

KHODINKA: AN INCIDENT OF THE CORONATION OF NICHOLAS II.

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" I cannot understand such obstinacy. Why should you do without sleep and go ' with the people,' when you can go straight to the pavilion with your Aunt Vera, and see everything without any trouble? I told you Behr had promised to pass you through, though, as far as that's concerned, you have the right of entry as a maid of honour."

It was thus that Prince Paul Golitsin – known in the aristocratic set as " Pigeon " – addressed his twenty-three-year-old daughter Alexandra, called for shortness' sake " Rina."

The conversation took place in Moscow on 17th May 1893 –on the eve of the popular fête held to celebrate the coronation. Rina, a strong, handsome girl, with a profile characteristic of her race – the hooked nose of a bird of prey – had long ceased to be passionately devoted to balls

* The Khodinka is a large plain outside Moscow where the military often exercise. It was here that the people of Moscow assembled to celebrate the Tsar's accession, and where many hundreds were crushed to death.

or social functions, and was, or at least considered herself to be, an " advanced " woman and a lover of " the people." She was her father's only daughter and his favourite, and always did what she wished. In this particular instance it occurred to her that she would like to go to the popular festival with her cousin, not at mid-day with the Court, but together with the people, the porter and the grooms of their own household, who intended to start in the early morning.

" But, father, I do not want to look at the people; I want to be with them. I want to see how they feel towards the young Tsar. Surely for once . .

" Well, well, do as you like. I know how obstinate you are."

" Don't be angry, father, dear. I promise to be careful, and Alec will not leave my side."

Although the plan seemed wild and fantastic to her father, he gave his consent.

" Yes, of course you may," he answered when she asked if she might have the victoria. " Drive to Khodinka and send it back."

" All right."

She went up to him, and he blessed her, as was his custom, and she kissed his big white hand, and they separated.

There was no talk of anything but the morrow's festival among the cigarette-makers in the lodgings let by the notorious Marie Yakovlevna. Several of Emelian Tagodin's friends had met in his room to discuss when they should start.

" It's not worth while going to bed at all. You'll only oversleep yourself," said Yakov, a bright youth who occupied a space behind a wooden partition.

" Why not have a little sleep? " retorted Emelian. " We'll start at dawn. Every one says that's the thing to do."

" Well, if we are going to bed, it's time we went."

" But, Emelian, mind you call us if we don't wake up in time."

Emelian promised he would, and, taking a reel of silk from a drawer in the table, drew the lamp nearer, and began to sew a missing button on his summer overcoat. When he had finished this job he laid out his best clothes and cleaned his boots, and, after saying several prayers –" Our Father," " Hail Mary," etc., the meaning of which he had never fathomed, and had not even been interested in – he took off his boots, and lay down on the crumpled, creaking bed.

" Why not?" he said to himself. "There is such a thing as luck. Perhaps I shall get a lottery ticket and win." The rumour had spread among the people that, besides other gifts, some lottery tickets were to be distributed. " Well, the 10,000 rouble prize is expecting too much, but one might win 500 roubles. What couldn't I do with it? I could send something to the old folk; I'd make my wife leave her situation: it's no sort of existence living apart like this. I'd buy a good watch and a fur coat. As it is, it's one long struggle, and you're never out of your difficulties."

He began to dream that he and his wife were walking around the Alexander Gardens, and that the same policeman who had taken him up a year ago for using bad language when he was drunk was no longer a policeman, but a general, and that this same general smiled at him and invited him to go to a neighbouring public-house with him to hear a mechanical organ. The organ sounded just like a clock striking, and Emelian awoke to find that the clock really was striking wheezily, and that the landlady was coughing behind his door. It was not quite so dark as it had been the night before.

" Don't oversleep yourself."

Emelian got up, went barefooted across the room to the wooden partition to awake Yasha, and then proceeded to dress carefully,

greasing and brushing his hair before the broken mirror.

" I'm all right! That's why girls are so fond of me. Only I don't want to get into mischief."

He went to the landlady, as arranged the day before, to get some food. He put a meat pie, two eggs, some ham, and a small bottle of vodka into a bag, and then left the house with Yasha and walked towards the Peter Park.

They were not alone. Some were in front; others were hurrying up from behind. From all sides happy men, women, and children, dressed in their best, were collecting together, all going in the same direction. At last they reached the field called Khodinka. Its edges were black with people. It was cold in the early dawn, and here and there smoke was arising from the fires which were made from such twigs and branches as were available. Emelian found some friends who also had a fire, and round which they were sitting preparing their food and drink. The sun was rising clear and bright, and the general merriment was increasing. The air was filled with singing and chattering, and with jokes and laughter. Everything gave rise to pleasure, but still greater pleasures were in store. Emelian had a drink, and, lighting a cigarette, felt happier than ever.

