Sasha

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Translated from Russian by Douglas Ashby

I

Gambrinous' is the name of a popular beershop in a vast port of South Russia. Although rather well situated in one of the most crowded streets, it was hard to find, owing to the fact that it was underground. Often old customers who knew it well would miss this remarkable establishment and would retrace their steps after passing two or three neighbouring shops.

There was no signboard of any kind. One entered a narrow door, always open, straight from the pavement. Then came a narrow staircase with twenty stones steps that were bent and crooked from the tramp of millions of heavy boots. At the end of the staircase, on a partition, there was displayed, in alto-relief, the painted figure, double life-size, of the grandiose beer patron, King Gambrinous himself. This attempt in sculpture was probably the first work of an amateur and seemed to be clumsily hacked out of an enormous petrified sponge. But the red jacket, the ermine mantle, the gold crown, and the mug, raised on high with its trickling white froth, left no doubt in the visitor's mind that he stood in the very presence of the great Beer King.

The place consisted of two long, but extremely low, vaulted rooms, from whose stone walls damp streams were always pouring, lit up by gas jets that burned day and night, for the beershop was not provided with a single window. On the vaults, however, traces of amusing paintings were still more or less distinguishable. In one of these, a band of German lads in green hunting jackets, with woodcock feathers in their hats and rifles on their shoulders, were feasting. One and all, as they faced the beer hall, greeted the customers with outstretched mugs, while two of them continued to embrace the waists of a pair of plump girls, servants of the village inn, or perhaps daughters of some worthy farmer. On the other wall was displayed a fashionable picnic, early eighteenth century, with countesses and viscounts frolicking in powdered wigs on a green lawn with lambs. Next to this was a picture of drooping willows, a pond with swans, which ladies and gentlemen, reclining on a kind of gilt shell, were gracefully feeding. Then came a picture of the interior of a Ukrainian hut with a family of happy Ukrainians dancing the gopak with large bottles in their hands. Still further down the room a large barrel sported itself upon which two grotesquely fat cupids, wreathed with hop-leaves and grapes, with red faces, fat lips, and shamelessly oily eyes, clicked glasses. In the second hall, separated from the other by a small archway, were illustrations from frog life: frogs were drinking beer in a green marsh, hunting grasshoppers among the thick reeds, playing upon stringed instruments, fighting with swords, and so on. Apparently the walls had been painted by some foreign master.

Instead of tables, heavy oak barrels were arranged on the sawdust-strewn floor and small barrels took the place of chairs. To the right of the entrance was a small platform, with a piano on it. Here, night after night through a long stretch of years, Sasha—a Jew, a gentle, merry fellow, drunk and bald, who had the appearance of a peeled monkey, and who might be any age—used to play the violin for the pleasure and distraction of the guests. As the years passed, the waiters, with their leather-topped sleeves, changed, the bartenders also changed, even the proprietors of the beershop changed, but Sasha invariably, every night at six o'clock, sat on his platform with his fiddle in his hands and a little white dog on his knee. And by one o'clock in the morning, always with the same little dog, Bielotchka, he would leave Gambrinous', scarcely able to stand after his beer.

There was, too, at Gambrinous', another unchanging face—that of the presider at the buffet, a fat, bloodless old woman, who, from being always in that damp beer basement, resembled one of those pale, lazy fish which swarm in the depths of sea caverns. Like the captain of a ship from his bridge, she, from the height of her bar, would give curt orders to the waiters, smoking all the time and holding her cigarette in the right corner of her mouth, while her right eye constantly blinked from the smoke. Her voice was rarely audible and she responded to the bows of her guests always with the same colourless smile.

II

The enormous port, one of the largest commercial ports in the world, was always crowded with ships. In it appeared the dark, rusty, gigantic armour-clad vessels. In it were loaded, on their way to the Far East, the yellow, thick-funnelled steamers of the Volunteer fleet that absorbed every day long trains of goods or thousands of prisoners. In spring and autumn, hundreds of flags from all points of the globe waved, and from morning until night orders and insults, in every conceivable language, rang out lustily. From the ships to the docks and warehouses and back along the quivering gangways the loaders ran to and fro, Russian tramps in rags, almost naked, with drunken, swollen faces, swarthy Turks, in dirty turbans, with large trousers, loose to the knees but tightened from there to the ankles, squat, muscular Persians, their hair and nails painted a red-carrot colour with quinquina.

Often graceful Italian schooners, with two or three masts, their regular layers of sail clean, white and elastic as young women's breasts, would put it to this port at respectful distances from each other. Just showing over the lighthouse, these stately ships seemed—particularly on a clear spring morning—like wonderful white phantoms, swimming not on the water, but on the air above the horizon. Here, too, for months in the dirty green port water, among the rubbish of eggshells and watermelon peels, among the flight of white seagulls, the high boats from Anatolia, the *felligi* from Trebizond, with their strange painted carvings and

fantastic ornaments, swayed at anchor. Here extraordinary narrow ships, with black tarred sails, with a dirty rag in place of a flag, swam in from time to time. Doubling the mole, almost rattling against it with its side, one of these ships, lying close to the water, and without moderating its speed, would dash into any harbour, and there, amid the international insults, curses and threats, would put in at the first dock to hand, where its sailors—quite naked, bronzed little people, with guttural gurgling voices—would furl the torn sails with amazing rapidity and the dirty mysterious ship would immediately become lifeless. And just as enigmatically some dark night, without lighting its fires, it would soundlessly disappear from the port. At night, indeed, the whole bay swarmed with light little smuggling craft. The fishermen from the outskirts, and from further off, used to cart their fish into town, in the spring small *kamsas* filling their long boats by the million; in the summer the monstrous dab; in the autumn mackerel, fat *kefals* and oysters; in the winter white sturgeon from ten to twenty poods in weight, often caught at considerable risk, miles out to sea.

