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Sashenka

Simon Montefiore

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Extract

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There where the waves spray
The feet of solitary reefs . . .
A loving enchantress
Gave me her talisman.
She told me with tenderness:
You must not lose it,
Its power is infallible,
Love gave it to you.

Alexander Pushkin, 'The Talisman'

Now and again in these parts, you come across people so remarkable that, no matter how much time has passed since you met them, it is impossible to recall them without your heart trembling.

Nikolai Leskov, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*

Here I am abandoned, an orphan, with no one to look after me,
And I will die before long and there'll be no one to pray at my grave,
Only the nightingale will sing sometimes on the nearest tree . . .

Song of Petrograd street children, 1917

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Part One

St Petersburg, 1916

1

It was only teatime but the sun had already set when three of the Tsar's gendarmes took up positions at the gates of the Smolny Institute for Noble Girls. The end of term at the finest girls' boarding school in St Petersburg was no place for policemen but there they were, unmistakable in their smart navy-blue tunics with white trimming, shiny sabres, and lambskin helmets with sultan-spikes. One clicked his fingers impatiently, another opened and closed the leather holster of his Mauser revolver and the third stood stolidly, legs wide, with his thumbs stuck into his belt. Behind them waited a traffic jam of horse-drawn sleighs, emblazoned gold and crimson with family crests, and a couple of gleaming limousines. The slow, slanting snowfall was visible only in the flickering halo of streetlights and the amber lamps of touring cars.

It was the third winter of the Great War and it seemed the darkest and the longest so far. Through the black gates, down the paved avenue, the white splendour of the pillared Institute rose out of the early twilight like an ocean liner adrift in the mist. Even this boarding school, of which the Empress herself was patron and which was filled with the daughters of aristocrats and war profiteers, could no longer feed its girls or heat its dormitories. Term was ending prematurely. The shortages had reached even the rich. Few could now afford the fuel to run a car, and horsepower was fashionable again.

The winter darkness in wartime St Petersburg had a sticky arctic gloom all of its own. The feathery snow muffled the

sounds of horses and engines but the burning cold made the smells sharper: petroleum, horse dung, the alcohol on the breath of the snoring postilions, the acrid cologne and cigarettes of chauffeurs in yellow- and red-trimmed uniforms, and the flowery scents on the throats of the waiting women.

Inside the burgundy leather compartment of a Delaunay-Belleville landaulet, a serious young woman with a heart-shaped face sat with an English novel on her lap, lit by a naphtha lamp. Audrey Lewis – Mrs Lewis to her employers and Lala to her beloved charge – was cold. She pulled the bushy lambskin up over her lap; her hands were gloved, and she wore a wolf-fur hat and a thick coat. But still she shivered. She ignored the driver, Pantameilion, when he climbed into his seat, flicking his cigarette into the snow. Her brown eyes never left the door of the school.

'Hurry up, Sashenka!' Lala muttered to herself in English. She checked the brass clock set into the glass division that kept the chauffeur at bay. 'Not long now!'

A maternal glow of anticipation spread across her chest: she imagined Sashenka's long-limbed figure running towards her across the snow. Few mothers picked up their children from the Smolny Institute, and almost no fathers. But Lala, the governess, always collected Sashenka.

Just a few minutes, my child, she thought; my adorable, clever, solemn child.

The lanterns shining through the delicate tracery of ice on the dim car windows bore her away to her childhood home in Pegsdon, a village in Hertfordshire. She had not seen England for six years and she wondered if she would ever see her family again. But if she had stayed there, she would never have known her darling Sashenka. Six years ago, she had accepted a position in the household of Baron and Baroness Zeitlin and a new life in the Russian capital,

St Petersburg. Six years ago, a young girl in a sailor suit had greeted her coolly, examined her searchingly and then offered the Englishwoman her hand, as if presenting a bouquet. The new governess spoke scarcely a word of Russian but she knelt on one knee and enclosed that small hot hand in her own palms. The girl, at first hesitantly then with growing pressure, leaned against her, finally laying her head on Lala's shoulder.

