



It was the best of times. It was the
revolution!

Comrade Commissar

David Woodruff © 2018

Parovnokovna Village, December 1917

The largest building in the village was a low, sprawling white-washed structure with the type of squat little doors and not only failed to close properly but required even a short man to duck to get through. It may have once been a warehouse, or perhaps some kind of meeting house or school. Surrounded by a low platform porch without railings, it had the looks of a railway station, with the tracks long since gone. Alexander Nicolovich knew it could never have been a rail station, he'd had to come for what seemed like forever using nothing more than a broken-down cart and a mule he'd requisitioned from a town over 60 leagues away.

Outside the town were fields sprinkled throughout. Rolling hills were spread sporadically between the fields and thick knotted patches of pine forests had been left to grow haphazardly between them. Everywhere was a light dusting of snow ... but what wasn't covered with snow was a light tan dirt ... as if the dirt existed as a rug for the snow. All around where sheep and cows, gently grazing on the poor-quality grass, and passing through the fields ran a weed-ridden, dirt road. If you could call it a road.

Alexander was dressed in nondescript khaki-brown uniform with a wrinkled cloth cap. An old army greatcoat his only protection against the elements. Above its leather brim was a small cloth red star-sown into the caps headband. The buttons of this uniform were as plain as the tailoring and the entire outfit seemed to fit him poorly as if it was made for someone more portly in stature. His black, oily hair clumsily hung over a long, but unassuming face. Lidded amber eyes were set low within their youthful sockets, giving him an unexpectedly friendly appearance for someone in his profession.

He headed for the white building and under his breath cursed the People's Soviet of Petrograd who had sent him to this forgotten backwater of what was left of the Tsar's empire. He stopped the mule near what looked like the main door. Before he could dismount from the cart with any amount of dignity, his black cavalry boots caught in the loose flooring of the cart and he found himself tumbling into the well-worn dust covered path made up the front walk to the building. He jumped to his feet, quickly looking about to be sure his fall had not been seen. Satisfied, he brushed himself off. As he patted the nut-colored woolen material, clouds of light tan powder and snow flew into the air like miniature fog banks, soon dissipating in the relentless sunshine.

Quite unexpectedly Alexander was being brushed off by a short, diminutive man in peasant's attire. He jumped slightly since he had been sure no one had been around, yet here was this fellow with white hair and a long, unkempt beard cleaning him off.

"Where did you come from?" he demanded.

"Oh, you know, everyone always asks me that. But I've always been here ... well at least as long as I can remember. Which is longer than everyone else in the village, because I'm the oldest one in the village." He droned on as he continued to brush down Alexander's pants. "I can remember when everyone was born. I have a good memory. I know everyone. Oh," he stopped, "I haven't introduced myself. What poor manners. I'm Dimitri, Dimitri the Caretaker. I used to be Dimitri the Hog Seller, but we've run out of hogs, so now I'm Dimitri the Caretaker."

"Well," replied Alexander imperiously, "I'm Alexander Anatoly Nicolovich, political commissar of Marxist Russian Social Democratic Labor Party."

“Well, well, well a man with three names. We haven’t had one of those around here in quite some time. Yes, quite some time.” He continued in time with the whisk of the brush on the wool, “Most of the people in this village are peasants. We only have one name. You don’t want to be too pretentious after all if you’re a peasant.”

Alexander ignored him and tried to paste a proclamation of the Supreme Soviet on the wall of the white building, all the while Dimitri kept brushing him off. Alexander stopped, turned and glowered at the man. Dimitri sheepishly stopped and put the brush down, only to return to it after Alexander turned back to work at putting the document on the wall.

Several times Alexander turned to Dimitri. Each time he stopped, only to return to the action once again. Finally, Alexander ignored him ... until he turned, resulting in Dimitri going from brushing the back of his collar to the bottom of his face. Dimitri dropped the brush and eyed Alexander back with a look of abject servitude.

“Assemble all of the villagers,” Alexander commanded authoritatively, “I have an announcement from the People’s Soviet of Petrograd.”

“Oh, I can’t do that,” Dimitri apologized, “Who knows where they all are. No,” he remarked, “Best you wait until this evening ... for the weekly village political debate. That way everybody will be here anyway and you can make your announcement then.”

“The town has political debates?” Alexander was stunned.

“Every Tuesday,” Dimitri replied, “We tried one of those Georgian comedies once ... but the political debates are much more amusing.”

“Alright, this evening then.” Alexander tried the door of the building, but it appeared stuck.

“Can I help you?” Asked Dimitri.

“I am commandeering this building as the headquarters of the Marxist Russian Social Democratic Labor Party of Prono ... Pevnof ...”

“Parovnokovna,” Dimitri corrected him.

“Right, that.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” Dimitri retorted.

“Look,” cried Alexander Nicolovich in an irritated tone, “I am fully empowered by the Marxist Russian Social Democratic Labor Party and the First Soviet of Petrograd to seize and occupy any public building useful to the Marxist Russian Social Democratic Labor Party and ...”

“And I’m sure you are,” Dimitri casually replied, “only the building is haunted.”

“Come now comrade, this is the 20th century, surely you do not believe in spirits of the departed walking around among us ...”

“20th century, 19th century,” Dimitri scoffed, “some of them have been around since the 1650s, in fact” he winked, “we’ve had so many new spirits since the war, the council been thinking about adding an extension.”

“I’ve got to get out of here,” Alexander muttered.

Alexander Nicolovich scoffed at such a superstitious notion and returned to trying to force open the reluctant door. It opened, sending Alexander Nicolovich crashing into the interior of the building. Beyond the door, he saw a huge vacant hall, filled only with cobwebbing and dust. The floorboards groaned under Alexander’s feet and the room seemed to sway until he regained his unsteady feet.

“Come to think of it, you’ll probably get along famously,” remarked Dimitri, “many of them had three names too.” And he walked off, back towards the other run-down buildings of the village.

The wooden floors of the new party headquarters creaked as Alexander brought in his things from the mule cart. The building was rectangular and consisted of a single large room and another tiny room in one corner. The secondary room seemed more like a shack built inside the larger building. It consisted of rough unpainted wooden boards, a single dilated door and on one side, and opening for a window with no glass, screen or even a drape. Nearby a stove showed a cheery fire, warming the room. How the heat stayed inside with the door so poorly made caused the commissar to wonder, but the warmth was welcoming.

The rest of the huge open space was covered in a layer of dust almost as thick as the layers of dirt on the outside of this hapless village. Yet one thing he noticed as he walked across the room is that the dust didn’t move. He couldn’t disturb it. He expected it would rise in a noxious cloud and he marched across the room, but it kept its place, the sunlight shining through the many windows showed not a speck of dust floating into the air. Later, he’d have to find a broom.

Alexander set up his bedroll in the tiny room ... he’d have to find a bed later. He then went about the town looking for furniture. Upon entering a miserable, snow-covered, little hovel, so battered he first believed it to be a storage shed, he found a miserable collection of fixtures that could only have been new in the early 1700s. The bed was a rope bed made with hemp from the same period and a rickety, three-legged chair stood in the corner, leaning against the wall. He started to grab things but was so overcome with their pathetic condition he eventually put them back in their places gently, almost embarrassed that could have ever found them useful.

He stormed out to the cottage, paused ... and then with a determined look on his face, went right back in and commandeered the wretched three-legged chair.

The rest of his search fared no better, finding such pitiful items he despaired that his office desk would most likely be a large rock. After hours of scrounging in the empty town, he finally was able to cadge together enough material to create a makeshift desk. It consisted of two poorly-constructed wooden boxes, one slightly larger than the other. Over these two items of teetering wood, he placed an old door he found inside a barn. Peeling white paint encrusted its surface, but it was the best piece of wood Alexander could find in the village, after all, this piece of wood had once been painted!

He hung up his great coat on a peg he found protruding from the wall near the door and got out his requisition forms. Step one, he thought to himself, this town has so little materials to work with, I'm going to have to start by ordering more requisition forms.

"In my day, we didn't need forms for such a thing," Alexander heard a deep voice say. "You simply went to the local noble and demanded what you wanted from him ... and if he didn't have it ... well, you did without."

He was startled, standing before him was a Russian Imperial army officer, dressed in the full regalia of his office. He was impeccably appointed, with impossibly white pants, dark blue Hussars coat with the fancy white strings stripped across his chest. The coat was practically armored with medals, and the man's neck was hidden by a tall red collar, bedecked with the most opulent display of silver-leaf decorations he had ever seen. His black polished boots, like his pants, held not a lick of dust on them. His own were so covered in grime they could best be described as an irregular lumpy brown with a thin band of black at the top. The officer paced to one side of the desk and then did an about-face, spun and paced to the other side. Alexander hadn't heard him come in, which seemed impossible. He swore the floors creaked loudly if he was even to drop a feather upon their surface ... yet he continued to pace in utter silence.

