

# CHAPTER I

## ***A SLEEPING VILLAGE***

*Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay.*  
—Tennyson

THE nineteenth century was still very young; its eventful day — that day whose sunset we have yet to see — had but lately dawned upon the world. There were regions, even in Europe, where, for any illumination brought them by the age, the hand of time might have been put back for centuries. In the vast monotonous plain around Moscow the ancient — Moscow the holy, with her “forty times forty churches” — Russian serfs tilled the cornfields of their lords, trembled beneath the knout and the plitt, ate their kasha and drank their kvass, and enjoyed the simple luxuries of their stoves and their vapour-baths, just as their fathers and fathers’ fathers had done for generations.

In that land of sameness, where received types repeat each other to weariness, with almost as little variety in the works of nature as originality in those of man, the village of Nicolofsky was a fair sample of a hundred others. It belonged to Plato Zoubof, one of the favourites of Catherine II, who had bestowed it upon him with the adjacent lands and the “bodies and souls of men” it contained. Out of these he contrived to wring no inconsiderable revenue; but he never honoured Nicolofsky with his presence. A steward managed everything, unfortunately for the peasants, or mujiks, who were treated with much more severity than their brethren whose natural lords dwelt “among

their own people,” and cultivated relations with them usually kindly, often even paternal. From the mujiks of Nicolofsky heavy dues were exacted, and much labour required in the cornfields of their lord. In harvest time they were often forced to toil the whole night long, and any shortcoming was cruelly punished. At this very epoch a series of enlightened enactments, tending to improve the lot of the serf and to prepare the way for his complete emancipation, were emanating from the supreme authority in the state. But from these Nicolofsky had as yet received little or no practical benefit, except, indeed, the deep conviction, which sank into the heart of the mujik, that his lord the Czar loved him and cared for his welfare.

Still, as the proverb tells us, “The holy Russian land is large, but everywhere the dear sun shines.” Many a gleam of sunlight, from the mercy of Him whose compassions are over all his works, brightens even the lot of servitude, that looks, and rightly looks, so dark and so degrading to the thoughtful observer. Had such an observer visited Nicolofsky on the bright afternoon of one of the Church holidays in the late Russian spring, he would have found some difficulty in remembering, and perhaps as much in persuading the mujiks, that they were an oppressed and miserable race.

Youths and maidens, boys and girls were crowding to the birchwood to enjoy their favourite pastime of the swing. Nor were the older villagers unrepresented — at least so far as regards the men. Many a grave, bearded mujik keenly enjoyed the motion without labour so dear to the indolent and excitable Russian, although the women for the most part remained at home to prepare the *tschi* (cabbage soup) for the festive evening meal. The young people, as they passed along, made the air resound with their sweet national songs, chanted in parts and with wonderful grace and harmony.

The company of children seemed to follow the guidance of one of their number, whom either his position or the choice of his companions had made a leader among them. At twelve

or fourteen the little mujik is often a very handsome lad, as may be seen from the boy postilions of St. Petersburg. And a most favourable specimen of the class, if indeed he belonged to it at all, was the fair-haired boy who stepped so proudly along, quite conscious of his superior dignity, and conspicuous in his new caftan of bright blue, bound around the waist with a crimson sash. He held by the hand a little girl, very pretty, though not so gaily clad. She seemed to be his especial charge; and when the spot in the wood where they meant to pursue their sport was reached at last, the other children crowded around them, and, like juvenile courtiers, emulously tendered their help to make a swing for "Barrinka," the little lord, who had promised to swing Anna "Popovna," the priest's daughter. These swings were made very easily, by bending down and tying together the flexible elastic branches of the giant birches.

Barrinka, however, wanted to do all himself, and he did it quickly and neatly. He had just, with boyish gallantry, placed his little companion in the seat prepared for her, when an older lad pushed rudely through the group of children, and coming up to him laid his hand on his shoulder. "Get into that seat and swing yourself, Ivan Barrinka," he said. "Today Anna Popovna belongs to me — not to you."

