

*The White Guard*

Mikhail Bulgakov

Translated by Roger Cockrell



ALMA CLASSICS

ALMA CLASSICS LTD  
London House  
243-253 Lower Mortlake Road  
Richmond  
Surrey TW9 2LL  
United Kingdom  
[www.almaclassics.com](http://www.almaclassics.com)

*The White Guard* first published in full in 1966  
This edition first published by Alma Books Ltd in 2012

© by the Estate of Mikhail Bulgakov

Translation © Roger Cockrell, 2012

Cover image © Nicola Bottinelli

Extra Material © Alma Classics Ltd

Printed in Great Britain by by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

Typeset by Tetragon

ISBN: 978-1-84749-245-6

All the pictures in this volume are reprinted with permission or presumed to be in the public domain. Every effort has been made to ascertain and acknowledge their copyright status, but should there have been any unwitting oversight on our part, we would be happy to rectify the error in subsequent printings.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of the publisher. This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not be resold, lent, hired out or otherwise circulated without the express prior consent of the publisher.

## Contents

Introduction	ix
The White Guard	i
<i>Part One</i>	7
<i>Part Two</i>	107
<i>Part Three</i>	163
<i>Note on the Text</i>	267
<i>Notes</i>	267
Extra Material	275
<i>Mikhail Bulgakov's Life</i>	277
<i>Mikhail Bulgakov's Works</i>	290
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	305

## Introduction

It is an evening in mid-December. The tiles of the Dutch stove are blazing with heat, and the outside world lies concealed behind cream-coloured curtains. On the table with its starched white tablecloth and vase of slightly faded flowers stand plates of food and bottles of vodka. In one corner of the room there is a piano with an opera score lying open. One of those present, the youngest of the family, the seventeen-year-old Nikolka, is strumming quietly on a guitar; the others, including Nikolka's brother and sister – Alexei and Yelena – are sitting round the table engaged in animated conversation. Every so often, a fierce argument breaks out, only to dissolve in banter and laughter. The room is bathed in the pink glow of the lamplight, filtering through the cigarette smoke. Next door there is a library lined with books and journals in many languages, evidence of a rich cultural heritage.

This is Bulgakov's portrayal, in his novel *The White Guard*, of the Turbin family at home, seemingly secure in their first-floor apartment and striving to recreate, now that Alexei has returned from military service, the environment of cosy domesticity that they have all known since early childhood. It is an apparently timeless and strangely innocent picture. Yet time and history have caught up with the Turbins, threatening to destroy not only them, but an entire culture and way of life. For at the point the novel opens – a week or so before Christmas in the “terrible year” of 1918 – the world beyond the cream-coloured curtains has become fractured, fraught with menace and confusion. The immediate environs are relatively quiet, with only the occasional sledge swishing along the street on which the Turbins live. But the wider city, with its shops, bars, clubs and schools that are all so familiar to them, stands on the edge of an abyss.

The *White Guard*, written for the most part in the early 1920s, but remaining unpublished in full in Soviet Russia until 1966, is set in Bulgakov's native city, the Ukrainian capital of Kiev. The narrative spans a period of less than two months during the exceptionally

harsh winter of 1918–19. With the withdrawal of German troops from Kiev after Germany’s defeat on the Western front in November and the consequential abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II, the situation of the Ukrainian puppet government under its Hetman, Pavlo Skoropadsky, has become untenable. Now, in December, the city is under attack by the forces of the Ukrainian nationalist Symon Petlyura, resisted only by scattered and disorganized units of officers and cadets, including the Turbin brothers and a group of their close friends (the “White Guard” of the title). Everyday life for the city’s population has deteriorated, with circumstances suddenly becoming frighteningly arbitrary and fragile.