The people were wearing their best clothes, but several rich merchants, with their wives and children, were also noticeable among the well-dressed working men. Rina Golitsin, too, was remarkable as she walked at her cousin's side between the wood fires, happy and radiant at having got her own way, and at the thought of celebrating with the people the accession to the throne of a Tsar who was adored by them.

" Here's to your health, good lady," cried a factory hand to her, raising his glass to his lips. " Don't refuse to break bread with us."

" Thank you."

" You ought to answer 1 a good appetite to you," " whispered her cousin, showing off his knowledge of popular customs, and they moved on.

Accustomed to occupy the best places everywhere, they penetrated through the crowd, going straight for the pavilion. The crowd was so dense that, notwithstanding the bright weather, a thick mist caused by the breath of the people, hung over the field. But the police would not let them pass.

" I'm rather glad," said Rina. " Let us return," and so they went back into the crowd.

" Lies, all lies," said Emelian, seated with his companions in a circle round the food which was spread out on white paper – in answer to a young factory hand who, on approaching them, told them

that the distribution of gifts had begun.

" I tell you it is so. It's contrary to regulations, but they have begun. I saw it myself.

Each one receives a mug and a packet and away they go."

" Of course, what do the crazy commissionaires care? They give as they choose."

" But why should they, how can they – against regulations? "

" You see they can."

" Let's go, friends. Why should we wait? "

They all rose. Emelian pocketed his bottle with the remains of the vodka and advanced with his comrades. They had not gone more than twenty yards when the crowd became so dense that it was difficult to stir.

" What are you pushing for? "

"You're pushing yourself."

" You're not the only one here."

" That'll do."

"Oh, Lord! I'm crushed!" cried a woman's voice.

A child could be heard screaming on the other side.

" Go to –"

" How dare you? Are you the only one? Everything will be taken before we get there. But I'll be even with them, the beasts, the devils," cried Emelian, squaring his stalwart shoulders and elbowing his way forward as best he could. Seeing every one else was elbowing and pushing he, without knowing exactly why, also began to try to force a way for himself through the crowd. On every side people were crushing him, but those in front did not move or let any one through their ranks – and all were shouting and shrieking and groaning.

Emelian silently clenched his strong teeth and frowned, but without losing heart or strength he steadily continued to push those in front, though he made but little progress.

All at once there was a sudden agitation; the steady surging and swaying was followed by a rush forward to the right. Emelian looked to that side and saw something whizz over his head and fall among the crowd. One, two, three – he realised what it meant, and a voice near him exclaimed:

" Cursed devils – they are throwing the things among the crowd ! "

The sound of screaming, laughing and groaning came from that part of the crowd where the bags were falling. Some one gave Emelian a severe blow in the ribs which made him even gloomier and angrier, but before he had time to recover from the blow some one else had trodden on his foot. Then his coat, his new coat, caught and was torn. With a feeling of maliciousness in his heart he exerted all his strength to advance when something suddenly happened which he could not understand; and he found himself in an open space and could see the tents, where the mugs and packets of sweets were to be distributed. Up to then he had seen nothing but the backs of other people in front of him.

He felt glad, but only for a moment, for he realised that the reason he could see all these was because those who were in front had reached the trench and were slipping or rolling over into it, and that he himself was knocked down on top of a mass of people. He was tumbling on those below, and others from behind him were in their turn tumbling on him. For the first time he felt afraid. As he fell, a woman in a woollen shawl stumbled over him. Shaking her off, he tried to turn round, but those behind prevented him and his strength began to fail. Then some one clutched his legs and screamed. He neither saw nor heard anything, but fought his way through, treading on human beings on all sides.

" Friends, help,- take my watch – my gold watch," shrieked a man near him.

" Who wants a watch now? " thought Emelian, climbing out to the other side of the trench.

His heart was divided between fear – fear for himself and for his own life – and anger at those wild creatures who were pushing him. In spite of this, the aim with which he had set out – to reach the tents and get hold of a packet with a lottery ticket – still drew him on.

The tents were now close at hand. He could see the distributors quite distinctly and could hear the cries of those who had arrived at the tents and the creaking of the boards on which the people in front were crowding.

Emelian stumbled. He had only about twenty paces more to go when he heard a child's scream under or rather between his feet. Emelian looked down and saw a bare-headed boy in a torn shirt lying face downwards, crying incessantly, and clutching at his legs. He felt his heart stop beating. All fear for himself immediately disappeared and with it his anger against the rest. He was sorry for the boy and, stooping down, put his arm round his waist, but those behind him were pushing so violently that he nearly fell and let go the child. Summoning his strength for a supreme effort he caught him up again and lifted him on his shoulders. For a moment the crush became less and Emelian managed to carry off the child.

