

# One Man In His Time: The Memoirs Of Serge Obolensky

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father's house in Czarskoe Selo was the first in the row after leaving the station, and there I was born on October 3, 1890. I was my father's first child; we were in the direct male line of the Obolensky family. Each summer the Emperor and the Empress left the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, twenty miles away, for Czarskoe Selo; and the villas filled up with people whose position in Russian life was about like our own. By that I mean they belonged to one of the two hundred princely families of Russia, their wealth was generally in landed estates, their social life revolved around court functions, and their sons went into the army. Under ordinary circumstances I might have been expected to do the same. My father was Colonel Platon Obolensky, then forty years old, a heavy-set, kindly man who had a military record of considerable distinction and was aide-de-camp to Grand Duke Vladimir. You see, in Russia in those days a boy with a background like mine would almost automatically be trained to become an officer, and if his father was aide-de-camp to a Grand Duke, it meant that he would probably be brought up close to court circles. But I was too young to have had a real life in the Russian court before the war and the Revolution came. Curiously enough, I had no military training whatever until 1914, when I entered the Russian cavalry as a private and was trained in actual combat. ¶ Up to the time I was five or six years old, my mother had complete charge of me and brought me up the way she thought I should be brought up, regardless of tradition or anything else. She was strong-willed, and she had her own ideas. Mother was born Marie Narishkin. She was a slight, rather frail-looking woman, with thin features and dark hair, much younger than my father. She loved horses, raised thoroughbred trotters on her estate in the district of Tambov and raced them. The Narishkins were a family of courtiers. They had been in evidence at the Russian court from the time of Peter the Great, whose mother was a Narishkin. But the Narishkins never accepted a title. They considered it beneath them. They were brilliant, gay, reckless, good-looking people, art collectors, patrons of artists, gamblers, and they lived abroad much of the time. Pushkin's famous gambling story, *The Queen of Spades*, was inspired by the life of my great-great-great-grandmother Anna Narishkin. It is a sinister tale about a great lady who never loses when playing cards and who is murdered by an impecunious young officer for her secret. And about the time I was born, Tschaikovsky based one of his last operas, *Pique Dame*, on the same Narishkin family legend. Mother's father, my grandfather Narishkin, was typical of the family. He lived a very gay life, spending most of his time in Paris, was mixed up with a lot of women, and ran through a couple of fortunes. But he was exceedingly lucky—or maybe he gauged things right, for he came into a new inheritance every time his money ran out. When he died, at a considerable age, he was once again possessed of tremendous wealth. His wife, my grandmother Narishkin, was a tall, imperious woman and one of the most famous beauties of her time. Mother was not very strong, and I eventually learned that she had lost a child shortly before I was conceived. She had been disappointed by so many miscarriages that when I appeared I was babied, petted, worried about, and spoilt. The worst thing, though, was that Mother had wanted a daughter. She had no intention of changing her feelings just because I turned out to be a son. For the first five years of my life my hair was kept long, and I was dressed in skirts. This was humiliating to me. I even had curls, like Little Lord Fauntleroy. My male cousins pulled my hair and made my life miserable, whilst my girl cousins liked to curl my ringlets, which was just as bad. But I had a guardian angel in the person of my nurse, Miss Lizzie Arthur, a stout little Scottish woman born in Glasgow. She came to us because her aunt, Mimi Brown, had been the nurse of the Narishkin family, my mother's own nurse. Miss Lizzie lavished her kindness on us all her life, for she remained with us as housekeeper when we no longer needed a nurse. Firm, independent, just, and loving, she saved our young souls from cynicism after our mother left. I barely managed to get her out of Russia at the beginning of the Bolshevik Revolution. Miss Lizzie was extremely outspoken, but she pronounced Russian words with a rolling Scottish burr, so it was almost impossible to understand her. She spoke English also with an accent that could hardly have been surpassed by Robert Burns himself. The result was that I learned to speak English like some Russian branch of a Highland clan, which highly amused my English friends later on at Oxford. I had an old donkey, an animal so portly that his neck had a roll of fat on it. His tummy bulged so much that I actually fancied him to be a python who had swallowed something in two parts. They used to place a basket saddle on his back and strap me

