, my dear Anna Ivanovna, all Moscow says the same. We're preparing... We shall fight to the death for our ancient Livonian patrimonies..."

At this point, Konigseck trod on Roman Borisovich's foot. Her face flushing with anger, the tsarevna Natalia cried:

"That's enough of your silly rubbish... Have you been dreaming of war, or something? You've clearly been drunk since yesterday..."

Holding little Alexei's shoulders, she went behind the chintz curtain where the logs were crackling in the stove. Anna Ivanovna sailed after the tsarevna with Olga and Antonida, to be followed, after a moment's pause, by Amalia Knipercron, the astonishment still manifest on her face. The cavaliers sat at the table. No one looked at Roman Borisovich, as if there was nobody there. He realised that he had said something out of place... But what? Wasn't he allowed to speak up for Holy Russia? Must a Russian hold his tongue in the presence of foreigners? He stared at the table, frowning. They were serving the courses. There was one free place at the end of the table,

the last. They were already humiliating him by not inviting him to join them. To hell with them. Prince Roman turned round and went into the passage. Princess Avdotia was sitting meekly on a little chair near the pile of fur coats.

"Why are you waiting here like a beggar woman?"

"They didn't invite me in, Father."

"Didn't invite you? Oh, you silly woman! Have you forgotten who you are?.. Let's go into the other room..."

After a good meal with plenty to drink, Roman Borisovich calmed down. It might be that he really had blurted out too much in front of the tsarevich and the tsarevna... The top people were touchy, especially in front of foreigners. Well, never mind, they wouldn't take it out of an old man...

After midday, as he rolled, heavy with food and sleep, into his carriage, Roman Borisovich yawned, made a soft place for himself with his backside and fell asleep, conscious of the balmy March breeze... Had there been something on his conscience — but no, his conscience was clear. How could he possibly have foreseen the grievous and strange consequences that would overtake him because of a seemingly trivial incident at tsar's coaching-station?

Before Voronezh, however, they had their share of trouble. Had not a freezing wind blown up bringing snow, they would have drowned somewhere crossing a river. In their haste, they had discarded their own horses and were using posthorses. The nearer they drew to the Don, the more surly became the peasants in the villages they passed; the men glowered morosely and refused to doff their hats unless shouted at. Roman Borisovich lost his voice yelling for horses at each coaching-station. He even went into the huts and shook the men by the chest: "Do you know who I am, you son-of-a-bitch? I'll ruin you!"

The peasant would clench his teeth malignantly, his head jerking to and fro. On the stove, little children watched with glittering eyes, like wolf cubs, and a big-boned woman would grip an oven fork or a poker in a menacing way. "It's no use ruining us, boyar. We're ruined already. We have no horses, so go in peace."

In one village of about ten households battered by inclement weather — it stood on a slope over the river — the Buinosovs had to wait a whole day and a whole night. There were only womenfolk, no men or horses. They spent the night in a chimneyless hut (a man's head disappeared in the smoke if he stood up). The princesses moaned as they lay under sheepskins on benches placed side by side. The smoke stung their eyes. The wind howled mournfully like a lost spirit.

Roman Borisovich awoke to the sound of voices outside. Someone had evidently just driven up. He coughed and crawled unwillingly out from under his fur coat. It was white with snow outside, the stars peeped from among the scudding clouds. After relieving himself, prince Roman went to the gates. He could hear quiet voices outside.

"...The Zhukovo peasants will all run away in spring, Ivan Vassilievich."

"Thank God, we've stuck it out until this mud business... Azmus arrived — what is it they call him? — Antichrist. Then things got moving... They made scoops, and then got us digging the mud out of the bog, moulding bricks, drying them in our barns... Our men have been carting this mud morning, noon and night; the barns are completely crammed with it... They've crippled the horses... There'll be no ploughing or sowing..."

"The tsar came... 'That's not enough,' says he... Ordered them to put up a mill with scoops and drag mud up from the bottom... They baked it in front of him — brought it out of the barn. No, we can't stand this duty... We'll run away and never look back..."

"We hide in the gullies, Ivan Vassilievich. We only come for a crust of bread at night. What sort of a life is that?"

"Will the revolt start soon, ataman?"

Unaware that the wind was penetrating under the fur coat he had thrown over his head, Roman Borisovich applied his eyes to a crack in the gates. In the faint light of the stars, several peasants were standing glumly round a sleigh with a carpet back. In it, holding the reins, was a thickset man in a big sheepskin overcoat and a Cossack hat, his beard partly grey. "Oh, I've seen that villain somewhere before," thought Roman Borisovich in fright.

Bending over the back of the sleigh, one of the men asked:

"What's the news from the Don, ataman?"

Pepper-and-Salt Beard shifted the reins from one hand to the other and replied importantly: "Wait until summer."

The men moved in a little closer.

"Are they expecting war?"

"God grant it..."

"It's got to end somehow, and quickly..."

"It will end, it will end," said Pepper-and-Salt Beard in a grim voice. "We have teeth." He turned round abruptly in his sleigh: "Lads, who can I leave my horse with?"

"I'd gladly take it, Ivan Vassilievich... But the devil's sent us a boyar with his women yesterday... They're throwing their weight about. They've scattered straw and hay over the place. I hid the oats, but they found them, and it's unbelievable — they're giving them to the hoses by the bucketful... And I can't get anything out of him, he won't let me have a kopeck..."

Pepper-and-Salt Beard opened his eyes wide:

"Ha!" He burst out laughing. "Ha-ha! Take the knife out of my bag under the box... Get yourself a kopeck... That's how, man. (He pulled on the reins.) Well, who's it going to be?"

One of the men ran away from the sleigh:

"Me, Ivan Vassilievich, I've got plenty of room..."

Only at this point did Roman Borisovich suddenly feel the cold. His teeth chattering, he hurried into the dark hut.

"Avdotia!" He shook the princess, who was sleeping as if drugged by the fumes from the stove. "Where have you put my pistols? Get up. Olga, Antonida! Light the lamp... Where did you put the flint and tinder... Mikhail, Ivan, get up — harness the horses..."

The tsar's newly built log palace stood on the far bank of the river on a peninsula between the old and new courses. Peter hardly ever lived there, sleeping out wherever nightfall found him. The palace was occupied by Natalia Alexeyevna with the tsarevich, and the tsar Ivan's widow Praskovia with her daughters, Anna, Ekaterina and Praskovia. The boyars'

wives who had arrived for the festival and their daughters had also been crammed into the palace. There was nowhere to go outside the building. There was nothing round about but bogs and streams. All that could be seen from the windows were the wooden roofs of shipyard warehouses, the bright yellow skeletons of ships on the stocks (on the bank of the old Voronezh), gullies limed with dirty snow and hills bristling with tree-stumps.

The Buinosov girls languished at the little window, hoping for balls and fireworks. A fine place they'd found! No wood to walk in or river-banks to sit on: slime, garbage and woodshavings everywhere. From the yellow ships on the bank came the sounds of hammering and men shouting. Parties of cavaliers often rode over there. But the girls could only exclaim from a distance at the elegant riders. No one knew when the fun would begin. Meanwhile, they lit bonfires near the ships and worked all night. The girls draped their petticoats over both windows in their chamber in order not to be woken by the terrible glow of the flames.

When the mud dried outside in the courtyard, which was fenced off by timber walls, they went out on to the porch to sun themselves and idle the time away. Of course, they could have amused themselves with the girls sitting on the porches of the other houses: with princess Lykova, the silly fool, wider than she was high — even her eyes were sunk in fat — or with princess Dolgorukova — a proud, swarthy woman (hide it or not, all Moscow knew that she had hairy legs); or with the eight Shakhovskoy princesses — a malignant brood who did nothing but whisper among themselves and wag their tongues. Olga and Antonida did not like the womenfolk.

Once, some men were herded into the yard. In a single morning, they put up swings and a roundabout with horses and boats. But it was impossible to get near those amusements; either the tsarevich wanted a ride, nudging the nurses to stop them holding him by the belt, or the little tsarevnas. Their tutor always came out with them, in one pocket of his coat a silk handkerchief for blowing his nose and in the other a bunch of twigs — a birch. This was Johann Ostermann, a German with a very foolish big face full of its own importance. He wore round spectacles. He would seat the tsarevnas

in the boats, and himself would mount a painted horse and say to the men who worked the roundabout: "Begin, *aber langsam, langsam*"* and, closing his eyes behind the lenses of his glasses and scraping the huge soles of his shoes on the ground, he would ride himself round and round into a stupor.

Sometimes, a motley crowd would come tumbling down from the main porch: divine fools in caftans worn inside out, Ethiopian jesters, black as soot, two old clowns in women's clothing, and big-bottomed chambermaids. Then, supported by the elbows, the tsaritsa Praskovia would sail down the steps in a voluminous black velvet gown. A chair and cushions would be brought out to her and she would sit down, turning away from the sun a blue-eyed, rouged face, as full as a pumpkin. She did not wear a wig, for her own dark hair was beautiful. The dwarfs, divine fools and jesters would sit at her feet, puffing out their cheeks. The chambermaids respectfully stood behind her chair.

"Sit down, sit down," the tsaritsa would say languidly to the boyars' daughters to make them stop curtseying and stay in the porches. She would look at the swings and the roundabout, and she would begin to moan weakly, holding her head on one side. The women would edge closer in alarm:

"What is it, Mother, what's hurting, precious?"

"Nothing... Away with you... (The tsaritsa was always suffering from some pain or other; she was obese.) Now then, you Johann... Stop riding round, you'll make the tsarevnas' heads spin... Look at him, Lord forgive me, that fool of a German... Thin as a rake, wears spectacles, and all he can do is go round and round in circles..."

Johann Ostermann would bring the girls up to their mother. The oldest, eight-year-old Ekaterina, was pockmarked and squint-eyed, so the tsaritsa felt sorry for her. She loved the youngest fat, cheerful little Praskovia and would stroke her curly hair and pull her close to her stomach between her parted knees and kiss the child on her forehead. The middle one, Anna Ivanovna*, a swarthy, rather solemn little girl with pale lips, would come up timidly, always behind her sisters...

* *Aber langsam*—but slowly (German).

* The future Empress Anna.

"What are you staring at your feet for, your mother won't eat you," the tsaritsa would say. She would take some sweetmeats from a plate brought up by an old clown and present one to the amiable Praskovia, one to Katya and, with a "Have a gingerbread!" would thrust one at Anna. Sighing, she would survey the tutor from his brown cloth hose to his dressed peruke. "Oh, I turned the children over to him too early. I should have left them with their nannies longer..."

The petticoats of the fat-bottomed women would rustle agitatedly behind the chair.

"It's too early for them to study, dearest Mother..."

"That's enough from you. Stop hissing in my ear..." the tsaritsa would say with a frown. She would summon Ostermann... "Well, German, what have you been reading to them today? Have you been teaching the princesses German? Have you been teaching them figures?"

Johann Ostermann would put his foot forward, adjust his spectacles and deliver a lengthy report without getting to the point. The tsaritsa would slowly nod her head without understanding a word. One thing she did grasp however; life as it used to be lived in the old days was a thing of the past. Difficult though it might be, she must adapt herself to the new ways. She still vividly remembered the year 1698 when, for those old times, all the ruling people in the Kremlin were expelled: the tsarevna Sophia and her sisters were lucky to escape the knout, and the tsarevna Evdokia, in her husband's own lifetime, was weeping tears at Suzdal in the habit of a grey nun.

Not for nothing was Praskovia descended from the Saltykovs — she was unhealthily fat, but shrewd; also shrewd was her counsellor, steward and brother, Vassily. They were aware that Peter could not manage in Moscow without a proper court. Foreign ambassadors and distinguished visitors from overseas were fussy; you couldn't get all of them to go out to the Mons woman's place in Kukui. The tsaritsa Praskovia arranged for la politesse in her household and received the ambassadors, travellers and important traders from other countries. Her beloved olden times stayed with her in the back rooms and were put away out of sight when necessary. In gra-

titude for all this, Peter loved and favoured the tsaritsa Praskovia.

Bored of sitting in the sun, Praskovia would leave with her daughters and attendants. The Buinosov girls would sit on the roundabout and order the men to turn it at an impossible speed. They would squeal softly. From far away would be borne the noise of gunfire and the shouts of men hoisting a mast on a ship somewhere. Then it would be lunch-time. They would snore away in the hot chambers that smelt of resin.

Two or three times, a messenger was sent from the town by Roman Borisovich for linen. He told how the prince was living in crowded quarters, four to a room in Apraksin's house, and no one knew when the wait at Voronezh would be over...

One day at noon, however, Peter rode into the courtyard on horseback, haggard, his sunburnt cheeks freshly shaven. He looked with amusement at the roundabout and glanced up at the windows where the heads of the sleepy womenfolk were bobbing about. He jumped down from his horse, adjusted the sash tied round his narrow caftan, and ran upstairs to the tsaritsa Praskovia.

Within a matter of seconds, the whole palace knew that the ship to be launched next morning and that the festivities were to begin.

On the sloping river-bank, the two-decker, fifty-gun *Predestinatsia* was standing on props and wedges. Her high stern with its three rows of square ports was intricately decorated with oak woodcarvings. Two white strakes ran along her two black sides. The gun-hatch ports were hanging open on their copper hinges. Sails were furled up on the yards. On the blunt prow, considerably lower than the poop, a nude naiad supported with arms powerful as wooden beams the long bowsprit, which carried, as distinct from the earlier ships, fore-and-aft-rigged sails only. The ship had been built from Peter's design under his own supervision and that of Fedosey Sklyaev and Aladushkin.

The sun rose above the yellow-green hills and the rickety towers of Voronezh. The day was cloudless, cool and blue.

A pleasant breeze lightly ruffled the waters, so that it seemed like an invitation to set sail and head for where the river was in full spate, into the vernal distance.

On a wooden stage near the ship stood tables loaded with food and drink. The wind tugged at the corners of the red tablecloths, the hat plumes, the ringlets of perukes and the tassels of the officers' sashes. Behind the table sat the tsaritsa Praskovia and the tsarevna Natalia with their children, and ambassadors, envoys, Dutch and English merchants, Poles, Germans, a Jesuit from Paris, Amalia Knipercron, the Saxon military engineer Hallart, and Carl Eugene, Duke of Croy, who had only just arrived with a letter from King Augustus. Guests who were of high birth but were not so important just now were standing behind the tables on the stage. Sailors served vodka out of wooden pails.

The Duke of Croy was sitting at his ease between the tsaritsa and the tsarevna, his elbows on the table, twirling his blond moustaches and staring upwards with unseeing eyes. His nose was long and slightly crooked, his face flabby, with bags under the eyes, and his flat peruke began immediately over his eyebrows. Under his lilac caftan he was wearing the ribbon of some Order, a gold chain round his neck, and diamond stars on his sides. Even the tsaritsa and tsarevna felt shy of him, and small wonder: he was a Duke of the Holy Empire, an invincible warrior who had taken part in fifteen famous battles. But evidently (as the Muscovites gathered, although they gave no indication of it) the Duke's pocket was empty, otherwise wild horses wouldn't have dragged him to Voronezh. Behind his chair stood Pyotr Pavlovich Shafirov, who was acting as his interpreter.

The Duke was saying, with his somewhat red eyelids half-closed:

"Russia is a beautiful land, the Russians are an industrious and God-fearing people, the women in Russia are captivating. So they are somewhat baffled in Europe by the determined efforts of the Russians to adopt our manners and dress. God himself has indicated that Russia should turn her gaze on Asia, bringing to the foot of the tsar's throne the countless multitudes of Asiatic peoples and clearing a free road to Persia

and Cathay. That is a most wonderful task that would benefit the whole Christian world..."

The Duke did not finish his reflections; the guests began making a noise and scraping their feet. The tsar came up quickly from the ship in Dutch knee-length velvet pantaloons, a linen shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and an oilskin hat. He stopped by the stage, respectfully doffed his hat to the portly Admiral Golovin who was sitting under a veritable haystack of a wig with a glass of Hungarian wine.

"Mister Admiral, I greet you..."

"Greetings, Master Peter Alexeyevich," replied Golovin importantly.

"Mister Admiral, the ship is ready for launching. Will you order the wedges to be knocked out?"

"Commence, and good luck."

The Duke stopped twirling his moustaches and stared in amazement as the tsar, like a common carpenter or man of low degree, bowed to the admiral, donned his hat and hurried away over the wood-chips. "Ready!" he shouted to the workers, and they got busy under the steep bottom of the ship. On the way, he picked up a cast-iron hammer: "Stand by the wedges! All together! Strike them out, strike them out!" There were blows of the hammers on the beams supporting the enormous ship for'ard. Horns sounded long notes. The guests rose to their feet, holding their glasses high before them. They could see Peter's shoulders working under his shirt as he swung his hammer. The masts swayed, the ship settled somewhat on the runners. She hesitated and then moved off down the sloping, larded shipway. "She's away, she's away!" shouted everybody on the stage.

The ship glided down to the river with gathering speed. The lard began smoking under the runners. The bows touched the water. The gilt naiad went into it up to her waist. Swiftly, throwing up two waves in front of her bows, the ship flew out on to the water, turned, and began rocking from side to side. Pennants ran up the masts, the wind began shaking their narrow silken tongues. Flames darted from the sides and the guns boomed.

There had been feasting for two days and nights in Menshikov's house on the city side near the bridge. Some of the

guests had not slept at all, others were lying on hay under the tables (the hay on the banqueting hall floor had already been changed several times). The ladies, after a short rest, had rouged their faces, powdered themselves, changed their gowns, and were again arriving in thundering carriages drawn by horses at full gallop. There had been fireworks the day before, and now there was to be a ball.

The foreigners were most satisfied with the festivities. Pyotr Pavlovich Shafirov, without sparing himself, regaled them with the finest Hungarian wines and dry champagne (but was less generous to his fellow countrymen). The artful Jew had successfully arranged for certain envoys to write to their friends in Constantinople about all they had seen at Voronezh. After the *Predestinatsia*, five more big ships and fourteen galleys had been launched in a week, and work on the other vessels was being finished at speed — their ribbed hulls could be seen as far as the suburb of Chizhovka. Add all this to the Azov fleet, and the Sultan, who was anxious to guard the Black Sea as if it were chaste virgin, would not have to put on too many airs during the peace talks.

Antonida in soft azure blue and Olga in strident lemon yellow were eating in the spacious, hastily erected wooden hall. About a hundred and fifty guests were sitting at tables ranged in the form of a Greek letter pi. Inside, the jesters were capering about, playing leapfrog, fighting with peafilled bladders, barking, caterwauling, and kicking up such shindy that the hay was flying onto the dishes and the wigs of the guests. No one was bothering to look at the jesters. The Prince-Pope, standing under a canopy in a tin mitre, was exhausted, poor old fellow, with waving his handkerchief through the windows at the gunners after each toast — the walls shook at every salvo. The honourable jester Yakov Turgenev had amused everybody some time ago by putting on a turban, a Tatar robe and slippers, riding into the hall on a dirty hump-backed sow and shaking his flabby face and false beard.

"Come closer," he had shouted, "come closer! Kiss His Sultanic Majesty's feet!"

He was now lying under the table, dead drunk. The sai-

lors' choir had lost their voices, the horn players were out of tune. All were waiting for the dancing to begin. Olga had a cavalier sitting next to her, Leopoldus Mirbach, an ensign of the Preobrazhensky Regiment. Beside Antonida was Lieutenant Bartholomäus Bram. Olga's companion was still burbling something in Russian and massaging his face with the palms of his hands to sober himself up. Bram, the Dane, red as a beetroot, only went on drinking, winking at the infatuated girl. What did they want with idle conversation?.. They were dying to offer their fingertips to a partner, lift their petticoats in front and, in time to the fiddles, curtsey and glide over the waxed floor. The girls were as agitated as a forest lake in a thunderstorm.

Roman Borisovich was sitting at the opposite end of the table with Avdotia. The prince was much put out at being so far from his sovereign. Peter was surrounded by foreigners. Next to him was the Duke of Croy, so drunk that he could only shake his head like a horse pestered by flies. On the other side was Amalia Kniperkron. Until just now, Peter had been laughing and joking merrily, but something had happened (Menshikov had been noticed going up to him and whispering in his ear) and the laughter had faded from his eyes. He was clearly holding himself in check. When the next course was brought in, his knife and fork began to twitch so convulsively that they either missed the plate altogether or the fork went wide of his mouth. With gentle solicitude, Amalia Kniperkron laid her hand on his cuff:

"Herr Peter, you must be calm..."

He threw down his knife and fork and laughed with a grimace:

"My hands are my enemies... (Pushing his hands under the table.) What are you staring at, you, clever little girl? We've some dancing to come yet — we're going to shake our heels."

Lines furrowed her brow and she said quietly, with reproach:

"Herr Peter, I am really so unworthy of your trust?"

The pupils of his eyes darted and his nostrils flared:

"Rubbish, rubbish!"

"Herr Peter, I have a grave presentiment."

"Has some old woman read something in the beans?.."

He turned away. Amalia's lips quivered:

"My father also is most seriously alarmed... I received a letter today..."

"A letter?" Intently, with rounded eyes, like a bird of prey, he looked at the girl's troubled face. "What does Knipercron write?"

"Herr Peter, we would prefer not to see what can be ignored no longer... We would prefer not to hear it. But it is now being about openly discussed... (Amalia was afraid to utter a certain word and her nose reddened.) It is contrary to all reason... It would be disloyalty... (Her eyes filled with tears at the tension.) One word from you, Herr Peter..."

Her lips parted as if she were about to heave a profound sigh. Vassily Volkov came to a halt quickly and grimly behind Peter's chair. His wet, wind-blown face was unshaven, his cloth caftan was creased — it had evidently only just been taken out of his kit-bag. The corner of a letter was protruding out of his cuff. Amalia went very white and transferred her gaze quickly from the tsar to Volkov. She knew that Vassily and his wife were abroad... It was clearly not good news that had brought him here posthaste.

Peter pointed to the chair beside him... "Sit down." Menshikov came up in a luxuriant wig, a crooked smile on his face. Peter stretched out his hand and Volkov hurriedly gave him the letter.

"From King Augustus," said Peter, not looking at Amalia. "Bad news... Disturbances in Livonia... (He turned the letter over and over, then resolutely slipped it behind the skirt of his caftan.) Oh, well... Livonia's long way off... They can't stop us enjoying ourselves... (To Volkov.) Tell me in your own words..."

Volkov was about to rise, but Menshikov pressed him down again by the shoulders and stood leaning there, his elbows on the back of the chair.

"King Augustus's Saxon army has invaded Livonia without declaring war," stammered Volkov. "They marched to Riga, but they only managed to take the small fortress of Koberschanz. They were afraid to attack the town because of the fierce fire put up by the Swedes... After this unsuccessful diversion, General Karlowicz marched to sea and took the fortress

of Dunamunde by storm, where, at the end of the attack, he was killed at point-blank range by a musket shot."

"A pity, a pity about Karlowicz," said Peter. "Well, is that your news?.." He laid his cold hand on Amalia's arm. The girl was breathing fast. He squeezed her arm so hard that it hurt. Volkov was at a loss for words. Letting the ringlets of his peruke run through his be-ringed fingers, Menshikov said casually:

"I asked him, but he doesn't know any more. He was in Warsaw when the news arrived from Riga. King Augustus sent him here on the same day. The Saxons haven't taken Riga, nor are they going to... The Swedes have sharp teeth... It was a futile move to make..."

Without withdrawing her hand, Amalia quickly bowed her quivering face.

"This is war, this is war, Herr Peter," she whispered. "Don't conceal it from me... I realised it on the journey here. O, what a calamity..."

He was silent for a moment, then said huskily:

"What did you realise? Were things being said? Who was saying them?"

She then began evasively to tell how astounded she had been by prince Roman's speech at the coaching-house.

"So Buinosov blabbed to you, did he?" asked Peter ominously. "Which one? That clown over there? (Amalia nodded, the tears trickling down her cheeks.) You believed that fool? We always thought you were a clever little girl... Take a hankie, wipe your eyes... (He felt that Amalia was listening to him against her will, she was calming down.) Write this to your father: I will never consent to begin an unjust war and I shall not tear up the permanent peace treaty with Charles. And even if the King of Poland takes Riga, he won't have that city; I shall wrest it from his claws... On this I swear by God..."

Peter's eyes were round with sincerity. Menshikov bowed his head in confirmation, but covered his face with his fingers, for any sign of amusement would have been inappropriate under the circumstances.

Amalia applied her handkerchief to her eyes, smiling in embarrassment. She believed, and was repentant. Peter leaned cheerfully back against the leather of his chair.

"Prince Roman," he summoned. "Come to us."

Owing to the shrieking of the jesters, who were kicking up a fuss round a dish of lampreys (they were rolling over and over in a heap, snatching the lampreys out of one another's mouths), Roman Borisovich did not hear the tsar's voice straightaway; he was laughing so much that he was having an attack of hiccoughs. Antonida and Olga, terror in their eyes, indicated that he was being called... Princess Avdotia tugged him by the breeches: "Go for your just reward, go, Father, it's what we've been waiting for."

Roman Borisovich trotted off to obey the summons and bowed, his sword hitching up the hem of his waistcoat: "Here I am, my true benefactor,—yours body and soul!" Peter ignored him and said to Amalia:

"This man is an exemplary politician and most dashing. But I don't know whether to appoint him Generalissimo—I fear he will shed much blood—or to take him for domestic requirements."

He turned to Roman Borisovich so suddenly that a red mist veiled the prince's eyes.

"I hear you intend going to the wars. To take back our ancient Livonian patrimonies. Is that so, may I ask?"

Roman Borisovich blinked, and a sick sensation sank from his stomach down to his knees.

"We need bold generals. For great valour, I dub you Generalissimo of the whole jesters' army."

Peter jumped up and dragged Roman Borisovich by the hand over to the stage where the Prince-Pope, his arms dangling down, a frown on his puffy face, was bellowing in his sleep as if his last hour had come. Peter shook him. "Go to the devil," muttered the Prince-Pope. Sensing a new diversion, the guests thronged round the stage. The jesters crawled between their legs and scampered all over the steps. A cross of two tobacco pipes tied together was thrust into one of the Prince-Pope's hands, a raw egg into the other. Roman Borisovich was made to kneel. The flustered Prince-Pope sucked up his saliva:

"Dub him?" he asked. "I'll dub him all right, damn him..."

He broke the egg over Roman Borisovich's pate so that the yolk streamed down over his wig, shoved the cross in his face and dealt him a kick. The jesters started crowing. Prince Ro-

man Borisovich was planted astride a chair, given a hambone to hold and dragged in among the tables. He froze, clutching the bone, his mouth wide open. The guests poked at him with their fingers and rocked with laughter. Amalia Kniperkron laughed ringing too; all her fears, all the pain of her heart had ended in merriment.

Antonida and Olga only became truly aware of the catastrophe when, looking round, they saw that their escorts had vanished; Leopoldus Mirbach and Bartholomaus Bram were stubbornly and drunkenly bowing low to the malignant Shakhovskoy princesses in the ballroom doorway. The eight young women, rounding their bare arms and turning their powdered heads from side to side, were curtseying again and again, glancing haughtily at the Buinosov girls.

## 2

The Volkovs never did get to Riga that winter. The wide winter sleigh route ran from Smolensk, across Orsha and as far as Kreuzburg. On the other side of the Polish frontier, it was different from the Moscow state (a whole day's riding through dense forest between one village and the next); settlements were frequent. There would be a monastery or a Catholic church and manor house on high ground, and in some places there was a castle too, with stone walls and ditches. Our estates were inhabited only by low-ranking gentry, or some boyar out of favour sitting glumly behind his high fence like a badger. The Polish gentry lived merrily in grand style.

Sanka could not bear it: she desperately wanted to turn off the road into one of those fairy-tale castles whose pointed tiled roofs and enormous windows could be seen behind the immemorial limes. Volkov kept losing his temper. "We're government people, we're carrying documents, it would be unfitting for us to fish for invitations, you must understand that..."

They did not have to fish for an invitation. Once, late in the evening, they drove into a big village that seemed dead; even the dogs didn't bark. They put up at a tavern. While the landlord, a tall, round-shouldered Jew in a fox-fur hat was

struggling to open the gates, Alexandra alighted from the carriage to stretch her legs on the snow. She looked at the half-moon; its dismal light had not paled the stars. She felt somehow languid... She walked slowly along the street... The small huts were nearly all dilapidated, many without roofs, only the rafters showing black against the moonlit sky. She walked as far as a rime-clad weeping willow with a little shrine under it. A woman in a white overcoat was lying prone by the locked door, her face in her hands. She did not look round as the snow creaked. Alexandra stood for a moment, sighed, and went away. She kept imagining that she could hear music somewhere in the distance.

Volkov called her. They went into the tavern through a long passage lined with tubs and casks. The landlord lit their way with a tallow candle, his thick beard jutting in front of his little face with its senile, gloomy eyes.

"No bedbugs, you'll have a good night's sleep," he said in Byelorussian. "Just so long as Pan Malahowski doesn't take it into his head to drop in on us for a meal. Oh, God, God..."

There was a sour smell in the hot tavern. A baby was crying behind a torn curtain. Alexandra took off her fur coat and reclined on the cushions brought in to her out of the cold. She felt like weeping too. She frowned, feeling to the right of her heart, where her soul dwelt, an intolerable agitation. She was sorry for someone, or perhaps she wanted to love.

The door in the tavern kept banging as the landlord and various other people came and went. The child wept meekly. "Another sleepless night..." Her husband called her: "Aren't you going to have some supper, then?" She pretended to be asleep. In her mind's eye, she could see the waning moon casting its faint light by the shrine onto the back of the woman in the white peasant overcoat. She wanted to shake off the memory, but couldn't... Then she saw something that had happened long ago: her mother's terrible eyes when she was dying... A taper was burning and her little brothers in their wet shirts were poking their heads down from the stove and listening to their mother's groans, looking at the shadow of the distaff on the timbered wall as if it were a little old man with a thin neck and a goatee beard... "Sanka, Sanka," her mother called with a sigh, "Sanka, I'm so sorry for them..."

Volkov ate his noodle-soup slowly. The door banged again. Someone had come in and was sighing quietly. Sanka swallowed back the tears. "That's how you'll ride past happiness,"she thought. "Sanka, at least have a drop of milk." It was her husband again.

A woman's voice at the door: "Kind Sir, the Queen of Heaven will preserve you -- we haven't eaten for three days; be so kind as to let us have a little bread." Sanka sat up on the bench as if stung. There was a woman kneeling in the doorway, the profile of a child's pathetic face peeping from the bosom of her white overcoat. Sanka jumped to her feet and snatched up a dish of goose: "Here!" She gave it to the woman and shook her head peasant-fashion. "Go away, go away!"

The woman went out. Sanka sat down at the table. Her heart was beating fast and she could not even drink any milk. Volkov asked the Jewish landlord:

"What's happened? A bad harvest?"

"No, God hasn't brought us to that yet. Pan Malahowski collected up a good harvest and has taken it to Konigsberg..."

"You don't say!" Volkov put down his spoon in amazement. "So they're selling it in Konigsberg. And are they getting good prices?"

"Ach, prices, prices!" the landlord croaked, twisting his bearded head from side to side. He put the candlestick on the bench, but hesitated to sit down himself. "Nowadays, Konigsberg merchants know perfectly well that the wheat won't be taken to anybody but themselves. It won't go to Riga; who wants to pay taxes to the Swedes? So they give a gulden..."

"A gulden! For a pood?" Volkov incredulously opened wide his blue eyes. "You must be lying!"

"By God, I'm not lying. Why should I tell lies to the high-born sir? When I was a young man, they used to take the grain to Riga, and they'd get one-a-half or two guldens a pood. Will the gentleman be offended if I sit down? Oh, God, God... All these pranks of Pan Malahowski's... He cut down one of our Jews, Alter, with a sabre in Pan Badowski's village. And Pan Badowski is the kind of gentleman who is ready to raise the whole district gentry over a chicken — and Alter had been his bailiff. So Pan Badowski rode with his gentry against Pan Malahowski. There was shooting with pistols. Oh, God,

God... Then Pan Malahowski attacked Pan Badowski with his gentry. So much powder used, and all for one slain Jew... Pan Malahowski's gentry came here, seized me, seized five of our Jews, threw us into an open cart, pinned us down with poles, just as if they were carrying sheaves of corn, and took us to Pan Badowski's place... Pan Malahowski held his sides for laughing: "There you are, Pan Badowski, six Yids for one." Yankel Kagan had one rid broken while he was lying in the cart, and Moisei Levid had his liver crushed, and my legs have been numb ever since..."

"So, if you're not lying," said Volkov, pouring milk into an earthenware dish, "why is your village so poor?"

"What have the peasants to grow fat on?"

"Why should they get fat? You mustn't let the peasant prosper too much... Still, the huts ought to be re-roofed. I had a look, and cattle live better than you... Haven't you any people on quit rent?"

"All our peasants are on labour rent."

"How many days?"

"They work for the Pan all six days."

Volkov was astounded again. "Our tsar's Treasury wouldn't allow it — you couldn't get half a kopeck off a muzhik as poor as that..."

"Who pays the taxes to the Treasury here? The Pans, or what?"

"No, the Pans don't pay any taxes. We pay them..."

"Now there's a country for you!" Volkov sneered and shook his head. "The Pans are in clover, Sanya."

Sanka wasn't listening. Her eyes were wide open and staring. She turned to the window and pressed her face up against the wet glass. Outside, the sound of music, sleighbells and voices was growing louder and louder. The landlord, worried, took the candlestick and shuffled to the door with bent shoulders:

"I told you so. Pan Malahowski won't let you get any sleep..."

About ten sleighs drew up at the tavern. Jews were scraping away on fiddles and blowing wheezy clarinets. The gentry, in

a pile on the carpets with their legs in the air, were guffawing, shouting, frolicking about. One mustachioed worthy in a short sheepskin jacket was dancing on the trampled snow now kicking his feet out importantly and stroking his whiskers, now whirling frenziedly round, his sabre flying after him.

Horsemen galloped up with torches and leaped down. A team of four big horses with peacock feathers tossing on their heads loomed up out of the darkness. There were ladies in the open sleigh. (Sanka pressed her face hard up against the window-pane the better to see the foreigners. All were wearing slim velvet fur coats, fur collars, and little hats on one side.) The ladies were laughing in the torchlight. A burly Pan stepped down of the footboard of the sleigh, staggered up to the tavern and saw Sanka's face behind the clouded window-pane. "Ai-da!" he waved to the gentry. The Pan, with the gentry behind him, some in ordinary sheepskin coats, some very ragged, but all carrying sabres and pistols, burst into the tavern. The Pan, red as a copper kettle, his legs planted wide apart, ran his hand over his moustaches, which were so big that it could not cover them. His cloak of black and brown fox fur was plastered with snow — he had evidently fallen over several times already. Rattling his sabre and flashing his eyes at Sanka, he addressed her extravagantly, with drunken swagger:

"My most gracious Pani Princess, the accursed taverner reported your arrival late. Really! That such a beautiful and high-born Pani should spend the night in such a tavern! We shall not permit it. Gentlemen, go down at her feet and invite the lady princess to the castle..."

Filling the tavern with the reek of spirits, the gentry, some of them white-haired with sabre scars on their faces, began going down on their knees before Sanka, pulling off their hats and beating their breasts with their hands.

"Most gracious Princess, we would die rather than rise from your divine feet; please do come and visit Pan Malahowski."

Sanka jumped up from behind the table, pulling the travelling shawl from her shoulders. She stood before the kneeling gentry, pale, eyebrows raised, her nostrils quivering. The landlord held the candle high in the air. Pan Malahowski, looking at this beauty, shoved one out of the way, then another and,

taking a step towards her, himself went down heavily on his knee:

"I implore you."

Sanka still had the presence of mind to look round at her husband. Vassily, extremely frightened, was unbuttoning the collar of his shirt with a trembling hand to take out the package of papers testifying to his immunity. With a slight stammer, but in a lilting voice, Sanka said:

"I shall be happy to make your acquaintance..."

This was the second week that Pan Malahowski had been creating an uproar all over the Orsha district. His wife, Pani Augusta, was so fond of merrymaking and balls that she made her escorts dance until they were in a stupor. One of them, exhausted, would hide somewhere in a closet, be woken up and dragged, still half-asleep, into the columned hall where the skinny musicians, in patched lapserdaks, were knocking themselves out in the gallery. Candle-wax dripped from the Venetian candelabra under the richly painted ceiling on to sweaty wigs and fluttering petticoats; in the adjacent rooms, the district gentry enthusiastically drank and shouted their heads off.

Suddenly, during the night, Pani Augusta, a little curly-haired woman with dimples in her cheeks, thought of a new diversion and clapped her hands: "Let's go riding." They piled into the sleighs, raced with torches to a neighbour, where there were more casks of Hungarian wine, rams roasted whole for the distinguished guests and, for the gentry, enormous cauldrons of tripe with garlic. They drained their goblets to the beautiful ladies, to Polish honour, and to the great freedom of the Rzecz Pospolita.

Or Pani Augusta would have the notion of dressing her guests up as Turks, Greek, Hindus and smearing the faces of the poorer gentry with soot. After making merry all night, they went in costume at dawn to the neighbouring monastery, its bell ringing a welcome behind the bare trees on the hill. They attended Mass and then, in the white refectory, warmed by the blazing logs in the fire-place, they quaffed hundred-year-old mead and joked with the gallant monks in their perfumed robes — and spurs, just in case.

Sanka threw herself into this merrymaking with all the ardour of her being. She only changed her dresses and wet shirts, wiped herself with scented vodka and again, thinner, tall, completely possessed by the music, proudly curtseyed in a minuet or whirled like a mad thing in the polka.

Vassily resisted at first, but he was landed with two of the gentry, tipplers famous all over Poland, Pan Hodkowski and Pan Domoratski. They were the sort of who could down a gallon jar of beer, eat a whole goose garnished with plums, scoff a bowl of dumplings, and sink five bottles of Hungarian wine. Vassily was their boon companion day and night. When day began to dawn, he would longingly try to find his wife: "Sanka, my dear, we must get ready to leave, we've had enough." Sanka would not even look round. Pan Hodkowski would seize him by the shoulders and they would stagger off to carry on with their carousing...

Vassily bellowed and burrowed into his pillow. Someone was shaking him by the shoulder. (He was sleeping fully clothed, except for his caftan and his sword.) His head was like lead and he could not lift it up. He was being shaken determinedly by someone whose nails were digging into his skin... "Oh, now what is it?"

"Come and dance with me... Come on, come on," Sanka was urging in a voice so strange that Vassily raised himself on one elbow. Sanka was shaking her powdered head at him. There was a look in her eyes — it was as if the house were on fire or some other disaster had struck... "Don't you want to dance with me?"

"You're off your head, woman. It's morning outside..."

Sanka's face had changed and her bare shoulders were bluish in the glow of the dawn behind the big transparent window... "What's she been up to? She's as pale as death."

"You'd better lie down and get some sleep."

"You don't want to, you don't want to... Oh, Vassily..."

She sat down suddenly on the high chair and let her bare arms hanging down. She smelt of sweet French perfume — alien somehow. She stared at her husband without blinking, and a lump rose to her throat.

"Vasya, d'you love me?"

She didn't ask him softly, in a normal manner, but as if she were making a threat. Vassily punched his pillow in exasperation.

"Just leave me in peace."

She swallowed the lump in her throat.

"Vasya, d'you love me?"

What could he say to that? Woman's babble! If his head hadn't been splitting so, Vassily would certainly have sworn heartily at her. But he had neither the strength nor the inclination. He said nothing, looking his wife up and down with a reproachful smile. Sanka slowly lifted up her hands:

"If you won't bother about me, on your own head be it..."

She rose to her feet, kicked back the long train of her gown and went out.

"Shut the door, Sanya..."

Vassily couldn't get to sleep nevertheless. He sighed, turning over and over, listening to the distant music in the halls downstairs. Against his will, he thought: "It's bad, it's wrong." He sat up, holding his head... "This sort of life gets you nowhere..." He got dressed and went out of the back entrance to the services to make sure the carriage was in order. Seeing Antip, his driver, at the coach-house (he had bought him for sixty rubles from the governor of Smolensk to replace the one he had lost near Vyazma), he was overjoyed at meeting one of his own people:

"Well, Antip, we'll be leaving tomorrow."

"Ah, Vassily Vassilievich, that would be good — I'm so sick of it here."

"Go to the tavern in the evening and see about horses."

Vassily walked slowly back across the park. Pure snow was blowing, in the wind the trees, dotted with rooks' nests, were whispering solemnly. Many peasants, men and women, were working at the pond — evidently the whole village had been rounded up to clear away the snow, they were putting up poles with flags that were flapping in the wind. "All trifles and amusement." Vassily suddenly halted as if someone had gripped him by the shoulders and frowned. His heart was thudding. He

had guessed: it was him! How many times he had seen him through a drunken haze; only now did he realise that it was he — Pan Wladislaw Tyklinski, a tall beau in a Parisian orange velvet caftan. Alexandra was always with him: minuet, country dance, mazurka — always with him.

Vassily looked down at his feet. The snow was sticking to his cheeks and neck. But the realisation was over and everything was veiled by a drunken stupor again. He could not make up his mind. And he was already wanted for breakfast. (There was a custom here: after a merry night, they had a hearty breakfast and slept till lunch-time.) His two tiresome friends Hodkowski and Domoratski, fat-bellied boasters and liars, roaring with laughter, took him by the arms: "There's such marvellous sauerkraut and sausage being served, Pan Vassily..." Alexandra was not at table, nor was the other man. Vassily downed some strong matured vodka, but it had no effect.

He left the table and walked through into the ballroom. It was empty. A tall, bony Jew was asleep in the gallery, slumped against a Turkish drum. Vassily carefully opened the two-leafed doors into the gallery of mirrors: Pan Wladislaw was walking past the windows over the waxed parquet floor littered with confetti, the skirt of his orange caftan dashingly hitched up on his sword. Alexandra was with him. He was talking to her passionately, his peruke tossing. She was listening with bowed head. There was something virginal and defenceless about her bowed head: an inexperienced girl had been taken abroad, abandoned, insulted — she could only choke back her tears...

Vassily should have gone up to them in a rage and demanded satisfaction from the proud Pole, but he merely looked through the gap in the doorway in agonies of self-pity... "A fine protector you are, Vassily." Meanwhile, with a beautiful gesture, Pan Wladislaw pointed to a sidedoor. Sanka's shoulder-blades barely lifted; almost imperceptibly, she shook her head. They turned and went into the winter garden. Vassily involuntarily stiffened. He must roll up his sleeves — except that they weren't sleeves, they were only lace. And he had left his sword upstairs... Oh, damn!

He slammed the doors shut, but he was assailed from behind by the two noisy fat men, Hodkowski and Domoratski.

"Pan Vassily, just you try hot dumplings with sour cream."

He sat at the table again, his mind in a whirl. Shame and anger. They were clearly in collusion. These gluttons were getting him drunk... Run for his sword and fight? A fine emissary of the tsar he would turn out to be — fighting over a woman like a peasant in a tavern!.. Oh, leave it. As if it mattered!

He pushed away the glass that had been brought up to him and quickly left the banqueting hall. Upstairs, gnashing his teeth, he looked for his sword... It turned up under a pile of Sanka's petticoats... He belted his sash round him as tightly as possible and ran down the staircase. They were already asleep in the castle. He ran round the winter garden. There was no one there. He bumped into a chambermaid — she performed a low curtsey and squeaked:

"Pani Princess, Pani Malahowska and Pan Tyklinski have gone for a ride. They said not to expect them back before evening..."

Vassily went back upstairs and sat at the window till twilight. He thought and thought to the point at which he even began composing a letter of apology to tsar Peter, but he couldn't find pen and paper.

It then turned out that Sanka had returned long ago and was resting in Pani Augusta's bedroom. After supper, a carnival and firework display were to be held on the pond. Vassily looked into the coach-house and ordered Antip to start getting the horses ready and to carry some of the boxes to the carriage. He returned gloomily to the castle. They were lighting lampions on the cornices, the wind was fanning the flames. The snowy clouds had dispersed, the night was blue, one side of the moon had been sliced off.

Near a snow-covered garden structure decorated with stone women Volkov heard husky cries, panting and the clashing of sword blades. He was going to walk past — he was not interested. Round the corner (at the foot of a Cupid with an arrow) stood a woman with a fur coat over her shoulders: she was holding it together at her throat, her white wig was awry. He looked harder — it was Alexandra. He ran up. Just round the corner, in the moonlight, Pan Wladislaw and Pan Mala-

howski were duelling with sabres. They were leaping with legs wide apart, lunging, stamping their feet, frantically sobbing for breath, clashing sabre against sabre.

Sanka rushed up to Vassily, threw her arms round him, hugged him tight, threw back head and muttered through her teeth with closed eyes:

"Take me away, take me away..."

The mustachioed Malahowski gave a loud yell on seeing Volkov. Pan Wladislaw flew at him: "She's not yours, we won't allow it." The gentry were running with bare sabres, across the park to separate the duellists.

Vassily calmed down when they had driven about half a hundred versts away from Pan Malahowski. He never said a word to Sanka and asked no questions, but he was grim. She sat in the carriage, subdued, her eyes closed. They bypassed the rich estates.

At one place, the guide, sitting on the coach-box with his frozen fingers tucked into the narrow sleeves of his sheepskin coat, screwed his head round, pointing down to the tiled roof of a chapel by the road. Antip pushed his head into the carriage.

"Vassily Vassilievich, we can't help stopping here."

It turned out that this shrine (in honour of St. Jan Niepomuk) had been built by the famous Pan Boreiko — his obesity, gluttony and hospitality were a legend. His house was a long way from the road, behind a dark wood. In order to rope in drinking companions without difficulty, he had set up the shrine on the very road way with a kitchen and cellar in one building and refectory in the other. Here permanently lived a capuchin, a fat, jolly man. He officiated at the services, and played cards with the Pan when things were dull. They kept watch together for passing travellers.

Whoever rode by, whether it were an important Pan, or a carefree member of the gentry who had drunk up his last hat, or a respectable trader — the serfs stretched a rope across the road. Waddling and wheezing, Pan Boreiko would bring him a glass of wine (the serfs briskly unharnessing the horses in the meantime). The abashed traveller would be dragged into the

shrine, the capuchin would say Grace and the feasting would begin. Pan Boreiko never did people any harm, but he would not let anyone leave sober. Some of them he carried to their sleigh unconscious, others, never recovering, yielded up their souls to the Lord while the capuchin granted him absolution.

"What are we going to do, Vassily Vassilievich?" asked Antip.

"Turn round and drive hell for leather over the fields."

Clearly, the Pans had only one thing in mind—merrymaking: it seemed as if the whole of the Rzecz Pospolita was feasting without a care in the world. In the villages and towns, wherever there was an important house, the gates would be wide open and drunken gentry would be yelling on the porch. In the towns, however, the streets were clean and there were many fine shops, and markets. Painted signs projecting into the street were hung over the shops and barbers' shops, over the workshops; a lady in a Polish jacket, a cavalier on horseback, a barber's copper bowl. A German with a clay pipe would be smiling a welcome in the doorway, or a Jew in a fine fur coat would politely invite the passerby to drop in and have a look round. Not as in Moscow, where the damned merchant drags you by the skirts into a wretched little shop containing only rubbish at three times the price. Here, you could go into any shop and feast your eyes. If you were short of cash, they allowed you credit.

The nearer they came to the Livonian border, the more frequent were the towns. Windmills turned their vanes on hilltops. In the villages, they were already carting the dung to be spread. There was a smell of spring in the overcast skies. Sanka's eyes began shining again. They drove up to Kreuzburg. Here, the unexpected happened.

At a coaching-inn, behind a partition, Pyotr Andreyevich Tolstoy was having a rest. He was returning to Moscow from abroad. On hearing Russian voices, he came out with a sheepskin coat over his shoulders, his balding head bound with a silk foulard.

"Forgive an old man," he said, bowing politely to Alexandra. "Most delighted at this pleasant encounter..."

He looked closely and caressingly at Sanka from under eyebrows as black as stoats' tails as she removed her coat and

hat. He was approaching fifty, lean, and short in stature, but very wiry. Tolstoy was out of favour in Moscow; the tsar could not forgive him the past when he and Khovansky had raised the streltsy for Sophia. But Tolstoy knew how to bide his time. He took on difficult missions abroad and carried them out in exemplary fashion. He was well versed in languages and polite letters; he knew how to buy a painting at a fair price (for Menshikov's palace), a useful book, and he could appoint a capable assistant. He did not push himself into the foreground. Many were beginning to fear him.

"Is it not to Riga that you are proceeding?" he asked Alexandra. A Kalmyk girl was helping her off with her felt bootees. Alexandra replied with a bored air:

"We're in a hurry to get to Paris."

Tolstoy felt for his horn snuff-box, tapped it with his middle finger and dipped his big nose into the snuff.

"You will not avoid trouble — you would do better to go by way of Warsaw."

"Why?" asked Volkov, rubbing his weather-beaten face.

"There is war in Livonia, Vassily Vassilievich. Riga is under siege."

Sanka clutched her cheeks. Volkov blinked with alarm.

"Has it started? How is that? Is Augustus on his own, or what?.."

He broke off; Pyotr Andreyevich had transfixed him with such a coldly warning eye. Tolstoy raised his snuff-stained nose. He sneezed, and the ends of his foulard flew up like ears.

"I advise you, my amiable Vassily Vassilievich, to turn off for Mitau immediately. King Augustus is there. He will be glad to see you and especially your spouse, *si charmante, si sympathique...*"

Tolstoy gave them some details of the war which had broken out. As early as in autumn, the King Augustus's Saxon battalions had begun moving towards the Livonian frontier, to Yanishki and Mitau. Dalberg, the governor of Riga (who three years previously had insulted the Moscow embassy and Peter), either did not want to see anything or simply disdained this as a mere diversion. Riga could have been taken with ease. But invaluable time had been lost on the delights of Venus and on mindless frivolities. The Saxon Commander-in-Chief,

young General Flemming fell in love with Pan Sapieha's niece and spent the whole winter feasting in the castle. The soldiers caroused in their own fashion and looted the villages of Courland. The peasants began fleeing to Livonia. In Riga they finally came to their senses. The governor fortified the city.

"When General Karlowicz joined the army, military operations, thank God, began at last," stated Pyotr Andreyevich Tolstoy, pushing out his clean-shaven lips as he articulated each word with relish. "But Venus and Bacchus, alas, are deaf to the whistling of bullets: General Flemming seeks more ardent tussles. Instead of digging approaches to the Swedes, he bravely storms the fortress of the beautiful Polish girl and carries her off to Dresden, where the wedding will soon take place..."

Volkov gathered from all this that things were going badly for King Augustus. He reasoned that if he was to avoid any unpleasantness and not be held responsible for it by the tsar, he must turn off for Mitau.

"Where are your knights, Sir? Where are your ten thousand cuirassiers? Your vows, Sir? You have lied to the king."

Augustus abruptly put the burning candelabra down before the mirror among the powder-puffs, gloves and vials striding fume. One candle fell over and went out. He began striding up and down over the silvery bedroom carpet. His strong, tightly clad calves were quivering with wrath. Johann Patkul stood before him, pale, gloomy, kneading his hat in his hands.

He had done everything humanly possible. All winter he had written inflammatory letters and secretly sent them to the knights on their Livonian estates and to Riga. Disdaining Swedish law and disguised as a merchant, he had crossed the border and had stayed in the castles of von Benckendorff, von Sievers and von Pahlen. The knights had read his letters and had wept, remembering the former might of the Order, and had complained about the grain taxes; those who, as a result of the Reduction, had lost part of their lands, swore not to spare their lives. But when, finally, the Saxon army burst into Livonia with Augustus's manifestoes on the overthrow of Swedish

domination, none of the knights dared mount his horse and, what was even worse, many joined the burghers in fortifying and defending Riga from the king's mercenaries, who were eager to begin looting.

Patkul had brought this unreassuring news to Mitau that day. The king had left his dinner, seized a candelabra from the table, gripped Patkul by the arm and rushed him into the bedroom.

"You drove me into this war, Sir, you!.. I unsheathed my sword, relying on your sworn undertakings. And you dare to announce that the knights of Livonia, those drunkards and liver-sausage eaters, are still vacillating!"

Huge and magnificent, in a white military coat, Augustus approached Patkul, his fists clenched, furiously brandishing his lace sleeves, shouting in his exasperation much that had better been left unsaid.

"And where is the Danish auxiliary army? You promised it to me. Where are the tsar Peter's fifty regiments of soldiers? Where are your two hundred thousand chervontsy? The Poles, devil take it, are expecting that money. They are waiting for me to succeed, when they will take to their sabres, or for me to fail, when they will begin unprecedented internecine warfare..."

The foam dribbed from his full, clean-cut lips and his sleek face quivered. Averting his eyes and swallowing the fury that threatened to choke him, Patkul replied:

"Sire, the knights would like to have a guarantee that the overthrow of Swedish domination will not mean their being subjected to an invasion by the barbarians of Moscow. This, as I think, is the cause of their vacillation..."

"Rubbish! Groundless fears!.. Tsar Peter swore on the crucifix not to go beyond Yamburg. The Russians need Ingermanland and Karelia. They won't even make an attempt on Narva."

"Sire, I fear treachery. I know that spies have been sent from Moscow to Narva and Revel, ostensibly to buy merchandise; but they have been ordered to obtain plans of those fortresses."

Augustus stepped back. His big hand with its painted nails

fell to the hilt of his sword and his round chin protruded haughtily.

"Herr von Patkul, I give you my royal word: neither Narva nor Revel, nor, even worse, Riga will set eyes on the Russians. Whatever may happen, I shall snatch those cities out from under Peter's claws..."

The king was desperately bored in Mitau, in the duke's castle. His presence near the army did not accelerate events. He succeeded only in taking the little fortress of Koberschantz. Riga was bombarded twice, but without success. The Livonian knights were still deliberating whether or not to mount their horses. The Polish magnates were warily biding their time, evidently preparing a question for the king at the next Sejm: What were his aims in dragging Poland into this dangerous war?

The weather in Mitau was foul. There was not enough money. The Courland landowners were uncouth, their wives more like pregnant cows than members of the fair sex. The young Duke of Courland, Friedrich Wilhelm, was a drunkard and an insufferable bore. Had it not been for the efforts of his new friend, Athalia Desmont, who had left gay Warsaw with the king, Augustus's fiery temperament would have been under threat of melancholia.

Athalia Desmont arranged balls and hunts, sent for Italian players from Warsaw and scattered money about with such incomprehensible generosity that even Augustus snorted as he instructed the minister of the court to find so many gold doubloons for the countess. The Italian players coughed and sneezed in the harsh climate. At the elegantly planned balls, the local gentry, unfamiliar with refined pleasures, simply goggled at the sumptuousness of it all, mentally calculating how much it must have cost the king.

One day, the king was dining. According to his custom, he was eating alone at a small table with his back to the fireplace. The ladies were ranged in front of him in a semicircle on gilded chairs. His Majesty was wearing a small, stylish wig, a light flowered coat and a batiste shirt trimmed with lace that fell on to his stomach. The wine butler, a parchment-skinned old

man with dyed whiskers, was serving warmed wine. The reception was being attended that day by six local baronesses with beetroot cheeks; six portly barons were standing tensely behind their floured wigs. Two chairs were vacant.

As he ate stuffed hare, Augustus kept glancing absent-mindedly at the ladies. The logs cracked in the fireplace. The barons and baronesses did not burge, evidently apprehensive of indecent sounds in the form of wheezes. The silence was lasting too long. Augustus leaned on his elbows, wiped his lips and dropped his napkin on to the table.

"Mesdames et Messieurs, I shall not weary myself by speaking yet again about the high satisfaction which I enjoy at being the guest of your beautiful city. (He confirmed this with a slight movement of the wrist.) One must take as exemplary the superior qualities of the Courland gentry, who happily combine sober practicality with a noble mode of thought..."

The barons bowed their horsehair perukes with dignity. The baronesses, after a slight delay (since they had a poor knowledge of French), heaved up their gorgeous posteriors a little way and curtseyed.

"Mesdames et Messieurs, alas, in our practical age, even kings, concerning themselves with the highest welfare of their subjects, are sometimes constrained to come down to earth. This truth is not understood by all, alas (with a sigh, rolling his eyes). What else other than bitterness can be aroused by the near-sighted and frivolous prodigality of some pride-puffed Pan, squandering gold on banquets and hunts and on feeding drunkards and idlers at a time when his king, like a simple soldier, goes sword in hand to storm an enemy stronghold..."

Augustus took a sip of wine. The barons listened tensely.

"It is not done to question royalty. But in the eyes of their subjects, kings read the agitation that troubles their souls. Messieurs, I began this war alone, with ten thousand of my Guards. Messieurs, I began it for the sake of a great principle. Poland is torn by internal strife. The Elector of Brandenburg, that rapacious wolf, is gnawing our vitals. The Swedes are lords of the Baltic Sea. King Charles is a boy no longer; he is bold. Had I not been the first to invade Livonia, the Swedes would be here by tomorrow, the grain of Courland would be

burdened with five times the tax and the Reduction would spread to your lands."

His blue eyes widened. The barons began to breathe heavily, the ladies pulled down their heads between their shoulders.

"The Lord has entrusted me with a mission—from the Elbe to the Dnieper, from Pomerania to the Finnish coast, to enthrone peace and happiness in a single great power. Someone must eat the soup that has been prepared. The merchants of Sweden, Brandenburg and Amsterdam are holding out their spoons for it. I am of the nobility, Messieurs. I want the soup to be consumed by you in peace. (He raised his eyes to the ceiling, as if measuring the distance from there to floor level.) Yesterday, I had two foragers hanged: they had looted a number of farms on Baron Ixkul's estate... However, Messieurs... My soldiers are shedding their own blood, they need nothing but glory... But horses need oats and hay, confound it... I am forced to appeal to the farsightedness of those for whom we are spilling our blood..."

The barons went red in the face, now realising what he was driving at. Augustus, increasingly exasperated by their silence, began spicing his language with soldiers' idioms. Athalia Desmont came in; her half-closed eyelids gave her a languorous, passionate air. She curtseyed to the king with elegant ease, fluttered her mother-of-pearl fan (the baronesses glanced sideways at this amazing Parisian novelty) and said, with a bow:

"Sire, grant me the happiness of presenting the Muscovite Venus to you..."

Her enormous train gliding over the floor, she went up to the doorway and led Alexandra in by the hand. Truly, of all her schemes, this was probably the shrewdest. Athalia, the first to know about the arrival of Volkovs, had gone to meet them at the coaching-station, had summed up Alexandra's qualities, had taken her to her own quarters in the palace and had gone through her wardrobe, strictly forbidding her to put on anything from Moscow: "My friend, these are the clothes of savages. (And this of the finest dresses, that had cost a hundred chervontsy each!) Wigs! but those were fashionable in the last century. My sweet, wigs haven't been worn in Versailles since the Festival of the Nymphs!" She bade the maid throw all the

wigs on the fire. (Sanka was terribly shy, she just blinked and agreed to everything.) Athalia opened her own trunks and arrayed Alexandra as a "dame de qualité in an evening gown."

Augustus looked with agreeable astonishment at the Muscovite Venus: two ash blonde waves on the inclined head, a curly lock of hair falling on to the half-bared breast, a few flowers in the hair and on her gown, which was plain, not gathered up on the hips, and resembled a Greek tunic; a gold fabric cloak thrown over one shoulder and trailing over the carpet behind her.

Augustus took the tips of her fingers, bowed and kissed them. (She glimpsed, out of the corner of her eye, the red faces of the baronesses.) This was it, the long-desired hour. The king looked like a being from a magic realm somewhere, or an image from a pack of cards; big, magnificently attired, amiable, with a red mouth and high, sable-black eyebrows. Sanka looked enchantedly into the king's confidently smiling eyes: "I am undone."

Vassily had now been stuck at the coaching-inn for a week, Sanka had been taken away and he had been forgotten. He kept going to the palace to make enquiries, and the king's adjutant always courteously assured him that His Majesty would not delay in seeing him next day. Out of boredom, Vassily would spend the afternoon roaming about the crooked little city streets. Narrow, sombre houses with steep roofs and iron doors; no life inside, unless high in some little window an angry face in a nightcap pressed itself up against the windowpane. Nearly all the shops on the market place were shut. Sometimes, drawn by four skinny horses, guns would rumble over the big cobblestones of the roadway. Gloomy riders shielded themselves with woollen cloaks from the piercing wind. Only the beggars — men and women with anguished faces or children in rags — wandered in groups round the city and stared up at the windows with doffed hats.

In the evenings, after supper, Vassily would sit in the candlelight with his cheek propped up on his hand. He would think of his wife, Moscow, his restless life in the service. His fathers and grandfathers had taught him to be humble, to fear

God and to respect his elders. That wouldn't get you far nowadays. It was the ones with claws and teeth that were getting to the top. Alexander Menshikov was bold and brazen; he had been a batman not so long ago — he was a governor now, a cavalier, he was only waiting for the chance to jump two heads in front of the rest. Alexei Brovkin had been made Guards captain for recruiting troops; he had the effrontery to grab governors by the wig. Yakov Brovkin, a fatheeled, evil, coarse muzhik, was in command of a ship. And Sanka, ah, Sanka, my God, my God!.. Any other husband would have tanned her hide long ago...

It meant that something else had to be understood. The quiet ones didn't fit any more. Like it or not, you had to scramble up the ladder... (He looked with sad eyes at the candle-flame... He would like to live in comfort, on a quiet country estate, with the blizzard howling over the snow-covered roof... The stove, crickets, and unhurried, agreeable thoughts.) Should he start reading that Pufendorf? Try commerce, like Alexander Menshikov or Shafirov? We don't do things like that. It would be better if war came soon. The Volkovs were humble, yes, humble, but let them mount a horse and then see who was in front — Yakov and Alexei Brovkin?

During one such pensive evening at the coaching-inn, the king's adjutant appeared and, with great courtesy, conveyed his apologies and asked Volkov to come to the palace at once. The agitated Vassily hastily got dressed. They set off in a carriage. Augustus received him in the bedchamber. He put out his hand in greeting, would not let Vassily kneel, embraced him and made him sit by his side.

"I cannot understand anything, my young friend. I can only offer my apologies for the disorder in my court. Only at dinner did I learn of your arrival. The countess Athalia, that most frivolous of women, was charmed by your spouse, tore her away from her husband's embraces and, hiding her from all for a week now, has alone been delighting in her company..."

Volkov was not given the chance to bow when he hastened to rise to his feet, since Augustus pressed him down again by the shoulder. He talked loudly, laughing much. He did not, however, laugh for long.

"You are travelling to Paris, I know. I wish to request you, my friend, to carry secret letters to brother Peter. Alexandra Ivanovna will, in complete safety, await you under the roof of Countess Athalia. You are conversant with the latest events?"

The laughter suddenly seemed to have been wiped of his face and ugly lines settled at the corners of his mouth.

"Things are bad at Riga. The Livonian knights have betrayed me. The best of my generals, Karlowicz, died the death of a hero three days ago..."

He half-covered his face with his hand and, in a moment of silent concentration, paid his last respect to the luckless Karlowicz.

"Tomorrow I leave for Warsaw to the Sejm to avert a most frightful ferment of minds... In Warsaw I shall hand you letters and papers... You will spare no effort, you will demonstrate the necessity for the immediate participation of the Russian army."

During the night, Athalia woke up the maid; they lit the candles, kindled the fire and brought in a little table laden with fruit, pates and wine. Athalia and Alexandra got out of the wide bed in their night-dresses and lace nightcaps and sat down to supper. Alexandra was desperately tired (no wonder — not a moment's respite all day, not a sincere word, everything la-di-da, always on the qui vive), but, rubbing her swollen eyes, she manfully drank wine from a goblet that shone like a soap bubble and smiled with the corners of her mouth turned up. She had not come abroad to sleep, but to learn refinement. This same refinement (as Athalia explained) was not understood at all the royal courts by any means; even in Versailles, there was no lack of rudeness and bestiality.

"Imagine, my dear, you cannot open the windows on a damp evening, there is such a stench round the place from the shrubbery and even from the balconies. The courtiers take shelter in the crush, sleep anywhere, in disarray and drench themselves with perfume to keep away the smell of dirty linen. Ah, you and I must go to Italy... It will be like a beautiful dream come true... It is the homeland of all refinement; poetry,

music, the play of passions, subtle pleasures of the mind — all at your beck and call..."

Athalia was peeling an apple with a silver fruit knife. Her legs crossed, one slipper dangling and her eyes halfclosed, she took a sip of wine.

"Refined people are the true royalty of life... Listen to how this is put: 'The good ploughman walks behind his plough, the industrious artisan sits at his loom, the bold merchant sets sail on his ships at the risk of his life... Why do people toil? After all, the gods are dead... No, I see other divinities amid the blushing clouds on Olympus.'"

Sanka listened to her like a hypnotised rabbit. The lines moved on Athalia's brow. She held out her empty glass: "Fill it up," said she.

"My friend, I still cannot understand why you are aftaid to accept Augustus's love. He is suffering... Virtue is only indicative of a mental failing. With virtue a woman covers moral ugliness, as the Queen of Spain covers her sagging breasts with a thick dress. But you are intelligent, you are brilliant... You are in love with your husband. No one hinders you from displaying your passionate feelings, only do not do so openly. Do not make yourself ridiculous, my friend. The good citizen goes out for a walk with his wife on Sunday with his arm round her waist so that no one may dare steal his treasure from him. But we women of refinement are above this sort of thing."

Sanka's bowed face was not visible under the lace of her nightcap. What was she to do? She could dance for a day and night without sitting down, she could impersonate any Greek goddess you cared mention, she could read a whole book through at night and learn verses by heart... But there was something inside her that she could not overcome — she would be consumed with shame, would be in torment afterwards if Athalia persuaded her to take pity woman-wise of the king... ("All that will come, of course, only not just yet.") How could she explain it? Shouldn't she point out that she had not been born on Parnassus, but had tended cows; that she was ready to part with her virtue, but there was something in her that she could not root out, as if her mother's terrible eyes were keeping watch on something precious, something vital?

Athalia did not insist. She pinched Sanka's cheek and changed the subject.

"My dream is to see tsar Peter. Oh, with reverence shall I kiss the hand that can wield both hammer and sword. Tsar Peter reminds me of Hercules and his twelve labours; he fights the Hydra, he cleans the Augean stables, he lifts the world on his shoulders... Is it not truly a fairy-tale, my friend, that in a few years tsar Peter has created a mighty fleet and an invincible army? I want to know the names of all his marshals and all his generals. Your sovereign is a worthy adversary of King Charles. Europe is waiting for the Muscovite eagle to sink its talons at last into the Swedish lion's mane. You must gratify my curiosity..."

Every time Athalia turned the conversation to matters concerning Moscow, Sanka answered as best she could. She could not understand why the warily secretive voice of her friend became so disagreeable... Then, in bed, pulling the blanket up to her nose, she would lie awake for a long time, troubled by these nocturnal conversations... Oh, it wasn't an easy matter, that refinement.

## 3

"...And, finally, this entire coalition is no more than a scrap of paper that can frighten the venerable senators but not your fiery valour... The Danes will not dare break the peace — trust a woman's intuition. Tsar Peter is tied by peace talks, he will not come out until the Turks loose his hands. But this is not going to be. The clerk Ukraintsev has distributed all his sable coats to the viziers — he has nothing more to say. Tsar Peter has been trying to intimidate the Turks by launching a new Voronezh fleet, instead of which he has put the English and Dutch on their guard. Their ambassadors in Constantinople do not even want to hear about Russian ships in the Black Sea. Most irreconcilable of all is Leszczynski, the Polish ambassador, Augustus's mortal foe. He has been beseeching the Sultan in the name of the Rzecz Pospolita to help the Poles obtain the Ukraine with Kiev and Poltava from the Russians.

"Here is the latest news, or scandal, whichever you prefer — Warsaw is full of it. Augustus and I are spending a great deal of money on balls and diversions — alas, the king's popularity is still on the wane. He is in a fury and is putting himself in a ridiculous position, trailing after a certain common Russian woman...

"And so the favourable wind of history fills your sails and whistles in the rigging of imminent glory. Now or never. Your devoted Athalia."

Charles received this letter in Kungsor Forest. He read it leaning against a tree. The pines were murmuring and low clouds were scudding across the March sky. The hounds were baying below in the misty gorge and, from the note of impatience in their voices, it was clear that they were tracking a big animal. An old jaeger, trampling down the snow between the rocks, descended several paces and turned round expectantly. The king read the letter over and over again. The courier who had delivered it was holding his horse by the bridle, its lilac eye turned on the baying dogs.

A reindeer appeared out of the gorge, going up the incline in a series of powerful bounds. Charles did not raise his musket. Tossing back its branched horns, the reindeer sped in among the trees. After fifty paces, a shot came from where the French ambassador was standing at his station. Charles did not turn round, the letter fluttering in his now wind-reddened hand. The jaeger, his wrinkled chin dug into his leather collar, returned to his original position behind the skinny, small-headed, thin-faced stripling in the long elk-skin coat.

"Who gave you this letter?" asked Charles.

Without releasing the bridle, the officer moved a pace nearer.

"Count Piper, and he bade me inform Your Majesty by word of mouth concerning extremely important news not yet known to the Senate."

The grey eyes of the ruddy, fat-faced officer were inquiring and bold. Charles turned away. These gentry, they were all the same, watching him as if waiting for something — all the Guards were like a pack of starving hounds.

"Precisely what were you ordered to convey to me?"

"Danish troops, fifteen or twenty battalions, have crossed the border into Holstein."

Charles slowly crumpled up Athalia's letter. The baying of the hounds was drawing nearer again. The roar of a bear came from the forest gorge. Charles raised his musket, which had been propped against a tree, and said over his shoulder to the officer:

"Change your horse and ride back to Stockholm. Tell Count Piper that we are enjoying ourselves here as never before. Three full-grown bears have been surrounded. I invite Count Piper, General Rhenskjold, General Lowenhaupt, and General Schlippenbach to the battue. Go, and make haste."

There were red blotches on his usually pale face. With a flick of the finger, he cocked his musket. He stepped decisively towards the gorge, his frozen boot-tops slapping. The officer stared with a grin at his boyish, bent back and at the tense, conceited attitude of the head; he jumped into his saddle and bounded over the deep snow until he was lost to sight in the forest.

Fourteen bears were killed or driven into the nets. Charles revelled like a little boy in the frantic bellowing of the netted bear cubs—they were bound with raw thongs to be sent to Stockholm. Piper, Rhenskjold, Lowenhaupt and Schlippenbach, who had arrived that day at dawn (in leather caftans and hats decorated with black-grouse plumes), each speared a beast. Guiscard, the French ambassador, personally shot a monster seven feet tall.

The weary hunters returned to the log castle over the waterfall that roared among the ice-floes at the bottom of the gorge. It was hot in the dining-room because of the blazing pine branches. The glass eyes of reindeer and elk heads glittered on the walls. Guiscard, stocky, full of red wine, twirling his moustaches and waving his short arms, told with inspiration how the beast, whipping up the snow like a hurricane, leapt out of its lair and was ready to devour him: "I could already feel his stinking breath on my face! But I managed to leap back and take aim. A flash in the pan!.. My whole life passed before me in a trice... I seized my spare musket..."

The taciturn Swedes listened, drank and smiled. During supper, Charles did not even have a sip of beer. When the

French ambassador had, with some difficulty, been conducted away to his bedchamber, Charles had a sentry posted at the door and sat by the fire. Piper and the generals moved their chairs up closer to him.

"I want to know your opinion, gentlemen," he said, and closed his lips firmly. His little boy's nose was bright red in the heat of the fire.

The generals bowed their heads. In all matters, but especially in this, it was needful to think carefully. Piper slowly wiped his square chin.