Ivan shook off his hand, and for a moment they stood motionless, looked each other in the face. Strong was the contrast between the fine, delicate features of the one, and the rough, dogged, determined face of the other, which seemed hewn out of his native granite. Evidently this was not by any means their first quarrel.

"Hold your peace, One-eared Michael," Ivan answered at last. "I tell you Anna wants me to swing her — *me*, and not you."

"Let her say so, then. Is that true, Anna Popovna? Did you not promise me yesterday, after church, that I should swing you today — I, and no one else?"

Thus appealed to, the little girl behaved very like a grown-up daughter of Eve. She pouted, blushed, stammered, and seemed to hesitate between her two cavaliers, neither of whom she wished to offend. At length she said, "If you wanted so much to swing me, why were you not here in time, Michael Ivanovitch?"

"Easy for those who have nothing to do to blame those who work hard. I had water to fetch and wood to cut for the mother," said Michael, the widow's son.

"Well, it was a pity, since you stayed away so long, that you did not stay altogether, and leave us in peace," Anna rejoined in a pettish tone.

This exasperated Michael, and not without reason, if all were told. "You did not say that to me, Anna Popovna," he cried. "When I went to seek you in the snowstorm, you and your brother the Popovitch, and lost my left ear to save you." Then he turned fiercely upon Ivan, as upon a foe more worthy of his wrath: "It is all your fault, Ivan Barrinka. I am quite tired of you and of your pride. Lord though you may be, you shall not lord it over me. And, after all, who knows who and what you are? I'm sure I don't. Do you know yourself? Answer me that. Whose son are you?"

"It is you who are proud, Michael Ivanovitch. Since that wonderful snowstorm you were out in, there has been no bearing with you. One would think, from the airs you give yourself, that no one ever had an ear frozen before."

By this time the loud voices had attracted the attention of the other boys. Leaving their swings, they came crowding around. And as soon as they understood the cause of the dispute, they all turned with one accord upon Michael, threatening him with condign punishment if he did not forthwith let Barrinka have his way, whatever that way might be.

But Barrinka no longer cared for the pastime. Michael's taunt, "Who knows who and what you are?" had struck home. From infancy the pet and plaything of the village — every

wish anticipated, every caprice borne with, he had been surrounded with an atmosphere, of deferential affection. He could not but know that he differed from all around him; a mystery hung about his birth, which, through injudicious and mistaken kindness, had been neither wholly concealed nor yet frankly revealed to him. All his little playfellows had fathers and mothers. It is true they were beaten sometimes, while he was never beaten. Still, it seemed to him a strange thing to have no father or mother. He called the starost, or elder of the village, in whose house he had been brought up, "Bativshka" (Little Father), and his wife, "Mativshka" (Little Mother), but that was not by any means the same as having a father and mother of his own.

"Take the swing if you like it," he said to Michael. "I care nothing about it. I shall do something by-and-by much better than anything you have ever done in your life."

Leaving the children behind him in the wood, he bent his steps homeward, regardless of the regretful looks sent after him by blue-eyed Anna Popovna, who saw that her little cavalier was sorely vexed, and would gladly have comforted him. Two longings filled his childish heart: to be able to tell Michael and everybody who he was, and to be the hero of an adventure more wonderful than Michael's wanderings through the snow in search of the priest's children. Michael had been out in a snowstorm and lost an ear! In comparison with such a hero the little lord felt himself a very child.

He soon came in sight of the double row of brown wooden cottages that called itself Nicolofsky. These cottages, or *izbas*, were built of the trunks of trees laid one over the other, with the interstices stuffed with moss. There was a church, also of wood, but larger and better built, with a bell suspended from a fine elm tree close to it. Two of the *izbas* were better than the rest, and belonged, one to the starost, the other to the pope, or parish priest, Anna's father. That of the starost boasted a porch, with ornamental wooden pillars and quaint carvings.