into the basket; then we waddled through the lanes in the park. Czarskoe Selo was surrounded by a dense belt of fir trees. Inside this perimeter the park was magnificently landscaped. It was heavily wooded in places, and successive empresses had planted shrubs that by my day had turned into small forests of lilac. It was in one of these that the old donkey took it into his head to run away with me. Miss Lizzie rushed home and alerted the police. The servants were called out to search the woods, and I understand that a whole cortege streamed from the house in their varied costumes and went plunging through the lilac bushes. They found me in a gentle little glade, fast asleep in the basket saddle, while the donkey contentedly nibbled the lilacs. ¶ During the winter we lived in our house on the Mohovaya in St. Petersburg. We occupied the top two floors. The nursery was the next room but one from the end of the long corridor, with Father's dressing room on one side. Opposite this was a big bathroom with two bathtubs in it and two small wood-burning stoves—chip heaters. Beyond Father's dressing room, the corridor led to the Green Room, a big sitting room which opened onto our landing—Miss Lizzie's and mine. Across the landing was the Red Room, another big sitting room. Beyond the Red Room was Mother's bedroom. It was an enormous room, and she always kept it dark and shadowy. It was also the haunt of her poodle, Turk, who always growled at me and bullied my poodle, Filka. Turk didn't bite, but Filka and I never liked that side of the house. Mother's dark room was a creepy place. From the landing a wide stairway covered with a cerise rug swept down to the first floor. Another aide-de-camp to Grand Duke Vladimir, Prince Chahovskoy, lived there with his two children, who were about my age. On the first landing, there stood an enormous stuffed bear that my father had killed. In his paws the bear held a silver tray on which callers deposited their cards. Beside him stood an old-fashioned Victorian chair with a canopy over it. Down another few steps was the entrance. Our doorman was an enormous man with a very long black beard. His uniform was blue, and he wore a kind of bandoleer, blue, with red and gold ornaments on it. On great occasions he substituted a large red bandoleer for his everyday blue one. I could never find out what it was for. Father was of the opinion that in earlier days it was a sort of scabbard and that it had probably been much smaller then. As he said, there was always meaning to such things. In any event, all the doormen of the big houses wore them, and all had great beards and smart blue uniforms. ¶ At intervals a significant pair of gray trotters and a sleigh appeared before our door. You could tell those were fast horses just by looking at them. The coachman looked enormous in his padded livery. A coachman like that was what I wanted to be. And in the back of the sleigh, on a carpeted platform, stood a footman wearing a long coat with an immense fur collar. Whenever that sleigh appeared, my curls were put in order, a fur coat was pulled over my skirted clothes, and Miss Lizzie hustled me off to visit my Grandmother Obolensky. Those were her fast trotters, and when they arrived at our doorstep it generally meant that she wanted to see me. Nothing ever delighted me more. Grandmother's sleigh was very grand, and Father always had slow horses, so those gray trotters with the blue net over them, the fat coachman, the motionless footman and the two-horse sleigh gave me a thrill every time I saw them. I really loved horses, good ones. We sailed out over the snow. The Mohovaya ran perpendicular to the Neva River, which was only a few blocks from our house, and opened into the Sergievskaya, the street on which my grandmother lived. The Sergievskaya ran parallel to the Neva. So it wasn't a very long journey to my grandmother's, really just around the corner. But thanks to Grandmother, who I think had heard how much I enjoyed these rides, we took longer than necessary. Then we turned and approached her house with considerable ceremony. Across the frozen Neva was the outer ring of Peter and Paul Fortress. A short distance upstream, on our side of the river, stood the Winter Palace. The sleigh stopped before the house. Grandmother had an apartment. We got out and went upstairs. As soon as I came in, some elderly ladies gave me candy and all sorts of things, and they fussed and clucked over me. They were callers—aunts and great-aunts of the family, which was large. I suppose they had heard I was coming. To elderly ladies of Russia, children were always an occasion. Grandmother herself lived alone except for a lady companion. She was very old, and she was an invalid. A hint of peppermint always pervaded her dim bedroom. There were a great many icons over in one corner, and before them a vigil light that was always burning gave a fading reddish luster to the heavy furniture and the drawn curtains. I suppose the lack of other Obolensky