"The Senate is afraid and does not want war. An extraordinary session was held on the eve of our departure. Stockholm is disturbed at the rumour of the invasion of Livonia by the King of Poland and, in particular, by the commencement of hostilities by the Danes. The shipowners, timber and grain dealers sent a deputation to the Senate. They were given an attentive hearing and not one of the senators spoke in favour of war. It was decided to send ambassadors to Warsaw and Copenhagen to end it with peace at all costs."

"And their own king's opinion of this?" asked Charles.

"The Senate evidently assumes that Your Majesty's vanity has been adequately gratified by the bear hunt."

"Excellent." Quickly, like a lynx, Charles turned his narrow face to look at Rhenskjold. The general drew the air through the big nostrils of his upturned nose.

"I think," he stated, his blue eyes round with earnestness, "I think that there are many young gentry in the army who feel cramped in Sweden... Men will be found willing to win glory by the sword. If the king leads us to the ends of the earth, we shall go to the ends. For the Swedes, it will not be the first time..."

His straight mouth smiled good-naturedly. The generals nodded in confirmation: "It would not be for the first time that we have sailed from our native cliffs for foreign lands in quest of gold and glory." When the heads ceased nodding, Piper said:

"The Senate will not grant a farthing for war. The royal Treasury is empty. This must be discussed."

The generals were silent. Charles bit his lips. Steam rose

from the soles of his thigh-boots, which were resting on the fender.

"Money is needed for the first few days only, so that we can embark the army on ships and transport it to Denmark. The French ambassador will give me the necessary money. He will give it to me, because otherwise I shall obtain it from the English. Our subsequent military operations must be paid for by the King of Denmark. He will pay."

The generals moved up close to the king's chair, voicing their support. The skin moved on Piper's brow. Once again, he could only marvel at this boy.

"Even if we should decide against this war, the powers will compel us," said Charles. "We shall do better; we shall attack first... The magnificent Augustus dreams of a great empire. Like me, he has no money; he is obtaining chervontsy from the tsar Peter and drinking them up in the company of girls. Augustus would not make a bad fair-ground actor. Even less am I scared by the tsar of Moscow; he will lose his allies before he will teach his regiments of muzhiks to fire muskets... Gentlemen, I wish to put forward a plan for discussion..."

That evening, over a map spread out on Charles's knees, the three generals drew up their disposition: Welling, the governor of Narva, would take command of the Swedish troops in Estland and Livonia and would go to help Riga; Lowenhaupt and Schlippenbach, under cover of military manoeuvres, would assemble the Guards and the army at Landskrona, a military port in the Sund; Piper would do all necessary in Stockholm to distract the Senate's attention from these preparations.

They threw more pine roots into the fireplace and dismissed the sentry at the door. Supper was served. Monsieur Guiscard, who had slept well, appeared in the dining-room, rubbing his hands. Charles offered him a seat at the fire and said, coughing as if the words were sticking in his throat:

"Dear friend, you may be assured of my warm and devoted love for my brother and your sovereign... (Guiscard's hand movements slowed down suddenly.) Sweden will remain a true guardian of French interests in the northern seas. In the dispute over the Spanish succession, I offer my sword to Louis. (Guiscard bowed his head low, spreading out his short arms.)

But I do not wish to conceal it: the English are doing everything possible to incline Sweden to their side... Apart from the king, there is a Senate in Sweden, and I cannot read their minds... Alas, the world is full of contradictions just now... Today I learn that an English fleet has appeared in the Sund... To avert a fatal mistake, I need material proof of your friendship, Monsieur Guiscard..."

The bellowing bear cubs were taken in a cart through the streets of Stockholm. Behind, on horseback, rode Charles, the hunters and the jaegers. Brass horns blew and the packs of hounds bayed. The good people came to the windows and shook their heads: "The king has not chosen the best time for diversions."

There were alarming rumours disturbing a city accustomed to many years of peace. The English and Dutch fleets had appeared in the waters of the Sund. Why? Was it not to join up with the Danes and put an end to Swedish domination over the northern seas? The vast country of Poland threatened to obliterate the Swedish garrisons from the Baltic coast. In the east, the thousand-mile-long Moscow frontier was almost undefended, save for the little fort of Nyenschanz near the Neva estuary and the fortress of Noteborg where the river flows out of Lake Ladoga.

It was a chilling thought — war against nearly the whole of Eastern Europe with only a small army of twenty thousand soldiers and an extravagant king. Peace, peace, of course, even if it meant sacrificing the lesser to save what mattered most.

Charles appeared in the Senate without taking off his riding coat and, with arrogant absent-mindedness, listened to the paternal speeches about God's right hand raised at that hour over Sweden and about reason and virtue. Toying with the ivory handle of his dagger, he replied that he was engaged in organising a spring carnival at Kungsor Castle, and only after the festivities would he state his view on foreign policy. The spokesman of the senators rose with a low bow and, in exemplary language, wished the king carefree amusements.

The king shrugged his shoulders and went out. A few days later, he did indeed leave for Kungsor. On arriving, he changed

mounts and, accompanied by Rhenskjold and ten Guards officers, galloped to Landskrona. On the way, almost without resting, he spared neither horses nor men. It was as if some other man had taken possession of him: his passions and will were in the grip of a single obsession.

On a cloudless spring morning Swedish ships carrying fifteen thousand picked troops sailed out into the Sund. By midday, the outlines of ships and galleys, black as if suspended between the rim of the sea and the bright sky, appeared on a sunlit stretch of the sea. Hundreds of pennants were fluttering from the masts. This was the cruising Anglo-Dutch fleet.

When the king's standard was run up the mast on the leading Swedish frigate, round puffs of smoke began detaching themselves from the sides of the ships, gunshots rolled, the smoke drifted south in a pall. The English and Dutch admirals, in their gold braid, went in boats to the leading frigate.

Charles stood waiting for them on the bridge. He was wearing a grey-green coat buttoned tightly up to his black cravat and his greased thigh-boots with wide tops adapted for all the vicissitudes of fate. Under the small hat with its turned-up brim, the wig had been plaited into a queue and inserted in a leather bag. His hand was resting on his long sword, as on a stick. Thus did he set out on his long journey to conquer Europe.

The admirals, who had heard so much about this spoilt youth, were amazed at his uncommon determination and self-control. He talked of intolerable insults inflicted on him by the kings of Poland and Denmark and magnanimously agreed to accept the assistance of the Anglo-Dutch fleet to punish the Danes for their breach of faith.

On that day, the three combined fleets, their sails covering the sea, set course for Copenhagen.

## 4

It had stopped raining and the clouds had been dispersed by the wind. The evening was warm and smelt of grass and

smoke. Far away, in the German suburb, the bell was tolling on the kirch.

Peter was sitting at a raised window, the candles yet not having been lit, and was reading petitions. At the other side of the bedroom, at the door, gleamed the motionless, bald white skull of Nikita Demidov, a smith from Tula.

"...Truly, Sire, the people are becoming too lax in the fulfilment of their obligations — give them half a chance and they think that everything will be as it was of old... (The letter was from a tax farmer, Alexei Kurbatov.) Matvei Shustrov, a member of the merchants' guild, submitted a report on trade and possessions, and in his return he wrote that his possessions totalled only two thousand rubles and he was completely ruined. I know for a fact that Matvei has in his house in the Zaryadye, under the floor boards of the privy, which it is an embarrassment to enter, forty thousand of his grandfather's gold chervontsy. And the said Matvei is an inconstant man; he depletes his wealth with drunkenness and does not multiply it, and if he is not curbed he will exhaust it entirely. Great Sovereign, instruct that an under-clerk be sent to Matvei in the Zaryadye with twenty soldiers, and then he will take out that gold money..."

Peter nodded and laid the report on the left-hand side of the window-sill, meaning that he intended to take action. The next was from a judge, Mishka Beklemishev, written in a shaky hand. He could only decipher some of it: "... I served your father and your brother and was in many services, and was appointed judge in the Moscow Judicial Commission... I have served to this day as judge without reproach... Owing to this dedicated service, I have been getting into debt and I am now impoverished. Great Sovereign, take pity; for my dedicated service, send me as governor, even if only to Poltava..."

Peter yawned and threw the petition on the pile of papers on the right. There were also denunciations from Belgorod and Sevsk to the effect that men serving in the regiments and constables and all other ranks, serfs and peasants did not want to work for the sovereign on the building of seagoing ships or on timber-felling and were fleeing from all directions to the Cossack communities on the Don... On the corner of the paper

he noted: "Summon the governors of Belgorod and Sevsk and interrogate under duress."

There was a tearful complaint from some state peasants against Sukhotin, governor of Kungur; he had started taking eight altyns extra for his own pocket from every house and was ordering the huts and bath-houses to be sealed, and to hell with the consequences—it was cold weather, many mothers were giving birth in cattle-sheds, children were dying prematurely; and the governor was taking some women by the breasts in the municipal chamber and squeezing their tits till they bled, and was committing other outrages and acts of bodily harm...

Peter scratched the back of his head. The wailing could be heard all over the land. If one governor was removed, another misbehaved even more badly. Where were the right people to be found? They were all thieves. He began writing, his goose quill sputtering: "Send to Kungur..."

"Nikita," he said, turning round. "If I appointed you governor, would you steal?"

Without moving away from the door, Nikita Demidov sighed cautiously:

"Naturally, Peter Alexeyevich. It's that kind of job."

"No people, eh?"

Nikita shrugged one shoulder, as if to say, of course, on the one hand, there are no people...

"You break them under interrogation... You pay a big salary... And they steal... (He dipped his pen and wrote, although it was dark.) They have no conscience. No sense of honour... I've made so many clowns of them... Why?" (He turned round.)

"It's the well-off ones who steal worst, Peter Alexeyevich; they get bolder..."

"Watch it, you are a pretty bold one yourself..."

"I could weep, Peter Alexeyevich... You're grieving because there aren't enough people... But eleven of my best smiths were taken for soldiers from urgent duties..."

"Who took them?"

"Your Majesty's Boyar Chemodanov, on your authority. He came to Tula with clerks for a census... (Nikita broke off and peered intently into the darkness; he could not see Peter's face, since the tsar had turned right away from the window.)

Why hide it from you—there's been such goings-on in Tula! All the ones who could pay, got out of it... He sent an under-clerk to my works... If I'd been in Tula at the time, I wouldn't have begrudged five hundred rubles for such skilled men. Do me the favour, somehow. They were all armourers and no worse than the English master-craftsmen..."

"Put in a petition..." said Peter through his teeth.

"Very well... Yes, people will be found in the end."

"All right... Talk business..."

Nikita went up to him warily. It was a matter of great importance. That winter, he had gone to the Urals, taking with him his son Akinfi and three knowledgeable Old Believers men from the Danilov wilderness whose trade was mining. They had explored the Ural ranges from Nevyansk to the towns on the Chusovaya River. They had found iron mountains, they had found copper, silver ore and asbestos. Riches were lying there and going to waste. All round was wilderness. The only iron foundry on the Neiva River, built two years before in accordance with a Ukase from Peter, was smelting barely half a hundred poods, and it was difficult to transport even that wretched quantity owing to the lack of roads. Dashkov, the manager, had taken to drink out of boredom, and Protasyev, the governor of Nevyansk, had also taken to the bottle. Those of the workers that were fit enough had fled and only the weaklings remained. The mines had gone to wrack and ruin. There were immemorial forests all round. If you scooped up the water in the lakes and rivers, you could wash out gold even on a sheepskin. It wasn't like Nikita Demidov's Tula works, where the ore was poor and there wasn't enough firewood (since the year before, it had been forbidden to fell oak, ash and maple trees for charcoal), and every pest of an under-clerk was breathing down your neck. Out there, in the Urals, there were majestic spaces, but they were difficult of access and big money was needed. The Urals were desolate.

"Peter Alexeyevich, nothing will come out of it with us... I've talked to Sveshnikov, Brovkin, and others as well... And they balk at the idea of sinking their interests in such a remote business. And I'm offended; it's as if I were their agent or something... There's so much work got to be put into raising the Urals..."

Peter suddenly stamped his foot.

"What do you need? Money? People? Sit down... (Nikita sat down with alacrity on the edge of a chair and fixed his sunken eyes on Peter.) I need a hundred thousand poods of cast-iron cannonballs and fifty thousand poods of iron this summer. I haven't time to sit through a lot of hargey-bargey while you're thinking about it. Take the Nevyansk Factory, take the whole of the Urals... That's an order! (Nikita thrust forward his gypsy beard and Peter moved up closer to him.) I have no money, but I will give money for that. I will make over whole districts to the works. I will order you to buy people from the boyar patrimonies. But mind... (He raised his long finger and shook it warningly twice.) I'm paying the Swedes a ruble a pood for iron; you'll deliver it to me for three grivenniks..."

"Not practicable," said Nikita hastily. "It won't work out. Half a ruble..."

He stared blankly, the whites of his eyes showing, and Peter looked at him furiously for a moment. Then he said:

"All right. That'll come later. And another thing; I'm watching you, you thief. You'll pay me everything back in cast iron and iron in three years... By God, you're a bold one... Remember, or by God I'll break you on the wheel..."

Nikita cleared his throat quietly and said in a husky whistle:

"I'll pay you back that money ahead of time, by God."

It was one of those evenings when a man feels very much at a loss. Peter wanted to ask for the candles to be lit; he glanced at the unread papers, lay down on the window-sill and put his head out of the window.

It was already night, but it felt even warmer. The leaves were dripping. There was a slight mist hanging over the grass. Peter drew the thick air through his nostrils — it smelt of swelling sap. A drop fell on to the back of his neck and a tremor ran over his body. He slowly wiped away the damp off his neck with the palm of his hand.

Everything was warily asleep in the spring silence. No lights anywhere; only far away, in the soldiers' suburb, could

the long, drawn-out cry of the sentry be heard: "A-a-all's we-e-ell!" His body felt languid, as if everything were bound up. He could hear the lively beating of his own heart, pressed up close to the window-sill. All that remained for him to do was grit his teeth and wait.

Wait, wait... Like a woman in the silence of the night, raising her head from the hot pillow and listening to the imagined sound of horses' hooves. Things had been going wrong all day. He'd been invited to supper at Menshikov's, but he hadn't gone. They'd be feasting there, no doubt! It had not been so difficult before; the great thing was to wait, to be able to wait. King Augustus had entered into the war on the impulse, had not waited, and his claws had got stuck at Riga... Christian of Denmark, too, had not been able to wait — he was himself to blame...

"Himself to blame, himself to blame," muttered Peter, peering at the dark lilac bushes, heavy after the rain. Someone was moving about there — his batman, maybe, with some slip of a girl... Colonel Langen had arrived that day from King Augustus with disturbing news: the Swedish lion cub had unexpectedly shown his teeth. He had turned up with an enormous fleet in front of the forts of Copenhagen and had demanded the surrender of the city. Without undertaking a battle, the terrified Christian had begun negotiations. Charles, meanwhile, had landed fifteen thousand infantry in the rear of the Danish army which was besieging a fortress in Holstein. The Swedes had burst into Denmark headlong, like a storm. Neither his own people nor foreigners could even have so much as thought that this prankster, this frail youth, could in a short time have displayed the reason and courage of a true military leader.

Langen had also conveyed Augustus's request for money. Poland could be stirred up to war if the primate and the crown hetman were given about twenty thousand chervontsy for distribution to the Polish aristocracy. With tears in his eyes, Langen beseeched Peter not to wait for peace with the Turks but to go into action.

These tales had made him itch for action. But he mustn't. He mustn't get involved in a war while the Crimean Khan was hanging on his tail. He must wait, wait for the right moment. Ivan Brovkin had arrived some time ago and had told him that

there had been an uproar in the Chamber of Merchants: Sveshnikov and Shorin had secretly begun buying up grain and sending it by water and overland to Novgorod and Pskov. Wheat had immediately gone up three kopecks. Revyakin had shouted at them: "What have you lost your wits for? Ingermanland isn't ours yet, and when will it be? There's no sense in letting wheat rot in Novgorod and Pskov..." And they had answered: "Ingermanland will be ours in autumn, and we'll take the grain to Narva as soon as the sleigh routes are fit..."

The wet bushes suddenly swayed and showered raindrops. Two shadows flitted past... "Ooh, stop it, lovey, don't, don't..." The lower shadow backed away and ran lightly off on bare feet. The other, a tall one (Misha the batman) went clumping after it in jack-boots. They stopped under a lime-tree together, and again: "Oh, stop it, lovey..."

Peter leaned out of the window almost as far as his waist. A great moon, wreathed in mist, was rising over the low ground behind the hoary willows. The ricks, the wooden shacks and the milky ribbon of the stream were conspicuous on the plain. Everything seemed eternal, immovable, unchangeable, fraught with alarm. And those two shades under the dark lime-tree were whispering hurriedly about only one thing...

"Stop fooling about," growled Peter in a deep voice. "Misha! I'll tan your hide."

The girl hid behind the trunk of the lime-tree. In less than a minute, the batman tiptoed up the creaking stairs and scratched at the door.

"Candle," said Peter. "Pipe."

He paced up and down, smoking. He took a paper from the table, held it close to the candle and threw it down again. Night was only just beginning. It seemed odd even to think of retiring. The pipe smoke drifted to the window, curled under the bottom edge of the sash and was carried away into the freshness of the night.

"Misha! (The batman jumped through the doorway again with his fat cheeks, snub nose and stupid eyes.) You watch it with the girls. Watch it. (He went up to him, but Misha — well, you could beat him with anything that came to hand, he was

incorrigible anyway.) Run and order them to send the gig. You'll come with me."

The moon had risen over the plain and droplets were glittering in the blue grass. The horse, snorting, rolled its eyes sideways at the dim shapes of the bushes. Peter flicked it with the reins. The mud flew off the wheels as they splashed along the mirror-like ruts. He drove along a sleeping street in Kukui, where, as many years before, the flowering tobacco plants behind the garden fences gave off their stiflingly sweet fragrance. In Anna Mons' windows, behind the now luxuriant poplars, shone openings in the shape of heart carved in the leaf of each shutter.

Anna, Pastor Strumpf, Konigseck and the Duke of Croy were peacefully playing cards by the light of two candles. From time to time, Pastor Strumpf would charge his nose with snuff, draw out a checked handkerchief and sneeze with relish, his moistened eyes cheerfully surveying his companions. The Duke of Croy, as he studied the cards, blinked his lashless eyelids in concentration; the drooping moustaches that had been present at fifteen famous battles were puffed out and had ridden up to his very nostrils. Anna, who had filled out by this time, her arms bare to the elbows, with diamond drops in her ears and on her velvet neckband, frowned weakly as she tried to understand the cards. Konigseck, alert, smartly dressed and powdered, now smiled tenderly at her, now tried to help her with silent lip movements.

Undoubtedly all storms were flying past this peaceful room in which there was a pleasant smell of the vanilla and cardamon that are put into the crispbread, in which the chairs and divans all stood in linen covers and in which the clock ticked slowly away on the wall.

"We modestly say Clubs," sighed Pastor Strumpf, raising his eyes to the ceiling.

"Spades," said the Duke of Croy, as if half-drawing a rusty sword.

Konigseck rose to look over Anna's shoulder at her cards and said sweetly:

"We are Hearts again."

Peter walked through the back entrance and unexpectedly opened the door. The cards fell from Anna's hands. The men

hastily rose to their feet. No matter how self-possessed Anna may have seemed — she uttered a cry of joy and, with a radiant smile, curtseyed, kissed Peter's hand and pressed it to her breast that was only half-covered by her fichu — he still imagined he had caught a fleeting glimmer of horror in her limpid blue eyes. Peter turned to the divan, his shoulders bowed.

"Carry on playing, I'll just have a smoke here."

But Anna had run up to the table on her high heels and was already mixing up the cards.

"We were amusing ourselves out of boredom... Ach, Peter, how nice — you always bring joy and merriment into this house... (She clapped her hands like a child.) We shall have supper..."

"I don't want anything to eat," growled Peter. He gnawed the stem of his pipe. The hatred was welling up in him. He glanced out of the corner of his eyes at the covers and the tapestry-frames with their balls of wool. A deep line appeared on Anna's clear brow (a line that had not been noticeable before).

"O Peter, then we shall think of some jolly game..." (And again there was something pathetic in her eyes.)

He was silent. Pastor Strumpf glanced at the clock on the wall, then at his own pocket watch: "My God, it's past two already." He took his prayer-book from the window-sill. The Duke of Croy and Konigseck also reached for their hats. Anna, in a more pathetic voice than was called for by good manners, cried out, wringing her hands:

"Oh, don't go away..."

Peter grunted, and the sparks flew from his pipe. He began to draw up his legs and jumped to his feet. He strode out abruptly, slamming the door. Anna's breathing quickened and she covered her face with her kerchief. Konigseck hurried out on tiptoe to fetch a glass of water. Pastor Strumpf thoughtfully shook his head. The Duke of Croy was shuffling the cards at the table.

Steam was rising from the wooden roofs and from the street as it dried in the sun; there was a deep blue abyss in the puddles. The bells were ringing — it was the second week of



*Peter the Great by Ivan Nikitin(?). Beginning of 1720*



*Wedding of Peter the Great and Catherine. 1712.*
*Engraving by A. Zubov*





*The Empress Catherine I (1683-1727). Engraving by I. Adolsky and A. Zubov. 1726*



*Count Boris Petrovich Sheremetev (1652-1719). Engraving by A. Schoonebeck. 1702-1706*




*The Battle of Grönhamm, 27 July 1720. Engraving by A. Zubov. 1721*






*St. Petersburg. 1727. View of the Peter-and-Paul Fortress. Engraving by A. Zubov*


ЗБУРГЪ



*Accustoming the boyars to the new fashion. Shortening the caftans. Engraving by R. Philips. 1742*





*Tsarevich Alexei (1690-1718), Peter's son. Engraving by C. A. Wortman, from an original by Ludden. 1729*



*Peter the Great by an unknown artist.*
*Amsterdam Museum*



*The Dying Peter by Ivan Nikitin. 1725*



*Head of Peter the Great (from the death-mask) by Bartolomeo Carlo Rastrelli. 1721. Leningrad. Russian Museum*



*Monument to Peter the Great in Petersburg by Étienne Maurice Falconet. Detail. 1782*

Easter, and the piemen and hot drink vendors were shouting their wares. People on holiday were strolling about, most of them drunk. On the peeling city wall, in the embrasures, young men in new shirts were waving poles topped with bast — they were racing their pigeons. The white birds fluttered in the blue, disporting themselves, wheeling round, swooping. Everywhere, behind the high fences, under the night-washed limes and grey willows, people were amusing themselves on swings: now girls, their braids flying, sailed up in among the branches, now a playful old man rocked a fat woman who sat squealing on the wooden seat.

Peter rode down the street at a walking pace. His eyes hollow, his face set in a scowl. The sun burned down on his back. His batman Misha, who had waited for him all night in the gig, kept jerking his head back to avoid dozing off. The people gave way before the horse's muzzle; only an occasional passer-by, recognising the tsar, snatched his hat off and bowed to the ground after him.

That night, Peter left Anna Mons and went to Menshikov's place. But he only glanced at the big curtained windows, from which came strains of music and drunken cries. "Oh, to hell with them!"— he lashed out with the reins, drove out of the yard and turned straight towards Moscow, to the streltsy quarter. At first he went at a brisk trot, then whipped the horse up to a gallop.

In the quarter, they stopped in front of an ordinary house over whose gates stood a pole with a tuft of hay. Peter threw the reins to Misha and knocked at the gate. In his impatience, he stamped his feet on the squelching mud. He started banging with his fist. A woman opened the gate. (Misha managed to catch a glimpse of her – big, round-faced, in a dark sarafan.) She gasped, and her hands flew to her cheeks. Peter stooped, walked into the yard and slammed the gate shut.

Misha, standing in the trap, saw a light wink on high up in two little windows of the log-built hut. Then the woman hurried out on to the porch and called:

"Luka, Luka..."

An old man's voice replied:

"Yes?"

"Luka, don't let anyone in, d'ye hear?"

"What if they start banging?"

"You're a man, aren't you?"

"All right, I'll take a staff to them."

"Now I get it," thought Misha.

After a short while, three in strelets bonnets emerged from an alley, looked up and down the empty, moonlight-flooded street and went up to the gates.

"On your way," said Misha sternly.

The streltsy went grimly up to the gig.

"Who is this fellow? What's he doing in the suburb at this hour?"

Said Misha to them quietly and with menace:

"Lads, get away from here, quick..."

"What?" yelled one of them bitterly, more drunk than the rest. "What are you trying to scare us for? We know who's from where... (The other two grabbed him by the shoulders and whispered something.) Your head's hanging by a thread too... Just you wait, just you wait... (His comrades were already dragging him away and preventing him from rolling up his sleeve.) We haven't all been hanged yet. We've got teeth... Just wait until they impale him on a stake." (They hit him on the neck — he dropped his hat — and dragged him up a side-street.)

The light in the windows soon went out. But Peter did not emerge. At the gates, Luka began sleepily shaking his rattle from time to time. Soon there was such a silence that even the weary horse hung his head. As he dozed, Misha heard the cocks crow. The light of the moon had faded. Daybreak glimmered yellow and pink at the end of the street. For the second time, he was awakened by someone whispering: little boys, some without breeches, were standing round the trap. As soon as he opened his eyes, they all ran away, waving their arms, their black heels a blur. The sun was already high in the sky.

Peter came through the gate and pulled his hat down over his eyes. He coughed thickly and took the reins.

"That's a weight off my mind," he said in a deep voice, and he started off at a trot.

When they drove out of Moscow into the green fields, they could see, in the distance, the steep roofs of the German quarter, and behind them were snowy clouds beyond the rim of the

world. Peter said: "That's how to deal with you batmen. And if you lark around any more in the nights, I'll lock you in the closet." He burst out laughing and tipped his hat on to the back of his head.

They overtook half a company of soldiers in ill-fitting brown coats. All had bundles of hay and straw tied to their feet — they were marching raggedly, their bayonets colliding. The sergeant frantically shouted: "Attention!" Peter alighted from the gig, took one and then another soldier by the shoulders, turned him round and felt the stiff, crumpled cloth.

"Muck!" he shouted, his eyes bulging at the pimply sergeant. "Who delivered these coats?"

"Mister Bombardier, the coats were sent by the Sukharev clothing factory."

"Take them off!" Peter grabbed the third, a skinny, sharp-nosed, soldier. The man almost choked with terror, looking at the round, black-moustachioed face of the bombardier towering over him. His comrades next to him tugged the rifle from his grasp, unbuttoned the crossbelt and pulled the coat off his back. Peter snatched it up, threw it into the gig and, without saying another word, sat in it and raced off in the direction of Menshikov's palace.

Shaking from head to foot, the coatless soldier stared as in a trance at the gig as it disappeared down the grassy road. The sergeant prodded him with his stick:

"Golikov, fall out, make your own way back... Attention! (Opening his mouth, he threw his head and shoulders back and roared in a voice that was heard all over the field.) Left — hay foot, right — straw foot! Remember what you've been told... Quick march! Hay — straw — hay — straw..."

The cloth for the Sukharev military clothing factory had been supplied by Ivan Brovkin's new mill, built on the Neglinnaya River near Kuznetsky Bridge. Menshikov and Shafirov had interests in the business. The Preobrazhensky Commission had paid an advance of a hundred thousand rubles for the delivery of cloth. Menshikov had boasted to Peter that he would deliver a cloth no worse than that from Hamburg. They turned out a mixture of waste and rags. Menshikov had been

born among thieves, had been a thief, and always would be a thief. "Just wait!" thought Peter, tugging impatiently at the reins.

Alexander Menshikov was sitting on his bed and drinking gherkin brine after the night's spree (they had been carousing till after six). His blue eyes were clouded and his eyelids puffy. A cup of gherkin brine was being held in front of him by the household chaplain, nicknamed Pedrila, a seven foot tall barrel-waisted man with the voice and looks of a wild beast.

He dipped his fingers into the cup and said sympathetically:

"Have a bite of cucumber..."

"Go to hell..."

Pyotr Pavlovich Shafirov was sitting in front of the sumptuous bed, his intelligent, benign face as round as a pancake, an open snuff-box at the ready. He was advising bloodletting — half a glass — or leeches on the back of the neck.

"My dear Alexander Danilovich, you're simply ruining yourself with the immoderate consumption of intoxicating beverages."

"You go to hell too..."

The chaplain was the first to see Peter in the window: "The big man himself and he's angry." They did not have time to collect themselves — Peter strode into the bedroom and, without greeting him, went straight to Menshikov and thrust the soldier's coat under his nose.

"That's better then the Hamburg weave, is it? Shut up, you thief, shut up, don't make excuses!"

He seized him by the front of his lace shirt, dragged him to the wall and, when Menshikov, his mouth open, resisted, Peter began hitting him from each side in turn so that his head jerked this way and that. In his anger, he snatched up a stick standing by the fireplace and broke it on Menshikov. Throwing him aside, he turned to Shafirov, who was kneeling humbly by his chair, but Peter only breathed heavily over him:

"Get up! (Shafirov jumped to his feet.) You'll sell the rubbishy cloth to King Augustus in Poland at the price I paid you. I give you a week. If you don't sell it, you'll be flogged with a knout in the stocks with your shirt off. Understand?"

"We'll sell it, we'll sell it much sooner than that, Your Majesty..."

"You and Ivan Brovkin will deliver me good cloth in exchange."

"God, myn Herz," said Menshikov, wiping away the snot and blood, "when were we ever able to let you down? Look what's just happened over the cloth..."

"All right. Have breakfast served."

# *Chapter Four*

## 1

Heat-wave. Not a breath of wind. The tiled roofs of Constantinople had lost their colour. Heat-shimmer over the city. No shade even in the parched, dusty gardens of the Sultan's palace. Ragged people were sleeping at the foot of the fortress walls, on the rocks by the mirror-smooth water. The city had fallen silent. Only from the lofty minarets were sustained voices beginning to call with their grievous reminder. In the nights, the dogs howled at the big stars.

A year had passed and the great ambassador Emelyan Ukraintsev and the clerk Cheredeyev were still staying in a house in Pera. Twenty-three conferences had been called, but the Russians had moved neither forward nor backwards, nor had the Turks. Recently, a courier had arrived from Peter with an order to conclude the peace with despatch, to concede as much as possible to the Turks, apart from Azov, and preferably not to mention the Holy Sepulchre at all in order not to anger the Catholics, and, having given way, to stand firm.

At the twenty-third conference, Ukraintsev said: "This is our last word. We have two weeks left to stay in Tsargrad. If there is no peace, blame only yourselves: the great sovereign's fleet is not what it was last year. You may have heard..." For intimidation, the great embassy moved from the house to the *Krepost*. The ship had lain idle so long that her sides were mouldy; cockroaches and bedbugs were breeding in the cabins and Captain Pamburg had grown quite fat with boredom.

Ukraintsev and Cheredeyev would wake up before daylight, scratching themselves and coughing in the stuffy cabin. They would put on Tatar robes over their underwear and go up on deck. Homesickness... A cloudless dawn that presaged a hot day would be spreading over the still dark Bosphorus and over the scorched hills. They would sit down for a bite to eat. Oh for kvass from a cool cellar... Some hope! They ate stinking

fish and drank water with vinegar, all tasteless. Captain Pamburg, after downing a glass on an empty stomach, would stalk about in his underpants over the creaked deck. An orange-hued sun would roll up into view. Soon it would be intolerable to look at the flowing water, at the boats of water-melons and musk-melons rocking idly at the shore, at the obnoxious crescents in the blue of the sky. From the narrow side-streets of Galata would be borne the noise of voices, shouts, and the bells of the street-vendors.

"Emelyan Ignatievich, what use am I to you?" said the clerk Cheredeyev. "Let me go. I'll make it on foot."

"We'll be leaving for home soon, very soon... Have patience, Ivan Ivanovich," replied Ukraintsev, closing his eyes in order not to see the now hateful city either.

"Emelyan Ignatievich, there's one thing I wouldn't refuse: to lie for a while in a garden, in the cool, in the goosefoot. (Cheredeyev was already shrivelled up with heat and misery and his eyes were hollow.) I have a little cottage in Suzdal. Two old silver birches in the garden. I dream about them. You get up in the morning, go and have a look at the cattle, but they've already been driven out on to the meadow... You go to the beehives, and the grass is waist-high... The muzhiks are working with a drag-net down by the river... The women are beating the washing with paddles... It's a blessing..."

"Oh yes, oh yes, yes," the great ambassador's wrinkled face nodded.

"Sheat-fish pie for dinner..."

Swaying from side to side, without opening his eyes, Ukraintsev said:

"Sheat-fish is a bit heavy for that time of the year, Ivan Ivanovich... In summertime, cold vegetable soup's the thing. Mint kvass..."

"Ruff makes a fine fish soup, Emelyan Ignatievich..."

"Mind you, you mustn't clean it, the ruff—it must be boiled as it is, slime and all. Boil it and take it out—then add sterlet to the broth..."

"What a country, my God! And this place, Emelyan Ignatievich? We're truly among the Mussulmans. It's like a mirage. And the Greek women here are true vessels of foulness..."

"That's something you should steer clear of, Ivan Ivanovich."

Sweat like grains of millet started forth on Cheredeyev's nose. His eyes sank even deeper. A six-oared sandal covered with a carpet was heading for the ship from the shore. Captain Pamburg suddenly shouted hoarsely:

"Bosuns, pipe all hands on deck! Lower the gangway!"

Solomon, one of the Grand Vizier's clerks, sailed up in the sandal and ascended the gangway, his slippers slapping hastily. He was quick in his thoughts and body movements, with high, pronounced cheekbones and a squashed nose. He glanced briskly round the ship, briskly applied the palm of his hand to his forehead, to his lips and to his heart, and then began speaking in Russian.

"The Grand Vizier bids me enquire after your health, Emelyan Ignatievich. He fears that you are cramped on board ship. Why are you angry with us?"

"Greetings, Solomon," replied Ukraintsev, taking as much time as he could. "Tell me about the health of the Grand Vizier. Is all well with you? (At these words, he half-opened a shrewd eye.) We're fine here too. We feel homesick. Still, we have fifty feet beneath us."

"Emelyan Ignatievich, may I have a word with you apart?"

"Why not, we can talk privately, to be sure." He coughed and said to Cheredeyev and Pamburg: "Leave us alone." He walked into the shade of a sail.

Solomon revealed his crooked teeth in a smile.

"Emelyan Ignatievich, I am your true friend, I know your enemies. I could number them off on my fingers. (He wiggled them before Ukraintsev's nose; the ambassador merely said: "Yes, yes".) I laugh at their intrigues. Were it not for me, the Divan would have stopped talking to you. I have managed to turn the course of events; the Grand Vizier will sign the peace tomorrow. But baksheesh must be paid to someone..."

"So that's how it is!" said Ukraintsev. Everything was clear now. A certain Greek, who was in his pay, had reported the day before that the French ambassador had returned to Constantinople from Paris and there had been an assembly of the Divan – the Sultan's ministers — and they had received big presents. All night, tormented by the heat and the cock-

roaches, Emelyan had wondered: "What is the meaning of this? It must be that they are inciting the Turks to war with the Austrian Emperor again. This means that the Turks must free their hands of Moscow affairs..."

"Well, baksheesh is a minor matter... You tell the Grand Vizier this: we are only waiting for a favourable wind. If there is peace, good; if not, so much the better for us... But this is what we mean by peace. (He looked firmly at Solomon from under his greying brows.) We shall destroy the Dnieper forts as we arranged. But, in exchange, there is to be Russian soil round Azov for ten day's ride on horseback. That is definite."

Taking fright, as if the baksheesh had already slipped out of his fingers — the Russians evidently knew more than they ought — Solomon clutched the great ambassador by the sleeve. He began to argue. They went into the cabin. Pamburg, knowing that many spy-glasses were trained on the *Krepost*, sent the men aloft as if to set sail for a voyage. Emelyan looked out of the cabin for a moment.

"Ivan Ivanovich, get ready, we're going to the city."

He soon came out again in a wig and carrying a sword. Solomon clutched him by the elbow as they descended the gangway to the sandal.

After noon, for the first time in many day, the narrow pennant flapped on the ship. The distant hills were veiled in a colourless pall. The blue of the sky seemed to become full of dust that shrouded the city.

Peace was signed on the following day.

## 2

Ivan the Great was booming out over Moscow. Twenty-four lusty lads of the market were swinging its bronze clapper. Prayers were being said for the granting of victory to Russian arms over the adversary. That day, after the service, the Clerk of the Duma Prokofy Voznitsyn, in a Russian fur coat, a fur bonnet and Russian leather boots, in accordance with the ancient custom, went out on to the Stewards' Porch (already overgrown with nettles and burdock) and clearly read out a Ukase from the tsar to the crowds, who came running up:

the men-at-arms were to go forth to war against the Swedish towns. All squires, court officials and nobles of Moscow and residents and all others registered for training in warfare were to be ready on horseback.

They had been expecting this for a long time, and yet Moscow was still shaken to the marrow. In the morning, the streets were covered with dust as the regiments and baggage trains passed by. The soldiers' women ran alongside, frantically waving their long sleeves. The townsmen in great numbers pressed back against the fences to avoid the guns bounding along over the roadway. Through the wide-open doors of the ancient churches, the powerful-voiced deacons roared "Grant us vic-to-ry!" The gates of the boyars' houses were swung open and out galloped horsemen, some wearing old-fashioned armour and cloaks, spurring their horses, charging into the crowds, lashing out with their whips. Wagons collided, axles cracked, horses whinnied.

In the Cathedral of the Dormition, by the light of many candles, the physically frail Patriarch Adrian, wreathed in incense smoke, wept as he raised his hands on high. The boyars and, behind them, a packed crowd of eminent traders of the best of the merchants' guild, were on their knees. All wept, looking at the tears flowing down the face of the patriarch as he gazed up into the dome. The archdeacon, his mouth wide open, the veins bulging on his temples,was drowning the patriarch's choir with cries for victory that rang out like the Last Trump on Judgement Day. Black was the patriarch's cloak, and black were the faces of the saints in their golden frames. The church was a-glitter with gold and glory.

Merchants had never before been admitted in such numbers into the Cathedral of the Dormition, that stronghold of the boyars. The Chamber of Merchants had spent twenty-five poods of wax candles for this occasion, and many distinguished people had set up candles separately, some half a pood, others a pood in weight. The deacon had been instructed not to spare the incense.

Ivan Artemich Brovkin, hoarse with sobbing, was repeating: "Glory, glory..." On one side of him, president Mitrofan Shorin was adding his own zealous voice to the choir; on the other side, Alexei Sveshnikov was devouring the gold icono-

stasis, the robes and the crowns as eagerly with his gypsy eyes as if all this pomp was his personal concern. Sumptuously attired, with roses embroidered on his vestments, the archdeacon roared "Vic-to-ry!" so loudly that the vaults shook; he was then veiled in clouds of incense smoke.

They went up to the cross. First was the white-haired, stout Prince-Emperor Romodanovsky. He kissed the cross for about a minute, his senile shoulders quivering. After him came the princes and boyars, each older than the one before (the young were already in service and on campaign.) The merchants moved with zeal. They flung jingling chervontsy, rings, and ropes of pearls on to the sexton's big plate, and then walked out of the cathedral, their heads high. Crossing themselves once again in the direction of the enormous image over the entrance, they shook their hair, put on their caps and hats and walked across the much-trodden square with its grassy patches to the Chamber of Merchants, their heels tapping briskly, looking in a proprietory sort of way at the windows of the Commissions.

As he came out of the cathedral, the velvet skirts of Ivan Brovkin's coat were clutched by a dozen black, gnarled hands: "Prince, Prince... A kopeck... A piece of bread!" they wailed — shaggy, toothless, half-dressed, festering... They crawled along, reached out, shook their rags. "Prince, Prince!" Ivan Brovkin looked round in horror: "What's the matter with you, you fools? I'm no prince, beggars..." he turned out both pockets and threw down some kopecks. A bald divine fool began shaking his limbs and howled in an heart-rending voice: "I want burning coals..."

At the same spot, smiling through his slit eyes and pinching his small beard, stood Vassily Revyakin. Somehow pulling his skirts free, Ivan Artemich said to him:

"Isn't that your army, merchant?.. You'd better cross your brow for such a day..."

"We come in peace, Ivan Artemich," said Revyakin, placing his hand on his stomach and bowing. "We are reconciled with the world. The world is God-forsaken, but we are with God."

"Ugh! Dog of a dogmatist!" Ivan Artemich walked away, and the divine fool bleated after him like a goat.

## 3

From time to time, the soldiers had to pile in and drag the wagons and guns out of the mud. For many days the wind had been blowing from the west, in which direction, strung out for hundreds of versts, the troops of generals Weide and Artamon Golovin were slowly moving. Repnin's division had still not managed to leave Moscow. Forty-five thousand foot and horse and some ten thousand wagons were on the move.

The chill mists trailed among the tree-tops in the forests. The rain was dislodging the last leaves from the silver birches and aspens. Wheels sank up to their hubs and the horses broke their legs in the bluish mud of the churned uproads. All along the route lay dead horses, their bellies bloated and their legs in the air. The men sat down in silence on the crests of ditches, completely past caring. The foreign officers proved particularly soft; they had long since dismounted and were shivering in wet cloaks and sodden wigs amid the utensils under the matting roofs of the wagons.

The troops had left Moscow looking smart in plumed hats, green caftans and green stockings; now they were approaching the Swedish frontier barefoot, up to the necks in mud and in disarray. As they skirted Lake Ilmen, many of the carts were engulfed by the swollen waters lashing the meadow bank.

Owing to the general chaos, the baggage trains were held up and lost their way. It was impossible to light campfires during halts: there was rain overhead and marsh underfoot. Worse than any mortal foe were the mounted squadrons of the noblemen's levy; like locusts, they stripped the surrounding villages of everything fit to eat. As they passed the infantry, they would shout: "Out of the way, bumpkins!" Alexei Brovkin, now a captain in von Schweden's advance regiment, had words with the mounted gentry on several occasions and belaboured them with his cane. There was much hard work and worry, but little order.

The advance army only emerged from the mud at the Luga River near the frontier, where it set up camp, waiting for the baggage trains. The men put up tents and somehow dried

themselves out. They remembered the Azov Campaigns, and some veterans recalled Vassily Golitsyn's Crimean Campaigns. There could be no comparison between this and marching over the free steppes to the warm south! They remembered how they used to sing as they marched... But what sort of land was this? Dismal swamps, storm clouds and wind. It would cost many tears to conquer this starving country.

Acrid smoke came from the camp-fires at the tents. The soldiers patched their uniforms and went down the slippery slope to the river to do their washing. Their government-issue shoes had come to pieces; it was just as well that some had obtained bast shoes and cloths; others had wound rags round their feet. Here, even without any fighting, half the men would be dead by November. The horsemen sometimes brought in one of the locals on the end of a lasso. They would gather round him and ask him in Russian and Tatar what sort of life it was here. The local people were stupid, they just fluttered their cow-like eyelashes. One was taken into Alexei Brovkin's tent for interrogation. Such prisoners were rarely released; they were usually bound and sent to the baggage train to be sold for three quarters of a ruble; some of them, if very fit, went at a higher price to the sutlers, who resold them to the agents of the military suppliers in Novgorod.

Alexei Brovkin was a very keen company commander. His soldiers were properly fed, he did not offend them without cause and he ate from a soldier's mess-tin; but he did not allow any misconduct. Every day someone howled with pain, lying with his buttocks bared under the canes outside his tent. During the night, he would wake up and check the patrols himself. Once, going unheard up to the fringe of the forest, he listened intently; there was a noise like a door creaking or some animal whimpering. He called out quietly. He dimly discerned a soldier sitting on a tree-stump, his arms round his musket barrel, his head pressed to the iron. Alexei said to him:

"Who's on patrol?"

The soldier jumped up and said inaudibly:

"I am..."

"Who's on patrol?" snapped Alexei.

"Golikov, Andrei."

"Was that you whimpering?"

"I know not..." said the soldier, looking strangely into his face.

"I know not! Oh, you Old Believers!"

He should have thrashed the man, of course... Alexei remembered the flame flying up above the forest over the collapsing church and the people being roasted alive, and this man wringing his hands on the ruddy snow. Alexei had ordered him to be seized with the possessed muzhik and the elder Nectarius. On the way, Nectarius had escaped, the devil knows how, during the night when they were halted under the firs. Andrei Golikov lay in the sledge under the matting, out of his mind, not eating, not speaking. In Povenets, at the municipal chambers, when threatened with knout at interrogation, he suddenly blurted out: "What are you tormenting me for? I've been tormented already..." And he began telling all (the under-clerk hadn't even time to dip his pen) pulling off his undervest to show the sores from his beatings. Alexei saw that this was no ordinary man — he was literate — and ordered him to get his hair cut, have a bath and sign on as a soldier.

"Do you think a soldier can whimper? Are you ill, or something?"

Golikov did not reply but stood correctly at attention. Alexei threatened him with his cane and went away. Golikov desperately called after him:

"Captain, Sir..."

Hearing that voice coming from out of the darkness. Alexei felt something quiver inside him. He had been like that himself once. He stopped. Grimly:

"Well? What d'you want now?"

"It's terrible in the dark, Captain. I'm afraid of the wilderness at night... It's worse than death, it is heart-sickness... Why have they driven us here?"

Alexei was so astonished that he went back to Golikov.

"How dare you argue, you vagrant! Don't you know what you can get for that kind of talk?"

"Kill me right here, Alexei Ivanovich... I'm my own worst enemy... Cattle couldn't stand this kind of life... The world doesn't want me... I've tried everything — even death won't have me... It's senseless... Take this musket, finish me off with the bayonet..."

In reply, Alexei clenched his teeth and hit Andrei on the ear. The man's head jerked, but he did not even gasp.

"Pick up your hat. Put it on. That's the last kind word you'll get from me, priestless one. You've picked up a thing or two from those elders. They've taught you to be clever! You're a soldier. If you're ordered to go on campaign, it's on campaign you'll go. If you're ordered to die, you'll die. Why? Because that's the way it's got to be. Stay here till dawn. If I hear you whimpering again, watch out!"

Alexei went away without turning round. He lay down on the hay in his tent. Dawn was a long way off. He felt cold, but there was no rain or wind. He pulled his horsecloth over his head. He sighed. "Of course, each keeps his mouth shut, but they think to themselves all the same... Oh, people..."

A round-shouldered soldier, Fedka Wash-in-Mud, was gloomily pouring water out of a dipper on to Brovkin's hands. Alexei snorted into the freezing water, his whole skin shuddering. It was a cold morning, there was a bluish rime on the bent grasses, the sticky mud crunched under the jack-boots. The smoke of camp-fires rose high between the tents. With a sheepskin flung over his braided caftan, Leopoldus Mirbach, an ensign who was still half asleep, was shouting something at two soldiers who stood with their heads held back in fear.

"Flog them, flog them," he kept saying in a husky voice. "Pfui! *Du Sshwein!*" He took one by the face, clenched his fist and punched. Adjusting the coat on his shoulder, he went to Alexei's tent. His long unshaven face was puffy and his eyes were swollen. "No hot water. No food. This is not war... In a proper war, an officer is content... I am not content. Your soldiers are lousy..."

Alexei did not reply. He wiped his cheeks furiously with his towel, he cleared his throat and offered Fedka his back in its grubby shirt: "Bash away!" Fedka began hitting him with the palms of his hands. "Harder..."

Just at that moment, a heavy wagon with a sailcloth roof came out of the forest. The steam was rising from the six different coloured horses. Behind were ten riders in mud-splashed capes. The wagon lurched towards the camp at a walking pace

over the flattened stubble. Alexei snatched up his coat—he was in such haste that he could not get his hands into the sleeves—grabbed his sword and ran to the tents.

"Drummers, drummers, sound the alarm!"

The carriage stopped. Peter alighted in a peaked fur cap with ear-flaps. Menshikov climbed down, his star-shaped spurs catching his wide maroon sable cape. The riders dismounted. Peter stared at the camp, frowning, and thrust his red hands into the pockets of his fur jacket. A trumpet sounded in the clear air and the drums rolled. The soldiers jumped down from their wagons and ran out of the tents, buttoning themselves up and throwing on shoulder-straps. They formed up in a square. The ensigns trotted along the line, jabbing with their sticks and swearing in German. Alexei Brovkin, his left hand on his sword and holding his hat in the other, halted in front of Peter. (He had been in too much of a hurry to put on his wig.)

Peter looked over his tousled head.

"Put your hat on. You're not supposed to take it off on campaign, you fool. Where are your powder wagons?"

"They've stopped at Lake Ilmen. All the powder's wet, Mister Bombardier."

Peter transferred his gaze to Menshikov, whose clean-shaven face was distorted by a grimace.

"Kindly answer," he said, also staring over Alexei's head. "Where are the other regimental companies? Where is Colonel von Schweden?"

"They're halted further downstream, in disarray, Mister General..."

Menshikov shook his head with the same twisted smile, Peter merely scowled.

Both of them, each seven feet tall, walked over the stubble to the square of men on parade. Without taking his hands out of his pockets, Peter, absent-mindedly, it seemed, ran his eye over the grey, lean, weather-beaten faces, the crudely made hats, the shabby coats, the rags, the remnants of shoes on their feet. Only the foreign ensigns held themselves smartly at attention. So they stood for a long time in front of the men on parade. Peter jerked his head back:

"Greetings, lads!"

The ensigns turned about to face the line.

"Good health, Mister Bombardier!" ran raggedly down to line.

"Any complaints?" Peter stepped nearer to them.

The soldiers were silent. The ensigns (holding their sticks to their sides, left jack-boot forward) fixed their eyes on the tsar. Peter repeated more sharply:

"Any complaints? Step out, don't be afraid."

Someone suddenly took a deep breath and sniffed (Alexei recognised Golikov; his musket was moving in his hands, but he straightened up and was silent).

"Tomorrow we go to Narva. It'll be very tough going, lads. King Charles of Sweden himself is coming to meet us. We must beat him. We cannot surrender our homeland. Here are Yamgorod. Ivan-gorod, Narva — all the country as far as the sea is our former homeland. We shall soon win, and we shall soon rest in winter quarters. Understood, lads?"

His eyes bulged sternly. The soldiers looked at him in silence. What could be more understandable? One gloomy voice from the rank wheezed: "We shall win, we have enough men to spare." Menshikov immediately stepped forward, peering. Who had said that? (Alexei's heart sank: it had been Fedka Wash-in-Mud, the most unreliable soldier that ever was.)

"Captain... (Alexei went up smartly.) I thank you for the order in the company. You are not to blame for the rest. Issue the men a triple tot of vodka."

Peter went to the carriage with bowed head. Menshikov winked at Alexei (this time he allowed himself to recognise his old friend), stuck his sleek hand out of his fur cloak, slapped Alexei on the shoulder and, bending to speak in his ear, said:

"It's all right with Peter, he's satisfied. You've got what the others haven't... Distinguish yourself at Narva, and you'll be up for a colonelcy... I saw Ivan Artemich in Novgorod: he sends you his greetings..."

"Thank you, Alexander Danilovich..."

"Good luck!" Taking up his cloak in front, Menshikov overtook Peter at the double. They got into the carriage and drove off along the bank to where the river, reflecting the cold sky, curved round behind a fir wood.

Two versts downstream from Narva, a floating bridge had been built across the two arms of the Narova that flowed round the long and marshy island of Kamperholm. Sheremetev's horse regiments rode across it and moved on to the Revel road to carry out a reconnaissance operation against the enemy. After them, units of Trubetskoy's divisions crossed over to the left bank. They ringed themselves round with the baggage train a verst away from the stone bastions of Narva. The garrison did not obstruct the crossing; they were evidently afraid to go out into the open field because of their small numbers.

On the twenty-third of September, the entire advance army turned off the Yamgorod road, came out on to a hilly plain and — in sight of the squat, grass-grown towers of Ivan-gorod, once a stronghold of Ivan the Terrible, and in full view of the pale-blue, sharp-towered kirches and slate-tiled roofs of Narva beyond the river — moved towards Kamperholm Island and began crossing the shaky bridges over the turbid and swift-flowing river.

It was a quiet day. A weak sun was shining. The alarm bells swung to and fro on the brick churches of Narva and Ivan-gorod.

Soldiers rolled up in disorder to the bridges over the much-trampled sandy road: streltsy in the fox-fur-trimmed bonnets that Peter detested so much; wagons, coming apart but lashed together somehow, carrying barrels, bales, crates, and mouldy loaves of bread; peasant carters, completely in rags after the journey, whipping scraggy ponies straining into their bast collars with what little strength they had left; a banner fastened to a staff would float by, or a field-badge on a pike, or a ramrod on the shoulder of a gunner who had lost his unit; belabouring the heads of the men with the stick, a mounted officer would force his way through, his cape flung back over his shoulder; a nobleman would gallop past, whooping, in an unbuttoned fur coat over his grandfather's mail, and after him would come his men-at-arms, bouncing up and down on their nags like so many barrels, in quilted felt caftans, with Tatar bows and quivers behind their backs...

As they passed, all turned to look up from the road at a bare hilltop. There, on a grey horse, sat the tsar in a steel cuirass, looking through a spy-glass. Next to him on a black horse was Menshikov with his hands on his hips, a cheerful expression on his face, the wind playing with the plumes on his gilded helmet.

The troops were forming up in a semi-circle, a cannon-shot away from Narva, their flanks extending to the fortress. Beyond the town, upstream, stood units of Weide's divisions; in the centre, at the foot of the wooded Hermansberg hill, was Artamon Golovin's division; on the left flank, by the bridge across Kamperholm Island, were the Semyonovsky and Preobrazhensky regiments and Trubetskoy's marksmen regiments. Also there was the tent of the Duke of Croy, who was travelling with the army as high consultant. Peter and Menshikov were quartered in a fisherman's hut on the island.

All along the line the men began digging a deep ditch with lunettes and redans facing outwards in case the Swedes should approach along the Revel road. Redoubts for the breaching guns were being thrown up before the bastions of Narva. Engineer Hallart was in charge of the siege works. Puffs of smoke detached themselves from the fortress walls; the guns bellowed savagely in the autumn damp, the bombs travelled in high, smoking arcs, fell and exploded near wagons, tents, and in ditches out of which the soldiers jumped. Several farmhouses amid the orchards and kitchen gardens were set ablaze by the bombs. A grey cloud of smoke from the conflagrations and the many camp-fires drifted towards the city, from which darted the fiery tongues of cannon shots. The commandant of Narva was Colonel Horn, an experienced and valiant soldier.

Peter and engineer Hallart, making their way through on horseback under the protection of the orchards and buildings, were inspecting the bastions — Thomas, Gloria, Christiwall and Triumph. They sometimes had to ride so near that they could see the grim faces of the Swedish gunners in the embrasures. Without fuss, but briskly, they would roll up and lay a gun, then wait watchfully. Fire! The shell, relentlessly compressing the air in its flight, would pass overhead with a hiss. Peter's eyes widened, his jowls swelled, but he did not bow to the cannonballs. Engineer Hallart, an experienced man (busi-

ness-like, calm, and a bore), always touched his horse with his spurs at the right moment and rode to one side. The gorgeous Menshikov—he was the one they invariably aimed at—merely shouted boastfully at the gunners, his helmet plumes tossing: "No good, comrades!" and slapped his prancing foal on the neck. Fifty dragoons, mustachioed, huge, waited unmoving, wondering who would be hit by one of the black cannonballs.

The fortress walls were high. The projecting semi-circles of the bastions were built of boulders and were so strong that a cast-iron cannonball would simply disintegrate on them like a nut. Heavy guns peeped out of the slits and embrasures of the towers; there were at least three hundred of them in the fortress and a garrison of some two thousand foot, horse and armed citizens. The spies had been lying when they said that Narva could be taken by storm.

Peter dismounted, sat down on a drum and spread out a sheet of paper on his knees. His batman Misha handed him an inkpot. Hallart squatted down nearby on his heels, estimating the distance by eye. Peter's big hand, holding the goose quill, carefully drew some trembling lines. Menshikov paraded up and down in front of the semi-circle of mounted dragoons.

"For each bastion, we need fifteen breaching guns; sixty forty-eight-pounder brass cannons will be required for a breach," said Hallart in a level, monotonous voice. "A hundred and twenty thousand balls at least..."

"That many!" said Peter.

"To start fires in the city before storming it, we shall require at least forty mortars and a thousand bombs for each one..."

"See how they reason in Europe," said Peter, making a note of the figures.

"Ten big barrels of vinegar to cool the guns. Only uninterrupted fire, a veritable hell from all batteries, will make it possible to shatter the morale of the besieged, as the Marshal of Luxemburg teaches. We need fifteen thousand hand-grenades. A thousand twelve-arshin scaling ladders, so light that each can be carried at the double by two men. Five thousand sacks of wool..."

"What are they for?"

"To protect the soldiers from musket fire. During the siege

of Dunkirk, by covering himself with such sacks, Marshal Vauban was able to go right up to the gates, no matter how fierce the firing, for a bullet is easily stopped by wool..."

"Very well," said Peter hesitantly, making a note on his sheet of paper. "Danilych, we need five thousand sacks of wool!"

Resting his elbows on his parted knees, Menshikov bent over the paper as it fluttered in the wind. His lips quivered:

"Pipe dreams, myn Herz. There isn't any wool to be had at all. (To Hallart.) They went up to the walls of Azov with their swords alone, and they took the town..."

Behind them, in the line of dragoons, a horse reared up, and a man uttered a muffled scream. They turned round. A dragoon's grey horse, its hooves thrashing, was blindly jerking its head — black blood was spurting out above its nostrils in a jet the thickness of a man's finger. The mustachioed dragoons glanced uneasily sideways towards the bushes from which, a hundred paces away, puffs of smoke were rising. Peter sat dead still on his drum, holding the pen in his hand.

Unnoticed, behind the thunder of the guns, a detachment of chasseurs emerged from the gates of the fortress tower (not visible because of the projecting Gloria bastion) and raced across behind the wattle fences of the kitchen gardens. After them on heavy red mounts flew about fifty horsemen in steel cuirasses with their helmets down low. Raising their swords, they galloped to outflank the left, stringing out over the field of heather.

For a second, no longer, Menshikov stared with wide open eyes at the enemy diversion, rushed to his jet-black foal, unfastened his cape, threw it down, and leapt into the saddle. "Draw swords!" he shouted, going red in the face. He unsheathed his sword, dug in the rowels of his spurs, bent down low over the neck of his mount as it reared up on its hind legs, and spurred it forward at full gallop: "Dragoons, follow me!" — and all of them, Menshikov, and the dragoons, passing round Peter who was standing near the drum, thundered away to cut off the horsemen who had already begun to rein in their mounts and turn round.

Anxiously compressing his thin lips, Hallart brought Peter his grey, black-maned, restless mare.

"Please leave the zone of artillery fire, Your Majesty."

Peter leapt into the saddle on one foot and watched as the dragoons and horsemen closed in on one another. Our men were galloping in a tight bunch, with Menshikov's plumes tossing on his glittering helmet in front. The Swedes were strung out far over the field, and now the ones on the flanks, turning sharply, were spurring on their horses and beating them with their swords. But they had no time to rally. Peter saw Menshikov's black foal collide head on with a red horse; the rider fell over, clutching at his animal's mane... The red plumes were now bobbing among the iron helmets; but the dragoons were already swarming on to the scene and, without reining back, they continued galloping (brandishing their swords as if in play). Behind them were men lying on the field; one was shaking his bowed head and struggling to sit up, the other's knees were jerking in the air. Several riderless horses were galloping in terror across the field.

Hallart pulled firmly on the bridle. "Your Majesty, it's dangerous here." The grey mare half sat down, its hindquarters slewing round. Peter struck it with his heels. After riding a short distance away, he kept looking back over his shoulder. The horsemen were fleeing from the Russians as fast as they could. From the right, barring their way back to the town, a motley band of riders — several hundred of the irregular regiment of the gentry — were galloping across the brown strips of stubble and flourishing their sabres with Tatar bravado. Musket shots rattled at them from under the wooden corbels on the fortress wall.

They rode into a birch-grove. Peter took a deep breath through his open mouth and let his mare go at a walking pace. "No, this isn't going to be easy," he said aloud, as if in answer to his own thoughts.

"Let me congratulate Your Majesty on his excellent cavalrymen," said Hallart.

"What'll come of that—it was nothing, really. Getting excited, galloping and hewing—that alone isn't going to take the fortress."

He rode up onto a hillock, pulled on the reins and for a long time stared with knitted brows at the line of troops and wagons stretching away for a distance of about seven versts.

Clumps of earth were lazily flying out of the ditches everywhere. Shouts and imprecations. Men idling by camp-fires at the unharnessed wagons. Scraggy hobbled horses. Rags on the bushes. The whole of this massive army seemed to be living and moving sluggishly, with great reluctance.

"Before November it is out of the question," said Peter. "Until the frosts set in, we'll never bring up the siege-guns. It's one thing on paper, another in reality..."

Moving off again at a walking pace, he began questioning Hallart about the campaigns and sieges of the famous marshals Vauban and Luxemburg, creators of the art of war. He asked about the munitions factories in France. He jerked his thin neck, tightly wrapped in a linen cravat.

"Of course... They've got it all organised there, everything to hand... They've got roads, but look what we've got..."

Sailing over the ditches, up galloped Menshikov, still flushed with excitement and grinning cheerfully, with a wild look in his eyes... Only one plume was left bobbing on his helmet, and there were dents in his glittering cuirass. He reined in his horse so that its hindquartes swung round.

"Mister Bombardier... The enemy has been repulsed with losses — barely half of the riders got away from us... (He was, of course, exaggerating in the heat of the moment.) Two of our men killed, some have sustained scratches..."

Peter wrinkled his nose with delight as he looked at Menshikov.

"All right," he said, "well done."

The generals assembled that evening in the Duke of Croy's tent: the pompous, always stern Artamon Golovin (the first creator of the game army), prince Trubetskoy, favourite of the streltsy regiments, Buturlin, the heavily built, wealthy boyar, commander of the Guards, distinguished for his thundering voice and heavy fists, and the ailing, balding Weide, shivering in a sheepskin coat. When Peter, Menshikov and Hallart arrived, the duke invited them to a campaign-style supper at the table. They were served with rare delicacies (the duke's runner had obtained them in Revel), and French and Rhenish wines flowed in abundance.

The duke was in his element. He had many candles lit. Spreading out his bony hands, he described famous battles in which, on an eminence overlooking the field of bloody battle, his foot on a smashed gun, he had given his orders: the cuirassiers were to break through the square, the chasseurs were to turn the flanks. He had drowned whole divisions in a river and burned cities down...

The Russians, their eyes glumly lowered, ate asparagus and Strasbourg pâté. Peter looked distractly at the duke's long face with the wet moustaches. He began drumming his fingers on the table or working his shoulder-blades, as if he were itching. (This distracted air had been noticed about Peter even since the beginning of the campaign.)

"Narva!" exclaimed the duke, holding out an empty glass to his batman. "Narva! One day's good bombardment and a quick storm of the southern bastions... The keys of the town on a silver dish will be yours, Sire. Leave a small garrison there and, deploying cavalry on the flanks, descend with all forces on King Charles. We shall celebrate Christmas Eve in Revel, upon my word of honour..."

Peter rose from the table, took a few steps up and down, stooping so as not to catch his head on the canvas of the tent, picked a straw up off the ground, and reclined on the duke's bed (brought from a nearby farmhouse). He began picking his teeth with the straw.

"Hallart has given me a list," he said, and all turned to him, leaving their food. "If we had all that's mentioned in the list, we would take Narva. We need sixty breaching pieces... (He sat up on the bed, pulled out of his bosom a crumpled sheet of paper and threw it on the table for Golovin.) Read that... At present, we haven't a single good gun on the redoubts. Repnin is floundering with the siege guns in the mud at Tver... The mortars, as I learned today, are stuck on Valdai... The powder wagons are still at Lake Ilmen... What think you of this, generals?.."

Moving the candle closer, the generals bent their heads over the list. Only Menshikov sat apart with an evil smile, a full glass in front of him on the table.

"It's not an army encampment, it's a gypsy camp," resumed Peter after a pause, again sternly and without haste. "We've

been preparing for two years. And nothing's ready. Worse than Azov. Worse than under Golitsyn... (Menshikov's spurs jingled and he grinned maliciously from ear to ear.) Military encampment! The soldiers are loafing about in the baggage trains... Their wagons are full of women. Uproar... Chaos... They're working badly –it makes me sick to watch them... The bread's rotten... In some regiments, there's only enough salt pork for two days... Where is all the salt pork? In Novgorod? Why isn't it here? When the rains start, what about the dugouts for the soldiers?"

There was a silence except for the sputtering of the candles. The duke, who did not quite understand what was being said, transferred his gaze curiously from Peter to the generals.

"We've been two months getting here from Moscow and we haven't all arrived properly yet. As you know, King Charles forced Christian to accept a shameful peace; he's made him pay two hundred and fifty thousand gold doubloons as a contribution. Now Charles and his whole army have landed at Pernau and are marching on Riga. If he beats King Augustus there, we must expect him here in November... What sort of reception are we going to give him?"

Artamon Golovin, the senior in rank, rose, bowed and lowered his hoary brows:

"Peter Alexeyevich, with God's help..."

"We need guns!" interrupted Peter, and the veins bulged on his forehead. "Bombs! A hundred and twenty thousand breaching cannonballs! Salt pork, you old fool..."

Once more the rains set in for two weeks and impenetrable fogs drifted in from the sea. The soldiers' dugouts were flooded, the tents leaked and there was no shelter from the damp and the chill of the night. The whole camp was waist-deep in swamp. The men began going down with diarrhoea, there were cases of fever, and dozens of dead were carted out into the field every night.

Guns and small-arms fired without cease on the besiegers from the fortress. At dawn, more often than not, there were sorties; the Swedes would despatch the sentries, crawl up to the dugouts and shower the sleeping men with hand-grenades.

Every day Peter rode round the line of fortifications. In a wet cape, in a floppy-brimmed hat, taciturn, grim, he would appear on a grey mare out of the curtain of rain, stop, look round with a glassy stare and carry on over the pitted field at a walking pace into the mist.

The baggage trains arrived slowly. A report came in from those on the way that the whole trouble was with the horses and carts. Everything had been taken from the peasants; the army would now have to procure from the landowners or from the monasteries. The horses were scraggy, the fodder had been consumed, and every day conditions were being made worse by the pouring rains and the churned-up roads. There was a rumour that Peter had personally beaten the quartermaster-general senseless in the fisherman's hut on the island and had given orders for his assistant to be hanged. Things seemed slightly better with food and there was more order in the camp. The commanders were bad: the Russians were dilatory, accustomed to the old ways, verbose and incoherent; the foreigners could only drink vodka to keep out the damp and hit the men in the face for some reason or for no reason at all.

It was reliably confirmed that King Charles, who had landed at Pernau, had turned towards Riga, and his appearance alone had pacified the Livonian knights and driven King Augustus's troops to Courland. Augustus himself was sitting in Warsaw amid the dissension-torn Polish aristocracy and was sending couriers to Peter asking for money, Cossacks, guns and infantry. It was realised at Narva that the Swedes could be expected with the first frosts.

Sheremetev and four irregular horse regiments, sent to reconnoitre, got as far as Wesenberg and would, with luck, have beaten the Swedes' protective detachment, but he suddenly withdrew to Pyhajoggi Pass about forty versts from Narva, from where he wrote to Peter:

"...I withdrew not out of fear, but the better to preserve our strength... There are unspeakable marshes and an enormous forest at Wesenberg. The fodder that was available not only here but all round had been used up. Moreover, I was anxious not to be cut off from Narva. As to your being angry because I am burning all the villages and massacring the locals, be assured that only a few villages have been burned, and

only so that the enemy could not use them for his army. I have now given orders for the land not to be laid waste without instructions. Here, where I have halted at Pyhajoggi Pass, the enemy cannot get through unobserved. I shall withdraw no further, and here we shall lay down our lives, you need have no doubt of that..."

Finally, for better or for worse, a wind began blowing from the north. In one day it dispersed the wet murk, a low sun thinly illumined the mud-swamped camp, the golden cockerel on the city's church steeple caught fire. The land was in the grip of frost. The wagon trains began arriving with the ammunition. Ten pairs of oxen to each piece brought up the two famous cannons *Lion* and *Bear*, each weighing three hundred and twenty poods and cast a hundred years previously in Novgorod by Andrei Chokhov and Semyon Dubinka. Like tortoises, howitzers and stubby mortars that could hurl three-pood bombs crawled along on low, broad wheels. All the troops stood to arms, all the horse regiments were mounted with drawn sabres in case of a sortie by Swedes.

Two hundred men hauling on ropes, towed *Lion* and *Bear* to the middle redoubt opposite the fortress's south bastions. They spent the whole night in the batteries setting up the howitzers and mortars. The defenders in the fortress did not sleep either, preparing to be stormed — the lights of torches moved along the walls and the sentries called to one another.

At dawn on the fifth of November, Peter, the duke and the generals rode up to Hermansberg Hill. A stinging wind was blowing. The camp was still veiled in twilight, the red glow of the sun had caught the steep roofs of the town and the crenellations of the towers. Below, long tongues of flame darted out, cannons boomed and barked — the bombs described sparkling curves as they sailed into the town. Both the camp and the walls were veiled in smoke. Peter lowered his telescope and, his nostrils distended, nodded to Hallart, who rode up and clicked his tongue.

"Bad. Falling short. The powder is no good."

"What can we do? Quick!"

"Increase the charge... If only the guns can take it..."

Peter rode down the hill, galloped across the drawbridge, through the oak gates and along the palisade and chevaux de

frise. The gunners in the centre battery were swilling the long barrels of *Lion* and *Bear* with water and vinegar. The Dutch battery commander, Jacob Winterschieverk, a small, elderly sailor with a beard protruding from under his collar, went up to Peter and said calmly:

"This is no good... We can only shoot sparrows with this powder... Nothing but smoke and soot..."

Peter threw off his cape and caftan, rolled up his sleeves, took a ramrod from a gunner and, with a powerful movement, cleaned the sooty muzzle...

"Charge..."

They began throwing packets of powder in grey paper from hand to hand up from the battery magazine. Peter tore one open, scattered some grains of powder on the palm of his hand, and merely spat furiously, like a cat. He rammed six packets into the muzzle...

"That will be dangerous," said Jacob Winterschieverk.

"Shut up, shut up... Shot..."

He tossed the round shell in his hands, rolled it into the muzzle, and, leaning against the ramrod, drove it firmly home. He squatted down at the sights and turned the screw...

"Slow match... All stand clear of the gun..."

Bursting the ear-drums, *Bear* belched flame and recoiled heavily on its cast-iron wheels, its trail digging into the ground. The ball sailed away, a diminishing sphere. Stones flew on the Gloria bastion and a merlon fell down.

"So, that's not bad," said Jacob Winterschieverk.

"Carry on firing like that..."

Throwing on his caftan, Peter galloped to the howitzer battery. The order was given to all batteries to increase the charge by half as much again. Again the earth trembled to the thunder of a hundred and thirty guns. A terrible flame flew out of the upended mortar barrels. When the clouds of smoke dispersed two houses were seen to be ablaze in the town. The second salvo was a success. But it was soon known that two howitzers, recently cast at Lev Kirillovich's Tula factory, had blown up in the west battery, and the axles of some guns had cracked in the carriages. "We'll sort that out later," said Peter. "We'll find the culprits... Carry on!"

So began the bombardment of Narva, and it lasted without interruption until the fifteenth of November.

Muttering under his breath, Felten, the tsar's cook, was scrambling eggs in a pan over some tapers. It had been difficult getting a dozen eggs — the scullion had ridden almost as far as Yamburg, and they had all proved slightly off...

"What are you mumbling about, use more pepper, Felten..."

"Very well, Your Majesty, pepper it is!"

