Chapter 111

The Country House

For some time the heavy tread of Saturn had been felt by the whole world for a Great War raged in Europe, Asia and Africa. The Emperor of all the Russias, the Emperor of Japan and the King of Great Britain were confronted by the imperial armies of Germany and Austria-Hungary. There were also minor participants on both sides. Millions of the world's best men were being crushed or maimed under the iron heel of the god of time.

In 1916 Zuka Ossinin was in Moscow attending the Moscow Imperial High School. His father was working for the Army Ordnance. His mother was busy with her hospital in Bougoulma and Matthew was in Petrograd at Officers' Training School. Niania Agraphena Semenova died a few years earlier and the old manor house at Ossinin's Spring was empty.

A reserve officer, Uncle Leonid, present head of the Ossinin family, had been called to the Army. Zuka was all by himself in Moscow. Although he had several aunts and uncles there it felt as if he was living among strangers. But he adapted quickly to life in Moscow. He liked his school and his friends but was sad about the misfortunes that were befalling his country. In 1915 the Russian Army had suffered heavy losses. The disaster was due to former Minister of the Army, General Souhomlivov's incompetence, negligence and stupidity. The Russian Army was short of ammunition, and this shortages resulted in appalling losses of men and consequently great loss of faith in the government. General Souhomlivov was a charming man, a great favorite of the Empress, but completely unfit for his job.

Uncle Michael Rostovsky died in Paris but Zuka's father often shared his sad perdition: "If this crowd lost one war, I do not see why they won't lose another." Yes, Zuka thought to himself, the same crowd is losing another war. This time it was a much more important war, a really essential war. It seemed that the many blunders of the Japanese War had taught the higher-ups in Petrograd nothing.

In order to keep *au courrant* of events, Zuka visited his popular Aunt Inna regularly. Her husband, Uncle Serge, was closely connected with the Winter Palace in Petrograd, but preferred to keep his family in Moscow. At his aunt's parties Zuka, unobserved by the guests, would listen to the conversations floating around the room. He had an uneasy feeling that something was very wrong with the government. With each day the government, the imperial family, and the throne were becoming more and more unpopular. The Empress was the most unpopular of all because of her support for the infamous Rasputin, whose evil influence was felt throughout Russia. Her unpopularity was transferred to the Tzar. What astonished Zuka most was that this criticism came, not from the liberals or those hostile to the intelligencia, but from the most staunch and loyal supporters of the monarchy. The guests belonged to the ruling class, whose patriotism and love of country was beyond suspicion. All his life Zuka had been taught to be loyal to the Tzar and to obey him implicitly. But gradually he was being assailed by doubts. What was the matter

with the Tzar's administration? How was it possible that all these people were wrong and the Tzar be right? On all sides he heard voices raised against him, and the gross mis-administration, incompetence, favoritism and stupidity in affairs of state.

But when one is sixteen, one does not worry over long about complicated questions or political squabbles. Zuka was very busy with his studies at Moscow High School and ice skating in his spare time. The Moscow Imperial Yacht Club had the best ice rink. A military band played there on weekends. Zuka liked to skate and he skated well. Also he could appreciate a good skating partner. At the rink he met a marvelous girl, slim and strong, with her hair cut in the fashion of a medieval page. She was a wonderful skating partner. Her lips were soft; her eyes mocking and magnetic.

The winter passed quickly. Classes ended early because of the war so Zuka left for home in the middle of April. He chose a round-about way to go to Ribinsk by train, then to Kazan by small Volga River boat, then transferred to a luxury passenger boat which took him to Simbirsk where he stayed with friends for a few days before taking the train to Bougoulma. During this trip Zuka again heard remarks of open dissatisfaction with the government.

Only at home in Bougoulma, among the Tartars, did he find life going on quietly and pleasantly as if there were no war. The spring floods were late; it was too early to go on to the country place. The new estate had the peculiar name of "Ick," after the River Ick which formed one border of the grounds. Zuka liked "Ick" even more than he liked "Malinovka." It was less formal there, small and cozy. Instead of one big house there was a cluster of several small cottages. Each member of the family had his own quarters, a stone's throw away from the river which meandered through the fields. The river had formed many tiny bays overgrown with river canes, water lilies and ivy. The river was full of fish. The bays were populous with wild ducks. Fishing and hunting there were second to none. "Ick" was not exactly a business enterprise, but rather a delightful summer resort, quite popular not only with the Ossinins, but also with close friends and distant relatives that came to visit from the big cities. It was the home of Peter Ossinin's stud farm for thoroughbreds. This year the spring floods had made access to the estate impossible, turning the settlement into a small scale Venice.