grandchildren gave me a special importance in Grandmother's eyes. At each visit, her features glowing, she handed me a little present. I'm afraid I was always disappointed. What I really wanted was those trotters. But I adored her, and I think the feeling was mutual. I know now that I grew up in a world where the relics of different social periods were all around me. Grandmother represented something fundamentally Russian, timeless and changeless, that underlay them all. She was a survivor of a bygone era even then. Her native Russian quality was neither tempestuous nor emotional, which is what Europeans have erroneously come to think of as the Russian temperament—the extreme, in other words. On the contrary, Russia's strength of that epoch, Grandmother's strength, was abiding simplicity, a radiant hospitality, an almost frugal way of life that linked the richest people to the general norm of Russian existence. Wealth was not at all a matter for display. It was used to maintain the outward forms of responsibility and position, the way my grandmother kept those wonderful horses that she never used. Or maybe she kept them up for me. ¶ In Russia you were called by your first name and your father's name. In some circles it was actually a social error to forget the patronym. So I was Serge Platonovitch—Serge for my own name, and Platonovitch meaning "son of Platon." However, I couldn't pronounce Platonovitch. I said "Paponch," so they called me Paponch or Paponka, the diminutive. Paponka means "horse blanket." Once when a party was setting out from the house at Czarskoe a general whose name I can't remember, but who was commander of the Emperor's Cossack bodyguard, said to Mother, "I'm going to teach Paponka something." He got a tea tray and said "Horse Blanket, you come along with me." He took me up the front stairs, put me on the tray, and let me loose. I came swinging down the stairs, around the curve, with a terrific clatter, to the absolute horror of poor Mother. From then on I found tea-traying down the stairs a superlative pastime. It may have been good training for tobogganing at St. Moritz later on. ¶ Horses made up the abiding interest of my childhood. Father drove what were called English harness horses. And when I say drove, I mean that he drove himself. As an old cavalryman he often dispensed with the services of the coachman and handled his own team. I often think his coaching knowledge may have served him in good stead—nobody knew where he went. But, as I said, he had slower, heavier horses than my grandmother. Mother, like Grandmother, preferred fast horses. She had a pair of blacks, Atlasnie and Skvoretz—Satin and Blackbird. Satin was a cross between an Arab and a race horse. Mother also had a pair of bays, but she preferred the blacks. They were usually driven as a team, but sometimes singly. Sometimes Satin was placed in the shafts and Blackbird was harnessed as a wheel horse or trace horse, a *pristiashka*, harnessed outside the shafts and guided by an outside rein. Blackbird galloped while Satin trotted, and the art of the coachman was to keep the two gaits equal but dissimilar. Blackbird looked as if he were just running alongside to keep Satin company. I liked to dress up as a coachman, so Mother had a blue coachman's coat made for me. What with my hair and skirts, she really went to an enormous amount of trouble. The coat was lined with white rabbit fur. I wore it practically all the time. As a result, the fur molted and soon my clothing was covered with rabbit hairs. Then Mother gave me a little red two-wheeled governess cart for Czarskoe, and the aged donkey, more obedient than before, pulled it around. Our house at Czarskoe Selo was well heated, and we were able to stay there in the autumn until after the snow fell. Mother also gave me a little Finnish sleigh, called a *veica* sleigh, lighter than the Russian sleighs. The donkey was harnessed to it and I drove around the grounds in my molting coachman's coat. ¶ Besides living in St. Petersburg in the winter and at Czarskoe in the summer, we sometimes visited Mother's estate, called Ira, in the district of Tambov, about three hundred miles southwest of Moscow. These trips awed me. The train that carried us south lived in my memory. The engine was supposedly dangerous, and at stations we all stood well back for fear it might explode. Inside the carriage, though, we seemed to be speeding like the wind. I retained an image of the little city of Tambov as colorful and glamorous, and of the trip overland to Ira, a long way to the east, as a prolonged adventure. Most of the land was flat, with hilly country around the Vorona River, near which the estate lay. Mother had sheep, primarily, and cattle, and she kept about a hundred brood mares. The house itself was fantastic. It was built in the gayest tradition of Russian rococo architecture, which is saying a good deal. Panels of different colors covered the long front of the house and gave it an almost medieval checkerboard effect. An ell on one end repeated the

pattern, and a dome rose mysteriously beyond the ell, glowing hotly in the southern sunshine. Inside it was all great shaded rooms and long polished halls. The Narishkins always had a lot of guests. Sometimes Mother, Miss Lizzie and I visited Aunt Lila Narishkin at Hamalise, their summer house near Viborg in Finland. Many of the Narishkin villas were really palaces, but the house in Finland was a big rambling frame structure, about like an Adirondack Mountain lodge. Madame Narishkin—she was rarely referred to as Aunt Lila—was the granddaughter of Barclay de Tolly, the general who with Koutouzoff turned back Napoleon's invasion of Russia. When her grown children were around her, the effect was unreal, like a theatrical setting in which a number of superlatively handsome people have been gathered—young men, debonair and elegant and faintly cynical, and her daughters, Ella, Marie, and Nathalie, ethereally beautiful, with Madame Narishkin even at her age more beautiful than any of them. Mother was an attractive woman in most company, slight and graceful, but she had a long and inquisitive Grecian nose, a slightly prim appearance, and among those beauties she was an ugly duckling. She was, I must say, totally overshadowed by her ravishing sister-in-law Aunt Lila. Because Father was aide-de-camp to Grand Duke Vladimir (the brother of the late Alexander III) the children of the Grand Duke were often around our house in St. Petersburg. There were Grand Duke Cyril, Grand Duke Boris, Grand Duke Andre, and Grand Duchess Helen, who became the wife of Prince Nicholas of Greece and the mother of Marina, the Duchess of Kent. They were all older than I. During the summer all the children of the court were at Czarskoe, and we all played together. Besides the royal family and the children of Grand Duke Vladimir there were the children of the other Grand Dukes, like Grand Duke Dimitri and Grand Duchess Marie, always called The Younger, to distinguish her from the other Grand Duchess Marie; these two were the children of Grand Duke Paul, and about my age. When there was a court function at the Summer Palace, friends came from St. Petersburg and stayed with us and then the whole party went to court. A slide was put up in an unused ballroom, and while our parents went to the court ball, or whatever it was, we slid down the slide. I recollect that Prince Belosselsky, whose son escaped from the Bolsheviks and came to America, used to come to these court functions and stay at our house, because I remember his valet. The man was a Hungarian named Crouch, who wore enormous handlebar mustaches which he kept waxed and pointed. After the grownups left Crouch used to scare me stiff because he'd glower and turn the points of his long mustache straight ahead and charge right at me. These important occasions, with Father in his uniform, and Mother wearing a tiara, were interesting to us children—people coming and going, brilliant uniforms, much jewelry, and fine horses and carriages. Mother was a vivid, ardent, sociable woman—really a young girl—and she loved people, crowds and parties, balls, music and dancing, and grew radiant and animated: I liked to watch her dress. She had whole sets of jewelry, from tiara and earrings down to brooches, necklaces and stomachers. It was fascinating for me to watch her prepare for her state occasions. There was a concealed safe in her dressing room that was far taller than I was. Whenever it was open and its trays upon trays of chamois leather were exposed, I used to pull up a chair and stand upon it. I loved to look at the jewels. I was particularly fascinated by the deep, glowing blue of the sapphires. But I also loved the rubies and emeralds. I was less interested in the diamonds and the pearls. My parents' bathrooms were at opposite ends of a corridor in the house on the Mohovaya in St. Petersburg, and when they were getting ready to go to a court function I was kept busy running from one end of the corridor to the other to see how their preparations were coming along. Father shaved himself. He had seven razors, each razor with the name of a day of the week on the handle. I liked to watch him lather his face and shave neatly around his large mustache and nose. A small chip fire was always kept burning in Mother's bathroom. I had a small tub in a corner, because the big bathtub was too large for me to bathe in, and I was indignant whenever she locked me out of our bathroom while she bathed. In those days my parents were always together. Father and Mother were quite social. But Father was basically the more serious of the two, although he possessed a great hidden twinkle that often seemed about to burst out. There was a deep difference between them. Father had a good business head, and for all his liberal ways was highly practical. Mother was hopeless at finance, and extravagant. When she had to leave Russia many years later, she left not with one but with all her jewels. For a start, she had seven tear-drop emeralds, in fact, a whole