"Cat got your tongue? Speechless?" the officer inquired, "Rather unusual for a political officer don't you think? It doesn't bode well for your future progress, I can tell you."

Alexander regained his wits, "How did you get in here?" he demanded.

"Oh, I don't think that's the right question, do you?" The officer halted his pacing in front of the desk and spun on his heels, leaning over and firmly placing both hands on the makeshift desk with a crash. The door making up the desk was seriously disturbed, the side near Alexander rising into the air and then unexpectedly falling back down again as the officer released his weight from his side. Papers flew everywhere and Alexander rushed to slap them back down on the table.



The officer's eyes bore directly into the commissar's with a steady gaze making him completely uneasy. His hair was combed back and what must have once been a full head of hair was now receding and salted in gray. His jowls and forehead were streaked with wrinkles and he had two furrowed, extensively deep bags under his eyes as if the man rarely slept. Two grey eyebrows arched under his brow like imperial flags, fully unfurled in the wind.

"Can I call you Alex," he inquired in an astoundingly friendly tone.

"No," he responded curtly, "but you may address me as Alexander Anatoly, and I am a political commissar of Marxist Russian Social Democratic Labor Party."

The officer stared at him with his penetrating eyes. Although the officer didn't advance, Alexander pulled his head back as if desired more space between the two of them.

"You know the problem with little men whose title is longer than their names?" the officer asked bluntly.

Alexander stammered and hedged, not sure how to reply. The question reminded him of the pointed questions aging professors asked their students when they were sure they won't have the answer.

"They end poorly," he answered for the hapless commissar, in a tone not far from threatening.

"My name is Baron Pyotr Nikolayevich Sablukov," the officer then announced with a flourish.

"Can I call you Pyotr?" he snapped back as he tried desperately to regain some of his composure and regain the upper hand in the conversation.

"Of course not," his tone turning annoyed, "you grubby little man."

"What a minute," Alexander responded deliberately, "did you say you were Baron Pyotr Sablukov?"

"Is your hearing as shabby as your uniform?" He asked with more than a little bit of disdain, "Yes, that's what I said."

"Impossible," Alexander smiled, "are you putting me on? Baron Sablukov's been dead for 70 years."

"Has it been that long?" he replied forgetfully, "It doesn't seem that long."

"Fraud," the commissar exclaimed, "get out of my office with that ridiculous get up." And he returned to straightening up his papers. As he dipped his pen into an inkwell, the baron's hair and dusky blue cape blew backward as if blown by a great wind, yet the room was as still as a mouse frozen in a predator's gaze. The room turned icy cold, so much so Alexander saw his breath in the air.

Alexander stared at the sight, unable to make any reply. Then, in the commissar's full sight, the officer simply vanished. Then Alexander could hear: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy," in the baron's sartorial tones.

Alexander Nicolovich was not a man to be taken in by superstitions or a believer in the supernatural, but he ran out of the building like it was on fire. As he passed he tried to grab his coat, but it simply slipped off the peg and fell to the floor. He made no attempt to stop and pick it up and found himself outside in the freezing cold, his clammy skin as white as the surrounding snow.

Dimitri the Caretaker stood before him.

"I see you've met the baron," he suggested, "Only he can turn a man as sickly white as you appear."

"How ... adb ... dah ... he ..." Alexander sputtered incoherently.

"Yes, that's him alright, our baron." Said Dimitri, shaking his head. "You'd better get a coat, you'll catch your death out here."

He sauntered off, back to whatever task he had been working on. Then he stopped as if forgetting something.

"Best to let him call you Alex," Dimitri whispered as if the baron might overhear him.

"Are you dead too?" Asked the commissar in a fearful, hushed tone.

"God forbid, not yet anyway," he replied.

“God is an abstraction,” Alexander recited, “invented by the Bourgeoisie to keep the masses of the Proletariat enslaved. He’s not real.”

“There are days,” Dimitri answered him, “When he would agree.”

“I’ve got to get out of here,” Alexander muttered. Then coming to his senses, he looked around for the caretaker.

“Comrade,” Alexander called after him, regaining some more of his wits, “do you have any Vodka handy?”

“Joseph,” Dimitri yelled across the village.

As if in response, a large young fellow with a tangle of deep black hair answered, appearing from behind one of the village ramshackle huts, “Yes.”

“Where the vodka?” Dimitri asked, loud enough so Alexander could easily overhear their shouted conversation.

The man laughed, “you know where it is, Dimitri, we drank it last night.”

“No, not that vodka.” He replied in a distressed tone.

“You mean the new batch.”

“Yes.”

“It’s in the shed,” he replied. Then both figures turned around corners and effectively disappeared from Alexander Nicolovich’s sight.

“Wait,” he cried after them in vain, “Which shed?” he asked. Then speaking only to himself, he added, “They all look like sheds!”

“I’ve got to get out of here,” Alexander muttered.

Having failed to obtain any vodka, Alexander Nicolovich lumbered back into his headquarters. The warmth had returned to the place as did some of his color. He stopped to put his coat back up on the peg, then ambled off to the small room and curled up on his blanket like a small child, only absent his Teddy bear.

When he awoke, Dimitri the caretaker was standing in the open doorway.

“Why didn’t you use the bed?” he asked.

“Bed?” he inquired.

Dimitri kicked him until he stood up and pushed him, unceremoniously into open doorway. As he watched astonished, Dimitri reached down and picked up the blanket, throwing it at the astonished commissar. Crossing to the far wall, he reached up and put a hand to a rope Alexander had not noticed was there before. Pulling it, a wooden bed unfolded, made from the same rough planks as the wall, but boxed in on the sides. Two wooden legs unfolded and crashed to the floor with a hard thud. Then Dimitri Took the blanket from the commissar’s hand and carefully spread it on the planks.

“The bed,” the little man announced, “I’ll get you a pillow later, come.”

Outside, in the expansive room, a mob of people had assembled sitting in crude stools assembled in a semi-circle. It was dark outside, but the room was lit with several oil lanterns hanging from the ceiling. Their glow filled the room with a cheery light. Before the villagers stood a tall, dark-haired man with a high forehead and a Vandyke. He was the only man in the room whose peasant shirt was not made of the same harsh material all the others wore. It might even have been cotton. Alexander took him for the mayor, or at least whatever form of local leader this village possessed.

“What is this?”

“The meeting,” Dimitri answered matter of factly, “Our weekly political discussion,” he announced proudly, “You wanted to make an announcement, remember?”

“Right.”

“The peasantry and farmers are a scattered class incapable of organizing and effecting socio-economic change ...” the Trotsky-looking village leader announced to the gathering. Upon seeing the Commissar, he stopped and pointed him out to the crowd, “This is our gift from the Soviet in Petrograd ...”

The gathering applauded wildly.

“You’ve read Marx?” the astonished Alexander Nicolovich asked excitedly.

“Not a word of it,” he whispered, then more loudly and directed at the assembled crowd, “But I thought the language would make you feel more at home. It was the best welcome I could think of.”

Dimitri interrupted, bringing the two together, “Allow me to introduce Sergeev the bookreader.”

“Let me guess, he’s called the book reader because he’s the only one in the village who can read.”

“And people were beginning to say you were not perceptive, Alexander Anatoly,” Dimitri snickered in a sarcastic tone.

“Our illustrious friend from Petrograd has an announcement he wishes to make...” declared Sergeev politely.

Alexander Nicolovich found himself alone before the whole village. He had been in the forefront of the October Revolution only a month before extolling the crowds at the Winter Palace, whipping them up to a frenzy in the streets of Petrograd. But now, in this tiny out of the way village, all his courage fled. It occurred to him the crowd outside the palace would have crashed through the gates even without him and starving people needed no encouragement to break into bread shops. But here ... here in this out of place wilderness ... these people didn’t need him either. They were perfectly fine without him. But more importantly, he had no idea how to extort them to support the revolution. These people had no desire for change. They didn’t care who ruled in Petrograd; Soviets, provisional government, the Tsar. It didn’t matter to them.

“Ah, well,” he began haltingly, “my name is Alexander Anatoly Nicolovich, I’ve been assigned to this village as a representative of the Marxist Russian Social Democratic Labor Party.” He waited for a reaction. But the crowd sat silently.

“The Provisional Government has fallen. Minister Kerensky was fled and we can now build a true social paradise in our beloved Russia.” He declared proudly.

“What’s he saying,” an old woman with few teeth, turned to the much younger woman with a flowered scarf covering her head.

“He’s saying the government ministers were only from the provinces, they weren’t Russian.” The scarf-headed woman replied.

“Actually,” Alexander interrupted her, “They were provisional, they weren’t the people’s choices because they hadn’t been elected by the constituent legislature.”