" Give him to me," cried a coachman who was at Emelian's side, and taking the boy, raised him above the crowd.

" Run over the people."

Looking back, Emelian saw how the child walked further and further away, over the heads and shoulders of the swaying mass, now rising above it, now vanishing in the crowd.

Emelian, however, continued to advance. He could not help doing so; but he was no longer attracted by the gifts and had no desire to reach the tents. He thought of the little boy Yasha, of those who had been trampled on, and of those whom he had seen as he crossed the trench.

When he reached the pavilion at last he received a mug and a packet of sweets, but they gave him no pleasure. What pleased him was that the crush was over, and that he could breathe and move about; but his pleasure, however, only lasted a moment, on account of the sight which met his eyes. A woman, in a torn striped shawl and in buttoned boots which stuck straight up, with her brown hair loose and in disorder, was lying on her back. One hand lay on the grass, the other, with closed fingers, was folded below her breast. Her face was white – that bluish white peculiar to the dead. She was the first who had been crushed to death and had been thrown over the fence right in front of the Tsar's pavilion.

When Emelian caught sight of her, two policemen were standing over her, and a police officer was giving them directions. A minute after a few Cossacks rode up and no sooner had their officer given them some order, than they rode full speed at Emelian and at the others who were standing there, and drove them back into the crowd. Emelian was again caught in the whirl. The crush became worse than ever; and to add to the horror, one and the same everlasting crying and groaning of women and children, and men trampling their fellows under foot – and not able to help doing so. Emelian was no longer terrified or angry with those who were crushing him. He had but one desire – to get out, to be free, to have a smoke and a drink, and to explain the meaning of those feelings which arose in his mind.

He longed for a smoke and a drink, and when at last he managed to get away from the throng, he satisfied his craving for these.

It was not so with Alec and Rina. As they did not expect anything, they moved about among the people who were seated in groups, chatting with the women and children, when the whole people suddenly made a rush for the pavilion, the rumour having spread that the sweets and mugs were being given away contrary to regulations, and before Rina had time to turn round, she was separated from Alec and carried along by the crowd, and was overcome by terror. She tried to be quiet, but could not help screaming out for mercy. But there was no mercy, for they pressed round her more and more. Her dress was torn, and her hat also fell off. She could not be quite sure, but

she thought some one snatched at her watch and chain. Though she was a strong girl and might have resisted, she was in mortal fear not being able to breathe. Ragged and battered she just managed to keep on her feet.

But the moment the Cossacks charged the crowd to disperse it, Rina lost hope and directly she yielded to despair, her strength failed her and she fainted. Falling down she was not conscious of anything further.

When she regained consciousness she was lying on the grass. A bearded working man in a torn coat was squatting beside her and squirting water into her face as she opened her eyes; the man crossed himself and spat out the water. It was Emelian.

"Who are you? Where am I?"

" You're on Khodinka field. Who am I? I'm a man, I've been badly crushed myself, but the likes of us can stand a good deal," said Emelian.

"What's this?" Rina asked, pointing to the coppers that lay on her breast.

" That's because people thought you were dead, they gave coppers for your burial. But I had a good look at you and thought to myself: 1 No, she's alive,' and I got some water for you."

Rina glanced at herself and seeing her torn dress and bare breast, felt ashamed. The man understood and covered her.

" You're all right, miss, you'll not die."

People came up and also a policeman, while Rina sat up, and gave her father's name and address, and Emelian went for the cab. The crowd round her continued to increase. When Emelian returned with the cab, she rose, and refusing help, got into the vehicle by herself. She was so ashamed of the condition she was in.

" Where is your cousin? "asked an old woman.

" I don't know. I don't know," said Rina in despair.

(On reaching home she learnt that Alec had managed to leave the crowd when the crush first began and he returned home safely.)

" That man saved me," said Rina. " If it had not been for him, I don't know what would have happened."

"What is you name?" she said, turning to Emelian.

"Mine? What does my name matter ? "

" She's a princess," a woman whispered in his ear. " Ri-i-i-ch."

“ Come with me to my father, he will thank you.” Suddenly the heart of Emelian seemed to be infused with a kind of strength so that he would not have exchanged this feeling for a lottery ticket worth 200,000 roubles.

“ Nonsense, go home, miss. What is there to thank me for? ”

“ Oh, no. I would so much rather.

“ Good-bye, miss, God be with you. But, there, don't take away my overcoat,” and he showed his white teeth with a merry smile which lived in Rina's memory to console her for the most terrible moments of her life.