All these people—sailors of varied nationalities, fishermen, stokers, merry cabin-boys, port thieves, mechanics, workmen, boatmen, loaders, divers, smugglers—all young, healthy, and impregnated with the strong smell of the sea and fish, knew well what it was to endure, enjoyed the delight and the terror of everyday danger, valued, above anything else, courage, daring, the ring of strong slashing words, and, when on shore, would give themselves up with savage delight to debauchery, drunkenness, and fighting. At night, the lights of the large town, towering above the port, lured them like magical shining eyes that always promised something fresh, glad, and not yet experienced, but always with the same deceit.

The town was linked to the port by steep, narrow, crooked streets, which decent folk avoided at night. At every step one encountered night shelters with dirty windows, protected by railings and lit up by the gloomy light of the solitary lamp inside. Still oftener one passed little shops in which one could sell anything one happened to have, from the sailor's kit down to his net, and rig oneself out again in whatever sailor's kit one chose. Here, too, were many beershops, taverns, eating-houses and inns, with flamboyant signboards in every known language, and not a few disorderly houses, at once obvious and secret, from the steps of which hideously painted women would call to the sailors in hoarse voices. There were Greek coffee-shops, where one used to play dominoes and cards; and Turkish coffee-shops where one could smoke narghiles and get a night's shelter for five kopeks. There were small Oriental inns in which they sold snails, *petalidis*, shrimps, mussels, large inky scuttle-fishes, and all sorts of sea monstrosities. Somewhere in the attics and basements, behind heavy shutters, were hidden gambling dens, where faro and baccarat often ended in one's stomach being slit or one's skull broken. And right at the next corner, sometimes in the next house, there was sure to be someone with whom one could dispose of anything stolen, from a diamond bracelet to a silver cross, and from a bale of Lyons velvet to a sailor's Government greatcoat.

These steep narrow streets, blackened with coal dust, towards night became greasy and reeked as though they were sweating in a nightmare. They resembled drains or dirty pipes, through which the cosmopolitan town vomited into the sea all its rubbish, all its rottenness, all its abomination and its vice, infecting with these things the strong muscular bodies and simple souls of the men of the sea.

The rowdy inhabitants of these streets rarely visited the dressed-up, always holiday-like, town, with its plate-glass windows, its imposing monuments, its gleam of electric light, its asphalt pavements, its avenues of white acacias, its imposing policemen and all its surface of cleanliness and order. But every one of them, before he had flung to the winds those torn, greasy, swollen paper roubles of his toil, would invariably visit Gambrinous'. This was sanctified by ancient tradition, even if it were necessary to steal under cover of darkness into the very centre of the town.

Many of them, truly enough, did not know the complicated name of the famous Beer King. Someone would simply say: "Let's go to Sasha's." And the others would answer: "Right-o. That's agreed." And they would shout in a chorus together: "Hurrah!"

It is not in the least surprising that among the dock and sea folk Sasha enjoyed more respect and popularity than, for example, the local archbishop or governor, and, without doubt, if it were not his name then it was his vivid monkey face and his fiddle that were remembered in Sydney or Plymouth, as well as in New York, Vladivostok, Constantinople and Ceylon, to say nothing of the gulfs and bays of the Black Sea, where there were many admirers of his talent among the daring fishermen.

Sasha would usually arrive at Gambrinous' at a time when there was nobody there except perhaps a chance visitor or two. At this time, a thick, sour smell of yesterday's beer hung over the rooms and it was rather dark, as they were economical in those days with gas. In hot July days, when the stone town languished from the heat and was deafened by the crackling din of the streets, one found the quiet and coolness of the place quite agreeable.

Sasha would approach the buffet, greet Madame Ivanova, and drink his first mug of beer. Sometimes she would say: "Won't you play something, Sasha?"

"What do you want me to play, Madame Ivanova?" Sasha, who was on the most polite terms with her, used to ask amiably.

"Something of your own."

Then he would sit down in his usual place to the left of the piano and play long, strange, melancholy pieces. Somehow it became sleepy and quiet in the basement, with only a hint of the muffled roar of the town. From time to time the waiters would jingle carefully the

crockery on the other side of the kitchen wall. Then from the chords of Sasha's fiddle came, interwoven and blended with the sad flowers of national melodies, Jewish sorrow as ancient as the earth. Sasha's face, his chin strained, his forehead bent low, his eyes looking gravely up from under the heavy brows, had no resemblance, in this twilight hour, to the grinning, twinkling, dancing face of Sasha that was so familiar to all Gambrinous' guests. The little dog, Bielotchka, was sitting on his knees. She had been taught long ago not to howl to the music, but the passionately sad, sobbing and cursing sounds got on her nerves in spite of herself, and in convulsive little yawns she opened her mouth, curling up her fine pink tongue, and, with all her fragile body and pretty small muzzle, vibrated to her master's music. But little by little the public began to appear, and with it the accompanist, who had left his daily occupation at some tailor's or watchmaker's shop. On the buffet there were sausages in hot water and cheese sandwiches, and at last the other gas-jets were lit up. Sasha drank his second mug of beer, gave his order to his accompanist: " 'The May Parade,' *eins, zwei, drei*," and a stormy March began. From this moment he had scarcely time to exchange greetings with the newcomers, each of whom considered himself Sasha's particularly intimate friend and looked round proudly at the other guests after receiving his bow. Winking first with one eye and then with the other, gathering all his wrinkles into his bald receding skull, Sasha moved his lips grotesquely and smiled in all directions.

At about ten or eleven, Gambrinous', which could accommodate two hundred or more people, was absolutely choked. Many, almost half, came in accompanied by women with fichus on their heads. No one took offence at the lack of room, at a trampled toe, a crumpled hat, or someone else's beer being poured over one's trousers; and if they did take offence it was merely a case of a drunken row.