Mischa

After several days of aimless wandering around the house at Bougoulma, and interfering in everything, Zuka became restless and somewhat of a nuisance. Mother decided to get him out of the way by suggesting he pay a visit to "Ivanovka" or to "Soumorokovo" where young Mischa Rostovsky was living. Zuka remembered quite well the dramatic first appearance of young Mischa in Bougoulma. It was late spring in 1914. The family were gathered in his mother's quarters waiting for supper. It was an unusually pleasant evening when the animated conversation and the jokes were interrupted by the entrance of a chambermaid who announced that a police officer was at the door and would like to see the Barin.

Zuka and his mother, the Barina

"What does he want?" the Barin asked irritably.

"I do not know, Barin, but he said it was important."

"Confound the police officer!" Peter Ossinin said, rising.

The officer was right. It was important. That very evening a Railway Gendarme had apprehended a youngster on the train. He was shabbily dressed, had no luggage and could hardly speak Russian. He had no money, only a letter addressed to Peter Ossinin in both Russian and French. The youngster was taken to the police station and an officer was sent to notify Mr. Ossinin and ask him to come and see the boy.

The penniless, tired and hungry boy was young Mischa Rostovsky. His story was pathetic. His father had been drained completely dry by his French wife. With all the money gone Suzette had left as well. Destitute, friendless and without even the desire to live, Uncle Mischa had gone down, down, down until he hit bottom. Double-pneumonia proved to be the way out of his misery. But before he died he had managed to write a letter to his cousins, Peter Ossinin, giving his fourteen-year-old son into his care.

The Russian Consul at Paris had advanced some money for the trip and with help from station masters and fellow travelers, at last he had reached Bougoulma. When Mischa entered the room and stood embarrassed and pitiful, Catherine Ossinin ran to him, gathered him into her arms and wept silently, her tears falling on his bent tawny head. Mischa was so much like his father! Even unkept, dusty and dead tired, he was still a beautiful boy. His only possession was his father's picture in full-dress uniform. It was a sorry homecoming for a descendent of Grand Duke Vladimir the Saint, Grand Duke Jaroslav the Wise and Mstislav the Great.

"Ivanovka"

Zuka decided to visit "Ivanovka" first and then to see Cousin Mischa at "Soumorokova. "Ivanovka" was the county seat for the head of the family. Now it belonged to Uncle Leonid married to Catherine Agrov. They had two daughters, Rita and Annie, who were contemporaries of Matthew and Zuka and a much younger son, Leonid, Jr.

For a change, the house at "Ivanovka" had been properly planned and built. It was surrounded by a vast, carefully kept park. The park was flanked by a big pond with an old mill.

The silver cascades of water slowly rotated the big wheel. The broad alleys of the park were walled with the flowering shrubs of lilac, acacia, eglantine and rock-berry trees. "Ivanovka" and the old park held many sweet memories for Zuka. He wanted to see the trees of the park, the ancient trees that were his real friends: the white-branched birch tree, the mysterious gnarled oaks, the cheerful and refined maples, the aspens with their ever-trembling leaves, the straight fresh-as-young maidens poplars, the untidy and gloomy elms, the evergreens and carefree pines. They had all seen many generations. They had seen noisy youngsters playing hide-and-seek among their trunks. They had witnessed first kisses, the kisses that started by being shy and bashful, then grew bolder, fiery and demanding. The light rustle of their leaves had mingled with the rapturous sighs of love. And how often they had longed to wipe away bitter tears with their tiny green handkerchiefs and to whisper words of encouragement:

"Do not cry! All will pass with time. Time will heal your sorrow. Come and rest with us."

The old trees had seen the beginning and the end of love. They knew the secrets of past generations. Only in the dead of night would they whisper among themselves. The trees, wise with age, loved the children of the family and the children loved their old and trusted friends, the trees.