emerald parure. With this she bought herself *one* Rolls-Royce, which even in those days was a bad rate of exchange, particularly when the emerald set was my inheritance. Nevertheless, she lived well for the rest of her life. Mother was a cheerful person, a complete extrovert, yet she had an insatiable interest in mysticism. She loved people, was popular, and was interested in everything from court life and political events to the simple people on her estates. Father was something of a scholar, with a thoughtful, philosophical streak. He delighted in shocking the older ladies with some of his risqué stories at the slightest provocation. He had originally studied to be a lawyer, graduating from the law school of the University of Moscow. The influence of Pan-Slavism had led to the Turkish War of 1877. Pan-Slavism was really a mystical desire on the part of Russians to unite all Slavic peoples. This, together with the age-old Russian drive to the Mediterranean, comprised the national feelings of Russia, and my father shared them. He was a lieutenant in the Chevalier Guards—where, incidentally, he became a famous gentleman jockey; Tolstoy's story of Vronsky's famous race in *Anna Karenina* is based upon an actual race ridden by my Father on his famous horse Correggio. During the Turkish War, when his regiment was not called to fight, Father was so furious that he pulled strings to get into the Hussars, who were leaving for the front. He was successful, and he made a fine reputation for himself under enemy fire. Soon he was made aide-de-camp to Grand Duke Nicholas. Later he was attached to the staff of General Skobelev, called the "White General," the outstanding general of the Turkish War, and he wound up as aide-de-camp to Grand Duke Michael, the brother of Alexander II. He was also attached to the armistice commission that negotiated with the Turks when English political pressure halted the Russian advance on Constantinople. Somewhere—I don't know where it is today—he kept a very valuable diary of the whole war. Father came naturally by his interest in military life. He was the great-grandson of Field Marshal Suvorov, one of the greatest military geniuses of Russian history, whose tactics were still employed by the Reds as late as Korea and Dien Bien Phu. Suvorov had Swedish blood, fought as a common soldier against the Swedes and in East Prussia, restored Poland to Russia, suppressed the revolution of Pugachev in 1775, defeated the Turks, and then drove the French revolutionary armies out of Italy, consistently defeating the young Napoleon—he was the only general who did so. Suvorov lived like a common soldier on campaigns, eating and sleeping with the men. He was opposed to the elaborate uniforms and ceremony that Potemkin was introducing into the Russian army. One of our family stories is that when Potemkin came to visit Suvorov dressed in a magnificent uniform and covered with decorations, Suvorov took one look at him, jumped on a chair, and crowed like a rooster. After the death of Catherine the Great, some of Suvorov's poems satirizing the new Russian uniforms and tactics incensed Emperor Paul, and Suvorov was disgraced, spied upon, and humiliated. He moved to his estate called Jerichovo, which we inherited, worked in his fields with the peasants, rang the church bell, and sang in the choir. His famous chair was still standing by the window when I lived alone in his house years later. Father had always prided himself on his business acumen, and, in fact, he was first-rate. When he had charge of Grand Duke Vladimir's household, he saved the Grand Duke a lot of money by introducing business methods and strict accounting. The Grand Dukes headed the different departments of the army and navy; all military purchases passed through departments they headed. Grand Duke Vladimir headed the Russian cavalry. Here is a typical example of Father's work in the Grand Duke's household. He found employed in the kitchen a big, friendly, ungainly farm boy from near Kiev who wanted to become a chef. Father befriended him, and made it possible for the boy, whose name was Vassily Yourtchenko, to become an apprentice. And suddenly Vassily turned into a true artist of the kitchen, one of the greatest chefs in Russia. Strangely enough, Vassily was to walk out of Russia with Catherine, my first wife, her children, and myself when the Reds took over. He remained with my family until his death here in New York last year. My first trip abroad came in my childhood, not long after the coronation of Nicholas II. Father and Mother went with the Grand Duke Vladimir and his Grand Duchess on a kind of state visit to Queen Maria Christina of Spain, the queen mother and regent. King Alfonso XIII of Spain was then only a child, and the children of the Grand Duke were taken along, and so was I. In Paris we stopped at the Hotel Continental, and from there went to San Sebastian, where I played on the beach. The thing that impressed me most—and I didn't like it—was bathing in the surf. On the