“Oh, sorry,” the young woman replied. Then she whispered in the old woman’s ear: “They fell off of some kind of constant ledge.”

The old woman nodded her understanding and smiled, “poor fellows, I hope they didn’t get hurt.”

“No, no,” replied Alexander in distress, “they ... never mind.” He clapped his hands together, trying to think of how to proceed. “Yes, well ... the last government has fallen from a balcony. They are all dead. End of story. The new government is headed by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, who has worked tirelessly for the worker ... and the peasants,” he added.

The crowd broke into spontaneous applause when Alexander said the word peasant.

Emboldened, he continued, “As the first decree of the government, all peasants now own the land they work on. It is your land comrades,” he broke into an impassioned, fevered state as he spoke, becoming more and more excited. “Your land now belongs to you and can never be taken away.”

He waited for more applause, but the room remained silent, the crowd seemingly transfixed.

“You have it wrong,” the toothless lady interjected, “We belong to the land. The land and the peasants are one. This is why we cannot affect true social or economic change, because of our ties to the land and the inflexible nature of the demands of an agricultural economy.”

Alexander stared back at her dumbfounded. Now it was his turn to be transfixed.

“I think you miss our new commissar’s point, Nadezhda,” said a bearded man in a shirt looking like he’d pulled a burlap sack over his budding chest, “we can now sell the land back to the landowners for real cash.” He announced.

The crowd once more broke into a round of applause.

“No, no, no,” Alexander interrupted, “You can’t sell the land.”

“I thought you said we owned it,” another young woman with a disheveled mop of brown hair questioned him.

“You do,” Alexander replied, “But you can’t sell it.”

“If we own it,” stated yet another man in a dark jacket, “Then it is ours to sell since we have the right of ownership under the new decree.”

“No,” the commissar argued, “It is the landlords, who do not share your hardships, can no longer demand your produce or your services for working the land.”

“I think what the commissar is trying to say,” responded still another young man, a cigarette burning in his lips, “the government now owns the land instead of the landowners.”

“So,” said the scarf covered young woman, “Those who own the land now live farther away from us so they can understand our plight even less.”

“No wonder they fell off a balcony,” said the toothless old woman.

Dimitri the caretaker rose and waved the assemblage to silence. “My apologies,” he said, directing his remarks to the stunned Alexander, “This is, after all our weekly political discussion.” Then directing his remarks to the villagers, “Let the commissar complete his announcement.”

He sat back down, “we’ll discuss it later.”

Alexander Nicolovich stood frozen, any bravado he once had, had been driven from him like a mist in the warming sun. His frozen, unmoving state was beginning to become embarrassing, audience members coughed, shifted restlessly in their seats and cleared their throats waiting for him to continue. Finally, the pain of his own silence broke him.

“The government warns you not to listen to the lies and propaganda of the whites. These counter-revolutionary forces want to take away these new rights the government has granted you and return you to the terror of the hated Tsarist regime.” He managed to say at last.

“What did he say?” asked the toothless old woman again.

“He doesn’t want us to read the stories in the white snow,” the woman in the scarf explained.

“Doesn’t he know we can’t read?” the old woman replied in an incredulous tone.

“Perhaps we should talk about our plans for the Christmas pageant,” Sergeev interjected, seeing what difficulty Alexander was having. He was politely trying to change the subject.

This bolted the commissar into action, his party training kicked in and he was again his old self. “No, he demanded, “The party has given us a new event to celebrate, the Revolution!” He gestured wildly.

“No longer will we be separated by the bonds of different religions or different nationalities that have caused this terrible war. You have more in common with the workers and farmers of other countries than you have in common with those who tell you what superstitious thing to believe in. Once the workers ... and peasants,” he quickly added, “unite and we spread the revolution to the rest of the world, there will be no more nationalism, no more religion, everyone will share the same goals and reap the same benefits the world over. We must celebrate the revolution!”

“Didn’t you say the revolution only happened last month,” asked Dimitri. The little man was abruptly at his side, tugging at this shirt sleeves.

Once again Alexander was dumbfounded. In Petrograd, it didn’t matter what you said, the crowd cheered you. No one ever asked questions. Because those who did, disappeared. He remembered once

when a minister of the provisional government tried to argue with the crowd, the revolutionary crowd drowned him out and he walked away in disgust. He couldn't respond, the party never told you what to do with questions. There weren't supposed to be any questions.

Alexander Nicolovich stammered hopelessly.

"We'll have a celebration of the revolution next year!" Sergeev shouted and the crowd roared in agreement. The room quickly broke down into individual conversations. Alexander felt totally ignored ... it was a new feeling for him.

"The villagers are fond of celebrations," the bookreader joyously informed the commissar.

"This is the first time I remember," Dimitri remarked as he scratched his head, "us celebrating the first anniversary of anything."

"A first for the first," Sergeev shouted delighted.

"Well, Alexander Anatoly," said Dimitri the caretaker, "you've certainly made a good impression tonight. Clever of you to bring us a new date to celebrate. Very shrewd of you."

Once the crowd had thinned out, Alexander found himself alone in the room with Dimitri.

"I thought you said the village knew this building was haunted," he asked the little man.

"Oh, they do," he replied, "But they usually don't come out at night."

"Traditionally, is it not the other way around?" Asked the commissar.

"Who's tradition?" The little man responded, "I think they sleep. I suppose in this village, sleeping may be an old habit ... old habits are hard to break."

"I've got to get out of here," Alexander muttered.

Dimitry when around the room and standing on a rickety stool, slowly turned out the lanterns. He left the one on the middle on but turned it down until the light barely broke through the gloom.

"Good night," he mumbled, "Tomorrow is a new day."

"Chances are ... a terrible day," Alexander responded sarcastically.

As Dimitri left, Alexander shoveled a few more chunks of coal in the stove and then retreated to his little room in the corner. With the bed down there was barely enough room to walk along the side of the wooden bed. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a candle and a copy of Lenin's pamphlet, "What is to be Done." He usually liked to read it before drifting off to sleep but he doubted he could get another candle. So, he set both on the open window mantle facing the main room and turned to the bed.

With the side wooden boards, it was clearly designed to hold a mattress, but he didn't have one. In fact, he was reasonably sure there wasn't a true mattress in the entire town. He sighed and settled in on the wooden planks, drawing his wool blanket over him.

He awoke, sometime in the night, to a very disturbing feeling. Then he noticed at the foot of the bed was a bald man wearing an upside-down red cup on his head, a stringy black tassel streaming from its top. He was dressed in a long, thin blue striped white flowing robe which Alexander didn't recognize. They appeared to be his bedclothes. The figure didn't say a word, he merely looked at the sleeping form of Alexander Nicolovich. For all the commissar knew, he might have been there for hours. He was sitting cross-legged and ... well ... he was hovering about half a meter over the end of the bed. Alexander sat bolt upright.

"Ah," the figure finally said, "you're awake. Did I disturb you?"

"If you count a strange man staring at you while you're asleep as disturbing, well yes."

"I am the Turk," he announced smugly, "you may call me ... the Turk."

As he floated he bounced up and down slightly as if he was on one side of a large scale. Unlike the baron, who appeared as solid as himself, this apparition was a bit less substantial. Alexander could barely make out the other side of the room by looking directly through him, but the walls behind the floating figure appeared indistinct and out of focus, scarcely visible.

"Did you have something you wanted?" Alexander inquired.

"I am the first," he declared.

"Actually ... you're the second," he replied, "The baron got there before you."

"No, you infidel pipsqueak," the Turk thundered in an annoyed tone, "You Rus always think you were here first, but this was the land of the Turks. Before you, this was a quiet village of the Turks. It had no importance, but the people who lived here were content. Then you slaughtered every one of us. It was then I decided, all those who came to this village would never leave since you wanted it so badly. Now I tell you, Alexander Anatoly Nicolovich, you too will never leave this place."

The spirt folder his arms and sat glowering at the commissar.

"The truth of the matter is," Alexander explained, "That's why I'm here. It's the landowners who create tension between the workers and the peasants. With the revolution, there will be no more land ownership and the need for imperial ambitions will be gone."

"Don't believe a word he says," came a voice from the doorway. The speaker was dressed in a moth-eaten and disheveled Imperial Russian uniform. The front was wracked by a number of holes, each one big enough for a man to put his finger through. They ran from right to left, closely spaced above the man's belt, but dropping lower as they went across his shirt. He wore a cloth Tsarist cap, but he stood on the floor in his bare feet.

"If that had been so," he stated with a bit of acid in his voice, "I wouldn't have had to go off to fight in this stupid war."

"Ignorant peasant," scoffed the Turk.

The two began to argue in angry tones with each other, the Turk suggesting the soldier simply got what he deserved and the private calling the Turk a filthy peddler of false mysticism. Finally, Alexander broke the deadlock.