The dampness of the dimly lit cellar showed itself on the walls, smeared with oil paint, and from the ceiling the vapour from the crowd steamed like a warm heavy rain. At Gambrinous' they drank seriously. It was considered the right thing in this establishment to sit together in groups of two or three, covering so much of the improvised table with empty bottles that one saw one's vis-à-vis as through a glass-green forest.

In the turmoil of the evening the guests became hoarse and overheated. Your eyes smarted from tobacco smoke. You had to shout and lean over the table in order to hear and be heard in the general din. And only the indefatigable fiddle of Sasha, sitting on his platform, triumphed over the stuffiness, the heat and the reek of tobacco, the gas jets, the beer, and the shouting of the unceremonious public.

But the guests rapidly became drunk from beer, the proximity of women, and the stifling air. Everyone wanted his own favourite songs. Close to Sasha, two or three people, with dull eyes and uncertain movements, were constantly bobbing up to pull him by the sleeve and interfere with his playing.

“Sash … the sad one … do pl …” the speaker stammered on, “do, please.”

“At once, at once,” Sasha would repeat with a quick nod as, with the adroitness of a doctor, he slipped the piece of silver noiselessly into his pocket. “At once, at once.”

“Sasha, that’s a swindle! I’ve given the money and this is the twentieth time that I’m asking for: ‘I was swimming down the sea to Odessa.’ ”

“At once, at once.”

“Sasha, ‘The Nightingale.’ ”

“Sasha, ‘Marussia.’ ”

“ ‘Zetz,’ ‘Zetz,’ Sasha, Sasha, ‘Zetz,’ ‘Zetz.’ ”

“At once … at once.”

“ ‘The Tchaban,’ ” howled from the other end of the room a scarcely human, but rather a kind of colt’s voice.

And Sasha, to the general amusement, shouted back to him like a cock:

“At once.”

And then without stopping, he would play all the songs they had called for.

Apparently he knew every single one of them by heart. Silver coins fell into his pockets from all sides and mugs of beer came to him from every table. When he descended from his platform to get to the bar he would be nearly pulled in pieces:

“Sashenka, one little mug, like a good chap.”

“Here’s to your health, Sasha! you devil, come along when you’re asked.”

“Sasha come and d-r-i-i-i-nk some beer,” bellowed the colt’s voice.

The women, inclined, like all women, to admire professionals, would begin to coquet, make themselves conspicuous, and show off their adoration, calling to him in cooing voices and capricious, playful little laughs:

“Sashetchka, you simply must have a drink with me. No, no, no, I’m asking you. And then

play the ‘Cake Walk.’ ”

Sasha smiled, grimaced, bowed right and left, pressed his hand to his heart, blew airy kisses, drank beer at all the tables and, on returning to the piano, where a fresh mug was waiting for him, would begin something like “Separation.”

Sometimes, to amuse his audience, he would make his fiddle whine like a puppy, grunt like a pig, or rattle in heartrending bass sounds, all in perfect time. The audience greeted these antics with benevolent approval: “Ho, ho-ho-ho-o-o.”

It was becoming still hotter. Heat steamed from the ceiling. Some of the guests were already in tears, beating their breasts, others, with bloodshot eyes, were quarrelling over women and were clambering towards each other to pay off old scores, only to be held back by their more sober neighbours, generally parasites. The waiters miraculously found room for their legs and bodies to slide between the barrels, large and small, their hands strung with beer mugs raised high above the heads of the carousers. Madame Ivanova, more bloodless, imperturbable, and silent than ever, directed from her counter the performances of the waiters, like a ship captain in a storm.

Everyone was overpowered by the desire to sing. Softened by beer, by his own kindness, and even by the coarse delight that his music was giving to others, Sasha was ready to play anything. And at the sounds of his fiddle, hoarse people, with awkward, wooden voices, all bawled out the same tune, looking into one another’s eyes with a senseless seriousness:

“Why should we separate?

Why should we live in separation?

Isn’t it better to marry

And cherish love?”

Then another gang, apparently hostile, tried to howl down its rival by starting another tune.

Gambrinous’ was often visited by Greeks from Asia Minor, “Dongolaki” who put into the Russian ports with fish. They, too, gave orders to Sasha for their Oriental songs, consisting of dismal, monotonous howling on two or three notes, and they were ready to sing them for

hours with gloomy faces and burning eyes. Sasha also played popular Italian couplets, Ukrainian popular songs, Jewish wedding-marches, and many others. Once a little party of negro sailors found their way into Gambrinous', and they also, in imitation of the others, wanted very much to sing a bit. Sasha quickly picked up a galloping negro melody, chose the accompaniment on the piano, and, then and there, to the great delight and amusement of the habitués, the beershop rang with the strange, capricious, guttural sounds of an African song.

An acquaintance of Sasha's, a reporter on a local paper, once persuaded a professor of the musical school to pay a visit to Gambrinous' and listen to the famous violinist, but Sasha got wind of it and purposely made his fiddle mew, bleat, and bellow more than usual that evening. The guests of Gambrinous' were simply splitting their sides and the professor observed with profound contempt: "Clownery."

And out he went without even finishing his mug of beer.

III

Every now and then the exquisite marquises, the festive German sportsmen, the plump cupids, and the frogs looked down from their walls on the kind of debauch that one could seldom see anywhere, except at Gambrinous'.

For example, a gang of thieves on a spree after a good haul would come in, each with his sweetheart, each with his cap on one side and a defiant, insolent expression, displaying his patent leather boots negligently with all the distinction of the cabaret at its best. To them Sasha would play special thieves' songs, such as "I'm done for, poor little boy," "Don't cry, Marussia," "The spring has passed," and others.