'*Mne zavout Mrs Lewis*,' said the Englishwoman in bad Russian.

'Greetings to a bespoke guest, Lala! I am be-named Sashenka,' replied the child in appalling English. And that had been that: Mrs Lewis was henceforth 'be-named' Lala. The need met the moment. They loved each other on sight.

'It's two minutes to five,' said the chauffeur tinnily through the speaking tube.

The governess sat forward, unhooked her own speaking tube and spoke into the brass cup in excellent Russian (though with an English intonation). 'Thank you, Pantameilion.'

'What are the pharaohs doing here?' said the driver. Everyone used the slang term for the political police, the Gendarmerie. He chuckled. 'Maybe the schoolgirls are hiding German codes in their petticoats?'

Lala was not going to discuss such matters with a chauffeur. 'Pantameilion, I'll need you to come in and get her trunk,' she said sternly. But why were the gendarmes there? she wondered.

The girls always came out on time. Madame Buxhoeven, the headmistress, known to the girls as Grand-maman, ran the Institute like a Prussian barracks – but in French. Lala knew that Grand-maman was a favourite of the Dowager Empress Maria Fyodorovna and the reigning Empress Alexandra.

A cavalry officer and a gaggle of schoolboys and students in gold-buttoned uniforms and caps walked through the gates to meet their sweethearts. In Russia, even schoolboys had uniforms. When they saw the three gendarmes, they started, then walked on, glancing back: what were the political police doing at a boarding school for noble girls?

Waiting to convey their masters' daughters home, the coachmen, in ankle-length padded robes lined with thick white lamb's fur, red sashes and bowler hats, stamped their feet and attended to their horses. They too observed the gendarmes.

Five o'clock. The double doors of the Smolny swung open, casting a ribbon of canary light down the steps towards the gates.

'Ah, here they come!' Lala tossed her book aside.

At the top of the steps, Madame Buxhoeven, severe in her black cape, serge dress and high white collar, appeared in the tent of light – as if on wheels like a sentry on a Swiss clock, thought Lala. Grand-maman's mottled bosom, as broad as an escarpment, was visible even at this distance – and her ringing soprano could crack ice at a hundred paces. Even though it was freezing, Lala pulled down her window and peered out, excitement rising. She thought of Sashenka's favourite tea awaiting her in the little salon, and the biscuits she had bought specially from the English Shop on the Embankment. The tin of Huntley & Palmers was perched beside her on the burgundy leather seat.

The coachmen clambered up on to their creaking conveyances and settled themselves, whips in hand. Pantameilion pulled on a beribboned cap and jacket trimmed in scarlet and gold and, stroking a well-waxed moustache, winked at Lala. Why do men expect us to fall in love with them just because they can start a motor car? Lala wondered, as the engine chugged, spluttered and burst into life.

Pantameilion smiled, revealing a mouthful of rotten fangs. His voice came breathily through the speaking tube. 'So where's our little fox then! Soon I'll have two beauties in the car.'

Lala shook her head. 'Hurry now, Pantameilion. A trunk and a valise, both marked Aspreys of London. *Bistro!* Quick!'

2

It was the last class: sewing for the Tsar and Motherland. Sashenka pretended to stitch the khaki breeches but she could not concentrate and kept pricking her thumb. The bell was about to ring, releasing her and the other girls from their eighteenth-century prison with its draughty dormitories, echoing refectories and alabaster ballrooms.

Sashenka decided that she would be the first to curtsy to the teacher – and therefore first out of the classroom. She always wanted to be different: either the first or the last but never in the middle. So she sat at the very front, nearest the door.

She felt she had grown out of the Smolny. Sashenka had more serious matters on her mind than the follies and frivolities of the other schoolgirls in what she called the Institute for Noble Imbeciles. They talked of nothing but the steps of obscure dances, the cotillion, the *pas d'espagne*, the *pas de patineur*, the trignonne and the chiconne, their latest love letters from Misha or Nikolasha in the Guards, the modern style for balldresses and, most particularly, how to present their décolletage. They discussed this endlessly with

Sashenka after lights-out because she had the fullest breasts in her class. They said they envied her so much! Their shallowness not only appalled but embarrassed her because, unlike the others, she had no wish to flaunt her breasts.