“Look, I don’t care who either one of you are!” he yelled both of them into silence. “I wasn’t here when your people were driven from the village,” he glared at the Turk, “and the party always opposed the war,” he shouted at the private, “You should have killed your officers at the outset, as we told you. But in any case, right now ...”

His voice lowered several levels of volume, “I just want to get some sleep. Undisturbed.”

The Turk and the soldier looked at Alexander for several seconds, slightly taken aback at the abruptness of the commissar’s interruption and then ... simply vanished.

“I’ve got to get out of here,” Alexander muttered.

The next morning, Alexander Nicolovich was back at his makeshift desk, jotting down notes. *Sergeev the bookreader*, he wrote down in the plain handwriting style indicative of the new order, *maybe a Socialist Revolutionary, he mocks the works of Marx and seemed to be mired in the ways of the Bourgeoisie, clinging to the old ways which were used in the past to suppress the workers.*

“Actually, Sergeev’s a Constitutional Democrat and quite pleasant once you get to know him,” announced a feminine voice, “Quite good looking I think.”

“Requisition forms on your right,” he droned on in a stern bureaucratic voice, “Requests to the Marxist Russian Social Democratic Labor Party on your left, membership forms are under at.”

He looked up and there stood a handsome woman in a high collar dress, the type of costume one might wear in a Chekov play. The light summer outfit was completely out of place in late December. She wore a wide-brimmed hat, covered in a dark blue bow and her high-heeled white shoes were closed with a series of tight silver buttons running up the shoe and high over her ankle. At her side, she carried a frilly umbrella with a decorative handle.

“Natashia Alliluyeva Komanov,” she said in a rich tone, “how may I address you?”

Alexander was flabbergasted. He was not particularly interested in women. He’d had few infatuations at the party congress, but they were far more interested in the revolution than in him. In fact, their rejection of him convinced him he would have no luck with the fairer sex. Alexander buried himself in his efforts to support the revolution, hoping to be more attractive to them. But before he realized it, he was so absorbed in the march to the worldwide revolt of the Proletariat, he had all but forgotten them.

Which was fortunate since they had long forgotten him.

Natasha however, seemed to look at him like he was the only person in the room. This, of course, may have been helped by the fact he was, in reality, the only other person in the room. In any case, her gaze was intoxicating and he could be happy remaining under those eyes all day long.

“By the way, It’s Boris the woodcutter who is the Socialist Revolutionary.” She told him as if it was a matter of gossip.

Mentally Alexander kicked himself. First, you fall for two revolutionary women who wouldn't give you the time of day. Now you fall for a woman who is dead. What next, he asked himself, attraction to the local sheep?

"And you must meet Yakov the anarchist," she smiled as if she was at a grand social gathering.

Alexander's icy interior melted with her smile. He was not prone to frivolity, but he found himself with a beam on his face as if he was some besotted schoolboy. But once again the realization she was an apparition pushed his barriers back up like a street barricade and he returned to his normal sour state.

"Let me guess," he replied snidely, "He's the local anarchist."

She deftly ignored his verbal attack with the skill of a fencer ducking a foil.

"I like your eyes," she remarked, "You have nice eyes."

Once again Alexander became the smitten schoolboy, but Dimitri the caretaker came rushing in, anxious to tell the commissar something, but first, he turned to the young woman in the outlandish summer attire.

"Countess, could you talk to Nicoli for me? He still won't return Katrina's cow. It's been over a week now."

"I'm sure we can work something out." She answered.

"What a minute," Alexander chimed in, "you can see her?"

"Of course, he can see her," an astounded voice added from a completely different direction, "We can all see her. You'd have to be blind not to see the Countess." The tsarist private from last night sat in a well-appointed chair off to the side of the desk. Alexander was, at first, surprised the private had somehow acquired a chair with four actual legs. But it did establish he hadn't been dreaming last night.

"It occurs to me I failed to introduce myself last night. Most inconsiderate of me. My name is Anton the shopkeeper." He extended a dirty and blood-stained hand in the commissar's direction.

"There's a shop in this village?" Alexander asked, "What could there possibly be to sell in this village?"

"Cigarettes, mostly," Anton replied, "imported vodka ..."

"He means imported from the next village," Dimitri interjected.

"Oh," Anton sounded excited, "And sometimes we have oranges."

"Oranges," Alexander scoffed in derision, "how exciting."

"I know what you need," The countess announced pleasantly, "a nice glass of wine."

She leaned over and there was a bottle of red wine in her delicate hands. She bent forward and tilted the bottle as if to pour its contents on the desk. Alexander rushed to move all of his papers out of the way, but as he threw his arms forward he found three intricately cut glasses in the center of the table. The countess deftly poured the wine into the glasses as Alexander Nicolovich watched. She then picked up a glass and handed it to Dimitri.

“Thank you, Countess,” he babbled politely as he took the offered glass. Dimitri took a sip and smiled.

“It has a fine bouquet, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, an excellent year,” the little man took another sip.

“You’re drinking a wine that doesn’t exist,” Alexander looked at Dimitri with scorn. Yet as he delivered his contemptuous remarks, an odd scent reached his nose, he could smell flowers and grapes as if it were summer. He reached out and took one of the glasses right after Natasha finished pouring it. He sniffed the aroma from the glass. Definitely grapes with a hint of flora. He tilted the glass back and hurled its entire contents over his tongue and down his throat in an instant. Although he expected no taste from the illusion, it unquestionably had the effect of wine. Sweet with a slight tingle as it went down.

“Really,” the countess murmured in mock shock, “We’ll have to teach you the intricate ways of drinking wine. You really don’t get the full taste if you gulp it down like that.”

“He’s a Bolshevik,” Dimitri tried to apologize for Alexander’s crude behavior.

“I see,” she remarked, “we haven’t had one of those in the village yet, you’ll be our first Bolshevik.” She beamed this with a certain amount of pride.

Dimitri the caretaker almost spit up his wine back into the glass, “I almost forgot.”

“Forgot what?” Alexander Nicolovich asked.

“The Whites”

“The Whites?” Alexander repeated, trying to get more out of the diminutive old man.

“The Whites are in Kernovdapol.”

“In Kernovdapol,” Alexander repeated yet again.

Dimitri turned to Natasha confused and asked: “Why does he repeat everything I say?”

“What about the Whites in Kernovdapol?” he growled with a bit more annoyance and explosive commitment than he intended, so he corrected his tone. Lowering his voice, he asked again: “You were saying about the Whites in Kernovdapol?”

“Yes, they are in Kernovdapol.”

Still in his quiet voice, but clearly as annoyed with the old man, Alexander requested further information, “and what is so important about Kernovdapol?” The blood vessels in his head were now standing out, throbbing. His jaw was set, his teeth clenched. He was barely holding his temper in check, simmering, almost to the point of explosion.

“Nothing at all really,” answered Dimitri meekly.

“Nothing at all,” Al repeated barely able to hold his composure. The lines on his forehead were starting to stand out more intensely now, He was close to steam coming out of his collar like one of those

cartoons in the cinema. Dimitri feared he might be having a heart attack. Even the countess looked concerned.

“But unless they go back where they came from ... well, then the only place they can go is ...”

“... Parovnokovna,” Alexander Nicolovich finished for him.

“Yes,” the little man answered, quite pleased. “I don’t know you were so well informed about the outlying districts.” He turned to the countess, “He’s a smart one he is.”

Alexander started frantically gathering up all the piles of papers he spent so much time carefully organizing on the desk with a wild sweep of his arm and scooped them all into a leather briefcase he had stashed by the side of the desk. He began to frantically look around the room, trying to see if he forgot anything.

“No rush,” Dimitri said calmly, attempting to get the commissar to relax and act in a more sensible manner, “it takes a good day to march here from Kernovdapol.”

As if to punctuate the little caretaker’s statement, the sound of horse’s hooves could be heard in the distance. “Unless they have horses.” He added.

“Unless they have horses.” Alexander’s panic began to grow and he started rushing blindly about the room, still holding the empty wine glass in his hand. He ran smack into the baron.

This time he was smartly dressed as a White officer, long heavy grey coat topped off by a tall woolen cap.

“Here,” he said in the type of commanding tone which caused the listener to follow along and comply, despite any protest they may have, “Put this on.”

He handed Alexander a White army coat, snatched off his party cap and put on a plain wool cap on Alexander’s head. The baron turned around and grabbed Alexander Nicolovich’s coat from the peg on the wall. He threw it across the room as if aiming for the floor, But Anton the shopkeeper as there to catch it. He was still dressed in his regular Tsarist army uniform, only now sands his bare feet and the former line of holes across his lower chest.

“Get rid of this,” the baron ordered.

Anton deftly took the flying coat and relayed it on the bed. Then he nimbly, flipped the bottom of the bed up until it folded neatly into the far wall. He rushed into the main room and stood at attention, Alexander Nicolovich between himself and the baron, facing the front door as if expecting an officer’s inspection.