Although their lives are to be profoundly affected by these events, the Turbin family remains at the still centre of this whirlpool throughout the novel. Despite their differences in character, behaviour and temperament, the three of them, together with their close circle of friends, are united by their love for pre-revolutionary Russia, the Tsar and autocracy, and by their anti-Ukrainian sentiments embodied in their hatred for Petlyura. Their most vitriolic contempt, however, is reserved for the treacherous behaviour of the Hetman and the general staff officers, including Yelena Turbin’s husband Sergei Talberg, who abandon their posts and flee to Germany. Meanwhile, waiting in the wings for the opportunity to strike, are the “grey hordes” of the Bolsheviks under Trotsky.

The story that Bulgakov tells is a largely authentic reconstruction of these historical events. Many of the details relating to the setting and the characters, furthermore, possess a strongly autobiographical element, an evocation of Bulgakov’s own family circumstances. Yet his use throughout of the term “the City” to refer to Kiev reminds us that *The White Guard* is primarily neither autobiography nor history, but a visionary novel springing from a highly original and creative imagination. As in his short story *The Fatal Eggs* (1925), the last of Bulgakov’s prose works to be published during his lifetime, facts jostle with fiction to portray an alternative universe that diverges from historical reality in seemingly random and therefore unsettling ways. The novel’s essentially fictional quality is further emphasized by its abundance of literary allusions, both direct and indirect. Among the most resonant and pervasive of these are the allusions to Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, the two novels sharing a central theme: the contrast between the concerns of the individual and the family on the one hand, and wide-reaching and destructive historical events on the other. The

parallel can be extended to include at least some of the characters. Alexei Turbin, for example, has much in common with Tolstoy's equally sceptical and world-weary Prince Andrei Bolkonsky. And his younger brother Nikolka shares a number of attributes with Petya Rostov; both are guileless, impulsive young men, and both idealize war, anticipating a "glorious and heroic" death in battle – until, that is, they come face to face with its reality. Additionally, there is more than an echo in *The White Guard* of Tolstoy's derisive attack on the pomposity and hubris of so-called "great" men – the generals and politicians – who imagine that they are able to shape the course of historical events. In reality, however, they are merely puppets, their decisions shaped by forces of which they are unaware and which they are unable to control.

Whereas Tolstoy tells his story rationally and lucidly, Bulgakov's narrative unfolds far less evenly: episodes of family life intersperse with accounts of military action, punctuated by songs, poems, dreams, fragments of thoughts, swirling rumours and snatches of conversation (often of uncertain provenance). The novel's first epigraph, a quotation from Alexander Pushkin's historical novel *The Captain's Daughter* describing the onset of a disastrous blizzard, plunges us into a world of darkness and elemental chaos, a world in which people's minds become unhinged and the usual social norms governing human behaviour no longer operate. Suffering and tragedy are portrayed on both an individual and a grand scale, with scenes depicting barbaric acts of primitive savagery perpetrated by members of Petlyura's armed forces and frequently motivated by the crudest kind of anti-Semitism. The second epigraph, taken from the Book of Revelation, anticipates the apocalyptic theme that manifests itself in various ways throughout the work, including references to the Bolshevik leader Trotsky as the Antichrist, with his armies characterized as legions of the Devil. Here Bulgakov's world intersects most closely with that of Dostoevsky; it is not by chance that the book languishing open at the foot of Alexei's bed is Dostoevsky's most apocalyptic novel, *The Devils*.

Despite the undoubted bleakness of much of *The White Guard*, this is not the whole story. We note that the "red, quivering" Mars of the opening paragraph is counterbalanced by Venus, the goddess of love. Through the Turbin family we are made aware of the resilience of the human spirit and of the virtues of loyalty and steadfastness of principle – qualities that are thrown into strong relief when contrasted with the self-serving banalities of their landlord Vasilisa Lisovich

skulking with his wife Vanda in the apartment immediately below the Turbins'. Although, with the arrival of the Bolsheviks in the City at the end of the novel, the Turbin's eventual fate remains as uncertain as ever, one of the final scenes shows them at home together, laughing and singing. And, in the penultimate paragraph, we see young Petya Shcheglov, from the neighbouring family, "uninterested", we are told, "in the Bolsheviks, or Petlyura, or the Devil" and dreaming he is walking across a large, green meadow towards a glittering diamond globe that showers him with coloured lights when he reaches it; he bursts out laughing from happiness.