It had a substantial chimney built of good bricks, and secure well-glazed windows to keep out the intense cold of the Russian winter. Indeed all the cottages were more comfortable than they looked.

Ivan entered, and dutifully made his bow, as he had been taught to do, to the holy picture which hung in the corner, with a lamp burning before it, since this was a feast day. The contents of the *izba* were extremely simple. The most conspicuous object was the stove, with a wide shelf or platform over it, upon which the family usually slept; a handsome carved chest contained the clothing used upon festive occasions, and there were besides a few stools, a table, an armchair, and some wooden cups, platters, and cooking utensils. The vapour-bath, that indispensable Russian luxury, occupied an outhouse.

An old woman stood over the fire, diligently stirring a capacious caldron, from which there issued a very savoury steam. The family the starost had to feed was not a small one, — three grownup sons, with the wife and child of one of them, found shelter beneath his roof.

“You are cooking *tschi* for our supper, Mativshka,” said Ivan.

“And what better dish could I be cooking, my little dove? ‘For *tschi*, folk wed,’ says the proverb.”

“When I am old enough I will wed Anna Popovna.”

“Hush! Hush! My darling must not talk so. He is worth a thousand Popovnas.”

“One-eared Michael does not think that.”

“Who cares for One-eared Michael?”

“But, Mativshka, today he asked me who I was, and I — I had no answer.”

“No answer! Why, everyone knows who you are. You are our dear little lord.”

“But whose son am I, Mativshka? That was what he wanted to know.”

“Ask the father, Boy, ask the father. As for me, why, ‘A word is not a bird: if it flies out, you’ll never catch it again.’ ”

Old Feodora would not have thought it any harm to put her nursling off with a string of falsehoods, if they had occurred to her at the moment, or if she had thought them necessary; for these poor, “dimly-lighted souls” had little idea of the value of truth. But Ivan’s history was now so much an “open secret” in the village, that she saw no reason why the boy should not know it himself, since he was twelve years old, and very intelligent. Still, she was afraid to tell him anything without her husband’s knowledge and concurrence.

Soon afterwards the starost came in — an imposing and venerable figure, his long, gray beard nearly covering the breast of his caftan. He would have parted with his head quite as readily as with that beard.

As soon as he had made his reverence to the sacred picture, seated himself in his chair by the stove, and exchanged his formidable and fragrant boots of Russia leather for a pair of *lapti*, or bark slippers, Ivan stood up before him, and put the question directly, “Bativshka, whose son am I?”

“Great St. Nicholas! What has come to the boy?” the starost exclaimed. Then he looked perplexed, and hesitated for an answer. His wife leaned over the back of his chair and said a few words in a low voice, and a whispered discussion followed, during which Ivan waited patiently. Presently Feodora returned to her cooking; and the starost solemnly crossed his breast with the thumb and two fingers of his right hand, then taking from his pocket a medal with the effigy of his patron saint upon it, he brightened it with a rub against his sleeve, and said a prayer to it, or to the personage it represented. Having thus prepared himself, he told Ivan to sit down at his feet.

“My child,” he said, “since you wish to know, I will tell you today what name you have a right to bear; but pray to your saint day and night that the knowledge may work you no harm.”

“Why should it work me harm, Bativshka? Is it that I am the son of a bad man?”

“God only knows that. What I know is that you are the son of our lord and master.”

“Not of Zoubof! No, no!” cried Ivan, wondering.

The old man replied by a gesture of supreme contempt: “*Zoubof!* He is of yesterday. Such as he come and go and are forgotten, like last year’s snow. But you, Ivan Barrinka, you are the son of our true lord, our master in God’s sight — a great boyar (nobleman), a prince who can trace his lineage back to the days of Rurik. Yes; you are the son of . . .” — here he paused and bowed his gray head reverently — “of Prince Pojarsky.”

Ivan was impressed by the solemn tone in which these words were spoken. He waited in silence for a few moments, then he questioned in a low voice, “And who is Prince Pojarsky?”