Sergeev walked in carrying a red flag, the gold hammer and sickle clearly visible below the outline of a single gold star. Without paying attention, he closed the door.

“I thought this might brighten up your office,” he said before noticing the line of the three of them by the desk. The three shrugged, dropping their shoulders from their position of attention.

“I don’t think this will be very appropriate, do you?” The baron remarked slyly.

He directed Anton to lift up the door making up the top of the desk and as he did so, coolly tucked the flag over the two boxes which acted as legs. Anton released the door and let it come crashing back down as the White officer strode into the room. He was followed by several blacked booted men all appropriately armed with the latest rifles.

The three managed to get back into line and give the officer a snappy salute.

“Ah, Colonel,” the officer spoke, “I didn’t know anyone was here.”

“Well,” replied the baron casually, “we just got here ourselves.”

“Damn,” the officer exclaimed. He was clearly disappointed someone had gotten to the village before he did, “But we’re on our way to Moscow.” He announced. Briefly, he looked with suspicion at Alexander Nicolovich, who was still holding the black briefcase in his hand.

“Are those reports,” the officer asked, taking off his grey kid gloves and slapping them against his leg arrogantly, “May I take a look?”

The Baron quickly wrenched the briefcase out of Alexander Nicolovich’s hand and addressed the officer.

“My aid is carrying a few notes for my memoirs,” he stated with conviction, “Our glorious struggle against the foul machinations of the vile revolutionaries.”

“I’d love to read it,” the officer extended a hand expecting the baron to give the case over. The baron clutched it tighter, hold one hand over the leather top.

“They are not in any condition to be read. I’m still in the very early stages of writing. Jotting things down as it were.”

The officer continued to extend his hand as if not willing to accept no for an answer.

“Captain,” the baron put of his full military airs, “Don’t you have something to do?”

The officer lowered his hand and returned a salute. Now cowed into submission, the officer announced “I’ll have to quarter my men here for the night. Then it’s on to Moscow in the morning!”

“There’s a stable out back,” Sergeev commented, “allow me to show you the way.” He gestured at the door.

The officer stopped dead in his tracks as Sergeev led him to the door. He stood in place as if contemplating a question, then spun on his heels. He looked directly at Natasha.

“And who is this lovely young creature?”

She did not look as she had when she originally appeared in the room. She was now dressed as a tsarist nurse. Simple dress, with a flat gray cap, unfolded on her well-combed hair.

“That captain,” the baron snorted, “is my wife.”

“Charmed,” her remarked kissing her hand, “And how brave of you to accompany your husband on such a hazardous venture.”

“Yes, well ...” the baron took the captain by the shoulder and walked him back over to Sergeev. “This man will show you where you can keep your horses and quarter your men for the night.”

The captain reluctantly followed Sergeev to the door, snapping his fingers as he went. His soldiers followed him out at a smart pace, rifles neatly leaning against their shoulders.

After the White soldiers left, the baron turned to Dimitri; “Dinner party, tonight 9 PM,” he declared with an air of cold dictation, “make sure everyone is here.”

“Dinner party,” Alexander responded, “are you mad? I’m a Bolshevik. An official of the Marxist Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. We can’t have a dinner party for the Whites.”

“If we don’t the captain will get suspicious ... or do you want him looking around the village and asking questions?” the baron asked.

Alexander Nicolovich held out his finger as if to respond to the baron, lecturing him like a trouble-making schoolboy, but nothing came out. He tried again, in vain, as he failed to form any convincing argument.

“Oh, yes,” the baron mocked, in a good representation of one of the living villagers, “we do have a Bolshevik political commissar in town. In fact, last night he gave such a rousing speech against your faction ...”

“Right, Dimitri, dinner party tonight, 9 PM,” Alexander ordered.

The baron and Anton led Dimitri out of the building, leaving Alexander alone with Natasha.

“How exciting,” she exclaimed, “a subversive meal with the stalwart Whites. A real party with intriguing conversation ... and perhaps some real intrigue as well. I wonder what they are plotting to do once they get to Moscow ...”

Alexander was a little taken aback by her excitement over the upcoming event, but he managed a meager smile. As it turned out it was more alarming ... than the disarming smile, he had hoped it would be.

“Are you the baron’s wife?” Alexander asked, now without paying any attention to her obvious excitement over the dinner party.

“Of course not.” For the first time, Alexander saw she was truly disturbed by the idea. Her composure was lost for the first time. “He’s 100 years too old for me.”

Alexander Nicolovich stood, unable to move a muscle ... and at a total loss for words.

“Besides,” she smiled delightfully, “I prefer younger men.”

Alone in the great emptiness of the vast central room of the party’s headquarters, Alexander, still wearing his White army coat, was sitting behind his desk, basking in a rare moment of silence. Then the room burst into light and became alive. Several long tables filled the room, covered in elegant, flowing white and gold table clothes, set with fine china and candelabras burning brightly. At each place setting

was a fine stylish chair covered in fine leather upholstery, small brass nails neatly holding the leather to the excellent quality wood of each seat.

At one table alone, there was more food than Alexander had seen in a week. Caviar, Quail and a massive duck covered in some kind of orange sauce. The rest of the foods were well out of Alexander's experience, definitely beyond his current diet of black bread, turnips, and potatoes. At the back of the room was a table holding a huge punch bowl. Surrounding the extravagant glass container was a large display of vodka bottles in all shapes and sizes.

A string quartette in the corner started up a lively version of the Russian Imperial Anthem, the melody flowing over the room like a wave of sound.

Before Dimitri entered the room, the baron appeared. Dressed as a White colonel once more, he was accompanied but a motley group soldiers in tsarist uniforms, most of them with ill-fitting trousers, and baggy shirts. Behind them stood a gaggle of young ladies dressed in their finest Sunday wear. Amongst them was the lovely Natasha, although to Alexander it appeared as if she stood in the beam of a spotlight, radiant in its circle of cheerful light.

Alexander Nicolovich stood by, not knowing what to do, as the White Captain and his soldiers poured into the room ... although this time without their weaponry. Alexander had a sudden wish for a machine gun he could use to remove this threat to the revolution in a single stroke, but it passed as soon as it appeared. The atmosphere was too cheerful, too lively to harbor such thoughts.

The officer and his men took their places at the table, each accompanied by a refined young lady. Alexander watched astounded at the frivolity of the affair when the baron nudged him roughly with the sharp point of this elbow. "As my adjutant, you sit on my right," he whispered with only enough volume for Alexander to hear amidst the din of the gathering. The Baron smiled at the gathering crowd as villagers, dressed in peasant garb, poured vodka for the soldiers.

"Traditionally, you pull out my chair for me so I can sit down," the baron continued under his breath.

"Right," said Alexander, pulling out a chair from the center of the table, "I've got to get out of here," he muttered.

The baron took his seat with Alexander Nicolovich taking his place on the baron's right. Across from them sat the beaming Natasha, speaking in soft girlish tones to the White captain. For more than a moment, Natasha was the only person in the room.

From Alexander's perspective, Natasha was the center of the room. She delighted the captain with her witty conversation, asking him about all his battles. His plans both during and after the revolution. She got information out of him as smoothly as a man might ski down a snow-covered slope. Information which would have taken the Cheka a month to wring from the man using both drugs and their famous bare-fisted questioning approach. Alexander should have been making at least mental notes of their conversation, but he found all he could focus on was her. Her charm, her wit and of course her lovely smile.

The rest of the affair became a blur to him. He watched as Natasha danced with the captain, both verbally and physically. She glided about the room as effortless as a cloth floating on the wind. With the

delicate grace of a flower swaying in the breeze. Only once did he hear anyone else's voice. It was the barons. Interposing himself between himself and the countess, he interjected; "Put your eyes back in your head. You're starting to make a scene."

At last Natasha became aware of Alexander Nicolovich's apparent distress. Without saying a word, she led the officer over to a young lady in a rather ornate dress. The three spent a few minutes talking until Natasha sent the captain off twirling gayly on the floor with the young lady. She looked at Alexander Nicolovich and smiled, giving the commissar a giddy feeling he was quite unaccustomed to.

"You don't look like you are having a good time," Natasha commented.

"Let's just say I'm not completely familiar with attending this type of event," Alexander replied with a stern and disapproving look on his face.

"Disagreeable habit we Bourgeoisie have ... enjoying ourselves. I appreciate your restraint, you know, not putting a stop to our unproductive frivolity."

She had a way about her where she could tease and it didn't seem like she was being cruel, Alexander noted. An achievement he had seen few people master.

"I have someone you should meet," she grinned. She brought a young boy out of the crowd of peasants who were constantly milling about, cleaning up as they went. He was no more than 15, dark, disheveled hair with a thin face. He reminded Alexander of himself.

"This is Yakov the anarchist," she introduced him.