Peter was sitting by the hot stove. It was only warm there (in the cubicle on the other side of the partition, where he and Menshikov slept, the wind blew through the walls). Now, at midnight, he could hear the wind howling and the sails of the windmill creaking near the cottage on the island. The birch tapers were crackling away. The dumpy, irascible Felten laid out the food and kept sniffing it, the reflected light blazing wrathfully on his fleshy nose.

"Well now, supposing the Swedes take you prisoner, what then, Felten?"

"I'm listening, Your Majesty..."

"Ah, they'll say, the tsar's cook! And they'll hang you up by the legs..."

"All right, so they'll hang me. I know my duty..."

He spread a clean cloth on the shaky wooden table, put down an earthenware jug of pepper vodka, and cut some thin slices of hard black bread. Puffing lightly at his pipe Peter watched as Felten moved nimbly, softly and quickly about in his felt boots and quilted jacket with an apron tied round the waist.

"I'm not joking about the Swedes... You should get your things packed."

Felten glanced sideways at the tsar and realised that he was indeed not joking. He served the scrambled eggs hot from the stove and poured from the jug into a pewter cup.

"Your meal is served, Your Majesty."

The whole cottage was shaken by a gust of wind. The candle-flame fluttered. Menshikov came in noisily from outside.

"What weather..."

Frowning, he unknotted his sash. He began warming his hands at the hearth over the tapers.

"He'll be here in a moment..."

"Sober?" asked Peter.

"He's been asleep. I got him out of bed. It didn't take long..."

Menshikov sat opposite. He made sure that the table was firm. He poured himself a drink, downed it and shook his head. They ate for a while in silence. Said Peter quietly:

"It's too late... We won't set things to rights now..."

Swallowing with difficulty, Menshikov said:

"If he's a hundred versts away and Sheremetev doesn't hold him up, he'll be here the day after tomorrow... If we go into the open field, can't we beat him with our cavalry? (He unfastened his collar and turned to Felten.) Have you any cabbage soup left? (He poured a second glass). His total strength is only ten thousand — the prisoners swear it on the Bible... Are we really such dolts? It's sickening..."

"It's sickening," echoed Peter. "You can't knock sense into people in only two days... If things go wrong at Narva — we'll hold him up in Pskov and Novgorod..."

"Myn Herz, it's a sin even to think of such a thing..."

"All right, all right..."

They were silent. Felten squatted and blew on the coals. He was warming up some beer in a copper pot.

Things had indeed gone wrong at Narva. They had been bombarding for two weeks, exploding mines and driving approach trenches, but they still hadn't breached the walls or set the town on fire. The generals had hesitated to attack. Of a hundred and thirty guns, half had blown up and been rendered unserviceable. The previous day, they had begun taking stock; the powder and bombs left would only last them for one day of such a bombardment, and the powder wagons were still trailing along somewhere near Novgorod.

The Swedish army was approaching the Revel road by forced marches and might already be fighting Sheremetev in Pyhajoggi Pass. The Russians were in pincers between the fortress artillery and the approaching Charles.

"We've made a lot of noise... We're capable of that at least." Peter threw down his spoon. "But we haven't learned

to fight yet. We went about it the wrong way. This business is no good at all. For a gun to be fired here, it has to be loaded in Moscow... You follow me?"

"I was riding along now. The soldiers were talking round a camp-fire in the first company. They're expecting the Swedes and the whole camp's in turmoil. As for what they say of the generals — well.. One — I heard him — said: 'The first bullet's for the ensign.'"

"Generals! (Peter's eyes flashed.) They should march round the walls with church banners! Military leaders!.. Dead ducks, if you ask me!"

Then Menshikov said cautiously, with a sudden look:

"Peter Alexeyevich... Let me have the army for the next three days. Seriously. Eh?"

As if he hadn't heard, Peter put his hand in his pocket for his tobacco pouch. Grunting, he rubbed the grains of tobacco between his fingers:

"The Commander-in-Chief from tomorrow is to be the Duke of Croy. He's an extraordinary fool, but he knows the European way of fighting... And our foreigners will be more cheerful under him. You get packed before dawn, you hear? We're leaving..."

He grunted. He moved up the candle and lit his pipe.

"Peter Alexeyevich, where are we going?" asked Menshikov quietly.

"Novgorod."

Peter finally looked into the other's transparently blue eyes, now wide open in extreme astonishment. Suddenly, Peter began to turn deep red (the vein across his sweating brow bulged) and, containing his fury, he said:

"That boy king has nothing to lose, but I have. You think that Narva's the beginning and the end? This is only the beginning of the war. We're bound to win. But not with this army. Have you grasped that? We must begin with the rear, with the baggage train. Galloping with a sword is the last thing. Fool, you want to be bolder than Charles? Lower your eyes! (Frenzy flicked across his face.) Don't you dare look at me!"

Menshikov did not obey him and did not look down. Tears of burning shame welled up and one of them trickled down his

drawn cheek. Peter stared at him with narrowed eyes. Both held their breath. Peter suddenly laughed. Leaning back against the wall, he thrust his hands deep into his pockets.

"Myn Herz," he teased, imitating Menshikov's voice. "Dear friend... You are ashamed for me? Wait, something else will happen; they'll all turn their backs. He was frightened of Charles... He abandoned the army... He galloped off to Novgorod, just as when he fled to the Trinity Laura... All right... Wipe your face. Come and meet them — the generals have arrived..."

The calls of sentries. The clip-clop of hooves over the frozen ground. Outside, in the windows, the light of torches. Spurs jingling, the duke and the generals came in, all ruddy-faced from the wind and very anxious. What had happened at such a late hour? Peter nodded to them, went up to the duke and embraced him. He made a sign to Menshikov to take a candle and went behind the boarded partition.

In there, Menshikov put the candle on a little table piled high with papers, with tobacco scattered all over them. All were standing. Peter sat down, took a sheet of paper, and, his lips moving, sternly read to himself the ash-besprinkled text with its many deletions. He coughed and, without looking at anyone in particular, said:

"*In Gottes Namen,* in God's name," he began in a grim, firm voice, "whereas His Majesty is leaving the army, on a matter of extreme urgency, we commit his army to this illustrious prince, the Duke of Croy, under the following articles... (The duke was right by the table; his calf jerked. Peter looked at his thin leg in its white stocking, then at the dry hands gripping the gold hilt of the sabre.) Article One: His Highness is to be Commander-in-Chief... Two: all generals, officers, and other ranks are to be under his command, as if under His Majesty... Three: (He raised his voice.) Narva and Ivan-gorod are to be taken immediately by any possible means... Four: in the event of disobedience by generals, officers and other ranks, they are to be punished as if they were the Commander-in-Chief's own subjects, even to the death penalty..."

He looked past the duke at the generals. Weide was nodding agreement, prince Trubetskoy's sweating face was puffy, Buturlin's close-cropped grey hair moved over his low forehead, and Artamon Golovin bowed his head, as if the burden of shame and disaster had already fallen on his shoulders.

"His Highness shall also make it his concern to ascertain the course being taken by the King of Sweden. As soon as reliable information is received about the arrival of King Charles, and if he is very strong, he must be firmly obstructed so that he cannot enter the town of Narva, and with God's aid you are to try and seek him out. But it were better to wait, if possible, until help shall arrive..." He lowered the sheet of paper and said to the duke: "Repnin and the hetman with his Cossacks and the ammunition wagons are a few days' journey away... (To Golovin.) Sit down and make a fair copy..."

There was a knock on the door into the passage. Menshikov anxiously squeezed his way through into the kitchen. Someone came in and the shouting of many voices in the distance was borne by the wind through the open door. Peter thrust someone aside and strode into the kitchen.

"What's happened?" he shouted in a terrible voice.

Before him stood a young man, with a drawn, girlishly pink face, an upturned nose and bold eyes. His blond hair was matted with blood over one ear...

"Pavel Yaguzhinsky, a lieutenant under Boris Petrovich Sheremetev," said Menshikov quickly.

"Well?"

Yaguzhinsky's face quivered. He looked up at Peter and controlled himself:

"Boris Petrovich has sent me, Sire, to ask where his regiments are to take up position?"

Peter was silent. The generals crowded the closet doorway in alarm.

Menshikov hurriedly put on his fur jacket:

"They fled dishonourably all the way from Pyhajoggi... They threw down their hats... So much for the gentry..."

On the morning of the seventeenth of November, after learning from the sentries that Swedish mounted patrols had

ridden during the night along the seashore on to the Revel road in their rear, the irregular regiments of the gentry were thrown into confusion and, disobeying Boris Petrovich Sheremetev, began to move away from Pyhajoggi in fear of being cut off from the main army. He galloped up to the disordered cavalry, seized reins, shouted himself hoarse and belaboured mounts and men with his whip,— but the ones at the back pressed on and his horse was spun round in the flood of retreating troops. He was only able to muster a few hundred to cover the rear and rescue part of the army's baggage train from the Swedes, who appeared at sunrise in steel cuirasses and ribbed helmets on all rocky heights. The Swedes did not pursue. The regiments of the gentry retired at a gallop. In the night they appeared under the stockade of the camp outside Narva. The sentries on the ramparts, taking them for the enemy in the darkness, opened fire. The horsemen yelled desperately: "Friends, friends!.." The whole camp woke up and buzzed with activity.

Lieutenant Pavel Yaguzhinsky was allowed through the stockade. He galloped to the tsar. An icy wind was raging. The cavalry dismounted and stood on the far side of the ditch by the raised bridges. Jeers came from behind the stockade: "Gentlemen, what brought you here in such a hurry?.. Want to join the siege, darlings?.." Drums began beating all over the camp, lights floated about, horsemen galloped off with lanterns. Under the colours of the regiments and cavalry units, the tsar's Ukase was read on the handing over of the army to the illustrious and invincible Croy, Duke of the Austrian Empire. The troops were shocked into silence. Soon, a rumour flew round that the tsar was no longer in the camp and the Swedes had halted in full strength only five versts away.

No one slept. Camp-fires were lit, but the wind blew them out. Towards morning, Sheremetev's cavalry were moved to the right flank. Without going beyond the stockade, they halted on the bank, where the Narova thundered frenziedly among the islets in the rapids. Dawn broke, but there was no sign of the Swedes. Patrols sent out to reconnoitre found no enemy in the vicinity, although Sheremetev's men swore that he had been on their heels all the way from Pyhajoggi.

To the wheezy wailing of horns, the duke, in a gorgeous

cape and holding a Field-Marshal's baton to his side, rode round the camp, followed at half a horse's length by generals Golovin, Trubetskoy, Buturlin, the Prince of Imeretia and Prince Yakov Dolgoruky. The duke, fluffing up his drooping moustaches with the edge of his glove, shouted to the soldiers: "Greetinks, lads! We'll die for our fater the tsar!" An order was read out in all regiments to the beating of drums:

"...At night, half the army is to stand by under arms... Before dawn, the soldiers are to receive twenty-four cartridges with bullets. At sunrise, the whole army is to form up and, at a signal of three cannon shots, music is to be played, the drums to be beaten and all banners to be placed on the entrenchments. Not a shot is to be fired until the enemy is at a distance of thirty paces..."

During the night, the wind veered to the west, blowing in from the sea. It grew warmer. In the darkness, the Swedish Major-General Ribbing, with two horsemen, had the animals' hooves muffled in felt, secretly rode right up to the stockade and measured the depth of the ditch and the height of the ramparts.

Alexei Brovkin, hungry as the devil, the wind piercing right through him, was pacing up and down the rampart — three paces forward, three back — near the company field-badge. The rampart was seven versts in length, and the soldiers were thinly strung out along it. The horns sounded, the drums rolled. Cannons and muskets were loaded and slow matches smoked. The wind shook the banners on the entrenchments. It was eleven o'clock in the morning...

With all his strength, Alexei pulled his belt tighter. The new Commander-in-Chief had taken care of everything, but had forgotten to issue food. For many days now, the officers and men of the line had been chewing mouldy biscuits and shaking crumbs out of their field-packs. No biscuits had been issued that night at all. The soldiers were standing about on the rampart like black scarecrows (eighty fit men were left of Brovkin's company.) There had been a time when Alexei had simply burned to see action to lead his company through the gunsmoke, to seize the staff of an enemy banner with his own hands... ("Thank you, Alexei, I promote you to colo-

nel...") Today he only wanted one thing – to crawl into the cosy fug of the dugout and sip thin porridge from a bowl until it scalded his throat.

Screwing up his eyes against the wind, Alexei shouted to the nearest man – Golikov, as it happened:

"What are you gaping at? Stand up properly!"

Golikov did not hear him; his ragged shoulders hunched, he was staring as if he had seen death itself... The other men were likewise staring towards Hermansberg Hill. A low sun kept appearing and disappearing over it in the swift-scudding clouds. Between the tree-stumps and bare, tossing birch-trees, heavily burdened men were on the move – more and more of them were coming out of the forest. They were throwing the packs down off their shoulders, running forward and forming up in wide, close columns. Guns drawn by teams of six were brought out; some moved down, straight towards the middle redoubt, others proceeded at a trot across the brook to Weide's strong fortifications, the others raced at a gallop to the right over the plain. Six columns of infantry were forming up on Hermansberg Hill. The cavalry rode out of the forest – two ranks of dull iron.

"Drummers, battle alarm!" shouted Alexei in a voice that was not his own.

Mustachioed ensigns jumped up onto the rampart, jamming down their three-cornered hats to prevent them being blown off by the wind. The drums rolled... Leopoldus Mirbach, overjoyed for some inexplicable reason, pointed with his finger and shouted to Alexei: "Look, that one there on the horse – that's King Charles!" The Swedish columns, terrible in their precision and order, as if they were not human beings but unfeeling and immortal, were crawling down the hill in wavering black and dark-blue lines... Up above them, on an eminence, were five or six horsemen; a slim figure in front kept gesticulating with his hand, and horsemen were galloping up to him and then racing down to the columns.

The wind bent the staffs of the banners and field-badges on the rampart, the drums rattled deafeningly. A leaden, snowy cloud was coming up from the sea, quickly blotting out the sky. Four gun crews galloped up to within two hundred paces of the ditch opposite where Brovkin's company was stationed,

then wheeled round at speed; the limbers were unhitched, green ammunition boxes were brought up at a gallop and turned round. Burly men in blue uniforms jumped down and stood by the guns. At the double, without breaking formation, an infantry column moved up; several men with white lapels ran ahead of it... At a wave of glittering swords, the ranks of Swedes divided into two, skirted both sides of the battery, bent down, and clods of earth began flying...

Alexei, his hands cupped round his mouth, tried to outshout the wind: "Ensigns... Tell the NCOs, tell the soldiers... No firing without orders, on pain of death..." Leopoldus Mirbach ran in his jack-boots along the rampart, shouting in German and brandishing his stick threateningly... Fedka Wash-in-Mud (bearded, dirty, a real scarecrow) grinned evilly, and Leopoldus hit him on the head... The wind tore at the skirts of caftans and someone's hat flew high into the air...

Alexei turned to the Russian battery: "Come on... Hurry up!" Finally, something tore at the eardrums... "Devils, why can't they learn to shoot?.." In reply, four Swedish guns jumped back, belching fire... Half a verst away, in their own special and important way, *Lion* and *Bear* boomed out... "Oh, that's ours... Lazy." Four teams of horses galloped up, hooked up the guns and drew them closer to the rampart. The gunners doubled up to them, cleaned them, charged them and jumped clear, two to the wheels, the third on one knee with the slow match. A man with white lapels raised his sword... Salvo... Four balls struck the pinewood timbers of the stockade and exploded with an iron shriek; splinters flew. Alexei reeled backwards and fell. He jumped up again... In a flash, but with terrible clarity (he was to remember it for the rest of his life) he saw galloping on a horse over the hummocky field along the ditch, a youth, upright, as slim as a finger, in a little tricorne with a leather bag bouncing under it on the nape of his neck, his feet stretched out before him in un-Russian style and thrust up to the heels into the stirrups, the thin derisive face turned to the men firing from the stockade, with about twenty double files of cuirassiers on very bony horses galloping stirrup-to-stirrup behind him... "Lord have mercy on us!" came Golikov's despairing cry.

The low cloud was precipitately covering the whole sky. The

light was failing rapidly. A pall of snow was spreading over the camp, the lines of galloping cuirassiers and the advancing Swedish columns. The cannons barked in the wailing of the wind, their flames a dull glimmering in the gloom. The stockade crackled and banged. Shells hissed savagely overhead. The whirling blizzard drove the slanting, stinging snow into the men's faces and glued up their eyes. It was impossible to see what was in front and on the far side of the ditch, or what had already started happening quarter of an hour previously in the camp.

A soldier, bent double and running in blind panic, blundered straight into Alexei. He was not from Brovkin's company... Alexei seized him by the sides... The man yelled: "We've been sold out!" wrenched himself free and vanished into the blizzard... Only then did Alexei notice what looked like bundles of brushwood beginning to tumble into the ditch out of the whirling pall. Clawing the snow off his face, he shouted:

"Fire!.. Fire!.."

Nimble figures were already swarming about in the ditch...

(...The Swedish grenadiers, who had the snow driving into their backs, had run up, had begun throwing fascines into the ditch and were scrambling over them without ladders up the stockade...)

...Alexei saw something else: Golikov fired, recoiled, then lunged forward with his bayonet... A big, snow-powdered man swung his legs over the stockade and grabbed the bayonet with his hand - Golikov pulled the musket one way, his adversary tugged back... Alexei yelled, sticking the Swede with his sword like a pig. More and more men were climbing over as if propelled by the blizzard... Alexei thrust again and again, sometimes missing, occasionally running his blade into something soft... Pain spurted from his eyes—his skull, his whole face seemed flattened as if by a blow...

...Golikov did not remember how he rolled into the ditch... He crawled along on all fours in animal terror... Someone ran past waving his arms, and after him with levelled bayonets came two ferocious, heavily-built Swedes... Golikov flattened himself like a beetle... "Oh, what people!" He raised his head and his mouth was filled with snow. He jumped unsteadily to

his feet and at once bumped into two men: Fedka Wash-in-Mud was lying prone on top of Leopoldus Mirbach and was reaching for his throat with his fingers... Leopoldus was tearing at Fedka's beard... "Lying devil!" wheezed Fedka, and he pressed down hard with his shoulders... Andrei ran for it... "Oh, what people!.."

The middle column of Swedes — four thousand grenadiers — hurled itself in all its fury on Artamon Golovin's division... The battle at the stockade lasted for a quarter of an hour. The Russians, blinded by the blizzard, weakened by hunger and distrustful of their commanders, ebbed back from the rampart... "They've sold us out, lads!.. Kill the officers!.." Firing haphazardly, they ran through the camp, trampling on one another in the snow-filled ditches and between the battery gabions... They crushed and swept Trubetskoy's regiments along with them. They ran in their thousands to the bridges, to the river crossing...

The Swedes did not pursue them far, themselves afraid of losing their way in the blizzard in such an enormous camp. Hoarse trumpets recalled them imperiously back to the rampart... But some of the grenadiers came up against chevaux de frise with wagons behind them... Shouting: "*Mit Gottes Hilfe, in Gottes Namen!..*" the grenadiers stormed the baggage train. There, under snow-covered matting, they found barrels of putrid salt pork and casks of vodka. Over a thousand grenadiers stayed with the broken casks till the end of the battle... They cut down some of the Russians wandering among the wagons, others they simply drove away.

After the infantry, the cavalry burst into the camp through the smashed gates and headed straight for the main redoubt. *Lion* and *Bear* were taken in the cavalry ranks and their crews were cut down; wounded in the head, the commander, Jacob Winterschieverk, surrendered his sword. The guns were turned east and began bombarding Weide's fortifications. This time, the Swedes met with stubborn resistance. Weide drew up his whole division on the stockade in four close ranks and himself hurled back the Swedes with an officer's spear as they climbed up the stakes. The men behind loaded their muskets, the ones

in front sprayed the enemy with rapid fire... The whole ditch was piled with dead and wounded. When cannon-balls began flying over from the main redoubt and the voices of *Lion* and *Bear* were recognised, Weide galloped along the rampart on horseback: "Stand firm, lads!.." A bomb burst under his horse and the men saw the animal rear up in the flying snow and smoke and topple over...

Sheremetev's horse regiments were jammed close to the river between Weide's stockade and the forest. Flurries of snow were driving into their faces and the Narova thundered behind them. The forest boomed ominously. They waited there, unable to see or make sense of anything. On the right, in the distance, the cannons were booming more and more frequently... Musket fire started up quite near on the stockade, with shouts and death screams that made the cavalrymen's hair stand on end under their hats.

Boris Petrovich was on the hill in the midst of his army. He had put his spy-glass in his pocket; visibility was so bad that he could hardly have distinguished his own horse's ears... It was clear what was happening in the Russian camp. He waited in vain for an order from the Commander-in-Chief, but either he had forgotten about the horse regiments of the gentry, or they could not be found, or something had gone seriously wrong.

Firing could be heard on the left flank; it must be from the forest. Boris Petrovich listened, half-standing on his stirrups. He summoned the young prince Rostovsky:

"Take four hundred men, boy, gallop into the forest and drive the enemy out of there... Good luck..."

The prince, stiff with cold in his armour and steel helmet, muttered something in reply and rode down the hill.. Then a cannon boomed in the forest. A voice began screaming in its death agony. At once muskets rattled, on the right, on the left, and in front. Boris Petrovich looked round, intending to give the order "Draw sabres, charge and God be with you..." But there was no one to take the order: the rumps of the horses were moving up the hill... "We're lost, we're lost, get away across the river!" shouted thousands of voices. Boris Petrovich was left alone and had no choice but to wheel his horse round

to avoid being crushed; he screwed up his eyes, burst into tears and pulled on the reins...

Roaring, bellowing, wild whooping... The heaving lava-flow of uplifted horses' heads, shaggy manes and horsemen's snowy backs was streaming to the river. The bank was steep, the horses slithered down on their hindquarters, those behind charged straight into them and galloped over the falling ones... In the yellow water, under the pall of the blizzard, horses' muzzles and choking human faces began whirling round and round; hands rose out of the eddies, clutching convulsively at the air... More and more riders flung themselves in their hundreds into the Narova, floated, struggled in the currents and went down...

Boris Petrovich's goodly horse climbed out on to a little island in the middle of the river and stood there for a while, its flanks quivering, then warily re-entered the water and, baring its teeth, began swimming and carried him over to the far bank...

The snowstorm which had blotted out the battlefield was, for the Swedes, perhaps more dangerous than for the Russians. Communications broke down between the advancing columns; the runners dashed about helplessly in the snow flurries, trying to find the generals and the king. The bold plan had been to turn the enemy's flanks by a series of violent attacks, surround him and pin him up against the fortress under fire from the bastions; but it did not succeed. The Russian centre was penetrated immediately: Artamon Golovin's troops retreated in disorder and were lost in the snowstorm, but the flanks were defended with unexpected stubbornness, especially the right one, where the Semyonovsky and Preobrazhensky, the two crack regiments, were positioned.

The battle had been raging for over three hours now and the firing had not abated. The blizzard was still raging. It was essential to win before dark, otherwise the four battalions of Swedes that had penetrated through the centre into the camp, battered and tired as they were, could, in their turn, be surrounded and wiped out if the Russians had the nerve finally to come out from behind the stockade – at a modest estimate,

they still had about fifteen thousand fresh troops on their flanks.

At the beginning of the battle, Charles and three squadrons of cuirassiers were situated between the columns of Stenbock and Maydell in order to see simultaneously the attack on the centre and the right flank. Here, Charles was caught in the blizzard. The advancing columns vanished behind a curtain of snow and it was impossible to see even the gun flashes. His nose in the air, his teeth clenched, Charles listened to the intoxicating din of battle. General Rhenskjold's adjutant galloped up to report that the grenadiers had penetrated the centre and were driving the Russians deep into the camp. Charles clutched the officer by the shoulder and shouted in his ear:

"Tell the general that the king orders him to call off the pursuit, occupy the central redoubt, prepare for defence and await further instructions..."

He sent runners one after another to Schlippenbach on the right flank, where he was unsuccessfully trying to storm Weide's line of fortifications... "Tell the general that the king is amazed." He sent him two companies of the reserves as reinforcements, but they could not be found. The Swedes were frenziedly attacking the half-destroyed stockade. General Weide was wounded by a bomb fragment, and the Russians continued beating off the attacks as best they could.

The danger was growing every minute. The day before, at the council of war, all the generals had objected to the mad operation at Narva: with only ten thousand hungry, exhausted soldiers burdened with packs (the wagon trains had been abandoned in the hasty advance), to hurl themselves on an army of fifty thousand men behind strong fortifications. That would be careless... But Charles said: "The one who advances wins, danger increases strength, tomorrow you will bring Tsar Peter to my tent..." He gave the generals his disposition; it envisaged and allowed for everything except a snowstorm...

Stretched out in the saddle, covered with snow, his nose in the air, he listened intently to the noises of battle. He was intoxicated by the danger. Even bear-hunting in Kungsor Forest could not compare with this game. The wind brought with particular force the shooting on the left flank, where two grenadier battalions under General Löwenhaupt were storming

the positions held by the Semyonovsky and Preobrazhensky regiments. Were they still having no success even there, in the most vital place?

Charles turned round and seized the muzzle of someone's horse by the bridle (horse and rider were invisible in the driving snow), and shouted that four reserve regiments were to be sent to help Löwenhaupt. The horse's muzzle tossed and vanished. (Those companies likewise were neither found nor sent.) The firing on the left was becoming more and more desperate. A snow-covered rider leapt out of the blizzard.

"Majesty... General Löwenhaupt asks for reinforcement..."

"I have sent him four companies... I am amazed..."

"Majesty... The stockade is wrecked, the ditches are filled with fascines and bodies... But the Russians have retired behind chevaux de frise... They have gone wild with terror and bloodshed... They are screaming obscenities and throwing themselves on our bayonets... General Löwenhaupt has sustained several wounds but continues to fight on foot in front of his men..."

"Show me the way!.."

Charles spurred his horse, bending down against the snow and wind, and galloped off stirrup-to-stirrup with the officer towards the shooting on the left flank. The wind blowing right through him seemed to sing in his heart... In this intoxication of wind, snow, and booming gunfire, he needed to feel the resistance of the blade entering the living body... The officer shouted something, pointing ahead to where a yellow blob had spread over the snow... This was the choked-up bed of a stream. Charles dug in his spurs, the horse sailed over the yellow snow in a heavy bound and stuck in a quagmire, its hindquarters sinking deeper as it struggled to jump clear. Nostrils flaring, it snorted into the snowy wind. Charles jumped off and his left leg sank up to the hip into the glutinous ooze... He wrenched it clear, pulled his leg out of its jack-boot and, his hat and sword left behind, crawled on all fours to the other bank, where a dismounted officer stood with outstretched hand.

Just as he was, bareheaded and in one jack-boot, Charles mounted the officer's lean, trembling horse that was coated

with ice, and pricking it with his spur, galloped to the nearest shots and frenzied cries. The horse began jumping over mounds of snow — the dead or wounded. Vague shadows flitted to and fro. The gun thundered fiercely. Suddenly he saw a disordered crowd of his own grenadiers uncommonly near; they were resting morosely on their muskets and looking to where the sharp, slanting stakes of the chevaux de frise loomed beyond the trampled, blood-stained snow and the prostrate bodies of the dead. Behind the stakes heaved a wall of Russians. Shaking their fists and their muskets, they were shouting frenziedly. They had evidently just beaten off an attack.

Charles rode straight at the grenadiers: "Sword!" he shouted in a voice like a musket shot. The men looked round and recognised him. Bending over in the saddle, he extended his hand with the fingers splayed-out.

"Sword! (Someone pushed the hilt of a sword into his grasp.) Men! The honour of your king is right here, at those chevaux de frise. They must be taken!.. You will hurl the filthy barbarians into the Narova. (He raised his sword, and at that moment, a horn sounded a sustained note, and a second, and then more — they could not be seen through the snowstorm.) Men... God and your king are with you! I go before you!.. Follow me!"

He galloped off over the bloody snow. Behind, gloomy throats bayed: "In God's name!" Ragged shots came from behind the chevaux de frise. He marked out one man, a Russian of gigantic stature standing with his head lowered in a breach that had been knocked in the chevaux de frise by a cannon-ball. Grinning, Charles reared his horse up on its hind legs; the Russian, with a maddened face, drove his bayonet like a pitchfork into the animal's chest... Sprawling over the horse's back and sliding off, Charles drew himself up with all his strength and sank his sword in the giant's chest.

As he jumped down from his horse, however, he staggered. (Around him were roaring mouths, the clash of iron, crunching blows.) He was pushed over and fell. A heavy boot was planted on his back and trampled him into the snow. Then he was picked up, lifted up, and carried away. His mind was in a whirl. He recovered consciousness on a gun-carriage under a stinking greatcoat. The horns were sounding the long,

drawn-out notes of the retreat. He threw off the coat and sat up:

"Bring me someone's boots, I'm barefoot... Boots, and a horse..."

In terror of being cut off from the river crossing, the mixed regiments of Golovin and Trubetskoy rushed to the bank and swarmed on to the bridge so tightly packed that the pontoons settled; whipped up by the west wind, the yellow waters of the Narova began to lash over the railing. The carcasses of horses and the bodies of Sheremetev's cavalrymen were floating in the foaming water under the pall of snow (they had been drowned while crossing five versts upstream). The dead horses were piling up against the settled bridge. Shouting men pressed on from the right, water spurted through the deck, the railings cracked and the hempen cables began to snap; the middle pontoons were completely submerged and came apart. Men on the bridge were falling into the roaring current, in which the bodies of horses and men were whirling round and round. A warning cry went up, but the crush continued from behind - soldiers in their hundreds kept falling into the Narova until the broken half of the bridge was pushed into the marshy bank.

The Duke of Croy's tent stood near the river, behind the dispositions of the Preobrazhensky and Semyonovsky regiments. The desperate battle at the chevaux de frise had been raging for over two hours on the south and west. There could be no directing or giving orders in that snowy hell... In the tent, the fat Preobrazhensky Colonel Blumberg was seated at the table, clutching his head in his hands and groaning from time to time. Opposite him, the tedious Hallart was blinking at the candle, waiting calmly until it was time to surrender his sword - hilt first, with a bow - to some Swedish officer.

The duke came into the tent with a snow-dusted reindeer-skin coat over his armour, his visor raised, his moustaches drooping with icicles, his lips trembling...

"Let the devil fight with those Russian pigs!" shouted the duke. "Major Cunningham and Major Gast have been strangled in the dugouts... Captain Walbrecht is lying with his throat

cut right here, only twelve paces from this tent... The tsar knew what he was about when he dumped this army on me! Army? Rabble! Scum!.."

Hallart stood up hastily and drew back the carpet; a flurry of snow blew into the tent. The roar of many thousands drowned the noise of shooting. The duke rushed out of the tent. Below could be seen the outlines of the bridge being swept to the bank with men shouting on it. On the right, where the camp fence entered the river, vast crowds were frenziedly milling about...

"The centre's been penetrated," said Hallart. "That's Golovin's regiments..."

Soldiers were climbing over the fence and several groups were running towards the tent...

"Oh, devil!" shouted the duke. "To horse, gentlemen!" He pulled off his reindeer-skin coat. His armour hampered his movements. "Help me, oh, devil!"

The duke, Hallart and Blumberg mounted their horses, rode down towards the water and galloped heavily westwards along the marshy bank towards the sound of the Swedish guns, to surrender rather than be killed by the maddened soldiery...

It became dark. The wind was dying down and soft snowflakes were falling. Only occasionally did a solitary shot ring out. The Russian camp was as quiet as a cemetery; there was not a single light to be seen... Except for the centre, in the captured baggage train, where the drunken Swedish grenadiers were shouting their raucous songs. The flames of the burning barrels cast a ruddy glow on the snow falling on the dead drunk and on the slain.

Artamon Golovin, Trubetskoy, Buturlin, the Prince of Imeretia, Yakov Dolgoruky, ten colonels (including the son of the renowned General Gordon and the son of Franz Lefort), lieutenant-colonels, majors, captains, lieutenants — eighty officers altogether — were assembled on horseback or on foot at the dugout in which the generals were conferring. Prince Kozlovsky and Major Piel had only just been sent to King Charles as

flag-bearers, but they had run into their own soldiers, been recognised and murdered...

In the dugout, Artamon Golovin was saying by the light of the taper:

"The fortifications have been penetrated, the Commander-in-Chief has fled, the bridges have been destroyed, the powder wagons are in the hands of the Swedes... We cannot resume the fighting tomorrow... As long as the Swedes cannot see our plight in the darkness, we can obtain generous conditions from the king and preserve our arms and troops... You, Ivan Ivanovich (he bowed to Buturlin), go, Sir, to the king himself; tell him that, not desirous of shedding Christian blood, we wish to part: we shall go to our own land, and let him return to his..."

"And the guns? Hand them over?" said Buturlin huskily.

No one answered and the generals lowered their heads. The proud Golovin's face was puckered all over as if he were close to tears. Said the fat-lipped, dark Yakov Dolgoruky with a frown:

"It's no use talking... We'll drink the cup of shame to the dregs... We must throw ourselves on their mercy."

Buturlin clicked the flints of two pistols, tucked them behind his belt, pushed his hat down over his eyes and left the dugout.

"Trumpeter!"

Some officers came up to him.

"Now what, Ivan Ivanovich? Are we going to surrender?"

"We're ready to die, Ivan Ivanovich... But not at the hands of our own people..."

Charles and the generals received Buturlin in a farmhouse a verst away from the Russian camp. The Swedes, like the Russians, were afraid of the morrow. After formal hesitation, they agreed to let the whole Russian army with its guns and banners cross to the far side of the Narova, but without cannon and baggage trains. They demanded as surety that all the Russian generals and officers should be delivered to the farmhouse, and then the army could make its own way home... Buturlin tried to argue. Charles said to him with a sneer:

"Out of love for my brother, tsar Peter, I am saving his il-

lustrious generals from the fury of the soldiers. You will be calmer and better fed in Narva than with your army."

All these terms had to be accepted. A troop of cuirassiers galloped off to take the hostages. Swedish sappers lit bonfires on the banks and began building a bridge so that the Russians could be seen off over the river as soon as possible. The first to leave the camp were the Semyonovsky and Preobrazhensky regiments; carrying banners and arms and with drums beating, they crossed the bridges. The soldiers were tall, mustachioed, gloomy. They carried the wounded on their backs. When Weide's division began marching, the Swedish cuirassiers moved up threateningly and demanded the surrender of arms. Swearing, the men threw down their muskets. The other regiments were seen off quite simply, with shots.

At dawn, unshod, hungry, without commanders and in disorder, the remnants of the forty-thousand-strong Russian army moved off on its journey home. The bastions of Ivan-gorod fortress sent several bombs after them...

## 4

News of the disaster at Narva caught up with Peter on the day when he drove to the governor's house in Novgorod. Pavel Yaguzhinsky galloped through the wide-open gates after the tsar's carriage on a staggering horse. He dismounted at the porch and looked at the tsar with feverish eyes.

"Where from?" asked Peter, scowling.

"From there, Mister Bombardier."

"What's happened there?"

"A fiasco, Mister Bombardier."

Peter quickly bowed his head. Menshikov hurried up; he had immediately grasped what question had been asked and what the answer had been. The governor, Ladyzhensky, a pop-eyed little old man, stood on the bottom step with his mouth wide open, the keen wind lifting up his sparse locks...

"Well... Let's go, and you can tell me about it." Peter put one foot on the step, then suddenly turned to the governor, staring at him as if in great astonishment.

"Have you got everything ready for defence?"

"Great Sire... I cannot sleep at nights; all the time I'm thinking how to please you." Governor Ladyzhensky kneeled down, imploring with dog-like eyes and fluttering his eyelashes. "How can it be defended? The city is in a poor way, the ditches have fallen in, the bridge across the Volkhov is wholly rotten... What's more, the muzhiks can't be rounded up from the village, all the horses have been taken for cartage. Have mercy..."

The governor was not talking, he was wailing as he clutched at his sovereign's feet. Peter shook him off and ran into the passage. Monks, nuns, priests and elders in skull-caps jumped up from their seats. One, with chains rattling on his naked body, slithered under a bench...

"What people are these?"

The black friars and the priests bowed. The stern, well-nourished priest began speaking, his eyes rolling up under his brows:

"Let not the monasteries and churches of the Lord go to waste, great Sovereign. By your Ukase, it is ordered that each monastery shall give up to ten and more horses and carts, and as many men with iron shovels as possible, and they are to be fed. And each parish is to give horses and carts and men... Verily, this is beyond the powers of man, great Sovereign... We live by alms alone..."

Peter listened, holding the door handle. His eyes bulged as he surveyed the people bowing to him.

"Are there petitioners from all the monasteries here?"

"From all of them," replied the monks briskly.

"From all of them, benefactor," intoned the nuns in church-choir voices.

"Menshikov, don't let any one out, and mount a guard!"

Going into the dining-room, he ordered Yaguzhinsky to tell him of the fiasco. He did not sit, but paced up and down the hot low-ceilinged room, taking pickled gherkins from the table, chewing them and cross-questioning hastily. Pavel Yaguzhinsky told about the loss of all the artillery, the drowning of thousands of Sheremetev's horsemen in the Narova, the fate of the five thousand soldiers on the broken bridge, not to mention those killed during the fighting, the surrender of seventy-nine generals and officers (including the wounded Weide), and

the ill-fated withdrawal of the army without commanders and baggage trains (only the junior officers and NCOs remained, and even those mainly in the Guards regiments).

"The duke was the first to surrender? And him, one of the Emperor's soldiers, a hero, the son-of-a-bitch. And Blumberg with him? Sasha, can you understand it? Our own man, Blumberg, gallops off to the Swedes. Traitor, traitor! (The gherkin pips flew from Peter's mouth). Seventy-nine traitors? Golovin, Dolgoruky, Vanka Buturlin — I knew he was a fool — but a traitor! Trubetskoy, the sleek hog! How did they surrender?"

"Captain Wrangel rode up to a dugout with some cuirassiers and our people handed over their swords..."

"And not one of them ... so much as..."

"Some wept..."

"Wept! Heroes! Do they hope I'm going to sue for peace after such a fiasco?"

"To ask for peace now would be death," said Menshikov quietly.

Peter stopped before the little mica window, deep in the low vault, his legs apart, clenching and unclenching his fingers behind his back.

"A fiasco is a good lesson... We don't seek glory... And they'll beat us another ten times, and then we'll prevail, Sasha... I'm handing the city over to you. You'll start on the works today: dig trenches, erect stockades — we mustn't let the Swedes beyond Novgorod, even if we all may die... Have Brovkin and Sveshnikov found and brought here, and let the best of the Novgorod merchants come with them. Retire the governor... (After Menshikov.) Have him chucked out. (Menshikov left hurriedly. Peter, to Yaguzhinsky.) Go and find three hundred horses and carts, load them with baked bread, meet the army with the wagon train by evening. Got that?"

"It shall be done, Mister Bombardier."

"Call the monks..."

He sat on a bench opposite the door, malevolent, sheer Antichrist. The clergy came in. It had been stuffy before, but now the air was unbreathable.

"Listen to me, intercessors of the Lord," said Peter. "Go to your monasteries and parishes. Today, you are all to come out to work, digging the ground. (With menace to the priest,

whose eyebrows shot up under the high hat.) Silence, Father... You are to come out with iron spades and horses — and not just the novices, but all the monks, even up to those of angelic rank, and all the nuns, and priests, and sextons and priests' wives, and sextons' wives... You will toil to the glory of God... Silence, I said, I'll do the praying for the lot of you; I was anointed by the Patriarch of Constantinople for such an occasion as this... I shall send a lieutenant round the monasteries and churches; if he finds anyone idle – straight to the post on the square for fifty strokes... I'll take that sin upon myself too. Until the ditches are dug and the stockades put up, there shall be no services in any of the churches save St. Sophia's Cathedral... Now go..."

He gripped the edge of the bench and craned his neck — there was a stubble on his round cheeks and his moustaches bristled. Oh, he was a terror! The clergy, their bottoms colliding, backed away to the door. Peter shouted:

"Whoever's in the passage dismiss the guard."

He poured himself a glass of vodka and began pacing up and down... A little later, the door into the street banged. In the passage, a low voice: "Where is he? In a grim mood? Oh, what are things coming to?"

In came Brovkin, Sveshnikov, and five Novgorod merchants who were kneading their hats and blinking in with fear. Peter did not let them kiss his hand, but took them cheerfully by the shoulders, kissing them on the forehead and Brovkin on the lips.

"Greetings, Ivan Artemich; greetings, Alexei Ivanovich! (To the men of Novgorod.) Greetings, good sirs. Take a seat... As you see, there is food and wine on the table. I've had the master kicked out... Oh, how he disappointed me, that governor; I thought you would have had ditches and impregnable stockades ready by now... If you'd only shoved at least one spade into the ground..."

He poured out vodka for all. The Novgorod men, on taking it, jumped up. He drank first, gasped with relish, and put his empty glass down with a bang.

"We've drunk to the beginning... (Laughing.) Well, merchants, have you heard? The King of Sweden's given us a bit of

a drubbing... For a start, that's nothing... We're going to pay them back with interest, aren't we?.."

The merchants were silent. Ivan Artemich, his lips compressed, stared down at the table; Sveshnikov, his brows aslant, also turned his eyes away. The Novgorod merchants held their breath...

"We can expect the Swedes here this week. If we give up Novgorod, then we give up Moscow, and all will be lost."

"Oh dear..." Brovkin sighed heavily. The black-bearded Sveshnikov's face turned as yellow as wood-oil.

"If we hold the Swedes at Novgorod, we'll have a fresh army stronger than the former one mobilised and trained by the summer... We'll cast twice as many cannon... As for our guns at Narva, the Swedes are welcome to them; those guns were scrap-iron... We shan't make any more like that... The generals are in captivity, and I'm glad of that... I've got old men hampering my feet like shackles. We need young, fresh generals. We'll get the whole state on its feet... We've suffered a rout—all right! Now we're going to start the war in earnest... Give a ruble for the war, Ivan Artemich, and Alexei Ivanovich; in two years I'll pay you back ten."

He leaned back and banged his fists on the table.

"Well, what about it, merchants?"

"Peter Alexeyevich," said Sveshnikov, "where are you going to get it, that ruble? You think we have money in our coffers? Mice, rather..."

"True, oh dear, it's true," groaned the Novgorod merchants.

Peter threw a look at them. (They cringed.) He laid his hand heavily on Ivan Artemich's back.

"What have you to say?"

"God has bound us with the same cord, Peter Alexeyevich. Where you go, we go too."

Brovkin's fat face was open and honest. Sveshnikov froze; they had only just agreed to hold on to their money, and now the artful Vanka had wriggled out of it... Peter embraced him by the shoulders and pressed his perspiring face to his breast against the copper buttons...

"I didn't expect any other answer from you, Ivan Artemich... You have your wits about you, you're bold, you'll be

well rewarded for this... Merchants, we're urgently in need of money. We have one week to fortify Novgorod and put Anikita Repnin's division in a siege defence..."

"...Ditches have been dug and churches demolished ... stockades have been erected, and turf piled near the stockades on both sides. The work was done by dragoons and soldiers, and people of all ranks, and priests, and all ranks of clergy whether of the male or the female sex...

"And the towers were shored up with earth, and turf was laid on top — and embankments were raised. And the wooden tops of the towers and wooden roofs of the walls were all removed... And during this time there were no services in the parish churches, but only in the cathedral...

"It was ordered that Colonel Shenshin should be present at the work in the Pechersky Monastery. And the sovereign came to the monastery and, not finding Shenshin there, gave orders for him to be whipped mercilessly on the parapet and sent to the regiments as a soldier...

"And in Novgorod, the overseer Alexei Poskochin was hanged for taking money for horses and carts — five rubles apiece as a bribe so that the carts could not be used for the defence works."

## 5

The officer of the guard on the porch of Preobrazhensky palace was replying to all:

"No one is being admitted; go your way..."

Many coaches and carriages were assembled in the courtyard. The December wind was filling the black ruts with a snowy meal. The ice-covered trees rattled, the wind-vanes squeaked on the ramshackle palace roofs. The ministers and boyars had been sitting like this since morning in their coaches and carriages. Menshikov wanted to roll up in a gilded coach and six, but even his shafts were turned round.

In the evening after ten, Romodanovsky arrived. The officer of the guard trembled on seeing the Prince-Emperor wad-

dling in a bearskin coat up the worn brick steps. To admit him would be to disobey the tsar's orders; not to admit him —well, the Prince-Emperor on his own authority, without asking the tsar, could have him flayed alive with the knout.

Romodanovsky proceeded into the palace, the guards at each of the doors hiding when they heard the ponderous footsteps. On the way to the tsar's bedchamber, he sat down briefly three times. He tapped with his nail on the door, went in, and bowed in the old-fashioned style.

"What have you wandered in here for, Uncle?" Peter was walking about with a pipe in clouds of smoke. He turned round in annoyance and did not acknowledge the bow. "I said no one was to be let in."

"No one indeed is being admitted, Peter Alexeyevich. But your father used to admit me unannounced. (Peter shrugged one shoulder and continued pacing about, chewing his pipe-stem.) What have you been thinking about these twenty-four hours, Peter Alexeyevich? Your father and your mother enjoined you to hear my counsel. Let us deliberate together, shall we?"

"Have done with your drivelling... You know yourself what it's all about, don't you?"

Fyodor Yurievich did not answer at once. He sat down, opened his fur coat (the old man found it hard to breathe in the stuffy atmosphere) and wiped his face with a coloured handkershief.

"Perhaps I have not come to drivel... Perhaps I had a reason for coming..."

Unconscious of the power of his own voice, Peter suddenly started shouting so loudly that the sentry in the dark throne-room on the other side of the wall dropped his gun in fright.

"The moneybags in the Chamber of Merchants have started arguing in this wise: we showed ourselves up at Narva, we can't make war with the Swedes... We must make peace... They won't look me in the eye... This is how I talked to them... (He took Fyodor Yurievich by the front of his coat and shook him.) They weep: 'Send us to the block, great Sire, but there's no money, we're destitute...' What I am thinking about?..

I need money!.. I've been thinking for twenty-four hours about where to find some. (He released the other.) Well, Uncle?.."

"I'm listening, Peter Alexeyevich. I'll say my piece later."

Peter frowned: "Hm!.." He walked about a bit, his eyes on the Prince-Emperor, and then in a slightly more subdued tone of voice:

"I need extra gun-metal; let them manage without all those bells. They're not essential. We'll take them from the belfries and melt them down... Akinfy Demidov writes from the Urals that fifty thousand poods of cast iron in pigs will be ready by spring... But the money? Screw it out of the townsmen and peasants again? How much can one wring out of them? They're gasping for air as it is, and it'll take at least a year to collect the taxes... And yet there's gold and silver; it's going to waste... (Peter had not finished, but Fyodor Yurievich's eyes were already bulging like those of a crayfish.) I know what you are going to say, Uncle. That's why I never sent for you... But I'm going to get hold of that money."

"The monastery treasure must not be touched now, Peter Alexeyevich..."

"Why?" shouted Peter in a shrill voice, like a cockerel.

"It's not the time... It would be dangerous just now... I won't even tell you what kind of people are being dragged up before me nearly every day... (Fyodor Yurievich's fingers moved restlessly on his knee.) The Moscow merchants are your faithful servants for the time being... Well, they were frightened by Narva... Who wouldn't have been? They'll talk, and then they'll stop; war is to their advantage... And they'll give money so long as you don't lose your temper... But if you touch the monasteries, their mainstay, the divine fools will shout on all the squares what Grishka Talitsky* was screaming from the rooftops in the market. You know about it? That's it. The monastery treasury will have to be taken piecemeal, without fuss..."

"You're splitting hairs, Uncle."

"I'm an old man; why should I split hairs?"

* A schismatic and author of "Notebooks" in which Peter was called "Antichrist"; executed in 1700.

"Money's needed immediately—even if it means getting it by robbery and violence..."

"Do you need a great deal?"

Fyodor Yurievich smiled faintly at this question. Peter said "Hm" again, took a turn up and down the little bedroom, lit his pipe at the candle, blew a puff of smoke, then another, and said firmly:

"Two million."

"Can't you make it less?"

Peter promptly bent down before Romodanovsky and began shaking the prince by the knees.

"Stop tormenting me... So be it—I won't touch the monasteries for the time being... All right? Is there money? Is there a lot?"

"We'll have a look tomorrow..."

"Now... Let's go..."

Fyodor Yurievich picked up his hat and rose with an effort to his feet:

"Well, so be it... If the need is truly dire... (He waddled like a bear to the door.) Only don't bring anyone with you; we'll go on our own..."

It struck one o'clock on the Spassky Tower as the Prince-Emperor's leather carriage drove into the Kremlin, snaked along the dark, narrow alleys between the old Commission buildings and stopped at a squat brick edifice. A lantern stood on a step in the low porch. A man in a sheepskin coat was dozing, his back resting against the iron door. Alighting from the carriage after Peter, the Prince-Emperor picked up the lantern (a smoky tallow candle inside it) and kicked the bast shoe protruding from the sheepskin. The man said drowsily: "What d'you want, what d'you want?", half rose and turned back the edge of his collar. Recognition dawned and he jumped to his feet.

The Prince-Emperor pushed him away from the door, opened the lock with his own key, admitted Peter, then went in himself and locked the door behind him. Holding the lantern high, he waddled off through the cold passage, and then the warm one, into the low chamber of the Secret Affairs Commission with its vaulted ceiling and peeling walls. Founded by the tsar Alexei Mikhailovich, it now smelt of dust, dry mould and

mice. Two little lattice windows were shrouded in cobwebs. A door opened a little way and the senile head of the trusted watchman poked out fearfully:

"Who's that? Who are you?"

"Give us a candle, Mitrich," said the Prince-Emperor.

There were low oak cupboards by the far wall with forged locks (you could forfeit your life merely for being curious about what was kept in those cupboards, let alone for touching them). The watchman brought a candle in an iron candlestick. The Prince-Emperor pointed to the middle cupboard:

"Move that one away from the wall... (The watchman shook his head.) That's an order... I'll take the responsibility..."

The watchman put the candle on the floor. He pushed with his frail shoulder, but the cupboard did not move. Peter hurriedly threw off his fur coat and hat, tried—his neck turned purple—and finally shifted it. A mouse darted out from underneath. Behind it, veiled by dusty rags of cobwebs, there was a little iron door in the wall. The Prince-Emperor took out a two-pound key, grunted: "Mitrich, give me some light, I can't see," and clumsily inserted the key into the keyhole. The lock had gone rusty in the last three decades and would not yield. "We'll have to use a crowbar; run and get one, Mitrich."

"What's in there?" said Peter, examining the door with the candle.

"You'll see, my son... According to the palace inventory, there are secret things kept in there. During Prince Golitsyn's Crimean campaign, your sister Sophia came here one night... I couldn't open it then, as now... (The Prince-Emperor all but grinned under his Tatar moustaches.) She stood for a while and went away, did Sophia..."

The watchman brought a crowbar and an axe. Peter attacked the lock, broke the chopper and grazed his finger. He started hitting the edge of the door with the heavy crowbar. The blows reverberated hollowly through the deserted building—the Prince-Emperor uneasily went over to the window. Finally, Peter managed to insert the end of the crowbar into the crack. He pressed hard and broke off the lock; the little iron door half-opened with a creak. He impatiently snatched

up the candle and was the first to enter the vaulted and windowless storeroom.

Cobwebs, dust. On the shelves along the walls stood ornate wine bowls dating back to the times of Ivan the Terrible and Boris Godunov, Italian goblets on tall stems, silver bowls for washing the tsar's hands during the great processions; two lions of silver with gold manes and ivory teeth; stacks of gold plates; broken silver candelabra; a great peacock of solid gold with emerald eyes — this was one of two that once stood by the throne of the Byzantine emperors, but the mechanism was broken. On the lower shelves lay leather sacks; the seams of some had rotted away and Dutch gold coins had spilled out. Under the benches there were piles of sables and other furs, skins, velvets and silks, all moth-eaten and decayed. Peter picked up some of the objects, licking his finger and rubbing: "Gold! Silver!" He counted the bags of coins — there must be about forty-five, if not more... He picked up the sables and the foxtails and shook them.

"Uncle, these are all rotten."

"Rotten, but not ruined, my son..."

"Why didn't you tell me about this earlier?"

"I gave my word. Your father Alexei Mikhailovich left on campaign at various times and entrusted me with the safekeeping of spare money and treasures. At the end of his life, your father summoned me and willed that this should not be given to any of his heirs, unless dire need should come upon the state in time of war."

Peter slapped his thighs.

"We're saved, we're saved! That's all I need... The monks will thank you for this... One peacock! It could clothe, shoe and arm a regiment and give Charles what for. But as for the bells, Uncle, I'm going to take them down just the same, so don't be cross..."

# *Chapter Five*

## 1

Europe laughed and soon forgot about the tsar of the barbarians who almost frightened the Baltic peoples, but whose lice-ridden troops had faded away like phantoms. Having hurled them back after Narva into wild Muscovy, where it was meant for them to vegetate for all time in their immemorial ignorance (the inglorious and base character of the Russians was known from the reports of famous travellers), King Charles became the hero of the European capitals for a while. In Amsterdam, the City Hall and the Bourse were decorated with flags in honour of the Narva victory; in Paris, the bookshops exhibited two bronze medals—one side depicted Glory crowning the young King of Sweden; "the just cause triumphs in the end"; the obverse showed tsar Peter fleeing and losing his conical Kalmyk hat. In Vienna, the former Austrian ambassador to Moscow, Ignatius Guarient, published the notes, or diary, of his secretary Johann Georg Korb, in which were described with great vividness the comical and unenlightened manners of the Moscow state, and also the bloody executions of the streltsy in 1698. At the Viennese court, there was loud talk about the latest defeat of the Russians at Pskov, of Peter's flight with only a few men, of an uprising in Moscow and the release from a convent of Tsarevna Sophia, who had again taken over the reins of the state.

But all these minor events were quickly overshadowed by the threat of war, which finally came to a head.

When the King of Spain died, France and Austria reached out for the succesion. England and Holland intervened. Those brilliant marshals, John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, Prince Eugene of Savoy and the Duke of Vendome, began laying waste whole countries and burning cities down. In Italy, in Bavaria, in beautiful Flanders, armed ruffians roamed all the highways, plundering the peaceful population and exhausting

the stocks of food and wine. Revolts flared up in Hungary and the Cevennes... The fate of great countries was being decided: who was to dominate the seas with which fleet. Affairs in the east had to be left to take their own course.

In the heat of the moment, after Narva, Charles had decided to hurl himself after Peter into the depths of Muscovy, but his generals implored him not to dice with fate two times running. The tired and battered army was withdrawn to winter quarters in Laissa near Dorpat. From there, the king wrote the Senate a high-flown letter demanding replenishments and money. In Stockholm, those who did not want war kept their mouths shut. The Senate decreed new taxes and sent twenty thousand foot and horse to Laissa by spring. A book was published in Latin *On the Causes of the War Between Sweden and the Tsar of Moscow*; it was read with satisfaction in the European courts.

Charles now had one of the most powerful armies in Europe. He was faced with a decision — in which direction to aim the blow: eastward, into desolate Muscovy, where the infrequent and beggarly towns promised little booty and glory; or to the south-west, against the perfidious Augustus, deep into Poland, into Saxony, into the heart of Europe. The guns of the great marshals were already booming there. Charles' head whirled in anticipation of future glory as a second Julius Caesar. His guards, the descendants of sea robbers, dreamed of the gorgeous silks of Florence, the gold in the cellars of the Escurial, the fair-haired women of Flanders, the taverns on the crossroads in Bavaria...

When the summer roads were usable, Charles detached a corps of eight thousand under the command of Schlippenbach and ordered him to go to the Russian frontier, while he himself, with his whole army, crossed Livonia by forced marches, forded the Dvina on boats two versts above Riga in view of the enemy, and completely routed the Saxon troops of King Augustus. In this battle on the eighth of June, Johann Reinhold Patkul was wounded; he outrode the king's cuirassiers by a hair's breadth, thus escaping captivity and execution.

It was not those lice-ridden Russian troops that were routed at Riga, but the Saxon soldiers renowned all over Europe.

It looked as though the wings of Glory had spread out behind the king's shoulders. "King Charles thinks of nothing but war..." as General Stenbock wrote about him to Stockholm. "He does not listen to reasonable counsel any more... He talks as though God were directly inspiring his plans for the future... He is altogether self-opinionated and irrational... I think that if he had only a thousand men left, even with them he would hurl himself on an entire army... He is not even concerned about his soldiers' rations. When any of ours are slain, it no longer troubles him..."

Charles raced from Riga in pursuit of Augustus. In Poland, bloody internecine warfare broke out among the aristocracy: some were for Augustus and against the Swedes, others shouted that the Swedes alone could bring order and help to reclaim the right-bank Ukraine and Kiev, and that Poland needed a new king (Stanislaw Leszczynski). Augustus fled from Warsaw. Charles entered the capital without a battle. In Cracow, Augustus hurriedly began assembling a new army.

A rare hunt began, with king pursuing king. Again they applauded the young hero in the courts of Europe; his name was pronounced in the same breath as those of Prince Eugene and Marlborough. They said that Charles did not allow any woman near him, that he even slept in his jack-boots, that he appeared before the army at the beginning of a battle on horseback, in the inevitable grey-green coat buttoned up to the neck — and, with God's name on his lips, was the first to charge the enemy, taking the army with him. He left it to General Schlippenbach to deal with tsar Peter in the dismal East.

Peter spent the whole winter between Moscow, Novgorod and Voronezh (where the intensive building of ships for the Black Sea fleet was in progress). Ninety thousand poods of bell bronze were conveyed to Moscow. The man put in charge of casting the new artillery was an expert on mining, the old clerk of the Duma, Vinius. At the foundry in Moscow, he started a school in which two hundred and fifty provincial nobles, artisans and low-born but quick-witted youths studied foundry work, mathematics, fortification and history. When there was not enough red copper to add to the bell bronze, Peter sent Vinius to Siberia to find ore. In Liège, Andrei Artamonovich Matveyev, the son of the boyar murdered on the Main

Porch, bought up fifteen thousand of the latest muskets, and also rapid-firing guns, spy-glasses, and ostrich plumes for the officers' hats. In Moscow, five cloth and linen manufactories were working - experts were recruited for good money from all over Europe. The soldiers drilled from dawn to dusk. It was most difficult of all with the officers; they had to teach the soldiers and themselves they had to learn, but many of them, when promoted, would become intoxicated with a sense of their own power, or would take to drink.

At that time, about two weeks after the Narva fiasco, Peter wrote to Boris Petrovich Sheremetev, who was in Novgorod collecting up the battered remnants of the horse regiments (some without horses, some without sabres, some without anything at all):

"...It is not seemly to lose all in misfortune... For which reason I order that in the action which you have undertaken and commenced, you are to continue in charge of the cavalry, with which you are to protect the nearest places henceforth, and to proceed further to inflict greater damage on the enemy. You are not to find excuses for not doing so, as you have enough men, and the rivers and marshes are frozen over... I remind you once more: do not seek excuses, not even illness... Much sickness was contracted by many of the runaways, whose comrade, Major Lobanov, was hanged for the said sickness..."

But the noblemen's irregular cavalry was not reliable; and people of all stations were chosen in its place: peasants and bondsmen to serve to their own free will for eleven rubles a year with food, and enough of them for ten regiments of dragoons. So many bondsmen and serfs volunteered to join the cavalry that only the most fit and presentable were accepted. The trained dragoon squadrons went away to Novgorod, where General Anikita Repnin put them in order and gave instruction to the divisions that had been at Narva.

Novgorod, Pskov and the Pechersky Monastery were fortified by the new year, and in the north, Kholmogory and Arkhangelsk. The stone fortress of Novo-Dvinka was hastily built fifteen versts away, in the firth of the Beryozov. In summer, many merchant ships arrived at Arkhangelsk from England and Holland for the June fair. During that year, new goods, as against the former ones, were commandeered by the Treasury

for trade with the foreigners: sealskins, fish glue, tar, potash and wax... The tsar's traders took over everything for the state and the private merchants were left to deal in leather goods or carved bones. On the twentieth of June, the Swedish fleet burst into the North Dvina estuary. Seeing the newly-built fortress, they did not dare ignore it and continue on their way to Arkhangelsk; they opened fire on Novo-Dvinka with all guns. During an operation by four Swedish frigates, one ran aground on the shallows right in front of the fortress and was followed by a yacht. The Russians rushed to their boats and took the frigate and the yacht by force; the other ships sailed ingloriously back into the White Sea.

There were clashes all summer between Sheremetev's advanced detachments and Schlippenbach. The Swedes marched up to the Pechersky Monastery, but only burned the surrounding villages and did not take the fortress. Schlippenbach wrote in alarm to King Charles asking for another eight thousand men; each month, he said, the Russians were becoming more and more enterprising. Evidently, against all expectations, they had quickly recovered after the Narva disaster and had even achieved signal successes in the art of war and in armament. It would not be so easy to beat the Russian troops with two brigades this time... Meanwhile, Charles took Cracow and chased Augustus into Saxony — he was deaf to the voice of reason. So matters stood until December, 1701.

In mid-winter, Boris Petrovich Sheremetev learned from a prisoner that General Schlippenbach had halted for winter quarters at the farmhouse of Errestfer near Dorpat. When he learned this, he was frightened at the boldness of his own idea: to penetrate deep into hostile country and catch the enemy unawares while he was resting. A rare chance. In former times, of course, Boris Petrovich would have considered it best not to try his unreliable luck, but during this last year, Peter had become very difficult: he gave no one any peace, and blamed people not so much for what they had done, as for what they could have done, but hadn't...

He had to risk his luck. Boris Petrovich dressed ten thousand newly selected and newly trained troops in sheepskin jackets and felt boots and, with fifteen light guns on sledges, sending light horse regiments of Circassians, Kalmyks and Ta-

tars ahead, quickly but with much apprehension, reached Errestfer in three days. Too late, the Swedes noticed fur-hatted riders with the bows and with horse's tails on their spears upon the high, snowy bank of the little River Aa. Lieutenant-Colonel Lieven went out to the river with two companies and a gun. On the far bank, the slant-eyed barbarians raised their curved bows and released a shower of arrows. Down over the steep snowdrifts across the river, howling like wolves and kicking up clouds of snow, there came galloping from right and left striped Tatars with curved sabres and blue-coated Circassians with pikes and lassos, while the shrieking Kalmyks charged head-on. Lieven's three hundred Estland marksmen and the lieutenant-colonel himself were cut down or run through and stripped to their underlinen.

The whole Swedish camp was in turmoil. Another detachment with six guns drove the mounted scouts back from the river. Schlippenbach and his buglers galloped through the camp, the Swedes dashed out from their huts and dugouts in whatever they happened to be wearing and tore across the deep snow to their units. The whole army formed up in front of the farmhouse and met the approaching Russian army with artillery fire. Boris Petrovich, in only a cloth caftan with a three-coloured sash across his shoulder, rode forward on horseback in the middle of the square.

The Swedish artillery fire threw into confusion the leading squadrons of dragoons, who had not yet seen battle. The Swedes pressed forward, but, drawn out at a gallop on sledges, the fifteen light guns opened such a withering fire with case shot that the Swedes were disconcerted and halted in disorder. The now recovered dragoon regiments of Kropotov, Zybin and Gulitsa charged in from the flanks. "Brothers," shouted Sheremetev in a strained voice from inside the square, "brothers! Hit the Swede hard!" The Russians advanced with fixed bayonets. Dusk was falling rapidly, lit by the gun flashes. Schlippenbach ordered his men to retire under cover of the farm buildings. Hardly had the melancholy horns sounded the retreat, however, when the dragoons, Tatars, Kalmyks and Circassians charged with renewed fury from all sides at the retreating, bristling squares of Swedes, broke through them and flattened them. A massacre began... In the darkness, General

Schlippenbach with three officers only managed to get away by the skin of his teeth on horseback to Revel.

In Moscow, to celebrate the first victroy, fireworks were let off and transparencies lit. On Red Square, barrels of vodka and beer were set up, rams were roasted whole over fires and fancy bread was distributed to the populace. The Swedish banners were hung out on the Spassky Tower. Menshikov galloped to Novgorod to hand Boris Petrovich the tsar's diamond-set portrait and the unprecedented rank of General Field-Marshal. Each of the soldiers who had taken part in the victory was issued with a silver ruble (struck for the first time at the Moscow Mint).

Boris Petrovich gave thanks with tears in his eyes and sent a letter to Peter with Menshikov, beseeching him to let him go to Moscow on urgent matters... "My wife is living in someone else's house to this day, and I must find her at least some kind of dwelling where she can lay her head..." Peter replied: "There is no need for you to be in Moscow, Mister General Field-Marshal... But I leave it to your discretion... If you must, then arrange it so that you arrive during Passion Week and return at Easter."

Six months later, Boris Petrovich had another encounter with General Schlippenbach at Hummelshof, out of seven thousand, the Swedes lost five and a half thousand killed in a bloody battle. There was no one left to defend Livonia and the road to the sea towns was open. Sheremetev proceeded to devastate the country, the towns, the estates and the ancient castles of the knights. In autumn, he wrote to Peter:

"...Almighty God and the Holy Mother of God have fulfilled your desire: there is no more of that enemy land left to lay waste; all has been devastated; the only places left whole are Marienburg, Narva, Revel and Riga. I am much troubled over one matter: where to put the prisoners. The camps are full of local Finns, so are the prisons, and they have been billeted everywhere... This is dangerous, because the people are very fierce... Have an Ukase issued: take those of the Finns that can best use an axe or have some other trade and have them sent to work in Voronezh or Azov..."

## 2

For twelve days they hurled bombs into the ancient fortress of Marienburg. There was no way of approaching it, since it stood on a small island on Lake Poip. The stone walls rose straight out of the water; from gates, fortified with a low tower, ran a wooden bridge a hundred sazhens long that had been partially destroyed by the Swedes themselves.

There were big stocks of rye in the fortress. The Russians, short of food in devastated Livonia, urgently needed those food reserves. Boris Petrovich ordered volunteers to be called for, went to them and said: "There'll be wine and women in the fortress. Go to it, lads; I'll give you twenty-four hours to yourselves." The soldiers tore apart with alacrity several wooden huts in the village by the bank and built rafts. About a thousand volunteers punted off towards the fortress walls. Swedish bombs burst on the rafts.

Standing on the porch of his tiny hut, Boris Sheremetev looked through a spy-glass. The Swedes were enraged and ferocious; mightn't they actually succeed in holding out? To take the fortress by siege was the last thing he wanted — it could mean being stuck there until late autumn. Suddenly he saw a big flame burst from the ground near the fortress gates. The log-built superstructure on the tower swayed. Part of the wall collapsed. The rafts were already approaching the breach. A white flag was pushed through a window in the fortress and hung there. Boris Petrovich shut his spy-glass, took off his hat and crossed himself.

The inhabitants of the fortress were somehow picking their way to the bank over the piles of the destroyed bridge. They were carrying children in their arms, bundles and boxes. Weeping, the women turned round to look at their abandoned dwellings and gazed in horror at the Russians contemplating their booty. Hardly had the last refugees quit the fortress when the iron-bound door gates shut with a crash and puffs of smoke flew from the narrow embrasures. The first to be killed was a Russian lieutenant going up in a small boat to hoist the Russian banner on the fortress. The mortars on the bank

thundered in reply. People began rushing to and fro on the bridge, their bundles and boxes falling into the river. An enormous flame hurled the castle roofs skywards, the explosion shook the lake and many were struck by falling masonry. The fortress and the storehouses were in flames. It turned out that Ensign Wulf and Standard-Bearer Gottschlich had run in helpless fury down into the powder magazine and had lit a fuse. Wulf did not get away in time. The standard-bearer, burned and bloody, appeared in a breach in the wall and fell into the water. He was picked up by a boat.

Entering the hut in which, with his back to the window, General Field-Marshal Sheremetev was sitting importantly at a table laid for dinner, the fortress commandant, accompanied by his officers, took off his hat, bowed politely and presented his sword. The officers followed suit. Boris Petrovich threw the swords on to a bench and began shouting malevolently at the Swedes: why had they surrendered so late, caused so many intolerable injuries and deaths, and cunningly blown up the fortress?.. Dashing cavalry colonels with tanned faces and with stubble on their chins stood in the hut, their eyes fixed and hostile. The commandant nevertheless answered the General Field-Marshal with courage:

"There are many women and children amongst our people, also the superintendant, the esteemed Pastor Ernst Gluck with his wife and daughters... Please let them through unharmed and do not let the soldiers have them... The women and children can bring no credit to you..."

"I don't want to know!" shouted Boris Petrovich. His soft face, clean-shaven and accustomed rather to domestic life, was perspiring with rage. Drawing in his stomach, he got out from behind the table. "The commandant and the officers are to be put under guard!" He adjusted his three-coloured sash, threw on his short maroon cape with a martial air and, with his officers, went out to his troops.

Black smoke was billowing from the fortress and blotting out the sun. About three hundred Swedish prisoners were standing on the bank with their heads bowed. The Russian soldiers, who did not yet know what orders were to be given about the prisoners, merely walked up and down near the angry Livonians – who had fled from the invasion two weeks

previously to find refuge in Marienburg — or struck up conversations with the women who were sitting on their bundles, their heads dolefully on their knees. A trumpet sounded. The General Field-Marshal came up with an important air, his long starred spurs jingling.

Someone's eyes were watching him from behind a group of dismounted dragoons; they seared his heart like two little fires. In wartime, a woman's eyes were sometimes sharper than a sword-blade... Boris Petrovich coughed importantly — "Ahem!" — and looked back. There was a pale-blue petticoat behind the soldiers' caftans... He frowned and thrust out his jaw and saw those eyes, dark, shining with tears, and appeal, and youth... A girl of about seventeen was standing on tiptoe and staring at the Field-Marshal from behind the soldiers' backs. A mustachioed dragoon threw over her thin dress a crumpled soldier's cape (The August day was cool) and tried to hide her with his shoulder from the Field-Marshal. She silently craned her neck without saying a word, her fresh face distorted by terror. She tried to smile, her lips quivering. "Ahem!" grunted Boris Petrovich for the second time, and he walked past them to the prisoners.

At dusk, resting after dinner, Boris Petrovich was sitting on a bench and sighing. The only other person in the hut was Yaguzhinsky, who was scratching away with a quill at the corner of the table.

"Have a care or you'll ruin your eyes," said Boris Petrovich quietly.

"I'm finishing, Field-Marshal..."

"Well, finish away, then. (And purely to himself this time.) So that's how it gets a man... Well, well... Oh, my God..."

Lightly slapping the table with the palm of his hand, he stared out of the murky window. Flames were still darting from the fortress on the lake... Yaguzhinsky glanced sideways with mocking amusement at the Field-Marshal: look at him, he's in a bad way, he's hooked, the poor old fool.

"You will take the order to the colonel," said Boris Petrovich, "and look in on Number Two Regiment of Dragoons...

Try and find that orderly — what's his name — Oska Demin, or something. He's got some girl with him in the baggage train... Pity, she'll be done for, the dragoons won't spare her. You bring her here... Wait... For Oska... Here, give him this ruble, say it's a present from me."

"It shall all be done, Field-Marshal..."

Alone in the hut, Boris Petrovich coughed and shook his head. What could he do about it? You can't live without sin, try as you will. In 'ninety-seven he had ridden into Naples. One dark little girl had caught his fancy. There was nothing he could do about it... He'd climbed Vesuvius and looked at the fires of hell, he'd climbed the craggy cliffs on the Isle of Capri, and had looked at the shrines of the heathen Roman gods, and had diligently done the rounds of the Catholic monasteries, and had studied and touched with his hands the board on which the Lord Jesus had sat when washing his disciples' feet, and a piece of the bread of the Last Supper, and a wooden Cross containing part of Christ's navel and part of the circumcision, and one of Christ's much-tattered shoes, and the head of the prophet Zachariah, the father of St. John the Baptist, and many other truly wondrous and marvellous things... And yet it had been overshadowed by the sharp-eyed little Julia, who danced with a tambourine and sang songs... He had wanted to take her to Moscow and had thrown himself at the girl's feet... Oh, my God, my God!..