Sashenka was sixteen and, she reminded herself, no longer a girl. She loathed her school uniform: her plain white dress made of cotton and muslin with its twee pinafore and a starched shoulder cape, which made her look young and innocent. Now she was a woman, and a woman with a mission. Yet despite her secrets, she could not help but crave her darling Lala waiting outside in her father's landaulet with the English biscuits on the back seat.

The staccato clap of 'Maman' Sokolov (all the teachers had to be addressed as Maman) broke into Sashenka's day-dreams. Short and lumpy with fuzzy hair, Maman boomed in her resounding bass: 'Ladies, time to collect up your sewing! I hope you have worked well for our brave soldiers, who are sacrificing their lives for our Motherland and his Imperial Majesty the Emperor!'

That day, sewing for Tsar and Motherland had meant attaching a newfangled luxury – zippers – to breeches for Russia's long-suffering peasant conscripts, who were being slaughtered in their thousands under Nicholas II's command. This task inspired much breathless giggling among the schoolgirls.

'Take special care,' Maman Sokolov had warned, 'with this sensitive work. A badly sewn zipper could in itself be an added peril for the Russian warrior already beset by danger.'

'Is it where he keeps his rifle?' Sashenka had whispered to the girl next to her. The other girls had heard her and laughed. None of them was sewing very carefully.

The day seemed interminable: leaden hours had passed since breakfast in the main hall – and the obligatory curtsy to the huge canvas of the Emperor's mother, the Dowager

Empress Maria Fyodorovna with her gimlet eyes and shrewish mouth.

Once the ill-zippered trousers were collected, Maman Sokolov again clapped her hands. 'A minute until the bell. Before you go, *mes enfants*, I want the best curtsy of the term! And a good curtsy is a . . .'

'LOW curtsy!' cried the girls, laughing.

'Oh yes, my noble ladies. For the curtsy, *mes enfants*, LOW is for NOBLE GIRLS. You'll notice that the higher a lady stands on the Table of Ranks granted to us by the first emperor, Peter the Great, the LOWER she curtsies when she is presented to Their Imperial Majesties. Hit the floor!' When she said 'low', Maman Sokolov's voice plunged to ever more profound depths. 'Shopgirls make a little curtsy *comme ça* –' and she did a little dip, at which Sashenka caught the eyes of the others and tried to conceal a smile – 'but LADIES GO LOWWWWWW! Touch the ground with your knees, girls, *comme ça* –' and Maman Sokolov curtsied with surprising energy, so low that her crossed knees almost touched the wooden floor. 'Who's first?'

'Me!' Sashenka was already up, holding her engraved calf-leather case and her canvas bag of books. She was so keen to leave that she gave the lowest and most aristocratic curtsy she had ever managed, lower even than the one she had given to the Dowager Empress on St Catherine's Day. '*Merci, maman!*' she said. Behind her she heard the girls whisper in surprise, for she was usually the rebel of the class. But she did not care any more. Not since the summer. The secrets of those hazy summer nights had shattered and recast everything.

The bell was ringing and Sashenka was already in the corridor. She looked around at its high moulded ceilings, shining parquet and the electric glare of the chandeliers. She was quite alone.

Her satchel – engraved in gold with her full name, Baroness Alexandra Zeitlin – was over her shoulder but her most treasured possession was in her hands: an ugly canvas book bag that she hugged to her breast. In it were precious volumes of Zola's realist novels, Nekrasov's bleak poetry and the passionate defiance of Mayakovsky.

She started to run down the corridor towards Grandmaman, who was silhouetted against the lamps of limousines and the press of governesses and coachmen, all waiting to collect the Noble Young Ladies of the Smolny. But it was too late. The doors along the corridor burst open and suddenly it was flooded with laughing girls in white dresses with white lacy pinafores, white stockings and soft white shoes. Like an avalanche of powdery snow, they flowed down the corridor towards the cloakrooms. Coming the other way, the herd of heavy-hoofed coachmen, their long beards white with hoarfrost and bearing the freezing northern night in their cloaks, trudged forward to collect the girls' trunks. Resplendent in his flashy uniform with its peaked cap, Pantameilion stood among them, staring at Sashenka as if in a trance.