Alexander Nicolovich took step back reexamining the boy as if he had found a sneak thief in the audience. In his mind's eye, he saw the boy throwing a bundle of dynamite under a carriage and gleefully watching as the parcel exploded sending the wheels of carriage skittering off against the cobblestones of the street. The doors of the transport were now lying in the street swaying back and forth like a rocking chair, smoke slowly rising into the air around them.

Some people have a fear of drowning, others a fall from a great height, Alexander Nicolovich lived in terror of being the target of an anarchist. Someone who desperately wanted to remove all influences of the government, any government, on people's lives and affairs.

"Don't worry," Natasha brushed Alexander's arm gently, "He's agreed not to carry any bombs tonight."

Yakov bowed politely at the commissar taking his hat off in one hand in the process. He then straightened up, popped the cap back upon his head with a wink and disappeared into the crowd of peasants wondering the periphery. Alexander looked relieved.

"He's harmless," she beamed with a devilish look in her eye, "... mostly."

Natasha spotted someone else in the crowd, gave Alexander Nicolovich a wave with her dainty hand and was off like a hummingbird seeking another flower.

The party went on for some time, but Alexander made no note of its passing. As the evening broke up, the villagers escorted the White soldiers back to their quarters. The White officer disappearing into the night in the company of the young lady with the ornate dress.

When the room was at last empty, the lights dimmed and Alexander Nicolovich found himself standing alone in a huge empty space filled only with his makeshift desk. It was an eerie feeling, the type which often makes the hair on the back of your neck stand up, but Alexander found he was getting used to it. He certainly admired the efficiency of the clean-up process.

The next morning, Alexander stood next to the baron on the porch of the white headquarters building and watched as the White soldiers mounted their horses and prepared to ride out. Each trooper was lined up as if on parade, their greatcoats covering their legs almost to the very bottom of their boots and their rifles neatly slung diagonally across their backs, barrels pointed down. The Captain rode up to the baron, his horse prancing and snorting as he approached, and gave the baron a crisp salute. Then he turned to lead his column of troopers up the road. They gave every evidence the party had been a success, with several of the men staying on their horses with some difficulty.

They rode out of town. Once they were out of sight Alexander took off his coat and threw it to the ground, stamping his foot harshly on the lifeless gray coat. He turned to the baron, back in his old medal-covered uniform.

“Did that make you feel better?”

“Yes,” Alexander replied, “besides the bottom of my boots needed the cleaning.”

The baron's finger aimed silently to the top of Alexander's head as if to indicate a bird had taken nest in his hair.

“What?”

“You forgot the hat,” the Baron pointed out with some degree of jocularity.

Alexander tore the wool cap off his head, threw it on top of the coat and stamped his foot on both, adding a large helping of saliva to the mixture for good measure. Turning around he headed for the door, using his arms to grab Dimitri around one shoulder and Joseph the brewer around the other.

“Joseph I've decided to make you second assistant secretary to the village soviet.”

“Me?” cried Joseph, “I have no political aspirations. I'm no socialist ... I don't even belong to a party.”

“That's not a problem,” Alexander responded gently.

“But I don't want to become a member of any party,” he complained, “Why me, I'm only a brewer.”

“True, but you have access to the one village resource I'm putting under government control.”

Joseph stopped and looked at the commissar, confused.

“The vodka,” Alexander slapped the brewer on the shoulder with glee, “Let's move the whole stock into the party headquarters. Lesson number one: if you are going to control the people, you have to take charge of what the people care about.”

Then he turned to the old man as they entered the great room, “Dimitri I'm appointing you chairman of the committee on seating. I want you to find me a real chair. One with four legs ... not the three-legged stools so famously popular in Prova... Provo ...”

“Parovnokovna,” Dimitri finished for him.

“Yes, that. Are you clear on your instructions?” Alexander asked pointedly.

“A chair,” the old man announced proudly.

“Not just any chair Dimitri, a real chair with four legs.”

“Yes, comrade,” he replied sheepishly, “four legs.”

“If you do a decent job, I’ll put in a good word with the Soviet and I’ll see if I can get you a seat on the desk committee.” Alexander grinned.

Alexander Nicolovich spent the next several hours carefully rearranging forms on his desk. After creating several neat piles on his desk, he shuffled them, sorted them out and placed them in completely different parts of the desk. He repeated this process a number of times, and then ... started again. The next day he and Joseph arranged the vodka supplies, first by the size of the bottle, then by age of the contents and finally rearranging them by the volume of liquid in the bottles.

“I went to the finest schools in Petrograd, you know.” He told Joseph, “top marks, from all the senior instructors ... top, top marks. Then they send me here. To the district of ... does this district even have a name?”

“Orellentstsobersk,” Joseph tried to reply helpfully.

“We’ll ... there you have it ... I’ll never be able to remember that. There must be some way to get out of here.”

By the fourth day, Alexander Nicolovich had begun to despair. He’s inspected the village four times, only there was nothing to inspect. To the best of his knowledge, Parovnokovna has a population of fifteen people, eight goats, 75 sheep, twelve cows, and fourteen horses. So, he sat alone in the party headquarters, watching the sun crawl ever so slowly across the floor.

At last, he took out a party membership form, turned it over, and wrote:

*To keep your romance brimming
Put your love in the devoted cup,
Whenever you're wrong, just admit it;
Whenever you're right, shut up...*

“I like comic verse.”

Before he even looked up, he knew it was Natasha. His heart skipped a beat and a smile appeared on his broken face before he even lifted his head. She was wearing a black lace dress with a high collar, a long and closely spaced row of round cloth buttons bisecting the front. Quite modern, though Alexander.

“Do you write often?” she asked, her eyes bright as sunlight.

“Oh,” he wiggled in his seat uncomfortably, “It’s not mine. I heard it somewhere. I hope I got the words right.” He added.

*The league of ours is beautiful, my friends
It's indivisible and timeless as the soul --
Unchained, unshakable, and heedless, and a whole,
It's grown in the friendly muses' hands.*

*Let fate prepare for us the hardest roads,
Let fortune play to us the golden strings --
We are the same: in worlds -- we're outlaws,
And citizens -- in Village of the Kings.*

"Pushkin, isn't it?" Alexander asked.

"Yes, I love Pushkin," after saying this she stepped back as if to avoid a spitting cobra, "they haven't outlawed Pushkin yet, have they?" She lamented.

"No," Alexander replied, "They haven't put Pushkin on the forbidden reading list, he's ... he's ... he's too Russian."

"Good," Natasha stepped forward again, "I couldn't bear it if they outlawed Pushkin."

The countess made a fine cushioned chair appear and pulled it up next to Alexander, but all he saw was the dainty way she sat down, he barely noticed it had four legs.

"What do you want?" he asked him pointedly.

"Oh, common ownership of the land and the means of production ... an end to the class system," he replied casually.

"No, no, silly," she smiled, "What do *you* want?"

"I haven't given it much thought," Her question seemed to have opened a door somewhere inside Alexander Nicolovich, he stood up and crossed to the window. He stared out at the endless landscape for some time before he turned to face Natasha again.

"I guess I'm looking for a life," he said, "for ages now my life has been the revolution ..." He paused, as if afraid to say the next words, "but now ... now I don't know. I guess I never bothered to think about what comes after the revolution. At least on a personal level."

"But you love Russia?" she asked him with no small amount of pride.

"Yes, of course."

"Pushkin would say Russia isn't the grain in the fields, the hills, the forests, the lakes, and rivers ... it's the people. The community of the people. That's what you need," she proclaimed in a determined tone, "A community."

"I don't belong anywhere. I belong to the revolution."

"Exactly, a revolution is not people, it's about the concept of 'public,' but it's not about people." She explained, "It's a thing. I'm not talking about a thing. The community's not a thing, it's individuals."

Alexander gave her a strange look as if she had spoken to him in Chinese. He heard the words, but there was nothing in his revolutionary training to allow him to understand her ideas. In this case, it didn't matter. She could have said anything, about anyone, and he would have listened intently ... and smiled back. A facial expression for which he was not deeply familiar.

"You need to belong," she clarified seeing he didn't understand, "Be part of this village, protect its people. Which is how you'll protect the revolution. Become *their* commissar, not the commissar of the party."

"But, I'm a member of the *party*. The party is the revolution." He snapped into his revolutionary dogma, quoting his long-learned lessons.

"Are their other people in this party?" she asked.

"Of course, there are thousands of us." He replied using his training to mask the actual tiny size of the party.

"Sounds like even the party is made up of people," she teased him, "not the other way around. Without its members ... its people ... there would be no party."

Alexander Nicolovich had debated hundreds of opponents and counter-revolutionaries in his time, but he found the Countess' arguments so simple and at the same time, so precise, they were impossible to refute. His mind was awl with concepts, precepts, and philosophies, but none of them seemed to matter. The party dogma existed like waves striking rocks on the ocean shore. There were powerful, relentless, determined ... but, like the water crashing against the rocks, they had no effect. The rocks remained; unchanging, unmoved, constant.