Yaguzhinsky, as always, had wasted no time. He gently propelled into the hut the girl of a short while ago, in a blue dress and in neat white stockings. Her neckerchief was tied crosswise on her breast and there were straws in her dark, curly hair (clearly, they had already got round to rolling her under the carts in the baggage train). The girl went down on her knees in the doorway, bowing her head low, a picture of meekness and supplication.

Yaguzhinsky cleared his throat briskly and went out. Boris Pertovich studied the girl for some time... Presentable, frisky, by the look of her, neck and arms tender and white... Altogether appealing. He spoke to her in German:

"What's your name?"

The girl sighed lightly and briefly:

"Martha-Kathrin..."

"Katerina... Good... Who's your father?"

"I'm an orphan... I was in service with Pastor Ernst Gluck..."

"In service... Very good... Can you do the laundry?"

"Yes, I can... I can do lots of things... I can look after children..."

"You don't say!.. I haven't got anyone to wash my linen. Are you a maid?"

Katerina snivelled and murmured, without raising her head:

"No... I got married not long ago..."

"A-a-ah... To whom?"

"Johann Rabe, royal cuirassier..."

Boris Petrovich frowned. He inquired coldly after the cuirassier: Where was he? A prisoner? Killed, perhaps?

"I saw him and two soldiers jump down and swim across the lake... I haven't seen him since..."

"You mustn't weep, Katerina... You're young... You'll live to find another... Hungry?"

"Ever so," she replied in a thin loice, lifted up her drawn face and smiled again, meekly and trustingly... Boris Petrovich went up to her, put his hands on her shoulders, helped her to her feet and kissed her fine, warm hair. Her shoulders were warm and tender too...

"Sit at the table. We'll give you something to eat. We're not going to hurt you. D'you drink wine?"

"I don't know..."

"That means you do..."

Boris Petrovich called his batman and sternly (so that the soldier should not think the wrong thing; God forbid that he should smirk) ordered him to lay the table for supper. He did not eat much himself, but kept stealing looks at Katerina. Goodness, she was hungry! She ate tidily, neatly, glancing with moist eyes at Boris Petrovich and half-revealing her white teeth in gratitude. Her cheeks were soon flushed with food and wine.

"Were all your dresses burned?"

"All of them," she replied casually.

"Never mind, we'll get you plenty more... We'll go to

Novgorod during the week, it'll be better for you there. Today, it's campaign conditions; we'll sleep on the stove..."

Katerina looked darkly at him from underneath her eyelashes, blushed, turned her face away and half-covered it with her hand.

"Oh, really... Katerina, wench..." Boris Petrovich had taken an inexpressible liking to this chambermaid. He reached across the table and took her hand. She kept her face covered, one eye shining winsomely through her fingers. "All right, all right, all right, we're not going to make you into a serf, never fear... You'll live upstairs... I've needed a housekeeper for a long time..."

## 3

When the defeated troops were returning from Narva to Novgorod, many soldiers fled, some to the Old Believers' parishes and villages in the north, some to the great rivers, to the Don, the trans-Volga, the lower Dnieper. With them fled Fedka Wash-in-Mud, the gloomy man who had seen all there was to see. (He would be executed anyway for murdering Ensign Mirbach.) He induced Andrei Golikov to join him; after all, they had gone through hell together on the Sheksna once and they had eaten from the same bowl for a long time. After the horrors of Narva, Andrei was prepared to go anywhere to escape the army.

One night they stole a regimental nag from the bivouac, sold it to a monastery for fifty kopecks, shared out the money and wrapped it up in rags. They kept clear of the highway, going from village to village, begging for alms, stealing too; they helped themselves to a chicken from a priest's yard and they stole a costly bridle and harness from the leading merchant's house in Ostashkovo, then sold them to a tavern-keeper. Twice they managed to wrench off a church collection mug, but one was empty and the other only had one brass coin in it.

They spent the winter in Valdai, in snow-bound chimneyless huts with children half-suffocated by the fumes from the stove and infants crying in their cribs throughout the howling

nocturnal gales. Andrei Golikov often woke in the night and sat up, holding his bare feet in his hands. A calf champed nearby in a corner on the stinking straw. The man snored on his bench. The woman slept on the floor by the hearth, her knees drawn up. The children muttered in their sleep on the stove. Cockroaches nibbled the baby's fingertips and cheeks. The infant in its cradle went "Wa-a-a-a! Wa-a-a-a!"—there was no knowing why he had been born, no knowing why the cockroaches were nibbling him...

"Why can't you get to sleep, Andrei? " asked Fedka (he could not sleep either, and he was thinking.)

"Fedya, let's get away from here..."

"Where to? On a foul night like this?"

"I'm sick of it, Fedya..."

"It stinks here, you can't breathe. They live worse than cattle. Look how that muzhik's snoring. He'll snore till he wakes up, drink a dipperful of water and go off to work all day like a horse... I asked them once; the whole village is on quit rent. The young landowner went off with the army and the old one lives here, in the village beyond the gully. He has a fine house, but the old man's a skinflint and a bully. He takes everything from the peasants and leaves them nothing but goosefoot. All his peasants are stupid too. If one of them's a bit too bright, he drives him off to the market at Valdai and sells him straight off the cart. He's bred out all the clever strains—it keeps his mind at rest. The kids are born stupid here too, they can't speak for themselves..."

Andrei sat there, clutching his bare, cold feet and rocking himself to and fro. Ten men would have had more than enough of what Andrei Golikov had endured in twenty-four years. But he was still going strong. And not thanks to his frail body, but because of an insatiable desire to get out of the darkness. As if, ragged and hungry, he was crawling through a storm-devastated forest, across terrible places, year after year, verst after verst, believing that somewhere there was a radiant land which he was bound to reach sooner or later. Where was it, that land, and what was it like?

And even now, only partly hearing what Fedka was saying beside him on the straw, Andrei opened his eyes and gazed into the dark. He half-remembered, half-dreamed of a green

hill, a silver birch-tree, all its branches and all its leaves shivering and trembling in the warm wind... Oh, such joy!.. But it vanishes... A face drifts up, never seen before; nearer, nearer... It floats right up, opens its eyes and, more alive than the living, looks at Andrei... If he had board, brush and paints, he would paint it... It smiles and floats away... He dreams in the blue mist of a city, a wondrous city and passing fair. Where is he to find that city, where is he to find the birch-tree with the shivering leaves, where is he to find the wonderful, smiling face?

"We'll go to an estate, we'll spin a yarn to the boyar, anything he wants, and we'll be fed in the servants' quarters," said Fedka huskily. In rich houses, he always started stories about the Narva fiasco, telling a mixture of truth and lies, and sometimes he would reduce his audience to tears (occasionally the landowner himself would drop into the servants' quarters out of boredom and would listen sadly, his cheek on his hand.) Fedka would have them all in tears with the story of how King Charles, having smitten the innumerable thousands of the Russian army, rode round the field of battle...

"His face is shining, in his left hand he holds the mace, and in his right hand a sharp sabre, and he is clad in gold and silver, the horse under him is grey and mettlesome, and it is up to the belly in human blood; two valiant generals are leading it by the bridle... And the King rides up to me... And I lie there, of course, since I have a bullet in my breast... Around me are Swedes lying like sacks, all dead. The king rides up to me, stops and asks the generals: 'What manner of man is that lying there?' And the generals reply: 'There lies a brave Russian soldier; he fought for the Orthodox faith; he slew twelve our grenadiers.' And the King replies to them: 'A gallant, courageous death...' And the generals say to him: 'No, he is alive, he has a bullet in his breast.' And they lift me up, and I stand, and I take a musket, and I present arms, as is meet for royalty. And he says: 'Well done,'and he takes from his pocket a gold piece: 'Here,' says he, 'that is for you, brave Russian soldier. Go in peace to your homeland and tell the Russians: Do not go against God, do not sue the rich, do not fight with the Swede...'"

These stories of Fedka's never misfired, and the two of them would be allowed to stay in the servants' quarters for the

night and would be given a meal. But it was hard to get through to a rich household. People had become mistrustful. Year after year, more and more were fleeing to avoid recruitment for military and civilian duties; they were hiding in the forests, going on the prowl singly or in gangs... There were some little towns where only the old men, old women and little children were left; if you asked after anybody, one had been for the dragoons, another was on earth-works or had been transported to the Urals, and another, respectable and God-fearing, who had until recently run a shop in the market, had abandoned his wife and little children and was whistling with a bludgeon in a gully just off the highway...

Fedka often fell a-thinking: wouldn't it be best to join the robbers and go on the prowl? As he saw it, where had they to go? They couldn't spend the rest of their lives begging from door to door — they'd get sick of it... But Andrei would have none of this... He objected stubbornly: "Let's go south, to the end of the world..." Fedka would say to him: "All right, so you get there, and you'll find people there too; they won't feed you for nothing, you'll have to break your back for the Cossacks or work as bondsman for a landowner and sweat your guts out for a pittance... But if we go on the prowl and pull a few robberies, we'll each have a hundred rubles sewn into our hats in no time. You can start up as a merchant with that kind of money, and then you can't be got at by a dragoon, or an under-clerk, or a landowner — you can be your own master..."

Once, in summer, they were sitting in the glow of the evening sunset in a field. The smoke was drifting from their campfire of dried dung, the grasses were bowing and whistling in the wind. Andrei looked at the dwindling light of sunset; all that remained of it was a dull band on the rim of the world...

"Fedya, there's something I want to tell you, just this once... There's a force in me, it's such a force that it's more than human... I listen, the wind whistles in the stalks and I understand, I understand everything, and my heart is ready to burst. I look at the evening glow of sunset and the twilight, and I understand, as if I had spread over the sky with that radiance, and there's such sorrow and joy in me..."

"We had a fool in our village, a gooseboy," said Fedka,

poking a grass stem into the scattering embers. "He used to carry on the way you do; nobody could make head or tail of it. He played marvellously well on reed pipes, the whole village used to come and listen. At that time, they were looking for people to work for Franz Lefort as musicians; and what d'you think?—took him on..."

"Fedya, one of Boris Petrovich Sheremetev's serfs was telling me at Narva about the land of Italy... About the painters... How they live and how they work... I shan't have any peace of mind, I'll sell myself into slavery to an artist like that, just to grind his pigments. Fedya, I know how to do it... Take a wooden board of oak, wipe it with a little oil, prime it... Grind the pigments in pots, some with oil, some with egg... You take your brushes... (Golikov was talking very quietly, not loud enough to drown the whistling of the wind.) Fedya, the day has shone bright and now it's faded away; but on my board the day burns forever... You see a tree, a birch or a pine standing there. What's special about it? But you look at my tree on my board, and you'll understand everything, and you'll burst into tears..."

"Where is it, that country?"

"I don't know, Fedya... If we ask the way, they'll tell us."

"We could go there too... What's the odds?"

## 4

In the spring of seventeen hundred and two, there arrived in Arkhangelsk by ship ten lock engineers hired in Holland by Andrei Artamonovich Matveyev for high wages (seventeen rubles and twenty kopecks a month, with board at the state's expense). Half of them were sent to Lake Ivanovskoye near Tula, to build, as had been planned the year before, thirty-one stone locks between the Don and the Oka via the Upa and the Shat. The other half left for Vyshni Volochok to build a lock between the Tveritsa and the Msta.

The Vyshni Volochok lock was to join the Caspian Sea to Lake Ladoga, and the Ivanovsky lock was to link the whole Volga country with the Black Sea.

Peter was in Arkhangelsk, where they were improving the

Dvina estuary and building frigates for the White Sea fleet. The local manufacturers told him that a route had long been known from the White Sea to Lake Ladoga: it ran across Lake Vyg, Lake Onega, and the Svir. It was a difficult route, with many portages and rapids; but if canals were dug and locks built as far as Lake Onega, the whole White Sea coast would carry merchandise by water direct to Lake Ladoga.

All three great routes from the three rivers — the Volga, the Don and the Svir — converged on Lake Ladoga, which was separated from the Baltic Sea by a small channel, the Neva, guarded by two fortresses, Noteburg and Nyenschanz. Pointing to the map, Dutch engineer Isaak Abraham said to Peter: "By digging locks and canals, you will bring the dead seas to life, and hundreds of your rivers, the waters of the whole land, will rush into the great stream of the Neva and bear your ships out to the open sea."

Since the autumn of seventeen hundred and two, all efforts had been concentrated on mastering the Neva. Apraksin, the Admiral's son, spent the whole summer devastating Ingermanland, got as far as Izhory and, on the bank of the swift river that wound across a dreary coastal plain, beat the Swedish General Cronhiort and hurled him back to the Duderhof Hills, from where he retreated in confusion across the Neva to the little fortress of Nyenschanz on the Okhta.

Apraksin and his army marched to Lake Ladoga and halted by the River Nasia. Boris Petrovich Sheremetev also proceeded there from Novgorod with much heavy artillery and with baggage trains. Peter and five battalions of the Semyonovsky and Preobrazhensky regiments sailed from Arkhangelsk into the Bay of Onega and disembarked on the flat shore near the fishing village of Nyukhcha. From there he sent Captain Alexei Brovkin to the Old Believers' settlement of Soroka in the Vyg estuary. (In the summer, Ivan Artemich had managed to exchange his son for a captive Swedish lieutenant-colonel and had himself gone to Narva, taking three hundred efimki over and above.) Alexei was to sail in a boat all the way down the Vyg and see if the river was suitable for locks.

From Nyukhcha, the troops proceeded via Lake Pul and the village of Vozhmosalma to Povenets through forest lanes and over a corduroy road and bridges. This road had been

built in three months by Sergeant Shchepotev, who drove the peasants and monastery novices out of Kem, the Sumskoy settlement, and the Old Believers' hospices and retreats. The troops hauled two fully rigged yachts on rollers. They went over marshes where the forest was decaying, the mosquitoes sang, and there were enormous rocks covered with moss like fur coats. They saw the marvellous Lake Vyg with its many wooded islands, and their bristling humps rose like monsters out of the sunlit waters. There was not a cloud in the pale sky, the lake and its shores were desolate, as if all living creatures had disappeared into the depths of the forest.

Ten versts from the military road, day and night services were being held as if for Passion Week in the Vygoretsk Danilov Monastery. The men and women in linen shrouds prayed on their knees, and candles burned all the time. All four gates were firmly barred, straw and pitch had been made ready in the gate lodges and near the prayer-houses. This was when the elder Nectarius came out of his seclusion. After the burning of the congregation and his flight, finding himself unoccupied, he had moved to the community. But Andrei Denisov had no sympathy for him and would not let him among the people. Nectarius went bitterly down into a pit under a vow of silence and stayed there for two years. When anyone came to the pit, which was roofed over with poles and turf, the elder would throw excrement at him. That day, he voluntarily appeared before the people; his narrow beard had grown down to his knees, his cape had been eaten away by worms, the yellow ribs could be seen through the holes. Raising his withered arms, he shouted: "Andrei Denisov has sold Christ for a mess of pottage. What are you staring at? Antichrist himself has come to visit us with two boats on runners... They will herd you on board like swine and carry you away to the darkness of Hell... Save yourselves... Do not listen to Andrei Denisov... See how he has pushed his snout up against the window... Tsar Peter has sent him pies."

Seeing that matters were taking a turn for the worse and that perhaps people might be found who were indeed ready to be burned alive, Denisov began reproaching the elder and

shouting at him from the window of his cell: "You must have gone out of your mind in that pit, Nectarius; all you can do is burn people. You'd like to burn the whole world... The tsar isn't touching us, let him go by in peace, we'll mind our own business... As for the pie you reproach me with, you've eaten more pies in your lifetime than I have. We know who's been slipping you chicken in your pit during the night; you've got through all the poultry in the monastery and your pit's full of chicken bones."

Someone rushed to the pit, and it was true: there were chicken bones buried in one corner. Confusion set in. Andrei Denisov secretly came out of the retreat and rode on a goodly horse over the river to the army, which he found by the glow of the camp-fires, the whinnying of horses and sounding of brass trumpets at sunset.

Peter received Andrei Denisov in a canvas tent. He was sitting with the officers at a camp table and all were smoking pipes to drive the mosquitoes away. Peter smiled on seeing such a robust man in a cassock and skull cap.

"Greetings, Andrei Denisov! What good news do you bring? Are you still shielding yourself from me with two fingers?"

Denisov, as was indicated to him, sat at the table and, not frowning, but merely waving away the tobacco smoke from in front of his nose, said frankly, looking brightly into Peter's eyes:

"Gracious Sovereign, Peter Alexeyevich... We have started our community in the wilds, and strange people of all kinds have gathered here. Some have been brought to submission by kindness, others by fear. We did use your name as a bogey, there's no denying it. A great beginning cannot be without mistakes. All kinds of things have happened, and some of them are better forgotten..."

"Now what's going on?" asked Peter.

"Now, Gracious Sovereign, our economy is firmly on its feet. Over fifty dessyatines of common ploughland have been cleared and as many of meadowland. The herd of cows is a hundred and twenty head strong. We have fisheries, curing sheds, tanneries, and felt-rolling mills. We have our own min-

ing industry. Miners and smiths such as they don't have even in Tula..."

Peter was quick to ask in all seriousness which ores were where. When he learned that there was iron on the shores of Lake Onega and that there was even a place near Povenets where half a pood of iron was being smelted from a pood of ore, his pipe began emitting clouds of smoke.

"So what do you priestless folk want of me?"

Denisov thought for a moment and replied:

"You need iron for your army, Gracious Sovereign. Give the order, and we will set up foundries and forges wherever is most convenient... Our iron is better than Tula's and will cost you less. Akinfy Demidov in the Urals charges half a ruble..."

"Nonsense! Thirty-five kopecks..."

"Well, we can charge thirty-five kopecks too. But the Urals are long way off, and we're close at hand. There's copper here too. Mast timber near Povenets, on the Bear Mountains — forty-arshin masts, the wood has a fine ring to it... If the Neva becomes yours, we'll start sending rafts to Holland. There's only one thing we're afraid of; the priests and the officials... We don't need them... Forgive me, but I speak plainly. Leave us to live by our own rules... There's horror brewing. For three days no one's done any work in the monastery, they've all dressed themselves in shrouds and they're singing psalms... The cattle haven't been watered, they're bellowing in the sheds. If you send us a priest with the Nikonian Cross and the sacrament, they'll all flee... There'll be no holding them... Those people are hardened, they're tough. They'll go off into the wilds again, and the whole affair will be a failure."

"Strange," said Peter. "Are there many of you people in the retreat?"

"Five thousand workers of both sexes, the very old in retirement, and the children..."

"All free to the last one?"

"They fled slavery."

"What am I to do with you? All right, take off those shrouds. Pray with two fingers, pray with one if you like, and let the whole community pay double tax..."

"Agreed, with great pleasure..."

"You will send skilled men to Povents, good boat-builders. I need transports and gunboats, about five hundred vessels..."

"With great pleasure..."

"Now, drink to my health, Andrei Denisov." Peter poured a full glass out of a tin flagon and held it out with a nod of the head. Denisov paled. His blue eyes darted about. But he rose with dignity. Slowly, with sweeping movements, he crossed himself with two fingers pressed together. He took the glass. (Peter was watching him intently.) He drank to the last drop. Removing his skull-cap, he wiped his red lips.

"I thank you for your kindness..."

"What about a smoke, now?"

Peter offered him his pipe, wet stem first. A twinkle appeared in Denisov's eye this time. He was about to take the pipe without a qualm. Peter withdrew it.

"Measure..." (He spoke as if there had been no break in the conversation.) "... measure the places where you find ore, and the land round, as much as you need, and put up posts. Write about it to Vinius in Moscow. I shall tell him not to take taxes from the industries and smelting furnaces for about ten years... (Denisov's eyebrows went up.) Not enough? We won't take dues for fifteen years then. We'll come to terms about the price of iron. Start work without delay. If you need men or have any other requirements, write to Vinius... Don't ask for money... Now drink another glass, holy man..."

At the end of September, in foul weather, three armies, after joining up on the banks of the Nasia, moved off towards Noteburg. The ancient fortress stood on an island in the middle of the Neva where it flowed out of Lake Ladoga. Vessels could only enter the river by sailing along the two arms past the fortress within a mere twenty yards of the bastions and under the muzzles of the guns.

The troops came out on to the cape in front of Noteburg. The stone towers with the weather-vanes on their conical roofs could be seen through the low-flying rainclouds. The walls

were so high and strong that the Russian soldiers could only sigh as they dug approach trenches on the cape and redoubts for the batteries. It was not for nothing that the Novgorod men who had built the fortress had called it the Nut; it would not be an easy one to crack. The Swedes, it seemed, were thinking things over at length. There was not a soul to be seen on the walls. The lead roofs were veiled by sombre clouds. Then the king's lion standard crawled up the mast on the round tower of the castle, and began flapping in the wind. A heavy gun spoke with a bronze boom and a hissing ball fell into the mud on the cape in front of the approach trenches. The Swedes had engaged battle.

The right bank of the Neva on the far side of the fortress was strongly fortified, and access was difficult from the lake side because of the marshes. Earlier, before the arrival of the whole army at Noteburg, a lane had been cut through the forest from the lake across the cape to the Neva. Several thousand soldiers were now towing boats from Lake Ladoga, hauling them through the lane and launching them in the Neva below the fortress. About fifty men took hold of a rope and heaved, others supported the sides so that the ship would glide smoothly over the logs on its keel. "All together! Heave!" shouted Peter. He had thrown aside his coat, his shirt was soaked, the veins bulged on his long neck, bound with a twisted cravat, his ankles were bruised with being trapped between the logs. He seized hold of a rope and his eyes bulged. "All together! Heave!" The men had not eaten since the day before and the palms of their hands were torn and bloody. But there was no let-up with that devil; he shouted, swore, used his fists, heaved... Towards nightfall, fifty heavy boats with platforms in the bows and in the stern for the marksmen were successfully hauled across and launched into the Neva. The men didn't even feel hungry; they fell asleep wherever they lay down on the damp moss or on hummocks.

The drums began rattling before dawn. The ensigns shook the men and got them to their feet. Orders were given to load muskets and put two cartridges (being careful of the rain) in their chests and two bullets in their mouths. The soldiers, covering their flintlocks with the skirt of their coats, climbed

on the platforms on the rocking boats. There was a swell. They rowed through the darkness across the swift-flowing river to the right bank. There a forest murmured. The soldiers jumped down into the reeds. The officers swore in whispers as they assembled their companies.

They waited. A windy dawn began breaking, mulberry-red bands glowing through the flying mists. A rowing boat came up the leaden river. Peter and Menshikov jumped out with Konigseck. (The Saxon envoy had come on the campaign as a volunteer and was a member of the tsar's entourage.) "Get ready!" came the long, drawn-out cry of many voices. Clutching at the bushes, Peter climbed up the steep bank, the wind lifting the skirts of his short coat. He strode off, a dimly discernible tall shadow, and the soldiers hurried after him. Menshikov was on his left with pistols, Konigseck on the right. They halted suddenly. The first rank of soldiers caught up with them. Peter ordered: "Muskets at the ready. Safety catches off. Fire in platoons!" The flints clicked along the ranks... The second rank moved forward and passed Peter. "Look to your front!" shouted Peter in a wild voice. "First platoon, fire!" The musket flashes lit up lone, tossing little pines and, not far away on the plain behind some tree stumps, the low parapet of the Swedish trench. They were firing from there too, but erratically. "Second platoon ... fire!" The second rank, like the first, fired and went down on their knees... "Third!.. Third!" shouted Peter, his voice breaking. "Bayonets ready... At the double!"

Peter set off at a run across the uneven field. An excited crowd of a thousand soldiers, their ranks getting mixed up, shouting more and more loudly and furiously, their bayonets levelled, swarmed over the earth fortifications. The hands of men surrendering were already sticking up out of the ditch. Some of the Swedes ran off towards the forest.

The trenches on the right bank were taken. When it was light, the mortars were ferried across the river. On that same day, the Russians began shelling Noteburg from both banks.

A great fire broke out in the fortress, which had withstood two weeks of fierce bombardment, and the artillery ma-

gazines blew up, as a result of which the eastern part of the wall caved in. A boat with a white flag on its prow was seen hurriedly making for the cape and the trenches. The Russian batteries went silent. Steam billowed up from the mortars as they were swilled down with water. A tall, pale officer jumped out of the boat, his head bound in a bloody kerchief. He looked round him uncertainly. Alexei Brovkin sprang over the trench to him and demanded with a bold stare:

"What have you to say for yourself?"

The officer began speaking rapidly in Swedish, pointing to the clouds of smoke rising over the fortress into the windless sky.

"Speak Russian; are you surrendering or aren't you?" interrupted Alexei angrily.

Konigseck came to the rescue; elegant, smiling, he politely doffed his hat, bowed to the officer and, after questioning him, translated: "The wife of the commandant and the other officers' wives wish to be allowed to leave the fortress, where they cannot stay owing to the great smoke and fire." Alexei took from the officer a letter to this effect for Boris Petrovich Sheremetev. He turned it over and over. Suddenly, his face distorted with fury, he threw it down into the mud at the officer's feet:

"I refuse to report to the Field-Marshal... What is the meaning of this? The womenfolk are to be let out of the fortress. Then we're to spend another two weeks losing men in attacks! Surrender unconditionally at once, and have done..."

Konigseck was more courteous; he picked up the letter, wiped it on his coat and returned it to the officer, explaining that the request was in vain. Shrugging his shoulders and much annoyed, the officer got into his boat. No sooner had he pushed off than all forty-two mortars in the batteries of Goshka, Ginter and Peter Alexeyevich himself started up again.

The fire blazed all night. The lead roofs of the towers melted and burning rafters crashed down, ejecting tongues of flame. The river was illumined by the glow, as were both Russian camps and, downstream, hundreds of boats ready at the bank, with volunteers standing crowded together on the platforms and scaling ladders laid across the boats. The cannon-

ade died down after midnight and all that could be heard was the noise of the raging fire.

Two hours before dawn, a gun was fired in the tsar's battery. The drums began to beat deafeningly. Boats rowed up to the fortress, more and more vividly illuminated by the flames as they drew nearer. They were led by three young officers, Mikhaila Golitsyn, Karpov and Alexander Menshikov. (The day before, Menshikov had said to Peter with tears in his eyes: "Myn Herz, Sheremetev has made it to Field-Marshal. People are laughing at me: 'Major-General, Governor of Pskov! But he was really a batman, and a batman he always would be...' Let me go into action and earn myself promotion...")

Peter was with his Field-Marshal and colonels at the battery on the cape. They were watching through spy-glasses. The boats were rapidly approaching from the east, and they were being given a welcome of red-hot cannon-balls where the wall had collapsed. The first boat nosed into the bank; the volunteers rolled off the platform like peas, set up the ladders and started climbing up them; but they were not high enough, even for the breach. Men climbed up on one another's backs and scrambled up the projections in the masonry. Boulders and molten lead were showered down on them from above. The wounded fell from a height of six yards. Set on fire by the shells, several boats floated away downstream, blazing brightly.

Peter peered eagerly through the spy-glass. When the gunsmoke spread all over the scene of battle, he thrust the glass under his arm and began twisting the buttons of his coat (he had already torn several off). His face was the colour of earth, his lips black, his eyes sunken...

"What the devil's going on?" he kept saying hollowly, his neck jerking. He turned to Sheremetev. Boris Petrovich only sighed slowly; he had seen worse things during the last two years.

"Not enough shells again... Are we to take it with our bare hands? This is impossible."

"If God is merciful," replied Boris Petrovich closing his eyes, "we shall even take it that way!"

His legs planted well apart, Peter again applied the telescope to his left eye.

Many dead and wounded were lying under the walls. The sun was already high, half-veiled by a film of mist. The smoke from the fortress towers was mounting to the clouds, but the fire was evidently abating. A new detachment of volunteers, going in boats from the west side, flung themselves on the ladders. All had burning slow-matches in their mouths. They took grenades out of their packs, bit them off, lit them and threw them. A few managed to get into the breach, but they could go no further. The Swedes resisted stubbornly. The booming of the guns, the rattle of grenades, the shouts, faintly borne across the river, now subsided, now grew louder again. So it went on for an hour, and then another...

It seemed that the hopes and the fate of all their hard beginnings was in the stubbornness of those little men busily moving on the ladders, snatching a breather under the wall projections, shooting, or taking cover from the Swedish case-shot behind piles of boulders. There was no way of helping them. The batteries were forced to remain inactive. Had there been boats in reserve, another two thousand soldiers could have been ferried over to help; but there were no craft to spare, there were no ladders, and there weren't enough grenades...

"Sire, you should go into the tent, have a bite and take a rest... What's the use of eating your heart out to no avail?" said Boris Petrovich, sighing like an old woman.

Without lowering his spy-glass, Peter bared his teeth impatiently. A tall, grey-bearded old man in armour and an ancient casque had appeared on the wall. Pointing down, he had opened his mouth wide at the Russians; he must have been shouting. The Swedes crowded round him, also shouting; they were evidently arguing about something. He pushed one man out of the way, hit another with his pistol, and climbed with difficulty down the stone projections into the breach. After him came about fifty soldiers. In the breach, the Swedes and Russians clashed in a violent mêlée. Human bodies flew down like bales... Peter uttered a long, hoarse groan.

"That old man is the Commandant, Erik Schlippenbach, the elder brother of the General Schlippenbach I beat," said Boris Petrovich.

The Swedes quickly gained control of the breach and be-

gan firing their muskets from there. They ran down the ladders and hurled themselves on the Russians with bared swords. Standing in the breach, the tall old man in armour stamped his foot and waved his arms like a cock flapping its wings. ("If the Swede gets cross, death holds no terrors for him,"said Boris Petrovich.) The remnants of the Russians were retreating to the river and the boats. One man, his face bound with a rag, was rushing about and driving the soldiers away from the boats to stop them embarking, jumping about, hitting them. He pushed his weight against a boat and kicked it empty away from the bank. He bounded over to another and kicked that one away too. ("Mishka Golitsyn," said Boris Petrovich, "he's another hothead.") There was hand-to-hand fighting at the boats.

Twelve big craft, loaded with volunteers pulling on the oars so hard that they bent, were racing against the current towards the fortress. This was Menshikov's detachment, the last reserve. Without his coat, in a pink silk shirt, hatless, carrying a sword and a pistol, Menshikov was the first to jump ashore. ("Show-off, show-off!" muttered Peter.) The Swedes, seeing fresh enemies, ran for the walls, but only some of them succeeded in climbing back up again; the rest were cut down. Stones and logs showered from the walls again, the cannon belched case-shot. Again the Russians climbed up the ladders. Peter followed the pink shirt in his spy-glass. Menshikov was fearlessly winning himself rank and glory. He climbed up into the breach, threw himself on old Schlippenbach, ducked a pistol shot and engaged him in a sword fight. His own men just managed to save the old man and pull him up. The Swedes weakened under this fresh assault. ("That's the stuff, dammit!" shouted Peter, stamping his jack-boot.) Menshikov's pink shirt was already bobbing about on top of the wall between the embrasures.

It was hard to see properly through the spy-glass; the enormous incandescent glow of the northern sunset was flooding the sky behind the fortress.

"Peter Alexeyevich, they've put out the white flag," said Boris Petrovich. "It's about time... This's been going for thirteen hours..."

Big camp-fires burned that night on the bank of the Neva. No one slept in the camp. Copper kettles of broth were on the boil and rams were roasted whole on spits. Mustachioed lance-corporals stood by casks sawn in half, dispensing vodka to all comers — as much as a man wanted.

The volunteers, who had still not unwound after their thirteen-hour battle, nearly all bandaged with bloody rags and sitting on tree-stumps or fir branches by the fires, were tilling heart-rending stories about the fighting, about their wounds and about the deaths of their comrades. The narrators were ringed by a circle of gaping soldiers who had not been in the fighting. They listened, turning to look at the burnt-out towers, black against the river. Heaps of dead bodies lay over there under the walls of the deserted fortress.

Over five hundred volunteers had been killed, and about a thousand wounded were groaning in the wagons of the baggage train and in the tents. The soldiers kept saying with a sigh: "That really was a hard nut to crack — no two ways about it."

Beyond the stream, on a hill, shouts and horn music came from the tsar's brightly lit tent. There was no gunfire to accompany the toasts; there had been enough artillery firing for one day. From time to time, drunken officers crawled out of the tent to relieve themselves. One colonel, going up to the bank of the stream, spent a long time staring at the soldiers' camp-fire on the far bank before he bellowed drunkenly:

"Good lads, you made a real effort!"

One of the soldiers raised his head and growled:

"What are you shouting about? Go away and get on with your boozing."

Peter came out of the tent, also of necessity. He relieved himself, swaying on his feet. The lights of the camp swam in front of his eyes. He rarely got drunk, but today was an occasion. After him came Menshikov and Konigseck.

"Myn Herz, should I bring you a candle? You're taking so long," said Menshikov in a tipsy voice.

Konigseck clucked like a hen, and began to dance, kicking up the skirts of his coat.

"Konigseck..." said Peter to him.

"I am here, Your Majesty..."

"What were you boasting about at table?"

"I wasn't boasting, Your Majesty..."

"You're lying, I heard it all... What were you babbling to Sheremetev? 'This little thing is more precious to me than the salvation of my soul...' What's this little thing of yours?"

"Sheremetev was boasting about a slave, Your Majesty, a local girl. As for me, I don't remember..."

Konigseck was silent, as if he had suddenly sobered down. Peter, his teeth bared in a sneer, looked down on the other like a crane and stared into his frightened face.

"Ah, Your Majesty... I must have been talking about a snuff-box - French workmanship — it's in the baggage train. I'll fetch it..."

He proceeded at a shaky trot towards the stream, unbuttoning the shirt on his chest in terror... "God, God, how did he find out? Must hide it, must get rid of it at once..."

His fingers fumbled in the lace and found the medallion on a silken cord. He tried to tear it off, but the cord cut into his neck so that it hurt... (He saw Peter's towering figure on the hill, staring after him.) Konigseck nodded reassuringly as if to say, "I won't be long..." A log had been thrown from bank to bank across the deep stream that roared between granite boulders. Konigseck walked across it. His shoes, smeared with clay, slipped. He was still tugging at the cord. He lost his footing, waved his arms frantically, and fell backwards into the stream.

"There's a drunken fool for you," said Peter.

They waited. Menshikov knitted his brows. He went anxiously down the hill.

"Peter Alexeyevich, it looks as though something's happened. We'll have to call some men..."

They did not find Konigseck straightaway, although the stream was only a few feet deep. He must have struck the back of his head on a rock in falling and gone straight to the bottom. The soldiers carried him to the tent and laid him by the fire. Peter began bending his body, spreading out his arms, blowing into his mouth. Useless — envoy Konigseck had come to an unseemly end. As he was unbuttoning his clothes, Peter

found on his breast a medallion about the size of a baby's hand. He searched the pockets and took out a packet of letters. He and Menshikov immediately walked into the tent.

"Gentlemen," said Menshikov in a loud voice, "enough of feasting, the tsar is desirous of sleep..."

The guests hastily left the tent (some of them had to be carried out under the arms with their spurs scraping over the ground). There, amid the unfinished courses and dying candles, Peter unfolded the sodden letters. He lifted the lid of the medallion with his nail; it was a portrait of Anna Mons, a marvellous piece of work; smiling, with innocent blue eyes and even teeth. Under the glass, the portrait had been wound round with a lock of the fair hair that Peter had kissed so often. Inside, on the lid, the words *Love and Fidelity* had been engraved with a needle in German.

Peter prised up the glass, fingered the lock of hair and threw the medallion into a puddle of wine on the tablecloth. He began reading the letters. They were all from her to Konigseck, the foolish, lovesick missives of an infatuated woman.

"So," said Peter. He leaned on his elbows and stared at the candle. "How do you like that!" He shook his head, smiling. "She betrayed me. I can't understand it... She was lying, Sasha, lying... All her life, from the very beginning, or what? I don't understand... 'Love and Fidelity'!"

"She was a slut, myn Herz, trash, a tavern wench, she was on the make... I've long wanted to tell you about it..."

"Shut up, shut up, how dare you! Get out!"

He filled his pipe. He leaned on his elbows again, smoking. He looked at the little portrait lying in the puddle, "I climbed over the fence for you ... how many times did I repeat your name... Trusting you, I went to sleep on your warm shoulder... You're a fool twice over... You should be minding chickens... All right... It's over..." Peter waved his hand: he rose and threw down his pipe. He sprawled onto the squeaking cot and covered himself with his sheepskin coat.

## 5

Noteburg fortress was renamed Schlisselburg, or the key town. The breach was repaired and wooden roofs were built over the gutted towers. A garrison was stationed there. The troops went to winter quarters. Peter returned to Moscow.

At the Myasnitsky Gates, to the sound of the chimes, distinguished traders and the merchants' guild met Peter with church banners. Two hundred yards of red cloth were laid along Myasnitskaya Street. The merchants threw up their hats and shouted in a foreign language: "Vivat!" Peter rode standing in a gilded chariot of Mars. The Swedish banners were dragged over the ground behind him and the prisoners marched with bowed heads. On a high cart, a wooden lion was borne along with Prince-Pope Nikita Zotov sitting on it in a tin mitre and a bunting cape, sword in one hand and flagon of vodka in the other.

Moscow feasted for two weeks, as was appropriate for such an occasion. Many respectable persons fell sick and died of those feasts. On Red Square, pies were baked and distributed to the artisans and citizens. The rumour went round that the tsar had ordered the distribution of Vyazma printed gingerbreads and kerchiefs, but the boyars had deceived the people, who had come all the way from the outlying villages just for those gifts. Each night, rockets flew over the Kremlin towers and Catherine wheels spun on the walls. The feasting and merry-making lasted till Intercession when the great fire broke out. It blazed up in the Kremlin and spread to Kitai-gorod; the wind was strong and the blazing brands were carried over the Moskva River. The flames swept in waves across the city. The people ran to the gates. They saw Peter galloping through the smoke and flames on a Dutch fire-engine. It was impossible to save anything. The Kremlin was burned to ashes, except for the Zhitny Dvor and the Kokoshkin's House; the old palace was burned down (Natalia and the tsarevich Alexei were only rescued in the nick of time) and so were all the Commissions, monasteries, warehouses and ammunition dumps. The bells tumbled down from the Ivan the Great bell-tower, and the biggest, weighing eight thousand poods, was cracked.

Afterwards, among the ashes, people said: "Reign a little longer, reign a little longer, you'll live to see worse..."

On the arrival from Holland of his son Gavrila, Brovkin's whole family gathered together round the table after church service: Alexei, recently promoted to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel; Yakov, a Voronezh navigator, morose, harsh-voiced and smelling strongly of pipe tobacco; Artamon with his wife Natalia — he was an interpreter in the Foreign Commission. Natalia was big with child for the third time; she had become beautiful, slow, and heavy — Ivan Artemich couldn't take his eyes off his daughter-in-law; there was also Roman Borisovich with his daughters. That autumn, they had managed to marry Antonida off to Lieutenant Belkin, a man of mean birth but in the tsar's good graces (he was at present in Ingermanland). Olga was still languishing as a maid.

Roman Borisovich's health had deteriorated during the last few years, mainly because of having to drink so heavily. No sooner would he have woken up in the morning after a banquet than there would be already a soldier sitting in the kitchen with orders: he had to go somewhere or other that day. Roman Borisovich would snatch up his bast whiskers (he had thought them up himself) and wooden sword and ride off to serve his tsar.

There were six boyars of the festive table all of high birth and taken on as entertainers either for folly or because they had been denounced. In charge of them was prince Shakhovskoy, a drunkard who bore ill will to everybody, a dry little old man and an informer. It was not particularly hard work: usually, after the fifth course, when everybody had put back a fair amount of drink, Peter Alexeyevich would lay his hands on the table, and craning his neck and looking round, would say loudly: "I see that Ivashka Khmelnitsky is very much getting the better of us: let there be no rout." And then Roman Borisovich would get up from the table, tie on his bast whiskers and sit on a low wooden horse on wheels. He would be brought a goblet of wine, whereon he had to raise his sword and to drain the goblet briskly, after which he had to say: "We are dying, but we shall not surrender." The dwarfs, fools, jest-

ers and hunchbacks would rush up with a yell and tow Roman Borisovich on his steed round the table. That was the extent of his duties, if Peter did not happen to have some fresh brainwave or other.

Ivan Artemich was in a good mood; his family were all present, his affairs had never gone better, even the fire had not touched his house. Only his favourite, Alexandra, was absent. He was hearing about her from Gavrila, a circumspect young man who had studied at a navigation school in Amsterdam.

Alexandra was now living in the Hague (with Andrei Artamonovich Matveyev's embassy); she and her husband were not staying in the embassy building, however, but had privately rented a house. She kept pedigree horses, carriages and even a two-masted yacht... ("Ach, ach!" cried Ivan Artemich in astonishment, although, without Peter knowing, he had secretly sent Sanka a lot of money for the horses and the yacht.) The Volkovs had left Warsaw over a year previously, when King Augustus had fled from the Swedes. They had stayed in Berlin, but not for long: the king was parsimonious, the Germans lived tediously and calculatedly —every crumb had to be accounted for.

"Her house in the Hague is full of guests," Gavrila told them. "Not many distinguished ones, of course, but mostly all kinds of dubious people: adventurers, painters, Indians who can throw dust in your eyes... She goes sailing with them on the canal; she sits on deck, on a little chair and plays the harp..."

"She's learned to play?" exclaimed Ivan Artemich, throwing up his hands and looking round at the other members of the family.

"She goes out for a stroll in the street, and all bow to her, and she just inclines her head in acknowledgement, like this.... Vassily isn't always allowed to be present when she is receiving, but he's glad of it. He's become very quiet and thoughtful, he's always got a book with him, he even reads Latin and drives down to the shipyards, the museums and the Bourse and really wants to know what it's all about..."

Before Gavrila's departure, Sanka had been saying that she was fed up even with the Hague: the Dutch only had two subjects of conversation: trade and money; their men had no

refinement at all, they trod on your feet when dancing... What she wanted now was to go to Paris... "She's determined to dance a minivet with the King of France! Oh, what a girl!" sighed Ivan Artemich, his eyes narrowing with delight. "When does she mean to come home? You tell me that..."

"When she gets fed up with the adventurers she tells me: 'You know, Gavrila, I want some of our gooseberries from the kitchen garden ... or, I'd like a ride on a swing in a garden over the Moskva River...'"

"You see, blood is thicker than water..."

Ivan Artemich was willing to spend the whole day listening to stories about his daughter. Halfway through dinner, Peter and Menshikov arrived. (Peter often dropped in on the Brovkins.) He nodded to the servants, and said to Roman Borisovich, who was somewhat flustered: "Sit down, you're not on duty today." He stopped by the window and looked for a long time at the gutted ruins. In place of the recent lively streets, chimney stacks and burnt-out churches minus their domes rose out of the ashes. A foul wind was picking up clouds of ashes.

"Hopeless place," he said clearly. "Abroad, cities stand for a thousand years running, but I can't remember when this one wasn't on fire... Moscow!"

He sat down in a cheerless mood at the table and ate heavily for some time in silence. He called Gavrila and began questioning him sternly; what had he learned in Holland and what books had he read? He ordered him to bring pen and paper and draw the parts of ships, sails, and plans of coastal fortifications. Once he argued, but Gavrila firmly stood his ground. Peter patted him on the head: "I can see you didn't waste your father's money." (Ivan Artemich sniffed back the happy tears at this.) After lighting his pipe, Peter went up to the window.

"Artemich," he said, "we've got to build a new city..."

"Never worry, Peter Alexeyevich. They'll be back on their feet before the year is out."

"I don't mean here..."

"Where, Peter Alexeyevich? This is Moscow—settled lands, very ancient. (Jerking his head back and blinking rapidly.) I've already started on something of the sort, Peter Ale-

xeyevich... Five thousand peasants have been taken on to fell trees... We'll build huts on the spot, on the Sheksna, on the Shelona, and then we'll float them up on rafts: take one and set it up yourself: five rubles a hut complete with porch and gates ... what could be nicer! Alexander Danilovich is joining me as a partner..."

"Not here," reiterated Peter, looking through the window. "We must build a city on Lake Ladoga ... on the Neva... Send your woodcutters there."

Ivan Artemich was itching to put his stubby arms behind his back and twiddle his fingers.

"Just as you say," he said in a thin voice.

"Myn Herz, that old woman Mons has been to see me again. She weeps, she asks permission for herself and her daughter at least to go to Mass," said Menshikov cautiously.

It was evening and they were driving away from the Brovkins and past the gutted houses. The wind was flinging ashes against the side of the leather carriage. Peter leaned right back as if he had not even heard Menshikov.

After Schlisselburg, he had only once mentioned Anna Mons in Moscow; he had ordered Menshikov to go to her and take the diamond-set pendant bearing his portrait; the other valuables, likewise money, were not to be taken and she was to stay where she was living (if she so desired, let her leave for the country), but she must not be allowed to go anywhere or appear in public.

He had uprooted that woman from his heart like a poisonous growth. He had forgotten her. And now, in the carriage, not a muscle moved on his face.

Anna had written to him, but he had not answered. She had sent her mother to Menshikov with presents imploring that she be allowed to prostrate herself at the feet of His Majesty, the only one whom she had loved in her life... Konigseck's medallion, she averred, had been stolen from her. (She did not know about the letters found on him.)

Menshikov could see that myn Herz was badly in need of a woman's affection. The tsar's batmen (all in Menshikov's

pay) reported that Peter was sleeping badly at night, groaning, bumping his knees against the wall. It was not just a woman he needed, but a good friend. Menshikov had mentioned Anna Mons just now merely as a test. Peter had taken no notice. They drove off a timbered road and on to a soft one. Menshikov suddenly started laughing to himself and shaking his head.

Peter said to him coldly:

"It amazes me how I put up with you, I just don't know..."

"Now what have I done, for God's sake?"

"You can't help stealing, whatever the job in hand... And you're up to something again, I can see."

Menshikov sniffed. For some time they rode on in silence. He suddenly spoke up with amusement:

"I had a row with Boris Petrovich. He'll be complaining to you... He kept boasting about his housekeeper... He bought her from a dragoon for a ruble, so he said... 'And I won't let her go,' says he, 'for ten thousand... She's so pert, and as bright as a new pin. She can turn her hand to anything...' Well, I dropped in on him... We had a drink or so together. 'Let's have a look at her!' He hums and haws. 'I don't know where she's got to,' says he... I keep on at him... The old man squirms and squirms, then he calls her... I like the look of her straightway; not that she is a raving beauty... Nice clear voice, bright eyes, curly hair... I say: 'According to the old custom, the guest should be served with a cup and a kiss.' Boris Petrovich looks black, but she laughs. She fills a goblet and brings it to me with a curtsey. I drink up and kiss her on the lips. I kiss her on the lips, myn Herz, and it burns me, I can't think straight, my blood's on fire... 'Boris Petrovich,' I say, 'let the girl go... I'll give you my palace, I'll let you have the shirt off my back... How can you cope with someone like that? She needs a young man to caress her... And you just get her worked up for nothing... Besides,' I tell him, 'it's a sin; you've got a wife and children... And just wait till Peter Alexeyevich gets the wind of your carryings-on.' I've got the old man cornered... He snivels... 'Alexander Danilovich, you're taking my last joy away from me...' He waves his hand and bursts into tears. It's truly comical... He goes out and locks himself in his bedroom. I have a lively chat with that housekeeper, send for a carriage, load her into it with her bundles and take her to my own place...

And the next day, I bring her to Moscow. She's been crying all week, but only to keep up appearances, I think. She's as chirpy as a song-bird."

It was hard to tell whether Peter was listening or not... Towards the end of the story, he coughed. Menshikov knew all his coughs by heart. This one, he realised, meant that the tsar had been listening very closely indeed.

## 6

The merchants Brovkin, Sveshnikov, Zatrapezny and the tsar's traders Dubrovsky, Shchegolin and Evreinov were building woollen, linen, silk and paper mills, and also ropeyards on the Yauza and Moskva rivers. Villages from the Estates Commission (to which went the patrimonies of those killed in war or of disgraced landowners) were assigned in perpetuity to many of the mills.

The merchants were waking up from their slumbers. Assembling on the big porch of the Chamber of Merchants, quickly rebuilt after the fire, all they could talk about was Ingermanland, which had been reconquered and where it was necessary to gain a firm foothold on the sea coast that summer. Their grandfathers' pots of chervontsy and efimki were dug up out of the cellars. Agents were sent round the markets and taverns to recruit labour.

During that winter, Ivan Artemich expanded his business activities a great deal. He obtained through Menshikov the right to take convicts from Romodanovsky's prisons as serf labour and put them, some in chains, some not, in his woollen, silk and linen mills, whose water-wheels were turning on the Yauza. He paid seven hundred rubles for master smith Zhemov, who was on the lists of the Criminal Commission (he had him fetched from Voronezh in a troika); at Ivan Artemich's new sawmills in Sokolniki, Zhemov soon built an incredible fire machine that worked on steam from a boiler.

There were not enough labourers anywhere. Many people fled from the assigned villages to the outlying wilderness. It was hard working for a landlord: a horse was sometimes better off than a man. Even more hopeless, however, was the lack of

freedom in those mills, worse than prison for convict and hired labourer alike. There was a high fence all round and the watchmen at the gates were more savage than dogs. In the dark workshops, if a man, bent over the clattering looms, so much as struck up a song, he was given a cut across the shoulders by a foreign foreman who would threaten him with the prison. In the country, the peasant could at least get his sleep on the stove in winter. Here, he had to throw the shuttle winter and summer, day and night. Wages and clothing had long been drunk up in advance. It was sheer bondage. Most terrible of all, however, were the sinister rumours about Akinfy Demidov's factories and mines in the Urals. People fled out of sheer terror from the districts assigned to him.

Akinfy Demidov's recruiting agents toured the markets and taverns, generously treated all and sundry, and glowingly described the life of ease in the Urals. Out there, they said, there was land for the taking; work for a year, sew your money up in your hat and good luck — we won't keep you... If you can be bothered to go prospecting for gold, it's common as dung underfoot.

After getting a likely prospect drunk, the agent, by persuasion or deceit, with the tavern-keeper as witness, would slide over a deed of bondage: just make your mark, dear friend, on this little place here. And the man was done for. They'd put him in a cart, chain him up if he was violent, and take him a thousand versts beyond the Volga, beyond the feather grasses of the Kirghiz steppes, beyond the high forested mountains to the Nevyansky works or to the mines.

Few ever returned. Men were chained to the anvils or to the foundry furnaces. The intractable ones were flogged with canes.

No one could get away. Mounted Cossacks with lassoes guarded all the roads and forest paths. If any attempted to mutiny, they were thrown down deep mine-shafts or drowned in the ponds.

Recruitment for the army began again after Christmas. In all towns, the tsar's recruiting officers rounded up carpenters, stonemasons and navvies. From Moscow to Novgorod, lists of names were taken for cartage duties.

"Why don't you show me this Katerina?"

"She's shy, myn Herz. She's fallen so much in love with me, she clings like a vine, she won't look at anyone else. It'll be wedding bells next!"

"Why don't you get married, then?"

"Ah well, you see, after all..."

Menshikov sat down on the waxed floor by the hearth and, turning his face away, poked the burning logs. The wind howled in the chimney and rattled the tin roof. The snow had been driven up against the panes of the high window. The flames of the two wax candles fluttered on the table. Peter was smoking and drinking wine, wiping his red face and damp hair with a napkin. He had just returned from the Tula works and, without calling at Preobrazhenskoye, had dropped straight in at Menshikov's palace for a bath. He had steamed himself for some three hours. In Menshikov's perfumed linen and silk coat, without a cravat, his chest bare, he had sat down to supper (forbidding anyone to come into the small dining-room, even the servants), had asked about various trifles and had laughed occasionally. Suddenly he had asked about Katerina (it was the first time he had mentioned her since the conversation in the carriage).

"To get married, Peter Alexeyevich, with my poor birth, and to a prisoner, what's more... I don't know... (He pushed the poker in, making a shower of sparks.) They're trying to make a match for me with Avdotia Arsenyeva. An ancient family from the Golden Horde... It'll compensate for my pie-selling past at least. I always have foreign guests in my palace, and the first thing they ask is whom I'm married to and what my title is. Ours, the fat-bottomed and high-born, they're only too glad to whisper that I was picked up in the gutter..."

"Correct," said Peter. He wiped his face with a napkin. His eyes were shining.

"I'd at least like to be a count or something." Menshikov threw down the poker. He shielded the grate with the copper fire-guard and returned to the table. "There's a blizzard blowing out there, it's awful. You mustn't even think

of going home, myn Herz, no two ways about it."

"I wasn't going to."

Menshikov reached for his glass, his hand trembling slightly. He sat without raising his eyes.

"I didn't start the conversation, you did. Call her in."

Menshikov turned pale. He rose with a powerful movement and went out.

Peter sat swinging one leg. It was quiet in the house except for the howling of the blizzard round the big attics. Peter listened, his eyebrows raised. His leg was swinging as if driven by clockwork. Footsteps again—quick and angry this time. Menshikov returned and stood in the open doorway, biting his lips.

"She'll be here in a moment."

Peter pricked up his ears; he could hear, in the silence of the house, the quick, carefree sound of a woman flying lightly along on tapping heels.

"Come in, don't be scared." Menshikov showed Katerina through the door into the room. She frowned slightly as she came from the darkness of the corridor into the candle-light. As if asking him something, she looked at Menshikov (dark-haired, with mobile brows, she scarcely reached his shoulder). With the same light, quick step, without shyness, she went up to Peter, performed a low curtsey, lifted his big hand from the table and kissed it. He felt the warmth of her lips and the chill of the white, even teeth. She slid her hands under her white apron and stopped before Peter's chair. Under her petticoats, the legs that had brought her there so easily were slightly apart. She looked him clearly and merrily in the eyes.

"Take a seat, Katerina."

She answered in broken Russian, but with such a pleasant voice that he immediately felt the warmth of the fireplace, the soothing howl of the wind, and he relaxed and stopped swinging his leg.

"I will sit down, thank you," she said. She promptly perched on the chair, still keeping her hands on her stomach under her apron.

"D'you drink wine?"

"I do, thank you."

"You're not having a bad time in captivity?"

"Not bad, thank you."

Menshikov came up glumly and poured wine for all three.

"You've got one bit right — 'thank you, thank you'. Tell us something," he said.

"How am I going to talk, this man is not a simple people."

She pulled her hands from under her apron, took the glass and smiled at Peter with her quick eyes.

"They know to themselves how to start a conversation..."

Peter burst out laughing. It was a long time since he had laughed so heartily. He began questioning Katerina; where she came from, where she lived and how she ended up as a prisoner. As she replied, she sank deeper into her chair and rested her bare elbows on the tablecloth. Her dark eyes sparkled, her dark locks shone like silk, falling in two strands on to the lightly heaving breast. And it seemed as if she had skipped through all the misfortunes of her life as lightly as she had only just run down the stairs.

Menshikov kept replenishing the glasses. He put some more logs on the fire. The blizzard howled as a reminder that it was midnight. Peter stretched, wrinkling his short nose, and glanced at Katerina.

"Well, bed-time, eh? I'm going... Katyusha, take the candle and light my way..."

The gloomy muzhik, Fedka Wash-in-Mud, with a fresh crimson brand on his brow, his bare, chained feet planted well apart on the high trestle, was wielding an oak sledge-hammer, pausing slightly each time after bringing it down on the face of the pile... The man was tough. The others — some dropping their hand-barrows, some standing waist-deep in the water with their beards tilted up, some unshouldering a log — watched as the pile sank a little further into the marshy bank with each blow.

The first pile was being driven for the embankment reinforcement of the tiny island of Janni Saari (Finnish for Hare Island). Three weeks previously, Russian troops had achieved the unconditional surrender of Nyenschanz Fortress two versts higher up the Neva. The Swedes had left the banks of

the Neva and withdrawn beyond the River Sestra. The Swedish fleet, fearful of the shallows, stood with dark sails beyond the sunny ripple far out in the bay. Two small ships had the effrontery to sail up the Neva estuary as far as Hiwri Saari Island where a battery under Captain Vassiliev was concealed in a forest; but they were surrounded by galleys and boarded.

The route from Lake Ladoga to the open sea had been opened at the cost of much bloodshed. An endless stream of wagon trains and hosts of workers and convicts began arriving from the east. (Peter had written to Romodanovsky: "...men are greatly needed, order all cities, Commissions and town councils to round up criminals and send them here.") The houses of labourers who had travelled thousands of versts were transported on rafts and boats to the islands of Koibu Saari near the right bank of the Neva, where huts and dugouts stood on the bank, fires smoked, axes thudded and saws whined. Here, to the end of the world, came more and more labourers, never to return. In front of Koibu Saari, on the marshy island of Janni Saari on the Neva, in order to protect the dearly won estuary of all the trade routes of the Russian land, they began building a fortress with six bastions ("...they are to be built by six commanders; the first bastion is to be built by Bombardier Pyotr Alexeyev, the second by Menshikov, the third by Prince Trubetskoy, the fourth by Prince-Pope Zotov..."). After the foundations had been laid, during the uproarious celebrations in Peter's mudhut, to the noise of toasts and artillery salvoes, it was decided to call the fortress Petersburgh.

The open sea was only a stone's throw away. The wind covered it with merry ripples. In the west, beyond the sails of the Swedish ships, stood towering ocean clouds like the smoke of another world. Only the soldiers patrolling the deserted Kotlin Island saw those un-Russian clouds, the watery wastes and the terrible fires of the sunset. There was not enough bread, and there was no transport from devastated Ingermanland, where the plaque had broken out. The men ate roots and pounded tree-bark. Peter wrote to the Prince-Emperor asking him to send more people: "There is much sickness here, and many

have died." Wagon trains, labourers and convicts kept coming in an endless stream.

Fedka Wash-in-Mud, his hair falling over his damp, fevered brow, banged and banged away at the piles with his oak sledge-hammer.

# BOOK THREE

# *Chapter One*

## 1

Life in Moscow was tedious. At dinner-time, in the July heat, only stray dogs roamed the crooked streets with their tails down, sniffing the garbage that people threw outside their gates. There was none of the former bustle and shouting in the squares when some respected man had his skirts torn as he was wheedled to go into a shop, or his pockets picked before he could manage to buy anything in such a tricky place. Formerly, before dawn, from all the suburbs – the Arbat, the Sukharev and from beyond the Moskva River — carts would arrive loaded with fancy and leather goods and hardware; pots and pans, buns, baskets of berries and vegetables; vendors carried trays of pies or poles hung with bast-shoes, or carts and stalls would be set up on the squares. The streltsy suburbs were empty, the houses in them were falling down, and were overgrown with thick nettles. Many people were now working with convicts and bondsmen at the newly-built factories. Linen and wool went straight to the Preobrazhensky Commission. Swords, spears, stirrups and spurs were being made in all the Moscow smithies. There was no hempen rope to be bought in Moscow, it was all being commandeered by the Treasury.

Nor did the chimes ring from dawn to dusk as before. In many churches, the big bells had been taken down, transported to the Foundry and melted down to make guns. When dragoons stinking of tobacco pulled the big bell down from the belfry, the sexton of St. Pimen's got drunk and wanted to hang himself on the cross-beam; then, lying bound on a trunk, he shouted in a frenzy that Moscow had been famed for its mellow chimes, but now the city was going to be without joy.

Formerly, at the gates of every boyar's house, brazen, grinning house serfs with their hats tipped over one ear had thrown nails, tossed coins, or simply refused to let rider or pe-

destrian through — roaring with laughter, roughing up, pawing. Now the gates were shut tight, all was quiet in the spacious courtyards, the men had been taken for war, boyars' sons and sons-in-law were either non-commissioned officers in the regiments or had been posted overseas, and the youngsters had been sent to schools to learn navigation, mathematics and fortification, while the boyar himself sat with nothing to do at the open window, glad that for a little while, at least, Tsar Peter, being out of town, did not force him to smoke tobacco, scrape off his beard or spin round and jerk his legs about in white hose up to the knees and a wig of woman's hair down to his midriff.

The boyar's thoughts at the window were dismal and wearisome... "My Mishka will never learn mathematics anyway; Moscow was built without mathematics, we've lived, glory be to God, for five hundred years without mathematics, and better than we do now. There's nothing to be expected of this war except final ruin, no matter how many Neptunes and Venuses, so revolting to the Lord, are dragged round Moscow in gilded chariots in the name of the glorious victory on the Neva... The Swedes will beat our army in the end, and then the Tatars, who've been waiting for this for a long time, will come out of the Crimea with their Horde and cross the Oka. Oh dear, oh dear..."

The boyar put out a fat finger to the plate of raspberries, but the confounded hornets had swarmed all over it and over the windowsill as well. Idly fingering his rosary of olive-stone beads from Mount Athos, the boyar looked out at the courtyard. Desolation! How many years had the tsar's pranks left him no time to think of his own affairs... The sheds were lopsided, the turf roofs of the cellars had fallen in, the weeds were a disgrace everywhere... Look at the chickens — even they were too long in the legs, and the ducks were too small, and the humpbacked piglets followed the sow in single file, all dirty and skinny. Oh dear, oh dear! The boyar knew that he ought to call the cattle girl and the poultry girl and give them a whipping with a cane there and then under the window with their petticoats hitched up. But in a hot spell like this, shouting and losing your temper could be too much like work.

The boyar transferred his gaze higher, over the fence,

beyond the limes covered with white and yellow blossoms and droning bees. Not so far away, he could see the dilapidated Kremlin wall with bushes growing in the embrasures. It was ludicrous. What had Peter Alexeyevich brought the country to! All the way from the Troitsky Gates, where heaps of garbage lay, the fortress moat had become sheer swamp; a chicken could walk across it and the stench was horrible! And the Neglinnaya River was shallow nowadays; on the right side of it was the Rag Market, where all kinds of stolen goods were on sale, and on the left bank, under the wall, urchins in soiled shirts sat with rods and lines, and nobody even chased them off...

The merchants were locking up their shops in the rows on Red Square and getting ready for a meal. Trade was quiet, and heavy padlocks were being hung on the doors. The sexton closed the church doors, wagged his goatee beard at the beggars, and also went slowly home to have kvass and onions with fish, and then snatch forty winks in the cool shade of an elder tree. The beggars, the forsaken and all kinds of freaks crawled down from the porch and went their different ways in the midday heat.

It was indeed time to think of having dinner, otherwise he would die of boredom. The boyar suddenly looked harder, craned his neck, stuck out his lips, and even half rose from his stool and shaded his eyes with his hand. Glittering in the sun, a glass carriage drawn by four plumed horses in tandem was driving over the bridge from the Troitsky Gates across the Neglinnaya River to the Rag Market. It was the tsarevna Natalia, Peter's favourite sister, with the same restless nature as her brother's, going off, on a crusade. Saints, where was she going? Irritably waving the hornets away with his handkerchief, the boyar leaned out of the window.

"Grishutka!" he shouted to a small boy in a long canvas blouse with red armpits, who was paddling in a puddle near the well. "Run as fast as you can or I'll give you what for... You'll see a gold carriage on Tverskaya Street — run after it, don't lose it, and come back and tell me where it went..."

## 2

The four grey horses, with red plumes on their heads and with brass plaques and bells on their harness, drew the carriage at a heavy gallop over the wide meadow and stopped outside the old Izmailovsky palace. It had been built in the times of Alexei Mikhailovich, who loved to get up to all kinds of schemes in his village of Izmailovo; tame elks still grazed with the cows, bears were kept in pits, and peacocks strutted about the poultry yard, flying up into the trees for the night in summer. There was no counting the number of multi-coloured and tin roofs on the log-built, age-darkened palace covering the chambers, passages and porches: steep, with spines like ruff, or barrel-shaped, or resembling a woman's semicircular headdress. Darting swifts cleaved the air over them in the midday quiet. All the palace windows were closed. On the porch, an old cock was asleep, standing on one leg; when the carriage drove up, he flapped his wings, squawked, and ran off; as if at a fire, the hens began clucking under all the little porches. A low basement door opened, and an aged watchman looked out. On seeing the carriage, he kneeled down slowly and pressed his forehead to the ground.

Tsarevna Natalia put her head out of the carriage and asked impatiently: "Where are the ladies, grandfather?"

The old man rose, thrust out his grey beard and pursed his lips:

"Greetings, Mother, greetings, tsarevna Natalia Alexeyevna," and he looked at her with affection from under his beetling brows. "Where are the ladies, you ask? I don't know where they are, I haven't seen them."

Natalia alighted from the carriage, took the heavy, gem-studded horned headdress off her head and threw the long-sleeved brocaded gown off her shoulders; she only put on the old-fashioned Moscow attire for going out. Her boyarina, Vassilisa Myasnaya, picked them up and put them in the carriage. Tall, slender, quick-moving, in a light Dutch dress, Natalia walked over the meadow to a grove. There, in the cool shade, she closed her eyes, so strong was the sweet scent of the lime blossom.

"Anyone there?" called Natalia. A woman's languid voice

answered not far away, from where the sun glittered intolerably bright on the water behind the branches. There was a coloured tent on the bank of a sandy beach by the landing stage and four young women were reclining on cushions in its shade. Enervated by the heat, their braids loosened, they rose hastily to meet Natalia. The oldest, Anisia Tolstoy, small in stature, with a long nose, was the first to run to her. She threw up her hands, her eyes dancing:

"Dearest Natalia, tsarevna, oh, that foreign toilette! Oh, it's divine!"

The two others were Alexander Danilovich Menshikov's sisters, recently sent from their father's house to Izmailovsky palace under the supervision of Anisia Tolstoy to learn la politesse and reading and writing. Their names were Marfa and Anna, two full-blown but gauche beauties. They stood staring at the tsarevna, their full lips parted, their eyelashes fluttering. She was in Dutch costume; a wide skirt of red wool with a triple gold border round the hem and a tight bodice. Her neck and shoulders were bare, as were her arms to the elbows. Natalia herself knew that she could only be compared with a goddess such as Diana; there was something clear, young and haughty about the rounded face with the short, upturned nose, like her brother's, and the small ears and mouth.

"This toilette was brought to me yesterday from the Hague by Sanka, that is, Alexandra Ivanovna Volkova. It's pretty and it doesn't hamper the body. Of course, it's not for ceremonial driving out, but it's ideal for the woods, for the meadows, for leisure."

Natalia turned round so that they could have a good look at her. The fourth young woman stood a little distance away, her hands modestly folded in front of her, her slyly smiling mouth as fresh as a cherry. Her eyes were like cherries too, sparkling, feminine. The round cheeks were rosy with the heat, the dark curly hair was glossy. Turning round while the others gasped and threw up their hands, Natalia glanced at the girl several times and petulantly thrust out her lower lip; she did not herself know whether she liked or disliked this Marienburg wench who had been taken in a soldier's coat from under a cart into Field-Marshal Sheremetev's tent, bought from him

by Menshikov and, one night, over a glass of wine by a warm fire, unprotestingly handed over by him to Peter.

Natalia was a virgin, unlike Katya and Masha, the other sisters of tsarevna Sophia who was now shut up in a convent. They were the laughing-stock of Moscow. Natalia was fiery and intractable. She had often called Katya and Masha sluts and cows, losing her temper and slapping their faces. She had cleared the palace of the old customs and the hot, nasty whisperings of the various women dependants. She had even reprimanded her brother Peter when, having forever rid himself of the shameless favourite Anna Mons, he had become completely undiscriminating and blunt with women. Natalia had thought that this soldier's wench was just another girl of the moment: he'd come to his senses and forget her. But no, Peter had not forgotten that evening at Menshikov's when the storm had been raging and Katerina had taken a candle and conducted him to the bedroom. He gave orders for the purchase of a small cottage on the Arbat for Menshikov's housekeeper. Alexander Danilovich personally took her bedding, bundles and boxes there; but a short while afterwards she was moved to Izmailovsky palace, where she was to be under the supervision of Anisia Tolstoy. Here, Katerina lived an untroubled existence; she was always cheerful, frank and fresh, although she had lain under a soldier's cart in her time. Peter often sent her brief, amusing letters either from the Svir, where he had begun building a fleet for the Baltic Sea, or from the new city of Petersburg, or from Voronezh. He missed her. Tracing out his writing with her finger, she brightened up even more. Natalia was consumed with curiosity, wondering how she had managed to bewitch him.

"I'll make you a costume just like this, if you wish, for when the tsar comes," said Natalia, looking sternly at Katerina, who curtseyed in embarrassment and blurted out:

"I would like it very much, thank you..."

"She's shy of you, my dear Natalia," whispered Anisia Tolstoy. "Don't look so hard at her; be more gentle with her... I tell her how kind you are, but she has something of her own to say: 'The tsarevna is without sin, but I'm a sinner,' she says, 'and I've done nothing to deserve her kindness... And as for

the tsar having fallen in love with me,' she says, 'it amazes me too, like a bolt from the blue, I just can't get over it...'

"But those two silly girls of mine keep pestering her with their questions; what had happened to her and how? I've strictly forbidden them to think or talk about it. 'Get on with your Greek gods and cupids,' I tell them. 'Think and talk about their goings-on.' But no, they're stuck with this country habit of babbling all sorts of nasty things... Morning, noon and night I keep telling them: 'You were slaves once, now you're goddesses.'"

Because of the heat, the crickets in the mown grass set up such a chirruping that it made the ears feel dry to listen. In the distance, on the far side of the pond, the summits of the black pine forest seemed to melt in the heat-shimmer. The dragonflies were resting on the sedge, and spiders sat on the pale water. Natalia went into the shade of the tent, took off her bodice, wound her dark-brown hair round her head, unbuttoned her skirt, dropped it, stepped out of it, took off her thin shift, and unashamed of her nakedness, just as on the printed Dutch sheets which were sent occasionally from the Palace Commission, she went to the landing stage.

"Everyone's to bathe," cried Natalia, turning to the tent and still winding her hair round her head. Marfa and Anna were coy as they undressed, until Anisia Tolstoy shouted at them: "What are you cringing for, you fat cows? Nobody's going to steal your charms!" Katerina was also embarrassed, aware that the tsarevna was staring intently at her. Natalia regarded her with a mixture of aversion and admiration. When Katerina, her curly head bowed, walked carefully over the mown grass and the blazing sun gilded her round-shouldered and firm-waisted form, so full of health and strength, Natalia realised that her brother, building ships in the north, was bound to miss this woman, and he could probably see her through the tobacco smoke, lifting a baby in her beautiful hands to her high breasts... Natalia took a deep breath, closed her eyes and plunged into the cold water... There were springs on the bed of the pond.

Katerina stepped with dignity off the landing-stage, entering the water more and more boldly and laughing with delight. Only then did Natalia become fully aware that she could grow

very fond of the girl. She swam up and laid her hands on Katerina's sun-tanned shoulders.

"You're beautiful, Katerina, I'm glad my brother loves you."

"Thank you, my lady."

"You may call me Natasha..."

She kissed Katerina on her cold, damp rounded cheek and looked into her cherry-black eyes.

"Be sensible, Katerina, and I shall be your friend..."

Dipping first one toe and then the other into the water, Marfa and Anna were still squealing with fright on the boards. Anisia Tolstoy lost her temper and pushed the two beauties into the water. All the spiders skated away, the dragonflies detached themselves from the sedge and swarmed into the air over the bathing goddesses.

