

Chapter 1V

The Fall of the Imperial House

The climax of Russia's long struggle against Petrograd came at the end of February. After the death of the infamous Rasputin in December 1916, the situation deteriorated rapidly. The prime ministers and the czar's advisors played leap-frog as they moved in and out of the czar's cabinet at high speed. Russia had no stable government. The inability of the czar to handle the situation had become apparent to everyone but himself. Nearly all the members of the imperial family, the representative of the *Duma*, Russian Parliament, even the representatives of the Allied Forces tried to persuade the Emperor to form a government responsible to the Duma and to restrain his wife from interfering in affairs of state. All to no avail.

The last straw was the appointment of Mr. Sturmer, a well-known Germanophile, and an ardent advocate of a separate peace. Although he was removed from office, his successor, Mr. Protopopov, was even worse. In a historic speech Professor P. Millukov, a member of the *Duma*, openly listed the most appalling blunders of the government one after another, asking each time:

“What was it treason or stupidity?”

This speech echoed throughout Russia, but the government neither refuted the charges, nor arrested and prosecuted the professor. All Russia knew it was not treason but colossal stupidity. And all Russia ended up paying for this stupidity with its blood. The only man who might have saved the situation, Grand Duke Nickolai Nickolaievitch, had been dismissed as Commander-in-Chief of all the Imperial Russian Forces. In a dramatic move the czar himself took over supreme command of the armies while his wife acted in his stead on the home front. It was an open secret that the removal of the popular Grand Duke had taken place because of the Empress' personal jealousy. The imperial cabinet of ministers reacted strongly when the Grand Duke was removed. Nearly all of them resigned their positions. Their dissatisfaction was expressed by the minister of the navy, Admiral Grigorovitch: “The Tzar is not fit to command the army and run the country at the same time. The results will be a revolution!”

That eventful year Zuka was living in Moscow with the friendly and cultured family of Mr. Ostafiev. Although he and his bosom friend, Kesh Ilyn, rented only two rooms, they were treated like members of the family. The family consisted of the ever-absent Mr. Ostafiev, a dignified old Barin, the mother Mrs. Ostafiev and two daughters. The youngest, Nina, an imp of a girl of Zuka's age, was his boon companion and she was a “knockout” as far as looks were concerned.

Every day brought more bad news. The growing dissatisfaction with the government resulted in an open revolt of the of the reserve battalions of the Imperial Guard. On Monday, March 4th, Nina announced at the breakfast table there would be no classes at Moscow High

School because the city was in revolt. Later, that same morning, there was more sensational news: The czar's train had been detained at the small station of Dno, and two representatives of the *Duma* had climbed aboard to discuss abdication with the czar. By doing so they started a long line of disastrous events that would affect the entire country. The most fantastic rumors were flying around Moscow. That afternoon Kesha and Zuka decided to go into the city and find out for themselves what was going on. Mrs. Ostafiev tried in vain to stop them but the temptation to see historical events in the making was too strong to resist.

The day was soft and fresh; the winter snow had just started to thaw. The streets were quiet. There was practically no traffic, but Moscow was full of cheerful people hurrying toward the center of the city. What impressed the boys was the number of Red Cross cars running about in all directions. Observing closely, Zuka was surprised to see that these cars carried no doctors or nurses but were crammed full with odd looking characters who had nothing to do with health or hospitals. Later he discovered that the revolutionaries were using the Red Cross cars for camouflage.

The nearer the boys got to the center of Moscow, the denser the crowd became and the greater the excitement. Strangers stopped each other to share news, if any, then hurried on. Suddenly, among the somberly dressed crowd, bright red slashes began to appear. Zuka saw a cheap, pimpled fop of a salesman, normally obsequious, now parading proudly, wearing a knot of blazing red ribbons. He was enjoying his own daring immensely, his heroism, and the admiration of the giggling girl at his side. The sight was revolting. Kesha's expression on the subject was not printable. There were no police, no authority to challenge the red sashes.