beach, there were cabins mounted on big wheels and a man arrived with a horse and drew those little cabins into the breakers. We sat in the cabin and watched the waves rising around us, which alarmed me considerably, and besides, the breakers were cold. There were professional bathers who took care of us children in the surf. They wore leather jackets over their bathing suits, and berets on their heads; they stood with their backs against the waves, holding us by the hands, and broke the force of the breakers before they reached us. My other memory of San Sebastian is of the Grand Duchess Helen washing my hair. She was then thirteen years old. She asked the Spanish maid to bring her a basin of rain water, because rain water is soft and girls prefer it for washing their hair. But the maid misunderstood her and brought her a basin of water with sugar dissolved in it. When she put it on my head it grew thick and gummy before her astonished eyes. My ringlets stuck together and projected out in all directions. With all the other trials I had had to endure about my hair, this seemed to me to be the final indignity, and I cried. The Queen of Spain, who was a pleasant, good-natured woman, gave me a Spanish harness for my donkey. The harness was amazing—finely tooled leather with hand-worked buckles, and enormously large woolen pompons of different colors, which gave it a highly picturesque appearance. I put it on my donkey as soon as we got home, but he had grown too lazy to pull the governess cart, and Mother gave me a little brownish piebald pony, named Sitzovie, which means “Chintz.”

Later, while we were staying at the Narishkin’s place near Viborg, my cousin Cyril Narishkin and I found a pair of scissors one morning and we chopped off half my ringlets. Mother was having breakfast in bed and Aunt Lila Narishkin was having hers on a tray quietly by the window. When we marched into Mother’s bedroom, I was brandishing the curls chopped from one side of my head, and Cyril was brandishing the scissors. There was a most awful scream from Aunt Lila, and Mother almost upset her breakfast tray. But—I was a boy from then on. The rest of my hair, now an unpleasant reminder, was chopped off by a barber who was hurried in from Viborg. Thereafter I was given pants and dressed properly.

Soon I was given a sort of personal servant or bodyguard—what the Russians called a *diadka*, a man who looked after a boy and kept him from getting hurt. Mine was a sailor from the Russian marines named Matthew Troufanov. Matthew began each morning by waking me with the orders of the day. He read them. “Today,” he would read, “we will wear whites.” And so we did. We did calisthenics. We went for walks. We ran, rode, and underwent all sorts of exercises designed to make a man of me. Matthew was my valet as well as my bodyguard. He was even responsible for seeing to it that I was properly dressed when we dogtrotted around Czarskoe Selo.

I never had an inkling in advance of any trouble between my father and mother. He loved her, I knew, and to my childish eyes they seemed happy together. And of course I was too young to be aware of any subtle differences between them. One apparently minor thing may have been significant of Mother’s growing unhappiness. Despite her extrovert nature there was that deep mystical streak. She began to go to mediums and belonged to a little group of St. Petersburg society people who held séances and tried to communicate with the other world. They were feverishly serious about it all. They had table rappings in darkened rooms, and even levitation, when tables were said to rise and float in the air. Father, of course, pooh-poohed it all, and it amused him greatly to talk about it. He could hardly have taken to that sort of thing, any more than I could have accepted the cult of Rasputin that swept the Russian court during the First World War. Still, I can tell fortunes with the cards—good ones. Father may well have joked too hard, and Mother would get furious. There was an incident during that time that truly caused an uproar, and I’m still not certain that Father with his wild sense of humor didn’t actually perpetrate the deed. There was once a séance held at the house of old Countess Kleinmichel, and since meetings there were always good, it may have struck Mother that she just might be able to convert Father to her way of thinking. Certainly it is the only logical explanation for his having been asked at all. Father told me that on his part he had *reluctantly* agreed to participate. I noticed that when he spoke, he had a twinkle in his eye. This particular séance, he told me, had been visited by a specially frivolous ghost. At the height of the séance, when all the lights were out, there was a scream from old Countess Kleinmichel. Father said innocently, “Shall I put on the lights?”