## 3

Binding up her wet hair in the shade of the tent, Natalia was drinking berry juice, pear mead and tart fruit kvass fetched straight from the cellar. Popping a tiny piece of sugared gingerbread into her mouth, she said:

"It's humiliating when you think how ignorant we are. Thank God, we're no more stupid than other nations, our girls are incomparably tall and beautiful — all foreigners say so — and they can be given schooling and learn la politesse. Goodness knows how many years my brother's been struggling to drag people out of their musty quarters, out of the bad old ways. They resist, but it's not the girls that do, it's their fathers and mothers. When he left for the war, my brother asked me: 'Natasha, please don't give them any peace, those Old Testament greybeards... Harass them if they won't respond... That quagmire'll suck us all down...' I haven't the courage while I'm on my own... Thank goodness for tsaritsa Praskovia; she's been helping me... Even though it's hard for her to break with the old ways, she's made new rules for her daughters: on Sundays, after church, visitors call on her in French dress, drink coffee, listen to the music box and talk about worldly mat-

ters... And I'm going to start a novelty in the Kremlin in autumn, a real novelty..."

"And what will that be, my dear?" asked Anisia Tolstoy, wiping the sweetness from her lips.

"It will be something most unusual — a theatre. Not quite what they have at the French court, of course... They have illustrious actors, and dancers, and painters and musicians at Versailles. But here, I'm on my own; I must render tragedies from French into Russian, I must make up what's needed, and I deal with the players..."

When Natalia uttered the word "theatre", the Menshikov girls, Anisia Tolstoy and Katerina, who had been watching her intently with her dark eyes, exchanged glances and threw up their hands...

"At the beginning, so as not to frighten people too much, there will be 'The Play of the Fiery Furnace' with verses sung to music. When the tsar arrives from Petersburg for the festival, we shall put on 'An Edifying Drama about the Lecherous Don Juan, or How the Ground Swallowed Him Up...' When I command all to go to the theatre, they'll resist, so I'll send the dragoons out to bring in the public... It's a pity that Alexandra Ivanovna Volkova isn't in Moscow now; she would have been a great help... Now, she's from a low peasant family; her father used to wear a bast cord round his waist; didn't start learning to read and write until she got married... She speaks three languages fluently, and writes verse; she's in the Hague now with our ambassador, Andrei Artamonovich Matveyev. Cavaliers fight sword duels over her, some have been killed... And she's determined to go to Paris and shine at the court of Louis XIV... Now do you see the worth of schooling?"

Anisia Tolstoy promptly gave Marfa and Anna a sharp dig in the ribs:

"Did you hear that question? The tsar will arrive and he might bring you, or you, a gallant cavalier, and with his own ears he'll hear you disgrace yourselves..."

"Let them be, Anisia, it's hot," said Natalia. "Well, goodbye. I still have to visit the German quarter. More complaints about my sisters. I'm afraid the tsar might get to hear of it. I want to have a severe talk with them."

## 4

A long time ago, when Sophia had been confined in the Novodevichi Convent, tsarevnas Ekaterina and Maria had been moved out of the Kremlin and kept away from the public eye in Pokrovka Street. The Palace Commission provided for their upkeep and entertainment, paying the wages of their singers, grooms and household staff, but did not put cash into the hands of the tsarevnas; first because there was no need for it, secondly because it could be risky in view of their extravagance.

Ekaterina was approaching forty and Maria was a year younger. All Moscow knew that they were idling away the time. They would get up late, sit for half the day with their hair uncombed at the window and yawn till the tears came to their eyes. As soon as it was dusk, singers with domras and pipes would come into their room. All dressed up, the tsarevnas, heavily rouged, their eyebrows lined with soot, would listen to the songs, drink sweet cordials and gallop and dance about till late at night so that the old timbered house shook from top to bottom. The tsarevnas openly lived with the singers and bore their children, whom they handed over to the town of Kimry to be brought up.

The singers were so spoiled that even on ordinary days they went about in raspberry-coloured silk blouses, tall coonskin hats and Morocco leather boots, incessantly screwing money out of the tsarevnas and drinking it in the tavern by the Pokrovskiye Gates. To obtain money, the tsarevnas used to send a woman from Kimry named Domna Vakhrameyeva to the Rag Market. She lived in a closet under the stairs in their house and sold all their old clothes at the market. The money thus obtained was not enough, and tsarevna Ekaterina dreamed of finding treasure, for which she ordered Domna to dream of some. Domna dreamed accordingly, and the tsarevna hoped to be in the money.

Natalia had long intended to have a serious talk with her sisters, but she hadn't been able to find the time; either there

was a thunderstorm and pouring rain, or something else prevented her. She had been told the previous day about their latest escapades; the tsarevnas had taken to visiting the German quarter. They had left in an open carriage to pay a call on the Dutch ambassador. While, amazed, he was putting on peruke, caftan and sword, Katya and Masha had sat on chairs in his room, whispering and giggling to one another. When, upon meeting such high personages, he began to bow to them, sweeping the floor with his hat, they were unable to return the compliment properly, merely lifting their backsides off their chairs, flopping down again and promptly asking: "Where does the German woman live who sells sugar and sweets?" It was the sole reason why they had called.

The Dutch envoy kindly conducted the tsarevnas right up to the confectioner's shop. Inside, they helped themselves to handfuls of sugar, sweets, pies and marzipan apples and eggs worth nine rubles in all.

"Take this lot to the carriage immediately," said Maria.

"Not without payment," replied the confectioner.

The tsarevnas whispered angrily to one another and said to her:

"Wrap it up and seal it, we'll send the money later."

Casting all shame to the winds, they went from the confectioner to the former favourite, Anna Mons, who still lived in the house that Peter had built for her. They weren't admitted straightaway and had to knock for a long time while the watchdogs barked. The former favourite received them in bed; she may have retired to it intentionally.

"May you prosper for many years, dear Anna Ivanovna; we know that you lend money on interest, let us have at least a hundred rubles, though we could do with two hundred."

"I won't lend without surety," replied the Mons woman callously.

Ekaterina burst into tears.

"That's hard on us; we have no surety, we thought we'd ask anyway."

Crestfallen, the tsarevnas left the favourite's house.

They now felt hungry. They ordered their carriage to stop at a certain house where, through the open windows, they could see the guests making merry. The wife of Sergeant Da-

nila Yudin, who at that time was serving in Livonia, had given birth to twins and the company were wetting the baby's head. The tsarevnas went into the house, got themselves invited to the meal and were treated with all honours due to their station.

Three hours later, when they had left the sergeant's wife, they were recognised in their carriage by the English merchant William Peel. They stopped and asked him if he would care to treat them to dinner. William Peel threw his hat into the air and shouted merrily: "With the very greatest pleasure." The tsarevnas drove to his place, where they dined and drank English spirits and beer. An hour before evening, after leaving Peel, they rode round Kukui, staring into the brightly lit windows. Ekaterina wanted to get them invited somewhere else for supper, but Maria dissuaded her. And so they diverted themselves until nightfall.

## 5

Natalia's carriage raced at a gallop through the German quarter past the wooden houses skilfully painted to look like brick, past the squat, long merchants' warehouses with the iron-bound gates, past the fancy trimmed shrubs in the front gardens. Painted signs were suspended over the pavement everywhere. The shop doors were wide open and festooned with wares of every kind. Natalia sat pouting like a doll, not looking at anyone, in her horned headdress and with a Russian gown over her shoulders. She was bowed to by fat men in braces and knitted bonnets; staid women in straw hats pointed out her carriage to their children; a dandy in a caftan with flared skirts would leap off the road and shield himself from the dust with his hat. Natalia all but wept with shame, well aware that Masha and Katya were the laughing-stock of the whole quarter and, of course, all of them — Dutch, Swiss, English and Germans — were gossiping about how tsar Peter's sisters were greedy barbarians, cadging all over the place.

She caught sight of her sisters' open carriage in a crooked side-street near the red-and-yellow striped gates of the house belonging to the Prussian envoy Keyserling, about whom it

was said that he wanted to marry Anna Mons, except that he was still somewhat in fear of Peter. Natalia knocked with her beringed knuckles on the front glass. The black-bearded coachman looked round and roared: "Whoa, my doves!" The grey horses stopped, their flanks heaving. Natalia said to her boyarina-in-waiting:

"Go, Vassilisa Matveyevna, tell the German envoy that I need Ekaterina Alexeyevna and Maria Alexeyevna most urgently... Don't let them eat anything; bring them here by force if you have to..."

Moaning softly, Vassilisa Myasnaya alighted from the carriage. Natalia leaned back and waited, cracking her fingers. Soon, envoy Keyserling hurried down from the porch skinny, small, with calf-like eyelashes, clutching his hat and stick to his breast, bowing on each step, turning out his legs in their red stockings, amiably thrusting forward his sharp little nose, imploring the tsarevna to visit him and drink chilled beer.

"I haven't time," replied Natalia stiffly, "and I shan't drink beer with you... You're up to a shameful business, Sir... (Not giving him the chance to open his mouth.) Go, go, send the tsarevnas out to me at once..."

Ekaterina and Maria finally came out of the house looking like a couple of haystacks in wide dresses with frills and furbelows. The round, rouged faces of both women were frightened and stupid. Instead of their own hair, they were wearing raven black, steeply upswept wigs draped with pearls (Natalia groaned through her clenched teeth.) The tsarevnas screwed up their small eyes against the sunlight. Boyarina Myasnaya hissed behind them: "Don't make fools of yourselves, go and sit with her in the carriage." Bowing, Keyserling opened the carriage door. Forgetting even to take their leave of him, the tsarevnas got inside and with difficulty found room for themselves on the seat opposite Natalia. Its red wheels throwing up the dust, the carriage, rocking from side to side, set off across the wasteland to Pokrovka.

Natalia was silent all the way and the tsarevnas fanned themselves with their kerchiefs in amazement. Only after she had gone up to their rooms and given orders for the door to be locked did she speak her mind:

"Have you gone completely out of your wits, you hussies, or do you pine for seclusion in a convent? Haven't you earned yourselves a bad enough name in Moscow? Now you have to go and disgrace yourselves before the whole world! And where did you get the nerve to crawl for a hundred rubles before that filthy slut, Anna Mons? Now she can pride herself on having thrown you out, you cadgers. Keyserling's bound to write about it to the King of Prussia, and the King will babble it all over Europe! You wanted to cheat the confectioner... Oh yes you did, don't try and wriggle out of it! It's a good thing she didn't let you have anything. My God, what's the tsar going to say now? What's he going to do about you, you cows? You'll have your hair shorn, and you'll be sent to the Pechorsky Convent in Pustozersk..."

Without removing her headdress and gown, Natalia paced up and down the room, wringing her hands in distress and flashing her eys at Katya and Masha. They remained standing at first, then, feeling weak at the knees, sat down. Their noses reddened, their fat faces wobbled, they wanted to howl with misery, but were too terrified to utter a sound.

"The tsar is killing himself, trying to pull us out of the mire," said Natalia. "He's not getting enough food or sleep, he's sawing planks himself, he's driving in nails, he goes about under shells and bullets just to try and make human beings out of you. That's all his enemies are waiting for, to dishonour and destroy us. And just look at you! Our deadliest enemy couldn't have thought of doing what you've done. I'll never believe it; I'll find out who put it into your heads to go to the German quarter. You're a pair of clumsy old maids."

At this point, Katya and Masha, their puffy lips parted, burst into tears.

"No one put it into our heads," blubbered Katya. "May the earth swallow us up..."

"You're lying!" shouted Natalia. "Who told you about the confectioner? And who told you that the Mons woman lends money on interest?.."

Masha started wailing too.

"We were told about it by Domna Vakhrameyeva from Kimry. She dreamed about that confectioner, and we believed her, we wanted some marzipan..."

Natalia rushed across the room and threw open the door. A little old man jumped back from it; this was a house jester in woman's clothes. Behind him cowered female servants, female freaks, and female jesters with straws in their hair. Natalia seized the arm of a neatly dressed, soft woman in a black headscarf.

"Are you the woman from Kimry?"

The woman silently executed a reverent bow, her whole body quivering.

"My lady tsarevna, I am the poor widow Domna Vakhrameyeva from Kimry..."

"Did you incite the tsarevnas to go to the German quarter? Answer!.."

Vakhrameyeva's white face shook, her big mouth twitched:

"I am a poor bewitched woman, I say meaningless things in the distraction of my mind, my benefactresses the tsarevnas are amused by my foolish words and that gladdens my heart... I have wondrous dreams at night... But whether or not my benefactresses the tsarevnas believe my dreams, I do not know... I have never visited the German quarter in my life and I have never set eyes on any confectioner." She bowed to Natalia again and stood with her hands clasped over her stomach under her shawl, as if turned to stone, unshakeable, immune to everything.

Natalia looked darkly at her sisters. Katya and Masha moaned feebly, wilting in the heat. A little old clown with nostrils but without a nose, his moustaches and beard scraggy, his lips protruding, pushed his way through the door.

"You need amusement?" Maria waved him away with her kerchief in exasperation; but a dozen hands had already clutched the door from outside, and jesters, freaks in rags, bareheaded, some in women's clothes and in tree-bark headdresses, pushed the little old man aside and tumbled into the room. Energetic, shameless, they began hopping, skipping, shrieking, fighting one another, pulling each other's hair, slapping faces. The little old clown climbed up on to a humpbacked woman, his bast shoes sticking out from under his patchwork petticoat, and started shouting in a nasal voice: "See the German riding the German woman on the way to drink beer..." In the passage, the singers, who had just arrived in

time, struck up a dance-tune with whistles. Domna Vakhrameyeva moved away and stood behind the stove, letting her shawl fall down over her eyes.

Natalia stamped her red shoes in annoyance and anger. "Get out!" she screamed at the cavorting rag, tag and bobtail, "get out!" But the male and female jesters only shrilled the louder. What could she do with this demented rabble on her own? Moscow was full of them. These throwbacks to the Dark Ages swarmed in every boyar's house and at every church porch. Natalia fastidiously picked up the hem of her skirt, realising that this was the end of her talk with her sisters. It would, however, be foolish to leave now. Katya and Masha would lean out of the window and laugh at her carriage as it drove off...

Suddenly, amid the hubbub and gambolling about, horses' hooves and the rumble of wheels were heard in the courtyard. The singers in the passage broke off. "Run for it!" shouted the little jester, baring his teeth. The clowns scampered for the door like rats. The house suddenly went dead. The wooden staircase began creaking under heavy footsteps.

Puffing and blowing, a portly man entered the room holding a silver-tipped staff and a hat in his hand. He was dressed in the old Moscow style, in a long, loose cranberry-red coat down to his heels. The broad, swarthy chin and cheeks were clean-shaven, the black moustaches were curled up in Polish style, the bright, moist eyes bulged like those of a crayfish. He bowed silently to Natalia, his hat almost touching the floor, turned round heavily and likewise bowed to the tsarevnas Ekaterina and Maria, who were both gasping with terror. He then sat down on a bench, laying his staff and hat beside him.

"Well," he said, "here I am. I've arrived." He took from his bosom a big coloured handkerchief and wiped his face, his neck, and the damp hair combed down over to his forehead.

This was the most terrifying man in Moscow, the Prince-Emperor, Fyodor Yurievich Romodanovsky.

"We have heard, yes, we have indeed heard that unseemly deeds are afoot. Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!" pushing his handkerchief into the breast of his coat, the Prince-Emperor transferred his gaze to the tsarevnas Ekaterina and Maria. "So you craved marzipan? Well, well, well... But folly is worse than

treachery... There has been a great to-do." He turned his idol-like, broad face to look at Natalia. "They were sent to the German quarter for money, that's what. Which means that someone needs cash. Do not be angry with me, but sentries will have to be posted round your sisters' house. They have a woman from Kimry living in their store-room, and she secretly takes food in a pot out to the wasteland behind the kitchen garden, to a disused bathhouse. And in that bathhouse dwells the fugitive monk Grishka... (At this point, Ekaterina and Maria turned pale and clutched their cheeks.) The said monk Grishka apparently brews love philtres in the bathhouse, and potions against conception, that the fruit be cast out of the womb. Very well. It is known to us that the monk Grishka also writes seditious letters in the bathhouse and goes at nights to the German quarter, to the houses of certain envoys, and calls on a nun, the which nun visits the Novodevichy Convent, washes the floors there, and among them the floor of the cell inhabited by the former regent Sophia Alexeyevna... (The Prince-Emperor was speaking quietly and slowly, and all in the room were holding their breath.) So I shall remain here a while, my dear Natalia Alexeyevna, but you need not concern yourself with these matters. Go home in the cool of the evening..."

# *Chapter Two*

## 1

The three Brovkin brothers, Alexei, Yakov and Gavrila, were seated at table. It was a rare occasion for them these days to be able to meet like this and have a heart-to-heart talk over a glass of vodka. Now it was all hustle and bustle, with no time to spare; you were here today, and gone tomorrow, suffering the discomforts of a journey thousands of versts long, burrowing into the hay under a sheepskin coat... There just weren't enough people for the work that had to be done.

Yakov had arrived from Voronezh and Gavrila from Moscow. Both had been ordered to build warehouses on the left bank of the Neva upstream of the Fontanka estuary, jetties by the water, and booms on the water, and to reinforce the whole bank with piles in expectation of the first ships of the Baltic fleet, which was being built with all urgency near Lodeinoye Pole on the Svir. Menshikov had gone there the previous year, had ordered the felling of mast timber and had laid the foundations of the first shipyard in Holy Week. Renowned carpenters had been fetched from the Olonets district and smiths from Ustyuzhina Zhelezopolskaya. Young master navigators, who had learned their trade in Amsterdam, old craftsmen from Voronezh and Arkhangelsk and famous masters from Holland and England were building on the Svir twenty-gun frigates, schooners, galliots, brigantines, cutters, galleys and smacks. Peter hurried there by sleigh route, and he was expected soon in Petersburg.

Alexei, in a blouse of Dutch linen — a clean one in honour of Sunday — his lace cuffs turned back, was slicing salt pork on a board. Before the brothers stood an earthenware bowl of hot cabbage soup, a flagon of vodka, three pewter cups and, in front of each, a slice of stale rye bread.

Alexei, ruddy-faced, clean-shaven, with bright upturned moustaches and his head shaved (his peruke was hanging on

a wooden peg on the wall), was telling his brothers: "Cabbage soup with salt pork is no novelty in Moscow. But here it's only on holidays that we get salt pork. As for the sauerkraut – Alexander Danilovich has some in his cellar. Bruce has, maybe, and myself, and that's all. Just because we had the foresight in the summer and planted cabbage in our kitchen gardens. Times are hard. Everything's expensive, nothing's available."

Alexei tipped the chopped pork off the board into the bowl of cabbage soup and then poured each a glassful of vodka. The brothers bowed their heads to one another, sighed, downed their vodka and gravely began sipping their soup.

"People are afraid to come here — no women. It's like living in the wilderness, by God... In winter, it's just barely tolerable. The blizzards are appalling, pitch darkness, and there's been so much to do this winter... But when a spring gale blows, as it's doing today, you have the craziest thoughts. And they make heavy demands on people here..."

"Yes," said Yakov, sucking a piece of gristle. "There's nothing very cheerful about these parts."

Unlike his brothers, Yakov didn't bother about his appearance. His brown caftan was stained, buttons were missing, the black cravat round his hairy neck was soiled and he smelt all over of cheap tobacco... His hair (he didn't wear a peruke) came down to his shoulders and he didn't take the trouble to comb it.

"What d'you mean, brother?" said Alexei. "These parts are very cheerful, really, especially down along the sea coast and on the side round Cape Duderhof. The grass grows waist-high, the trees in the birch groves are so tall that your hat falls off when you look up at them, and rye grows there, and all kinds of vegetables and berries. In the mouth of the Neva, of course, it's quagmire and desolation. But for some reason that's the place the tsar favours for his city. It's handy in the military sense. Only one thing wrong; the Swedes are giving a lot of trouble. Last year they pounced on us from the River Sestra; we were scared stiff. But we drove them off. Now they don't poke their noses in from the sea any more. In January, near Kotlin Island, we lowered some cribs full of rocks under the ice and we carted and put down stones all winter. Before

the river ices up again, there'll be a round bastion ready with fifty guns. Peter Alexeyevich sent drawings specially from Voronezh and a hand-made model, and he ordered us to call it the Kronschlot bastion."

"I know all about that," said Yakov. "I had an argument with Peter Alexeyevich about that model. I told him the bastion was too low, the guns would be flooded in heavy seas and it would have to be twenty inches higher. He fetched me one with a stick. But he called me in the morning. 'You're right, Yakov,' says he, 'and I'm wrong.' And so he brings me a glass of vodka and a fancy loaf. We make it up. And he gives me this pipe."

Yakov took out of his pocket, already crammed with various odds and ends, a burnt pipe with a gnawed cherrywood mouthpiece. He filled it and began striking a spark on the tinder. The youngest brother, Gavrila, who was taller than the others and of much heavier build, with youthful cheeks, dark moustaches and big-eyed like his sister Sanka, suddenly began waving his soup-filled spoon about and said for no reason in particular:

"Alyosha, I've caught a cockroach."

"That's a bit of charcoal, you fool." Alexei took the little piece of black from the other's spoon and dropped it on to the floor. Gavrila flung his head back and roared with laughter, revealing teeth as white as sugar.

"Just like our late mother. Dad would throw down his spoon and say: 'Disgraceful, a cockroach.' And Mum would say: 'It's only a bit of charcoal, dear.' You didn't know whether to laugh or cry. You were a bit older, Alyosha, but Yakov remembers how we spent the whole winter on the stove without any breeches on. Sanka used to tell us awful yarns. Yes, that's the way it was..."

The brothers put down their spoons, rested their elbows on the table and fell thoughtful for a moment, as if overcome by a faraway sorrow. Alexei filled the cups, and the unhurried conversation was resumed. Alexei complained that he had been watching the workers in the fortress where they were sawing planks for the Peter-and-Paul Cathedral that was under construction. There weren't enough saws and axes, it was getting harder and harder to obtain bread, millet and salt for the

workers, the horses were dropping in their tracks for lack of fodder; they were being used to cart stone and timber from the Finnish coast over the winter sleigh-route. Sleighs were no longer useable, wagons were needed, but there weren't any wheels.

Then, after pouring out a glass each, the brothers began discussing European politics. They marvelled and condemned. You would expect the enlightened states to work and trade honestly — but no. The King of France was waging war on land and sea with the English, the Dutch and the Austrian Emperor, and the end of the conflict was nowhere in sight. The Turks, Venice and Spain, having failed to share out the Mediterranean Sea, were burning one another's fleets. Only Frederick, King of Prussia, was sitting tight for the time being and sniffing out where he could most easily tear off a piece for himself. Saxony, Silesia, Poland and Livonia were ablaze from end to end with war and internecine conflict. During the month before last, King Charles had ordered the Poles to choose a new king, so now there were two monarchs in Poland; Augustus of Saxony and Stanislaw Leszczynski. Some of the Polish aristocracy supported Augustus, others were for Stanislaw; they were hacking away with their sabres at the Sejms, mobilising their gentry and burning one another's villages and estates, while Charles wandered over Poland with his troops, living off the land, plundering, destroying cities and threatening, when he had oppressed all Poland, to turn on tsar Peter, burn Moscow and devastate Russia. Then he would proclaim himself the new Alexander the Great. It might be said that the whole world had gone out of its mind...

A big icicle suddenly fell with a ringing sound outside the deep-set four-paned window in the plastered wall. The brothers looked round and saw the fathomless, dark blue, damp sky such as is only to be seen on the sea coast, and heard the rapid drips falling from the roof and the sparrows twittering on a bare bush. Then they began to discuss what was most vital.

"Here we are, three brothers," said Alexei pensively, "three poor wretches. My batman washes my shirts and sews on my buttons if need be, but it's still not enough — it's the feminine touch that's missing... But it's not the shirts, confound them, that matter... I want my woman to be waiting for me at

the window, and looking out onto the street. As it is, I come back tired and frozen, fall onto a hard bed, nuzzle into the pillow, all alone in the world. Where am I to find her?.."

"That's the whole point — where?" said Yakov, resting his elbows on the table, and he blew three puffs of smoke in succession. "Me, brother, I'm a hopeless case. I shan't marry an uneducated woman, I'd have nothing to talk to her about. As for the missy with the lily-white hands who has to be whirled round at a ceremonial ball and paid compliments by order of Peter Alexeyevich — her kind wouldn't marry me. So I have my amusement somehow or other when the need is on me... It's nasty, of course, it's dirty. But mathematics alone means more to me than all the women in the world..."

Said Alexei to him: "One needn't interfere with the other..."

"It must interfere if I say so. Look at that sparrow in the bush; he has nothing else to do but hop round the she-sparrow... But God created man that he should think." Yakov glanced at his younger brother and sucked his pipe so that it gurgled. "Our Gavrila's lively enough on that score."

Gavrila flushed to the roots of his hair; he grinned slowly, his eyes glistened, he did not know where to look in his embarrassment.

Yakov nudged him:

"Tell us about it. I love this kind of story."

"Oh, really... There's nothing to tell. I'm too young for that sort of thing..." But Yakov, and after him, Alexei, persisted: "You're with your own family, what are you being so shy about?.." Gavrila resisted for some time, then began sighing, and finally he told his brothers all about it.

One evening, just before Christmas, a palace runner dashed into Ivan Artemich's place and said that Gavrila Ivanovich Brovkin was ordered to go to the palace at once. Gavrila objected at first — although young, he was a person of consequence, he was in the tsar's eye, and, besides, he was busy drawing in India ink the complete plans of a two-decker ship for the Voronezh shipyard and he wanted to show the drawing to his pupils in the Navigation School in the Sukharev Tower where, by order of Peter, he was teaching shipbuilding to the adolescent nobility. Ivan Artemich had given his son a severe telling-off: "Put on your French coat, Gavrila, go

where you're ordered, this is no laughing matter."

Gavrila put on a white silk coat belted round with a sash, let the lace out from under his chin, perfumed his raven-black peruke with musk, put on a cape that reached down to his spurs and drove off to the Kremlin in his father's troika, which was the envy of all Moscow.

The runner led him up narrow staircases and along dark passages to the ancient stone chambers that had survived the great fire. All the rooms there were low ceilinged, vaulted and painted with all kinds of vegetation and flowers on a gold, crimson or green background. There was a smell of wax and old incense. It was hot because of the tiled stoves with an Angora cat dozing on every ledge. Behind the mica windows of the cupboards there gleamed wine bowls and dippers from which Ivan the Terrible himself may have drunk, but which were no longer in use. With every contempt for this antiquated rubbish, Gavrila walked with jingling spurs over the carved flagstones. In the last doorway he bent, stooped, took a step forward, and was overwhelmed by the charming scene that met his eyes.

Under a dull golden vault there stood, supported by winged gryphons, a table on which candles were burning. Sitting in front of them, her bare elbows resting on scattered sheets of paper, was a young woman with a fur jacket over her bare shoulders. The soft light bathed her mild, rather round face. She was writing. She put down the swan's feather quill, raised her beringed hand to her light brown hair and, straightening the thick plait, looked up at Gavrila with velvety eyes. It was tsarevna Natalia Alexeyevna.

Gavrila did not throw himself at her feet, as he was supposed to in conformity with the barbarian custom, but in the full style of la politesse française, put his left foot firmly down in front of him and waved his hat low down, the ringlets of his raven-black peruke covering his face. The corners of the tsarevna's little mouth turned up in smile; she came out from behind the table, lifted the sides of her broad, pearl-grey satin petticoats and performed a low curtsey.

"You are Gavrila, the son of Ivan Artemich?" she asked, looking up at him with eyes bright in the light of the candles, since he was tall, his wig all but touching the vaulted ceiling.

"How do you do? Take a seat. Your sister, Alexandra Ivanovna, has sent me a letter from the Hague. She writes that you may be extremely useful to me in my work. Have you been in Paris? Have you seen the theatres there?"

Gavrila told her how, the year before last, he and two navigators had gone to Paris from the Hague and had seen great marvels in that city — theatres and street carnivals. Natalia Alexeyevna wanted to know everything in detail, impatiently tapping her shoe when he fumbled for words and could not express himself coherently. She drew closer in her excitement, wide-eyed and even open-mouthed in amazement at the French customs.

"There you are," she said, "people don't skulk at home like wolves in their lairs, they know how to make merry and divert others, and they dance in the streets, and they willingly listen to comedies... We must introduce the same kind of things here. You're an engineer, I'm told. You're the one I shall order to rebuild one of the rooms; I have it in mind for a theatre. Take a candle and let's go..."

Gavrila took a heavy candlestick with a burning candle; Natalia Alexeyevna, with a light-footed gait, her dress rustling, flitted ahead of him through the vaulted rooms in which the Angora cats woke up on their ledges, arched their backs and lay luxuriously down again; where from the ceiling the stiff faces of the Moscow tsars regarded here and there with implacable severity tsarevna Natalia who was dragging down to the Nether Regions not only herself, but this youth in a wig horned like the devil, not to mention the whole of ancient Muscovy.

On a steep, narrow staircase that descended into the darkness, Natalia Alexeyevna felt scared and slipped her bare hand under Gavrila's elbow. He sensed the warmth of her shoulder, the fragrance of her hair, the fur of her jacket. She put out from under the hem of her petticoat a square-toed satin slipper, stooping in the dark and going down with increasing caution. Gavrila felt himself beginning to tremble inwardly and his voice became muffled. When they stepped off the stairs at the bottom, she looked intently into his eyes.

"Open that," she said, pointing to a little door covered with moth-eaten padding. Natalia Alexeyevna stepped first

across the raised threshold into the warm darkness that smelt of mice and dust. Holding the candlestick high, Gavrila saw a big vaulted room with four squat pillars. In the old days, this had been the room in which the humble tsar Mikhail Fyodorovich had dined with the Boyar Council. The paintings on the ceiling and columns had peeled off, the wooden floorboards creaked. At the far end, bast wigs, paper cloaks and other stage tat hung on nails; one corner was piled with tin crowns and armour, sceptres, wooden swords, broken chairs — all that was left of the German theatre of Johann Kunst that had been on Red Square and had recently been disbanded for stupidity and unwonted indecency.

"My theatre shall be here," said Natalia. "On this side you will put up a stage for the players with a curtain and lampions, and here there will be benches for the spectators. The vaults must be brightly painted, so that a cheerful note is struck right from the start..."

Gavrila escorted the tsarevna Natalia up the stairs and she dismissed him, after permitting him to kiss her hand. He returned home after midnight and, as he was, in wig and coat, fell on to his bed and stared at the ceiling, as if in the vague light of the expiring candle he could still see the round face, the intent velvety eyes, the little mouth uttering words to him, the soft shoulders, half-covered with fragrant fur; and, all the time, the heavy folds of the pearl-grey petticoat rustling as she flew ahead of him into the burning dark...

The next evening, tsarevna Natalia again ordered him to visit her and she read out "The Play of the Fiery Furnace", her yet unfinished comedy about the ordeal of the three young men. Gavrila listened until late at night as, waving a feather quill, she declaimed the neatly turned verses, and it seemed to him that he was one of those three youths and was ready to howl with happiness as he stood naked in the fiery furnace...

He set about rebuilding the old room with great enthusiasm, although the officials of the Palace Commission immediately began harrassing him with every kind of red tape over timber, lime, nails and so forth. Ivan Artemich said nothing, although he could see that Gavrila had abandoned his drawings and was not going to the Navigation School, and, at dinner-time, without picking up his spoon, was staring with

foolish eyes into empty space, and at night, when people were asleep, would use up a whole candle worth an altyn. Only once did Ivan Artemich, after some hesitation and twiddling his fingers, warn his son: "One thing I will say, Gavrila, just one thing: you're going too near the fire, so watch out..."

In Lent, tsar Peter rushed from Voronezh across Moscow to the Svir and ordered Gavrila to leave with his brother Yakov for Petersburg to build harbours. That was the end of his work for the theatre. And that was the end of Gavrila's story. He got up from the table, undid the many buttons on his Dutch jacket, pulled it open on his chest and, shoving his hands into his short, baggy trousers, started pacing up and down the hut between door and window.

"And you can't forget her?" said Alexei.

"No... And I shan't forget, even if they threaten me with the block..."

Said Yakov, drumming his fingernails on the table:

"It's our Mum that gave us the passionate heart... Sanka's just the same... There's nothing anybody can do about it, there's no cure for the sickness. Come on, brothers, let's fill our glasses and drink to the memory of our mother, Avdotia Evdokimovna..."

Just then, in the covered passage, there was a sound of boots being stamped to shake off the mud and of spurs jingling. The door burst open and there entered, in a black, mud-splashed cloak, in a black hat with a silver band, Bombardier Lieutenant of the Preobrazhensky Regiment, the Governor-General of Ingermanland, Karelia and Estland and the Governor of Schlusselburg, Alexander Menshikov.

## 2

"Saints, you've smoked the place up like a den! Don't get up, don't get up, no ceremony. Greetings!" said Alexander Danilovich with brusque cheerfulness. "Shall we go down to the river, eh?" Throwing down his cloak and pulling off his hat together with an enormous peruke, he sat at the table, looked at the gnawed bones and glanced into the empty soup bowl. "I had dinner early out of boredom, lay down for forty winks,

and when I woke up there was no one in the house, no guests, no servants. They'd left the Governor-General in the lurch... I could die in my sleep and no one would know." He winked at Alexei. "Mister Lieutenant-Colonel, bring some pepper vodka and some sauerkraut if you can, my head's aching for some reason... Well, and how are things with you, shipbuilder brothers? You must, must get a move on. I'll go down tomorrow and have a look."

Alexei brought sauerkraut and a flagon from the covered passage. Sticking out his well-cared-for little finger with the big diamond ring Alexander Danilovich carefully poured himself a drink, took a pinch of ice-cold sauerkraut from the plate, frowned, took a pull at the cup and, opening wide his eyes, began crunching the sauerkraut.

"There's nothing worse than Sunday. I get so bored on Sundays, it's awful. Or is it the spring here that's so pernicious?.. It's as if my whole body was broken and drawn... No women, that's the reason!.. That's your conquerors for you! We've won. We've built a city, and there aren't any women! By God, I'll ask Peter to let me out of it, I don't need a Governor-Generalship, I don't need it at all... I'd be better off in Moscow selling in the market to get by somehow... And the girls they have in Moscow! Venuses! Cunning eyes, glowing cheeks, so tender and mocking... Come on, let's go, let's go down to the river, it's stuffy in here..."

Alexander Danilovich could not stay in one place for long; he never had time, like all who worked with tsar Peter. He would say one thing while thinking about various other matters. It was very difficult to adapt to him, and he was a dangerous man. Again he pulled on his wig and hat, pulled on his sable coat and went out of the hut with the Brovkin brothers. The damp spring wind immediately blew into their faces. On what had been Thomas Island in the old days but was now called the Petersburg side, pines were murmuring as softly and mightily as if a river were flowing from profoundest depths of the pale-blue sky. The rooks called, wheeling over the few naked birches.

Alexei's hut stood on the far side of Trinity Square, which had been cleared of trees not far from the newly-built wooden market. The shops were boarded up and the merchants had

not yet arrived. On the right could be seen the earthen ramparts and bastions of the fortress, now bare of snow. At present, only one of the bastions, that of Bombardier Pyotr Alexeyev, was half clad in stone; on it a white nautical flag bearing a St. Andrew's cross fluttered from a mast in token of the expected fleet.

There was water rippling in the wind as far as the eye could see. Menshikov splashed diagonally across the square towards the Neva. Petersburg's main square only existed in talk and on the plans which Peter kept drawing in his notebook. All that stood there was a timbered and smoke-begrimed, moss-caulked little church, the Trinity Cathedral, and, not far from it, nearer the river, Peter's house, a two-roomed hut faced on the outside with boards and painted to look like brick. A painted wooden mortar and two bombs with imitation fuses had been mounted on the roof ridge.

On the other side of the square stood a low Dutch house which seemed to beckon you inside — there was always a wisp of smoke curling up from the chimney, and through the dull window-panes could be seen pewter mugs, plates and hanging sausages. The entrance door bore the picture of an appalling character with a pirate's beard, holding a drinking mug in one hand and dice in the other. Over the entrance, a sign creaked: "Hosterly of the Four Frigates".

When they came to the river, the wind snatched up their capes and ruffled their wigs. The ice on the Neva was dark-blue, with big watery patches, with bulging, already melting dung-strewn roads. Menshikov suddenly lost his temper.

"They were allotted two thousand rubles for all this work! Oh, the pen-pushers, oh, the skinflints, oh, the parasites! To hell with all the clerks, and under-clerks, and all the Commissions! They get into a stew over half a ruble in Moscow, the maggots! I'm the master here! I've got money, I've got horses, I can get good men, as many as I want, and as to where I find them — that's my business... Just remember, you Brovkin brothers, you didn't come here to vegetate. You won't get enough sleep and you won't get enough to eat, all the jetties have to be ready by the end of May, and the booms too, and the warehouses... And not only on the left bank, where you've been shown... Here, on the Petersburg side, there must be faci-

lities so that a big ship can come in and tie up..." Alexander Danilovich walked quickly along the bank, pointing out where they were to begin driving the piles and where they were to build the jetties. "After the naval victory, the flagship will come in with guns firing and her sails holed with shot. Will she hove to in the Fontanka estuary! No! Here!" he stamped his boot in a puddle. "And if it happens that a rich trader puts in from England or Holland, that's Peter Alexeyevich's house over there, and that's mine—so be our guest..."

Alexander Danilovich's house, that is to say, the Governor-General's palace, a hundred sazhens upstream of the tsar's hut, had been built in haste of clay finished in plaster, with a high Dutch roof visible from a long way downstream. In the exact centre of the facade, a porch had been built with a portico on which, on the right-hand side of the roof, lay a gilded wooden Neptune with a trident, and on the left-hand side, a mermaid with huge breasts, her elbow resting on an overturned pot. On the pediment of the portico were the letters "A.M." with a snake coiled round them; on the roof, the Governor-General's personal flag hung on a mast; the porch was flanked by two guns.

"No need to be ashamed of showing that little house to the foreigners. Ah, they're lovely, they're lovely, the gods of the sea. They look just as if they'd come out of the ocean and lain down over my porch. And when the fleet from the Svir sails past, we'll make the cannons belch smoke. Beautiful, ah, beautiful!"

Screwing up his blue eyes, Alexander Danilovich admired his house. Then he turned and spluttered with annoyance as he surveyed the distant left bank, where the wind was rocking lone pines amid the stumps and bare patches.

"Oh, that's horrible... We've made a mess of the place in our haste..." He pointed with his cane to where the Fontanka flowed out of the Neva. "There was such a beautiful view from my windows; the pine forest was like a wall, I could have built a summer-house there for amusement in the summer... They've cut it down! Devil take it, it's always that way... Oh well, let's go to my place; we'll scrape something together and have a drink..."

"Mister Governor-General," said Alexei. "Look, there's

a lot of sleighs coming down the Neva... Wouldn't that be the tsar?"

Alexander Danilovich took one look, said "It's him!" and wasted no more time. The Brovkin brothers hurried off at once in various directions bearing instructions; he himself rushed home, summoning the servants in a loud voice. Within a short time, he was again standing on the bank, on a wooden landing-stage, wearing only his Preobrazhensky uniform with its enormous gold-braided cuffs, a silk sash across his shoulder, and a sword, the one with which the year before last he had boarded a Swedish frigate in the Neva estuary.

A long, strung-out sleigh-train was approaching over the bulging ice of the Neva, which it was frightening merely to contemplate. Fifty dragoons spurred their weary mounts and galloped to the bank, keeping clear of a molten patch in the ice. A heavy leather coach on runners turned to follow them through water several inches deep and stopped at the landing-stage. As soon as a long leg in thigh-boot emerged from behind the bear rugs inside the carriage, the two cannons were fired at the Governor-General's house. After the boot came two sheepskin coat-sleeves, from which emerged fingers with strong nails that gripped the leather apron of the carriage, and from there a low voice said:

"Danilych, help me, blast it, I can hardly get out..."

Menshikov sprang from the landing-stage up to his knees in water and helped Peter to alight. Meanwhile, all the bastions of the Peter-and-Paul Fortress belched flames and were wreathed in smoke, and thunder rolled along the Neva. The standard climbed up the mast outside the tsar's cottage.

Peter stepped out on to the boards, stretched, stood erect, tipped his fur bonnet on to the back of his head and, first of all, looked at Menshikov's long, happily flushed face, and at his dancing eyebrows. He gripped him by the cheeks:

"Greetings, kamrad... You didn't come to visit me and I was expecting you... So, you see, I've come to you... Help me off with this sheepskin coat. It's a terrible road, we nearly sank below Schlusselburg. I'm all shaken up by pot-holes and I've got pins and needles in my leg..."

Peter stayed behind in a short coat trimmed with hareskin; turning his round, clean-shaven face with the bristling

moustaches into the wind, he stared at the whirling spring clouds, at the swift shadows fleeting over the puddles and patches of melting ice, and, through the gaps in the clouds, at the fierce, relentless sun beyond Vassilievsky Island. His nostrils flared and dimples appeared at the sides of his small mouth.

"Paradise!" he said. "By God, Danilych, paradise, heaven on earth... It smells of the sea..."

Men were running across the square, splashing through the puddles. Behind them, soldiers of the Semyonovsky and Preobrazhensky regiments in tight coats and white gaiters clumped along and formed up in line, holding their rifles with fixed bayonets before them.

## 3

"...He said at Cardinal Radzijewski's table in Warsaw: 'I shan't let a single tub into the Neva, the Muscovites need not even hope to stay by the sea. When I've finished with Augustus, I'll chew Petersburg up and spit it out like a cherry-stone...'"

"He's a fool, the whoreson dog!" said Menshikov, who was sitting naked on a bench and soaping his head. "Just let me get at him on the battlefield and I'll give that hero a cherry-stone or two..."

"And he said more: 'I shall not let a single English ship through to Arkhangelsk; let the goods of the Moscow merchants rot in the warehouses."

"So our goods aren't rotting, myn Herz, eh?"

"Thirty-two English ships in convoy, with four frigates for protection with God's aid and without losses, have put in at Arkhangelsk bringing iron, steel, gun metal, casks of tobacco, and also many goods we don't need but had to buy."

"Never mind, myn Herz, we shan't stay the losers... They must get some pleasure out of it too — they sailed with valour... Want some kvass thrown on? Nartov!" shouted Menshikov, slapping in his bare feet over the wet, new-laid floorboards to the low door into the changing-room. "What are

you up to in there? Gassed yourself with the stove fumes, Nartov? Fill a dipper with kvass and throw it in properly..."

Peter was lying on the shelf immediately under the ceiling, his thin knees drawn up, fanning himself with the switch. Nartov, the batman, had already steamed him twice and doused him with ice-cold water. Peter was now relaxing. He had gone to the bathhouse directly on arrival so that he could enjoy his supper with a real appetite. The bathhouse was a light one, built of lime-wood. Peter did not want to leave, although for two hours the guests had been languishing in the Governor-General's dining-room waiting for the tsar's arrival and a meal.

Nartov opened the little bronze furnace door, jumped to one side and splashed a dipperful of kvass onto the redhot stones. A strong, soft fragrance flew out, there was a blast of heat and an aroma of rye bread. Peter coughed, flicking his chest with the leaves of the birch switch.

"Myn Herz, Gavrila Brovkin's been telling how they don't know anything about steam-baths in Paris, let alone with kvass. They're puny folk."

"They understand something else there that it wouldn't hurt us to know too," said Peter. "Our merchants are barbarians pure and simple. What a struggle I had with them in Arkhangelsk! The first thing the fellow wants to do is sell rotten goods. For three years he'll lie, swear by God Almighty, complain, and go on trying to palm off the rotten goods until the fresh stuff starts rotting too. Look at all that fish in the North Dvina; shove your oar into the water and it'll stand up straight, the shoals of herring are so crowded in there. Yet you can't walk past the warehouses because of the stink. I had a word with them in the Chamber of Merchants. I was friendly at first, but in the end I had to lose my temper..."

Alexander Danilovich sighed tragically:

"That's how it is with us, myn Herz. Ignorance. Give those merchants any leeway, the devils, and they'll bring the whole state to rack and ruin. Nartov, let's have some cold beer..."

Lowering his long legs, Peter sat up on the shelf and bowed his head, the sweat streaming from his curly dark hair.

"Good," he said. "Very good. That's how it is, my dear kamrad... Without Petersburg we'd be a body without a soul."

# 4

On the borderland of Russia, on a bay wrested back from the enemy, the new men were sitting at Menshikov's table: those "whose station was to be reckoned by usefulness", as ordered by tsar Peter, and who by ability alone had risen from the chimneyless hut, had exchanged bast shoes for square-toed leather shoes with buckles, and instead of bitter thoughts: "Why do you condemn me, O Lord, to howl with hunger and cold?" had begun, as now, their plates piled high with food in front of them, to think and talk, whether they liked it or not, about affairs of state. Here were the Brovkin brothers, Fedosei Sklyaev and Gavrila Avdeyevich Menshikov — famous shipwrights who had accompanied Peter from Voronezh to the Svir; the Novgorod contractor Yermolai Negomorsky, with eyes that shone like those of a cat in the night; Terenti Buda, an anchor smith, and Yefrem Tarakanov, a fine wood-carver and gilder.

Not all at the table were of humble birth; on Peter's left sat Roman Bruce, a red-haired Scot of royal lineage with a bony face and fine lips kept fiercely compressed; he was a mathematician and a bookworm, like his brother Jacob. The brothers had been born in Moscow, in the German quarter, had been with Peter since boyhood, and looked on his cause as their own. There was Colonel of the Guards Prince Mikhail Mikhailovich Golitsyn, hawk-eyed, languid, supercilious with moustache shaved to a pencil-thin line under the sensitive nose; he had distinguished himself by the storming and capture of Schlusselburg; like all the rest, he was drinking heavily, going white in the face and jingling his spur under the table. There was Cornelis Cruys, Rear-Admiral of the awaited Baltic Fleet, a sea rover with deep, stern wrinkles on his weathered face and a watery-eyed stare as strange as the chill ocean deeps. There was Major-General Chambers, sturdy, strong-faced, hook-nosed, another rover, and one of those who, believing in the tsar Peter's good fortune, had given him all he owned his sword, his courage and his honour as a soldier. There was the quiet Gavrila Ivanovich Golovkin, the tsar's chamberlain,

a man with a shrewd and cunning mind and Menshikov's assistant in the building of the city and the fortress.

The guests were all talking loudly at once; occasionally, one would start shouting in order to catch the tsar's attention. There was a smell of damp plaster in the high-ceilinged room; three-branched candelabra with bronze reflectors burned on the walls, many more candles pushed into empty flagons flickered over the coloured table-cloth amid the pewter and earthenware dishes, laden with an abundance of everything with which the Governor-General could regale his guests; hams, tongues, smoked sausages, geese, hares, sauerkraut, radish, salt gherkins, all brought as a gift to Menshikov by the contractor Negomorsky.

The quarrelling and shouting were largely over the issue of food and fodder — who had wangled most away from whom. Victuals came here from the Main Provender Commission in Novgorod; in summer, by cargo boats along the Volkhov and over Lake Ladoga; in winter, over newly-built road through the dense forests to the warehouses in Schlusselburg, where they enjoyed the protection of its mighty fortress walls. There, in sheds, carefully selected officials presided as commissaries and, on demand, issued goods to Petersburg for the army stationed in the dugouts on the Vyborg side, for various Commissions engaged on building works, and for the municipal peasant builders arriving in three shifts — April to September — navvies, woodcutters, carpenters, masons, roof-makers. The road from Novgorod was hard going, the land thereabouts had been ravaged by war, there was nothing available in the vicinity, there was a constant shortage of supplies, and Bruce, Chambers, Cruys and others of less consequence had each been grabbing what he could for himself. Now, at table, they were flaring up and squaring accounts.

Peter was served the hot course – chicken noodle soup. Soldiers sent out in various directions had managed to find a cock on a farm on the banks of the Fontanka, obtaining it from a local fisherman who skinned them of five altyns for the ancient bird. After eating, Peter laid his long arms and big hands on the table; the veins in them were swollen after his bath. He spoke little and listened intently; his eyes bulging, stern, terrifying. When filling his pipe or for some other rea-

son, he lowered his eyes, his round-cheeked face with its snub nose and small, smiling mouth seemed benevolent; you could go boldly up and clink glasses with him: "Your health, Mister Bombardier!" According to who it was, he would not answer or would incline his head with a toss of his dark, fine, curly hair. "In Bacchus' name!" he would say in a bass voice, and he would drink as he had been taught in Holland by mariners, into his open mouth and straight down his throat, his lips not touching the glass.

Peter was pleased today because Menshikov had put up such a fine house to spite the Swedes, with Neptune and a mermaid on the roof, and because all his own people were sitting at the table, quarrelling and flaring up about a vital cause, heedless of how dangerous it might be or whether it would succeed; and it particularly gladdened his heart that here, long-term plans and difficult beginnings had come together — everything that for remembrance's sake he had been illegibly entering in the fat notebook lying in his pocket with a chewed pencil stub, a pipe and a tobacco-pouch — all of it had come true; the flag on the fortress bastion was flapping in the wind, piles were sticking up out the swampy banks, and everywhere people were going about preoccupied with their work and their worries, and a city was already there, not a great one yet, but, recognisably, a city.

Chewing the amber mouthpiece of his pipe, Peter was only half listening to what the irate Bruce was muttering to him about rotten hay and what the drunken Chambers was shouting as he tried to clink glasses with Peter. This was the desired and truly beloved place. It was fine, of course, on the Sea of Azov, colourless, warm, achieved at the cost of great efforts, and it was fine on the While Sea, rocking its chill waves under the hovering mist; but they could not compare with the Baltic, that wide road to wondrous cities and to rich countries. The heart beat here in a special way, thoughts spread their wings and one's strength was redoubled.

Menshikov kept glancing at the way myn Herz's nostrils began to distend and the smoke began to billow ever more densely from his pipe.

"That will do, you people!" he shouted suddenly at the guests. "You've settled it, oats, wheat, oats, wheat!" Menshi-

kov winked hugely at a sweetly smiling, rather fat little man in a short flared coat. "Felten, serve the Rhenish wine, you know the one..." He turned to Peter expectantly. As always, Menshikov had read in Peter's darkening eyes that the moment was due when everything that had long been fermenting, swirling, agonising, sorting itself out in his mind, was distinctly and unshakeably becoming will. And at this point there could be no quarrelling with him or thwarting his purpose.

Silence fell at the table, save for the wine gurgling as it was poured from the pot-bellied bottle into the glasses. Without taking his hands off the table, Peter leaned back in his gilded chair.

"King Charles is courageous, but not clever, he's merely arrogant," he began slowly, drawling his words Moscow fashion. "In seventeen hundred, he missed his luck. Had it been with him, we would not be drinking Rhenish wine here now. The rout at Narva was greatly to our advantage. Iron is strengthened by being beaten, and a man matures. We have learned much of which we never even dreamed. Our generals, with Boris Petrovich Sheremetev and Anikita Ivanovich Repnin have shown the whole world that the Swedes are not superhuman and that they can be beaten in the open field and on fortress walls. You, children of my heart, obtained and built this sacred place. The god Neptune, guardian of the ocean deeps, reclines on the roof of this magnate here, waiting for the ships on which we have been working so hard that we have callouses on our hands. Does it make sense for us, having consolidated ourselves in Petersburg, eternally to fight off the Swedes on the River Sestra and on Kotlin Island too? To wait until Charles, weary of warring with his dreams and phantoms alone, brings all his troops against us from Europe? In that event, even Neptune cannot save us. Our heart is here, and we must meet Charles on the far outskirts, in heavy fortresses. We must pluck up courage and advance first. As soon as the ice has melted, we must proceed to Kexholm and take it from the Swedes, so that Lake Ladoga, as in olden times, shall again be ours and our fleet may sail from the north without fear. We must go beyond the River Narova and take Narva, this time without being routed. Prepare for the campaign at once, kamrads. Delay will mean death".

## 5

Through the tobacco smoke, though the lattice window, Peter saw that the crescent moon, which had been racing through the ragged clouds, had stopped and was hanging motionless in the sky.

"Don't get up, Danilych, don't get up, there's no need to see me out, I'm just going for a breath of fresh air. I'll be back soon."

He left the table and went out on to the porch that had the Neptune and the busty girl with the gold pot on the roof. The sharply fragrant, soft wind blew into his nostrils. Peter thrust his pipe into his pocket. A hatless man in a peasant's coat and bast shoes detached himself from the wall of the house behind a column, went down on his knees and held a sheet of paper over his head.

"What do you want?" demanded Peter. "Who are you? Stand up! Don't you know the regulations?"

"Great Sovereign," said the man in a quiet, penetrating voice. "Andrei Golikov, a poor wretch, defenceless and in debt, pays his respects... I am perishing, Sire, have pity..."

Peter angrily sniffed, angrily took the sheet of paper and once again ordered the man to stand up:

"Runaway from work? Sick? Are they giving you pine-cone vodka, as I ordered?"

"I am well, Sire; I am not running away from work, I cart stone and I dig the earth and I saw logs... Sire, a wondrous force in me is going to waste... I am an artist of the Golikov family, the icon painters from Palekh. I can do portraits that are like living human faces and do not age or die, and the spirit lives in them for all eternity... I can paint the waves of the sea, and ships on them under sail and in the cannon smoke, and all with much art..."

Peter snorted again, but not angrily this time:

"You can paint ships? How am I to know you're not lying?"

"I could run over there, bring and show you — but no — I've drawn pictures on the wall, on the plaster — with char-

coal, though, not with paints; there aren't any paints or brushes to be had. I dream of them at night... For just a few paints, even though in pots no bigger than a thimble and for a few brushes, I'd render you such service, Sire, I'd go through fire and water..."

For the third time, Peter snorted. "Come on," he said and, raising his face to the moon shining down on the thin ice of the puddles that crunched under his heavy boots, he set off at a fast pace, as always. Andrei Golikov trotted along behind him, glancing at the unusually long shadow of tsar Peter and trying not to tread on it.

They went past the square, turned off under some sparce pine trees, and went as far as the Bolshaya Nevka, where the turf-roofed, low dugouts of the building labourers stood on the bank. At one of them, Golikov, out of his wits with nervousness, bowing and chanting something under his breath, opened the plank door. Peter stooped and went inside. About twenty men were asleep on bunks, their bare feet protruding under sheepskin jackets and bast matting. Stripped to the waist, a man with a big beard was sitting on a low bench near a holder with a burning taper and patching his blouse.

He showed no surprise on seeing Peter, stuck his needle into his blouse, laid it aside, stood up and slowly bowed, as if to the back face on an icon in church.

"Complaints," said Peter abruptly. "Food bad?"

"Bad, Sire," replied the man simply and frankly.

"Poorly clothed?"

"They gave out clothing in autumn — worn out by winter, as you see."

"Do you fall sick?"

"Many fall sick, Sire. It's a harsh place."

"Does the pharmacy help you?"

"We've heard about the pharmacy, to be sure."

"You don't believe in it, then?"

"How shall I say — we get better of our own accord, like."

"Where are you from? On what draft did you come?"

"I came from the town of Kerensk, on the third, the autumn draft. We're artisans. Here, in the dugout, all of us are free men..."

"Why did you stay on for the winter?"

"I didn't want to go back home for the winter — it'd have meant starving again, as usual. I stayed on hire, on state food. We're carting timber. But look at the kind of bread they give us." The peasant pulled out of his sheepskin coat pocket a piece of black bread, crushed it and crumbled it in his stiff fingers. "Mouldy. Can a pharmacy help with that?"

Andrei Golikov quickly changed the taper in the holder. It became brighter in the low dugout, its walls clay-smeared and whitewashed only in places. One or two men poked their heads out of the bast matting.

"What do you do at home in Kerensk?"

"We're mead-vendors. But they're not drinking much of it these days, there's no money about."

"It's my fault, I've swindled you all? Is that it?"

The bearded one raised and lowered his naked shoulders and rose to his feet. The copper cross on his thin chest sank, and he shook his head with a smile:

"You seek the truth?.. Well, we're not afraid to tell the truth. We're tough... Of course, in the old days, the people had it much easier. There weren't such taxes and duties... But now, it's give money, money and more money... They used to pay hearth tax, by the plough, for the most part by mutual guarantee: folk could come to terms and share out the burden. It was handy. Now you've ordered everybody to pay by the head, you've registered us all. There's commissar, a government official breathing down the neck of every single one of us: Pay up! And the last few years, on top of all that, three shifts have got to come here, to Petersburg, to work for you. Forty thousand people liable for tax. Is that easy? At home, they take from each tenth house a man with an axe, or a chisel, or a spade, or a cross-cut saw. From each of the other nine houses they collect thirteen altyns and two dengi as ration money for him... And the money's got to be found... You go and shout yourself hoarse at the market: 'Hot mead, come and buy!' A fine fellow wants a drink but he's got nothing in his pocket except 'No, thank you'. You took my sons for the dragoons; at home I only have the old lady and four girls, each smaller than the other. Of course, Sire, you can see more clearly what it's all for..."

"It's true that I can see more clearly," said Peter harshly.

"Let's have that bread." He took the mouldy piece, broke it, sniffed it and stuffed it into his pocket. "When the Neva's navigable again, they'll bring new clothes and bast shoes. They'll bring flour and we'll bake the bread on the spot." He was about to go to the door with Golikov forgotten, but Andrei darted up so imploringly and looked at him in such a way that Peter said with a smile:

"Well, icon-painter? Show me..."

Part of the wall between the bunks had been carefully scraped, whitewashed and covered with matting. Golikov carefully drew back the matting, fetched the heavy holder, lit another taper and, holding it in a shaky hand, announced in a high-pitched voice:

"The most truly glorious naval victory in the mouth of the Neva on the fifth day of May in the year seventeen hundred and three: the fourteen-gun enemy schooner *Astrel* and the ten-gun Admiral's boat *Gedan* surrendering to Mister Bombardier Peter Alexeyevich and Lieutenant Menshikov."

Two Swedish ships riding the curly, foaming waves, wreathed in gunsmoke and surrounded by boats from which they were being boarded by Russian soldiers, had been skilfully drawn in fine charcoal on the plaster wall. Over the ships, two arms emerged from a cloud holding a long pennant inscribed with words just recited by Golikov. Peter squatted down on his haunches. "Well, I never!" he said. Everything was correct, the ships' rigging, the billowing sails and the flags. He had even depicted Menshikov with pistol and sword climbing the gangway, and he recognised himself, too well dressed, but, truly, he had been standing at the time directly under the enemy's prow in the bows of a boat, shouting and hurling grenades.

"Well I never! How did you come to learn about this victory?"

"I was one of the rowers in your boat..."

Peter touched the drawing with his finger. It was indeed charcoal. (Golikov groaned softly behind him.)

"I'm going to send you to Holland to study, perhaps. You won't take to drink, will you? I know you, you devils..."

...Peter returned to the Governor-General's palace and sat down again on the gilded chair. The candles were burning

down. The guests had drunk a great deal. At the other end of the table, the shipwrights, their heads bowed, were singing a mournful ditty. Only Menshikov was clear-headed. He at once noticed that the corner of myn Herz's mouth was twitching, and quickly tried to guess what the reason might be.

"Here, eat that with your vodka!" Peter suddenly shouted at him, pulling the piece of mouldy bread out of his pocket. "Have a bite of that, Mister Governor-General!"

"Myn Herz, that is not my fault, Golovkin's in charge of bread issues, he's the one that should choke on that... Oh, the thief, oh, the scoundrel!"

"Eat!" Peter's eyes were staring insanely. "You're feeding the men on muck, so eat it yourself, Neptune! You're responsible for everything here! For each and every human soul..."

Menshikov cast a languishing, remorseful glance at myn Herz, chewing the crust of bread, swallowing with an effort, as if choking back tears.

## 6

Peter went to sleep in his own cottage because the rooms in the Governor-General's palace were lofty, while he preferred his ceiling low and his rooms cosy. When staying in Zaandam, he had slept in Gerrit Kist the blacksmith's cupboard, where he couldn't stretch his legs out properly, and yet he had liked it.

The batman Nartov had the stove burning hot, and on the table in front of the long window, to see through which you had to bend down, he had laid out books, notebooks, paper and writing appurtenances, drawing and medical instruments and joiner's tools in stout leather bags, spy-glasses, compasses, and tobacco pipes. The room had been lined with sailcloth. In the corner stood a brass lantern half the height of a man, brought for the beacon mast of the Peter-and-Paul Fortress. There were a few anchors for boats and dinghies, and some tarred ropes and pulleys.

After his bath and a good supper, Peter, his cotton nightcap pulled over his head, should have fallen fast asleep on the

wooden bed with its dyed linen canopy on four spiral posts; but he could not sleep. The wind was booming boisterously round the roof, howling in the chimney and shaking the window shutter. On the floor, on a felt rug, the round lantern with the perforated casing stood beside him, and his dear friend Sasha Menshikov sat telling him of King Augustus' money troubles, about which regular reports were coming in by letter or messenger from the ambassador at his court, Prince Grigory Fyodorovich Dolgoruky.

King Augustus had finally been ruined by his mistresses and had no money left. In Saxony, his subjects had handed over all they could; it was said that you couldn't borrow a hundred thalers there if you tried. The Poles had refused money at a Sejm in Sandomir. Augustus had sold his castle at half its value to the King of Prussia and once again the devil, or perhaps King Charles, had slipped him a certain person, the most beautiful woman in Europe, Countess Aurora Konigsmark, and he was squandering that money on fireworks and balls in her honour. When, however, the Countess became aware that his pockets were finally empty, she paid him a gracious compliment and left him, taking with her a carriage full of velvets, silks and silver plate. He now didn't even have enough to eat. He called on Prince Grigory Dolgoruky, woke him up, collapsed into an armchair and actually burst into tears: "My Saxon troops," he said, "have been eating nothing but dried bread for over a week now, the Polish troops haven't been getting their pay and have started looting... The Poles have gone utterly crazy; such drunkenness and internecine strife have never been known before, even in Poland. The aristocracy and the gentry are storming one another's towns and castles, burning villages down and committing more atrocities than the Tatars. They have no pity for the Rzecz Pospolita... Oh, I am a wretched king! Oh, it were better for me to fall on my own sword!"

"Prince Dolgoruky, a kind-hearted man, listened to every word, wept over such misfortune, and gave him, without an IOU, ten thousand gold efimki out of his own funds. The king promptly rolled off home, where he had a new mistress on the loose, the Countess Kozelska, and off he went banqueting with her."

Menshikov moved the iron lantern closer, took out a letter,

held it close to the shining holes and read hesitantly, since he was still not altogether literate:

"Myn Herz, here, for instance, is what Prince Grigory Fyodorovich reports from Sandomir: 'The Polish army fights well in the taverns over a jar, but it is not easy to get it to come out against the enemy in the field... King Augustus's Saxon army is excellent, but has no heart to fight the Swedes. Half of Poland has been utterly devastated by the Swedes, who have spared neither Catholic churches nor graves. But the Polish aristocracy take no notice; each thinks only of himself. I do not know how such a state can survive! It will bring us no help save that, perhaps, of distracting the enemy...'"

"I am not counting on more help," said Peter. "I have written to Dolgoruky that since that's the way he wants it, let him get his ten thousand efimki back off the king himself; I am not liable in the matter... You could build a frigate with that kind of money." He yawned. "Daughters of Eve! What are they doing to us all?" and snapped his teeth together. "One came to me in Amsterdam, from a tavern. She was a liar and she was a sharp one, but she was all right... Only she wasn't cheap..."

"Myn Herz, can there be any comparison between you and King Augustus on that score? Aurora Konigsmark alone cost him half a million. But the tavern wench – I remember it well – you gave her somewhere between three hundred and five hundred rubles, no more..."

"Five hundred rubles? As much as that? Ai-ai-ai!.. I ought to have been thrashed! Augustus cuts no ice with us, we're the government, we don't have any money of our own. You be careful, Sasha, with that 'no more' of yours. Go a little easier on state funds." He was silent for a moment. "You've got a man here, he's carrying timber... And God has given him such talent..."

"You mean Andrei Golikov?"

"He's wasted here, he's not doing his rightful job... He must be sent to Moscow... Let him do a portrait of a certain person." Peter stole a glance at Menshikov. Sasha seemed to be smirking. "Listen, I'll get up in a minute and lay a stick across your back, mate. That'll teach you to laugh. I'm missing Katerina, that's all there is to it... If I close my eyes, I can

see her as if she was in front of me. If I open them, I can sense her with my nostrils... I forgive her everything, all those men she'd had, including you... Daughter of Eve — there's no more to be said..."

Peter suddenly fell silent and turned to the long window, now grey in the light of dawn. Menshikov rose lightly from the mat. Outside, in the noise of the wind, another noise was beginning, that of the ice cracking, breaking, piling up.

"The Neva's on the move, myn Herz!.."

Peter pulled his legs out from under the bearskin blanket.

"Aha! There'll be no sleep for us now!"

# *Chapter Three*

## 1

The campaign against Kexholm was called off as soon as it had begun. The advance infantry regiments and military baggage trains did not even get halfway to Schlusselburg, the cavalry had only just crossed the little River Okhta, the heavy boats carrying men of the Preobrazhensky and Semyonovsky regiments had only rowed five versts up the Neva, when a horseman galloped out of a fir copse on the bank, frantically waving his hat. Peter, who was following the infantry in a sailing boat, heard the man shouting: "Hey, boatmen, where's the tsar? I bear a letter for him!" Peter changed tack and glided up to the bank. The horseman jumped down, ran up to the water's edge, clapped two fingers to the brim of his velvet officer's hat, thrusting forward his ruddy face with an apprehensive look in his eyes, and said hoarsely:

"From Squire Pyotr Matveyevich Apraksin, Mister Bombardier."

From behind his mud-splashed scarlet cuff he drew a letter sewn up with thread and sealed with wax, handed it over and stepped back. It was Ensign Pavel Yaguzhinsky.

Peter bit through the thread, glanced over the letter, reread it carefully, and knitted his brows. Scowling, he looked across at the heavily laden boats gliding over the sunlit ripples, their oars moving rhythmically up and down.

"Give your horse to the sailor, get in the boat," he said to Yaguzhinsky, then suddenly shouted: "Go into the water, you can see we're in the shallows. Shove the boat out and jump in!"

He was silent all the way to the Petersburg side, which they gained by tacking into the wind. He skilfully guided the boat up to the landing-stage, two sailors hastily lowered the big sail, rushed forward, their shoes clumping, into the bows of the boat where the flapping canvas had caught on the jib-boom.

Peter watched silently, his eyes glittering, until sails and rigging had been stowed away according to regulations. Only then did he step off towards his cottage. He was immediately joined by Menshikov, Golovkin, Bruce and Rear-Admiral Cruys, all very much alarmed. Peter partly opened the window, letting the breeze into the stuffy little room, sat down at table and read them the letter from Pyotr Matveyevich Apraksin, commander of the garrison in Jamburg Fortress, twenty versts north of Narva:

"As you ordered, Sire, I left Jamburg at the beginning of spring with three infantry regiments and five companies of cavalry for the Narova estuary, and halted there at the place where a stream, the Rosson, flows in. Very soon, five Swedish ships arrived and the pennants of other were visible far out at sea. With a light wind blowing, two battleships put into the estuary and began bombarding our baggage train. Thank God, we gave as good as we got with our field guns; one of the Swedish ships was damaged by cannon shot and the enemy was driven out of the Narova estuary.

"Since this battle, the Swedes have been lying off the coast at anchor for over a week: there are five men-of-war and eleven cargo schooners which are giving me much anxiety. I am continually sending out patrols and not allowing the Swedes to unload anything on the dry bank. I am also sending dragoons along the Revel road and to Narva itself, and I am destroying the enemy patrols. Prisoners state that everything in Narva is in short supply and they are very disturbed that, by your wise command, we have occupied the Narova estuary.

"Our volunteers, stealing up to the very gates of Narva by night, seized an emissary from the governor of Revel bearing a letter in cypher to Horn, the commandant of Narva. This emissary proved to be a most distinguished person, Guards Captain Stael von Holstein, a favourite of Charles. At first, he refused to answer, but when I shouted at him a bit, he told me that Schlippenbach was expected in Narva shortly with a large army and that the Swedes had already sent a convoy there of up to thirty-five vessels carrying grain, malt, herring, smoked fish and salt pork. The convoy is under the

command of Rear-Admiral de Proux, a Frenchman, who has lost his left arm and wears a silver limb instead. He has over two hundred guns on board his ships, and also marine troops.

"I did not know whether to believe Captain Holstein concerning such an important and alarming matter, but today, Sire, early in the morning, the fog over the sea dispersed; we saw the whole horizon crowded with sail, and counted over forty pennants. My forces are insufficient, my cavalry are negligible in number. I have only nine guns, one of which recently blew up in action. I expect nothing but my ultimate doom. Help me, Sire..."

"Well? What have you to say?" asked Peter, when he had finished reading.

Bruce fiercely dug his chin into his black cravat. Cornelis Cruys's weather-beaten face was expressionless; he merely narrowed his eyes, as if he could see those fifty Swedish pennants in the gulf of Narva; Menshikov, always quick to answer, could only be silent this time, frowning.

"I am asking you, gentlemen of the council of war, whether we should consider that King Charles has taken a piece from me in this trial of wits, protecting Kexholm by one quick move against Narva. Or should we continue to be stubborn and march the army to Kexholm, giving up Narva to Schlippenbach?"

The face of Cornelis Cruys quivered; in spite of his rank as admiral, he took a wad of seamen's tobacco boiled with Cayenne pepper and rum and shoved it into his mouth.

"No!" he said.

"No!" said Bruce firmly.

"No!" said Menshikov, slapping his knee.

"We won't have any difficulty in taking Kexholm," said Gavrila Ivanovich Golovkin in a humble voice, "as long as King Charles doesn't take another chess piece from us in the meantime—the Queen, that is."

"Exactly!" said Peter.

And it was obvious, without a single word being spoken, that to allow Schlippenbach's corps into Narva would mean refusing to capture the main fortresses, Narva and Yuriev, without which the approaches to Petersburg would be left

wide open. They must not lose a moment. Within a short time, messengers galloped off down the Schlusselburg road and along the Neva with orders to send the troops and fleet of rowing boats back to Petersburg.

Ensign Pavel Yaguzhinsky, who had not dismounted from his horse for three days, only had time to ask the batman Nartov for a dipperful of the tsar's pepper vodka and a slice of bread and salt before riding back to Pyotr Matveyevich Apraksin with orders for him to commit his woes resolutely to God Almighty and stand firm with his army against the Swedish fleet, even to the last breath. As he dismissed Yaguzhinsky, Peter took him by the hand, drew him closer and kissed him on the forehead.

"Tell him from me that I shall be at Narva in a week with all my troops..."

## 2

King Charles was woken by the exuberant crowing of a cock. He opened his eyes in the half-light of the tent and listened to the bird as it strained its gullet to the uttermost, with an occasional pause for breath. It had been travelling with the baggage train and had been stood in a cage for the night outside the king's tent. Then a horn sounded the long, drawn-out notes of reveille, and the king remembered the misty gorge, the hunting horns, the baying of the hounds and his own eagerness to shed the blood of the beast. Just outside the tent, a dog began yapping; to judge by its voice, it was the sort of creature that ladies take with them in a carriage. Someone shushed it; the dog whimpered pathetically. The king made a mental note: "Must find out where that dog comes from." Nearby, at their tethering posts, the horses stirred restlessly and one of them whinnied frantically. The king made another mental note: "Pity, but Neptune will clearly have to be gelded." Firm, heavy footsteps were heard. The king pricked up his ears so as to hear the commands as the guard was changed. He noted: "It's going to be a fine day." The sounds of voices were becoming clearer.

Sweeter than viols, harps and harpsichords was that busy, brave music of a military camp coming to life.