The corner of two big streets, *Sadovaia* and *Dmitrovka*, was jammed with a shouting agitated mob. The boys had to investigate. Thus Kesha started to push into the crowd, shoulder first. Standing six foot two and carrying one hundred ninety pounds of well trained muscles, he was much better suited for service as a battering ram than his slightly built friend. Resentful remarks were stopped short by the steady eye of the "ram." Step by step the two inched their way to the front of the crowd. A company of the 55th Regiment was stationed across the street. The excited mob crowded the soldiers. Curious at first, the people became increasingly bold until the company was completely engulfed by the mob on three sides. The girls were even more aggressive than the men. The sergeants tried to hold the crowd in check. They could handle their own men but were no match for the brazen girls who were taking advantage of their sex by shouting to the soldiers. Non-commissioned officers simply could not use force on women. Realizing this, the girls were urging the soldiers to open revolt.

"Comrade soldiers, down with the government!"

"Brother soldiers, join the people against tyranny!"

"Soldiers, you are of the people. Join us against the bloody capitalists and warmongers!"

The Captain

The poor soldiers were at a loss as to how to react to the madness around them. They were a front-duty regiment, a battle-wise regiment, not one of those undisciplined reserve battalions. After many months of heavy fighting they had just arrived in Moscow for rest and recuperation. Anxiously they watched their commander, a young Captain who marched to and fro in front of the company. At last he stopped at the right flank, a few feet way from Kesha and Zuka. He swept the mob with one glance, looked for some time at his bewildered men and then beckoned his only subaltern, a very young Lieutenant. The Captain had steady gray eyes and a strong straight mouth. He had two gold stripes on his sleeve—twice wounded. There was nothing soft about that Captain. He was a battle-wise officer. Something about him gave warning: “Handle with care or else.” The young officer saluted his commander, with the adoring eyes of a neophyte.

“Listen, Deema” the Captain said, “I have to communicate with General Headquarters. We cannot stay here any any longer without action. This is an open revolt in war time. We are under extreme siege laws. This is treason. I have to have definite instruction. Mind the company!”

“Yes sir.”

And there was a world of loyalty and devotion in that simply “Yes sir.” The captain walked with deliberate steps to the big pharmacy at the corner and entered the building. With military precision the Lieutenant marched to the front of the company and faced the soldiers. In a quarter of an hour the Captain reappeared at the door. His face was livid, his eyes blazing with fire and fury. With a question in his eyes and a martial tread, the young officer approached his commander.

“Those God dammed bastards at General Headquarters!” the Captain hissed in a sibilant voice of utter contempt. “His high excellency, General Morsovsky, is not available. His excellency, the Chief of Staff, is not available. Not one of those bastards is available. Where are they? Under their wives’ skirts? Some kind of rabbit colonel advised me to be tactful with the crowd and avoid any possible trouble, not do anything rash under any circumstances. Now what am I to do? Play wet-nurse to a bunch of dirty traitors? The lousy bastards at headquarters can go to hell. I’m not going to see my company go to hell. We are going to march back to the regiment and to the devil with my orders and the cowardly generals!

“Yes Sir.” The lieutenant said officially, then unofficially “But Vassia, we are surrounded by a huge crowd. We cannot make a move. The streets are jammed by the mob.”

“What?” the Captain said contemptuously “These rats are to stop my company? The Bavarian Guards couldn’t do it!” Not on your life? Take command of the two rear platoons. I’ll show them!”

“Yes sir.”

Bavarian Guards or a rioting mob, the young lieutenant would be at his Captain’s side regardless.

The non commissioned officers watched every move of their commander. Their minds had been steeped with a sense of discipline and order. At the side of their Captian they had seen action. They would go to hell with him if he asked them. The Captain returned to his post with the same deliberate step. He faced his soldiers then slowly and contemplatively unfastened the flap of his holster. The significance of the act was eloquent and required no interpretation for either the soldiers or the crowd.

“Company, atten-SHUN!” His voice stopped the hubbub of the mob. The company stiffened into immobility. The Captain walked along the front, looking straight into the eyes of each man. The crowd hushed. The girls, so active a few minutes ago, dove into the human sea around the unit. Only at the rear some voices continued to heap abuse upon the emperor and the government. The steady eyes of the officer met the steady eyes of his men. Contact was established. He had his company in the palm of his hand. A few short orders and the men stood in close platoon formation.

“Company, fix bayonets.”