It was beneath their dignity to dance, but their sweethearts, for the most part not bad-looking and usually young, some almost little girls, would dance the "Tchaban," squealing and clicking their heels. Both men and women drank heavily; one thing only was wrong with them, they always finished their sprees with old disputes about money, and went off, when they could, without paying.

Fishermen, after a good catch, would come in a large party of about thirty. Late in the autumn there were such lucky weeks that each net would bring in every day up to forty thousand mackerel or *kefal*. At a time like this the smallest shareholder would make over two hundred roubles. But what was still better for the fishermen was a lucky haul of sturgeon in the winter; this was a matter of great difficulty.

One had to work hard some thirty versts from shore, in the still of the night, sometimes in stormy weather. When the boats leaked, the water froze on one's clothes and on the oars. The weather would keep like this for two or three days if the wind did not throw you two hundred versts away at Anap or Trebizond. Every winter a dozen or so of skiffs would simply disappear, and only in the summer did the waves bring back to this or that point of the coast the corpse of the gallant fishermen.

But when they came back from the sea safe, after a good catch, they came on shore with a frenzied thirst for life. Thousands of roubles went in two or three days in the coarsest, most deafening, drunken orgies. The fishermen used to get into some cabaret or other, throw all the other guests out, lock the doors, close the shutters, and for days at a stretch, without stopping, would devote themselves to women and drink, howl songs, smash the glasses and the crockery, beat the women and frequently one another, until sleep came over them anywhere—on the tables, on the floor, across the beds, among spittoons, cigar ends, broken glasses, the splash of wine and even the splash of blood. That is how the fishermen went on the spree for several consecutive days, sometimes changing the place, sometimes remaining in the same den. Having gone through everything to the last farthing, they would return to the docks, their heads bursting, their faces marked by brawls, their limbs shaking from drink, and, silent, cowed, and repentant, would enter the boats to resume that hard and captivating trade which they loved and cursed in the same breath.

Never did they forget to visit Gambrinous'. In they would throng with their hoarse voices and their faces burnt by the ferocious northwest winter, with their waterproof jackets, their leather trousers, and their top-boots up to the thighs, those selfsame boots in which their comrades, in the middle of some stormy night, had gone to the bottom like stones.

Out of respect for Sasha, they did not kick strangers out, though they felt themselves masters of the beershop, and would break the heavy mugs on the floor. Sasha played for them their own fishermen's songs, drawling, simple, and terrible, as the beat of the sea, and they sang altogether, straining to the uttermost their powerful chests and hardened throats. Sasha acted upon them like Orpheus on the waves and sometimes an old hetman of a boat, forty years old, bearded, weather-beaten, an enormous wild-animal-like fellow, would melt into tears as he gave out in a small voice the sorrowful words of:

"Ah, poor me, little lad

That I was born a fisherman. ..."

And sometimes they danced, trampling always on the same spot, with set stone-like faces, rattling with their heavy boots, and impregnating the whole cabaret with the sharp salt smell of the fish, with which their clothes and bodies had been soaked through and through. To Sasha they were very generous and never left him long away from their tables. He knew well the outline of their desperate, reckless lives, and often, when playing for them, he felt in his soul a kind of respectful grief.

But he was particularly fond of playing for the English sailors from the merchant ships. They would come in a herd, hand in hand, looking like picked men, big-chested, large-shouldered, with white teeth, healthy colours, and merry bold blue eyes. Their strong muscles stood out under their jackets and from their deep-cut collars rose, straight and strong, their stately necks. Some of them knew Sasha from former visits to this port. They recognised him, grinning with their white teeth, and greeted him in Russian.

"*Zdraist, Zdraist*."

Sasha of his own accord, without invitation, used to play for them "Rule, Britannia." Probably the consciousness that they were now in a country bowed down by centuries of slavery gave a certain proud solemnity to this hymn of English liberty. And when they sang, standing with uncovered heads, the last magnificent words: "Britons never, never, never shall be slaves," then, involuntarily, the most boisterous visitor to Gambrinous' took off his hat.

The square-built boatswain, with one earring and a beard that fringed his neck, came up to Sasha with two mugs of beer and a broad smile, clapped him on the back in a friendly way, and asked him to play a jig. At the very first sound of this bold and daring dance of the sea, the English jumped up and cleared out the place, pushing the little barrels to the walls. The stranger's permission was asked, by gestures, with merry smiles, but if someone was in no hurry, there was no ceremony with him, and his seat was simply knocked from under him with a good kick. This was seldom necessary, however, because at Gambrinous' everybody appreciated dances and was particularly fond of the English jig.

Even Sasha himself, playing all the time, would mount on a chair so as to see better.

The sailors formed a circle, clapping their hands in time with the quick dance music, and then two of them came out into the middle. The dance figured the life of a sailor on sea. The ship is ready to start, the weather is superb, everything is in order. The dancers have their hands crossed on their chests, their heads thrown back, their bodies quiet, though the feet mark a frenzied beat. Then a slight wind arises and with it a faint rocking. For a sailor, that is only pleasant, but the steps of the dance become more and more complicated and varied. A fresh wind starts—it is already not so easy to walk on deck—and the dancers are slightly rocked from side to side. At last there comes a real storm and the sailor is hurled from

taffrail to taffrail; the business is getting serious. “All hands on deck! Reef the sails!” By the dancers’ movements one detects with amusement how they scramble up the shrouds with hands and feet, haul the sails and strengthen the topsail while the storm tosses the ship more and more fiercely. “Man overboard, stop.” A boat is lowered. The dancers, bending their heads low and straining their powerful naked throats, row with quick strokes as they bend and straighten their backs. But the storm passes, the rocking settles down, and the ship runs lightly with a following wind, while the dancers become motionless again with crossed hands as they beat with their feet a swift merry jig.