The king felt excellent after his brief sleep on a campaign bed under a greatcoat that smelt of road dust and horse's sweat. Oh yes, it would be a thousand times even more pleasant to wake up to the sound of a cock crowing when the enemy was encamped on the other side of the field and the smoke of his fires came drifting over in the damp mist. Then it would be out of bed in one bound, boots, and then to horse... Then, at an easy pace, restraining the excitement in your eyes, ride out to your troops, who, mustachioed and stern-faced, are already drawn up in battle array.

Devil take it! After the fatal battle of Klissow, King Augustus, on losing all his guns and standards, had merely retreated. He had now been retreating for a whole year, dodging like a hare over the vast expanses of Poland. O, the coward, the liar, the intriguer, the traitor, the lecher! He was afraid of an open encounter, he was forcing his adversary to cheapen the thunderous glory of the victories at Narva, Riga and Klissow with a futile chase after hungry Saxon fusiliers and drunken Polish hussars. He was compelling his enemy to lie in bed all morning like a courtesan!

King Charles put two fingers to his mouth and whistled. The tent flap was promptly turned back and in came Baron Bjorkenhjelm, the chamberlain, and also his orderly and bodyguard, a man nearly as tall as the tent itself, bringing freshly cleaned boots and a dark green coat with patches in several places where it had been holed by bullets and shell fragments.

King Charles walked out of the tent and held out his hands palms upwards; the orderly carefully began pouring water over them out of a silver ewer. Charles had easily accustomed himself to flying shot, but he dreaded cold water falling on his neck and behind his ears. Throwing his towel to the orderly and without bothering to look into the mirror held up for him by Baron Bjorkenhjelm, he combed his short hair, straightened his coat, which he wore buttoned up to the neck, and glanced at the even rows of tents on the green slope that ran down to the stream. Behind the tents there was the usual bustle at the tethering posts and the gunners were cleaning the brass barrels of their guns with rags. Charles contemptuously noted: "How

much more magnificent are splashes of mud on gun-carriages and brass begrimed with powder!" Below, on the bank of the stream, the soldiers were washing their shirts and hanging them out on low willow branches. On the other side of the stream, storks, looking like professors of divinity, were stepping importantly across the marsh. Further away in the distance rose the stark chimneys of a burned village and beyond it, on a hill, yellow behind the trees, the two peeling towers of a Catholic church.

King Charles was sick to death of this tiresome landscape that he had seen so often. Three years of trailing through this damned country of Poland! Three years which could have given him half the world, from the Vistula to the Urals!

"Will Your Royal Majesty take breakfast?" inquired Baron Bjorkenhjelm, pointing with a well-groomed hand to the open tent flaps. Inside, on an empty powder barrel covered with a snow-white table-cloth, there was bread cut into fine slices on a silver platter, a bowl of boiled carrots, and another containing common soldier's broth. That was all. The king went inside, sat down and spread a napkin over his knees. The baron stood behind him, never ceasing to marvel at the stubborn eccentricity of the king in ruining his health with such meagre fare. Was this, perhaps, necessary for future memoirs? The king was vain... The gilded goblet, the work of the great master Benvenuto Cellini, seized with King Augustus's collection after the battle of Klissow, was filled with stream water that smelt of frogs. World fame was no easy burden, to be sure!

"What's that mangy pup doing in the camp? Has someone arrived?" asked Charles as he ate his carrots.

"Your Majesty, King Augustus's mistress, the Countess Kozelska, came late last night in the hope that you would be so kind as to receive her..."

"Does Count Piper know about this?"

The baron replied in the affirmative. King Charles finished his lonely breakfast, valiantly drank some water from the goblet, crumpled up his napkin and went out of the tent, cramming on the back of his head a small tricorne that was entirely innocent of gold braid. He asked where the Countess's carriage was and walked towards the nut bushes. There, between

the branches, glittered the gilded cupid and doves of a carriage roof.

The Countess Kozelska was sleeping in the carriage amid a heap of pillows and lace. She was a shapely, still young-looking woman, with a very white skin and fair hair peeping out from under her crumpled nightcap. Awakened by the yelping of the dog, which accidentally got under the king's boot, she opened the big, emerald-green Slavic eyes which King Charles despised in men and hated in women. She saw an earth-coloured, lean face with a contemptuous little boy's mouth and a big fleshy nose pressed to the glass pane of the carriage door. The countess screamed and covered her face with her hands.

"What are you doing here?" demanded the king. "Have your horses harnessed up forthwith and depart with all speed, otherwise you will be taken as a spy for that nauseating and shameless King Augustus... You hear me?"

The countess was Polish and not easily intimidated. In any case, the king had started off on the wrong foot, with discourtesy and threats. The countess took her hands away from her face, half rose on her cushions and smiled at him with disarming sincerity.

"Bonjour, Sire," she said gracefully. "A thousand apologies if I frightened you by screaming... My little dog Bijou is to blame, she gives me so much trouble, getting under people's feet... I let her out of the carriage so that she could find a crust of bread or a chicken bone... Sire, we are both dying of hunger... All yesterday we raced across the wilderness past ruined villages and gutted castles. We could not get a crust of bread; I offered as much as a gold piece for a hen's egg. The good Polish people who crawled out of their dreadful holes could only throw their hands up to the heavens... Sire, I want my breakfast! I want to recompense myself for all the horrors of the journey, I appeal to your magnanimity – allow me to breakfast in your presence."

Speaking all the time in sophisticated French, as if she had spent her whole life in Versailles, the countess managed in the meantime to tidy her hair, rouge her lips, powder and perfume herself and exchange her nightcap for Spanish lace. King

Charles tried vainly to get a word in, but the countess fluttered out of the carriage and took him by the hand.

"O my king, all Europe is mad about you, they no longer talk about Prince Eugene of Savoy or the Duke of Marlborough; both have been forced to yield the crown of glory to the King of Sweden... Forgive my agitation; to see you, the hero of our dreams, for one moment, I am insanely prepared to sacrifice my life... Blame me for what you will, Sire, but at last I hear your voice and I am happy..."

The countess snatched up the pug-nosed, shaggy little dog that was scuttling about at her feet and gripped the king by the elbow so tightly that he would have looked a fool had he attempted to disembarrass himself of the lady.

"I eat vegetables and drink only water," he said primly. "I doubt whether you would find that satisfying after the excesses of King Augustus. Come to my tent."

The whole Swedish camp was more than a little surprised to see its king escorting out of the nut grove a gorgeous beauty in light petticoats and lace fluttering in the morning breeze. The king led her, his nose raised disdainfully, to his tent where they were greeted by Baron Bjorkenhjelm in a massive wig, posing elegantly with a gold lorgnette, and the somewhat coarse, bulky and quietly mocking Count Piper.

As he showed the countess into the tent, King Charles said to him through his teeth:

"I'll not forgive you for this in a hurry," and to Bjorkenhjelm: "For God's sake, find some meat for this person..."

The king sat down on the drum opposite the countess, and she on cushions placed there for her by the baron. The breakfast, laid on the powder barrel, surpassed all expectations; pâté, goose giblets, cold game, and wine in Benvenuto Cellini's goblet. The king mentally noted with compressed lips: "Excellent. Now I know how that rascal Bjorkenhjelm feeds in his tent..." The countess was polishing off her breakfast with relish, throwing the bones to her dog and chattering all the time:

"Ach, Jesus Maria, why this unwonted dissimulation?.. Sire, you read my thoughts... I came here with one hope alone, to save the Rzecz Pospolita... It is the mission of my heart's desire... I wish to return to Poland her carefree spirit, her gaiety, her famous banquets, her splendid hunting parties... Poland is

in ruins, Sire, do not knit your brows, it is all because of King Augustus's irresponsibility. Oh, how remorseful he is now, that he listened to that demon Johann Patkul in an evil hour and became your enemy!.. It is not the evil will of Augustus, believe me, but only Patkul, worthy to be quartered, who began the unhappy war for Livonia. Patkul and Patkul alone created the unnatural alliance of King Augustus with the King of Denmark and that monster, tsar Peter... But are mistakes irreparable? Is not magnanimity the loftiest of virtues?.. O Sire, you are a great man, you are magnanimous..."

The countess's Slavic eyes turned the colour of dewy emeralds. She had not lost her appetite, however. Her thoughts galloped on at such a pace that King Charles had difficulty in keeping up with them, and he would just be on the point of making a tart reply when he would have to react to a new sentence. Bjorkenhjelm suppressed a sigh. Piper, standing with his heavy legs apart in a corner of the tent, a portfolio clutched to his stomach, smiled thinly.

"Peace, and only peace is wanted by King Augustus, who is ready to tear up with relief the shameful treaty with tsar Peter. But most loudly of all, it is we women who beseech you for peace. Three years of war and troubles have been too much for our short lives..."

"Not peace, but capitulation," said King Charles finally, fixing his yellow eyes on the countess. "I do not intend to talk here, in Poland, which does not belong to Augustus any more, but in Saxony, in his capital. You have had enough to eat, Madam? You have nothing else with which to reproach me?"

"Sire, I have gone completely out of my mind," said the countess hurriedly, licking her pink fingers after she had dealt with a beautifully roasted snipe. "I forgot to mention the most important thing, for which I hastened to you at such speed." She opened a little gold box dangling from her bracelet, took out a little tube of paper and unrolled it. "Sire, here is a despatch delivered by pigeon post yesterday morning. Tsar Peter has moved with a large force against Narva. It is my duty to warn you of this dangerous march by the Moscow tyrant..."

Count Piper stopped smiling and went up to the king; to-

gether they began studying the minute writing of the pigeon-post despatch. The countess transferred her beautiful eyes to Bjorkenhjelm, sighed gently and, raising the Benvenuto Cellini goblet, sipped from it...

## 3

The magnificent King Augustus, apparently created by nature for luxurious festivities, for the patronage of the arts, for amorous dalliance with the most beautiful women in Europe and for the self-esteem of the Rzecz Pospolita, which wanted to have a king no worse than in Vienna, Madrid or Versailles, was at the present time in an extremely despondent frame of mind. His court was staying in a half-ruined castle in the wretched little town of Sokal in the Lvov military district, and it was suffering from privations. There was not even a Sunday market there, because the Ukrainian population from the nearest villages had either taken refuge in the forests, waiting for the end of the war, or had gone the devil knew where, most likely of all to the Dnieper country, from where came ominous rumours of unrest in the Ukraine.

In order not to retire to bed on an empty stomach, King Augustus had to accept invitations to supper from the local landowners, utter compliments in French to the ladies of the backwoods and drink the most execrable wine. Any Polish aristocrat, twirling his luxuriant mustachios and proudly glancing towards the far, poorer end of the table, where the flighty local gentry were making a din with their sabres and glasses, could feel more of a king than Augustus himself. He had been dethroned by the Warsaw Sejm. True, half the Polish military districts did not recognise this; notwithstanding, a second King of Poland, Stanislaw Leszczynsky, was sitting in Augustus's palace in Warsaw, writing offensive decrees and presenting the ex-king's brocade coats and Parisian stockings to his own servants. The entire east, the right bank of the Dnieper from Vinnitsa to Podolia, was ablaze with a peasant uprising no less bloody than under Bogdan Khmelnitsky. And, closing the circle somewhere not

so far away between Lvov and Yaroslav, was King Charles with an army of thirty-five thousand picked troops cutting off Augustus's retreat to his native Saxony.

Augustus was losing self-confidence owing to his craven terror of King Charles, that ferocious little boy in the dusty coat and the faded boots, with the face of a eunuch and the eyes of a tiger. Charles could neither be bought nor seduced. He wanted nothing of life but the thunder and smoke of guns, the clash of crossed swords, the screams of wounded soldiers and the spectacle of a trampled field smelling of fire and blood, with his hollow-backed horse stepping warily over the corpses. The only book that Charles kept under his thin pillow was the *Commentaries* of Julius Caesar. He loved war with the passion of a medieval Norman. He would rather have been hit on the head by a twenty-pound bomb than sign a peace, even one highly advantageous to his kingdom.

King Augustus had been waiting all that day for the return of the countess. He had no hope that, for all her feminine cunning, she might incline Charles towards a peace. But the tidings delivered from Livonia by pigeon post on tsar Peter's march were so important and ominous, that Charles could not rely on General Schlippenbach's corps alone and debate whether or not to continue the senseless pursuit of Augustus or turn his troops against the Baltic countries, towards which everyone was firmly pushing him for an engagement with tsar Peter — the Emperor of Austria, mortally afraid that Charles would form an alliance with the King of France and move his troops on Vienna; and the King of France, who feared that the Viennese diplomats might win Charles over to the emperor's side and offer him a military pleasure-trip to the borders of France; and the King of Prussia, who definitely feared everybody, especially the deranged Charles, who for two pins would invade Brandenburg Prussia, seize Konigsberg and cut him off so that he could not move an inch.

Then Johann Patkul arrived, bitter as the devil, looking even fatter in a badly made green Russian general's uniform with scarlet cuffs. His voice was husky, his high forehead, too narrow for his ample and haughty face, was furrowed with wrinkles, and he complained in atrocious French of tsar

Peter's cowardice in avoiding a decisive engagement with King Charles.

"The tsar has two big armies. He ought to invade Poland, join forces with you and smash Charles, whatever sacrifices it might entail," said Patkul, his purple jowls quivering. "That would be a daring and clever move. The tsar is greedy, like all Russians. They've let him through to the Gulf of Finland, where he is building his pathetic little town with boyish haste. He has gained Ingermanland and two fine fortresses, Jam and Koporye; he should be content and do his duty before Europe, but now Narva and Yuriev are making his mouth water ... and now he has his beady eyes on Revel. After that, he will want Livonia and Riga! The tsar must be kept within bounds. But it is useless to discuss this with his ministers... They are rough-hewn muzhiks in wigs of dyed tow. Europe to them is as a clean bed to a pig... I express myself too sharply and bluntly, Your Majesty, but I want one thing only, that my Livonia should be returned under the sceptre of Your Royal Majesty... And yet everywhere, in Vienna, in Berlin and here, with you, I meet with total indifference... I am confused; who, in the end, is the greater enemy for Livonia: King Charles, who personally threatens to have me quartered, or tsar Peter, who has put such flattering trust in me, even to making me a lieutenant-general? Yes, I have donned a Russian uniform and I shall play this game honourably to the end. But my feelings are still my feelings... The pain of my heart is aggravated by Your Majesty's torpor and inaction. Raise your voice, demand troops of the tsar, insist on a decisive engagement with Charles."

At any other time, King Augustus would simply have booted the impertinent fellow out of the room. This time he had to remain silent, turning his snuff-box over and over in his hands. Patkul finally went away. King Augustus called the duty officer, Captain Tarnowski of the Cavalry, and said that he would give a hundred chervontsy (which he did not possess) to the first to report the return of Countess Kozelska. Candles were brought in a three-branched candelabrum, now green with corrosion and doubtless looted from somewhere. The king went up to the mirror and pensively began

contemplating his somewhat drawn face. He could never tire of it, because he vividly imagined how the ladies must surely love that somewhat sensual mouth, as clean cut as on an ancient statue, the strong teeth, the big patrician nose and the merry twinkle in the handsome eyes, those lanterns of the soul. The king lifted his wig — yes, grey hair! There were fine wrinkles running from his eye to his temple... Damn Charles!

"Permit me to remind Your Majesty," said the captain from the doorway, "that Pan Sobeszczanski has sent a gentleman for the third time to say that the Pan and his wife have not taken their places at table, since they are waiting for Your Majesty... They have some dishes that could spoil..."

The king took a powder-box from the pocket of his silk waistcoat that smelt strongly of musk, passed a swansdown puff over his face, brushed the powder and grains of snuff off the lace on his chest and asked casually:

"What have they that's so special for supper?"

"I asked the gentleman, and he says that they have been slaughtering suckling pigs in the Pan's yard; they have been killing poultry and stuffing sausages since yesterday. Knowing Your Majesty's exquisite taste, the Pani herself has prepared the roast leeches gorged on goose blood..."

"Delightful... Give me my sword, I am leaving..."

Pan Sobeszczanski's estate was not far from the city. A thundercloud had spread over the fading strip of sunset sky and there was a strong aroma of road dust and of imminent rain when Augustus, in a leather coach, much battered after many misfortunes, drove up to the estate. His arrival was announced by the noble who galloped on ahead of him. Torch-bearers came running up under the dark boughs of the centuries-old avenue to meet the coach which skirted a steep hill and, to the barking of dogs, drew up outside a long, single-storeyed house with a reed roof. Here, too, the owner's barefooted servants in ragged shirts and with wildly dishevelled hair were rushing about with torches. The porch was thronged with a crowd of some fifty of the local gentry who lived off Pan Sobeszczanski — white-haired veterans of their master's brawls, with appalling sabre scars on

their faces; fat-bellied gluttons, proud of their mustachios, waxed stiff as thorns and at least six inches long; youths in shabby second-hand coats who were nonetheless dashing for all that. All stood with one hand on the hip, the other on the sabre hilt in token of their independence as gentry. When King Augustus, his large frame stooping, alighted from the carriage, they all shouted a welcome to him in Latin. The elderly Pan Sobeszczanski came down from the porch, his arms wide open, ready at the moment, with unstinting Polish hospitality, to give his guest everything that he might ask for: hounds, horses from his stables, all his servants, if the king needed them, and even his own cornflower-blue fur-trimmed coat. He might, however, have refused the young Pani Anna Sobeszczanska... She was standing behind her husband, very pretty, white-skinned, with a tip-tilted nose and astonished eyes; she was wearing a Spanish hat with a high crown and a plume. King Augustus's melancholy lifted as if by magic.

With a low bow, he took Pani Anna by her fingertips and, raising her hand a little way, as if dancing the Polonaise, escorted her into the dining-room. After them came her husband, his eyes moist with emotion, and after him a cleric, a barefooted monk with a blue shaven scalp who wore a cord round his waist and smelt of goat. The gentry came last, in order of rank.

The table, with hay spread under the table-cloth and flowers scattered on top, produced cries of rapture. One lanky nobleman wearing a fur jacket over his bare skin even clutched his head, moaned, and swayed from side to side, thereby evoking laughter all round. The silver, pewter and painted dishes were piled high with sausages, roast game, veal, ham, smoked poultry and fish, tongues, salted or marinated delicacies, jams, pastries, bread rings, buns and scones; there were Ukrainian green glass bears filled with vodka, casks of Hungarian wine, pitchers of beer... Candles burned and, in addition, there were smoking torches outside shining into the room; these were held by the household serfs as they stared through the murky panes at the marvellous banquet their master was throwing. King Augustus hoped that his presence would compel the host to eschew the usual

wining of the guests so that not one of them could leave on his feet. Pan Sobeszczanski, however, held firmly to the ancient Polish tradition. He rose to his feet, stroking his white mustachios with his hand and, loudly pronouncing the name, drank a goblet of Hungarian wine to each guest at the table, beginning with the king and ending with the last man at the far end, the spindly nobleman who, as it transpired, was not wearing boots. All at table would rise with a shout of "Vivat!" The host would hold out the full goblet to the guest, who drank in reply to the toast of his host and hostess. When the health of all had been drunk, Pan Sobeszczanski again went round the circle, first drinking to the Rzecz Pospolita, then to the most gracious King Augustus of Poland, "the only one to whom we shall devote our sabres and our blood"... "Vivat! Down with Stanislaw Leszczynski!" shouted the gentry in a frenzy. Then there was a flowery toast to the inviolable freedom of the Polish gentry. At this point, all reason deserted their overheated minds. The guests drew their sabres, the table rocked and candles fell over. A burly, one-eyed man shouted: "Thus shall our foes perish, the schismatics and the Muscovites" and with great bravado hewed to pieces an enormous dish of sausage. On Augustus's left hand, on the heart side, sat Pani Sobeszczanska with a rosy flush on her face. She had skilfully managed to question the king about the diverting customs of Versailles and about his adventures there, laughing very gently, touching him now with her elbow, now with her shoulder while watching the guests, especially the bottom end, where an occasional gentleman, stupefied by drink, was cramming smoked tongue or halves of goose into the pocket of his baggy canvas breeches. With quick, stinging glances, she would summon the servants and give them orders.

The king had made several attempts to put his arm round his hostess's delicate waist, but each time Pan Sobeszczanski offered him a full goblet for a toast: "For Your Most Gracious Majesty." Augustus kept trying not to drink up, or to empty the wine out unnoticed under the table, but it was all to no avail; the goblet was promptly refilled by a servant standing behind his chair or by another who was sitting under the table with a bottle. Finally, the dear guest was

served the famous dish of roast leeches, the hostess placing a full plate in front of him with her own hands.

"Truly, I feel ashamed when you praise such rustic fare," she said in a simple little voice, while he read something quite different in her eyes. "It is not difficult to prepare, so long as the goose is young and not particularly fat... When the leeches are gorged with blood, they are put into the oven with the goose; they fall off the bird's breast and are put on a frying pan..."

"Poor goose," said the king, picking up a leech between two fingers and crunching it between his teeth. "The lengths to which beautiful women will go to enjoy a delicacy!"

Pani Anna laughed, and the plume on her little hat, with its high crown cocked over on one side, trembled saucily. The king could see that things were going in his favour. He was only waiting for the dancing to begin so that he could speak to her confidentially. At that moment, a sweating, frightened man in a torn, dust-blackened jacket, thrust aside the drunken gentry in the doorway and burst into the room.

"My lord, my lord, disaster!" he shouted, throwing himself on his knees in front of the host's chair. "You sent me to the monastery for a cask of old mead... I got it as ordered... But the devil took me back by the outskirts, along the highway. I lost everything: the cask of mead and the horse, and my sabre, and my hat... I barely escaped with my life... They robbed me! There's a great army marching on Sokal."

King Augustus frowned. Pani Anna dug her fingernails into his arm. What army could be entering Sokal if not King Charles in hot pursuit? The gentry cried out in wild voices: "The Swedes! Help!" Pan Sobeszczanski smote the table with his fist so hard that the goblets danced:

"Silence, sirs, your attention! Anyone who does not get the wine fumes out of his head this instant is to be stretched out on the carpet and be given fifty lashes... Listen to me, you sons-of-bitches... His Majesty is my guest and I shall not cover my grey hairs with eternal shame... Let the Swedes come here with their whole army, but we shall not surrender our guest..."

"We shall not surrender him!" shouted the gentry, drawing their sabres with a rattle of steel.

"Saddle your horses!.. Charge your pistols!.. We shall die, but we shall not sully our Polish honour!.."

"We shall not shame it! Vivat!"

It was clear to King Augustus that the only sensible move would be to leap into the saddle forthwith and flee under cover of darkness. But how could he run away, he, Augustus the Magnificent, like a wretched poltroon, leaving the merry supper and the charming woman who had still not released his hand? Charles was not going to drive him to such humiliation!.. To the devil with common sense!

"I order you, my dear sirs, to return to the table. We shall continue with our supper," he said, and he sat down, throwing the locks of his wig back from his flushed cheeks. After all, if the Swedes burst in there, he would be hidden away and spirited off somewhere — bad things don't happen to royalty... He poured some wine and raised his goblet; his big, handsome hand was steady... Pani Anna looked at him with rapture — the kind of look for which it would indeed be worth losing a kingdom...

"Good! The king bids us feast!" Pan Sobeszczanski clapped his hands and ordered the man who had hacked up the plate of sausages to ride with his comrades to the main sleigh route and stay there as look-outs; the whole table, down to the poorer end, was to pour the best Hungarian wine and drink until the bottom of the last barrel was dry, to bring from the cellars and larders all the good things left in the house, and to call the musicians as well...

The feasting roared on with renewed inspiration. Pani Anna went to dance with the king. She danced as if she were seducing the apostle Peter to open the doors for her into paradise. Her hat was on one side, the strains of the mazurka whirled in her locks, her short skirt spun and clung to her shapely legs, her red-heeled shoes now stamped, now flew, seeming not to touch the floor at all... Magnificent was the king as he danced with her; tall, splendid, pale with wine and desire...

"I'm losing my mind, Pani Anna, I'm losing my mind! By all the saints, have mercy on me!" he said through his teeth, and she replied with a glance that there was no mercy and the doors of paradise were already wide open.

Outside, the frightened voices of the servants in the dark and the whinnying of horses could be heard. The music stopped. No one even had time to reach for a sabre or cock his pistol. The king, with everything swimming round in front of his eyes, held Pani Anna tightly and drew his sword.

Two men entered the banqueting hall: one was enormous, blind in one eye, in a tall lambskin hat with a gold tassel and blond, drooping moustaches under the big nose. The other, smaller in stature, and a gentleman by his looks, with a pleasant softness of features, was dressed in a dusty uniform with a general's sash over his shoulder.

"Is His Royal Majesty King Augustus here?" he demanded and, seeing the king standing with his sword in a menacing attitude, he removed his hat and bowed low: "Most Gracious Majesty, please to accept this report: by command of the tsar Peter Alexeyevich, I have arrived and am at your disposal with eleven regiments of infantry and five mounted Cossack regiments."

This was the governor of Kiev, the commander of the auxiliary army, Dmitry Mikhailovich Golitsyn, the elder brother of Mikhail Mikhailovich, the hero of Schlusselburg. The other, the tall man in a mauve coat and a cloak down to his heels, was the Cossack ataman, Danila Apostol. The mustachios of the Polish nobles twitched menacingly at the sight of him. He stood on the threshold, one hand casually on his hip, toying with his mace, his handsome mouth curved in a grin, eyebrows like arrows, and in one eye, night illumined by the fires of Cossack raids.

King Augustus roared with laughter, thrust his sword back into its scabbard, embraced Golitsyn and held out his hand for the ataman to kiss. The table was laid for the third time. A goblet went round that held a pint of Hungarian wine. They drank to tsar Peter, who had kept his promise to send help from the Ukraine, and they drank to all the newly arrived regiments and to the destruction of the Swedes. The proud gentry particularly wanted to get the ataman Danila Apostol drunk, but he calmly drained goblet after goblet and merely raised his eyebrows; there could be no drinking that one under the table.

At dawn, when many of the gentry had been dragged out

into the courtyard and laid down by the well, King Augustus said to Pani Anna:

"I have no treasures to fling at your feet, I am an exile living on charity. But today I am strong and rich again... Pani Anna, I want you to sit in a carriage and follow my army. I must go into battle at once, without an hour's delay!.. I shall lead King Charles by the nose like a little boy... Divine Pani Anna, I want to bring you my Warsaw on a plate..." And, rising to his feet, he turned with a magnificent wave of the hand to those at the table whose eyes and waxed mustachios still showed signs of life: "Gentlemen, I invite you and I command you—saddle your horses; I am taking you all into my personal suite..."

No matter how firmly, though politely and in the most affecting terms, Prince Dmitry Mikhailovich Golitsyn tried to convince the king that the troops needed about three days' rest to feed their horses and bring up the rest of the baggage train, King Augustus was adamant. The sun had not even dried the dew when he returned to Sokal, accompanied by Golitsyn and the ataman. Carts, horses and guns stood everywhere on the town streets and tired Russian soldiers were sleeping on the green grass. Camp-fires were smoking. The king looked through his carriage window at the sleeping infantrymen and at the Cossacks sprawled picturesquely in their carts.

"What soldiers!" he kept saying. "What soldiers! Giants!"

He was met in the palace doorway by Captain Tarnowski, who said in a frightened whisper:

"The countess has returned; she does not wish to retire, she is most angry..."

"Oh, what nonsense!" The king cheerfully entered the vaulted, damp bedchamber where, dripping with molten wax, the candles were burning down in the green candlestick. The countess met him standing, silently looking into his face and only waiting for his first word to answer as she saw fit.

"Sophie, at last!" he said with greater haste than was seemly. "Well, how was it? Did you see King Charles?"

"Yes, I saw King Charles, thank you..." Her face looked flabby and unattractive, as if it had been dusted with flour.

"King Charles wants nothing more than to hang you on the first aspen-tree available, Your Majesty... If you need details of my conversation with the king, I shall tell you... But now I wish to ask what quality you yourself attribute to your conduct? You send me like any dishwasher to clean up your dirty little affairs... I am subjected to insults; I am subjected a thousand times on the journey to the danger of being raped, stabbed, robbed... Meanwhile, you are enjoying yourself in the embraces of Pani Sobeszczanska, that wretched woman whom I could hardly bring myself to accommodate as a maidservant..."

"What rubbish, Sophie!"

This exclamation was an indiscretion on King Augustus's part. The countess went up to him and deftly, like a kitten cuffing with its paw, slapped his face.

# Chapter Four

## 1

Jumping down from his horse on a hill, on top of which a watch-tower had been erected, Peter climbed up the steep ramp of cross-beams to the platform. After him went Chambers, Menshikov, Anikita Ivanovich Repnin and, last of all, Pyotr Matveyevich Apraksin, much hampered by stoutness and vertigo: it was no joke for him to ascend to such a height, ten sazhens above ground level. Peter, who was accustomed to climbing up to ships' mastheads and was not even out of breath, took a spy-glass out of his pocket, planted his feet apart and began surveying the terrain.

He could see Narva as if it were on a green plate; all its squat towers, with the gates and drawbridges, the projections of bastions built of hewn stone at the corners of the walls, the pile of the old castle with its round powder-magazine, the winding town streets, the sharp kirche roofs pointing skyward like nails. On the other side of the river rose eight sombre towers roofed with lead caps, and the high, shell-pitted walls of Ivan-gorod fortress, built back in the times of Ivan the Terrible.

"That town's going to be ours!" said Menshikov, also peering through a spy-glass.

"Don't count your chickens," said Peter through his teeth.

Below the town, downstream, in the place where Pyotr Matveyevich Apraksin's earth defences stood on a stream called the Rosson, baggage trains and troops were in movement, barely discernible through the dust they were raising. They were crossing the pontoon bridge, and the mounted and infantry regiments were taking up position on the left bank, five versts from the town. White tents were already visible over there, smoke was rising in the windless air, unsaddled horses were wandering over the meadows. Axes thudded, tree-tops quivered, immemorial pines toppled over.

"Our only protection is carts and chevaux de frise; will you not order us to dig ditches and build stockades for greater protection?" asked Prince Anikita Ivanovich Repnin. He was cautious, sensible and experienced in military matters, brave without bravado, but ready, for a great cause, to die without yielding an inch. Unfortunately he was ugly and puny, although he considered his family lineage more ancient than Peter's. He was pathetic-looking and weak-sighted, but the little eyes behind the screwed-up lids were shrewd and watchful.

"Ditches and stockades won't save us. We didn't come here to stay behind stockades," snapped Peter, swinging his spy-glass further round to the west.

Chambers, who was in the habit of drinking a glass of vodka in the morning to brace himself, wheezed in a husky voice:

"The soldiers could be ordered to sleep with their boots on and their rifles handy... Pointless! If it is authentic that General Schlippenbach is at Wesenberg, we need not expect his relief force in less than a week..."

"I once waited here for a Swedish relief force, thank you," replied Peter in a strange voice. Menshikov uttered a brief, coarse laugh.

In the west, towards which Peter was staring so eagerly, lay the sea, and not a hint of a breeze ruffled its grey surface, sleeping in streams of light. Out there, on the distinct line of the sea's rim, it was possible to discern, by straining one's eyes, many ships' masts with sails furled. This was the becalmed fleet of the silver-handed Admiral de Proux.

Apraksin, clutching the railing round the shaky platform, said:

"Mister Bombardier, what could I do but be afraid of such a force – half a hundred ships and such a brave admiral?.. Truly, God saved me. He didn't give the damned fellow a shoreward wind..."

"All those good things going waste!" Menshikov counted the masts on the horizon with his fingernail. "You can be sure his holds are crammed to overflowing with smoked eels, plaice, sprats, Revel hams... Lord, those hams of theirs! If there's one place where they really eat, it's Revel!

Everything will rot on him in this heat, he'll throw it all overboard, the one-handed devil... Apraksin, Apraksin, you're still sitting by the sea, you fat-arsed landlubber! Why haven't you got any boats? You could embark a company of grenadiers in this calm and de Proux wouldn't be able to do a thing about it..."

"That's a seagull settling on the sand!" shouted Peter suddenly. "By God, it's settling on the sand! I'll wager ten efimki there's going to be a storm... Anyone take the wager? Oh, you mariners out there! Don't complain, Danilych, we might still have a taste of the admiral's ham."

He pushed his spy-glass into the front of his coat and ran down from the tower. To Colonel Rohn, who hurried up to help him jump down to the ground, he said: "One squadron to proceed ahead, follow me with the other." He rolled into the saddle and moved off towards Narva. His horse, a big bay gelding with long ears, a present from Field-Marshal Sheremetev, who had taken the horse from under Schlippenbach himself in battle at Errestfer, was proceeding at a brisk trot. Peter disliked riding on horseback and bounced heavily in the saddle. Menshikov, on the other hand, spurred his milk-white steed, also won from the Swedes; the horse with its merry eyes and its rider seemed to be playing together, advancing sideways in a canter over the fresh meadow; or the horse would rear, sitting back on its haunches, pawing the air with its black hooves, tossing its head, then galloping onwards, and the short scarlet cloak over one shoulder streamed out behind Menshikov's back, as did the plumes on his hat and the ends of his silk sash. Although hot, it was a beautiful day and the birds were singing and squabbling in the copses and the now abandoned orchards.

Repnin, who had become accustomed in childhood to riding Tatar fashion, calmly, sitting half sideways, was being shaken up and down in a high saddle on a small fast-moving horse. Apraksin was streaming with sweat under the huge wig in which, for a Russian, there was neither comfort nor beauty. Far in the front, the scattered squadron of dragoons was threading its way through the undergrowth. Behind, in formation, came the second squadron, with Colonel Rohn

galloping in front of them, a handsome man and a heavy drinker, who like General Chambers, seeking his fortune in this world, had dedicated his honour and his sword to tsar Peter.

Peter was pointing out to Chambers, who was riding alongside, ditches, pits, high ramparts overgrown with weeds and bushes, and half-rotten stakes sticking up everywhere out of the ground.

"This is where my army perished," he said simply. "In these parts, King Charles found great glory, but we found strength. Here we learned what's what, and we buried forever the bad old ways that very nearly led to our total extinction..."

Peter turned away from Chambers. As he looked over his shoulder, he noticed in the distance an abandoned cottage with a caved-in roof. He reined in his horse. His round face went bitter. Menshikov rode up and said cheerfully:

"The same cottage, myn Herz. Remember?"

"I remember..."

Grim-faced, Peter struck his horse and again began bouncing up and down in the saddle. How could he not remember that sleepless night before the rout? He had been sitting in the cottage, looking at a guttering candle. Menshikov had been quietly weeping on the mat. It had been hard for him to quell his despair, and shame, and helpless bitterness, and accept that Charles would surely beat him on the following day... It had been hard to decide on the unbelievable, the intolerable — to leave the army at such a time, climb into a carriage, race to Novgorod and start all over again from scratch... To obtain money, grain, iron... Manage somehow to sell the shirt off his back to the foreign merchants so as to buy arms. Make guns and shot... And, most important of all, people, people, people! Drag them out of the centuries-old mire, open their eyes for them. Elbow them in the ribs. Beat, break in, train. Gallop thousands of versts over the snow and through the mud... Smash, build... Wriggle out of a thousand disasters in European politics. Look back and be horrified: "There's still a whole mountain to be moved!"

The dragoons in front galloped out of the hot shade of the

pines on to a broad meadow before the walls of Narva that loomed up on the far side of the moat. Running and shouting, frightened inhabitants were hurriedly driving their cattle into the town. The meadow emptied, the drawbridge rumbled as it slowly rose and the gates crashed shut. Peter rode at a walking pace up on to a hill. All took out their spy-glasses once again and surveyed the high, strong walls, covered with grass growing in the cracks between the stones.

Above the gate tower stood Swedes in iron casques and leather breastplates. One was holding out a yellow banner at arm's length. Another, a very tall man, went up to the edge of the tower, rested his elbow on the stone parapet and also began peering through a spy-glass, scanning the riders on the hill, then aiming directly at Peter.

"Tough-looking fellows, it gives you a fright just to see them on the tower," said Apraksin to Repnin, fanning himself with his hat. "Now you can see what I went through in the mouth of the Narova, alone, with nine guns, when the fleet bore down on me... And that tall one looking through the spy-glass - oh, what a nasty one he is!.. Just before you arrived, I met him in the field; I wanted to get hold of him... But it was hopeless..."

"Who is that tall one on the tower?" asked Peter hoarsely.

"Sire, it's General Horn himself, commandant of Narva..."

No sooner had Apraksin uttered that name than Menshikov spurred his horse and galloped away over the meadow towards the tower... "Fool!" yelled Peter frantically after him, but Menshikov could not hear because of the wind whistling in his ears. He pulled back almost at the gates, tore off his hat, flourished it and shouted:

"Hey, you there on the tower!.. Hey, Mister Commandant!.. We'll let you depart from the town with honour, with your banners, guns and music!.. Leave of your own free will!"

General Horn lowered his spy-glass, listening to the raving of the Russian mounted on the white horse and dressed up like a fighting cock. He turned to one of the Swedes, presumably for a translation. The stern old man's face creased in wrinkles as if he had just tasted acid; he bent over the parapet of the tower and spat in Menshikov's direction.

"That's my answer, you dolt!" he shouted. "Now you'll get something a little stronger."

The Swedes on the tower laughed offensively. A flame flashed, a white puff of smoke flew out, and, compressing the air, a shell whistled over Menshikov's head.

"Hey!" shouted Repnin from the hill in a high voice. "Bad shooting, Swedes! Send us your gunners, we'll teach them how!"

All on the hill guffawed in their turn. Menshikov, who knew that he was in for a cut of the whip from Peter anyway, turned, pranced on his horse, flourished his hat and grinned up at the Swedes until a second shell exploded very near, and the horse, jibbing, bore him away from the tower.

After riding round the fortress and counting at least three hundred guns on the walls, Peter turned off to the memorable cottage on the way back, dismounted, ordering the others to wait, and called Menshikov into the room where four years ago he had sacrificed his honour to save the Russian state. There had been a good stove in it at the time. Now there was only a pile of charred bricks and some dirty straw on the floor; the locals had evidently been driving their sheep and cattle in there for the night. He sat on the sill of the smashed window. Menshikov stood guiltily in front of him.

"Remember, Danilych, so help me God, if I see that damn fool showing-off of yours again, I'll have your hide off with a whip," said Peter. "Shut up, don't answer back! You settled your own fate today... I was wondering whom to put in charge of the besieging army, you or Field-Marshal Ogilvy. I wanted, in this matter, to give preference to one of my own countrymen. You spoilt it all for yourself, my good friend; you pranced like a mummer on your horse in front of General Horn. Disgraceful! You still can't forget the Moscow marketplaces, can you! You want to play jokes all the time, as if at table in my place! But Europe's watching you, you fool! Shut up, don't answer back!" He breathed heavily as he filled his pipe. "And one more thing; I had another look at those walls, and I was troubled, Danilych... We can't retreat from Narva a second time... Narva is the key to the whole war... If Charles hasn't grasped this yet, at least I have. We shall surround the whole town with our whole army tomor-

row so that not even a bird can escape from it... The siege guns will arrive in two weeks. And what will happen next? The walls are strong and General Horn is stubborn. Schlippenbach is breathing down our necks. If we hang around here too long, we'll bring Charles with his whole army from Poland. The town must be taken quickly, and I don't want to shed too much of our men's blood. What have you to say, Danilych?"

"We could, of course, think up a ruse of some sort... That's a secondary matter... But since Field-Marshal Ogilvy is in charge here, let him work out what's what from his books. What have I to say? Something silly again, like a peasant." Menshikov shuffled his feet, mumbled something and looked up. Peter's face was calm and sad, as he had rarely seen it before... Menshikov felt a stab of pity... "Myn Herz," he whispered, frowning, "come on, myn Herz. Give me till evening. I'll come to your tent, I'll think of something... Don't you know our people?.. It's not seventeen hundred now... Don't be sad, for God's sake..."

## 2

In the spacious canvas tent, thanks to Nartov, drawing instruments, tools, paper, and military maps had been laid on the campaign table as in the Petersburg cottage. The heat of earth came through the partly raised flaps as from a stove, and though you plugged your ears with tarred hemp, you could still hear the crickets chirping sharply and dryly in the grass.

Peter was working in a shirt open on his chest and in baggy knee-length Dutch breeches, with slippers on his bare feet. From time to time he rose from the table, and Nartov would pour a ladleful of spring water over his head in a corner of the tent. During these days of the Narva campaign, as always, a great many urgent matters had piled up and must be dealt with.

Secretary Alexei Vassilievich Makarov, an inconspicuous young man who had recently been taken on for these duties, was standing close to a pile of papers on the table and mur-

muring loudly enough to drown the rustling of the crickets. "Ukase for Alexei Sidorovich Sinyavin to manage the public baths in Moscow and other cities." He quietly laid before his sovereign the sheet of paper with the column of the Ukase on the left side. Running his eye over the lines, Peter read it through, stabbed his goose quill into the inkpot and, erratically and illegibly, missing out letters in his haste, wrote in a large hand on the right side of the sheet: "Wherever possible, open barbers' shops at the baths to accustom people to having their beards shaven, and also have good corn-cutters on the premises."

Makarov laid another sheet in front of him: "Ukase for Pyotr Vassilievich Kikin to manage fisheries and watermills all over the state..." Peter's hand, holding the quill with a blot on the nib, paused over the paper:

"Who drew up this Ukase?"

"It was sent from Moscow by the Prince-Emperor for your personal signature, Your Majesty..."

"Moscow's full of spongers, they sit at their windows eating sour gooseberries out of boredom, but people can't be found to do the real work... All right, we'll try Kikin out. If he embezzles, I'll flay him alive. Write to the Prince-Emperor that I have my doubts..."

"A report from Petersburg by courier from Lieutenant-Colonel Alexei Brovkin," continued Makarov. "Six peony bushes have arrived from Tikhon Ivanovich Streshnev in Moscow for your garden on the Petersburg side. Your Majesty, all are undamaged, save that Levonov, the gardener, was unable to plant them, since he died."

"What d'you mean, died?" demanded Peter. "What rubbish!"

"He drowned while swimming in the Neva."

"Drunk, of course... You see, the good die young... He had green fingers... It's a pity... Take this down..."

Peter went into a corner of the tent to douse his head and, snorting, said to Makarov, who was standing and writing adeptly on the end of the table corner:

"To Streshnev... Your peonies arrived in good condition, but it's a pity you sent so few. Kindly do not waste any time, send all kinds of flowers from Izmailovo, chiefly ones

that are fragrant and sweet-smelling; balsam, mint and mignonette. Send a good gardener, with his family, so that he doesn't get bored... Write and tell me, for God's sake, how Katerina Vassiliefskaya and Anisia Tolstoy and the other with them are faring in Izmailovo... Don't forget to write more often about this... Also kindly inform me how you are getting on with the recruitment of soldiers for the dragoon regiments. One regiment of the best men available should be formed as soon as possible and sent here..."

He returned to the table, read what Makarov had written, smiled to himself and signed it.

"Any more? The ones that matter!"

"A letter from Grigory Dolgoruky in Sokal about the successful arrival of the troops."

"Read it!" Peter closed his eyes, craned his neck, his big, strong, heavily scratched hands resting on the table. Dolgoruky had written to say that with the arrival of the Russian troops in Sokal, King Augustus had again fallen victim to an attack of excessive courage and wanted to meet King Charles on the field in order, with God's aid, by a general battle to square accounts for the fiasco at Klissow. He is chiefly being incited to this madness by his mistresses, of whom he now has two, and his mode of existence has become most erratic. Dmitry Mikhailovich Golitsyn had great difficulty in dissuading him from an immediate encounter with Charles (who, like a rapacious wolf cub, is waiting for just that), and in showing him the road to Warsaw, which Charles has left but poorly defended. God alone knows what might have come of it...

Peter listened carefully to the long letter, his lip with the thin moustache rose, revealing the teeth. "There's an ally for you!" he muttered, his head jerking on his neck. He moved up a clean sheet of paper, scratched the back of his head, and, his quill only just managing to keep up with his thoughts, began writing a reply to Dolgoruky:

"...Once again I remind you that you should not tire of diverting His Majesty King Augustus from his unhappy and disastrous intention. He hastens to seek a general battle, relying on fortune, or luck; but this is within the ken of the Almighty alone... Us mortals it behooves to look reasonably

on what is before us, what is on earth... In short, the seeking of a general battle could be most perilous for him, since he could lose all in a single hour... If a general battle does not succeed, as a result of which, may God preserve us all from it, not only will His Majesty King Augustus be plunged into melancholia by the enemy, but the infuriated Poles, deprived of the advantage to their country, will shamefully expel him and deprive him of his throne... So why should he plunge into such a disaster? As for what you write of the mistresses, truly, this fever has no cure... All you can do is try to win the sympathy and collusion of these hussies..."

It was impossible to breathe in the layers of tobacco smoke. Peter signed "Ptr" with a spluttering pen and went out of the tent into the intolerable heat. From there, on the top of the hill, could be seen a cloud of dust in the direction of Narva, raised by the baggage trains and by troops moving from the camp to their battle positions in front of the fortress. Peter slowly rubbed his bare chest with the flat of his hand; his heart was beating slowly and strongly. Then he stared towards where, on the boundless, glassy sea, indistinguishable at that distance, the ships of Admiral de Proux lay idle, loaded with enough goods to supply the whole Russian army. Earth, sky and sea were languishing and expectant, as if time itself had stopped. Suddenly, a host of black birds swept erratically past the hill on their way to the forest. Peter looked up; he'd been right! Transparent films of cloud were rapidly rising from the southwest high into a sky that was white-hot, like tin.

"Makarov!" he called. "Still want to wager those ten efimki?"

Makarov immediately emerged from the tent. Sharp-nosed, his complexion parchment-hued with fatigue and sleepless nights, his straight mouth unsmiling, he took a purse out of his pocket.

"As you command, Your Most Gracious Majesty..."

Peter dismissed the matter with a wave of the hand.

"Go and tell Nartov to get my sailor's jacket, sou'wester and sea-boots. And fasten the tent down firmly so that it doesn't get blown away. It's going to be quite a storm."

The sea had always appealed to him, had always fascinated

him. In a loose jacket and a leather hat low on the back of his neck, he rode at a spanking trot accompanied by a half-squadron of dragoons towards the seashore. (He had sent to Apraksin's camp for two cannons and some grenadiers.) The sun was stinging like a scorpion in its death agony. Columns of dust swirled on the roads. Gusts of wind raced in bands over the surface of the sea. A black cloud was climbing up from behind the overcast horizon. Finally, an odour of seaweed and fish scales blew in from the sea. The wind, rising, began to whistle and roar as Neptune blew for all his worth.

Peter grinned cheerfully, holding down his sou'wester. He jumped down from his horse on to the sandy beach. The sun flashed for the last time from the billowing rim of the cloud and a glassy light ran over the rising swell. Everything suddenly went dark. Higher and higher grew the breakers, with the spume flying from the crests. A rumbling cloud was illuminated from end to end by dull flashes, as if it were being kindled by flint and steel. A dazzling flash of lightning snaked down and plunged into the sea close by. There was such a bang that the people on the beach ducked as if the sky had fallen in.

Menshikov turned up beside Peter; he too was wearing jacket and sou'wester.

"A real storm! This is the stuff!" shouted Peter to him.

"Myn Herz, you certainly know what's coming!.."

"Have you only just realised that?"

"Will we get any booty out of it?"

"Hang on a bit..."

They did not have to wait very long. By the flashes of lightning, they could see Admiral de Proux's men-of-war and merchant ships quite near; the storm was driving them shoreward on to the shallows. They seemed to be dancing, their bare masts rocking, the remnants of sails fluttering, the high poops rearing into the air with their Neptunes and mermaids. It looked as if the whole convoy would be driven ashore in a short time.

"Well done! Well done!" shouted Peter. "Look what he's up to! Now that's a real admiral for you: he's setting his flying jibs. He's setting his jibs and his forestaysails. He's setting his trysails! Ah, the rascal! Learn a lesson, Danilych!"

"Oh, he's going to get away!" groaned Menshikov.

Either because the wind had changed slightly, or because the admiral's skill had triumphed in the struggle with the sea, his ships, tacking with storm sails, gradually began to withdraw beyond the horizon. Only three heavily loaded transports were still being driven towards the sandbanks. Their yards cracking and splintering, scraps of sail flapping, they ran aground in the shallows about three hundred paces from the beach. Enormous waves battered them and rolled them over, washing the boats and barrels overboard and snapping the masts.

"Fire at them, but fall short, just to frighten them!" shouted Menshikov to the gunners.

The guns barked, the bombs threw up the water near one of the transports. Pistol shots rang out in reply. Peter mounted his horse and drove it into the sea. The grenadiers ran after him shouting. Menshikov had to dismount, since his stallion refused to budge; he, too, walked into the turbid waves, spitting and shouting:

"Hey, you on those transports! Jump over board! Surrender!"

The Swedes must have been badly frightened at the sight of the horseman in the sea and the huge, mustachioed grenadiers advancing chest-deep through the waves to board them, swearing and threatening them with smoking grenades. Seamen and soldiers began jumping down from the transports. They held out pistols and boarding sabres: "Moscow, Moscow, friends!" and made their way ashore, where they were surrounded by horse dragoons. Menshikov in his turn with the grenadiers clambered on board a transport over the carved poop, took the captain prisoner, promptly clapped him condescendingly on the back, returned him his dirk and shouted:

"Mister Bombardier, there's a bit of a smell coming out of the hold, but the captain assures me that the herring and salt pork are fit to eat."

## 3

The troops enclosed Narva in a horseshoe, its ends touching the river above and below the town. On the other side of

the river, Ivan-gorod was surrounded in the same way. The men dug trenches and put up defensive stockades and chevaux de frise. The Russian camp was noisy, smoky and dusty. The Swedes watched them glumly from the high walls. After the storm that had dispersed de Proux's fleet, they turned nasty and fired their cannons even at lone horsemen galloping along the short road across the meadow past the menacing bastions.

On Peter's orders, barrels of herring and salt pork were unloaded from the barges and taken to the camp in full view of the Swedes. Behind the carts, decorated with branches, the soldiers carried a fat, naked man festooned with seaweed and wailed an indecent song about Admiral de Proux and General Horn. The barrels were distributed among the companies and batteries. Waving a herring or piece of pork in the air on the end of their bayonets, the soldiers shouted: "Hey, Swede, we've got eats to go with your vodka!" That was too much for the enemy. Trumpets sounded, drums rattled, the bridge was cleared and, crowding through the gates on massive horses, a squadron of cuirassiers rode out with bent heads in ribbed helmets. Levelling their broad swords between their horses' ears, they galloped ponderously towards the Russian trenches. The Russian had to abandon their possessions and defend themselves with whatever came to hand stakes, ramrods, or spades. A melee began and shouts were heard. The Swedish cuirassiers saw the dragoons racing at them from their rear and the dreaded grenadiers climbing over the stockade. They turned their horses back; only a few were left behind on the meadow. A few frightened, riderless horses galloped about, chased for a long time by Russian soldiers.

Apart from such sorties, the Swedes did not display any particular unease. General Horn, as the prisoners reported, was supposed to have said: "I'm not afraid of the Russians; let them pluck up the courage to attack us with the help of their St. George the Conqueror! I'll give them a warmer welcome than in seventeen hundred..." He had a sufficiency of bread, powder and shot, but he was relying most of all on Schlippenbach, who was awaiting reinforcements in order to deal a savage blow at the Russians. He was positioned in the town of Wesenberg on the Revel highway. This had been ascertained

by Menshikov, who had personally ridden out on reconnaissance.

The Russian toops were also inactive; all the siege artillery, the great wall-breaching guns and the mortars to set the town ablaze were still being towed from Novgorod over impassable roads. There could be no thought of carrying Narva by assault without heavy artillery.

The news was none too good from Field-Marshal Sheremetev either; he had laid seige to Yuriev, dug trenches, fenced himself round with a stockade, driven a sap to breach the wall and begun bombarding the town. "The Swedes are causing us much annoyance," he wrote to Menshikov in the camp at Narva. "Up to now, I have been unable to repulse the enemy's cannon and mortar fire; they are firing volleys from many guns, blast them, and planting ten bombs at a time in our batteries; worst of all, they are bombarding the baggage trains. We too are fighting, but cannot get a prisoner from the town; only two men came out to us, locals, who know nothing worth-while but simply rave that Schlippenbach is encouraging the town with the promise of early relief..."

Schlippenbach was indeed a thorn in their flesh and must be drawn out as soon as possible. Peter's sole thoughts were about this. That night, Menshikov did not fail him; he went to Peter's tent and sent everybody out, even Nartov, before telling of a scheme to disillusion General Horn of his hopes about Schlippenbach. Peter actually lost his temper at first: "Were you drunk when you thought that one up?" But he paced up and down the tent for a while sucking his pipe and suddenly burst out laughing:

"It wouldn't be a bad idea to make a fool of the old man."

"Myn Herz, we'll make a fool of him, by God."

"That 'by God' of yours comes too easy... Supposing it doesn't succeed? You'll pay dearly for it, my friend..."

"All right then, I'll pay for it. And not for the first time. I've spent all my life paying..."

"Get on with it!"

That night, Ensign Pavel Yaguzhinsky, after downing a stirrup-cup, galloped to the army warehouses of Pskov. With uncommon haste, he brought back from there on troikas all that was necessary for the planned operation. For two nights,

company and squadron sewing workshops remade and adapted coats, cloaks, officers' sashes, banners, and sewed a white band round the brim of soldiers' tricornes. During those short nights, secretly, squadron by squadron, two dragoon regiments commanded by Asafiev and Gorbov and the Semyonovsky and the Ingermanland regiments with guns whose green carriages had been painted yellow, moved off along the Revel highway and took up a position in the forest of Terviegi, ten versts from Narva. The clothing remade in the sewing workshops was also carried to the forest. The Swedes did not notice anything.

On a clear morning, on the eighth of June, uproar suddenly broke out in the Russian camp under the walls of Narva. The drums rattled the alarm, enormous kettledrums boomed and officers galloped about yelling at the top of their voices. Soldiers dashed out of the huts and tents, buttoning up their coats and gaiters, thrusting back behind their ears the long hair that hung down from under their tricornes, and forming up in two ranks. Shouting gunners towed out the cannons and brought them to bear on the Revel highway. Horsemen drove herds of baggage-train horses from the meadows into the camp behind the wagons.

The Swedes looked on in amazement from the walls at the desperate confusion in the Russian camp. General Horn climbed bareheaded up the outside stone stairs to the gate tower and aimed his spy-glass at the Revel highway. Two gunshots came from that direction, then two more, and so on, six times. The Swedes deduced that these must be signals from the approaching Schlippenbach, and they promptly replied from the Gloria bastion with the royal salute of twenty-one guns. The bells began ringing festively on all the churches in the town.

For the first time during the many days of the siege, the grim General Horn's lips curved in a smile when he saw Menshikov, the most brazen of the Russians, in all his finery, galloping about like a goat on a white horse on the far side of the trenches in front of the Moscow troops as they formed up in two lines. As if he was himself an experienced military leader, he ordered the rear rank of soldiers with a wave of his sword to turn round towards the fortress. Running like cattle, they took up position in the trenches behind the stockades. Next, he

made his horse rear up and galloped along the front line of soldiers, who stood facing the Revel road. Everything was clear to General Horn, made wise by the years and by glorious battles; this coxcomb in the red cloak and the ostrich plumes was about to commit an irrevocable blunder; he was going to lead a thin, extended line of infantry against the iron cuirassiers of Schlippenbach, who would shower it with shot, cut it to pieces, trample it down and annihilate it. General Horn drew a deep breath through his hairy nostrils. Twelve squadrons of cavalry and four battalions of infantry were standing behind the locked fortress gates, ready to hurl themselves on the rear of the Russians as soon as Schlippenbach came on sight.

As if eager to go to his death, Menshikov, without any need whatever, tore off his hat and waved it to evoke a cheer from all the battalions advancing at the double close behind his prancing horse.

The sound floated up to the walls of Narva, and again old Horn smiled thinly. Russian horsemen, followed by musket shots, began galloping out of the pine forest on which Menshikov's battalions were advancing. Finally, everywhere from out of the pines, in all their splendour, shoulder to shoulder as if on parade, their rifles and fixed bayonets levelled, came Schlippenbach's Guards regiments. The second rank fired rapidly on the march over the heads of the front rank, while the third rank loaded muskets and handed them to those who were firing. The king's yellow banners flapped high in the air. Old Horn tore himself away from his spy-glass for a moment, drew a linen handkerchief from his cartridge pouch, shook it and passed it over his eyes. "Gods of war!" he muttered.

Holding his hat in place, Menshikov raced ahead and halted his battalions. Towards his flanks there galloped guns drawn by teams of six horses and ammunition boxes drawn by pairs. The Russian artillerymen were businesslike; they'd learned a thing or two in the last few years. The guns, cleaned until they sparkled, eight on each flank, nimbly turned their muzzles on the Swedes (the teams of horses were unharnessed and galloped to one side) and immediately ejected dense white puffs of smoke, a sign of good quality powder. The Swedes had barely advanced twenty paces when the guns barked at them again. Old man Horn crushed his handkerchief in the

palm of his hand; such rapid fire was astounding. The Swedes halted. What the devil? It wasn't like Schlippenbach to be dismayed by gunfire! Did he want to let the cuirassiers through to attack, or was he waiting for his own artillery? Horn swung his spy-glass to and fro, searching for Schlippenbach, but the smoke obscured the view as it spread more and more thickly over battlefield. It even seemed to him that the Swedes had begun to waver under the shower of case-shot. But he waited... At last! Swedish guns with yellow carriages moved out of the forest and a mighty exchange began... Then he could see it clearly — Menshikov's ranks became confused. It was time! Horn turned his wrinkled face away from the spy-glass and, baring his yellow teeth and gums, said to his aide, Colonel Marquart:

"I order that the gates should be opened and the right flank of the Russians be attacked."

The drawbridges thundered, squadrons of cuirassiers rode out of the four gates simultaneously and after them, at the double came the infantry. Colonel Marquart led the Narva garrison in wedge formation so that, leaping across the Russian stockades and chevaux de frise, they could attack Menshikov's flank from the rear, drive him up against Schlippenbach and crush him in an iron embrace.

What Horn saw in the spy-glass delighted him at first, but then bewildered him. Marquart's detachment, having quickly cleared the Russian chevaux de frise without heavy losses, climbed over the stockade and ended up on the other side of the trenches. The townsfolk of Narva came after them from the gates on foot and in carts, intending to pillage the Russian camp. Erratically firing their muskets, Menshikov's battalions suddenly began to carry out a baffling manoeuvre; their right flank, for which Marquart was heading, began to retreat with all haste to its stockades and chevaux de frise, while the left flank, the more distant one, rushed with the same haste towards Schlippenbach's Swedes as if intending to surrender. The guns on both sides abruptly ceased firing. Marquart, who had been making such a brilliant attack, found himself in the open, in the gap between Menshikov's troops and those of Schlippenbach. His squadrons of cuirassiers, their armour gleaming, reined in their horses, wheeled round in a semi-circle

and halted in uncertainty. The infantry doubling up behind them also halted.

"I don't understand! What's happened? Damn that Marquart!" shouted Horn. His adjutant, Bystrom, who was standing beside him, replied:

"I don't quite understand either, Sir."

Then, moving his spy-glass about with increasing haste, Horn saw Menshikov; the coxcomb was galloping towards the Swedes as fast as his horse would carry him. Why? To surrender? Recognising him, Marquart rushed forward with two cuirassiers to cut him off, but Menshikov beat him to it and jumped down from his horse on a grassy hummock near a group of officers. To judge by their cloaks and the yellow banner with the rampant lion, this was Schlippenbach's staff. But where was Schlippenbach himself? Another movement of the spy-glass, and Horn saw Marquart, who had galloped in pursuit of Menshikov to the same hummock, wave his hand in a strange manner as if warding off ghost. He tried to turn back, but the others ran up to him and dragged him from his saddle... A rider on a big long-eared horse climbed up to the top of the hill, and the banner dipped to him in salute. This could only be Schlippenbach. A tear blurred old Horn's eye, he angrily wiped it away and clapped the spy-glass to his eye-socket. The rider on the horse with drooping ears did not look like Schlippenbach... He looked more like...

"Sir, treachery!" whispered adjutant Bystrom.

"I don't need you to tell me that's tsar Peter in a Swedish uniform... I've been well and truly led by the nose, I can see that without your help... Have my cuirass and sword brought to me!" General Horn put down the now useless spy-glass and ran like a young man down the curved staircase from the gate tower.

Out there, on the field of the mock battle, had begun what was bound to happen when a military leader has been led by the nose. The men of the Semyonovsky and Ingermanland regiments in Swedish uniform, the dragoons commanded by Asafiev and Gorbov, who had been hiding until the right moment in the forest, and Menshikov's battalions from the other side, hurled themselves in all their fury from two directions on the Swedes.The luckless Marquart, having surrendered his

sword to Peter and thrown his helmet on the ground, was standing on the hill amid the Russian officers, his head bowed in shame and despair rather than watch the annihilation of his brilliant detachment, at least a third of the Narva garrison.

Covering the infantry, his cuirassiers retreated some way without losing formation, hitting back with a series of brief sallies. But when Colonel Rohn, who had been lying in ambush, rushed out on them from the rear with his squadrons of dragoons, the melee began. The shooting stopped. All that could be heard was the wild yelling of the Russians as they hewed with their sabres, the hoarse screams of dying Swedes, and the clang of swords on cuirasses and helmets. Horses reared up on their hind legs, biting each other. The royal standard fell. A few solitary riders galloped out of the melee, raced blindly over the meadow, collided, waved their arms and fell... The entire Russian army climbed up on the parapets to look, as at a Shrovetide outing, when the people gather to watch the bear-baiting. The soldiers whooped, danced and threw their tricornes into the air.

Only a small part of the Swedish detachment managed to get back into Narva. All General Horn could do was to cover the gates to prevent the Russians from bursting into the town. The citizens who had driven out for plunder bobbed about on their wagons in front of the moat. Soldiers leapt over the stockade end, in the heat of battle undaunted by the fire from the walls, seized many of the townsmen with their horses and carts and took them into the camp for sale to the officers.

That evening, there was a merry supper in Menshikov's big tent. They drank Admiral de Proux's fiery rum, ate Revel ham, and, something few had ever seen before in their lives, smoked plaice. The fish was rather smelly but good. Menshikov's back was thumped black and blue as the company drank to his ingenuity. "You certainly led the wise old Horn by his nose!" boomed Peter, who was very drunk, his shoulders shaking with laughter; and, with a fist like a hammer, he clapped his friend between the shoulder-blades.

"I'll wager you could outwit the wily king Odysseus himself!" shouted Chambers, also thumping the Governor-General on the back. "It would be hard to imagine people craftier than the Russians!"

Interrupting one another all the time, the guests made several attempts to compose a missive to General Horn awarding him the order of the Big Nose. The beginning was elegant: "To you, Narva squatter and pants-wetter, old fool, castrated cat, but with the roar of a lion..." After that, owing to drunken confusion, the language became so ribald that Makarov hesitated in putting it on paper.

Bleating like a goat until he could not laugh any more, Anikita Ivanovich Repnin said towards the end:

"Peter Alexeyevich, should we shame the old man? The game isn't over yet, after all."

The others banged their fists on the table in protest and shouted at him. Peter took the unfinished letter from Makarov, crumpled it up and thrust it into his pocket:

"We've had a good laugh. That will do..."

He rose, swayed, clutched Makarov's shoulder, and stiffened the relaxed lineaments of his round face with effort; twisting his head round on his long neck, he gained control of himself, as always:

"The party's over!"

He left the tent. Dawn was breaking. The grass with the haze hovering over it was hoary with dew. Peter took a deep breath of the fresh morning air.

"Well, good luck! It's time!" From a small group of army men standing behind him, Anikita Ivanovich Repnin and Colonel Rohn immediately went up to him. "I repeat once more to both of you, I have no patience with extravagant reports of victory. I don't expect it. We have a hard task ahead of us. We must strike the enemy so that he cannot collect his forces together again. We must harden our hearts for such difficult a task... You may go..."

After bowing low to him, Anikita Ivanovich Repnin and Colonel Rohn walked away from the tent knee-deep in thick grass towards the dark forest where, changed back into their own uniforms, all the participants in the previous day's sham battle, the regiments of dragoons and the infantry in carts, were waiting to advance. They had a serious task ahead of them that day — to surround and destroy Schlippenbach's corps at Wesenberg.

# 4

"And so, gentlemen, ex-King Augustus, whom we thought reduced to nothing, has received help from the Russians and is moving rapidly on Warsaw," said the young King Stanislaw Leszczynski, opening the council of war. The king was exhausted by the matters of state imposed on him and his sensitive, insolent and hostile face was pale, almost blue, under the lowered eyelids. He did not look up because he was bored to revulsion with the pompous faces of the courtiers and with all the talk of war, money and loans... With a weak hand he counted his rosary. He was wearing Polish costume, which he detested; but when the Swedish garrison under command of Arvid Horn, the Narva hero's nephew, had been stationed in Warsaw, the Polish magnates and high aristocracy hung their perukes on wig-stands, sprinkled their French dress with tobacco to keep off the moths, and had been going about ever since in long coats with turned-back sleeves, beaver hats, in soft boots with jingling spurs, and instead of swords they had been girding on their ancestors' heavy sabres.

Life in Warsaw was cheerful and carefree under the reliable protection of Arvid Horn, who was forgiven for his ignorance in compelling the Sejm to elect as king this young and hardly blue-blooded but well-bred young man. The Swedish officers were coarse and arrogant, but they could not beat the Poles as drinking wines and meads, and in their dances they were completely eclipsed by those magnificent exponents of the mazurka, Wiszniewecki and Potocki. Only one thing was wrong – less and less money from the war-ravaged estates was coming in; but even this circumstance seemed equally temporary. Charles was not going to lord it in Poland indefinitely; one of these days he would leave for the east to settle accounts with Tsar Peter.

Then, suddenly, a black cloud descended on Warsaw. Augustus seized prosperous Lublin without a battle and headed at speed with his rowdy Polish mounted troops along the left bank of the Vistula towards Warsaw. That one-eyed scarecrow, ataman Danila Apostol, crossed over to the right bank of

the Vistula with the Dnieper Cossacks and advanced on Praga, a suburb of Warsaw. Eleven Russian infantry regiments were clearing King Stanislaw's supporters out of the forts on the Bug; they had already taken Brest and were also turning off towards Warsaw. The city was rapidly being approached from the west by the Saxon corps of Field-Marshal Schulenburg, a clever manoeuvre that deceived King Charles, who had been searching for him on another road.

"God and the Holy Virgin are my witness that I did not seek to put on the Polish crown; it was the will of the Sejm," said King Stanislaw with supercilious slowness, not raising his eyes. On the carpet at his feet lay a white borzoi bitch of irreproachable pedigree, its muzzle between its paws. "I have so far experienced nothing in my exalted position but difficulties and unpleasantness. I am ready to abdicate if the Sejm, from a feeling of caution and common sense, should desire this so as not to subject Warsaw to the malignity of Augustus. He undoubtedly has enough reasons for ruining his health. He is vain and stubborn; his ally, tsar Peter, is even more stubborn and crafty, and they will fight until they achieve what they want and until we are all destitute." He raised his foot in its Morocco leather boot on the dog's back: it looked up at its master with mauve eyes. "Truly I insist on nothing; I would be delighted to leave for Italy.... I am in raptures over the studies at the University of Bologna..."

Sitting opposite the king on a folding chair, rosy-cheeked, with furious cold eyes, burly in his worn green coat, Colonel Arvid Horn grumbled:

"This is not a council of war, it's shameful capitulation..."

King Stanislaw's mouth twisted slowly. Cardinal Primate Radzijewski, a sworn enemy of Augustus, had not heard the Swede's indecent remark, and said in the confidential, humbly mandatory tone that has been sedulously learned in the Jesuit colleges since the times of Ignatius Loyola:

"Your Royal Majesty's desire to eschew the struggle is no more than a passing weakness. The flowers of your soul have wilted under the harsh wind, and we sympathise... But the crown of the Catholic king, as distinct from the hat, is only removed simultaneously with the head. We shall speak with all courage of resistance to the usurper and enemy of the church,

Augustus, the elector of Saxony, a bad Catholic. We shall listen to what Colonel Horn has to say."

With a rustling of his purple silk cassock that was mirrored in the waxed floor, the Cardinal Primate turned ponderously to the Swede and made a truly exquisite gesture with his hand, as if offering him the sweetest delicacies. Colonel Horn pushed back his chair, planted apart his sturdy legs in their greased boots (like all Swedes, he wore a shabby coat and rough boots with wide tops in imitation of King Charles), and coughed dryly to clear his throat:

"I repeat—a council of war should be a council of war, not a conversation about flowers. I shall defend Warsaw to the last soldier, as is the will of my king. I have given orders that after nightfall my fusiliers are to shoot anyone who ventures out of the city gates. I shall not let a single coward escape from Warsaw; even the cowards are going to fight for me. I am amused; we have no less of an army than Augustus. The Great Hetman Prince Lubomirski knows that better than I. I am amused; Augustus is surrounding us! This only means that he is giving us the opportunity to destroy him piecemeal: in the south—his drunken mounted gentry; to the east of Warsaw—ataman Danila Apostol, whose Cossacks are lightly armed and will not withstand the shock of an attack by our armoured hussars. Field-Marshal Schulenburg will meet his fate before he even reaches Warsaw; my king is undoubtedly pursuing him. The only significant danger is the eleven Russian regiments under Prince Golitsyn; but while they are still trailing along from Brest on foot, me shall already have annihilated Augustus and they will either have to retreat or perish. I suggest to Prince Lubomirski that he brings all the mounted regiments into Warsaw this very night. I suggest that Your Majesty now, before these candles have burned down, should announce a general mobilisation... The devil take me if we do not pluck all the feathers out of Augustus's tail..."

Puffing out his blond mustachios, Arvid Horn laughed and sat down. Even the king now raised his eyes and looked at the Great Hetman Lubomirski, commander of all the Polish and Lithuanian troops. Throughout the conversation, he had been sitting in a gilded chair on the king's left hand, his forehead in the palm of his hand, so that it was only possible to see his

round head, shaved down to a pigtail and looking as if it had been sprinkled with pepper, and the long, drooping, flowing mustachios.

When silence fell, he seemed to come to himself; he sighed and sat upright. Big, bony, and broad-shouldered, he slowly laid his hand on the diamond-studded mace thrust into his costly embroidered cummerbund. His hook-nosed face, slightly scarred with smallpox, with its sunken cheeks, and the hectic skin drawn tight over the cheekbones, was so aloof and proudly morose that the king's eyelids quivered and he bent down to stroke the dog. The Great Hetman rose slowly to his feet. For him the long-awaited hour of retribution had come.

He was Poland's most powerful magnate, more influential in his vast possesions than any king. When he set off for the Sejm or to Czenstochow for the pilgrimage, in front of and behind his carriage rode no less than five thousand of the gentry on horseback, in britzskas and in carts, dressed identically in mulberry-red tunics with azure-blue sleeves. In the event of a general mobilisation for campaigns against the Ukraine in revolt or against the Tatars, he brought out his three regiments of hussars in steel cuirasses with wings behind their shoulders. A Piast by descent, he had considered himself the first claimant to the Polish throne after the overthrow of Augustus. Then, in the previous year, two-thirds of the delegates at the Sejm had rattled their sabres and shouted: "We want Lubomirski!" But King Charles had been against this because he needed a puppet. Colonel Horn surrounded the seething Sejm with his fusiliers: they lit their slow matches and insulted the solemnity of the occasion with the rattle of drums. As if driving nails in with his heels, Horn had gone to the empty throne and shouted: "I propose Stanislaw Leszczynski!"