The command echoed across the heads of the crowd which had not thinned despite the threat of military action. One, two, three short moves and the company girded itself with rows of glistening bayonets. The soldiers’ faces turned slightly grey, but not one man wavered. There was no hesitation on their taut faces.

“Company, forward march!”

With this command, the captain about faced sharply and stepped toward the crowd. With leveled bayonets the company moved behind him in single step, like a Roman legion. The crowd could meet the bayonets or flee. It was surprising how fast the huge crowd vanished. The company swept the mob aside like a new broom sweeping a dirty floor. Soon it was out of sight. At that time the Russian Empire had about a thousand regiments like this one. It had several thousand good officers like the Captain. But Russia had no one at the head of the realm half as good any of them.

The Revolution in Moscow

Having just witnessed a national tragedy, Zuka and Kesha continued on their way to the Kremlin. They reached “Theatre Square” the center of the revolution. It was packed with human beings behaving like ants in a disturbed ant-hill. They hurried up and down the side streets, met each other for a second, said something and hurried on. Occasionally a truck would rattle by full

of rifles to be hastily distributed to anyone who wanted one. The civilians who volunteered for the “Revolutionary Army of Liberation” were instructed “to take up positions and to die for the glory of the revolution.” The entire “revolutionary army” was gathered in front of the City Hall. It was not much of an army, just two companies of heterogeneous soldiers, one company of Cossacks, and the formless mass of the “Citizens’ Army.” After watching for a while, Kesha and Zuka both came to the conclusion that this nervous rabble would flee rather than fight. If anyone had said “Boo” loud enough, the Square would empty in no time. As it was, it was not much of a show.

The two friends continued to observe the revolution at close range. They strolled along another important street *Znamenskaya*. The people on the street were not scared or frightened. They behaved like a curious crowd attending a new and amusing show, not the downfall of an empire. The weather was fine. The crowd was good-natured and full of good humor. So far no one had made the slightest attempt to crush the riot and it looked like no one would. Continuing along the street the boys struck up a conversation with two high school girls full of curiosity and excitement. Chattering gaily they approached an enormous building, the *Mikhailovsky Manege*, a riding academy for the cavalry.

The *Manege* was surrounded by a sparse crowd of loafers who kept their distance from the main gates. Zuka and company passed through the crowd and came right to the front of the building where they could see into the gates which stood wide open. Inside they saw two squadrons of mounted gendarmes. The squadrons stood in perfect order; with men by their mounts and officers at their posts. These were among the best troops in Moscow. Beautifully mounted and well disciplined, they were hated and feared by the revolutionaries. The gendarmes were the pillars of the monarchy. No matter what the Socialists and common propaganda said, Russia had every right to be proud of the Imperial Gendarmes Corps.

Near the gate a small group of senior officers talked in undertones to a colonel. On the surface the officers seemed calm. Only their chair smoking betrayed uneasiness. They knew quite well what would happen to them should the revolution be a success. Still they played it cool. There was a clatter of hoofs near by and a small detachment of gendarmes scattered the loafers right and left as they rode into the *Manege*. A lieutenant, bending from his horse, reported something to the colonel. The report was long and important. The officers paid close attention. The government had surrendered without a fight. They were doomed. Their Tzar had abandoned them. The gendarmes could not expect military quarter from the new government, and they would not ask for any. After several minutes of conversation a decision was reached. The officers threw down their cigarettes, saluted the colonel, and headed toward their troops.

“Attention!”

The men straightened up. The colonel walked up to the squadrons and made a short speech.

“Mount. Forward march!”

Six abreast, in close formation, the squadrons sallied out of the *Manege*. They cut through the crowds on the streets as a destroyer cuts through the ripples of the sea. The appearance of gendarmes in battle formation created a tremendous stir at city hall. In a flash, at least half the revolutionary forces and all the civilian guards were gone with the wind. False alarm. The colonel of the gendarmes, like the captain of the infantry, disgusted with the cowardly disappearance of all the excellencies, took his troops back to the barracks. The fall of the imperial regime in Moscow occurred without a single shot being fired and without the slightest resistance.

