

Part 1: Childhood,

Section 1

1899

People :

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Text :

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MEMOIRS OF A REVOLUTIONIST

□ PART FIRST CHILDHOOD



MOSCOW is a city of slow historical growth, and down to the present time its different parts have wonderfully well retained the features which have been stamped upon them in the slow course of history. The Trans-Moskva River district, with its broad, sleepy streets and its monotonous gray-painted, low-roofed houses, of which the entrance-gates remain securely bolted day and night, has always been the secluded abode of the merchant class, and the stronghold of the outwardly austere, formalistic, and despotic Nonconformists of the "Old Faith." The citadel, or Kreml, is still the stronghold of church and state; and the immense space in front of it, covered with thousands of shops and warehouses, has been for centuries a crowded beehive of commerce, and still remains the heart of a great internal trade

which spreads over the whole surface of the vast empire. The Tverskáya and the Smiths' Bridge have been for hundreds of years the chief centers for the fashionable shops; while the artisans' quarters, the Pluschíkha and the Dorogomílovka, retain the very same features which characterized their uproarious populations in the times of the Moscow Czars. Each quarter is a little world in itself; each has its own physiognomy, and lives its own separate life. Even the railways --- when they made an irruption into the old capital --- grouped apart in special centers on the outskirts of the old town their stores and machine-works, their heavily loaded carts and engines.

However, of all parts of Moscow, none, perhaps, is more typical than that labyrinth of clean, quiet, winding streets and lanes which lies at the back of the Kreml, between two great radial streets, the Arbát and the Prechístenka, and is still called the Old Equerries' Quarter, --- the Stáraya Konyúshennaya.

Some fifty years ago, there lived in this quarter, and slowly died out, the old Moscow nobility, whose names were so frequently mentioned in the pages of Russian history before the times of Peter I., but who subsequently disappeared to make room for the newcomers, "the men of all ranks," called into service by the founder of the Russian state. Feeling themselves supplanted at the St. Petersburg court, these nobles of the old stock retired either to the Old Equerries' Quarter in Moscow, or to their picturesque estates in the country round about the capital, and they looked with a sort of contempt and secret jealousy upon the motley crowd of families which came "from no one knew where" to take possession of the highest functions of the government, in the new capital on the banks of the Nevá.

In their younger days, most of them had tried their fortunes in the service of the state, chiefly in the army; but for one reason or another they had soon abandoned it, without having risen to high rank. The more successful ones obtained some quiet, almost honorary position in their mother city, --- my father was one of these, --- while the most of the others simply retired from active service. But wheresoever they might have been shifted, in the course of their careers, over the wide surface of Russia, they always somehow managed to spend their old age in a house of their own in the Old Equerries' Quarter, under the shadow of the church where they had been baptized, and where the last prayers had been pronounced at the burial of their parents.

¶New branches budded from the old stocks. Some of them achieved more or less distinction in different parts of Russia; some owned more luxurious houses in the new style in other quarters of Moscow or at St. Petersburg; but the branch which continued to reside in the Old Equerries' Quarter, somewhere near to the green, the yellow, the pink, or the brown church which was endeared through family associations, was considered as the true representative of the family, irrespective of the position it occupied in the family tree. Its old-fashioned head was treated with great respect, not devoid, I must say, of a slight tinge of irony, even by those younger representatives of the same stock who had left their mother city for a more brilliant career in the St. Petersburg Guard or in the court circles. He personified for them the antiquity of the family and its traditions.

¶In these quiet streets, far away from the noise and the bustle of the commercial Moscow, all the houses had much the same appearance. They were mostly built of wood, with bright green sheet-iron roofs, the exteriors stuccoed and decorated with columns and porticoes; all were painted in gay colors. Nearly every house had but one story, with seven or nine big, gay-looking windows facing the street. A second story was admitted only in the back part of the house, which looked upon a spacious yard, surrounded by numbers of small buildings, used as kitchens, stables, cellars, coach-houses, and as dwellings for the retainers and servants. A wide gate opened upon this yard, and a brass plate on it usually bore the inscription, "House of So and So, Lieutenant or Colonel, and Commander," --- very seldom "Major-General" or any similarly elevated civil rank. But if a more luxurious house, embellished by a gilded iron railing and an iron gate, stood in one of those streets, the brass plate on the gate was sure to bear the name of "Commerce Counsel" or "Honorable Citizen" So and So. These were the intruders, those who came unasked to settle in this quarter, and were therefore ignored by their neighbors.

¶No shops were allowed in these select streets, except that in some small wooden house, belonging to the parish church, a tiny grocer's or greengrocer's shop might have been found; but then, the policeman's lodge stood on the opposite corner, and in the daytime the policeman himself, armed with a halberd, would appear at the door to salute with his inoffensive weapon the officers passing by, and would retire inside when dusk came, to employ himself either as a cobbler, or in the manufacture of some special snuff patronized by the elder male servants of the

neighborhood.

Life went on quietly and peacefully --- at least for the outsider --- in this Moscow Faubourg Saint-Germain. In the morning nobody was seen in the streets. About mid-day the children made their appearance under the guidance of French tutors and German nurses who took them out for a walk on the snow-covered boulevards. Later on in the day the ladies might be seen in their two-horse sledges, with a valet standing behind on a small plank fastened at the end of the runners, or ensconced in an old-fashioned carriage, immense and high, suspended in big curved springs and dragged by four horses, with a postilion in front and two valets standing behind. In the evening most of the houses were brightly illuminated, and, the blinds not being drawn down, the passerby could admire the card-players or the waltzers in the saloons. "Opinions" were not in vogue in those days, and we were yet far from the years when in each one of these houses a struggle began between "fathers and sons," --- a struggle that usually ended either in a family tragedy or in a nocturnal visit of the state police. Fifty years ago nothing of the sort was thought of; all was quiet and smooth, --- at least on the surface.

In this old Equerries' Quarter I was born in 1842, and here I passed the first fifteen years of my life. Even after our father had sold the house in which our mother died, and bought another, and when again he had sold that house, and we spent several winters in hired houses, until he had found a third one to his taste, within a stone's throw of the church where he had been baptized, we still remained in the Old Equerries' Quarter, leaving it only during the summer to go to our country-seat.

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