Natasha saw his inner turmoil and decided he had to be tormented, "And you need to learn to dance," she announced playfully.

She took his arms and used hers to place one of his hands on her back while holding the other in hers. As she began counting, "1 ...2 ...3, 1 ... 2 ...3," the quartet from the other night appeared, playing a gallant pavane. Only this time they were equipped with four melodious Balalaika. Natasha twirled about the room, but Alexander stepped on his right foot with his left and then his left foot with his right. Or perhaps it was the other way around, he couldn't be sure. While the countess was consumed with the dance's movements, Alexander expended all his efforts trying not to fall on his face. It was no easy task.

"He'll never learn," the baron said slyly.

Dressed back in his original 18th Century uniform which was half jacket and half medals, he clapped to the beat and stamped his black-booted heel on the floorboards. As if to prove his point, Alexander fell forward, one knee crossing the other and only barely managed to stumble his way back to his feet again in an awkward gesture similar to a man falling over a hurdle.

"Oh," Natasha remarked, "I think he's coming along nicely."

She raised her hand high in the air, and Alexander found himself spinning below it like a top ... and completely out of control.

"He'd have to grow up first," the baron replied, "and his kind rarely do."

Finally stopping his out of control spin, Alexander settled to a slow stop and then wove and shook like a drunken man. The countess, again, grabbed his hands forcefully and placed them back into their positions. She continued to twirl about the floor, dragging Alexander with her across the floor like a cart following a bolting mule.

The baron appeared directly in their path, compelling the couple to stop. Alexander stood in place as the baron stared deeply into his eyes, "You're going to have to choose my boy. You're going to have to make up your own mind for once."

"That was always your problem Pyotr," she teased him, "Always trying to incite a response."

Alexander looked at Natasha his head cocked to one side as if he were a dog seeing his master standing on his head. "You know for two people who were never married, you seem to know an awful lot about each other."

"Well," she smiled, "we have been living ..." she stopped and corrected herself, "spending a lot of time together."

"Purely Platonic," the baron added, "I assure you."

Natasha reached out from behind the baron and grabbed Alexander as the Balalaikas took up another tune. She spun and whirled, but Alexander fared no better than he did before. Except perhaps his feet now collided with each other at a more rapid pace. Yet she seemed delighted dancing without a care, but Alexander grew more frustrated with each mistaken step. At last, he stopped and slowly regained his balance, almost coming to attention. "This is impossible," he finally stated.

"The dance?" The countess asked.

"No." replied Alexander Nicolovich, once again the joyless Red commissar, "Us. The two of us. You're dead, I'm alive. That would seem to be a barrier to any relationship."

She smiled. It was an odd grin, halfway between a naive little girl and the smirk of someone playing a practical joke. "You'll never get anywhere if you keep trying to change things you can never alter."

Then, like the passing of a cloud over the sun, Natasha, the baron, and the musicians were gone. He missed her at once. In an instant, in the space of her vanishing, he had gone from firmly standing his ground to being adjectively sorry he had said anything at all. The room looked, not only empty but as if he was standing alone at one end of a long tunnel, with a lone soulless walk before him to the other side.

He would have finished the walk, kicking himself for being a lovesick fool had Dimitri not entered the building. He was out of breath as if he had run a long distance. Although in Dimitri's case he could have run across the street. In any case, the air was filling and expelled from his lungs in short, rapid gasps. He bent over, putting his hands over his knees as he fought to catch his breath. Finally, he got out a single word.

"Reds."

"Excellent," exclaimed Alexander Nicolovich. Now I can speak with someone who can get me out of this accursed backwater hamlet."

“No,” was all Dimitri could muster up the energy to say.

“No,” Alexander asked, “no what?”

“He means they are not coming for a friendly visit.” The voice from behind him startled Alexander some much, he almost threw himself over the desk. He overcame the shock and turned around, and there standing ... no floating cross-legged as before ... was the Turk.

“They are coming here to shoot you. Because you failed to resist the Whites,” he blithely announced, “You Rus infidels, it's always shooting this and shoot that ... and if it moves ... shoot it again.” He continued as if speaking to no one in particular. Alexander Nicolovich meanwhile stammered and shuddered; turning first to the right and then to the left as if seeking an escape. All at once he realized this time he'd have to come up with something more clever than changing uniforms. If they were from the Soviet, they will undoubtedly be able to identify him. Unfortunately, clever was not Alexander Nicolovich's strong point.

“What a minute,” Alexander barked, “How did they know about the Whites?” He turned frantically to Dimitri, who had finally regained his breath. “Is there an agent of the Cheka here?” Then, as if answering his own question, he turned to the Turk, “How can there be an agent of the Cheka here? I'M THE AGENT OF THE CHEKA.” He shouted.

“I've got to get out of here,” Alexander muttered.

Sergeev burst through the door, “Red Cavalry ... on their way here.”

“We know,” said Dimitri.

“The floorboards?” Sergeev said to Dimitri as if slyly passing a secret code word between the two of them.

“The floorboards,” Dimitri replied, “What an excellent idea.”

Sergeev and Dimitri picked up two floorboards at their feet. They had obviously not been nailed to the joists. Which explained the squeaking. Alexander leaned over and saw a dirt-filled space, big enough to fit a body if it was laying down. Before the commissar realized what was happening, Sergeev and Dimitri swept their feet under his legs and he went sailing into the hole in the floor. Then the wood came crashing down on top of him with a thud.

Fantastic, thought Alexander, I'm now in a coffin before I'm ever shot! Turning on his side to adjust his position, he found himself lying next to Natasha. There was little space under the floor and he found himself pressed tightly against her. It was not an altogether unpleasant feeling. In fact, Alexander began hoping everyone could go away and leave him down here for a bit.

Then he panicked. “This isn't ... this isn't your grave, is it?” he asked.

“Don't be silly,” she smiled, “this is the council building. The cemetery is down the street behind the church.”

Alexander tried to think up something useful to say, but with Natasha, his speech did not come easily. Party rallies he could do, women, especially attractive women ... no so much. And he'd never before dealt with one at such a delicate range.

"I thought he could talk." She explained, "It's a pity you weren't born in my time or I in yours."

Talking, thought Alexander Nicolovich, and at such intimate proximity at that. It was a terrifying thought. Various other terrors streamed through his mind. Escaped lions, earthquakes, floods, famine, anarchist's bombs. He imagined himself with a horribly disfiguring disease, but they all seemed trivial compared to the situation he was in at this moment.

"How will I ever know how you feel about me?" he blurted out.

"You must know," Natasha replied gently, "you're too intelligent not to know."

Overhead they heard boots stomping on the floor and then voices.

"We are looking for Alexander Anatoly Nicolovich, political commissar of Marxist Russian Social Democratic Labor Party for the village of Parovnokovna."

"Well," Alexander heard Dimitri respond, "This is Parovnokovna all right, but we're not having a party. There's a civil war going on you know."

"Don't toy with me, he's wanted by the state. Comrade Stalin has decreed anyone dealing with anti-revolutionaries are traitors to the state and must be eliminated." He said in a most disagreeable tone.

"That," Dimitri retorted, "will be both easy and hard."

"How's that?"

"Technically, he never got here, so he's easy to eliminate in that he has already been eliminated. But if you are looking to find him first, that's going to be hard as he never arrived." Alexander had to cover his mouth to keep from laughing and giving away his hiding place. The old man was an expert at confusing even the most focused individual.

"But he sent us a telegram announcing his arrival."

"How could he do that?" Sergeev announced as if he was discussing the weather, "We don't have a telegraph office in this village. Look for yourselves."

"He sent it from another village before he got here," came the frustrated reply.

"Well," Dimitri the caretaker spouted, "There's your answer. He was in the *other* village. He never got *here*. I'd look in the other village if I were you."

"But we captured a White officer who claimed he had dinner with him in this very building!"

"Comrade Captain," accused Sergeev disapprovingly, "believing White propaganda. What will comrade Stalin say?"

Their conversation was disturbed by the crack of a rifle shot. It was followed by another and yet another, accompanied by the staccato racket of a machine gun.

The sound of the Red soldier's boots echoed on the floor as they rushed for the door. Windows broke and orders were shouted. The shooting intensified as artillery opened up in between the rifle and machine gun fire. Alexander fidgeted and squirmed. He didn't want to find himself dead and already buried in the ground below party headquarters.

Jumping to a sitting position, the floorboards covering the commissar when flying left and right. He stood up and got out of the hole, extending his hand to help Natasha up. Then he tucked her behind his makeshift desk. It wasn't necessary, but Natasha humored him. Alexander crawled off to one of the front windows. As he arrived, a bullet poked a hole in one of the glass panes, shattering the windows. Alexander frantically ducked below the sill.