'Pantameilion!'

'Oh, Mademoiselle Zeitlin!' He shook himself and reddened.

What could have embarrassed the ladykiller of the servants' quarters? she wondered, smiling at him. 'Yes, it's me. My trunk and valise are in Dormitory 12, by the window. Wait a minute – is that a new uniform?'

'Yes, mademoiselle.'

'Who designed it?'

'Your mother, Baroness Zeitlin,' he called after her as he lumbered up the stairs to the dormitories.

What had he been staring at, Sashenka asked herself: was it her horrible bosom or her over-wide mouth? She turned

uneasily towards the cloakroom. After all, what was appearance? The shallow realm of schoolgirls! Appearance was nothing compared to history, art, progress and fate. She smiled to herself, mocking her mother's scarlet and gold taste: Pantameilion's garish uniform made it obvious that the Zeitlins were nouveaux riches.

Sashenka was first into the cloakroom. Filled with the silky furs of animals, brown, golden and white, coats, *shapkas* and stoles with the faces of snowfoxes and mink, the room seemed to be breathing like the forests of Siberia. She pulled on her fur coat, wrapped her white fox stole around her neck and the white Orenburg shawl around her head and was already heading for the door when the other girls poured in, home-bound, their faces flushed and smiling. They threw down shoes, slipped on little boots and galoshes, unclipped leather satchels and bundled themselves into fur coats, all the time chattering, chattering.

'Captain de Pahlen's back from the front. He's paying a visit to Mama and Papa but I know he's coming to see me,' said little Countess Elena to her wide-eyed companions. 'He's written me a letter.'

Sashenka was almost out of the room when she heard several girls calling to her. Where was she going, why was she in such a hurry, couldn't she wait for them, what was she doing later? If you're reading, can we read poetry with you? Please, Sashenka!

The end-of-term crowd was already pushing, shoving through the door. A schoolgirl cursed a sweating old coachman who, carrying a trunk, had trodden on her foot. Freezing outside, it was feverishly hot in the hall. Yet even here Sashenka felt herself quite separate, surrounded by an invisible barrier that no one could cross, as she heaved her canvas bag, coarse against the lushness of her furs, over her shoulder. She thought she could feel the different books inside

– the anthologies of Blok and Balmont, the novels of Anatole France and Victor Hugo.

'Mademoiselle Zeitlin! Enjoy your holidays!' Grandmaman, half blocking the doorway, declared fruitily. Sashenka managed a *merci* and a curtsy (not low enough to impress Maman Sokolov). Finally, she was outside.

The stinging air refreshed and cleansed her, burning her lungs deliciously as the oblique snow nipped her cheeks. The lamps of the cars and carriages created a theatre of light twenty feet high but no more. Above her, the savage, boundless sky was Petrograd black, tempered with specks of white.

'The landaulet is over there!' Pantameilion, bearing an Asprey travelling trunk over his shoulder and a crocodile-skin valise in his hand, gestured across the drive. Sashenka pushed through the crowd towards the car. She knew that, whatever happened – war, revolution or apocalypse – her Lala would be waiting with her Huntley & Palmers biscuits, and maybe even an English ginger cake. And soon she would see her papa too.

When a valet dropped his bags, she leaped over them. When the way was blocked by a hulking Rolls with a grand-ducal crest on its glossy flank, Sashenka simply opened the door, jumped in and climbed out the other side.

Engines chortled and groaned, horns hooted, horses whinnied and stamped their hooves, servants tottered under pyramids of trunks and cases, and cursing coachmen and chauffeurs tried to find a route through the traffic, pedestrians and grimy ice. It was as though an army was breaking camp, but it was an army commanded by generals in white pinafores, chinchilla stoles and mink coats.

'Sashenka! Over here!' Lala was standing on the car's running-board, waving frantically.

'Lala! I'm coming home! I'm free!' For a moment,