In the light of Father Alexander's injunction to Alexei that despair is forbidden, such scenes acquire a particular significance. But the novel's clearly religious dimension is not confined to the need for optimism. Every so often the veil of fog and despair lifts to reveal a providential and mysteriously interconnected universe in which the course of people's lives can be shaped by the apparently miraculous, rather than the logic of brutal reality. Nikolka somehow manages to escape from an impossible situation; Alexei is rescued, quite out of the blue, by a total stranger, who unselfishly acts to help save his life, and he is later resurrected from the dead through, we are led to believe, the intercession of Yelena with her impassioned prayer to the Virgin Mary. Both brothers are linked, in circumstances that transcend the merely coincidental, by the labyrinth of houses and the "white, fairy-tale terraced garden" on Malo-Provalnaya Street: it is here that Alexei finds Julia, and that Nikolka meets the sister of his idol, the heroic Colonel Nai-Turs, whose horrific death he has witnessed, and whose body he has helped to bury.

There is an unexpected final twist. Bulgakov directs his readers' attention away from purely earthbound concerns – away even from the City, with its abundance of beautiful parks and gardens, and the mighty river Dnieper, overlooked by the towering statue of St Vladimir and its gigantic illuminated cross. The novel concludes as it began: with an image of the night sky. Since, as Bulgakov assures us, nothing will remain of value other than the stars, why then do we stubbornly continue to ignore their existence? This final paragraph is no mere rhetorical flourish, for it forces us to consider an aspect of the novel that has been present throughout: Bulgakov's implied criticism of the blinkered lives that the Turbins lead. How far, however, is such criticism counterbalanced by Bulgakov's sympathy for a family and a way of life that were

so close to his own heart? As in the conclusion to Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, in which there is a similar tension between conflicting emotions, we cannot be certain on which side Bulgakov intended to tip the scales. Whatever we may decide, the fact remains: if people choose to live behind cream-coloured curtains they may be able, at least for the time being, to shut themselves away from the outside world, but they will certainly deny themselves the opportunity to see the stars.

– Roger Cockrell

*The White Guard*

*To Lyubov Yevgenyevna Belozerskaya\**

*It began to snow... lightly at first, but then in large flakes.  
The wind started to howl; it was a snowstorm. In an  
instant the dark sky merged into an ocean of snow.  
Everything disappeared.*

*“We’re done for now, sir,” shouted the coachman.  
“It’s a blizzard!”*

*Pushkin, *The Captain’s Daughter*\**

*...and the dead were judged out of those things which  
were written in the books, according to their works.*

*Book of Revelation 20:12*

## Part One

### I

**G**REAT AND TERRIBLE was the year of Our Lord 1918, the second year after the revolution. The summer was abundant with sun and the winter with snow, and two stars stood especially high in the sky: the shepherds' star – the evening Venus – and red, quivering Mars.

Yet, whether times are peaceful or bloody, the days fly past like arrows, and the young Turbins did not notice the onset of white, hoary December. Oh, Santa Claus, glistening with snow and happiness! Oh, mother of ours, glittering queen! Where are you?

A year after her daughter Yelena had married Captain Sergei Ivanovich Talberg, and in the very same week in which her elder son, Alexei Vasilyevich Turbin, had returned home to the Ukraine, to the City,\* after a disastrous period of military service and heavy fighting – that very same week the white coffin containing the body of their mother had been carried down the steep St Alexei's Hill\* to the little church of St Nicholas the Good in Podol, on the Embankment.

It was May when they conducted the funeral service for their mother, and the arched windows of the church were overhung with the branches of cherry trees and acacias. Father Alexander, stumbling from grief and strong emotion, sparkled and shone in the golden lights, and the deacon, his face and neck the colour of violet, the forged gold gleaming from his head right down to the soles of his boots, sorrowfully intoned the words of the funeral service for a mother who had left her children behind.