**1. My Father, the General—Prince Planton Obolensky.**

**2. My Mother, Princess Marie Obolensky—Narishkin.**

**3. Myself in 1892. My full**

**name of the record was Prince Serge Platonovitch Obolensky Neledinsky-Meletzky. #160;** "On *no* condition!" she said. So they sat in silence in the darkness, and they heard her scrambling about. Finally she sighed, and said the lights could be turned on. When they were turned on, Countess Kleinmichel's *moumoutka*, as Father put it, was upside down on the top of her head! A *moumoutka* is a wig, and Countess Kleinmichel was known for wearing one at all times. Father told me that this extremely naughty ghost had apparently snatched off Countess Kleinmichel's *moumoutka* and thrown it into a corner, where she found it somehow in the dark. It was awful that without lights she couldn't tell that she had put it back on wrong side out. Mother never took Father to a *séance* again. Yet, I am sure that Mother saw people of the other world. There is no question but that the following is astonishing, particularly since there was a witness other than herself. The group interested in spiritualism made a pact among themselves that the first to die should return to visit the others. One of the group was Capt. Korsakoff. He contracted tuberculosis and was sent off to the Crimea for his health. Mother was alone one afternoon, having tea in her boudoir in our house at Czarskoe Selo, when the butler came up and said that Capt. Korsakoff was calling. She said, "How extraordinary!" for she knew how ill he was and that he had gone away. Korsakoff came upstairs, the butler announced him, and then Korsakoff vanished, just disappeared before their eyes. Mother learned two days later that Korsakoff had died in the Crimea. Things may have gotten worse between my parents after the birth of my brother Vladimir, when I was about five years old. I do not know. All I remember is that one night we boarded a boat in St. Petersburg. Mother and I and the baby and the nurses. There was a storm, and I was seasick for the first time in my life. We sailed through the storm to Stockholm. Mother had sent her yacht there. It was anchored out in the harbor. I was wearing a sailor suit, and one of those flat-topped sailor caps that went with it. A ribbon was given to me on the dock. It was a hatband for my sailor cap, printed with the name of Mother's yacht—*Sayonara*, Japanese for "farewell." We sailed out of the harbor, into the Baltic, and crossed to England, where we landed at Hull. For some reason we went to London, where we stayed at the Piccadilly Hotel. I remember being bewildered by the traffic, the number of horses and buses, and the attention created by Vlady's nurse, who wore her native Russian costume. From London we went to the Isle of Wight, where Mother had taken a villa. We were living there when Father arrived. I do not know what happened between them, but Mother suddenly left. Father remained. I asked childish questions, which nobody answered, and then, like a child, I stopped asking questions. In a dim way I understood that I was not to see Mother again. I was acutely unhappy. Children need the sort of intuitive affection that a mother lavishes on them spontaneously, even though, in my case, Mother's demonstrations of it were sometimes extravagant and spoiled me. So far as the elementary needs of my childhood went, Miss Lizzie cared for me, trained me, disciplined me, and acted as a mother to me. And she did the same for my new young brother Vladimir. Miss Lizzie was devoted to us, and it was not hard to return her affection. She always told us that she really loved it whenever we got sick, because then she could have us all to herself. I realize now what she did for us. A child needs those little acts of affection that are funny and unexpected, that make a child's dream-world day. No amount of scrupulous care can contrive such moments—it is a talent inherent in the individual. People either have this facility with children or they don't. Miss Lizzie possessed it, and entered freely into our world; as a result we were protected from the immediate unhappiness of the divorce. In a divorce I believe the man is almost always at fault. Whatever the specific circumstances, he creates the kind of life in which those circumstances arise. As for a child, the need for affection that he feels when his mother has been separated from him by divorce is likely to become part of his whole psychological make-up and stay with him all his life. His yearning to be loved may easily turn to resentment of the fact that he was not loved enough to be cared for as other children were cared for. In my own case, though I had been under Mother's close care through the earliest and most critical years, I felt the loss; and my younger brother Vlady felt it more keenly than I. Automatically, when I thought of some of the boys I knew in those early years I said to myself, "People like him"—an unconscious revelation of my own fear that I was not liked. And before Vlady came I felt a kind of envy of the children of Prince Chahovskoy on the floor below us, since they had each other to play with while I was alone in the big rooms upstairs. Just at this time my childhood sorrows were