In the bright sunlight, he looked up and through the window, flashes of the White soldier's rifles firing at the Red guards who were hiding behind the pillars which supported the roof overhanging the porch. The Whites were dismounted and hiding behind a low rise on the other side of the street. From time to time, Alexander saw a White soldier raise his head and fire. Apparently, the Red guards also noticed this and when the next White raised his head he virtually flew over backward, blood gushing from the wound in his throat like a propellant.

Almost at the same time, Alexander saw a Red guard on the porch spin in place behind his protective column. His spin ended with him facing Alexander Nicolovich, but the man's face was missing, replaced by a gaping hole of red, black and gray tissues. The Red soldiers inside the building continued to return fire through the windows.

An artillery round exploded in the middle of the street. The explosion blew back one of the defenders at the windows and he fell back, bleeding from multiple cuts caused by the resulting shower of glass.

"By God," Alexander yelled, "That's enough."

He picked up the fallen soldier's rifle, pulled back the bolt and forced another round into the chamber. Then, taking the collapsed man's place at the window, he pulled the trigger. The shot went wild and only created a puff of dirt above the grass-covered mound across the street. Alexander found himself kneeling next to Anton, in his Tsarist uniform, this time complete with the bullet holes across his middle.

"Get another rifle," he suggested to Anton, "There's another over there." He motioned his head to indicate another victim of the explosion at the next window.

"I'd like to," explained Anton, "but since the war, I've become a committed pacifist. No more shooting of guns."

"What?" Alexander Nicolovich turned to Anton, but all he saw was Anton's fist rushing towards his face.

Which was the last thing he remembered. When he awoke, the battle was over. Several of the Red soldiers were leaning up against the wall, moaning. Cries of the wounded could be heard from the street. A doctor with a Red Army armband was busy treating one of the wounded men in the room, covering his leg with a large bandage trying to stop an excessive amount of bleeding, while the rest of the wounded were being carried out on stretchers.

The commanding Red officer approached the commissar, his pistol was drawn.

“Ah, you’re awake commissar,” he announced, “The good comrade doctor here would not permit me to shoot you while you were unconscious.”

Alexander struggled to his feet, brushing off the dust from his coat. The doctor hurried the rest of the wounded out of the building.

“Comrade Koba sends his greetings,” The officer continued, “and tells me to inform you, as a result of your anti-revolutionary activities, the Central Committee of the People’s Soviet of Petrograd has condemned you to death.”

The officer raised his pistol and pointed it at Alexander’s chest. As he did so the sky outside turned black, completely obscuring the sun. Lightning flashes filled the room as the wind could be heard howling outside.

After one of the flashes of lightning, the Turk preternaturally appeared in his flowing robes, standing before the Red officer, “You’ll have to go through me first.”

At first, the officer appeared distressed at the materialization of someone before him, but he chalked up the apparition to someone he had simply not noticed until now. Waving his arm to push the man out of the way, he was shocked to see his arm go right through the oddly dressed man as if he was not there.

“Alright, that’s going to be easier than I had hoped,” the Turk interjected.

The baron and a whole crowd of specters now appeared in support of the insubstantial man in the flaming red cap. Some of them seemed to Alexander to be members of the Balalaika dance quartet, Anton was there as well as a number of others which Alexander Nicolovich didn’t recognize. Another gang, villagers, entered through the side doors of the building, Joseph and Dimitri among them. The room was now full of people ... very full.

The officer took a step back and fired all six of his rounds into the baron to no effect. A great wind began to blow in the room, but the gale seemed only to affect the officer and his men. The lightning intensified and well as the boom of the thunder. To his credit, he didn’t run, but the other soldiers in the room bolted for the door, including the comrade doctor. They struggled at the exit, each trying to get through the door at the same time. Once they had managed to pass the threshold, the officer threw his empty gun at the crowd and followed swiftly after them.

When the door closed behind him the room was again silent, the sun shining through the windows.

“That’s it,” Alexander stated dejected, “I’m finished.” He crashed down at the stool behind his desk and sat.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” replied the baron.

“Didn’t you hear him, I’m under sentence of death. When he reports me here they’ll send others. Comrade Stalin doesn’t like to leave things unfinished.”

“I don’t think so,” the heavily medaled apparition smiled, “Would you tell the other godless party associates you’ve been kept from doing your duty but a collection of ghosts?”

“No,” the commissar admitted, “Not unless I wanted to be sent to an asylum for the rest of my life.” His face brightened as he was beginning to get the picture.

“And there you have it. I’m sure he’ll come up with some story or other,” He baron smirked, “But whatever he comes up with it won’t be that you are still here.”

“By the way,” Alexander asked, “why did you protect me?”

The baron beamed. “You’re this village’s Bolshevik. We only have one. Besides, do you think your party would ever send another commissar to a village at this end of the world? No. Besides we’ve never had a commissar before. Someday, you might put this village on the map.”

Natasha ran up and hugged Alexander.

He surprised himself. He didn’t have any trouble hugging her back.

“Don’t you believe in happy endings?” she asked.

“I used to,” the village commissar explained, “Once upon a time.”

Parovnokovna Village, December 1932

Alexander Nicolovich sat at his finely appointed desk, putting his pen back in its gold holder. He leaned back proudly in his real chair. It was a chair on wheels which even swiveled. The floor, once covered in immovable dust was now covered in brightly colored Persian rugs. New electric lights blazed from the ceiling, happily illuminating the interior. It was filled with comfortable couches and seats. In the center was a dozen chess tables, gleefully occupied by several teenagers, busily moving pawns, rooks, and kings. The commissar had lost his boyish looks, but now affected the handsome stature of a man who had been pleased with his lot in life. Only the tiniest streak of grey ran through his well-trimmed, pointed beard.

The door opened and in walked a young man in his twenties wearing a fine cotton peasant shirt, decorated with gold thread. “Everybody outside,” he announced, “It’s time.” Clapping his hands, the well-dressed young people scurried off out the doors and the two were left alone.

“Is it time?” Alexander asked, “So soon?”

“Yes, comrade.”

“Do you remember Dimitri, Georgy?” Alexander asked, memories pouring into his head.

“The old caretaker,” the young man smiled, “Oh yes. Quite the character that one. Chairman of the desk committee, wasn’t he?”

“And the head of the Bureau of Chairs,” Alexander added.

As if hearing the upcoming event like a dog hearing his master’s approach, the boy announced, “They’re here.”

The commissar looked out the window as a large black sedan pulled up before the freshly painted building. The street was not yet paved, so only the crunch of the fine gravel under the car's tires filled the air. Fine new homes graced the far side of the street, where Alexander remembered White soldiers once crouching behind a low earthen rise. He watched as two leather coated members of the NKVD emerged and walked toward the building.

Alexander walked back to his desk and took his seat as the door opened. He was pleased it was now a real door which closed properly and didn't require you to duck when you came in.

"Alexander Anatoly Nicolovich," the agent stated as he removed his black gloves, "I was speaking with an old Red Army officer in the Butyrka the other day. He told me this amazing story about you and his failed mission here during the Civil War." He remarked slowly, taking his time to reveal his purpose. He pushed up the brim of his dark hat as he spoke.

"How is the Captain?" Alexander asked.

"Dead tragically," the agent replied in an intimidating tone, "lead poisoning to the back of the head."

"I see."

"Comrade Stalin has ordered People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs to eliminate all the old members of the party." The agent waited for a response, an attempt by Alexander to flee, but receiving no reply continued, "Would you like to accompany me back to Moscow or should we just shoot you right here?"

"I'm not going anywhere," Alexander Nicolovich announced blithely.

"Very well," the NKVD officer pulled an automatic pistol from inside his coat and fired two rounds at Alexander Nicolovich at close range. They passed right through his chest as the relaxed commissar stared back at the two men. Assuming he had missed, he fired off two more rounds. He was sure these hadn't missed. He stood astounded. The silence was broken a flash of lightning, the boom of thunder and by the mellow tones of the baron.

"Well," he said, "at least you can shoot straight."

It was quite a sight to see two fearless officers of the NKVD, rush back through the main door, their faces white as ash. It was almost as if ... as if they'd seen a ghost. They jumped into the back of the car and gravel flew as the wheels spun. In a moment the car had disappeared over the horizon. Alexander laughed an emotional response which now came easily.

"You see," the countess hugged him, "nothing to worry about."

"Yes," he said, "But I still wish I could have skipped the heart attack when Georgy originally told me they were coming." He clutched his fist to his chest. But it had no tone of sadness to it, it was more like a memory of the past. A remembrance of a different time.

"Do you think they'll come back?" She asked as the sun shone through the windows.

"It doesn't matter," Alexander smiled easily, "I'm not going anywhere."