

14 LITTLE GRANDMOTHER OF RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

cent banquets and balls. On every holiday a fortune was spent on the champagne alone. And all this fountain of squandered wealth flowed from a source buried in muddy huts and squalid poverty — from the meek and oppressed peasants. Their last penny, their last bit of cloth, cheese, butter, and bread went into his storehouse, while they were starving. He plundered not only the peasants but the merchants. If a merchant came to buy wheat, the Duke would exact a large deposit in advance, promising prompt delivery of the wheat in return. Then he would sell the same wheat over and over again to half a dozen other merchants, taking a deposit from each, and, of course, failing to deliver the grain. The merchants had no redress against a nobleman. The Duke was a frequent visitor at Madame Shiria's, where a circle of the more worthless nobility used to gather. Katya knew this group. She often heard their behavior discussed and condemned in her own home.

Another nobleman was a kleptomaniac, to put it delicately. Wherever he went, his friends had to keep an eye on their silver spoons and candlesticks.

There were a few nobles of a better type. Constantine Verigo liked Nicholas Kovalik — the father of that Kovalik who afterwards became a leader in the revolutionary movement of the seventies. Young Kovalik's mother and Katya's mother had been schoolmates. The friendship between the two families was so close that, although their estates lay far apart, visits were frequent; and the simplicity and sincerity of the Kovaliks made a lasting impression on Katya.

When the nobles of the better sort got together, she noticed that they often discussed certain matters in