

Chapter 1X

The House Abandoned

It was a beautiful September day in Bougoulma, nice, crisp, but that was the only thing good in Bougoulma in September, 1918.

Zuka Ossinin was walking gloomily along the dusty main street of town. The times were bad, the military situation even worse. The Czechs, who so gloriously started to fight against the Bolsheviks, ended by an inglorious opening of the front lines, without notifying Colonel Kappel, Commander of the White People's Army. The result was disastrous. The Red Army poured into the breach and the People's Army had to retreat.

Still worse was the attitude of the people who were suffering under the Bolsheviks. Colonel Kappel with only four hundred volunteers, including Zuka, liberated Kazan, the Capitol of the Volga district. It distressed him that out of twelve thousand officers, only one hundred twenty-six joined him, many of whom were liberated prisoners expecting to be executed.

The contingent of Colonel Kappel's forces were mostly high-school boys, cadets and youngsters of the middle class. Senior officers were prominently absent. Their excuse was they were used to commanding regiments and divisions. It was beneath their dignity to command such small units in the People's Army. A few years later, these same generals did not consider it beneath their dignity to be janitors, doormen and such in exile. Had more of these officers joined the People's Army the results might have been completely different.

As it was, things were bad. Kazan had fallen once again into Red hands. Samara was ready to fall and the People's Army was slowly retreating toward Bougoulma. Refugees crowded the town. Most of them preferred to run rather than fight. Most of the men of Bougoulma's junior set were in the Army. Zuka was with the Samara Lancers as a volunteer with the rank of corporal. Lt. Matthew Ossinin was executive officer with the Horse Machine-Gun Company.

Zuka knew that Bougoulma was doomed, and so were the Ossinins. Mother was at the estate, father with Colonel Kappel, all the servants were gone, most of the young Tartars had already joined the army. The house seemed abandoned already. The rooms kept their gloomy silence. Only the huge mirrors in the Big Room reflected the last days as imperturbably as ever. They knew their immediate future, and what their end would be.

Zuka walked deeply absorbed in his cheerless thought. He knew that soon they would have to abandon the town. The whole country was completely mad.

"Hi, Zuka" a girl's voice startled him. He stopped and looked up. Lena, his one time sweetheart and bosom friend, stood before him. She had been his first date at his very first official ball.

“What, day-dreaming again?” she tossed her blonde head, and her grey eyes laughed at him.

“No” Zuka said crossly. Lean was wearing a nurse’s uniform. She was straight, lithe and mocking as ever.

“Let each day take care of itself; now we are in God’s hand.” *Carpe diem* is our motto now!”

“No! No, don’t,” Lean stopped Zuka’s angry outburst. “We all know the situation and we must go forward into the future. That is why some of us decided to organize a last dance and party. Soon we will all be gone and I do not think we will ever come back. So tonight we will have the party. Come at 8 o’clock to the Girl’s High School Hall. Do not be late. Lucy will be there. I have already talked to her. She will be there, Zuka, do not fear.” The last sentence she shot out a little pointedly.

Zuka smiled at her. He still appreciated her mocking gray eyes and the smiling lips that once he had loved to kiss.

For a long time the Christmas Ball at the Girl’s High School was a big gala even in Bougoulma. On those occasions, the whole building would be ablaze with lights decorating it inside and out. The principal, Liudmila Pavovna, used to receive guests at the head of the broad staircase, surrounded by the prettiest girls. She always invited and entertained the most distinguished guests. At the appropriate time she would cross the shining dance floor, seat herself in an arm chair specially arranged for her, and incline her head toward the leader of the band. With the first few bars of music, the master of ceremonies would glide across the room and with a deep bow, invite her to join him in opening the ball. Liudmila Pavlovna would make a tour around the room, waltzing gracefully as everyone watched. She would then thank the master of ceremonies and proclaim the ball open.

A delightful custom of the time was the Flirtation of the Ribbons. Any girl could pin a ribbon of any color upon a boy’s lapel. The size and the color of the ribbon had a special meaning: red - love; blue- friendship, green - hope, yellow -jealousy, white - innocence. The number of ribbons a boy received was an indication of how popular he was.