deepened by the death of my Grandmother Obolensky. She was buried in our family burial ground in St. Sergius Monastery, about fifty miles west of St. Petersburg. A big cross, with a head of Christ, the work of the great sculptor Vasnetzoff, stood in the family plot, and there Grandmother was buried among all the generals, beside her husband and her son Vladimir. I did not want to go to her funeral, but I had to. I could not explain why I didn't want to go, so it was put down as simple badness on my part and lack of feeling for someone who loved me as deeply as my grandmother had. But I was really distressed. The sculpture by Antakolsky, in which the head of Christ seems to be part of the living rock, is a great piece of work; perhaps I can explain what I mean about the quality of Vasnetzoff's sculpture. He was one of the most thoughtful of Russian artists. He once carved a magnificent statue of Ivan the Terrible wearing a skullcap, sitting on his throne and leaning on his staff, with a brooding and bitter expression on his features. The statue is now in what was the Museum of Alexander III in St. Petersburg. The original small bust, simply the head and shoulders, went through many vicissitudes. It was taken out of Russia after the Revolution and wound up in my possession in London. It finally came to rest in my son's house in Rhinebeck, New York. A superb piece of characterization in stone, it shows eloquently the sculptor's struggle to understand Ivan, his greatness as an administrator, his brooding malignance, and his cruelty. While I admire that statue of Ivan the Terrible as a work of art, I still wish someone could have presented as beautifully the side of old Russia that my grandmother's life symbolized—its simplicity, kindness and unfailing generosity in material things, its sheer adoration of little children, and in any judgment of the character of other human beings its absolute perception. I believe my parents' divorce was the first case in Russia involving people of their station in life. It caused a sensation. Father did not want Mother to divorce him, but Mother demanded it; they were divorced in 1897, when I was seven years old. Then Mother suddenly married General de Reutern. He was an exceedingly brilliant young officer, already a general despite his youth, and he was aide-de-camp to the new Emperor Nicholas II. It was an absolute scandal. General de Reutern was forced to resign from the army, and he and Mother left Russia. She bought a villa outside of Naples, and for years they lived there, entirely apart from our Russian way of life. **2 TO MAKE CLEAR** the importance of my grandmother in my childhood perceptions, I should say something about the Obolensky family history. The Obolenskys were solid, substantial people, soldiers and statesmen, not having much to do with the life of the court. They stemmed from the Viking sea lords who appeared at the beginning of recorded Russian history. They were seafaring robbers who raided the villages near the Baltic, penetrated inland, and finally moved their long, narrow ships on rollers overland on a legendary portage to the rivers, and then sailed down the rivers to the Black Sea and raided Constantinople. Our family records begin with Rurik, the first real ruler of Russia, in the year 862 A.D. From him the male family line is traced intact to my own grandson. Rurik was a Viking who was asked by the Russians to come in and impose peace on a country town during the incessant wars of petty chieftains. He ruled for nearly two decades as Grand Duke of Kiev and Novgorod, Nijny Novgorod, the oldest Russian trading center, about a hundred miles south of St. Petersburg. By the next generation the rule of the dynasty reached six hundred miles south. Rurik's son, Igor, became Grand Duke of Kiev, which city was thereafter the capital of Russia for centuries. A bewildering array of Svyatoslavs, Vladimirs, Olegs and others followed, until in the eleventh generation the line produced a saint, Michael, the son of Vsevolod and Maria, who was the daughter of King Casimir of Poland. He was a Christian martyr, tortured to death for his faith. St. Michael was canonized in 1246. His grandson, Constantine, was the first to be named Prince Obolensky. Ivan the Terrible, two centuries later, began to liquidate the more independent princes. He wiped out the Obolensky family except for one prince. That prince was one of Ivan's leading generals against the Poles and Lithuanians. This solitary survivor of our line, known as the "Silver Prince," happened to be at the Lithuanian front outside Russia when Ivan set about bringing the principalities under the direct control of his government in Moscow. Ivan the Terrible summoned the Silver Prince to Moscow just after Ivan had declared himself czar—meaning Caesar—a title the rulers of Russia had never claimed before. The Silver Prince realized that he would be executed if he returned, and went over to the Lithuanians. He sent his aide, Schibanoff, with a letter to Ivan. The letter stated that he, the Silver Prince, had done many things for Russia,

and that he had always been her loyal son. But now, with his family slaughtered needlessly, he could no longer continue his allegiance. Ivan was incredibly cruel—he had killed his own son with his own hands in a fit of passion. He always carried a huge heavy staff in his hand. Its long steel point was sharpened. He bade Schibanoff come very close and read the letter, and as Schibanoff read, Ivan the Terrible placed the steel point of the staff on the emissary's foot, and slowly pushed it through. Schibanoff calmly went on reading. It is one of the great stories of bravery in Russia; Pushkin wrote a poem about it. When the letter was finished, Ivan ordered Schibanoff to be killed. That was the sort of story in the family background. The Silver Prince was, at that time, the last of the Obolenskys. He came back into Russia in disguise to the woman he loved, and Ivan's police nearly caught him. His exploits inspired a lot of poems and stories which were in our library in St. Petersburg, and his numerous sons saved the family from extinction. ¶ By my father's time, however, things had changed. The Obolenskys were civilized and cultured, generally distinguished for a sober devotion to public affairs. Grandmother Obolensky's husband, my grandfather Prince Serge Obolensky, was a liberal who enthusiastically cooperated with Emperor Alexander II in freeing the serfs. He cooperated so enthusiastically that he turned over nine-tenths of the best Obolensky land to the government to be applied to the peasant holdings of the freed serfs. This considerably reduced the family fortune, although, of course, it was no expropriation: the government paid a nominal price for the land, and the peasants paid the government for it in very small installments. Yet when I later managed father's farms I was hard put to it to get good production from the residue. That's when I started to study agriculture. I became something of an expert. In any event, the Obolensky fortune by Grandfather's time was in real estate in St. Petersburg and Moscow, and in landed estates, like the landed estates of England, except that in Russia the estates' values were reduced. Without primogeniture they were being split up between the various male and female children. By my time our estates were still fairly extensive, though, and the Obolenskys were considered to be among the richer families of Russia. Whether one was titled or not made little difference where actual wealth was concerned. Grandfather Obolensky died in 1882, soon after the assassination of Alexander II. Then Grandmother's second son, my Uncle Vladimir, died while still a young man the year after I was born. And my Uncle Valerian, Father's elder brother, had no children. So everything conspired to add to my grandmother's interest in me as the principal bearer of the family name. Not that the name was in danger of dying out. Other branches of the Obolensky family—my father's cousins and uncles—included big families. There was Vladimir Obolensky, who was aide-de-camp to Emperor Alexander III, in charge of his personal household. Each morning he went over with the Emperor the arrangements for the day, and usually remained to lunch with him and the Empress. After Alexander III died in 1894, his cousin, my Uncle Nicholas became aide-de-camp in charge of the household of the Dowager Empress Marie. Then there was Uncle Alexis, who was the representative of the Emperor in the Council of the Russian Church. He was the *Ober-Procurator*, the so-called "eye of the Emperor." The post had been established by Peter the Great, who wanted a man responsible to the crown to keep an eye on church affairs and report to him. Curiously enough, the Bolsheviks, when they found they could not suppress the Russian Church after the Revolution, restored a similar post and put in a commissar to watch the Church Council, even though they had already removed Church officials known to oppose them. Uncle Alexis, together with Count Witte, wrote the first draft of the Constitution that was granted by the Emperor in 1905. Uncle Alexander Obolensky, who was like Uncle Alexis in the Council of State, the Czarist equivalent of the House of Lords, was the head of the Conservatory of Music and of the Stiglitz Academy of Art in St. Petersburg, and was generally considered one of the greatest Russian patrons of the arts. Uncle Alexander was married to Anna Polovtzeff, heiress to the fortune of Baron Stiglitz, one of the richest men in Russian history, and she and her husband devoted their fortune to aiding musicians and artists. Finally, my father's only sister Aunt Vera, married to Count Koutouzoff, had five children, my first cousins. Count Koutouzoff was the grandson of the general who defeated Napoleon, the stolid genius Tolstoy pictured so brilliantly in *War and Peace*. He later became Grand Marshal to the court of Emperor Alexander III. The Obolenskys always deferred to the eldest member of the family. When I was young they were a matriarchy, the oldest then being women, like Great-aunt Dolly