Sometimes Sasha had to play a Lezguinka for the Georgians, who were employed at wine-making in the neighbourhood. No dance was ever unknown to him. When a dancer, in a fur cap and a *tcherkesska*, fluttered airily between the barrels, throwing first one hand and then the other behind his head, while his friends clapped in time and shrieked, Sasha, too, could not refrain and shouted joyously in time with them: “*Hass, hass, hass*.” Sometimes, too, he would play Moldavian dances and the Italian Tarantella and waltzes for German sailors.

Occasionally they fought, and sometimes rather brutally, at Gambrinous’. Old visitors liked to yarn about the legendary slaughter between Russian sailors on active service, discharged from some cruiser to the reserve, and a party of English sailors. They fought with fists, *casse-têtes*, beer-mugs, and even hurled at each other the little barrels that were used for seats. It must be admitted, and not to the honour of the Russian warriors, that it was they who first started the row, and first took to the knife, and though they were three to one in numbers, they only squeezed the English out of the beershop after a fight of half an hour.

Quite often Sasha’s interference stopped a quarrel that was within a hair’s breadth of bloodshed. He would come up to the disputants, joke, smile, grimace, and at once from all sides mugs would be stretched out to him.

“Sasha, a little mug; Sasha have one with me …”

Perhaps the kind and comic goodness, merrily beaming from those eyes that were almost hidden under the sloping skull, acted like a charm on these simple savages. Perhaps it was an innate respect for talent, something almost like gratitude. Perhaps it was due to the fact that most of the habitués of Gambrinous’ were never out of Sasha’s debt. In the tedious interludes of *dekocht*, which, in seaport jargon, means “stony broke,” one could approach Sasha for small sums and for small credit at the buffet without fear of refusal.

Of course the debts were never repaid—not from evil intention, but merely from forgetfulness. All the same, these debtors, during their orgies, returned tenfold their debts in their “tips” to Sasha for his songs. The woman at the buffet sometimes reproached him. “I am surprised, Sasha, that you’re not more careful with your money.”

He would answer with conviction: “But Madame Ivanova, I can’t take it with me in my grave. There’ll be enough for us both, that is for me and Bielotchka. Come here, Bielotchka, good doggie.”

IV

The songs of the day could also be heard at Gambrinous’.

At the time of the Boer War, the “Boer March” was a great favourite. (It seems that the famous fight between the Russian and English sailors took place at this very time.) Twenty times an evening at least they forced Sasha to play this heroic march, and invariably waved their caps and shouted “Hurrah!” They would look askance, too, at indifferent onlookers, which was not always a good omen at Gambrinous’.

Then came the Franco-Russian celebrations. The mayor gave a grudged permission for the “Marseillaise” to be played. It was called for every day, but not so often as the “Boer March,” and they shouted “Hurrah” in a smaller chorus, and did not wave their caps at all. This state of things arose from the fact that no deep sentiment underlay their call for the “Marseillaise.” Again, the audience at Gambrinous’ did not grasp sufficiently the political importance of the alliance; finally, one noticed that it was always the same people every evening who asked for the “Marseillaise” and shouted “Hurrah.”

For a short time the “Cake Walk” was popular, and once an excited little merchant danced it, in and out between the barrels, without removing his raccoon coat, his high goloshes, and his fox fur hat. However, the negro dance was soon forgotten.

Then came the great Japanese War. The visitors to Gambrinous’ began to live at high pressure. Newspapers appeared on the barrels; war was discussed every evening. The most peaceful, simple people were transformed into politicians and strategists. But at the bottom of his heart, each one of them was anxious if not for himself, then for a brother or, still more often, for a close comrade. In those days the conspicuously strong tie which welds together those who have shared long toil, danger, and the near presence of death, showed itself clearly.

At the beginning no one doubted our victory. Sasha had procured from somewhere the “Kuropatkine March,” and for about twenty-nine evenings, one after the other, he played it with a certain success. But, somehow or other, one evening the “Kuropatkine March” was squeezed out for good by a song brought by the Balaklava fisherman, the salt Greeks, or the Pindoss, as they were called.

"And why were we turned into soldiers,

And sent to the Far East?

Are we really at fault because

Our height is an extra inch?"

From that moment they would listen to no other song at Gambrinous'. For whole evenings one could hear nothing but people clamouring:

"Sasha, the sorrowful one, the Balaklava one."

They sang, cried, and drank twice as much as before, but, so far as drinking went, all Russia was doing much the same. Every evening someone would come to say goodbye, would brag for a bit, puff himself out like a cock, throw his hat on the floor, threaten to smash all the little Japs by himself, and end up with the sorrowful song and tears.

Once Sasha came earlier than usual to the beershop. The woman at the buffet said from habit, as she poured out his first mug: "Sasha, play something of your own." All of a sudden his lips became contorted and his mug shook in his hand.

"Do you know, Madame Ivanova," he said in a bewildered way, "they're taking me as a soldier, to the war!"

Madame Ivanova threw up her hands in astonishment.

"But it's impossible, Sasha, you're joking."

Sasha shook his head dejectedly and submissively. "I'm not joking."

"But you're over age, Sasha; how old are you?"

No one had ever been interested in that question. Everyone considered Sasha as old as the walls of the beershop, the marquises, the Ukrainians, the frogs, and even the painted king who guarded the entrance, Gambrinous himself.

"Forty-six." Sasha thought for a second or two. "Perhaps forty-nine. I'm an orphan," he

added sadly.

“But you must go and explain to the authorities!”

“I’ve been to them already, Madame Ivanova. I have explained.”

“Well?”

“Well, they answered: ‘Scabby Jew, sheeny snout! Just you say a little more and you’ll be jugged, there!’ And then they struck me.”