Zuka Ossinin loved to dance, and even when he was very young, he preferred to invite girls much more his senior and more experienced dancers to be his partners. Often he invited the less pretty, less popular girls who, otherwise, might have been wall flowers. So Zuka was well liked by the girls with serious faces. They treated him like a cavalier and decorated him with many ribbons. Then Zuka would walk around the dance floor like a young peacock. Later, Zuka received ribbons on his own merits from some of the prettiest girls..

Now everything was different. When Zuka arrived the hall it was dark, gloomy and quiet. There were only a few lighted windows. The broad stairway to the dance floor was empty and cold. Zuka walked on to the dining room where a table was being set by some of the girls in nurses' uniforms. They greeted him cheerfully: "Say, what about the band?" he asked.

"Don't worry, we cornered three musicians to play for us tonight." Shoora answered. Shoora was a statuesque blonde with beautiful legs. She was Matthew's girl. "Not much of a band but better than nothing. We will start the dance as soon as we finish preparing the table. Zuka, I have not seen Matthew yet. Is he coming?"

"Oh you should worry," Zuka replied.

"With your brother one has to worry." Shoora said, tossing her blonde bobbed head. We will eat after the mazurka. Otherwise it would not be a mazurka." she said, looking significantly at the bottles.

Zuka turned as he heard voices at the door. His closest friend and cousin, Anna Ossinin, had just entered with a group of her friends. Queen Ann looked good even in a nurse's uniform. With her bobbed hair she was quite a knock out. She was sentimental and practical at the same time. She understood quite well the power she had over men. So she did not worry about the tall officer with a strong and composed face that walked beside her. She gave a perfunctory kiss to her cousin. They visited for a while, until the sound of string instruments being tuned, signaled that the band was ready to begin.

The girls hurriedly removed their aprons. Zuka slowly walked to the top of the stairs. He could see everyone in the room but where was Lucy? He frowned and turned to walk along the corridor leading to the classrooms. A small shapely figure emerged from one of the darkened class rooms. The perfume was familiar. Suddenly Lucy was in his arms and the world stood still. Time ceased as they warmly greeted one another.

"Come let us dance," Zuka said. So off they went hand in hand to join the waltzers. The other couples were swaying in the poorly lighted hall. They were the remnants of a once gay, jolly and carefree set. Here on this very floor they had exchanged their first bashful secrets and confessions of love. Here the much coveted red ribbons were pinned and in the darkened class rooms, the first innocent kisses were exchanged.

Now they had come to say goodbye to their first loves and all their dreams of happiness. They knew they were the last generation. They knew that in a few days the whirlwind of revolution would separate them forever. It was the "Ball of the Condemned." Each minute was more golden because it was the last.

The enchanting Russian dances followed one after another. Only after the *Pas de quatre*, Zuka's favorite, did he and Lucy quietly slip out. Zuka looked back for a second. He noticed

that the pairs had not changed partners. There was no longer any gay laughter. The girls heads were on their partner's shoulders.

They entered a small classroom and stood close in the semi-darkness. Lucy put his head on her shoulder. Her golden hair shone even in the darkness. Zuka reverently kissed her fingers one after another. No words were said. It was not necessary. If ever in his life Zuka was close to saying the famous line from Faust "*Halt die angenbick du bist so shone*" it was at this moment. They could hear faint melodies being played from the dance floor as they kissed goodbye.

"Zuka! Lucy! Where are you? They are going to start the mazurka. Hurry up you lunatics." Volodia's voice brought them back to the moment. They arose. Neither would miss this mazurka for all the treasure of Ghengis Khan. There is no dance like the mazurka. It is the fastest, the most alluring and the most graceful of all dances. One cannot learn to dance the mazurka; one must be born to it.

So Lucy and Zuka flew hand in hand down the stairs to the main floor and rushed to catch up with the others.

"*Grand rond s'il vous plait,*" it was a custom to conduct the mazurka in French and that was the beginning of the famous cotillion part of the mazurka. All worries were forgotten as the gay, laughing partners executed the enticing and complicated figures.

"*A une collone, s'il vous plait.*" The pairs formed a collone at the other end of the room.

"*Mesdames a droite - Messieurs a gauche, S'il vous plait.*" That was the finale of the dance. The dancers glided with the mazurka's special steps to the other end of the hall and lined up facing each other across the room.

"*Messieurs, avancez at remerciez vos dames,*" setting the example Captain Volodia Taving floated over the floor, the gentleman followed in a straight line. When they reached their ladies they kneeled on their right knees. The ladies, with deep curtsies, extended their hands for the traditional kiss.