The Tzar Abdicates

The next few days, March 5th to the 12th, brought more astonishing news. After a brief consultation with two representatives of the *Duma*, Shoolgin and Goochkov, the emperor abdicated but not in favor of his son, Grand Duke Alexis. He abdicated in favor of his brother, the Grand Duke Michael. This next news was even morning astonishing. Grand Duke Michael abdicated in favor of the people. The czar was gone and no one felt sorry. But when the empire too was gone, that was bad and felt by many. To begin with Emperor Nicholas II had no right to abdicate in favor of his brother. It was a gross violation of the fundamental laws of imperial succession to the throne. Emperor Nicholas II deemed that his emotional choices and affection for his son was more important than the empire. To satisfy his personal feelings he had broken the laws he was supposed to guard. The revolutionary leaders were not interested in how they got rid of the emperor. For them the important thing was he had abdicated. But the new leaders erred the same way. They, too, allowed their emotions to over ride their judgement.

The leaders of the “Revolution” wanted desperately to have their names go down in history as “fearless leaders against cruel and bloody tyranny.” They were deeply disappointed because actually there had been no resistance and no revolution. There may be glamour in bagging big game, one may be proud of shooting a lion or tiger, but who ever bragged about shooting a rabbit? The czar’s government had offered only meek and voluntary abdication. So if there had been no revolution, one had to be created. Thus, the myth of the “Great bloodless Russian Revolution” was born.

There was no danger to the new regime so danger had to be created. Another myth, the “Revolution in Danger” was created. Actually there was no danger whatsoever. No one wanted to hurt the “revolution.” But the new leaders had to “live in constant danger” to “show their dauntless spirit.”

The new bosses had still another problem on their hands. There were no “Martyrs of the cruel and bloodthirsty Imperial Regime.” Such martyrs had to be found. In the absence of real victims, the best substitutes were criminal prisoners in jails. They were proclaimed the “innocent victims of vile imperial persecution and poor sufferers of czarism.” The jail gates were thrown

open. Hardened criminals acclaimed as “poor victims” were released. These martyrs and poor victims organized themselves immediately into bands. The first thing they did was to destroy all the criminal records. The new provisional government discharged and later arrested all the former and experienced member of the police force and formed a make shift “militia” as a substitute. The new militia was composed mostly of high school boys and released criminals. For curiosity’s sake Zuka enlisted in the militia of his district. Being appointed to the night beat in a slum area, he asked his superior, a well known pickpocket, for instructions in an emergency.

“Oh, there is a drug store on the corners, so in case of any trouble, go and stay there.”

Soon it was not safe to walk the streets of Moscow at night, not even for men. Zuka solved the problem by carrying a pair of brass knuckles in day time and a .38 revolver at night. He was not molested. The educated and well-to-do classes were considered to be “oppressors of the proletariat and blood-sucking parasites” and were placed outside the law by the new government. The proletariat was placed above the law. It required rough speech, shabby dress, dirty hands and an unshaven face to get away with things under the smoke-screen of a “free and rightful expression of the people’s wrath against the blood-sucking class of the bourgeoisie.” There was no order or peace in Moscow now. There were only revolutionaries giving speeches.

The Coachman

The closer Zuka Ossinin looked at the so called “bloodless and great revolution,” the less he liked it. It seemed to him that Russia had something she had not bargained for. One particular day Kesha and Zuka were strolling along a busy street called *Palikha*. In Moscow the streets were not named in an orderly fashion. The same street could carry different names between one corner and the next. The local residents were familiar with this tradition and even held it dear as it was a colorful reminder of their long history. But to a stranger, the system was most confusing. Such was the case when *Palikha*, at this particular corner, suddenly became *Lesnaia*. As there were no street markers, strangers found street name changes confusing.

At this corner Kesha and Zuka ran into a rather dense and hilarious crowd of loafing soldiers and members of the proletariat of both sexes. Kesha shouldered his way to the center of the commotion. A shrill voice was pouring out unprintable profanity against the Bourgeoisie. The mob parted to reveal an *Izvoztchik* (coachman) insulting sobbing women of unmistakable bourgeois origin. With each curse the crowd guffawed uproariously and urged the coachmen on.