Obolensky. The ranking member of the family was actually consulted in all matters affecting the family. At luncheons we all sat in order of seniority. Dolly was always at the head of the table. I, as the youngest, was always at the foot. Aunt Dolly seldom went out; she always received. She often had forty or fifty people for lunch on Sundays after church—as many of the family as might come. Several of the older people at Great-aunt Dolly's were survivors of my grandmother's era, simple and devout, unconcerned about the world beyond their relatives and friends. Their elderly lives revolved around the health and well-being of cousins and nephews, around marriages, the births of infants in different branches of the family, and which nephew was serving in what regiment. Politics and world affairs scarcely touched them. Yet the more virulent elements of the family had through the years established a tradition that was strongly liberal. A Prince Obolensky was one of the ringleaders in the Decembrist revolt after the death of Alexander I in 1825, which attempted to establish a constitutional monarchy with a federal government based on a parliamentary system. He was an idealist who threw himself whole-heartedly into the struggle when Nicholas I assumed the throne. He was exiled to Siberia, and left a moving account of his ordeal and his faith. My extremely liberal grandfather Serge Obolensky had perhaps been too enthusiastic a supporter of the reforms of Alexander II for his own financial good. My own father believed in and pressed for a constitutional and parliamentary form of government for Russia, a limited monarchy similar to England's, although, granted, by his time much of the Russian nobility favored such a government. Certainly all of my father's friends and associates did. My uncle Sasha Sverbeyev went even further. He was a slightly eccentric old statesman, the governor of a district (the equivalent of a state in the American system), an august personage with a beard so long and white that we always called him Uncle Moses. He was one of the handful of idealists in the nobility who had taken the lead years before in aiding the peasant cooperatives that had sprung up spontaneously in the rural districts. These idealistic pioneers provided the money that hired trained technicians and administrators to organize the scattered business cooperatives into national organizations: a great work, and one that was already expanding into an important part of Russian life during my early years. These groups were so successful that they became a real threat to Communist programs later on. They were either taken over or stamped out.

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Personal account of a young Russian nobleman and his life through the Russian Revolution, leaving Russia, and serving in two World Wars, including the U.S. Army (OSS) during WWII.

Obolensky was a Russian prince who became a publicist and international socialite. Scion of a wealthy White Russian family and husband of Czar Alexander II's daughter, the Oxford-educated Obolensky fled his native country after battling Bolsheviks as a guerrilla fighter. The tall, mustachioed aristocrat subsequently divorced Princess Catherine, married the daughter of American Financier John Jacob Astor, settled in the U.S. and worked with his brother-in-law, the real estate entrepreneur Vincent Astor. During World War II, Obolensky at 53 became the U.S. Army's oldest paratrooper and earned the rank of colonel. He started his own public relations firm in New York in 1949, handling accounts like Piper-Heidsieck champagne. Serge, a friend once remarked, could be successful selling umbrellas in the middle of the Sahara. A legend in the hotel business, Colonel Obolensky became a Director of Zeckendorf Hotels, then Vice Chairman of Hilton Hotels.

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