Zuka watched his cousin, Ann Ossinin with amusement. She was carried away by the dance and forgetting her surroundings, made a half circular motion with her right foot as if to straighten the heavy skirts of her supposedly heavy full evening gown. She had forgotten she was in a nurses uniform with a short skirt. The mazurka was over and with it the last ball in Bougoulma. A long dinner followed that lasted late into the night.

Two days later the town was evacuated. The trains, loaded to capacity, were leaving the unfortunate village. Military units were passing through. By the end of the second day, the town was almost deserted. Late that afternoon Matthew Ossinin rode to Zuka's quarters. Zuka's

thoroughbred Dahir, which had been his property since he was born, was saddled.

“Come on Zuka, we will make a last visit to the house to say goodbye.

“Just a minute. I will see George and tell him that I will be back later.” He went off to see his Commander and kin and returned in a few minutes.

While riding, Matthew told his brother that mother was fine at the estate and would soon evacuate to Ufa, a distance of about ninety miles. She would be escorted by Tartar riders.

“Well, we will see mother there then. Do you know where she is going to stay?”

Zuka answered with an affirmative grunt.

They dismounted in front of the house, unlocked the door and entered. The house was quiet. Much too quiet. The brothers slowly went through the house, room by room. At last they came to the ball room. It was serene as usual, as if the country was not in the middle of a revolution. The shades were down, the heavy curtains drawn closed and the tall mirrors reflected the two Ossinin brothers in field uniforms rather than in full formal dress. The big candelabra with its hundreds of glass icicles, was faintly reflected on the highly waxed floor. The potted palms stood silently in the corners of the large room.

“As you know Zuka, I have always been in awe of mirrors. They are mystical. I believe they not only reflect the present, but they also absorb the past. It would be interesting to have them play back the images they have absorbed during the last one hundred years. It would be fun to see all the generations of Ossinis who have enjoyed this room. I just cannot bear the thought that those apes being absorbed in the faces of these mirrors. It would be a sacrilege.

He turned to his brother who was contemplating the picture that hung at one end of the room. It was a picture of a Florentine lady painted in the eighteenth century. Her exquisite head was slightly turned, her grey-green eyes were smiling. It was impossible to find a tender or mocking smile on her lips as she was not smiling.

Zuka, out of his reverie, asked with his eyes.

Matthew understood Zuka’s question, even without an exchange of words. He unfastened his holster. He aimed at the middle of the largest mirror. A shot shattered the glass. Matthew fired three or four shots at random. For a few seconds nothing happened, then suddenly the glass collapsed with a soul rendering moan. A cascade of silver and rainbows rushed down the wall and lay motionless on the polished floor. Only tiny slivers of glass oscillated in agony.

Zuka raised his Mauser and with face set, he finished the execution. Now ugly wooden boards leered back mockingly.

“Now we will go from room to room and finish off the execution,” Matthew declared as he walked toward the door. Zuka paused for one last look at the beautiful painting. He raised his weapon and with a few more shots, finished off the Florentine lady. In convulsions the canvas slid to the floor.

“I do not want those apes to rape you, even with their eyes.” he said aloud. They went through each room of the house again, one by one. Many shots rang out!

They entered Matthew’s bedroom and approached his tri-paneled dressing table. Matthew stood for a long time looking into the mirrors that had watched him grow from boy to man. He sadly holstered his gun and said over his shoulder: “Zuka, I just cannot do it. Please, you do it for me!” Zuka sent three shots into the glass as Matthew left the room.

The brothers paused for a moment at the top of the broad carpeted staircase. “The house is dead now,” Matthew said sadly. “We have said our last good byes and now we must go.”

Then, as they had so many times in the past, they linked arms and descended the stairs for the last time.

Zuka quickly left the house. He rushed to his horse and threw the reigns over Dahir’s head. He put his left hand on the pommel and with one swift, lithe and angry motion he flung himself into the saddle. Spurring the indignant thorough bred viciously, he galloped down the dusty road.

Lieutenant Matthew Ossinin followed through the front doors without even bothering to shut the door after him. He walked to his roan, tested the saddle, then mounted. With a gentle spur he sent his horse off at a brisk pace along the same well- worn route back to Bougoulma.

Neither Ossinin brother looked back.