Everyone heard the news that evening at Gambrinous’, and they got Sasha dead drunk with their sympathy. He tried to play the buffoon, grimaced, winked, but from his kind funny eyes there peeped out grief and awe. A strongish workman, a tinker by trade, suddenly offered to go to the war in Sasha’s place. The stupidity of the suggestion was quite clear to all, but Sasha was touched, shed a few tears, embraced the tinker, and then and there gave him his fiddle. He left Bielotchka with the woman at the buffet.

“Madame Ivanova, take care of the little dog! Perhaps I won’t come back, so you will have a souvenir of Sasha. Bielinka, good doggie! Look, it’s licking itself. Ah you, my poor little one. And I want to ask you something else, Madame Ivanova; the boss owes me some money, so please get it and send it on. I’ll write the addresses. In Gomel I have a first cousin who has a family and in Jmerinka there’s my nephew’s widow. I send it them every month. Well, we Jews are people like that, we are fond of our relations, and I’m an orphan. I’m alone. Goodbye, then, Madame Ivanova.”

“Goodbye, Sasha, we must at least have a goodbye kiss. It’s been so many years … and, don’t be angry, I’m going to cross you for the journey.”

Sasha’s eyes were profoundly sad, but he couldn’t help clowning to the end.

“But, Madame Ivanova, what if I die from the Russian cross?”

V

Gambrinous’ became empty as though orphaned without Sasha and his fiddle. The manager invited as a substitute a quartette of strolling mandolinists, one of whom, dressed like a comic-opera Englishman, with red whiskers and a false nose, check trousers, and a stiff collar higher than his ears, sang comic couplets and danced shamelessly on the platform. But the quartette was an utter failure; it was hissed and pelted with bits of sausage, and the

leading comic was once beaten by the Tendrove fishermen for a disrespectful allusion to Sasha.

All the same, Gambrinous', from old memory, was visited by the lads of sea and port whom the war had not drawn to death and suffering. Every evening the first subject of conversation would be Sasha.

"Eh, it would be fine to have Sasha back now. One's soul feels heavy without him."

"Ye-e-es, where are you hovering, Sashenka, dear, kind friend?"

"In the fields of Manchuria far away …" someone would pipe up in the words of the latest song. Then he would break off in confusion, and another would put in unexpectedly: "Wounds may be split open and hacked. And there are also torn ones."

"I congratulate you on victory,

You with the torn-out arm."

"Stop, don't whine. Madame Ivanova, isn't there any news from Sasha? A letter or a little postcard?"

Madame Ivanova used to read the paper now the whole evening, holding it at arm's length, her head thrown back, her lips constantly moving. Bielotchka lay on her knees, giving from time to time little peaceful snores. The presider at the buffet was already far from being like a vigilant captain on his bridge and her crew wandered about the shop half asleep.

At questions about Sasha's fate she would shake her head slowly. "I know nothing. There are no letters, and one gets nothing from the newspapers."

Then she would take off her spectacles slowly, place them, with the newspaper, close to the warm body of Bielotchka, and turn round to have a quiet cry to herself.

Sometimes she would bend over the dog and ask in a plaintive, touching little voice: "Bielinka, doggie, where is our Sasha, eh? Where is our master?"

Bielotchka raised her delicate little muzzle, blinked with her moist black eyes, and, in the tone of the buffet woman, began quietly to whine out: "*Ah, ou-ou-ou. Aou—A-ou-ou-ou.*"

But time smooths and washes up everything. The mandolinists were replaced by balalaika players, and they, in their turn, by a choir of Ukrainians with girls. Then the well-known Leshka, the harmonicist, a professional thief who had decided, in view of his marriage, to seek regular employment, established himself at Gambrinous' more solidly than the others. He was a familiar figure in different cabarets, which explains why he was tolerated here, or, rather, had to be tolerated, for things were going badly at the beershop.

Months passed, a year passed; no one remembered anything more about Sasha, except Madame Ivanova, who no longer cried when she mentioned his name. Another year went by. Probably even the little white dog had forgotten Sasha.

But in spite of Sasha's misgivings, he had not died from the Russian cross; he had not even been once wounded, though he had taken part in three great battles, and, on one occasion, went to the attack in front of his battalion as a member of the band, in which he played the fife. At Vafangoa he was taken prisoner, and at the end of the war he was brought back on board a German ship to the very port where his friends continued to work and create uproars.

The news of his arrival ran like an electric current round the bays, moles, wharves, and workshops. In the evening there was scarcely standing-room at Gambrinous'. Mugs of beer were passed from hand to hand over people's heads, and although many escaped without paying on that day, Gambrinous' never did such business before. The tinker brought Sasha's fiddle, carefully wrapped up in his wife's fichu, which he then and there sold for drink. Sasha's old accompanist was fished out from somewhere or other. Leshka, the harmonicist, a jealous, conceited fellow, tried to compete with Sasha, repeating obstinately: "I am paid by the day and I have a contract." But he was merely thrown out and would certainly have been thrashed but for Sasha's intercession.

Probably not one of the hero-patriots of the Japanese War had ever seen such a hearty and stormy welcome as was given to Sasha. Strong rough hands seized him, lifted him into the air, and threw him with such force that he was almost broken to bits against the ceiling. And they shouted so deafeningly that the gas-jets went out and several times a policeman came down into the beershop, imploring: "A little lower, it really sounds very loud in the street."

That evening Sasha played all the favourite songs and dances of the place. He also played some little Japanese songs that he had learned as a prisoner, but his audience did not take to them. Madame Ivanova, like one revived, was once more courageously on her bridge while Bielinka, sitting on Sasha's knees, yelped with joy. When he stopped playing, simple-minded fishermen, realising for the first time the miracle of Sasha's return, would suddenly exclaim in naive and delighted stupefaction:

“Brothers, but this is Sasha!”

The rooms of Gambrinous’ then resounded once more with joyous bad words, and Sasha would be again seized and thrown up to the ceiling while they shouted, drank healths, and spilt beer over one another.