In the pre-war era Aunty Katia, the Lady of "Ivanovka," had been nicknamed "Universal Mother." The reason being that her in-laws, cousins, friends and many other relatives used to bestow the care of their children upon her during their absences from home. It was not unusual for a dozen or more children, from the ages of four to sixteen, to be gathered for the summer under her protective wings. Some came with their nurses and some with their saddle horses. It was a noisy, mischievous and sometimes tiring congregation. Aunty Katia had to be judge, nurse, attorney general and guardian angel all wrapped up in one. During all those hectic summer days she never lost her temper and never raised her voice. She was always adored if not always obeyed. It was great fun to spend several weeks at "Ivanovka.." In those days cousin Annie had been Zuka's favorite playmate. Annie was fair with laughing blue eyes. Her heavy blonde tresses reached to her waist. Zuka called her "Calamity Ann."

One upon a time it had been fun to live there but in the spring of 1916 times changed. The war had drained off all the man-power and most of the work was done by prisoners of war under women supervision.

When Zuka arrived at "Ivanovka" no one was interested in him. The house stood empty, silent and dismal. The park was neglected and looked like a down-at-heel gentleman. Zuka walked slowly through the bare lifeless rooms. The high windows were closed and the shutters down. The furniture, the pictures and the chandeliers and the bronzes were all draped with dirty white covers. His steps rang hollow through the halls. In the twilight the place seemed unfriendly and unfamiliar. He went to his usual room. The blinds were down and a musty smell permeated everything. Zuka walked to the window, raised the blinds and threw them open. His

old friends the maple trees stretched out their branches in welcome.

The moon was just as big as it was the night he and Rita speculated about there being a "Man in the Moon." The park was quiet; only the trees whispered among themselves. The quietness of the night, the dark house, the moon-lit park, made him sensitive and apprehensive, as if subconsciously he could discern the steps of Saturn and the approach of dreadful events in the very near future.

Game of the Well

The next morning greeted him with bright sunshine and the chirping of sparrows. Gone were the shadows of yesterday. After a hasty breakfast Zuka ran into the garden to see his old friend, Maxim the gardener. Maxim was working in the hothouse and greeted him affectionately. For a while they sat and talked about the news of "Ivanovka;" of all that had happened during his long absence. A long straight alley led for the hothouse to the end of the park. There, in order to facilitate the irrigation of the park, Uncle Leonid had sunk a deep well. The well was nearly seventy feet deep. A low brick wall surrounded it's mouth and was covered by a wooden platform. The bottom of the well was completely filled by a big pump. In the center of the platform there was a big wheel with a long handle. Water was delivered through a pipe running up the middle of the well. When they were children, Zuka, with the rest of the gang, loved to play the "game of the wheel." They would run all the way down the alley, jump on to the platform and swing on the handle of the wheel. The wheel would turn and they would get a free ride.

A wave of sentiment swept over Zuka. Once again he would play the "game of the well." Obeying the childish impulse, he sprinted toward the well. He took a flying leap, missed the handle and crashed heavily on the platform. A rotten plant snapped under the impact and he disappeared into the dark depths of the well. At first he fell backward, doubled up with his chin at his knees. He saw the hole in the platform grow smaller and smaller. A picture of the murderous iron pump at the bottom flashed like lightning through his mind. He had no doubt what would happen should he hit bottom. Yet he did not lose his nerve. From the first moment of his fall, somehow, he knew positively and definitely all would be well. He heard a voice telling him, calmly and emphatically: "Steady – no danger. All will be well!"

Suddenly his back hit an old decayed cross-pole. Under the impact the rotten wood broke but without hurting him. For a fraction of a moment it broke his fall. That was enough. Zuka's left hand shot out and grabbed the water pipe. The sudden strain on his arm was painful. The jerk nearly dislocated his shoulder, but it gave him just enough time. In a flash his right hand had grasped the pipe, too, and he flung his legs around it. A dull thud told him that the broken pole had hit the bottom. For several minutes Zuka clung there catching his breath, then he started to climb up hand-over-hand, sailor fashion.