One of the bystanders explained that a provincial lady evidently wanted to go from *Lesnaia* to *Palikha*. She had called a coach and driver who, after a long and tedious drive around Moscow, had delivered her to the corner next to the one she had started from. When the passenger had tried to protest against this racket, the coachman began to berate her, and even appealed to the people. The street was full of loafers and a sizable crowd gathered to side with him. As he stopped for a second to catch his breath a sharp-featured woman, blew her nose noisily with two fingers and cut in suddenly:

“Comrades, look at this blood-sucking vampire! Look at her fur coat? Whose coat is it? Hers? No, it is ours! We made it. We did it with our aching hands. We paid for that coat with our tears. Has she any right to it?”

Zuka and Kesha noticed “blood-sucking” was the essential phrase needed to start any political speech. It was common all though the years of civil war in Russia and it still serves as one of the most important arguments of the Soviet Union today.

“No, comrades, she has no right to it.” The woman continued. “If it was made by us, it must belong to us. It is our coat, not hers! Am I right, Citizens?”

The crowd supported her claim. She wanted the fur coat for herself and she was certain she would get it. There was no law to stop this woman from taking it now. She could get many willing hands to help her. This was all too much for Kesha. Slowly he walked over to the sled and stood glaring at the driver. Under the fixed gaze of his angry dark blue eyes the coachman wilted. The termagant looked at Kesha in sheer amazement. With his right hand Kesha grabbed the driver’s collar. With a swift, powerful jerk he lifted him clear out of the seat and with zest delivered a beautiful upper-cut. Then he dropped the man into the gutter. The coachmen fell into a deep sleep in an awkwardly uncomfortable position. The hushed crowd shifted uneasily. Unquestionable Kesha was a barin. It was written all over him. For centuries the Russian people had respected a strong and resolution barin. Next Kesha turned to the crowd and asked indifferently:

“Any objections?”

There were no objections.

“Anyone want my coat?” He was wearing a really expensive one. No! No one wanted his coat.

“In that case, you folks just move along! Move along!”

With dirty looks but mute tongues the crowd began to drift off as Kesha helped the frightened woman out of the sled.

Life in Moscow was becoming more and more unpredictable with the “deepening of the revolution.” Mr. Alexander Kerensky, Minister for Justice, made more speeches and instituted more unbelievably foolish measures. These “revolutionary measures” were usually ignored.

School Friends

As their classes at Moscow High School had stopped, Zuka, Kesha and their circle of friends had plenty of time on their hands, which they usually spent at Ostafiev’s house. Nina had

a few school friends of her own. Zuka introduced his and soon they formed a jolly informal club. They spent some evenings in interesting political disputes, which sometimes became quite animated. Mostly, the group enjoyed poetry and music. The musical section was dominated by Leo Galai, Zuka's schoolmate, an awkward youngster but a wonderful musician who had fallen in love with Nina. In the twilight, in a hushed room, bending over the piano with his nervous fingers flying over the keys, he kept the company spellbound with the beauty of his compositions. He poured out his love and his adoration for the girl of his dreams in those pieces.

Nina herself was just as good a musician. She listened in rapture to the enchanting music, as she was falling even harder and deeper in love with Kersha. Val Nabokov, a scion of an ancient family and two year's Zuka's senior, occupied an outstanding position in the merry crowd. He possessed a peculiar fascination. Tall, elegant, witty, he would attract people at first glance, but on closer acquaintance, this good impression faded. He seemed to be too mature for his age. His witticism seemed too cynical. He appeared to suffer from some physical deformity that affected his morals. But being a good musician he liked to play too. However his performance lacked the depth of Leo's. It reminded one of a butterfly fluttering over flowers in a garden. Val tried vainly to conquer the divine Baroness Helen von Neinendorf. Helen was a tall, blonde girl who was cool, composed and completely heartless. She had the face of a Greek goddess but made a cruel game of Val's devotion. She kissed Zuka only once but he never forgot that kiss.

Little did they dream, on those happy evenings, that within one year Kersha would be riddled with Communist bullets leading a bayonet charge at Osessa. The beautiful and ever-composed Helen would send six bullets into a murderous mob of Red soldiers and then shoot herself through the heart with the seventh, so as not to spoil her beautiful face. Within five years, Zuka and Val would meet again under tragic circumstances and the rest of their jolly crowd would be picked up by the mighty whirlwind of the revolution and scattered all over the globe.