Alexei, Yelena, Talberg, Anyuta, who had been brought up as one of the family, and young Nikolka, stunned by the death, with a lock of hair falling over his right eyebrow, stood at the foot of the ancient brown icon of St Nicholas. Nikolka's light-blue eyes, on either side of his long, birdlike nose, wore a lost, shattered expression. From time to time he looked up at the iconostasis, at the arch of the altar, barely perceptible in the semi-gloom, and at the sad, enigmatic figure of an

ancient God towering above them and winking. Why had this insult been inflicted upon them? What an injustice! Why had it been necessary to take their mother away from them, just when everyone had come together and started to feel a sense of relief?

Flying away into the crack in the dark sky, God said nothing in reply, and Nikolka was as yet unaware that everything that happens, whatever it might be, is always as it should be and always only for the best.

When the service was over, they went out onto the ringing flagstones of the church porch and accompanied their mother the whole way across the huge city to the cemetery, where their father had long since lain under a black marble cross. And there they buried their mother...

How many years before their mother's death, at No. 13 on St Alexei's Hill, had little Yelena, the elder son Alexei and tiny Nikolka been warmed and nurtured by the tiled stove in the dining room! How often had they sat by its glowing tiles, reading *The Shipwright of Saardam*,\* with the clock playing its gavotte! At the end of every December the air had been filled with the scent of pine needles, the multicoloured paraffin candles glowing on the green branches. The black clock on the dining-room wall had chimed in response to the gavotte played by the bronze clock standing in their mother's – now Yelena's – bedroom. Their father had bought these clocks long ago, when women still wore comical sleeves, puffed up to the shoulders. These sleeves had disappeared, time had sped by, their professor father had died, everyone had grown up, but the clocks remained, continuing to chime just as they had always done. These clocks had become so familiar that if, by some strange chance, they had vanished from the walls, everybody would have been affected as much as if a familiar voice had died, creating a gap that nothing could fill. But clocks, fortunately, live for ever, just as the Shipwright of Saardam lives for ever and, like some wise, ancient rock, the tiled Dutch stove continued, even in the most difficult times, to radiate warmth and life.

And these tiles, together with the old red-velvet furniture, the beds with their shiny brass knobs, the worn rugs – some multicoloured, some red – depicting Alexei Mikhaylovich\* with a falcon perched on his arm, the portrait of Louis XIV reclining languorously on the shores of a silken lake in some heavenly garden, the Turkish carpets with their stunning Oriental curlicues that entered the young Nikolka's delirious dreams when in bed with scarlet fever, the bronze lamp and lampshade, the finest bookshelves in the world, smelling mysteriously

of old chocolate, with Natasha Rostova\* and the Captain's Daughter, the gilt cups, the silver, the portraits and the drapes, all seven dusty, cluttered rooms that had nurtured the young Turbins – all this the children had inherited from their mother at the most difficult of times. With her final breaths she had clutched at the weeping Yelena's hand and enjoined them all to live together in friendship.

But exactly how were they to live? How?

The elder brother, the young doctor Alexei Vasilyevich Turbin, was twenty-eight, Yelena, twenty-four, her husband, Captain Talberg, thirty-one, and Nikolka, seventeen and a half. Their lives seem to have been shattered just as dawn was breaking. The winds had long since started to blow from the north, to blow and blow without ceasing, and the more they blew the worse it all became. The oldest Turbin had returned to his native city after the first gusts had blasted the hills above the river Dnieper. Now, at last, one might have thought, it would all stop, and the way of life depicted in those books smelling of chocolate would begin; but instead, it simply grew more and more terrible. The blizzard in the north howled and howled, while, close at hand, they could hear the dull rumbling of thunder, and an anguished growling from the depths of the earth. As the year 1918 flew towards its end, life became more threatening and bristling with the passing of each day.

The walls would fall, the frightened falcon would fly from the tsar's white sleeve, the light in the bronze lamp would fade, and the Captain's Daughter would be burnt in the stove. And, although the mother had told her children to live, the time would surely come when they would suffer and die.