The Great Hetman was nursing his grudge. No one had ever dared sully his honour; yet this is what had been done by King Charles, who probably had less arable land and gold plate than the Lubomirskis. Staring about him with a dark, wild look, scratching the head of his mace with his nails, he began to speak with fury, hissing the consonants like a snake:

"Have I heard wrongly or did I dream it? Did the commander of a garrison dare give orders to me, the Great Hetman, me, Prince Lubomirski? A jest? Or impertinence? (The king

raised his hand with the beads; the Cardinal leaned forward in his chair and his owl-like, flabby face wobbled, but the hetman merely raised his voice menacingly.) My counsel is awaited here. I have listened to you, gentlemen; I have been communing with my conscience... Here is my answer. Our troops are unreliable. To compel them to shed their own and their brothers' blood, it is needful that the heart of every nobleman should sing with ecstasy and the head should whirl with wrath... It may be that King Stanislaw knows such a battle-cry — I do not know it. 'In God's name, forward, to death for the glory of the Leszczynskis!' They will not go. 'In God's name forward, for the glory of the King of Sweden'? They will throw down their sabres. I cannot lead the army. I am hetman no more!"

The hetman's distorted face had turned purple up to his shaggy eyebrows. Unable to contain himself, he pulled the mace from his belt and hurled it down at the callow young king's feet. The white bitch whimpered pathetically.

"Treachery!" shouted Horn in fury.

## 5

The word "berserker", meaning one in the grip of madness, comes from remote antiquity, from the custom among the northern peoples of getting intoxicated on the fly-agaric mushroom. Subsequently, in the Middle Ages, it was applied to Norman warriors who were seized with madness in battle; they fought without armour, shield or helm, wearing only their linen shirts, and were so terrifying that, according to the legend, twelve berserkers, the sons of King Canute, sailed in a separate ship, since even the Normans themselves feared them.

The seizure that afflicted King Charles could only be called an attack of this frenzy, so frightened and crushed were all the courtiers in his tent at the time; Count Piper did not even expect to come out of it alive...On receiving a pigeon-post despatch from Countess Kozelska, Charles, despite the views of Piper, Field-Marshal Rhenskjold and the other generals, remained unshakable in his vengeful desire to finish Augustus off at once, re-

duce all Poland to subjection under Stanislaw Leszczynski, give his troops a good rest and, next year, in a single summer campaign, climax the eastern war with the brilliant smashing of all Peter's hosts. He was not alarmed for the fate of Narva and Yuriev; they had reliable garrisons and strong walls which would be too much for the Muscovites, and the valiant Schlippenbach was there. Apart from everything else, it would be a blow to his pride, as heir to the glory of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, to bungle his great plans because of a pigeon-post despatch, especially one sent by a dissolute courtesan.

News of the arrival of the Russian auxiliary army at Sokal and of Augustus's surprise march on Warsaw under the very nose of Charles (who, like a gorged lion, was in no hurry to sink his fangs into the doomed Polish King) was brought by the Pole who had hacked the dish of sausage to pieces at Pan Sobeszczanski's banquet. Much embarrassed, Count Piper went to awake the king. It was dawn. Charles was sleeping quietly on a campaign bed, his hands folded on his chest. The feeble glow of a copper lantern illumined his big acquiline nose, the ascetic hollowness of the cheek, the tightly compressed lips — even in sleep he wanted to be remarkable. He looked like the stone effigy of a knight on a sarcophagus.

At first, Count Piper put his hopes on the king's cockerel, which was due to strike up in full voice at any moment. But the cockerel was having to share the monastic life with the king and merely moved about in his cage behind the canvas tent, squeezing out of his throat a noise that sounded like "Eek-eek-eek!"

"Wake up, Your Majesty," said Count Piper as gently as possible, turning up the lamp. "Your Majesty, bad news (Charles opened his eyes without stirring)... Augustus has given us the slip..."

Charles, in his linen underpants and woollen stockings, promptly put his feet on the mat and, resting his chin on his fists, stared at Piper, who told him with all the tactfulness of the courtier about the happy new turn of events for Augustus.

"My boots and breeches!" said Charles slowly, opening his unblinking eyes still more frighteningly — they even began to glitter, or they were reflecting the light of the lamp, which was

beginning to smoke. Piper hurried out of the tent and returned immediately with Bjorkenhjelm in a hastily donned peruke. The generals came into the tent. Charles lifted up his legs and put on his breeches, pulled on his boots, buttoned up his coat, breaking two fingernails as he did so, and only then did he give vent to his fury:

"You pass your time with sluts, you've become as fat as a Catholic monk!" he barked (because his jaws were rigid and his teeth were chattering) at the entirely blameless General Rosen. "Today is the day of your shame," he shouted at General Lowenhaupt, turning as if to strike him with his sword. "You'd be more suitably employed trailing along with a low rank in my army's baggage train! Where are your scouts? I learn the news last of all! I learn the most important news, on which the fate of Europe hangs, from a drunken Polish gentleman! I learn it from courtesans! I am made to look ridiculous. I am still amazed that the Cossacks haven't dragged me asleep out of my tent with a rope round my neck and carted me off to Moscow! And you, Piper, I advise you to exchange the count's coronet on your coat of arms for dunce's cap. You are a guzzler of snipe, partridges and the like, a drunkard, and an ass. How dare you pretend to be hurt? I'd have you hanged, drawn and quartered with the greatest of pleasure. Where are your spies, I ask you? Where are your despatch riders, who are supposed to inform me of events twenty-four hours before they occur? To hell! I quit the army, I become a private person! I am sick of being your king!"

Charles then tore off all buttons on his coat. He kicked a hole in the drum with his boot. He snatched the wig from Baron Bjorkenhjelm's head and tore it to ribbons. No one protested as he charged about the tent amid the recoiling courtiers. When the seizure began to subside, Charles put his hands behind his back and bowed his head:

"I order immediately that troops be raised as for an emergency. I give you three hours, gentlemen, to assemble them. I am going into the field. You will learn all the details from my orders. Leave my tent. Bjorkenhjelm, pen, paper and ink."

# 6

"This is intolerable... We've been waiting here for ages... More determination, a good attack, and we could spend the night in Warsaw," grumbled the Countess Kozelska, looking through the carriage window at the myriad lights of camp-fires scattered in a wide arc before the city, invisible in the darkness of night. The countess was exhausted. Her elegant carriage with the gold cupid had been damaged during the fording of a small stream and she had been obliged to transfer to the uncomfortable, shaky, ugly coach of Pani Anna Sobeszczanska. The countess was so bitter, and Pani Anna seemed to her such a contemptible creature that she was even kind to this Polish woman of the backwoods.

"The king's carriage is in front of us, but he isn't there... What he's thinking of, God alone knows... No preparations for supper and rest..."

With an effort, the countess tugged the carriage window down by its leather strap. There was a warm smell of horses' sweat and the appetising smoke of field-kitchens. The night was full of camp noises; men were shouting to one another, carts were getting entangled and breaking; shouts, oaths, guffaws, horses' hoofbeats, distant shots. The countess was sick to death of these joys of campaign life. She raised the window and leaned back in a corner. Everything impeded her, her crumpled dress, and the burnous, and the corners of the chests; she would dearly have liked to bite someone and draw blood...

"I'm afraid we shall find the king's palace looted and in total disorder... The Leszczynski family are notorious for their greed, and I know Stanislaw only too well – he's a hypocrite, a skinflint, and he's petty-minded. He fled from Warsaw with more than merely a prayer-book in his pocket. I advise you, my dear, to have someone's private house in reserve, if, of course, you have respectable acquaintances in Warsaw... Don't count too much on King Augustus... Lord, what a rogue he is!"

Pani Anna enjoyed her chats with the countess; they were a veritable high-school education in top society. Ever since girlhood, when charming curves were becoming noticeable under her blouse, Pani Anna had dreamed of the exciting life. For this, all she had to do was look at herself in the mirror; she

was beautiful, not just pretty, sharp, intelligent, shrewd, mischievous and tireless. Her parents' house had been poor. Her father, a ruined gentleman, had lived by trading at the fairs and gambling at the card tables of the rich aristocracy. He was rarely at home. In a shabby dinner-jacket, tired, subdued, with a crumpled face, he used to sit at the window and quietly watched his wretched household. Anna, his only and much-loved daughter, would pester him to tell her about his adventures. Her father, reluctantly at first and then with growing inspiration, would begin boasting of his exploits and powerful acquaintances. Anna listened as to a fairy-tale, to truth and fiction about the wonders and luxuries of the princely Wiszniewiecki, Potocki, Lubomirski and Czartoryski families... When, after selling his last wretched horse to pay a gambling debt and eating the last chicken, her father married her off to the elderly Sobeszczanski, Anna did not complain, realising that this marriage was only a reliable stepping-stone to the future. She was merely annoyed that her husband was too passionate and had fallen in love with her in a way more befitting a younger man. Her heart was kind, incidentally, but in complete subordination to her reason.

And now chance had swept her to the very summit of fortune. The king had fallen into her coils. Pani Anna did not lose her head like any fool of a woman; her shrewd mind began sniffing around like a mouse in a dark granary; everything must be thought over and foreseen. To her husband, who usually, like any infatuated spouse, did not understand or notice anything, she declared tenderly: "I've had enough of the backwoods! You ought to be happy for me, Josef. Now I want to be the first lady in Warsaw. Don't worry about anything; eat, drink, be merry, and carry on adoring me."

The difficult part would be to outwit Countess Kozelska, get rid of her before she knew what was happening and, finally, the most ticklish thing of all, not serve the king as a passing fancy, but tie him down for good...

Feminine charms would not be enough for this; experience was needed too. Pani Anna wasted no time in extracting the secrets of bewitchment out of the countess.

"Oh no, my dear Countess, in Warsaw I am ready to live in a hovel just so long as I'm close to you, like a little bee near

a rose," said Pani Anna, sitting with her legs tucked up in another corner of the carriage and stealing an occasional look at the countess, whose eyes were closed, her face now rosy in the light of the fires, now lost in shadow like the moon behind clouds. "After all, I'm just a child, really. I still tremble when the king talks to me; I don't want to say something stupid or improper."

The countess began talking as if answering her own thoughts, which were as sour as vinegar:

"When the king is hungry, he guzzles rye bread or Strasbourg pâté with equal relish. In one wayside tavern, he latched on to a pock-marked Cossack wench who was running like lightning across the yard to the cellar and then back to the tavern with the jugs. She seemed like a woman to him... It only means one thing to him... Oh, the monster! Countess Konigsmark got him by showing her garters during a dance: black veltet ribbons tied in a bow on pink stockings..."

"Jesus Maria, you mean that works on him too?" whispered Pani Anna.

"He fell in love like a beast of the field with the Russian boyarina Volkova. She changed her dress and shift several times during a ball. He ran into the room, seized her shift and wiped his sweaty face with it... It was the same last century with Philip II of France — only there it ended with a long attachment; but boyarina Volkova, to everybody's delight, slipped out from under his nose..."

"I'm frightfully stupid," cried Pani Anna, "I don't understand what that person's underwear has to do with it."

"It's not the shift, it's the skin of the person, its particular fragrance... Her skin is to a woman as the scent is to a flower; all the girls in the convent schools know that... For a lecher like our beloved king, his nose decides his sympathies..."

"Oh, Holy Virgin!"

"Look closely at his enormous nose, of which he is very proud, since he thinks it gives him a resemblance to Henry the Fourth... He is always inflating his nostrils like a gundog that has scented partridge..."

"Which means that scent, fragrant powders and aromatic salves are particularly important, does it not? That's what I take it to mean, dear Countess."

"If you have read the Odyssey, you should remember that the enchantress Circe turned men into swine. Don't pretend to be so naive, my dear. Incidentally, all this is rather revolting, tiresome and degrading..."

The countess fell silent. Pani Anna fell thoughtful. Who had been outwitted by whom? A horse's muzzle, its black lips shedding foam, appeared outside the carriage window. The king had arrived. He jumped down from the saddle and opened the door. His nostrils were distended, his big, lively face was lit up in a dazzling smile. By the light of the torch, which was being held by a horseman, he was so magnificent in his light gilded helmet with the visor raised and in the purple cloak dashingly thrown back over one shoulder, that Pani Anna said to herself, "You must not make any mistakes."

"Come out, ladies," exclaimed the king cheerfully, "and you will be present at a historical spectacle..."

Pani Anna promptly fluttered out of the carriage with a thin squeal. The countess said:

"My back's broken, which you doubtless intended, Your Majesty. I am not properly dressed and I shall stay here and doze on an empty stomach."

"If you need a litter, I will send for one!" the king replied sharply.

"A litter? For me?" Augustus recoiled slightly from the look she flashed at him with her green eyes. The countess flew out of the carriage like a bombshell with its fuse ignited. She was wearing a peach-coloured burnous a-glitter with precious stones that trembled in her ears, on her neck, on her fingers, and with a coiffure somewhat dishevelled by the journey, but nonetheless captivating. "Always at your service!" She thrust her bare hand under his elbow. Once again, Pani Anna realised how great were the arts of this woman.

The three of them walked to the king's carriage, where, in the light of the torches, a squadron of picked mounted Polish gentry were waiting in cuirasses with white swan's feathers affixed to their shoulders on iron hoops. Augustus and the ladies — one on each side and slightly behind him — sat in chairs on a carpet. Pani Anna's heart was beating; it seemed to her that the towering horsemen with the wings and the light gleaming on their cuirasses and helmets around them were an-

gels of heaven come down to earth to return Augustus his Warsaw palace, his glory and his wealth... She closed her eyes and recited a short prayer to herself: "Let the king be like a lamb in my arms..."

The drumming of hoof-beats was heard. The squadron parted. The Great Hetman Lubomirski approached out of the darkness with his escort, also with wings behind their shoulders, but of ordinary black plumes. Riding right up to the king, the Great Hetman threw aside the reins, and with cloak billowing, sprang down from his snorting steed and kneeled before Augustus:

"Forgive my treachery if you can, Your Majesty..."

His dark, burning eyes were steady, his inflamed face was sombre, his voice broken. He had swallowed his pride. He did not take off his diamond-fringed fur hat, and his dry hands were trembling...

"My treachery to you came of my madness, my clouded mind. Believe me, I never acknowledged Stanislaw as king for a moment... My sense of outrage tore at my guts. I waited for the right moment... I threw my mace down at his feet... I spat and left him. The commandant's soldiers fell on me in the palace courtyard... Thank God, my sword arm is still strong... I confirmed the rupture with Leszczynski by shedding the blood of knaves... I offer you my life."

As he listened, Augustus slowly drew off his gauntlets. He threw them down on the carpet and his face cleared. He rose, reached out and shook the hetman by both hands.

"I believe you, Great Hetman... With all my heart, I forgive you and I embrace you..."

And with all his strength, he pressed the other's face to his chest, to the centaurs and nymphs embossed on his Italian-made armour. After holding the hetman there slightly longer than was necessary, Augustus ordered another chair to be brought. But the chair had already been brought. Fingering his crushed cheek, the Great Hetman began telling about the events in Warsaw after his refusal to fight Augustus and the Russians.

Panic had begun in Warsaw. The Cardinal Primate Radzijewski, who at the Lublin Sejm the previous year had publicly, on his knees before the Crucifixion, sworn loyalty to Augustus

and the freedom of the Rzecz Pospolita, had kissed the Lutheran Bible a month later in Warsaw in loyalty to King Charles and had demanded, actually foaming at the mouth, the dethronement of Augustus, proposing Prince Lubomirski as candidate for the throne; but there and then, on the demand of Arvid Horn, he had betrayed the prince. Three times a traitor, he had been the first to flee from Warsaw, nevertheless contriving to take with him several trunks full of church treasure.

For three days, King Stanislaw wandered round the empty palace; each morning, fewer courtiers turned up for the king's levee. Arvid Horn did not let him out of his sight; he swore that he would hold Warsaw with his garrison alone. Since, by the rules of etiquette, he could not be present at the king's table, he sat in the next room for dinner and supper, his spurs jingling. In order not to have to listen to this irritating sound, Stanislaw read Apuleius aloud to himself in Latin between courses. On the fourth night, he nevertheless managed to slip out of the palace with his barber and valet, wearing country clothes and a false beard. He rode through the city gates on a cart with two tar barrels containing the entire royal treasury. Arvid Horn realised too late that Stanislaw was a true Leszczynski. Apart from the recitations of Apuleius and the bored promenades round the empty palace rooms with his dog, he had been busy with something else during those days... Arvid Horn tore the curtains from the king's bed and stamped on them, ran the palace steward through with his sword and shot the commander of the night watch. But nothing now could stop the flight from Warsaw of the distinguished nobility, who in one way or another were associated with Leszczynski.

Augustus roared with laughter at these stories, banged his fists on the arm-rests of his chair and turned to the ladies. The Countess Kozelska's eyes expressed only cold contempt, whereas Pani Anna burst into bell-like peals of silvery laughter.

"What counsel will you give me, Great Hetman? A siege or an immediate assault?"

"Only an assault, my dear King. Arvid Horn's garrison is a small one. Warsaw must be taken before King Charles arrives."

"Immediate assault, the devil take it! Wise counsel."

Augustus's iron palletes rattled belligerently. "If the assault is to succeed, the army must be well fed, even if only on boiled goose... At a modest estimate, that makes five thousand birds! Hm!" He wrinkled his nose. "It wouldn't be a bad idea to give these men their pay... Prince Dmitry Mikhailovich Golitsyn was only able to allot me twenty thousand efimki... Chicken feed! And tsar Peter isn't generous where money's concerned. No, he isn't generous at all. I was counting on the cardinal's riches and the royal treasury, but all has been stolen!" He shouted, going red in the face. "And I can hardly expect contributions from my own capital city."

Prince Lubomirski listened to all this with his eyes on the ground and then said quietly:

"My army coffer is not yet empty... Simply give the command..."

"Thank you, I shall willingly avail myself of it," replied Augustus a shade too hastily, but with impeccable Versailles courtesy. "I need about a hundred thousand efimki... I shall return them after the assault..." Beaming, he rose to his feet and once again embraced the hetman so that their cheeks touched. "Go, Prince, and rest! We also would rest."

The hetman mounted his horse and galloped into the darkness without looking back. Augustus turned to the ladies.

"Ladies, you shall be recompensed for your enervating journey... Simply tell me your wishes... The first of them, and the most modest, I would guess, is to have supper... Do not think that I have forgotten about your comfort and amusement... Such is the duty of a king – never to forget anything... Pray come to my carriage..."

# *Chapter Five*

## I

Gavrila Brovkin was galloping at full speed to Moscow in a cart on iron wheels drawn by a team of three with the tsar's written authority for changes of post-horses. He was carrying mail for the tsar and a message for the Prince-Emperor to hasten the delivery to Petersburg of all kinds of ironware. Andrei Golikov was travelling with him. Brovkin had been ordered to waste no time on the way. As if he wanted to! Gavrila's eager heart was a hundred sazhens ahead of the troika. As they galloped up to next post-station, Gavrila, covered in dust, would run on to the porch and bang on the door with the haft of his whip. "Commissary!" he would shout, his eyes rolling. "Horses this instant!" He would advance on the sleepy station-master, whose only sign of office was the gold braid on his hat. During the hot weather the man usually barefooted, wearing only his underpants and a long unbelted blouse. "A dipper of kvass, and get the horses harnessed up while I'm drinking it..."

Andrei Golikov also was in a state of febrile rapture. Gritting his teeth and hanging on to the side of the cart so as not to fall off and get killed, his hair blowing behind him, his nose pointing forward like a woodcock's beak, he seemed to have opened his eyes for the first time to look at the forests with their warm fragrance of pines as they glided to meet him, at the round marsh lakes fringed with bright green and reflecting the sky and the summer clouds, and at the winding streams from whose black water rose flocks of all kinds of fowl whenever the wheels thundered over a bridge. The little bell under the rocking shaft-bow jingled its mournful refrain about the endless journey ahead of them. The driver urged the horses on, uncomfortably aware of the crazed passenger with the whip behind his bent back.

Only very occasionally did they pass neglected, sparsely

populated villages with wretched huts, in which, instead of windows, there was a hole two hands'-breadths wide with a bladder stretched over it, a smoke-begrimed slit above the low door and, under a blasted willow-tree, a little roofed icon so that there should at least be something before which to remember the Lord in these desolate parts. In some hamlets, only two or three houses were inhabited, in others, the thin roofs had caved in, the gates had fallen down and the whole place was overgrown with nettles. As for the people, they were only to be found in the dense forests, or in the clearings in the North along the Dvina or the Vyg; or they had fled beyond the Urals or to the lower reaches of the Don.

"Oh, what poor villages, oh, what a wretched life they have!" whispered Golikov applying his slender hand to his cheek in a compassion. Gavrila replied reasonably:

"There aren't many people, and it would take more than ten years to travel round the borders of our country. That's why there's such poverty; they make such heavy demands on everyone. I've been in France... Saints alive! The peasants can hardly stand on their feet; they eat grass with sour wine, and not all of them get even that. But a marquis or the Dauphin himself can go out hunting and shoot game by the cartload... There's poverty in France, but the reason's different."

Golikov did not ask why the French peasants could hardly stand on their feet... His was an unschooled mind; he did not understand causes. It was through his eyes, through his ears and through his nostrils that he savoured the bittersweet wine of life, and rejoiced, and was greatly tormented...

It was more cheerful in the Valdai Hills. Then came meadows dotted with last year's ricks on top of which kites were perched, and forest paths that plunged into the leafy woods, with berries for the picking everywhere. The murmur of the forests changed, becoming softer and more powerful. The villages were more prosperous, with gates and ornate carved and painted porches. They stopped at a well to water the horses, and there they saw a girl of about sixteen with a thick plait, in a high birch-bark head-dress with a light blue bead on every point. She was so charming to the eye that you wanted to jump down off the cart and kiss her on the lips. Golikov sighed with

restraint. Gavrila, paying no attention to such nonsense as a village maid, said to her:

"What are you staring at? Can't you see our rim's broken? Run and fetch the blacksmith."

"Oh!" she cried softly, dropped her yoke and buckets and scampered away over the sward, her pink heels twinkling under the embroidered hem of her linen dress. She must have said something to someone, for the blacksmith soon arrived. Anyone who looked at such a man would cry out with pleasure: Now there's a strapping fellow! The face with its curly beard was well formed, there was a faint smile on the lips as if the blacksmith had come to these fools of travellers out of condescension alone; you could have thumped him in the chest with a two-pood weight and he wouldn't have flinched; his massive arms were folded on his chest behind the leather apron.

"Broken your rim, have you?" he asked mockingly in a sing-song voice. "Moscow workmanship, that's obvious." Shaking his head, he walked round the cart, looked under it, gripped it by the rear end and lightly shook it with the two men still sitting in it. "The whole thing's falling to pieces. This cart's hardly fit for carrying firewood."

Gavrila lost his temper and argued. Golikov looked with delight at the smith; of all miracles, this was probably the most astounding. How could he not miss his brush, his paints and his fragrant oak boards?.. Everything, everything flies past the eyes, goes irrevocably into the mists of oblivion. Only the painter with his art stops this insane annihilation.

"Will you be long mending it?" asked Gavrila. "Every minute counts. I'm rushing on an errand for the tsar."

"It could be a long mending, and it could be a short time," replied the blacksmith. Gavrila looked sternly at his whip, then glanced sideways at the other.

"Very well... How much d'you want?"

"How much do I want?" The smith laughed. "My work's expensive. If I asked for what it was worth, you wouldn't have enough money. But I know you after all, Gavrila Ivanovich, you and your brother passed through here in spring and you both spent the night at my place. Forgotten? Your brother's a bright fellow. I know Tsar Peter well too, and he knows me. He always drops in at the forge whenever he's passing this way.

He's a bright one too. Anyway, turn off for the forge; we'll manage something."

The forge stood on a slope by the highway. It was a low structure built of enormous logs, with a turf roof and with three bays for shoeing the horses. There were wheels, ploughshares and barrows lying about. At the door, in leather aprons and with sweat-bands round their curly hair, stood two of his younger brothers and the eldest, the striker, a gloomy, tall, gangling man with a beard. Without undue haste, but quickly and cheerfully, the blacksmith set to work. He unharnessed the horses himself, turned the cart upside down, took off the wheels and drew out the iron axles. "Look, both cracked. That Moscow smith deserves one over the head with this axle..." He pushed them both into the furnace, emptied in a sack of charcoal and shouted to his youngest brother: "Vanya, pump harder! You can't fell trees by sitting at your ease!" The brothers got into their stride. Gavrila leaned against the door, sucking his pipe. Golikov sat on the raised threshold. They offered to help if it would speed things up. The blacksmith waved them away: "Take it easy, just see what the Valdai smiths are like..."

Vanya worked the bellows and sparks whirled crackling towards the roof. The bearded eldest brother stood like an idol bathed in the glow they cast, his hands resting on the long handle of his hammer. The smith kept moving an axle in the hotly breathing furnace.

"Just so as you know, we're the Vorobyovs," he said still smiling into his curly moustaches. "We smiths are armourers and bell-founders... You have one of our mellow chimes under your shaft-bow... Last year, tsar Peter sat on the threshold just like you and kept asking questions: 'Wait, Kondraty Vorobyov,' he'd say, 'lay off hammering for a second and answer me first; why do your bells have mellow chimes? Why does a sword blade of yours bend without breaking? Why does a Vorobyov pistol hit its mark at twenty-five paces and more without a misfire?' I would answer him: 'Your Royal Majesty, Peter Alexeyevich, our bells have those chimes because we weigh the copper and tin on scales, as we were taught by knowledgeable people, and we cast without bubbles. And a sword of ours bends without breaking because we heat it till it's mul-

berry red, then we temper it in hemp-seed oil. And our pistols shoot a long way without misfires because our father, Stepan Stepanovich, God rest his bones, used to birch us little ones till it hurt for each mistake and used to say: 'Bad workmanship is worse than thievery, and that's a fact...'"

Kondraty pulled the axle out of the furnace with the tongs, swung it on to the anvil, brushed off the scale with a switch and nodded his beard at the eldest brother. He took a step back and, swaying back and forward as he swung the hammer round in a circle, began striking. The red-hot sparks flew to the walls. Kondraty nodded to his middle brother: "Right, Stepa..." Then Stepan stood on the other side with a slightly smaller hammer and they started a succession of ringing blows that sounded like the Easter chimes—the eldest brother banged the hammer down once, Stepan struck twice, while Kondraty tapped away with a small hammer as he rotated the iron this way and that. "Stop!" he shouted suddenly and threw the forged axle on to the earth floor. "Vanya, hot it up a bit more."

"So he says to me," continued the blacksmith, wiping away the sweat with the palm of his hand: "Have you heard about the Tula smith Nikita Demidov? He has his own factory and his own mines in the Urals these days, and he has men signed on to him, and his houses are richer than mine, and he started out like you, with nothing to speak of... It's time you thought about big business instead of spending your life shoeing horses on the highway... There's no money to set you up; things are tight for me, but I'll give you some. Set up an arms factory in Moscow, or even better, in Petersburg... It's paradise there.' And he says all sorts of nice things to me; but me, I'm tempted, tempted... 'Oh, Your Majesty, Peter Alexeyevich,' I say to him, 'we have such a merry life by the highway... Our father used to say: 'A pancake's not a sword, it won't prick your stomach, eat your fill, sleep well, work smoothly...' And it's his advice that we follow... We have everything we need. We brew beer so strong it bursts the hoops on the barrels, and we drink your health, Sire. We put on fancy mittens, we go out on to the street and we have fun with fisticuffs. We don't want to leave this place. That's the answer I gave him. And he was so angry. 'You couldn't have given me a worse answer, Kondraty Voro-

byov. Whoever's content with everything and doesn't want to change the good for the better is going to lose everything. Oh,' says he, 'when will you lazy devils understand that?' He set me a real puzzle there..."

The blacksmith fell silent, frowned and bowed his head. His younger brothers looked at him. They too, of course, wanted to say something about this but they did not dare. He shook his head and grinned to himself.

"He pesters everybody like that... So we're lazy, are we? It turns out we're lazy." He quickly turned to the furnace, where the second axle was heating up, picked up the tongs and shouted "Get ready!" to his brothers.

An hour and a half later, the cart was ready, reassembled, firm and light. The girl in the birch-bark headdress had been loitering about the forge all this time. Kondraty finally noticed her.

"Masha!"

Her plait bobbed and she stood as if rooted to the ground. "Run and fetch the boyars some cold milk so that they can have a drink for the road."

Gavrila, screwing up his eyes as he watched the way her heels twinkled, asked:

"Your sister? An attractive girl..."

"Oh, never mind her," said the blacksmith. "It wouldn't be fair to give her in marriage, she's too young. She's no use at home for weaving, or milking, or minding the geese. All she ever thinks about is kneading blue clay and messing about making cats mounted on dogs or an old woman with a crook — very life-like though, and that's a fact... She moulds birds and beasts you've never seen in this world. Her room's full of the stuff. We tried to throw it out, but she screamed and wailed. We gave up in the end..."

"My God, my God," said Golikov quietly. "I must have a look at those things at once!" He stared with wide open eyes as if in holy terror at the blacksmith who slapped his sides and roared with laughter. Vanya and Stepan smiled with restraint, although they too wouldn't have been averse to a good guffaw. The girl in the birch-bark headdress brought an earthenware jar of milk. Kondraty said to her:

"Masha, this man wants to see your clay toys, goodness knows why. Show him..."

The girl froze, the jar of milk began to tremble in her hands.

"Oh, you mustn't, I shan't show him." She put the jar down on the grass, turned round, went away as if sleepwalking and disappeared behind the forge. All the brothers clutched their sides and their hair shook... Only Golikov did not laugh; he thrust his nose forward and stared at the corner round which the girl had just vanished.

"Well, what about it, Kondraty Stepanovich? Are we going to settle up?"

"What d'you mean, settle up?" The smith wiped his streaming eyes, straightened his moustache and thoughtfully stroked his beard. "If you see Tsar Peter, give him my greetings... Add what is due from yourself. And say that Kondraty Vorobyov begs him not to be angry; Kondraty Vorobyov is nobody's fool... The tsar will understand what I mean..."

## 2

Beyond the undulating fields, beyond the birch woods, beyond the rye fields, far beyond the blue forest, a rainbow was shining; one end was lost in the departing rain cloud; but gold sparks were glittering and winking where the other end touched the earth.

"You see that, Andrei?"

"Yes..."

"Moscow..."

"Gavrila Ivanovich, it's a good omen... The rainbow's lit the city up for us..."

"Myself, I can't understand why Moscow's sparkling like that... But you're glad you're coming to Moscow, aren't you?"

"I'll say I am... Glad, and frightened..."

"When we get there, we'll have a steam-bath straightaway... I'll hurry over to the Prince-Emperor in the morning... Then I'll take you to tsarevna Natalia Alexeyevna."

"That's what frightens me..."

"Listen, driver," said Gavrila almost ingratiatingly this time, "get a move on, my brave fellow, get a move on, I ask you as man to man..."

The road was smooth after the rain; lumps of mud were flying up from the horses' hooves. The leaves were shining on the silver birches. The breeze had become fragrant. Coming in the opposite direction was a long string of empty carts carrying peasants, with an unsold cow or a lame horse tethered to the tailboard. A post floated past bearing an eagle and the lettering: "To Moscow — 34 versts..." Again there were wretched little huts by the roadside, some sideways on, others with their backs to the road, and the peeling tent-roofed tower of a little church behind the hoary willows in the cemetery. Again a bare-bellied little urchin ran across the street right in front of the troika, tossing his head like a horse. The driver bent down and flicked him with the knout on the mosquito-bitten part where the legs begin, but the boy, undismayed, merely dashed off, following the troika with his round eyes.

And again, up hill and down dale. To the right, where a stream shone through the trees, bearded peasants in long shirts, one in front of the other, their feet well apart, were advancing across a meadow, their scythes flashing rhythmically. To the left, on the fringe of the forest, on the edge of the shadows, lay a herd of cattle, and the boy was running with a knout after a piebald bullock, and after him a dog, its ears bobbing up out of the grass... Another striped post — "31 versts"... Gavrila groaned:

"Driver, we've only done three versts..."

The driver turned round; he had a merry face with an upturned nose whose sole reason for existing between the rosy cheeks, was, it seemed, to insert itself into a glass of vodka...

"Don't count the versts by the posts, Boyar, count them by the taverns; you can't rely on the posts... Look, we'll get them going..."

He suddenly uttered a long, drawn-out "Oi-oi-oi, my beauties!", leaned back and lashed with the reins; the big-headed, different-coloured horses tore ahead at a gallop, turned off suddenly and stopped outside a tavern, an ancient, long hut with a high road-sign sticking up over the gates and, for the lit-

erate, traced out in cinnabar on an azure field over the door, the word: "Tavern".

"Can't be helped, Boyar, the horses are done in," said the driver cheerfully and took the tall felt hat off his head. "Beat me to death if you want, but you'd do better to order them to serve me a drop of vodka."

Looking very fresh and amiable, the tavern-keeper, dressed in the old-fashioned style in a cranberry-red caftan with a stand-up collar higher than his bald head, had already come out on to the rotting porch, holding a tray with three tots of vodka and three poppy-seed buns to go with them on a tray... It was no use, they had to get down off the cart and stretch their legs...

They began to approach Moscow in the damp twilight; there was no end to the estates, villages, woods, small churches and fences. Sometimes the shaft-bow brushed a lime-tree branch and the travellers were showered with raindrops. Light filtered through bottle-glass panes or mica windows everywhere; the beggars were still sitting on the church steps; the jackdaws cawed in the bell-tower arches. The wheels thundered over a wooden roadway... Gripping the driver by the shoulder, Gavrila pointed out which of the crooked side-streets were to be taken... "There, where the man's lying by the fence, opposite, into the dead end... Stop, stop, we're there!" He jumped out of the cart and knocked on the gates, bound, like a chest, with strips of tinned iron. Brovkin's famous wolf-manglers gave answer, barking frantically and rattling their chains.

It's pleasant after long absence to arrive at your parents' house. You go in, everything's familiar in a new way. A candle burns on the windowsill in the cool passage; there are carved benches by the walls for petitioners so that they can sit and wait quietly until summoned to the master. Further on is the empty winter passage with two stoves; a candle, fluttering in the draught, stands on the floor. On the left is a padded door leading into the unoccupied Dutch chambers for distinguished guests; on the right is the door into the warm, low-ceilinged rooms. But if you go straight on, you will begin wandering

along corridors and up and down steep stairways leading to cellars, basements, chambers, closets, store-rooms... There is a special, pleasant, cosy fragrance in your parents' house... The servants, pleased to see you arrive, talk and look lovingly at you, waiting to carry out your wishes...

As it happened, Gavrila's father, Ivan Artemich, was not at home; he was away touring his factories. Gavrila was met by the housekeeper, a massive (as was only right), stately woman with a heavy hand and a sing-song voice, the senior bailiff, about whom Ivan Artemich himself had said that he was Satan, and Karl, the major-domo, recently hired from abroad, with a name that no one could pronounce—a lanky, gloomy man with a face plump with inactivity and Russian food, a massive chin and a bulging forehead indicative of great intellect. Unfortunately, he had one blemish which had led to his arriving in Moscow to work for good wages; he wore a black velvet cover where his nose should have been, and his speech was somewhat nasal.

"I don't want anything, just to have a steam-bath," Gavrila told them. "Let there be jellied meat for supper, and beef pie, and goose, and something else that's filling. I've lost weight in Petersburg; I've been living on stinking salt pork and rusks..."

The housekeeper threw up her podgy hands and clasped them together: "Merciful Christ, how could you eat rusks!" The bailiff cried "Ai-ai-ai!" and sadly shook his goatee beard. The major-domo, who did not understand a word of Russian, stood like a stone statue, putting forward an enormous flat foot with supercilious pomposity and clasping his hands behind his back. The housekeeper began collecting clean linen for the bath and chattered away in her sing-song voice:

"We'll steam you, Master, we'll give you something to eat and drink and we'll lay you on a swan's-down bed. Sleep is sweet in your father's house... Everything is lovely here, trouble passes us by... The Dutch cows have all calved, every single one; the English pigs have each had litters of sixteen and the Prince-Emperor himself came to marvel... The berries and cherries in the orchard are unbelievable... It's paradise, paradise, your father's house... Except that it's empty—what a pity!.. Ivan Artemich walks round and round the rooms,

poor man... 'I'm bored, Agapovna,' he says. 'Maybe I should go and visit the factories again.' Your father has so much money, he'd lose count if it weren't for Senka," and she winked at the satanic bailiff. "Our only trouble is with that black-nosed one... Of course, we can't run our house these days without such a person; they've been saying in Moscow that it's high time Ivan Artemich was given advancement... Well, that one puts a hat with red feathers on his noddle, bangs the floor with his staff, stamps that great foot of his—and it looks impressive, I must say, you'll have to admit it looks impressive... He was major-domo for the King of Prussia until his nose got bitten off, or something... We were scared of him at first, after all, he's a foreigner, and that's no joke! Ignashka, the stable-hand, taught him the balalaika... Ever since then, he's been tinkling all day and getting on everybody's nerves... And he's a heavy eater... He follows me about: 'Ma, something to eat...' I've never known such a fool... Although maybe he needs that for his calling too. We had big company at table on St. John's day; tsaritsa Praskovia Fyodorovna came visiting, and without Karl, of course, we'd have been in trouble. He put on his coat, bless him, gold braid, about ten pounds of the stuff, and he put on elk mittens with fingers; he took a gold dish, stood a goblet worth a thousand rubles on it and, bending his knee, he presented it to the tsaritsa. He took another dish, another goblet even better than the other one, and presented it to the tsarevna Natalia Alexeyevna..."

While the housekeeper was telling her story, the servant who, with the appearance of the major-domo in the house, was now called the kammerdiener, or valet, took off Gavrila's dusty coat and waistcoat, undid his cravat and, grunting, began tugging off the heavy boots. Gavrilla suddenly put his feet down, jumped up and shouted:

"The tsarevna was in our house? What are you babbling about?"

"She was, she was indeed, sitting on Ivan Artemich's left hand and ever so lovely... They were all looking at her, they forgot to eat and they forgot to drink... She had rings on her fingers and bangles on her wrists, and shoulders as white as a swan, and a birth-mark the size of a buckwheat grain over her breast—everybody noticed it... She was wearing a dress

like flax in bloom, lighter than air, and her hips were all built up, and her hem was covered with silk roses, and she wore the tail of a bird of paradise on her head..."

Gavrila did not stop to hear any more... Throwing a sheepskin jacket over his shoulders, his Tatar slippers slapping over the floor, he raced along the corridors and stairs to the bathhouse. Once in the humid changing-room, he suddenly remembered something:

"Agapovna, where's the man who came with me?"

It turned out that Andrei Golikov had been refused admittance by the major-domo and was still sitting in the unharnessed cart out in the yard. He was happy enough with his thoughts anyway. The stars were shining over the black roofs, there were odours from the kitchen, the hayloft and the cattle-sheds. It was all very homely, and once in a while he caught the deliciously sweet scent of lime blossom. This in particular made Andrei's heart beat faster. Leaning on his elbows, he gazed up at the stars. What were all those lights sprinkled so thickly over the deep violet firmament? How far away were they and why were they burning up there? He did not know and was not even giving a thought to it. But peace flowed into his heart from the stars in the sky. How small he was in that cart! Yes, small—but not small in the way he had once been taught by the elder Nectarius; he did not see himself as a humble worm, as pitiful flesh... No beast could have endured what Andrei had suffered in his short life; they had beaten, tortured, threatened, punished him with a hungry and cold death, but now, like the king of kings, turning his eyes to the lights of the universe, he was listening to a mysterious voice within him: "Go, Andrei, do not be downhearted, do not turn aside; soon, soon your wondrous force will rejoice and play, and all things shall be possible to it; out of ugliness you shall create a beautiful world in your own transformation..."

For hearing a demonic voice like that during his stay with the elder, he would have had to be chained for forty days, living on a dipperful of water and secretly anointing his bloody scars with icon-lamp oil. When he thought of this, Andrei smiled without bitterness. He had a fleeting memory of how once he, the king of kings, had been beaten with particular brutality by some artisans in a foul-smelling tavern on Varvarka Street.

They had dragged him out by the feet on to the porch and thrown him onto the dung-stained snow. What had he been beaten for? He could not even remember. It was during that terrible winter when the hanged streltsy were swinging on the walls of Kitai-gorod and the Kremlin. Hungry, and with a torn peasant's coat over his naked body, barefoot, Andrei had gone round the taverns in despair and in sorrow, begging the revellers for a glass of vodka and secretly hoping that he'd be killed in the end; he had agonisingly wanted that, so sorry had he felt for himself... There, in some tavern, he had met a drunken sexton from the Church of St. Varvara the Great Martyr. A man with a squint, a deformed nose and a thin queue, he had persuaded Andrei to seek the peace of paradise, to go to the elder Nectarius for the flesh to be mortified with the fury of a lion... "Cranks!" whispered Andrei. "Torment the flesh! But the flesh can be oh so beautiful!.." And something else glimmered in his memory: a quiet evening in the village of Palekh: golden dust; the cows are lowing as they turn to their fences. His mother, thin, but with the shoulders of a man, goes to the gates, which should have been repaired long ago; the yard is poor and neglected. Andrei and his brothers, born at intervals of a year, are sitting on an overturned cart without wheels. They wait, they endure—with such a mother you must have patience... She opens the lop-sided gates a little way. Rubbing her broad flanks against the two leaves of the gate and mooing timidly and amiably, in comes Burenka, who feeds them. Mother's face is dark, bitter and mournful. Burenka's muzzle is warm, her brow is curly, her nose is wet and her eyes are deep violet. She won't give offence. She pants heavily at the little boys and goes to the well for a drink. And there, at the well, Mother sits down on a stool and starts milking her. Swish-swish, swish-swish—Burenka's milk jets into the pail. The little boys stay sitting on the cart and wait patiently. Their mother brings earthenware jars and fills them with milk from the pail. "Come on," says their mother in an unfriendly voice. The first to drink the fresh milk is Andrei, swallowing as much as his stomach can hold. His brothers watch him drinking and the youngest even sighs briefly, because his turn will be the last.

"Hey, traveller, get out of the cart!" Andrei started. Before

him stood the young valet with an angry look on his face. "Gavrila Ivanovich summons you to the bathhouse to steam yourself... Take your boots off here and chuck your hat and coat under the cart as well... It's not like the boyars' houses here, you can't come in wearing rags..."

In a good humour after their bath, with towels round their necks, Gavrila and Andrei sat down to supper. Agapovna sent the major-domo off to his cubicle so that he should not embarrass them. Her plump hands simply flew over the table as she laid the tastiest imaginable dishes and poured the vintage liqueurs and cordials into Venetian glasses brought out specially for the occasion. When the candles were fully lit, Gavrila noticed that a frame with canvas stretched over it had been stood on a chair in the corner. Agapovna sadly put her head on one side and propped up her cheek with her hand.

"I don't know how to show you that in front of a stranger... Your sister Sanka sent it specially for St. John's day from Holland... Ivan Artemich, bless him, hung it on the wall, then got to worrying, then took it down and covered it with some canvas... When she sent it, she wrote: "Don't be embarrassed, Papa, for God's sake, hang my portrait openly in the dining-room; they hang riskier things in Europe, so don't be a barbarian..."

Gavrila left the table, took a candle and tugged away the canvas from what was standing on the chair in the corner. Golikov half rose and caught his breath... It was a portrait of boyarina Volkova, looking indescribably beautiful and incredibly seductive...

"Well, well," was all Gavrila said, holding the candle in front of it. The painter had portrayed his subject in the middle of the morning sea, on a wave, on a dolphin's back, lying as nature had made her, except that she was discreetly covering herself with one hand, while in the other she was holding a goblet full of grapes, with two doves perched on the brim and pecking the fruit. Above her head, on the right and on the left, two babes upside down were puffing their cheeks and blowing into sea-shells. Sanka's dewy-eyed young face was smiling, with the corners of her mouth turned up very slyly...

"Good old Sanka," said Gavrila, also not a little startled. "She's the one we're sending you to in Holland... Mind some

devil doesn't get into you there... Venus, pure Venus! No wonder cavaliers are duelling for her with swords, and no wonder some have been killed..."

## 3

The protector of Moscow, the Prince-Emperor, lived in a spacious house that had belonged to his forefathers on Myasnitskaya Street, near Lubyanskaya Square. There he had a church with its clergy, felt-rolling, linen, tanning workshops, forges, stable, cowsheds, sheep-pens, chicken runs, and repositories and cellars crammed with all kinds of goods and built of huge logs and strong enough to last hundreds of years. The house was the same, being devoid of silly extravagances (which had begun to flaunt themselves off ever since the time of tsar Alexei Mikhailovich), ungainly, but solidly built with a shingle roof covered with moss, and with little windows high above the ground. The manners and customs in the house were likewise old-fashioned. But if anyone had, in the simplicity of his mind, been misled by this and had turned up in the old style in a fur-lined coat down to his heels with long sleeves, to say nothing of a beard, then let him be descended from Rurik, but he would leave the house to the laughter of Romodanovsky's servants, his fur coat off at the knees, mere tufts of beard left on his cheeks, and his beard sticking out of his pocket so that it could go with him to his grave should he be ashamed to appear before God without it... When the Prince-Emperor was entertaining on the grand scale, many of the distinguished guests sighed heavily as they prepared themselves for the occasion, there was such embarrassment, indecent tomfoolery and all kinds of practical jokes at his banquets. One trained bear was a pest; if one of the guests proved difficult, it went up to him, holding in its paws a tray with a goodly glass of pepper vodka on it and bellowed, demanding that it be downed. If the guest tried to wriggle out of it and did not want to drink, the bear threw the tray on the floor and began mauling him in earnest. The Prince-Emperor, however, only laughed so much that his stomach rocked the table, and the prince's jester--

intelligent, malicious, one-eyed, with only one tooth in his gums, would shout: "The bear knows which cattle to skin!.."

Rising early in the morning, the Prince-Emperor, in coloured Morocco leather boots and wearing a dark blouse bound round under the paps with a belt that had a prayer to Jesus woven on it, would attend morning church service. When a sunbeam penetrated the billowing clouds of incense, the light of the candles and the icon lamps faded, and the timid little priest proclaimed "Amen!" in a shaky voice, the Prince-Emperor flopped down on his knees on the mat, grunting heavily, applied his brow to the freshly washed floor, then, assisted to his feet again, kissed the cold cross and proceeded into the dining-room. There, sitting himself comfortably on a bench and straightening his black moustache, he would take a goblet of pepper vodka—so strong that any non-Russian, after drinking it, would sit for a long time with his mouth open—then the Prince-Emperor would snack on a piece of black bread sprinkled with salt, and eat cold fish and cold vegetable soup, various marinated and fermented delicacies, an assortment of noodles and roast meat—eating slowly, like a peasant. The other members of the household, and even princess Anastasia Fyodorovna, the tsaritsa Praskovia's sister, were silent at table, put down their spoons quietly and took morsels from the dishes between their fingers. In cages by the windows, quails and trained starlings began to give voice; one of them could even say quite distinctly: "Some vodka, Uncle..."

After drinking a dipperful of kvass, the Prince-Emperor would linger a while, rise to his feet and, the floorboards creaking under him, would go into the passage and be handed his coat, staff and hat. When his shadow, visible through the murky window-panes of the covered porch, slowly went down the steps, all who happened to be in the vicinity outside rushed off in all directions. He would walk alone across the yard along a brick-paved path. His neck was fat and he had difficulty in turning his head, but he noticed everything out of the corner of his protuberant eye—who had run in which direction, where he or she had hidden, what minor irregularities were being committed and where. He remembered everything. He was, however, extremely preoccupied with important mat-

ters of state and he simply had no time for trifles. He would walk through the iron gate in the fence into the neighbouring courtyard of the Preobrazhensky Commission. There, in the twilight of the long corridors, clerks and commission officials snatched off their hats before him and the sentries drew themselves up to attention.

Prokhor Chicherin, Clerk of the Preobrazhensky Commission, met him in the doors of the Chancellery and, as soon as the Prince-Emperor had taken his seat at the table in front of the little window under the mouldering vaulted ceiling, he at once began to talk of business matters in order of priority: yesterday, four finished bronze cannons and as many good cast-iron ones had been brought from Tula. Should they be sent off straightaway, and where—to Narva or Yuriev? Yesterday, the first company of the newly recruited regiment had finally been issued with uniforms, but the men were still barefoot. Shoes without buckles were due to arrive the following week; in the Chamber of Merchants, Soplyakov and Smurov, merchants of the shoemakers' guild, had sworn on the Bible that they would not let anyone down. What was to be done? Powder, slow matches, bags of bullets and sacks of flints had been sent to Narva in conformity with the Ukase. It had not been possible to send hand-grenades, because Eroshka Maximov, the warehouse superintendent, had been drunk two days running and refused to give the warehouse keys to anyone, and when they had tried to use force, he had in a frenzy threatened the men with a chopper of the kind used for shredding cabbage... What was to be done? Chicherin raised many problems of this kind, and towards the end, moving closer to the window under the vault, he took the columns of secret items (the depositions taken down by clerks at interrogations without the use of violence and at interrogations under torture) and began reading them out. The Prince-Emperor sat with his arm resting heavily on the table, so that it was impossible to tell whether he was listening or dozing, although Chicherin was well aware that he would be sure to catch the gist...

"A notebook one quarter of a sheet in size and half a finger thick was found under the floor-boards of the abandoned bathhouse where the unfrocked priest Grishka was hiding in the yard of the house inhabited by the tsarevnas Ekaterina Ale-

xeyevna and Maria Alexeyevna," said Chicherin, reading from the columns in as monotonous a voice as if he were dropping dry peas on top of Romodanovsky's head. "The first page of the note-book was inscribed: 'A Survey of All Kinds of Wisdom.' Underneath was written: 'In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost... There is a herb zelezeka by name; it grows in ravines, in places where there has been a forest fire; it is small, with nine leaves on each side and three booms on top—scarlet, purple and blue. This herb is very powerful; pluck it when the moon is new, pound it, boil in water and drink thrice and you will see water and air demons about you... Say to them the cryptic word nstsdtchndsi, and your desire will be accomplished..."

The Prince-Emperor sighed deeply and half-raised his eyelids:

"Say that word again, only more distinctly this time..."

Chicherin scratched his forehead, frowned, and almost with malice said: "nstsdtchndsi..." He glanced at the Prince-Emperor, who nodded. The clerk went on reading:

"'O princes, great men, o tears and sighings! What is desirable? We desire to subdue the present time and its frenzy, that the ordinary times might come again...'"

"That's it, that's it!" The Prince-Emperor stirred on his chair and a gleam of derision came and went in his protuberant eyes; he had sensed something. "The herb zelezeka makes sense. Has Grishka confessed to possession of the notebook?"

"Grishka confessed after two hours under torture. He bought it, he says, on the Kislovka from an unknown person for four kopecks and then hid it in the bathhouse under the floor-boards out of, he says, stupidity."

"Did you ask him what was meant by 'that the ordinary times might come again'?"

"I did. He was given five strokes of the knout and he replied that he had bought the notebook merely for the paper so that he could bake communion bread on it, and he had not read what was written in it, and he knew nothing about it."

"Oh, the traitor, the traitor!" The Prince-Emperor slowly licked his finger and turned over the tattered pages of the notebook. He read one or two passages aloud: "The herb vakharia, reddish yellow in hue; if a man has been fatally poisoned, let

him drink of it and he will be purged and discharged in all possible ways.' A useful herb," said the Prince-Emperor. And, further, running his fingernail along the lines: "It is said in the Book of Kirill; there will come a devil and a seducer, the portents of his coming: the herb Nicotiniana, that is, tobacco they will command that it be burned and that its smoke be swallowed, and that it be ground to a powder, and sniffed, and instead of the singing of psalms, there shall be the ceaseless sniffing of that powder and sneezing. Another portent—beard-shaving...' Oh, well..." The Prince-Emperor closed the notebook. "Let's go, Clerk, and ask him just who wants to subdue the present time. This unfrocked priest is a wily old hand at the game. I've long known about this notebook; he has been round half Moscow with it."

Descending the narrow, damp-eroded brick staircase into the cellar dungeon, Chicherin, as always, said unhappily:

"This damp is rising from the ground; the bricks are rotten. We could be killed at any moment; new stairs ought to be built..."

"Yes, they ought..."

In front of them went a copy clerk with a candle. He was dressed like the clerk in foreign clothes, but badly worn: he had a copper inkpot dangling from his neck and a roll of paper protruding from his pocket, the flap of which was half torn off. He put the candle down on an oak table in a low-ceilinged cellar, and several rats scuttled like shades to their lairs in the corners.

"And we've got rats breeding down here now," said the clerk. "I keep meaning to get some arsenic from the pharmacy."

"Yes, you should do that..."

Two beefy men, stooping under the low vaults, dragged in priest Grishka, his eyes half closed in pain and his beard matted like wool. His face was green and his lower lip was hanging down. Was he genuinely unable to use his feet? When stood under the hook with the rope hanging from it, he fell forward and landed on his face, as if dead. The clerk said quietly: "He's been interrogated without physical injury and he came away on his own two feet..."

The Prince-Emperor stared for a time at the bald spot in Grishka's dishevelled hair.

"It has been ascertained," he began in a sleepy voice, "that the year before last, at Zvenigorod, in the Church of St. Elijah the Prophet, you tore the silver frame from the icons, and in the Church of the Annunciation wrenched off the mug containing the donations, and in the said church you stole from the altar a priest's sheepskin coat and felt boots. You sold these articles, drank the proceeds, were arrested, escaped from the sentries and came to Moscow, where to this day you have been hiding in various boyars' houses and, latterly, in the tsarevnas' yard, in the bathhouse... Do you admit this? Are you going to answer? No? Very well. This is only the beginning of your troubles..."

The Prince-Emperor was silent. The torturer-executioner appeared suddenly behind the two beefy men — pleasant-looking, haggard, with a waxen complexion, a big red mouth, moustache combed flat and a small, curly beard.

"It has been ascertained," resumed the Prince-Emperor, "that you have been going to the German quarter to visit the nun Ulyana and have been handing her letters and money from certain persons... The which Ulyana carried the letters to a certain person in the Novodevichy Convent... From her Ulyana took letters and packages, and you carried them to the above-mentioned persons... Is that so? Do you admit it?"

The clerk leaned across the table and whispered to the Prince-Emperor, indicating Grishka with his eyes:

"He's listening, I can tell from the way he pricked up his ears..."

"You refuse to admit it? So... You are stubborn... But it's no use... It means extra trouble for both of us, and extra physical discomfort for you... Very well, then... Now tell me this... Whose houses did you visit? To whom precisely did you read from this notebook about the desire to subdue the present time and its frenzy, and about the desire to return to the ordinary times?.."

As if waking up, the Prince-Emperor raised his eyebrows slightly and his face became puffy. The executioner softly walked to Grishka, who was lying face down, touched him and shook his head...

"No, Prince Fyodor Yurievich, he won't talk today. We'll be bothering him to no good purpose. He went into a coma after being strung up by the wrists and given five strokes of the knout... We must put it off till tomorrow."

The Prince-Emperor drummed his fingernails on the table. But Silanty, the executioner, was experienced; if a man had gone into a coma, then you wouldn't get the truth out of him, even if you cut him in half. And it was a vital matter; with the arrest of Grishka, the Prince-Emperor had hit on the clue, if not to a direct conspiracy, at least of bitter discontent and stubbornness among Moscow persons who still regretted the boyar freedoms under tsarevna Sophia, to this day languishing in the Novodevichi Convent in a nun's black coif. But there was no option; the Prince-Emperor rose to his feet and went up the rotten steps, while Chicherin stayed behind to attend to Grishka.

## 4

It was a damp, warm, overcast morning. There was a smell of wet fences and chimney-smoke in the side-streets. A horse was splashing through the puddles. Gavrila dismounted at the gates of the Preobrazhensky Commission and it took him a long time to get through to the officer of the guard.

"Where has he got to, the devil?" he shouted at a mustachioed soldier on duty at the gates. "Who knows? He's been here all the time, then he went off somewhere..." "Go and get him for me..." "Can't leave my post nohow..." "Let me through the gates, then..." "It's not allowed to admit anyone." "I'll go through myself." Gavrila pushed him out of the way, intending to walk through the sidegate, but the soldier said: "If you open that gate, I'll bayonet you according to Regulations..."

Finally, the officer of the guard was brought out by the noise; he had been dying of boredom in a booth inside the gates. He had a small, pock-marked face with eyes that never looked anywhere in particular. Gavrila rushed up to him, explaining that he had brought the mail from Petersburg and must deliver it personally to Prince Fyodor Yurievich.

"Where can I find the Prince-Emperor? Is he in the Commission now?"

"There's no knowing," replied the officer of the guard, looking at a big striped tomcat walking fastidiously across the wet street. "That cat's from the prince's yard," he said to the soldier. "There was such a hullabaloo when he got lost, and now there he is, the rascal."

The gates suddenly grated on their hinges and opened wide; a team of four raven-black horses in tandem flew dashingly out in turquoise harness. Gavrila jumped back only just in time and through the window of the enormous, peeling gilt coach on low wheels, was Romodanovsky looking at him with his crayfish eyes. Gavrila hastily mounted his horse to overtake the carriage. The officer of the guard seized the bridle for some reason, either because he was a nuisance by nature or because it was truly against the Regulations to ride after the Prince-Emperor...

"Let me go!" yelled Gavrila frantically; he snatched back the reins, dug in his spurs and made his horse rear. The officer hung from the bridle and fell. "Guard! Stop thief!" Gavrila heard the hue and cry a long way behind him when he was already galloping onto Lubyanskaya Square.

He failed to catch up with the carriage, swore with chagrin and turned across Neglinny Bridge into the Kremlin, for the Siberian Commission.

The low, long, rusty-roofed little Commission premises, built during the times of Boris Godunov, stood with its back to the Moscow River on the hill higher than the fortress wall. The entrance hall and the passages were crowded; people were sitting and lying by the walls on the floor. Officials were continually running through the creaking doors in long-skirted coats with patched elbows (from the constant rubbing on the desk), with goose quills behind their ears, waving papers and shouting angrily at gloomy Siberians who had travelled thousands of versts to seek justice, either against a governor who was committing irregularities and taking bribes on a scale unheard-of since Creation, or in connection with various privileges concerning the mining, gold-mining, fur-trapping and fishing trades. The experienced man, after putting up with the curses, would screw up his eyes in a friendly way and say to the

under-clerk: "My dear fellow, we ought to get together some time and have a little chat, just you and me, in a nice eating-house somewhere, anywhere you care to suggest..." The inexperienced applicant would simply go away with his head hanging down: he'd spend money on lodgings and next day, and for many more, he'd come back to the Commission and bore them silly with his questions...

The Prince-Emperor was in the Ordnance Department. Gavrila did not bother to ask permission to enter, but simply barged his way through to the door. Someone pulled him back by the coat. "Where d'you think you're going? It's not allowed!" He elbowed himself free and went in. The Prince-Emperor was sitting alone in the stuffy, low-ceilinged room with the window shutter half-closed and was wiping his neck with a coloured handkerchief. A pile of letters, appeals and complaints lay on the desk beside him. On seeing Gavrila, he shook his head reproachfully.

"Ah, you're a bold one, Ivan Artemich's youngest! My word! The commoners have started opening doors for themselves! What do you want?"

Gavrila handed him the mail. He said what he had been ordered to convey by word of mouth about the urgent delivery to Petersburg of all possible ironware, especially nails... The Prince-Emperor broke the wax seal, unfolded the tsar's letter with his fat fingers and, holding it a long way from his eyes, began moving his lips... Peter had written:

"Sir! I inform Your Majesty that we performed a truly wondrous feat at Narva — the fools fooled the wise... Before the Swedes towered a mountain of pride through which they could not see our deception... Of this masquerade battle, in which we killed or captured a third of the Narva garrison, you will hear from an eyewitness, Guards Lieutenant Yaguzhinsky, who will be with you soon... As for the despatch to Petersburg of the medicinal herbs for the pharmacy, not an ounce has been sent yet... I have written about this many times to Andrei Vinius, who has staved me off each time with a Moscow 'forthwith'... Kindly ask him why so important a matter, worth more than a thousand heads like his own, is being dealt with in such a slipshod manner... Ptr..."

On reading it, the Prince-Emperor raised to his lips the

part of the letter on which the signature was written. He sighed heavily.

"It's stuffy," he said. "Heat-wave, dull skies... Too much work. And I can't manage it all on my own... Assistants, oh, those assistants of mine!.. Hardly anyone wants to work, they're all wriggling out of it. They're only in it for what they can get. What are you all dressed up and in a wig for? Going to see the tsarevna? She isn't in the palace, she's at Izmailovo... If you see her, don't forget: on Petrovka, in a tavern, there's a costly starling; it speaks Russian so well that people passing by stop and listen. I heard it myself from my carriage not long ago. It could be bought, if the tsarevna so wishes... Off you go... On your way out, tell the clerk Nesterov that he is to send for Andrei Vinius. He's to be brought to me forthwith... Here, kiss my hand..."

## 5

It began spotting with rain after noon. Anisia Tolstoy, afraid of the dumps, had the idea of playing ball in the empty throne-room, which had been disused for many years.

Anna and Marfa, the Menshikov girls, were only too glad to play at something. Their ribbons flying, their podgy arms reaching out of their sleeves up to the elbow, they raced squealing after the ball over the creaking floor-boards. Natalia Alexeyevna was tearful for some reason that day and the game did not raise her spirits... When she had been very tiny, the sun had always shone through the red, yellow and blue panes of all the high windows in that room, and the gilded leather on the wall had glistened brightly. The leather had been stripped off, leaving bare timber walls with the caulking hanging loose. The rain was drumming on the roof.

"I don't like Izmailovsky Palace," she said to Katerina. "It's big, and empty, and dead... Let's go somewhere and sit quietly together."

She laid her hand on Katerina's shoulder and led her down into the little bedchamber, also neglected and forgotten, that had once been used by her late mother, Natalia Kirillovna. Much time had passed, but here, though faintly, it smelt of

what might have been incense or musk. Natalia Kirillovna had loved Eastern perfumes to the end of her days.

Natalia looked at the bare bedstead with its spiral posts and no canopy, at the dull rectangular mirror on the wall. She turned away and pushed the old window-frame. The room was filled with the fragrance of the rain rustling on the lilac leaves under the window, on the burdock and on the nettles.

"Let's sit down, Katya." They took their seats by the open window. "Yes," sighed Natalia, "summer's nearly over and it will soon be autumn... As if that matters to you! At nineteen, you don't look back on the days, you let them fly like birds... D'you know how old I am? I'm only five years younger than my brother Peter... Reckon it up for yourself... Mother got married at seventeen. Father was nearly forty. He was fat, his beard always smelt of mint, and he was forever ailing... I don't remember him very well... He died of dropsy... Anisia Tolstoy once drank some cordial and started telling me secrets... When she was young, Mother was cheerful, carefree, passionate... You understand me? (Natalia peered mistily into Katerina's eyes). Goodness knows what Sophia's toadies and lickspittles didn't cook up about her... But can you really blame her? According to the Old Testament, everything's a sin, and being a woman's a sin, the vessel of the devil, the gates of hell... But according to our new ideas, charming Cupid flies up and pierces your heart with an arrow... Well, after that, are you going to jump into the pond on an autumn night with a stone tied to your neck? It's not the woman's fault, it's Cupid's! Anisia was telling me that in Moscow at that time there lived a boyar's son, Musin-Pushkin; he was as handsome as an angel, or the devil, rather — bold, a dashing horseman, a carouser... At Shrovetide, on the frozen Moscow River, he would challenge all-comers to a bout of fisticuffs... He used to beat them... Mother went there in secret, in an ordinary coach, and saw for herself how brave he was... Then she took him on in the palace as steward. (Natalia Alexeyevna turned her beautiful head to look at the ruined bedstead, and there was a furrow between her eyebrows.) Suddenly, he was sent to Pustozersk as governor... She never saw him again... But I haven't even got that, Katerina..."

The idle rain continued pattering outside. It was close.

Beyond the mists towered enormous trees that did not look like the Izmailovo pines at all. The birds had all taken cover under the roofs and were not twittering or singing. Only one dishevelled crow flew low over the hoary meadow. Katerina followed it with an unregretful gaze; she very much wanted to tell the tsarevna that the black crow was flying to the chicken-run and again, as on the day before, would probably carry away a fluffy yellow chick. Natalia Alexeyevna rested her elbows on the window-sill, her head bowed, heavy with its plaited braids. Katerina looked at the fine hairs on the nape of her neck and thought: "To think that no one's kissed that. What a shame!" and sighed almost inaudibly.

Natalia heard that sigh nevertheless, shrugged her shoulder defiantly, and said, propping up her chin with her hand:

"Now tell me about yourself... Only tell the truth, though... How many lovers have you had, Katerina?"

Katerina turned her head away and said in a whisper:

"Three..."

"We know about Alexander Danilovich. But before him? What about Sheremetev?"

"No, no!" replied Katerina with spirit. "I only made soup for the Field-Marshal, the sweet Estonian kind with milk, and I did the laundry. Oh, I didn't like him! I was afraid to weep, but I made up my mind that I'd light the stove and gas myself with the fumes before I'd live with him... Alexander Danilovich took me from him the same day... I loved him very much... He was very cheerful and joked with me a great deal, we laughed a lot... I was not afraid of him in the least..."

"Are you afraid of my brother, though?"

Katerina compressed her lips and knit her velvet-black eyebrows, anxious to give an honest answer.

"Yes... But I think I won't be afraid of him for long..."

"Who was the second lover?"

"Oh, Natasha, the second was not a lover, he was a Russian soldier, a good-hearted man, I loved him only one night... How could I refuse him anything? He rescued me from some terrible men in fox-fur hats with curved sabres... They were dragging me out of a burning house, and tearing my clothes, and beating me with a whip to stop me scratching; they wanted to put me in the saddle... He ran up, pushed one, then he

pushed another, so strongly. 'Oh, you kumiss-guzzlers!' he said. 'What's the idea of hurting this girl?' He picked me up in his arms and carried me to the baggage train... There was no other way I could thank him. It was dark, and we were lying on some straw..."

Her nostrils quivering, Natalia asked stiffly:

"Under a cart?"

"Yes... He said to me: 'It's up to you, girl... It's only sweet when the girl embraces of her own free will...' So I consider him a lover."

"Who was the third?"

Katerina replied solemnly:

"The third was my husband, Johann Rabe, a cuirassier of His Majesty King Charles from the Marienburg garrison... I was sixteen then, and Pastor Glück said: 'I have brought you up, Martha-Kathrin, and I wish to keep the promise I made to your late mother, and so I have found you a good husband...'"

"Do you remember your father and mother well?" asked Natalia.

"No... My father was Ivan Skavroshchuk. He ran away from Lithuania, from Minsk, from Pan Sapieha to Estland, and he hired a little farm near Marienburg. That's where we were all born — four brothers, two sisters and myself, the youngest... The plague came, my parents and my eldest brother died. Pastor Glück took me in, he became a second father to me. I grew up in his home... One sister lives in Revel, the other in Riga, but I don't know where my brothers are now. The war has scattered them all..."

"Did you love your husband?"

"I never had the chance... Our marriage was on St. John's day... Oh, what fun we had! We rode to the lake, we lit a fire and danced in wreaths while Pastor Glück played the fiddle. We drank beer and we roasted little sausages with cardamon. A week later, Field-Marshal Sheremetev besieged Marienburg... When the Russians blew up the wall, I said to Johann: 'Run!' He jumped into the lake and swam away, and I haven't seen him since..."

"You must forget about him..."

"I have a lot to forget, but I forget easily," said Katerina,

and she smiled timidly, but her cherry-black eyes were full of tears.

"You haven't hidden anything from me, Katerina?"

"D'you think I would dare hide anything from you?" said Katerina warmly, and the tears ran down her peach-coloured cheeks. "I'd remember if I did; I wouldn't sleep at night, I'd run and tell you at dawn."

"At least you're happy." Natalia propped up her chin and looked out of the window again, like a bird in a cage. A lump had come to her tender throat. "We tsarevna maids, make merry as we will, but have only one road, and that's to a nunnery... Our hands aren't given in marriage, we are not taken as wives. Or we have to run shamelessly wild, like Masha and Katya... No wonder Sophia fought for power like a tigress..."

Katerina wanted to stoop and kiss the blue-veined hand that Natalia, in her bitterness, had clenched into a fist, when a tall rider appeared on the meadow astride a wiry horse with a wet mane; his cloak was sodden and damp plumes hung from his hat. On seeing Natalia Alexeyevna, he jumped down from his horse, left it, and walked up to the window, doffed his hat, bent his knee into the grass and pressed his hat to his chest...

Natalia Alexeyevna rose quickly, her thick braid fell onto her neck, her face flushed and quivered, her eyes glowed, her lips parted...

"Gavrila!" she said softly. "Is it you? Greetings, my friend... Come inside, why are you standing out in the rain?.."

A trap drove up after Gavrila; beside the driver sat a sharp-nosed, frightened man, shielding himself from the rain with a sack. He immediately removed his hat, but did not alight. Not taking his dark eyes off Natalia Alexeyevna, Gavrila went right up to the lilacs.

"Prosper for many years to come," he said, as if short of breath. "I bear a message from the tsar... I have brought you a skilled painter with an order to paint the portrait of a certain dear person... Afterwards, he must be sent abroad to study... He's sitting in the trap... Permit him to come in with me..."

## 6

One servant was sent by Anisia Tolstoy on horseback to the Kremlin larders to fetch various provisions for supper, sweetmeats, and "as many candles as possible". Another galloped off to the German quarter for musicians. Dense smoke billowed out of the kitchen chimney and the close-cropped scullions began banging their knives. Girls with their skirts tucked up ran after the chickens through the wet weeds. The palace fishermen, lazy with nothing to do, went off with their creels and nets to the ponds to catch the no less lazy carp lying on their sides in the ooze.

A mist billowed up from the weedy ponds after the rain; it swathed the big, decaying bridge which no one used any more and crawled through the trees on to the meadow in front of the palace; the old palace was gradually engulfed in it up to the eaves.

Sitting at the kitchen door, or by the servants' hut, old people who had been servants in the time of tsar Alexei Mikhailovich watched the glow of a candle appearing and disappearing now here, now there in the windows of the mist-enshrouded palace and they could hear the stamp of feet and laughter... They hadn't let the old building totter and decay in peace, subjecting the timbered walls to bad weather and the thin roofs to torrential rains... And mischievous young people with new ways had burst into it... They ran down the stairs from attics to basements... They wouldn't find anything there — only cobwebs in the corners and mice poking their noses out of their holes...

Natalia Alexeyevna was as one possessed; she had been miserable since morning, but with Gavrila's arrival, the colour had returned to her cheeks, she had brightened up and had begun inventing all kinds of amusements, so that nobody could sit in peace for a moment. Anisia Tolstoy did not know where to put herself. The tsarevna said to her:

"It's to be Belshazzar's feast today; we're going to dine in full fancy dress."

"My dear, Christmas is a long way off... And anyway, I don't know how King Belshazzar feasted, I never saw him..."

"Search the palace for everything that's unusual and bring it all into the banqueting hall... Don't annoy me today, don't be stubborn..."

The old stairs creaked, the hinges of long unopened doors began to squeak... They began running all over the palace, Natalia Alexeyevna in the lead holding up her skirt while Gavrila followed with a candle, his eyes rigid with fright. The fright had begun earlier, when he had seen Natalia Alexeyevna in the window, sitting dolefully with her cheek on her hand. It was like something out of a fairy-tale that Sanka had told them on the stove, the one about Tsarevna Beauty-Beyond-Compare... Ivan Tsarevich had galloped on a steed higher than a standing tree and lower than a sailing cloud, up to that very little sash window, and had taken a ring from the white hand of Beauty-Beyond-Compare...