“He and his have been the lords of Nicolofsky and the lands around it for generations and generations, even before the old times when the Poles conquered Muscovy. But in the days of the great Czarina Catherine, who rests with God, our lord and your father, being a young man, full of pride and loving pleasure, needed to go out to travel in strange lands. For you must know, Ivan Barrinka, that there are other lands in God’s world besides holy Russia, and that the peoples of it do not obey our lord the Czar, but have kings and rulers of their own. This is hard to believe; but Pope Nikita says so and, moreover, the soldiers tell us of them when they come back from the wars. Besides, I have seen *Nyemtzi* (foreigners) myself — Frenchmen and Frenchwomen, who had not a word of good Russian, but spoke an outlandish tongue of their own. What is sad to think, our lord and your father not only went among these foreigners, but gave his hand in marriage to one of them. Not that I have anything to say against the beautiful, gracious lady, your mother. The good saints rest her soul! Mativshka loved her well, and God knows she served her

faithfully. But among her kinsfolk must have been some who were the devil's children; for they rose against their own king, and, horrible to tell, they slew him. Moreover, they did not do it secretly and in darkness, but openly, in the face of day, on a scaffold, as if he had been a thief or a murderer. Truly they are strange people, those *Nyemtzi*.

“Let us hope that evil men slandered our lord to the Czarina when they said he bore part in such wickedness. But at all events she believed the tale. When he came back to St. Peterburg, and dared to show his face at the Hermitage (the great beautiful house where our lady the Czarina lived), she scathed him with the lightning of her anger. It is even reported that she said to him, ‘*Pachol!*’ (Get out! — Go out from my presence in disgrace) the word you would use to a dog if you were angry with it. Immediately he was sent as an exile to Siberia, and all he had was taken from him and given to Plato Zoubof. Better had they laid him in his grave at once. The beautiful young lady, your mother, quickly died of grief, and Mativshka, who was your nurse, brought you home to her own people. For a long time we hid you carefully, and guarded the secret jealously amongst ourselves, for we feared the new lord Plato Zoubof, and still more the steward Dmitri — a hard man, who has no pity. But now both know you are here, and care nothing for it. ‘What is it to us?’ they say. So that now, without fear, you may call yourself, and be called by everyone, by the noble name you have a right to bear. Only remember, Ivan Barrinka, that although you are the son of a *boyar* and a prince, the same God made us and you, and the poor man's soul is worth as much in his sight as your own.”

Ivan answered not a word. As one overpowered, he threw himself face downward on the earthen floor, and lay there absorbed in thought. But at last he raised his wondering, child-like face, full of the brightness of a new idea. “Bativshka, people sometimes come back from Siberia, do they not,”

The old man shook his head. "They who go are as the sand," he said, "they who come back may be reckoned on your fingers."

"But I remember the time of the Czar's coronation — four-five years ago, was it? I was quite a little boy then. Many exiles came home from Siberia; and you went to the Moscow road to see them pass, and the people wept for joy, you said. I wanted to go, but you would not bring me, saying I was too young. If these exiles came back, then why not my father?"

"Ah, you cannot understand. That was quite another matter. The late Czar, Paul Petrovitch, who reigned after Czarina Catherine, was somewhat stern and hard. Doubtless God sent him to punish the great nobles for their sins. He banished many of them to Siberia; but the Czar that now is, whom God preserve, pardoned them all, and let them return home. Yet some offences there be that find no pardon ever, except in the grave — and to the exile's resting-place the grave is always near."

Ivan's next thought was a more childish one. "Bativshka," he said, after another silence, "I should like to tell all this to Anna Popovna and to Michael Ivanovitch. Still, although I am the son of a boyar and a prince," he added presently, "I shall not be quite happy, not *quite*, until I have taken a longer journey than ever Michael did, and have had something happen to me much more wonderful than getting frozen and losing one of my ears."