Sasha, it seemed, had scarcely altered and had not grown older during his absence. His sufferings had produced no more external change on him than on the modelled Gambrinous, the guardian and protector of the beershop. Only Madame Ivanova, with the sensitiveness of a kindhearted woman, noticed that the expression of awe and distress, which she had seen in Sasha’s eyes when he said goodbye, had not disappeared, but had become yet deeper and more significant. As in old days, he played the buffoon, winked, and puckered up his forehead, but Madame Ivanova felt that he was pretending all the time.

VI

Everything was as usual, just as if there had been no war at all and Sasha had never been imprisoned in Nagasaki. Just as usual the fishermen, with their giant boots, were celebrating a lucky catch of sturgeon, while bands of thieves danced in the old way, Sasha playing, just as he used to do, sailor songs brought to him from every inlet of the globe.

But already dangerous, stormy times were at hand. One evening the whole town became stirred and agitated, as though roused by a tocsin, and, at an unusual hour, the streets grew black with people. Small white sheets were going from hand to hand, bearing the miraculous word “Liberty,” which the whole immeasurable confident country repeated to itself that evening.

There followed clear, holiday-like, exulting days, and their radiance lit up even the vaults of Gambrinous’. Students and workmen came in and beautiful young girls came too. People with blazing eyes mounted on those barrels, which had seen so much in their time, and spoke. Everything was not comprehensible in the words they uttered, but the hearts of all throbbed and expanded to meet the flaming hope and the great love that vibrated through them.

“Sasha, the ‘Marseillaise’! Go ahead with the ‘Marseillaise’!”

No, this was not at all like that other “Marseillaise” that the mayor had grudgingly allowed to be played during the week of the Franco-Russian celebrations. Endless processions, with songs and red flags, were going along the streets. The women wore red ribbons and red flowers. People who were utter strangers met and shook hands with each other with happy

smiles. But suddenly all this jubilation disappeared, as if washed out like children's footsteps on the sands. The sub-inspector of police, fat, small, choking, with bloodshot protruding eyes, his face red as an overripe tomato, stormed into Gambrinous'.

"What? Who's the proprietor of this place?" he rattled out. "Bring him to me." Suddenly his eyes fell on Sasha, who was standing, fiddle in hand.

"So you're the proprietor, are you! Shut up! What, playing anthems? No anthems permitted."

"There will be no more anthems at all, your Highness," Sasha replied calmly.

The police dog turned purple, brought his raised index finger to Sasha's very nose, and shook it menacingly from left to right.

"None—what—ever."

"I understand your Highness—none whatever."

"I'll teach you revolutions! I'll teach you!"

The sub-inspector bounded out of the beershop like a bomb, and with his departure everyone became flattened and dejected. And gloom descended on the whole town. For dark, anxious, repugnant rumours were floating about. One talked cautiously. People feared to betray themselves by a glance, were afraid of their own shadows, afraid of their own thoughts. The town thought for the first time with dread of the sewer that was rumbling under its feet, down there by the sea into which it had been throwing out, for so many years, its poisoned refuse. The town shielded the plate-glass windows of its magnificent shops, protected with patrols its proud monuments, and posted artillery in the yards of its fine houses in case of emergency. But in the outskirts, in the fetid dens, in the rotting garrets, throbbed, prayed, and cried with awe the people chosen by God, abandoned long ago by the wrathful Bible God, but still believing that the measure of its heavy trials was not yet spent.

Down there by the sea, in those streets that resembled black, sticky drainpipes, a mysterious work was progressing. The doors of the cabarets, teashops, and night-shelters were open all night.

In the morning the pogrom began. These people who, so recently uplifted by the pure, general joy, so recently softened by the light of the coming brotherhood of man, who had gone through the streets singing beneath the symbols of the liberty they had won—these very people were now going to kill, not because they had been ordered to kill, not because

they had any hatred against the Jews, with whom they had often close friendships, not even for the sake of loot, which was doubtful, but because the sly dirty devil that lives deep down in each human being was whispering in their ears: “Go. Nothing will be punished: the forbidden curiosity of the murderer, the sensuality of rape, the power over other people’s lives.”

In these days of the pogroms, Sasha, with his funny, monkey-like, purely Jewish physionomy, went freely about the town. They did not touch him. There was about him that immovable courage of the soul, that absence even of *fear of fear* which guards the weakest better than any revolver. But on one occasion, when, jammed against the wall, he was trying to avoid the crowd that flowed like a hurricane down the full width of the street, a mason in a red shirt and a white apron threatened him with his pointed crowbar and grunted out, “Sheeny! Smash the sheeny! Smash him to the gutter.”

Someone seized his hands from behind.

“Stop, devil! It’s Sasha, you lout!”

The mason stopped. In this drunken, delirious, insane moment he was ready to kill anyone—his father, his sister, the priest, the Orthodox God himself—but he was also ready, as an infant, to obey the orders of any strong will. He grinned like an idiot, spat, and wiped his nose with his hand. Suddenly his eyes fell on the white, nervous little dog, which was trembling all over as it rubbed itself against Sasha. The man bent down quickly, caught it by the hind legs, lifted it up, struck it against the paving-stone, and then took to his heels. Sasha looked at him in silence. He was running all bent forward, his hands stretched out, without his cap, his mouth open, his eyes white and round with madness.

On Sasha’s boots were sprinkled the brains of little Bielotchka. Sasha wiped off the stains with his handkerchief.

VII

Then began a strange period that resembled the sleep of a man in paralysis. There was no light in a single window throughout the whole town in the evening, but for all that the flaming signboards of the cafés chantants and the little cabarets shone brightly. The conquerors were proving their force, not yet satiated with their impunity. Savage people, in Manchurian fur caps with St. George’s ribbons in their buttonholes, visited the restaurants and insistently demanded the playing of the national anthem, making sure that everybody rose to his feet. They also broke into private flats, fumbled about in the beds and chests of drawers, asking for vodka, money, and the national anthem, their drunken breath polluting

the atmosphere.

