

# Part 2: The Corps of Pages, Section 5

1899

## People :

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## Text :

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## V

Stormy times came now in the life of our corps. When Girardot was dismissed, his place was taken by one of our officers, Captain B----. He was rather good-natured than otherwise, but he had got it into his head that he was not treated by us with due reverence corresponding to the high position which he now occupied, and he tried to enforce upon us more respect and awe towards himself. He began by quarreling over all sorts of petty things with the upper form, and what was still worse in our opinion he attempted to destroy our "liberties," the origin of which was lost in "the darkness of time," and which, insignificant in themselves, were perhaps on that very account only the dearer to us.

The result of it was that for several days the school was in an open revolt, which ended in wholesale punishment, and in the exclusion from the corps of two of our favorite pages de chambre.

Then the same captain began to intrude into the classrooms, where we used to spend one hour in the morning in preparing our lessons, before the classes began. We were considered to be there under our teaching staff, and were happy to have

nothing to do with our military officers. We resented that intrusion very much, and one day I loudly expressed our discontent by telling the captain that this was the place of the inspector of the classes, not his. I spent weeks under arrest for that frankness, and perhaps would have been excluded from the school, had it not been that the inspector of the classes, his aid, and even our old director judged that, after all, I had only expressed aloud what they all used to say to themselves.

No sooner were these troubles over, than the death of the Dowager-Empress, the widow of Nicholas I., brought a new interruption in our work

The burial of crowned heads is always so arranged as to produce a deep impression on the crowds. The body of the Empress was brought from Tsárkoye Seló, where she died, to St. Petersburg, and here, followed by the imperial family, all the high dignitaries of the state, and scores of thousands of functionaries and corporations, and preceded by hundreds of clergy and choirs, it was taken from the railway station, through the main thoroughfares, to the fortress, where it had to lie in state for several weeks. A hundred thousand men of the guard were placed along the streets, and thousands of people, dressed in the most gorgeous uniforms, preceded, accompanied, and followed the hearse in a solemn procession. Litanies were sung at every important crossing of the streets, and here the ringing of the bells on the church towers, the voices of the vast choirs, and the sounds of the military bands united in the most impressive way, so as to make people believe that the immense crowds really mourned the loss of the Empress.

As long as the body lay in state in the cathedral of the fortress, the pages, among others, had to keep watch round it, night and day. Three pages de chambre and three maids of honor always stood close by the coffin, which was placed on a high pedestal, while some twenty pages were stationed on the platform, upon which litanies were sung twice every day, in the presence of the Emperor and all his family. Consequently, every week nearly one half of the corps was taken in turns to the fortress, to lodge there. We were relieved every two hours, and in the daytime our service was not difficult; but when we had to rise in the night, to dress in our court uniforms, and then to walk through the dark and gloomy inner courts of the fortress to the cathedral, to the sound of the gloomy chime of the fortress bells, a cold shiver seized me at the thought of the prisoners who were immured somewhere in this Russian Bastille. "Who knows," thought I, "whether in my turn I

shall not also have to join them some day."

The burial did not pass without an accident, which might have had serious consequences. An immense canopy had been erected under the dome of the cathedral, over the coffin. A huge gilded crown rose above it, and from this crown an immense purple mantle, lined with ermine, hung towards the four thick pilasters which support the dome of the cathedral. It was impressive, but we boys soon made out that the crown was of gilded cardboard and wood, the mantle of velvet only in its lower part, while higher up it was red cotton, and that the ermine lining was simply cotton flannelette or swansdown, to which tails of black squirrels had been sewn; the escutcheons, which represented the arms of Russia, veiled with black crepe, were simple cardboard. But the crowds, which were allowed at certain hours of the night to pass by the coffin, and to kiss in a hurry the gold brocade which covered it, surely had no time to closely examine the flannelette ermine or the cardboard escutcheons, and the desired theatrical effect was obtained even by such cheap means.

When a litany is sung in Russia, all people present hold lighted wax candles, which have to be put out after certain prayers have been read. The imperial family also held such candles, and one day, the young son of the Grand Duke Constantine, seeing that the others put out their wax candles by turning them upside down, did the same. The black gauze which hung behind him from an escutcheon took fire, and in a second the escutcheon and the cotton stuff were ablaze. An immense tongue of fire ran up the heavy folds of the supposed ermine mantle.

The service was stopped. All looks were directed with terror upon the tongue of fire, which went higher and higher toward the cardboard crown and the woodwork that supported the whole structure. Bits of burning stuff began to fall, threatening to set fire to the black gauze veils of the ladies present.

Alexander II. lost his presence of mind for a couple of seconds only, but he recovered immediately, and said in a composed voice: " The coffin must be taken ! " The pages de chambre at once covered it with the thick gold brocade, and we all advanced to lift it; but in the meantime the big tongue of flame had broken into a number of smaller ones, which now slowly devoured only the fluffy outside of the cotton stuff' and, meeting more and more dust and soot in the upper parts of the structure, gradually died out in its folds.

I cannot say what I looked at most: the creeping fire or the stately slender figures of the three ladies who stood by the coffin, the long trains of their black dresses spreading over the steps which led to the upper platform, and their black lace veils hanging down their shoulders. None of them had made the slightest movement: they stood like three beautiful carved images. Only in the dark eyes of one of them, Mademoiselle Gamaléya, tears glittered like pearls. She was a daughter of South Russia, and was the only really handsome lady among the maids of honor at the court.

At the corps everything was upside down. The classes were interrupted; those of us who returned from the fortress were lodged in temporary quarters, and, having nothing to do, spent the whole day in all sorts of frolics. In one of them we managed to open a cupboard which stood in the room, and contained a splendid collection of models of all kinds of animals, for the teaching of natural history. That was its official purpose, but it was never even so much as shown to us, and now that we got hold of it we utilized it in our own way. With a human skull, which was in the collection, we made a ghostly figure wherewith to frighten other comrades and the officers at night. As to the animals, we placed them in the most ludicrous positions and groups: monkeys were seen riding on lions, sheep were playing with leopards, the giraffe danced with the elephant, and so on. The worst was that a few days later one of the Prussian princes, who had come to assist at the burial ceremony (it was the one, I think, who became later on the Emperor Frederic), visited our school, and was shown all that concerned our education. Our director did not fail to boast of the excellent educational appliances which we had, and brought his guest to that unfortunate cupboard. When the German prince caught a glimpse of our zoological classification, he drew a long face and quickly turned away. The director looked horrified; he had lost the power of speech, and only pointed repeatedly with his hand at some sea stars, which were placed in glass boxes on the walls beside the cupboard. The suite of the prince tried to look as if they had noticed nothing, and only threw rapid glances at the cause of so much disturbance, while we wicked boys made all sorts of faces in order not to burst with laughter.

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