One day, at dusk, shortly after their mother's funeral, Alexei Turbin went to Father Alexander and said:

"We're all feeling so sad, Father Alexander. It's hard for us to forget about our mother, especially when times are so difficult... After all, I've only just got back from the fighting, and I thought we could put everything right, and now this..."

He fell silent. Sitting at the table in the twilight, he looked pensively into the distance. The priest's little house was overhung with branches from the trees in the church courtyard, so that the walls of the cramped, book-lined study seemed to mark the edge of a mysterious, tangled spring forest. Filled with the scent of lilac, the evening air hummed with the muffled sound of the City.

“What can you do?” the priest muttered a couple of times. (He was always embarrassed whenever he had to talk to anyone.) “It’s the will of God.”

“Do you think that perhaps all this will come to an end? That maybe things will be better in the future?” Turbin asked, addressing no one in particular.

The priest shifted uneasily in his chair.

“Times are unquestionably hard,” he muttered, “but you must not be downhearted.”

Then, suddenly, freeing his pale white hand from the dark sleeve of his cassock, he placed it on a pile of books and opened the top book at the page in which there was already a coloured, embroidered bookmark.

“Despair must not be permitted,” he said, still sounding embarrassed, but now with a note of conviction in his voice. “It is a great sin... even though there will be trials and tribulations to come, I think. Yes, yes, major trials and tribulations,” he said, speaking in an even more assured tone. “Lately, you know, I have been sitting at my books, mostly theological, of course...”

Raising the book a little to allow the last rays of light from the window to fall upon the page, he started to read:

“And the third angel poured out his vial upon the rivers and fountains of waters; and they became blood.”\*

## 2

AND SO THE FROSTY, white December raced towards its halfway point. There was already a feeling of Christmas in the snowy streets: 1918 would soon be at an end.

The Turbins’ apartment was situated on the first floor of No. 13, overlooking the street. No. 13 was a two-storey house of strikingly unusual design, with the ground floor adjoining a sloping and compact little courtyard. Above the house was a garden, clinging to an extremely steep hillside, the drooping branches of the trees reaching almost down to the ground. The hill and the little outbuildings were covered in snow, turning them into one gigantic sugarloaf. The house itself was topped by a covering of snow resembling a White general’s fur cap. At the front, the lower floor looked out onto the street, whereas, at the back, it formed a basement abutting the courtyard, beneath the Turbins’ veranda. Here the cowardly engineer and

unpleasant bourgeois Vasily Ivanovich Lisovich had just lit his feeble, yellow lights. Upstairs, by contrast, the Turbins' windows were cheerfully ablaze with lights.

At dusk Alexei and Nikolka went out to the shed to fetch some logs.

"Oh look at that! Practically all gone, damn it! They've been at them once again."

By the blue cone of light from Nikolka's torch they could see that some planks on the shed wall had been ripped away and hastily replaced from the outside.

"By God, they should be shot, the devils! Tell you what: why don't we keep watch tonight? I know who it is: it's those shoemakers in No. 11. They've got more logs than we have, damn them!"

"Oh, to hell with them... Come on, let's go."

The rusty lock squeaked and a pile of logs crashed down. The two of them carried the logs into the house and, by nine o'clock that evening, the tiles of the Dutch stove had become too hot to touch.

The gleaming exterior of this extraordinary stove bore the following historical notes and sketches, the work of Nikolka's hand, done in black ink at various times during 1918, and full of the most profound meaning and significance:

*If anyone tells you that the Allies are hurrying to our rescue, don't believe them. The Allies are bastards.*

*He's a Bolshevik sympathizer.*

A sketch of Momus's face,\* signed "Lancer Leonid Yuryevich".