Maxim had seen him sprint, jump and then crash into the well. For a second he was too

stunned to take action, then with an inarticulate cry, the old man limped toward the well. Trembling he leaned over expecting to see the mutilated body of his young master at the bottom. At that very moment Zuka's pale face appeared in the hole. Taking it for an apparition, the old man fainted on the spot. Zuka, too, was badly shaken but after a little rest he looked down the well. Only then did he realize the full extent of the danger he had escaped.

"Well young Barin, it was a miracle!" Maxim exclaimed: "For sure you were saved by the Lord's own will." For quite a while the old man just sat and held Zuka's hand to be sure he was not dreaming. In the end they decided to keep the whole affair a secret. Why alarm mother? What she did not know would not hurt her, but the incident killed any further interest Zuka might have had to stay longer at "Ivanovka." The soul of the place was gone. Only a lifeless skeleton remained.

Last Visit

His Mother was surprised to see him back so soon but was preoccupied with Mischa's sudden arrival from "Soumorokovo," so he was not pressed for an explanation. During the years Mischa had made good progress in the Russian language. He spoke fluently now and was deeply in love with Russia and "Soumorokovo." Bougoulma was much more interesting with Cousin Mischa on the scene. There were lots of things to do and they enjoyed roaming the countryside together. One evening, several days later, they sat visiting in the same room where their fathers had talked nearly ten years earlier.

"So Mischa, you have decided to stay at "Soumorokovo" and become a 'country squire?'" mocked Zuka.

Mischa rose and began pacing the room as he father used to do. For a moment he stopped and looked at Zuka. His eyes were starry. His cousin was neither as tall nor as handsome as he, but Mischa liked Zuka's freckled, animated face and his quiet smile.

"I do not think you could ever understand me Zuck," he said, resuming his crossing and recrossing of the floor. "You always had a family. The question of tomorrow never entered your head. You have been secure all your life. You have always lived in your own country. But until now I have never had any of these things. You do no know the bitterness of exile. I hope you never will know the life of a foreigner in an alien country. If you want a sample of hell on earth, try living in a cheap bourgeosie, French family when you are not sure of next month's rent, and when you are already in debt to them. I hope you will never know this. As soon as the war is over I am going to enter an agricultural college. I am going to develop "Soumorokovo." It is a great place. But how about yourself? What do you want to be?"

"How should I know?" Zuka tossed his head carelessly. "So far the question of my career has not come up. Mother is dead set against a military career. I am just as set on it. Only time will tell, and I have plenty of time yet." Zuka jumped from his chair laughing gaily. "Down with

serious questions! Come on, let's find out what we are having for dinner. I am really hungry."

The two boys rushed from the room, their ringing voices disturbing the quiet dignity of the house. "When do we eat?"

Neither boy could know that in a few months Russia would be in the midst of a bloody revolution. Or that a certain nobleman of Simbrisk Province by the name of Valdimir Ulianov, (later known to the world as "Lenin,") would seize the power so easily relinquished by the Tzar and create from the ashes of Imperial Russia, a new world order.

Nor could they guess that in May of 1918 a detachment of the Red Army under Comrade Commissioner Poloupanov, would invade peaceful "Soumorokovo." Having to deal with a defenseless boy, Comrad Poloupanov was brave and rough.

"Comrade Soldiers." he thundered. "Here is a dirty aristocrat who has sucked the proletariat's blood. Do not forget what Comrade Lenin said: 'Death to the class enemy!' Death to the enemy of the people!"

Certainly Mischa had never "sucked the blood of the proletariat." He said so, and also told them what he thought of Comrade Lenin. He stated it in very strong, clear terms. The Red soldiers, half drunk with lust for plunder and inflamed with lust for blood, literally lifted Mischa Rostovsky on their bayonets. What was his crime? None, except he was a loyal son of his country and his father had been an officer of the Imperial Guard.

Comrade Poloupanov was called to account for this wanton murder when, a few months later, a National People's Army temporarily liberated Samara Province. Then Poloupanov and his Red Band encountered soldiers of the White Army and not a defenseless boy. The encounter was short and decisive. After feeble resistance the Reds turned tail and ran. They were later rounded up, captured, court martialed and condemned to death for the murder of three thousand innocent victims in Samara, including poor Mischa Rostovsky.