Once, some ten of them visited Gambrinous' and occupied two tables. They behaved with the greatest insolence, talked dictatorially to the waiters, spat over the shoulders of perfect strangers, put their feet on other people's seats, and threw their beer on the floor, under the pretext that it was flat. Everyone let them alone. Everyone knew that they were police-agents and looked at them with that secret awe and disgusted curiosity with which the people regard executioners. One of them was apparently the leader. He was a certain Motka Gundoss, a red-haired, snuffling fellow with a broken nose, a man who was said to be enormously strong, formerly a professional thief, then a bully in a disorderly house, and after that a souteneur and a police-agent. He was a converted Jew.

Sasha was playing the "Metelitza," when all of a sudden Gundoss came up to him and seized his right hand firmly, shouting, as he turned to the audience, "The national anthem—the anthem, the anthem, the national anthem, brothers, in honour of our adored monarch!"

"The anthem, the anthem," groaned the other scoundrels in the fur caps.

"The anthem," shouted a solitary uncertain, voice.

But Sasha freed his hand and said calmly: "No anthems whatever."

"What?" bellowed Gundoss, "you refuse? Ah, you stinking sheeny!"

Sasha bent forward quite close to Gundoss, holding his lowered fiddle by the fingerboard, his face all wrinkled up, as he said:

"And you?"

"What, me?"

"I am a stinking sheeny; all right; and you?"

"I am orthodox."

"Orthodox? And for how much?"

The whole of Gambrinous' burst out laughing, and Gundoss turned to his comrades, white with rage.

"Brothers," he said, in a plaintive, shaking voice, and using words that were not his own but which he had learned by heart. "Brothers, how long are we to tolerate the insults of these

sheenies against the throne and the Holy Church?"

But Sasha, who had drawn himself up compelled him with a single sound to face him again, and no one at Gambrinous' would ever have believed that this funny, grimacing Sasha could talk with such weight and power.

"You?" shouted Sasha. "You, you son of a dog. Show me your face, you murderer. Look right at me. Well? Well—"

It all happened in the flash of a second. Sasha's fiddle rose swiftly, swiftly flashed in the air, and crack—the big fellow in the fur cap reeled from a sound blow on the temple. The fiddle broke into fragments and in Sasha's hands remained only the fingerboard, which he brandished victoriously over the heads of the crowd.

"Br-o-th-ers, help! Save me-e," howled Gundoss.

But already it was too late to save him. A powerful wall surrounded Sasha and covered him. And this same wall swept the people in the fur caps out of the place.

An hour later, when Sasha, after finishing his night's work in the beerhouse, was coming out into the street, several people threw themselves on him. Someone struck him in the eye, whistled, and said to the policeman who ran up:

"To the police-station. Secret service. Here's my badge."

VIII

Now for the second time Sasha was considered to be definitely buried. Someone had witnessed the whole scene outside the beershop and had handed it on to the others. And at Gambrinous' there were sittings of experienced people who understood the meaning of such an establishment as the police-court, the meaning of a police-agent's vengeance.

But now they were much less anxious about Sasha's fate than they had been before; they forgot about him much more quickly. Two months later there appeared in his place a new violinist (incidentally, one of Sasha's pupils), who had been fished up by the accompanist.

Then, one quiet spring evening, some three months later, just when the musicians were playing the waltz, "Expectation," someone's thin voice called out in fright:

"Boys, it's Sasha!"

Everyone turned round and rose from the barrels. Yes, it was he, the twice resurrected Sasha, but now with a full-grown beard, thin, pale. They threw themselves at him, surrounded him, thronged to him, rumpled him, plied him with mugs of beer, but all at once the same thin voice exclaimed:

“Brothers, his hand—”

Suddenly they all became silent. Sasha’s left hand, hooked and all shrivelled up, was turned with the elbow towards his side. Apparently it could not bend or unbend, the fingers were permanently sticking up under the chin.

“What’s the matter with you, comrade?” the hairy boatswain from the Russian Navigation Company asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing much—a kind of sinew or something of that sort,” Sasha replied carelessly.

“So that’s it.”

They all became silent again. “That means it’s the end of the ‘Tchaban?’ the boatswain asked compassionately.

“The ‘Tchaban,’ ” Sasha exclaimed, with dancing eyes. “You there,” he ordered the accompanist with all his old assurance. “The ‘Tchaban’—*eins, zwei, drei*.”

The pianist struck up the merry dance, glancing doubtfully over his shoulder.

But Sasha took out of his pocket with his healthy hand some kind of small instrument, about the size of his palm, elongated and black, with a stem which he put into his mouth, and bending himself to the left, as much as his mutilated, motionless hand allowed, he began suddenly to whistle an uproariously merry “Tchaban.”

“Ho, ho, ho!” the audience rocked with laughter.

“The devil,” exclaimed the boatswain and without in the least intending it he made a clever step and began to beat quick time. Fired by his enthusiasm the women and men began to dance. Even the waiters, trying not to lose their dignity, smilingly capered at their posts. Even Madame Ivanova, unmindful of the duties of the captain on his watch, shook her head in time with the flame dance and lightly snapped her fingers to its rhythm. And perhaps even the old, spongy, timeworn Gambrinous slightly moved his eyebrows and glanced merrily into the street. For it seemed that from the hands of the crippled, hooked Sasha the

pitiable pipe-shell sang in a language, unfortunately not yet comprehensible to Gambrinous' friends, or to Sasha himself.

Well, there it is! You may maim a man, but art will endure all and conquer all.