*There's terrible news, so they say:*

*The red hordes are on the way!*

The painted sketch of a head with a drooping moustache and wearing a fur cap with a blue tassel, with the inscription: "*Thrash Petlyura!*"\*\*

And the following notes, in paints, Indian ink, ordinary ink and cherry juice by Yelena and the Turbins' oldest and dearest childhood friends – Myshlayevsky, Karas and Shervinsky:

*Yelena Vasilyevna loves us all so...*

*But to some she'll say yes, to others no.*

*Lenochka, I have a ticket for Aida.\*  
Seat 8, dress circle, right-hand side.*

*Noon, 12th May 1918: have fallen in love.  
You're fat and ugly.*

*After saying this, I shall shoot myself. (Accompanied by a very life-like sketch of a Browning automatic pistol).*

*Long live Russia!  
Long live autocracy!*

*June. A barcarolle.*

*The whole of Russia remembers  
The day of Borodino.\**

Then in Nikolka's hand, in capital letters:

I HEREBY DECREE THAT ANY COMRADE RESPONSIBLE FOR WRITING  
UNAUTHORIZED MATERIAL ON THIS STOVE SHALL BE LIABLE TO  
BE SHOT WITH DEPRIVATION OF ALL RIGHTS.

SIGNED: COMMISSAR, PODOL DISTRICT COMMITTEE,  
LADIES', GENTLEMEN'S AND WOMEN'S TAILOR,

ABRAM PRUZHINER.\*  
30TH JANUARY 1918

The stove's decorated tiles glowed with heat and, just as thirty years ago, the black clock ticked on: *tonk, tank*. The older Turbin brother, clean-shaven, fair-haired, having noticeably aged and become sunk in gloom ever since 25th October 1917,\* was sitting in his favourite pose with his legs on the armchair. He was wearing an army jacket with huge pockets, blue riding breeches and soft new shoes. Nikolka was sitting by his brother's feet on a little stool, his forelock flopping over his eyes, his legs stretched out towards the sideboard – it was not a large dining room. He was wearing buckled boots, and he was strumming gently on his beloved guitar... *twang... twang...* a little absent-mindedly, however, since everything seemed uncertain at the moment. Things were bad in the City; anxiety and confusion were everywhere...

Nikolka was wearing the epaulettes with white stripes of a junior officer. On his left sleeve there was an acute-angled tricolour chevron. (Infantry, First Detachment, Third Squad. Formed four days ago, in anticipation of impending events.)

And yet, despite these events, everything in the dining room, it has to be said, was wonderful: warm, cosy, the cream-coloured curtains drawn, and the brothers wrapped in languorous warmth.

Alexei dropped his book and stretched himself.

“Come on then, play us ‘On the March’.”

*Twang, ta tum... twang, ta tum...*

“Their boots and caps so smart,  
The young engineers look the part  
As they march along!”

Alexei joined in the singing. There was a spark in his eyes, as well as sadness, and his blood quickened with life. But softly, gentlemen, softly.

“Hello there, summer residents,  
Hello there, all you folk...”

The guitar began accompanying the engineers as they marched along... left, right, left, right! Nikolka’s eyes were full of memories of the military school with its cannon and its peeling classical columns. The cadets crawling on their stomachs from window to window, returning fire. The machine guns in the windows.

The school had been surrounded by a large group of soldiers, a whole crowd of them. What could they do now? But General Bogoroditsky had taken fright and surrendered, given himself up with all his cadets. What a disgrace!

“Hello there, summer residents,  
Hello there, all you folk,  
The survey lads are here.”

Nikolka’s eyes clouded over: the columns of heat rising over the red Ukrainian fields; the companies of cadets marching along, covered in dust. At one time it had all been so real, but now it had all gone. The nonsensical disgrace of it all!

Yelena pulled back the heavy drapes over the doorway, and her auburn-golden hair was silhouetted against the dark gap. She looked tenderly at her brothers, and then cast a very worried look at the clock. It wasn't hard to understand why: where on earth had Talberg got to? She was anxious. She wanted to hide this by joining in the singing with her brothers, but suddenly she stopped and raised a finger.

"Wait! Did you hear that?"

All seven strings of the guitar and the engineers' march came to an abrupt halt. The three of them listened intently. It was gunfire – distant and muffled, but clearly heavy gunfire. *Boom!* There it was again. Nikolka quickly put down his guitar and stood up, followed, with a grunt, by Alexei.