Andrei Golikov's head was also in a whirl (he had been ordered to go with the rest). Since the evening before, when he had seen the portrait of Gavrila's sister on the dolphin, everything had been like a dream come true... He was embarrassed almost to breathlessness by the fair-haired, round-cheeked Menshikov girls, so beautiful and shapely that no folds of dress could conceal their physical charms. They breathed a fragrance of apples, and not to look at them was a downright impossibility.

In the store-rooms, they found all kinds of now forgotten wardrobe items: dresses, headgear, wide fur coats of Byzantine brocade, cloaks, caftans and pearl-studded crowns, each weighing a whole pood. The palace maidservants carried all this by the armful into the banqueting hall. High under the ceiling, in one basement room, they saw a small door. Natalia took a candle, stood on tiptoe, and threw her head back:

"What if he's in there?"

"Who?" chorused Anna and Marfa in fright.

"The house demon," said Natalia. The girls clutched their cheeks but did not turn pale, just stared with eyes as big as saucers. All were terrified. The old stoker brought a ladder and stood it against the wall. Then Gavrila jumped on to the ladder, he was game for anything by now... He opened the little door and disappeared into the darkness. They waited for what seemed a long time, but he did not answer and did not move.

"Gavrila, come down!" ordered Natalia in a terrified whisper. The soles of his thigh-boots appeared, then the flared skirts of his coat, and he climbed down, all covered in cobwebs.

"What did you see in there?"

"There's something grey inside, shaggy — it was as if something soft stroked my face..."

All gasped... They tiptoed away out of the basement and ran up the stairs. Only at the top did Marfa and Anna start screaming. Natalia Alexeyevna had the idea of playing at house demon. They looked for secret doors, carefully opened the closets under the stairs and looked under all the stoves, holding their breath in fear... Then they found it. In one dark place festooned with cobwebs, they saw two green eyes burning with the fires of hell... Out of their wits with terror, they rushed off... Natalia lost her footing and fell into Gavrila's arms. He held her up firmly, and she could hear the slow, muffled, manly beating of his heart... She moved her shoulder and said quietly: "Let me go."

Then they went to arrange a Belshazzar's feast. The old stoker, with a yellow beard like a house demon's, with a copper cross over his blouse and in new felt boots, once again brought a ladder. The long-stripped timbered walls in the banqueting hall were hung with moth-eaten carpets. The table was taken away and supper was laid on the floor, on a carpet. All were tickled at the idea of having supper while seated Babylonian fashion. Gavrila was to be King Belshazzar. He was arrayed in a somewhat tattered but still gorgeous brocade caftan, crimson in colour with gold gryphons; his shoulders were draped with a fur coat of the kind worn a century before, and on his head was placed a crown of pearls that must have belonged to the tsaritsa's grandmother. Natalia Alexeyevna was dressed up as Semiramis in gold robes, coloured kerchieves were wound over her heavy braids and palace maids were sent to pluck the most beautiful tail feathers from the cockerels and stick them in her turban...

Who were Marfa and Anna to be? Natalia ordered them to go into the next room, let down their hair, take off their dresses and petticoats, but keep on their long, white shifts of fine linen. The palace maids fled off to the pond again and brought back water lilies which they twined round the necks,

hair and arms of the Menshikov girls, using the long stems as girdles so that they become water nymphs from the Tigris and the Euphrates. Katerina was easy to dress up as the goddess of fruits and vegetables — Astarte to the Babylonians and Flora to the Romans. The palace maids ran off to pull carrots, parsley, spring onions, and peas, and to fetch unripe pumpkins, and apples. Katerina, laughing, as always, at the slightest thing, her face flushed, her mouth glistening, her eyes round with happiness and not shy any more, became a true Flora, festooned with peas and fennel, wearing a crown of vegetables and holding a basket of gooseberries and red currants.

"Who's the painter going to be?" thought Natalia, suddenly remembering Golikov at the last moment. "We haven't got an Ethiopian — he will have to be the King of Ethiopia..."

A new miracle began for Andrei Golikov when girls' hands (was he dreaming?) pulled him about, turned him round and round, smothered him with silks and brocades, smeared his face with soot and pinched his nostrils with a copper ring, since he absolutely must sit with a ring in his nose. He couldn't have been more blissfully happy if the Lord had given him a pair of angel's wings... Three musicians came from the German quarter – fiddler, a mouth-organ player and a flutist; they too had been dressed up for the occasion.

And now supper! Sit on cushions, draw up your feet, drink mead and wine from sea-shells...

None of them really knew how to play at Belshazzar's feast. They sat down in front of the candle-lit dishes, exchanged glances and smiled, but no one wanted to eat... Then Natalia Alexeyevna, the cock feathers in her turban shaking and her lips protruding, began reciting by heart the lines of verse that Gavrila had heard from her before that winter's night in the over-heated chamber under the golden vault:

*Upon a mighty mountain, the blessed gods do dwell,*
*And Cupid often smites them with his darts so fell...*
*Now Jupiter himself cries out, "Alas, and woe!*
*My peace of mind is gone, no remedy do I know.*
*A fire consumes my bowels, I cannot quench my thirst,*
*Nor can I fight with love. I am as one accursed!"*
*Alas, if even gods by Cupid's darts are slain,*

*Then surely mortals seek defence from him in vain?*
*Let us make merry, then! Leave sorrow for a time,*
*Let us extol the arrows poisoned with sweet wine...*

While Natalia was reciting this, her face turned pale under the high turban. She took a sip of wine and went off to dance the polka with Anisia Tolstoy. The musicians played not very loudly, but in such a way that every sinew in the body quivered.

"Go with Katerina!" cried Natalia, her eyes flashing at Gavrila. He jumped up and threw Belshazzar's fur coat off his shoulders. He could have danced round the clock. Katerina's back was warm, she was responsive to his touch and light-footed; strings of peas and cherries flew from her head and shoulders as she whirled round in the dance. Gavrila went faster and faster, and so did the musicians. Anna and Marfa also began spinning round, holding each other's hands. Only Golikov was left sitting on the carpet, in front of the candles. He could not eat or drink because of the ring in his nose, but even this did not mar his happiness. In his ears, to the piping of the flute, he could still hear the tsarevna's verses about the gods of Olympus, and a naked goddess seated on a dolphin and holding a goblet filled to the brim with temptation kept floating before his eyes...

Gavrila was naive; he had been told to dance the polka with Katerina, and so he danced without sparing his feet. Although he had the impression several times that Natalia Alexeyevna's smile was different, mirthless, without the former twinkle in the eyes, he did not realise that he should have escorted Katerina back to her seat by the pumpkins and carrots long ago... He had another glimpse of the tsarevna's face; her teeth were clenched, as if she were in pain... Suddenly, she swayed, stopped and clutched at Anisia Tolstoy; the turban with the cock feathers fell from her head. Anisia cried out in fright:

"The tsarevna feels dizzy!" She signalled to the musicians that they should stop playing.

Natalia Alexeyevna broke away from her and, her mantle trailing behind her, left the banqueting hall. That was the end of Belshazzar's feast. Anna and Marfa suddenly felt ashamed

in their shifts, whispered something to one another and ran out of the door. Frightened, Katerina sat down in her place again and began picking off the vegetables. Gavrila turned gloomy; he stood with his feet apart on the carpet, frowning and blinking in the candlelight. Anisia flew out after the tsarevna, soon returned and grasped Gavrila's arm so hard that her nails dug into his flesh:

"Go to her," she whispered, "apologise, you blockhead..."

Natalia Alexeyevna was standing just outside in the corridor, looking through the open window at the mist shining under the invisible moon. Gavrila drew nearer. The drips could be heard falling from the roof on to the leaves.

"Have you come to Moscow for long?" she asked, without turning round. He did not try to answer and merely sighed. "There's nothing for you to do in Moscow. Leave tomorrow, go back where you come from..."

As she said this, her shoulders rose slightly, and Gavrila replied:

"What have I done to anger you? God, if only you knew... If only you knew!"

Then she turned round, and her face, with the soot-lined eyebrows knitted in a frown, moved close to his.

"I don't want you, d'you hear? Go away, go away!"

Repeating "Go away, go away" she raised her hands to push him back; but perhaps because she realised that she hadn't the strength to move this tall young man, she laid her hands jingling with Semiramis's bangles, on his shoulders, and slowly bowed her head. Gavrila, also unaware of what he was doing, began, hardly touching her, to kiss the warm parting in her hair.

"No," she said again. "Go away, go away..."

# *Chapter Six*

## 1

Peter threw off his canvas jacket, rolled up his shirt sleeves, took out a crimson kerchief with vine-leaves embroidered round the hem — a present from Izmailovo — and bound it bandana-style round his head after the manner of the Portuguese pirates, as he had once been taught by Rear-Admiral Pamburg. In former years, he would also have taken off his boots so as to feel the warm, rough deck under his bare feet. A light wind was swelling the sails, the two-masted schooner *Katerina* was gliding obediently and plainly along as if airborne. The brigantine *Ulrika* was following in her wake, and the frigate *Wachtmeister* had crowded on full sail in the mist where the sea and the sky meet.

These ships had recently been captured from the Swedes in an unexpected and altogether glorious victory; the Russians had taken twelve brigantines and frigates — the whole piratical squadron of Commodore Leschert, who for two years had not allowed the meanest little boat into Lake Chud, had plundered the coastal villages and estates and had threatened Sheremetev from the rear when he was besieging Yuriev. The commodore was a valiant sailor, but the Russians had fooled him nevertheless. One dark night during a thunderstorm, fearful of the gale or for some other reason, he had led his squadron into the mouth of the Embach River and had carelessly got drunk on board the flag-yacht *Carolus*. When he rubbed his eyes open at dawn, hundreds of boats, rafts and barrels lashed together were sailing from the coast towards his ships... "Fire from starboard and larboard at Russian infantry!" shouted the commodore. The Swedes did not have time to ram the powder into the muzzles of their guns or cut the anchor cables; the Russians surrounded the ships from all quarters and, hurling grenades and firing pistols, boarded the enemy from boats, rafts and barrels... It was no small disgrace; infantry had cap-

tured a whole squadron. Commodore Leschert leapt down into the powder magazine in a frenzy and blew up the yacht; the flame darted out from all cracks and hatches; with a terrifying boom and a cloud of smoke, the masts, yards, barrels, crew and the commodore himself shot up almost as high as the clouds in the sky...

The sun was hot on his back, the breeze caressed his face, the glitter of the waves dazzled him, and Peter screwed up his eyes. To cool himself, he planted his legs apart as he stood at the helm. The wind whistled and sang in the rigging, the seagulls cried hoarsely over the wake of the ship. The sails, like white breasts, were full of strength.

Peter was sailing to Narva in triumph with Swedish standards piled up at the foot of the mainmast. Yuriev had been carried by assault three days ago. Another feather had been plucked out of King Charles's tail. Letters were sent to the Austrian Emperor and to the kings of England and France, announcing that "by God's intercession, we have recovered our ancient patrimony, the town of Yuriev, founded seven hundred years ago by the Grand Prince Yaroslav Vladimirovich to protect the fringes of the land of Russia".

Although it never even entered Peter's head — as it did that of his dear brother Charles — to liken himself to Alexander the Great, and although he considered war a day-to-day, sickening bloody slaughter, a necessity of state, even so he had recovered faith at Yuriev in his military talent and was now feeling thoroughly proud of himself. In ten days (arriving at Yuriev from Narva), he had done what Field-Marshal Sheremetev and his foreign engineers, pupils of the celebrated Marshal Vauban, had considered totally impossible.

And there was another joy — to look at the distant wooded coast and to know that yonder shore, recently Swedish, was now Russian and Lake Chud was entirely Russian again. But such is human nature — enough is not as good as a feast. One would have thought that nothing could have been more pleasant than to sail on such a clear morning on board a schooner flying an enormous St. Andrew's flag from the high poop just to spite Charles. But no! It was on this very day that he turned to thoughts of his sweetheart... No other word would do; not wench, or girl, but his sweetheart, his dear Katerina... His

shoulder-blades working under his shirt, he drew the humid air through his nostrils... The water and the ship's timbers gave off an odour reminiscent of a bathing-place and he imagined Katerina bathing on just such a hot day... As if she had cast a spell on the handkerchief with the embroidered vine-leaves and had scented it with her presence, the wind behind him was fluttering its corners so that they tickled his nose and lips from time to time... She knew what she was about, that curly-haired, merry Livonian witch... In Yuriev, the terrified women of the town had been as comely as you could hope for, and yet not one of them could compare with Katerina, not one of them had a striped skirt swaying so provocatively on her hips... Not one of them did he want to take by the cheeks, and look deep into her eyes, and press his lips to hers...

Peter impatiently stamped the heel of his square-toed shoe on the deck. Someone immediately dashed half-asleep out of the wardroom and slammed the door. Alexei Vasilievich Makarov ran up the companionway:

"I'm here, Sire..."

Trying not to look at the man, his parchment face and red eyelids so out of place on board ship, Peter ordered through his teeth:

"Something to write with..."

Makarov hurried away, tripping up on the companionway in his haste. Peter spat after him like a cat. Makarov returned quickly with a small chair, paper, an inkpot, and with goose quills stuck behind his ear. Peter took one of them.

"Man the helm and hold it tight, landlubber; hold it like this. If you spill the wind, I'll give you a taste of rope's end."

He winked at Makarov, sat on the folding chair, put a sheet of paper on his knee and, twisting his head, looked up at the top of the mainmast from which a long pennant was flying, and began to write.

On one side of the sheet he wrote: "To Mistresses Anisia Tolstoy and Ekaterina Vassiliefskaya..." On the other side, spattering the ink and missing out letters: "Auntie and mother, prosper for many years. I wish to hear about your own health... We live in toil and need... There is no one to wash and sew for us, and worst of all, it is dull without you... Only the day before yesterday, we danced a dance with the

Swedes that will make King Charles see red... By God, but never since I began serving have I seen such a glorious game... In brief, with God's help we took Yuriev by storm... As for your health, God preserve you from answering this, but come to me as soon as possible... Just to cheer me... Travel as far as Pskov, wait there for instructions where to proceed further; the enemy is not far from here... Peter..."

"Fold it up and seal it without reading it," he said to Makarov, taking over the helm from him. "Send it on the first possible occasion."

He felt slightly easier in his mind. The ship's bell rang loudly. A cannon boomed immediately, the sails shivered and there was a pleasant whiff of gunpowder. The commander of the schooner, Captain Neplyuev, with young bony, bold face ran on to the bridge holding down his short sabre and brought two fingers up to his tricorne.

"Mister Bombardier, it's time, please to take a glass..."

The dumpy glossy-faced Felten in a green knitted waistcoat came up behind Neplyuev. He was not wearing a chef's hat, but had also bound his head pirate-fashion with a white kerchief. He served a silver goblet and a poppy-seed bun on a tin tray.

Peter weighed the goblet in his hand, eagerly drained the extremely strong, raw-smelling vodka sailor-fashion and, hurriedly popping a piece of bun into his mouth and chewing it, said to Neplyuev:

"We'll drop anchor for the night by the Narova and spend the night on shore... Have you taken a sounding?"

"There's a sandbank on the right bank of the Narova. Eleven feet on the left..."

"Good. Dismiss."

Peter was left alone again on the scorching deck. The vodka had sent the cheerfulness flowing through his veins, and he began remembering, now sucking in his breath, now smiling, the day-before-yesterday's glorious engagement which was bound to make King Charles see red...

## 2

Field-Marshal Sheremetev was directing the siege of Yuriev half-heartedly. He was not particularly overburdening himself or the army, hoping to prevail over the Swedes by attrition. Peter crumpled up his long-winded letters and threw them under the desk. Something had got into the Field-Marshal; for two years he had fought boldly and fiercely; now he was wailing outside the Swedish walls like an old peasant woman. When Field-Marshal Ogilvy finally arrived at the Narva camp, engaged by Moscow on the insistence of Johann Patkul for a not inconsiderable salary, plus board and all kinds of wines and other victuals — three thousand gold efimki per annum — Peter transferred the command to him and hurried impatiently to Yuriev.

The Field-Marshal was not expecting him. At noon, after dinner, he was snoring in his tent in the baggage train behind a high rampart and only woke up when the tsar snatched from his face the handkerchief that he used to keep off the flies.

"You're sleeping peacefully behind the chevaux de frise!" shouted Peter, his eyes rolling dementedly. "Come and show me your siege works!"

The Field-Marshal was so terrified that he lost the power of speech; he could not even remember how he got into his breeches, and since neither his wig nor his sword were to hand he mounted his horse just as he was, bareheaded. Military engineer Kobert ran in, buttoning up his French coat wrongly since he too was half-asleep; the only good thing he had done for this siege had been to fatten his cheeks on Russian cabbage soup. Peter nodded acidly to him from above. The three rode off to the positions.

Nothing there was to Peter's liking. On the east side, on which Sheremetev's army was conducting the siege, the walls were high, the squat towers had been refortified, the ravelins, in the shape of a star, ran far out into the field, and the moats in front of them had been filled with water. In the west, the city was reliably protected by the Embach River which was in full spate, and in the south by a mossy bog. Sheremetev had moved deep trenches and approach trenches up to the town walls,

but very cautiously and not too close for fear of the Swedish guns. His batteries were positioned even more foolishly; he had hurled two thousand bombs into the town from them, had set a few houses on fire, but had not even scratched the walls.

"Are you aware, Mister Field-Marshal, how much each bomb costs me?" said Peter morosely. "We have to transport them from the Urals... Would you care to pay for those two thousand useless bombs out of your own pocket?" He snatched the spy-glass from under Sheremetev's arm and surveyed the walls through it. "The south wall is shaky and low. Just as I thought..." He looked quicky round at engineer Kobert. "This is where you must throw the bombs, to smash the walls and gates here. It's from here you must take the town. Not from the east. Not simply for the comfort of keeping our feet dry... We must seek victory even if it means being up to our necks in the bog..."

Sheremetev did not dare argue; he simply muttered:"But of course... You know best, Mister Bombardier... We thought about it, but we didn't realise..." Engineer Kobert respectfully shook his sagging cheeks with an apologetic smile.

"Your Majesty, the south wall and the tower gates, named the 'Russian Gates', are dilapidated, but they are nonetheless unassailable, since they can only be approached across the bog... The bog is impassable."

"For whom is the bog impassable?" shouted Peter, his long neck jerking, his foot twitching so that it came out of its stirrup. "Nothing is impossible to the Russian soldier... We're not playing chess, we're playing a game of life and death..."

He jumped down from his horse, spread out a map of the city on the grass, pulled a set of drawing instruments out of his pocket and selected compasses, a ruler and a pencil from it. He began taking measurements and making notes. The Field-Marshal and Kobert squatted down beside him.

"This is where you'll put your batteries!" He indicated the edge of the bog in front of the "Russian Gates". "And add breaching guns on the other side of the river..." He began deftly drawing lines to show how the shells should fly from the batteries to the "Russian Gates". He took more measurements with his compasses. Sheremetev muttered: "Of course... The distance can be covered." Kobert smiled thinly. "I give you

three days to change your positions... On the seventh I'm starting the firework display." Peter put the compasses and ruler back into their box and began cramming it into his coat pocket, but there was the crimson kerchief inside it with vine-leaves stitched round the edges. He pulled out the kerchief and angrily tucked it behind his shirt front.

For three days and nights he gave his men neither rest nor sleep. In the daytime, in front of the Swedes, the whole army continued its former siege-works, digging trenches under the bullets and shells and knocking ladders together. In the night, secretly, not lighting any lamps, they harnessed bullocks to the guns and mortars and hauled them to their new positions on the edge of the bog and across a floating bridge to the other side of the river, shielding the batteries behind fascines and ramparts.

As soon as the sun appeared over the forest, the thin roofs on the south wall lit up, the stone crenellations of the "Russian Gates" tower appeared over the bog mist and the chimney smoke showed blue in the morning hush, sixty breaching guns and heavy mortars shook heaven and earth. Two-pood shells and fused bombs flew hissing across the bog. The batteries thundered out on the other side of the river. Under cover of the powder smoke, the grenadiers of Ivan Zhidok's regiment ran up with bundles of brushwood to pave the bog.

Peter was at the south battery. He did not have to shout, instruct or lose his temper; he barely had time to turn his head, look at the gunners and say: "Well done, well done!" Before you could have said "Our Father", the barrels had already been cleaned, charges of powder had been thrust in, the shot rammed home, the priming sprinkled on and the sights set.

"All batteries!" his blood-shot eyes bulging, shouted little Colonel Nechayev, whose hat and wig had been blown off by the first volley. "Range as before. Apply slow match... Fire!" The battery commanders roared after him: "Fi-i-re!"

The shells could be seen hitting their targets, tower merlons fell, the roof on the wall began smouldering and burst into flames and houses in the town began burning, set on fire by the bombs. The bells started jangling on the steep-roofed churches. Reeling from the effects of the explosions, Swedish soldiers in short grey uniforms ran out of the gates and started

digging a curtain, hauling beams, barrels and sacks... Even so, before the end of the day, the gate tower and the wall were still standing firm. Peter had the batteries brought up closer.

The firework display lasted six days. Ivan Zhidok's grenadiers, up to the knees and the waist in the bog, were paving the quagmire, protecting themselves from the enemy bombs and bullets with portable fascines in the form of baskets filled with earth. The slain sank there and then; the wounded were carried out on their comrades' shoulders. The Swedes spotted the grave danger, brought up some of their guns from the other towers and intensified their fire every day. The city was shrouded in smoke. A reddish sun blazed through the floating clouds.

Peter did not leave the batteries; he was black with powder smoke, did not wash, ate on his feet anything that came his way and poured vodka for the gunners himself. He would lie down for forty winks under an artillery wagon to the thunder of the guns nearby. He sent engineer Kobert away to the main baggage train because, although a skilled man, he was very timid, and "we don't want timid people here".

At dusk, on the night of the thirteenth of July, he sent for Sheremetev. During the last four days, the Field-Marshal and his whole army had been making a lot of noise on the east side, doing their best to alarm the Swedes. He had recovered his spirits and had not dismounted, but had fought and cursed. He found Peter in the battery, which had gone quiet for the time being. Around him stood mustachioed bombardiers, all old acquaintances, some of them the men who, during the play manoeuvres at the city of Pressburg, had treated the Prince-Emperor's cavalry in the earnest to radish and earthenware bombs discharged from wooden cannons. Several now had their heads bound with rags and their uniforms were in tatters.

Peter was sitting on the gun carriage of *Salamander*, the biggest gun, cast in bronze at Tula. It had taken some twenty buckets of vinegar to cool it and it was still hissing. He was chewing bread and, speaking very quickly, was going over the day's work. The south wall had finally been breached in three places and the enemy would not be able to repair them. Bombardier Ignat Kurochkin had planted several red-hot balls one after another into the left angle of the gate tower...

"It was like knocking in nails! Wasn't it so?" Peter had positively crowed with joy. The whole corner of the tower had fallen in, and the tower itself was about to collapse at any moment.

"Ignat, where are you? I can't see you, come here!" And he handed the bombardier his pipe with its chewed mouthpiece. "I'm not giving it to you, I haven't got another with me, but have a smoke... Congratulations!.. We'll pull through, and I shan't forget this."

Ignat Kurochkin, a staid man with luxuriant mustachios, removed his tricorne, carefully took the pipe, poked his fingernail inside it and his face creased in crafty wrinkles:

"There's no tobacco in it, Your Majesty..."

The other bombardiers laughed. Peter produced his tobacco pouch, but it turned out to be completely empty. Just at that moment, the Field-Marshal came up. Said Peter joyfully:

"Boris Petrovich, have you any tobacco on you? We haven't any vodka or tobacco at the battery... (The bombardiers laughed again.) Do us the kindness..." Courteously, with a bow, Sheremetev offered him a fine pouch embroidered with beads. "Oh, thanks!... You just give the pouch to bombardier Kurochkin... I'm making you a present of that, Ignat, but mind you don't forget to give me back my pipe..."

He dismissed the bombardiers and noisily crunched rusks for a while. The Field-Marshal, holding his baton to his side, stood silently in front of him.

"Boris Petrovich, we mustn't wait any longer," said Peter in a changed voice. "The men are very angry. The grenadiers have been lying in that bog for days... It's too much! I'm going to light barrels of tar and bombard all night... Send me without delay as reinforcements a battalion of Moscow marksmen from Samokhvalov's regiment — they're a surly lot, but they're brave... Get on with your work, but for God's sake don't lose men to no purpose... I'm going into the assault at daybreak... (Sheremetev lowered his baton and crossed himself.) Go, my friend."

When barrels of tar began blazing on the edge of the bog and on the far side of the river, all batteries set up a rapid cannonade of a kind the Swedes had never heard before. Gates collapsed. Splinters flew from the curtains, stockades and chevaux de frise. The Swedes expected an attack that night;

through the breaches in the wall, by the flickering light of the tar fires, they had seen the wavering spikes of bayonets, helmets, banners... The alarm was sounded all over the town.

With his knees drawn up, Peter was peering through a spy-glass from a ditch behind the fascines. With him stood young Colonel Ivan Zhidok, a man from Orel who looked like a gypsy; there was a dry glitter in his black eyes, his lips were trembling and, without realising it, he was grinding his teeth with frustration. The night was short, the east was already a green glow and the stars had vanished. It was impossible to wait any longer. But Peter still delayed. Suddenly, Ivan Zhidok, in a fit of anguish that burst from the very depths of his being, blurted out "Ooooh!" and shook his bowed head from side to side. Peter gripped him by the shoulder.

"Off you go!"

Ivan Zhidok leaped over the fascines and, bending over, doubled across the bog. A rocket hissed, soared, burst and blossomed into green lights — then a second, and then a third. The guns held their peace. The silence oppressed the ears. Men began to stand up amid red and black hummocks of the bog; sinking in the ooze, they moved off sluggishly towards the gates. The whole bog came alive, seething with soldiers. Companies of Moscow marksmen, their bayonets levelled, advanced from the bank to support them... Peter lowered his spy-glass, sucked the air in through his teeth, frowned: "Oh!" he said. "Oh!" Five surviving Swedish guns belched flame from the curtain point-blank at Ivan Zhidok's advancing grenadiers. A lone, desperate voice in the bog shouted "Hurrah!" Swedes leapt out of the breach in the wall, running to meet the Russians as if in a frenzy of joy. A melee began shouting, roaring, the clash of steel. Something like four thousand men were fighting at the walls and the gates...

Peter climbed out of the ditch and walked away, his heavy boots squelching in the moss. He kept feeling in his pockets, as if he could have dropped a pipe or a weapon somewhere... He was overtaken by Colonel Nechayev:

"You mustn't go that way, Sire..."

Both stared at the scene of a battle.

Said Peter to him:

"Send for help."

"Not necessary, Sire..."

"Send for help, I said."

"Not necessary... Our men are getting his guns off him..."

"Liar..."

"I can see it..."

And, indeed, first one gun, then another lanced a flame towards the gates... A great mass of men in combat wavered and then surged through the breaches into the town...

Said Nechayev, his protuberant eyes streaming with tears:

"Sire, the firework display has begun!"

The grenadiers and Moscow marksmen, infuriated because it had been so hard for them and because so many of them had needlessly been killed by the Swedes, thrust, hewed and drove the enemy along the narrow little streets as far as the town square. There, in the heat of the moment, they killed four drummers sent out by the commandant of Yuriev to beat Chamade, or surrender. Only the trumpeter on the castle tower, bursting his lungs with a hoarse trumpet call appealing for surrender, was able, with great difficulty and only after some time, to stop the slaughter.

## 3

The *Katerina,* with lowered sails and the crew clinging to the yards, glided for some time along the coast in the green shade of the forest. After a cannon shot, the anchor cable rattled. A boat drew up. In it stood Menshikov wearing a long cloak with tall plumes in his hat. The cuffs alone of this beau's coat must have taken no less than ten arshins of cherry-red English cloth. Peter looked down at him, resting his elbows on the bulwarks. Menshikov crooked his arm, carried his hand to his right ear, doffed his hat and, pressing it three times to his side, shouted:

"Vivat! Vivat, Mister Bombardier, on your great victory!.."

"Wait. I'm coming down to you right away," replied Peter in a low bass. "Have you any news?"

"We have a victory of our own to report."

"That's good... Did you make preparations as I asked for in my letter? We didn't have even a drop of beer over there..."

"Three barrels of Rhenish received yesterday!" barked Menshikov. "It's not like under Sheremetev in our camp. We don't have hold-ups and we don't have break-downs..."

"Boast away, boast away." Peter called Captain Neplyuev and ordered him, as soon as the flag was hoisted on the ships tomorrow to fire with starboard and larboard guns the signal: "Seized by Valour", and, with drums beating, to carry the Swedish banners ashore to the army. For the young captain this order was an honour, and he blushed. Embarrassing him with a stubborn stare, Peter said:

"You did well, Commodore."

Neplyuev flushed so violently that he broke out into a sweat, his eyes stung and watered with suppressed excitement; the tsar had appointed him commodore, that is, flagman of a squadron... Peter did not say any more; stretching out his long legs and scraping his shoes over the tarred side, he climbed down into the boat. He sat next to Menshikov and nudged him with his elbow.

"I'm glad you came to meet me... Thanks... So I can congratulate you on a victory too. Have you beaten Schlippenbach?"

"I'll say we have, myn Herz... Anikita Repnin attacked him on carts near Wenden, and Colonel Rohn with the cavalry, barred his way into the town, as I advised at the time... The Swedes had to accept battle in the open field, willy-nilly... We hit Schlippenbach so hard that our hero only just got away to Revel with a dozen cuirassiers."

"Still, he got away this time too... Hell's bells!"

"He's a very slippery customer... Fat lot of good it'll do him; he's got no banners, no guns and no army... Anikita Ivanovich was complaining half-drunk; 'I'm not sorry about Schlippenbach giving me the slip,' he says, 'but I'm sorry I didn't get his horse: it's got wings like a bird.' I told him off for saying that: 'Anikita Ivanovich,' says I, 'you aren't a Crimean Tatar to go lassoing horses; you're a Russian general, you should think along state lines...' We didn't half swear at each other... And another piece of news: a courier has arrived from Warsaw; king Augustus is sending you a high ambassa-

dor... It would be a good thing to receive this ambassador in Narva itself, in the fortress, eh, myn Herz?"

Peter listened to his chatter, frowned at the green water and bit his fingernail.

"Any news from Moscow?"

"Another tiresome chore: the Prince-Emperor has sent you a whole box of letters and documents... Gavrila Brovkin went through to Petersburg; he brought you a letter from Izmailovo. (Peter looked at him sharply.) I have it with me, myn Herz. Also four hot-house musk-melons; I've brought them wrapped in a sheepskin coat; we'll try them at supper... He says they're missing you terribly in Izmailovo, they've all been crying their eyes out..."

"Oh, now you're lying!" The boat went sideways up to the beach. Peter jumped out and climbed up the bank to where Menshikov's tent stood overlooking the water.

They sat down to supper in the tent together. Peter, hunched over on saddle cushions, ate heavily; he had half-starved at Sheremetev's table. Menshikov merely toyed with his food, but drank a good deal, applying the palm of his hand to the broad sash bound tightly round his stomach — amiable, flushed, with the cunning glints of the candles in his affectionate blue eyes. Carefully, so as to avoid the least sign of displeasure on Peter's drawn, calm face, he told him about Ogilvy, the new Field-Marshal.

"A learned man, no question. He's brought a whole cartload of calf-bound books, they've been dumped in his tent. He started out by snapping at us so haughtily that he wouldn't eat anything of ours. As soon as he wakes up in the morning, instead of a glass of vodka and a bite, he takes chocolate and coffee, and white wheat bread, and fresh fish for dinner — and not just any fish, it has to be burbot, and game, and veal. We expressed our regrets, but the Field-Marshal said they must be obtained... I sent one of the local people, a scout, to Revel for coffee and chocolate, and I gave him five chervontsy of my own... A cow's been tethered to a peg specially for him, and they've found a clean girl to milk and churn. They've knocked a closet together for him behind the tent and fitted it with a lock... And he doesn't let anyone else have the key..."

Peter hastily swallowed a mouthful and burst out laughing.

"That's what I'm paying him three thousand efimki for - to teach you Asiatics a thing or two..."

"He's teaching us all right... On the next morning, he called the colonels of all the regiments, didn't ask them their names or patronymics, didn't shake hands with anyone, and started telling them all pompous-like how much the Emperor loves him and what armies he's commanded, and what cities he's besieged, and how Marshal Vauban said to him: 'You are my best pupil', and gave him a snuff-box... He showed us all his Orders and this snuff-box; it's got a girl embracing a cannon on the lid; and then he dismissed us... He could at least have offered us some chocolate for decency's sake, but no... 'I shall write out my disposition,' says he, 'and then you will understand how Narva is to be taken...' He's been writing it ever since..."

"Oh, well..." Peter wiped his hands with a napkin, took by its stem the Magdeburg goblet of coconut with the gilt divinities and said, his lips curving merrily (his dark eyes seldom laughed): "As at Kukui in times past we shall extoll, my dearest friend, our father, Bacchus, and our mother, indefatigable Venus... Let me have that letter..."

The tiny note, sealed with wax and as sweet and femininely fragrant as the handkerchief embroidered with vineleaves, was from Katerina Vassiliefskaya (although penned by Anisia Tolstoy, since Katerina herself could not write).

"Sire, my light, my joy... I send you, Sire, my light, my joy a little present – musk-melons, ripened under glass in Izmailovo, so they are sweet... Eat, Sire, my light, my joy, for your health... And, my light, my joy, I want to see you again..."

"She hasn't written much, but she must have spent a long time knitting her brows and fidgeting with her apron," said Peter quietly and mockingly. He drank up a goblet. Clapping himself on the knees, he rose and walked out of the tent. "Danilych, call Makarov and go through the Moscow mail with him. I'm going to stretch my legs."

It was a stuffy evening and there was a fragrance of warm resin from the black pine forest. Without giving any light, the huge sunset was gloomily fading. It was just the time for the solitary night birds to cry out and for bats to fly soundlessly overhead. Camp-fires were still glowing red here and there on

the meadow, and the horses of the caravan that had arrived with Menshikov were jingling their bits. Getting his stockings soaked to the knees in dew, Peter walked along the river. He stopped from time to time in order to breathe in more deeply. On the rim of a hollow that sloped down to the river, he stopped again; from down there came a disturbing fragrance of leaf-mould and mead, and there was smoke down there: either there was a camp-fire or a mist was rising. He could clearly hear a voice: it must be that of an army groom, one of those wags who never lets anyone sleep at night as he spins his yarns. Peter was about to turn back, but he overheard what they were saying:

"That's all nonsense, she's a witch, a witch! She was a common, grubby housemaid in a threadbare blouse... That's what she was when they took her. Not every man would've wanted to sleep with her... Am I right, Mishka? I saw her when she was still with the Field-Marshal... She skips out of the tent, throws out the slops, wipes herself with her apron, then back into the tent and her knives go chop-chop! Pleasantly plump and lively... Even then, I thought: 'That bird won't come to grief...' Oh, she's a lively one all right!"

A stupid voice enquired:

"What'll happen to her now, Uncle?"

"Didn't you know? They're right when they say there's one born every minute... Now she's living with our tsar; she eats pies, rounds them off with gingerbreads, sleeps half the day, and stretches the other half..."

The stupid voice said in bewilderment:

"Does that mean she has some kind of special arrangement, Uncle?"

"You ask Mishka and he'll tell you about her arrangement."

A thick, sleepy voice replied:

"To hell with you, I don't remember her at all..."

Peter breathed hard... His face burned with shame... His blood boiled with rage... The Prince-Emperor clapped men in irons for casting such aspersions on the tsar's honour!.. Arrest them! Shame, shame! Making a joke of it! But it was his own fault that the whole army was laughing... "He pulled the girl from under Mishka." Head bowed, he took a step in that di-

rection towards the idle oaf who had tasted her first sweetness... But a gentle force seemed to halt him and bind all his limbs. He took a deep breath again and put his hand on his damp brow... "Loose wench, Katerina..." And she rose up as in the flesh before him, swarthy, sweet, warm, kind-hearted, in no way to blame... "Damn, damn! After all, I knew everything about her when I took her... And I knew about the soldier..."

Picking his feet up as he walked through the wet weeds, he descended gravely into the hollow... Three men loomed up behind the smoke... "Who goes there?" barked one rudely. Peter growled, "It's me." The soldiers, although frightened out of their wits, nimbly and in a trice snatched up their muskets and stood without budging: weapons in front of them, head cheerfully held up, eyes bulging at the tsar, ready to go through fire for him even to the death.

Without looking at them, Peter prodded the extinct embers of the fire with the toe of his shoe.

"Give me a light!"

The middle soldier, the story-teller and wag, went down on his knees, raked around and picked up a coal on the palm of his hand, throwing it up and catching it again until Mister Bombardier had filled his pipe. As he lit up, Peter looked from under his eyebrows at the far soldier... That's the one... Tall, fit, well-built... He could not see the man's face...

"How tall are you? Why aren't you in the Guards? Name?"

The soldier answered strictly according to Regulations, but with a Moscow drawl, and Peter's moustache bristled at the gall of it.

"Mishka Bludov, Nevsky Dragoon Regiment, groom of Number Six Company, recruited in sixteen ninety-nine, height six foot seven, Mister Bombardier..."

"You've been on active service since ninety-nine without earning promotion. Lazy? Stupid?"

The soldier replied in a lifeless voice:

"Yes, Mister Bombardier, I'm lazy and stupid."

"Fool!"

The tobacco in Peter's pipe caught fire and he blew out the flame. He knew that as soon as he had disappeared into the mist, the soldiers would exchange knowing glances, would not dare laugh, but would certainly exchange glances... Putting his

lean arms behind his back, holding his head back with the pipe emitting sparks, he began walking up out of the hollow. On reaching his tent, he sat down at the table and pushed the candle a little further away from him. His throat was dry and he thirstily drank some wine. Shrouding himself in pipe-smoke, he said:

"Danilych... In the Nevsky Regiment, Number Six Company, there's a soldier tall enough to be in the Guards... Against regulations..."

Menshikov's blue eyes betrayed neither surprise nor cunning, just kindly understanding...

"Mishka Bludov... Certainly... I've known about him for a long time... He was awarded a ruble for the storming of Marienburg... The squadron commander refuses to let him go; he loves horses, the horses love him, and there was never a happier lot of horses in the whole of our army than the ones in Number Six Squadron."

"Transfer him to the Preobrazhensky Regiment as fugleman in Number One Company."

## 4

General Horn came down from the tower and walked across the market-place—tall, with thin legs, his feet in low-heeled shoes. As always, there were many people milling round the stalls, but, alas, there were less and less edibles on sale each day: a bunch of radishes, a skinned cat instead of rabbit, smoked horseflesh. The angry housewives no longer greeted the general with a respectful curtsey, and some even turned their backs on him. Several times, he heard a murmur: "Surrender to the Russians, you old devil. Why are you letting people die for nothing?.." But the general was unshakable.

When the town clock struck nine, he walked up to his clean little cottage and began wiping his feet on the doormat. A clean-looking maid opened the door and, executing a low curtsey, took from him his helmet and the heavy sword, unbuckled from its straps. The general washed his hands with dignified slowness and went into the dining-room, where the bot-

tle-glass panes in the low window, which was as long as the wall, feebly admitted a glow of green and yellow light.

At the table, waiting for him, stood his wife, née Countess Sperling, a person with a heavy character, three round-shouldered and thin-haired girls with long noses like their father's and a sulky mother's darling of a little boy.

The general sat down and his family did likewise; they clasped their hands, and silently said Grace. When the lid was taken off the pewter tureen, steam came forth, but there was nothing appetising about the contents; it was the usual oatmeal porridge without milk or salt. The affected girls could only swallow it with an effort, and the sulky little boy, pushing his plate away, whispered to his mother: "I won't, I won't..." For a second course, they were served yesterday's old mutton bones and a spoonful of peas. They drank water instead of beer. The general, not in the least disconcerted, chewed the meat between his big yellow teeth.

Said Countess Sperling rapidly, crumbling a crust of bread over her plate:

"No matter how hard I've tried to understand you in fourteen years of being married to you, I've never succeeded, Karl... Is there a drop of living blood in your veins? Have you the heart of a husband and a father? The king sends you a convoy of ships from Revel bringing ham, sugar, fish, smoked meats and biscuits. In your place, how should the father of four children conduct himself: break through to the ships sword in hand and bring them back to the town. But you preferred to watch without turning a hair as the Russian soldiers guzzled Revel ham... And my children must needs choke on oatmeal porridge! I've said it before and I'm going to say it again: you have a heart of stone! You are a monster! And that business of the mock battle! Now I shan't be able to show my face in Europe... 'Ah, so you're the wife of the General Horn whom the Russians led by the nose like a fool at a fair?' 'Alas, alas, yes!' I shall reply. You don't even know that every salesgirl in town calls you the old crane on the tower... To cap it all, our only hope, General Schlippenbach, perishes at Wenden trying to help us, and you, as if nothing had happened, sit and calmly chew mutton gristle as if this were the happiest day of

your life... No, I've had enough! You must let me and the children go to the king's court in Stockholm..."

"It's too late, Madam, it's too late," said Horn, and his whitish eyes, turned to the window, seemed to admit as little light as the bottle-glass panes. "We're caught in Narva like rats in a trap."

Countess Sperling clutched her lace bonnet with both hands and pulled it down tighter over her head.

"Now I understand what you're after; you want me and my unhappy children to eat grass and rats."

The sulky little boy suddenly burst out laughing and looked at his mother; the girls tearfully dipped their noses into their plates. General Horn was slightly taken aback: this was unjust, it was not his intention that his children should eat grass and rats. But, imperturbable as ever, he finished his breakfast.

Bystrom, his adjutant, had been jingling his spurs outside the door for some time now. Something had evidently happened. Horn took his clay pipe from the shelf, filled it, struck a light, lit a piece of paper with the fuse, lit up, and only then did he leave the dining-room.

Bystrom was holding the general's sword and helmet in his hands and was slightly out of breath.

"Your Excellency, movement has suddenly started in the Russian camp and we can't make sense of it..."

General Horn walked back across the square, which was full of agitated people. He held his head high, not wanting to look the citizenry in the eye, since they had been calling him the old crane. He climbed up the worn steps to the tower. Indeed, something untoward was afoot in the Russian camp; troops were forming up in two ranks all along the crescent of the siege installations that hemmed in the town. A cloud of dust was racing swiftly up from the east. At first, it was only possible to distinguish dragoons galloping on their low mounts. Some distance behind them came Peter and Menshikov. The yellow dust raised by the squadron's horses was so thick that General Horn knitted his brows... Behind the tsar and Menshikov galloped soldiers holding eighteen yellow satin banners high on poles. On their folds, eighteen royal lions extended their paws in indignation...

The squadrons, the tsar, Menshikov and the Swedish banners swept past the besieging army, and the soldiers shouted "Hurrah! Victory!" with all the power of their barbaric lungs.

## 5

They were celebrating in the Russian camp. The guns firing round the tsar's tent could clearly be seen from the Gloria bastion and it was possible from the salvoes to count the number of toasts being drunk. Knowing how boastful the Russians were, General Horn waited for a flag-bearer to ride out with a taunting message. That is exactly what happened. About forty men suddenly streamed out of the tsar's tent, waving goblets and mugs. One of them leapt on to his horse and galloped towards the Gloria bastion, followed by a trumpeter trying to catch him up. Dodging the shots on his horse, the flag-bearer took out a handkerchief, raised it high on the point of his drawn sword and stopped at the foot of the tower. The trumpeter, leaning back in the saddle, played with all his might, frightening the passing crows.

"Parley, parley!" shouted the flag-bearer. "This is Lieutenant-Colonel Karpov of the Preobrazhensky Regiment speaking!" He was drunk, flushed, with curly hair tousled by the wind. General Horn bent over the tower and replied:

"Talk, I'm listening. We can still shoot you."

"Announcement!" shouted the lieutenant-colonel, throwing back his merry head. "On Friday last week, the town of Yuriev, with God's aid, was stormed by Field-Marshal Sheremetev. In response to the tearful supplications of the commandant and because of their valiant resistance, the officers were allowed to keep their swords and a third of the soldiers their rifles without charges... They were not allowed banners or music..."

Bystrom translated in a loud voice, and the officers standing behind Horn exchanged glances. One of them, beside himself with rage, shouted: "He's lying, the Russian dog!" The lieutenant-colonel waved his arm in a sweeping gesture, indicating the distant tent where men were still standing about with mugs:

"Sirs, is not this peace better than the routs at Schlisselburg, Nienschanz and Yuriev?.. Bearing this in mind, the Commander-in-Chief, Field-Marshal Ogilvy, gives you the opportunity to surrender Narva on honourable terms... Emissaries for talks should proceed to the tent at once. The goblets are full, and the guns are charged for salutes..."

General Horn replied in a hollow voice:

"No! I'm going to fight!" His face with its sunken cheeks and the imposing-looking old man's nose was bloodless, and his sinewy hands were trembling. "Go! In three minutes I shall give the order to shoot..."

Karpov saluted with his sword and shouted to the trumpeter: "Get away from here!", but instead of galloping off himself, he rode on his prancing charger round to the other side of the tower. The officers rushed to the battlements, and he shouted up to them:

"Which of you is the scoundrel and boor who insulted me, a Russian officer, by calling me a liar? Interpreter, translate, quickly... Come on out, if you have the courage, and we'll settle it between us..."

The officers shouted. One of them, a fat man, turned purple, shook his fists and broke away from his comrades... The muskets clicked. Lying on the neck of his horse, Karpov raced away from the tower, pursued by shots and the whistle of bullets. He stopped at two hundred paces, and now spurring, now restraining his horse, waited for his opponent in a fever of impatience... It was some time before the gate hinges squealed, the bridge was lowered, and the fat officer galloped out and over the field towards Karpov. He was taller, and his horse was sturdier, and the Swedish sword was some fifteen inches longer than the Russian. He had put on an iron cuirass for the duel, whereas Karpov had lace showing from under his unbuttoned coat fluttering in the wind.

According to custom, the opponents, before engaging, exchanged insults, one frenziedly howling gloomy words, the other a stream of obscenities... Both drew pistols out of their saddle holsters, dug in their spurs and raced at one another. They fired simultaneously. The Swede held his sword well out in front of him. Karpov, Tatar fashion, swerved right in front of the other horse's nose, galloped round him and fired from

a second pistol. The Swede gnashed his teeth, growled and made another furious charge. Karpov only saved his life by shielding himself with his horse so that the enemy's sword ran deep into the animal's neck... "Oh, he's finished off my horse," he thought. "I won't hold out on foot..." But the Swede, as if asleep, released the hilt of his sword and swayed, feeling with his left hand for the pistol in its holster. Jumping off his horse as it fell, Karpov struck the other several times with his blade in the side under the cuirass and watched, gasping for breath, as the Swede began to sway more and more in the saddle... "The devil, he's tough, he doesn't want to die!" Limping, he ran back to his own side.

...The shades of night covered the field, the dew fell, the shots had long since died down, the field-kitchen fires were burning and all living creatures were settling down to sleep. But there was no peace in the Russian camp. On the west fringe, where the bridge had been built, more and more lights were moving and it was possible to hear the shouts of commands and the mournful chorus of voices "He-e-eave!" The camp-fires and the lights of torches and lanterns extended far across to the right bank of the Narva up to Ivan-gorod itself, and soon there were more of those unmoving and moving lights than there were majestic stars in the August sky.

At dawn, the men on the towers of Narva saw a long string of enormous wall-battering guns and siege mortars still being drawn by oxen along the Yamgorod road. Some of them were crossing the bridge, but most were turning off and halting on the right bank amid the agglomeration of troops.

That morning, General Horn rode into the old city to the Honor bastion which was adjacent to the river bank. He ascended the high ravelin that had been built of bricks and was considered impregnable. From there with the naked eye he could see the bronze monsters on cast wheels, was able to count them, and had no difficulty in grasping tsar Peter's plan and his own blunder. The Russians had outwitted him again, old and experienced as he was. Peter had spotted the two weakest points in the defences, the supposedly impregnable Honor bastion, which would be levelled in a matter of days by the new Russian wall-battering guns, and the Victoria bastion, which covered the town from the direction of the river – also

of brick, but dilapidated and dating back to the times of Ivan the Terrible. For two months the Russians had misled the Swedes by pretending that they were making preparations to storm the mighty fortifications of the new town. But the assault was, of course, being prepared from this side. General Horn watched as thousands of Russian soldiers dug with all haste and established breaching batteries opposite Honor and Victoria, and also Ivan-gorod, which covered the river crossing. The Russians were preparing an assault from the river over pontoons...

"Very good, all is clear, the foolish pranks are over and we're going to fight in earnest," muttered Horn, pacing along the ravelin as if he had suddenly become several years younger. "On our side, we shall put up Swedish courage... And that will be more than adequate." He turned to the little group of officers.

"It's going to be hell here!" He stamped his foot. "Here we shall face the Russian shot! They are making haste, and we must do likewise. I order you to collect in the town all who are capable of wielding a spade. If the walls collapse, we shall fight in the counter-trenches, we shall fight in the streets... I shall not surrender Narva to the Russians..."

Late that evening, General Horn rode home and, sitting down at table, chewed some gristly meat with his big teeth. Countess Sperling had been so frightened by the gossip in the market-place that she was silent. Running his finger round the rim of his plate, the sulky little boy said:

"The boys are saying the Russians will kill us all..."

General Horn swallowed a mouthful of water, lit his pipe at the candle, crossed his legs and replied:

"Well, Son, a man must carry out his duty, and in all else he must rely on God's mercy."

## 6

Had any other letter been so long and so tedious, Peter would have thrown it across the table to his secretary Makarov with a "Read that and give me the gist", but this was Field-Marshal Ogilvy's disposition. Considering that he had

been drawing his salary since the first of May and had done nothing else so far, this disposition had cost the Treasury seven hundred gold efimki, not to mention food and other supplies. Sucking his hoarse pipe and grunting, Peter patiently read the Field-Marshal's brain-child, which had been written in German. Little green midges were circling round the candles and horrible daddy-long-legs kept flying in, singeing themselves and falling all over the papers with their legs in the air; a moth was about to start circling round too and make the candle-flames flutter; it was half the size of a sparrow (Peter shuddered, he had never liked weird and useless creatures, especially cockroaches). Makarov pulled off his wig and, in a series of leaps and bounds, chased the moth out of the tent.

Near Peter sat Pyotr Pavlovich Shafirov, his short thighs apart. He had arrived with the Field-Marshal from Moscow — small in stature, with moist, smiling eyes that were very much on the alert. Peter had long had his eye on him: was the man intelligent enough to be loyal, or was he cunning on the grand scale, or was he too greedy? Recently, Shafirov had risen from ordinary interpreter at the Ambassadors' Commission to become an important person, albeit without rank.

"He's tied the whole thing up in knots again," said Peter, scowling. Shafirov waved his little hands with their rings, jumped up from his seat, bent over and quickly and accurately translated a difficult passage.

"So that's all it is, and I took it for great wisdom." Peter stabbed the goose quill into the inkpot and scratched a few words on the margin of the manuscript. "We do these things more simply... Well now, Pyotr Pavlych, you're on close terms with the Field-Marshal — is he a worthy man?"

Shafirov's clean-shaven face grinned from ear to ear, as cunning as the devil's own. He made no reply, not even out of caution, but because he knew that Peter's unblinking eyes would read his thoughts anyway.

"Our men complain that he is terribly proud. He doesn't go near the common soldier, whom he despises. I don't know what there is to despise about the Russian soldier; take the shirt off any one of them — his body is clean and white. As for the lice — only the baggage-train people have those. Oh, those Imperial officers! I dropped in on him this morning, and he

was washing in a tiny basin, rinsing his hands in the same water as his face and blowing his nose into it as well... He despises our men, yet he hasn't been to the bathhouse since he came from Vienna."

"No, he hasn't, he hasn't..." Shafirov shook all over, laughing and covering his mouth with his fingertips. "In Germany, he was saying, when a gentleman has to wash, they bring a tub of water in which he washes the various limbs according to necessity... But the steam-bath is a barbarian custom... Most of all, the Field-Marshal is embarrassed because we eat so much garlic, pounded, chopped or by the clove, serfs and boyars alike... During his first few days here, he kept plugging his nose with his handkerchief..."

"Indeed?" said Peter, surprised. "Why didn't you say so earlier? But it's true that we eat a lot of garlic. Incidentally, garlic is very good for you; let him get the taste for it..."

He threw the disposition on to the table, stretched, cracked his fingers, and said suddenly to Makarov:

"Barbarian, brush those filthy midges off the table... Have wine and a chair brought for the Field-Marshal... And you, Makarov, have a habit of breathing garlic in people's faces while you're listening to them... Turn away when you breathe in future..."

Field-Marshal Ogilvy came into the tent in a yellow wig, a white military coat trimmed with gold braid, and soft thigh-boots with the uppers below the knees. Holding his hat in one hand and his cane in the other, he bowed and promptly drew himself up to his full and very considerable height. Without rising, Peter indicated the chair with splayed-out fingers. "Take a seat. Are you well?" Gliding up with a sweet smile, Shafirov translated. The Field-Marshal, full of dignity, sat down, leaning back slightly and pushing out his paunch. He held his cane away from him at arm's length. His face was sallow, full, but austere, with thin lips. He had the eyes of a brave man.

"I've read your disposition, it's all right, it's sensible, sensible." Peter took a map of the town from under the table and unrolled it: as soon as he did so, the midges and daddy-long-legs began falling on to it. "I would disagree on one point

only. Narva must be taken not in three months, but in three days!" (He nodded, his lips compressed.)

The Field-Marshal's sallow face lengthened, the ginger brows rose as high as the front of his wig, the corners of his mouth went down, his eyes expressed indignation.

"Oh, well, all right! I said three days in the heat of the moment... Let's come to terms, let's settle for one week or so... But I will not grant you more time." Peter began brushing the insects off the map with a series of angry flicks of the hand. "You've chosen intelligent positions for your batteries... But, if you will excuse me, I gave orders recently for all the batteries on the other side of the river to be turned against the Victoria and Honor bastions, because they are General Horn's Achilles's heel..."

"Your Majesty," exclaimed Ogilvy, beside himself with anger, "according to the disposition, we begin with the bombardment of Ivan-gorod and the storming of same..."

"We mustn't... General Horn is placing all his hopes on our messing about with Ivan-gorod till autumn. But Ivan-gorod is no trouble to us; the very most it can do is fire on our pontoons a little. Further on, your plan is clever — clever, because you fear a relief force from King Charles... In 1700, I lost my army on these same positions because he arrived with a relief force... You prepare a counter-relief, but that is costly and complicated and you will spend much time on it... My counter-relief will be to take Narva as soon as possible... It is in speed that we should seek victory, not in caution... Your disposition is the very wise fruit of military science and Aristotelean logic... But I need Narva right now as a starving man needs a crust of bread... And a starving man doesn't wait..."

Ogilvy applied a silk handkerchief to his face. He had difficulty in keeping up with the logic of this young barbarian, but dignity did not allow him to give in without a dispute. The copious perspiration soaked his handkerchief.

"Your Majesty, fortune has found fit to favour me with the happiness of taking eleven fortresses and towns," he said, and he threw his handkerchief into his hat, which was lying on the carpet. "At the storming of Namur, Marshal Vauban embraced me and called me his best pupil, and there and then, on the battlefield, amid the groans of the wounded, he presented

me with a snuff-box. In drawing up this disposition, I have overlooked nothing in my military experience; everything in it has been weighed up and measured. With modest assurance, I affirm that the slightest deviation from my conclusions will have disastrous consequences. Yes, Your Majesty, I have extended the term of the siege, but purely out of the consideration that the Russian soldier is not yet a soldier, but a muzhik with a musket. He has not yet the slightest notion of order and discipline. Many more sticks will have to be broken on his back to make him obey without argument, as a soldier should. Only then can I be sure that, at a wave of my baton, he will take a ladder and scale the walls under a hail of bullets..."

Ogilvy had been listening with pleasure to the sound of his own voice, like a bird singing with half-closed eyes. Shafirov translated into sensible Russian his complicated didactic constructions; but when Ogilvy, on finishing, looked at Peter, he forgot his dignity, quickly drew his legs under his chair, pulled in his stomach and let fall the hand with the cane. Peter's face was terrifying — his neck seemed to have stretched to twice its natural length, the wild jowls bulged on either side of the tightly closed mouth, and Furies seemed, God forbid, about to fly out of his staring eyes... He was breathing hard. The great, veined hand in the short sleeve, lying amid the dead midges, was fumbling for something — felt a goose quill, snapped it in two...

"So that's it, so that's it — the Russian soldier is a muzhik with a musket!" he said in a strangled voice. "I see nothing bad in him... The Russian muzhik is clever, shrewd and brave... And with a musket he is the terror of the enemy... You don't flog him with a stick for that! Doesn't know order? He knows order. And when he doesn't, he is not the one that's bad, it's his officer... And when my soldier has to be beaten with a stick, then I'll beat him myself, but you will not do so..."

General Chambers, General Repnin and Menshikov came into the tent. Each taking a glass of wine from Makarov, they sat in the nearest place they could find. Glancing over the Field-Marshal's manuscript with his own comments, making sketches and notes on the map in pencil (standing in front of

the candles and waving the midges away), Peter read to the council of war the disposition which, within a few hours, was to set in motion whole armies, batteries and baggage trains.

## 7

Bareheaded women flung themselves at General Horn's horse. They seized it by the bridle and the stirrups, they clutched at the skirts of his leather coat... Haggard, black with the soot of fires, their eyes rolling, they screamed: "Surrender the town, surrender the town..." The gloomy cuirassiers, his escort, also held back, could not get through to him... The roar of the Russian guns shook the houses on the square, now littered with burnt beams and broken tiles. It was the seventh day of the bombardment. On the previous day, the general had sternly rejected a reasonable and polite offer from Field-Marshal Ogilvy not to subject the town to the horrors of an assault and to the fury of the troops once they had burst into it. Instead of giving a reply, the general had crumpled up the Field-Marshal's letter and thrown it in the envoy's face. The whole town heard about this.

The general stared with lacklustre eyes at the screaming women, whose faces were distorted with terror and hunger — such is the face of war! He drew his sword and began belabouring their heads with it and urging on his horse. "Kill us, kill us, trample us to death!" they screamed. He swayed — they were dragging him down from the saddle. Then there was an appalling crash, and even Horn's iron heart quailed. A black-and-yellow column of smoky flame shot up behind the slate roofs of the old town; the powder magazines had blown up. The high tower of the old town hall began swaying. Voices screamed heart-rendingly, people scurried up the side-streets, the square emptied. Holding his sword athwart his saddle, the general galloped towards the Honor bastion. Shells curved over from beyond the river, rapidly increasing in size and falling with a hiss onto the roofs of the houses overlooking the street or on to the crooked street itself, then spun round and exploded... The general repeatedly dug his huge spurs into the bloody flanks of his bucking horse.

The Honor bastion was shrouded in dust and smoke. The general could see piles of bricks, overturned cannons, horses with their feet in the air and an enormous breach in the side facing the Russians. The walls had collapsed to their foundations. A regimental commander came up, wounded in the face and grey with dust. "I order you not to let the enemy through..." The commander looked at him with what might have been reproach or mockery. The general turned away, spurred his horse and galloped along the narrow side-streets to the Victoria bastion. He had to shield himself several times from the flames of burning houses. As he rode up he heard the whine of approaching shells. The Russians were shooting accurately. The half-destroyed walls of the bastion were bulging, flying into the air and falling. The general dismounted. The round-faced, ruddy-faced soldier who took the bridle from him stubbornly refused to look him in the eye. The general struck him on the chin with his gauntleted fist and climbed up over the fallen bricks on to the remaining part of the wall. From there he could see that the assault had begun...

Brandishing his sword and shouting at the top of his voice, Menshikov ran across the floating bridge in the midst of the little marksmen, who belonged to the Ingermanland Regiment. All the men were yelling themselves hoarse. They were being shelled by cast-iron cannons on the high walls of Ivangorod. Compressing the air and hissing as they flew overhead, the projectiles smacked into the water. Menshikov crossed the bridge, jumped down on to the left bank and, turning round, stamped his foot, waving the hem of his cloak... "Charge! Charge!" Hunched under their field-packs, the marksmen ran in a dense mass across the bridge which settled slightly under their weight, but to Menshikov it looked as though they were marking time... "Faster, faster!" Then like a drunkard, he burst into a torrent of spontaneous obscenities.

On the left bank, there was little room on the narrow strip between the river and the damp fortress wall of the Victoria bastion, and those running across bunched up, pushed and slowed down; there was an acrid smell of sweat. Up to his knees in water, Menshikov ran ahead to overtake the column:

"Drummers, forward! Banner forward!" The guns of Ivangorod were now firing over the river at the column; the balls smacked into the bank, disintegrated against the walls in a shower of stinging fragments or smashed softly and stickily into human beings... The front ranks, charging ahead and waving their arms, were already scrambling up the brick rubble of the breach on the crest... The drums began beating... Louder and louder became the shouting along the column of marksmen climbing up to the ridge... Behind it, a voice howled hoarsely in Swedish... A volley rang out... Smoke covered everything... The marksmen burst over the crest of the breach into the town.

The second assault column went past General Chambers. He was sitting on a big horse nodding its head in time to the drums. He was wearing a bronze cuirass that had been cleaned with brick and which he put on only for specially solemn occasions, holding his heavy helmet in his hand so that the men would have a good view on his rubicund, hook-nosed face which resembled a red-hot cannon-ball. "Brave Russians, forward... Brave Russians, forward..." he kept saying, hoarsely and mechanically.

At the head of the column, a battalion of the Preobrazhensky Regiment was advancing, across the meadow towards the Honor bastion at a fast pace. These were man picked for their height—mustachioed, burly, with bayonets screwed to their muskets, since the orders were to stab and not to shoot. The battalion was led by Lieutenant-Colonel Karpov. He knew that he was being watched both by his own side and by the Swedes hidden in the breach. He ran on, inflating his chest like a pouter pigeon, holding his head well up without turning round to look at the battalion. Behind him came four drummers, beating away so that the blood tingled. Fifty paces remained to the wide breach in the massive brick wall. Karpov did not put on speed, but he began to hunch his shoulders. On seeing this, the soldiers slowed down, the ones in the rear pushing up against those in front. "Rrrat-tat-rrrat-tat!" went the drums. Iron casques and musket muzzles slowly rose up in the breach... Karpov shouted: "Throw down your arms, you

scum, surrender!" Sword in one hand, pistol in the other, he ran forward straight into a volley... There was a flash, a roar, and gunsmoke hit him in the face... "Am I really still alive?" he thought delightedly. He was free of the terror that had made him hunch his shoulders. He wanted a fight... But his soldiers overtook him and he looked in vain for someone to run through with his sword... He could only see the broad backs of the Preobrazhensky Regiment wielding their bayonets as peasants wield their pitchforks...

The third column, under Repnin, went into the assault with scaling ladders to storm the half-destroyed Gloria bastion. The men on the walls kept up a rapid fire, hurled down stones and beams, and lit barrels of tar to pour it over the besiegers. Repnin himself in his excitement was watching on a small, prancing horse at the foot of the gate tower, his huge cuffs pushed back, shaking his fists, shouting in a thin voice and encouraging the men for fear that they might falter on the ladders. One, another, and then several more, dislodged and run through, fell from the top... But God was merciful and more men swarmed frenziedly up the ladders. The Swedes didn't have the chance to empty out their blazing barrels; the Russians were already on the walls.

Countess Sperling kept seizing her children by the hand, as if counting them over again. Jumping up, she would listen, as the shooting and the frenzied shouts of men fighting came nearer and nearer... She stretched out her upturned hands, hotly whispering with her twisted lips: "You wanted this, you monster, you, you stubborn, heartless man..." The girls sobbed and cried: "Mama, be quiet, don't..." The little boy stuffed his fist into his mouth and watched his sisters weeping.

Wheels rumbled nearby and the countess rushed to the window; a limping horse with a broken leg was pulling a cart loaded with all kinds of possessions and women with bundles were running after it... "To the castle, the castle! Save yourselves!" they were shrieking... Four soldiers passed carrying stretchers... And then more stretchers and still more stretchers laden with waxen-faced wounded. Then she saw a bent old man with a sack, known to be a rich money-lender; his slippers scraping hurriedly, he was carrying a squealing porker under

one arm... Suddenly, he threw down the pig and the sack and ran... There was a noise of breaking glass very close at hand... "O-o-oh!" groaned a voice in anguish. She saw General Horn at the far end of the square... He was waving his hand and pointing at something... Cuirassiers galloped heavily past him... Horn struck his staggering horse several times on the ribs with his sword; she could see all the wolfish teeth in his blackened face. Bouncing high in the saddle, he galloped up a sidestreet and was lost to view... "Karl! Karl!" The countess ran out into the passage and opened the front door. "Karl! Karl!" Then she saw the Russians — they were making their way along the houses across the deserted square and were looking up at the windows... They had broad faces and long hair, and they wore bronze eagles on their hats...

The countess was so frightened that she stood and watched as they approached, pointing at her and at the commandant's flag over the door. Soldiers surrounded her, prodding her with their fingers and saying something excited and angry... One, a flat-faced brute, pushed her aside and went indoors... When he pushed her, as if she were a common peasant woman at the market, all the long-repressed hatred welled up in her —hatred for her old husband, who had been the bane of her life, and for these Russian savages who had brought her so much suffering and terror. She clutched the flat-faced soldier and pulled him back out of the passage, hissing, choking on fragments of words, clawing his cheeks, biting, kneeing... The soldier frantically defended himself against the crazed woman... They both fell onto the flagstones... His comrades, amazed at this female fury, lost their tempers, flung themselves on her and dragged the two apart. When the men drew back, the countess was lying face down, her head on one side, her face blue and contorted... One soldier tugged her skirt down over her naked legs, another angrily turned to the three girls and the boy in the doorway... The little boy, his feet drumming on the floor, was screaming soundlessly, without tears... The soldier said: "To hell with that brood! Let's get out of here, lads!.."

It was all over in three quarters of an hour. The Russians burst like a hurricane on to the square and into the streets of old Narva. It was impossible to halt or repulse them. General Horn ordered the troops to retreat to the earth rampart that separated the old town from the new. The rampart was high and wide; there, he hoped, tsar Peter's regiments would freely stain the steep slopes with their blood.

The general was seated on his horse, which had lowered its head almost to its forefeet. A fresh, rising breeze rattled his personal yellow-and-black field-badge on its high staff. About fifty gloomy and motionless cuirassiers waited behind him in a semi-circle. From the high rampart, the general could see down the length of several streets. There should have been troops retreating along them, but the streets remained deserted. The general watched and waited, his lips working. Then tiny human figures began to run across — first one, then another. He couldn't make out who they were or why they were running like that. The cuirassiers behind him began to grumble in low voices. A rider galloped up desperately. He jumped down from his horse at the foot of the rampart and, holding his bloody left wrist in his right hand, climbed up the steep slope. This was his adjutant, Bystrom, without a sword, without a pistol, without a hat, the skirt of his coat torn off.

"General!" He looked up at Horn, his face wild. "General! Oh God, oh my God!"

"I'm listening, Lieutenant Bystrom. Speak more calmly..."

"General, our troops are surrounded. The Russians are running wild... I've never seen such slaughter... General, take refuge in the castle..."

General Horn lost his composure. He now knew who those tiny men had been, running across the street in the distance. His slow thoughts, which had always led to a firm decision, were confused... He could not make up his mind. His feet slipped out of the stirrups and hung below his horse's belly. He was not even brought round by the alarmed exclamations of his cuirassiers... From both directions along the broad rampart, whooping shrilly, bearded Cossacks in terrifying tall lambskin hats tipped over on one ear were approaching at full gallop. They were brandishing curved sabres and taking aim with long harquebuses. Rather than see this horror, Bystrom

rested his bowed head against the general's horse. The cuirassiers exchanged glances, drew their swords, threw them on the ground and dismounted.

The first to gallop up was an overexcited Colonel Rohn. He seized the general's horse by the bridle:

"General Horn, you are my prisoner!"

Only then, like a man in a trance, did he lift the hand in which he was holding his sword. To take it from him, Colonel Rohn had to force open the general's fingers, which were tightened round the hilt...

Had not Field-Marshal Ogilvy been there, Peter would have long ago galloped to his troops; in three quarters of an hour they had done what he had been preparing for four years, what had been tormenting and worrying him like an incurable ulcer... But he would have to conduct himself as befitting a tsar, dammit, and in conformity with European custom. Peter sat importantly on a white horse; he was wearing a Preobrazhensky coat, a sash, and a shaggy new tricorne with a cockade. He was holding a spy-glass to his side with his right hand; there was nothing to look at any more from the hill and his face bore an expression of intimidating majesty... It was a matter of all-European importance to have stormed one of the most impregnable fortresses in the world.

Officers galloped up; Peter indicated Ogilvy with a nod and they reported to the Field-Marshal on the course of the battle... Such-and-such a number of streets and squares taken... Ours were pressing on like a wall, the enemy were retreating everywhere in disorder... Finally, three officers sped out of the destroyed Gloria gate and came galloping up at all possible speed... Ogilvy raised a finger and said:

"Oh! Good news, I imagine..."

The first to arrive was a Cossack officer who sprang from his galloping horse and, his black beard pointing up at tsar Peter, barked:

"General Horn, commandant of Narva, has surrendered his sword..."

"Wonderful!" exclaimed Ogilvy, and signalled gracefully

to Peter with his elk-skin glove: "Your Majesty, pray proceed, the town is yours..."

Peter strode vigorously into the vaulted knights' hall in the castle... He seemed taller, his back was straight, he was breathing noisily... He was holding an unsheathed sword... He glanced wildly at Menshikov, whose iron cuirass was dented by bullets, his lean face haggard, his hair damp with sweat, his lips caked· he looked at the little slit-eyed Repnin, who was smiling sweetly; he looked at the red-faced Colonel Rohn, who had managed to down a glass of wine; he glanced at General Chambers, as pleased with himself as if it were his name-day.

"I want to know," shouted Peter, "why the massacre has not been stopped in the old town yet. Why is there looting in the town?" He stretched out his sword. "I hit one of our soldiers... He was drunk and dragging a young girl along..." He threw the sword onto the table. "Mister Bombardier Lieutenant Menshikov, I appoint you governor of the town... I give you one hour to stop the bloodshed and pillage... You will answer not with your back, but with your head..."

Menshikov turned pale and immediately went out, trailing his torn cloak behind him. Anikita Repnin said in a soft voice:

"The enemy asked for quarter very late, it has been hard to get our men away, they are so terribly angry... Officers sent by me are pulling them off by the hair... And the citizens are looting their own town..."

"Arrest and hang some of them — as an example!"

Peter sat down at the table, but promptly stood up again. Ogilvy came in, followed by two soldiers and some officers leading General Horn. It became quiet, save for the slow jingling of the rowels of Horn's spurs. He went up to tsar Peter, raised his head and looked past him with clouded eyes, his lips curling in a sneer... Everyone saw Peter's clenched fist rise from the red cloth on the table... (Ogilvy, alarmed, took a step towards him). His shoulders twitched with revulsion and he stood for a long time in silence until those present could hold their breath no longer...

"You will be accorded no honour from me," said Peter in a quiet voice. "Fool! Old wolf! Bloodthirsty dunderhead!.." And he glanced at Colonel Rohn. "Take him away to prison, on foot, across the whole town, so that he may witness the sorry work of his own hands..."

THE END

Редактор русского текста *Р. Шубина*
Контрольный редактор *О. Чоракаев*
Художник *Г. Клодт*
Художественный редактор *Е. Поликашин*
Технический редактор *В. Перминова*

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*Alexei Tolstoy*



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