The sitting room was totally dark. Nikolka bumped into a chair. Outside, with all the snow, noise and twinkling lights, it looked like a scene from the opera *Christmas Eve*.<sup>\*</sup> Nikolka pressed his face to the window. The heat and the training school had disappeared from his eyes, to be replaced by an expression of intense alertness. Where was the gunfire coming from? He shrugged his junior officer's shoulders.

"God only knows! Could be coming from somewhere near Svyatoshin.\* It's strange, though: shouldn't be that close."

Alexei stayed back, in the darkness, but Yelena was closer to the window, her frightened black-rimmed eyes clearly reflecting her anxiety. Why hadn't Talberg come? What did that mean? Sensing her agitation, Alexei remained silent, although he very much wanted to say something. Yes, Svyatoshin: there wasn't any doubt about it. That meant the firing was coming from only eight miles or so away. What was going on?

Nikolka gripped the window latch with one hand and pressed on the glass with the other, as if he wanted to push it and climb out. His nose was flattened against the pane.

"I want to go and find out what's happening."

"Yes, you go ahead, you're all they need right now..."

That was Yelena, motivated by anxiety. This was a disaster. Her husband should have been back by no later than three that afternoon for heaven's sake, and it was now ten.

They went back into the dining room in silence. The guitar, too, was now glumly silent. Nikolka brought the samovar from the kitchen and it began to sing and splutter. On the table there were teacups, decorated with delicate flowers on the outside, but with special little gold figures on the inside. During their mother's – Anna Vladimirovna's – time this

tea service had been reserved for special family occasions, but now her children used it every day. Despite the gunfire and all the anxiety, alarm and nonsense going on, the tablecloth was white and starched. This was thanks to Yelena, who could not have done otherwise, and also to Anyuta who had grown up in the Turbin household. The floors were gleaming and, even though it was December, there were a few blue hydrangeas and two rather sorry-looking sultry roses in a tall, matt vase on the table – asserting life’s beauty and permanence, despite the fact that, at the gates to the City, there was a cunning enemy capable, perhaps, of destroying its snow-covered beauty and trampling on the rubble. The flowers had been brought by Yelena’s faithful admirer, Guards Lieutenant Leonid Yuryevich Shervinsky, the friend of the saleslady in La Marquise, the famous confectionery shop, as well as of the saleslady in the snug little flower shop Les Fleurs de Nice. Beneath the hydrangeas there was a blue-patterned plate, some slices of sausage, some butter in a glass dish, sugar lumps in a bowl and a long, white loaf. If only things weren’t so awful outside, how wonderful it would have been just to enjoy it all! Goodness, how wonderful!

There was a brightly coloured tea cosy in the shape of a cockerel covering the teapot, and the distorted reflections of the three Turbin faces could be seen in the gleaming side of the samovar, with Nikolka’s cheeks resembling those of Momus.

Yelena’s eyes had an anguished expression, and locks of hair touched with gold drooped mournfully down.

The evening had been ruined: Talberg and his train with its consignment of the Hetman’s money\* must have got stuck somewhere. What could have happened to him, damn it?... The brothers listlessly ate their bread and sausage. In front of Yelena lay her cup of cold tea and a copy of ‘The Gentleman from San Francisco’.\* Her eyes, misted over and unseeing, were fixed on the words “gloom, ocean, storm...”

But Yelena was not reading.

Finally Nikolka could hold out no longer.

“I’d really like to know why the firing is so close. It can’t be that close, surely...”

He interrupted himself, his reflection in the samovar being distorted as he moved. Pause. The hand on the clock crawled on past ten and... *tonk, tank*... on towards a quarter past.

“They’re shooting because the Germans are bastards,” Alexei blurted out unexpectedly.

Yelena looked up at the clock.

“But surely they wouldn’t just leave us to our fate, would they?” she asked dejectedly.

As if by command, the brothers looked the other way, and started lying to her.

“Nothing is certain,” Nikolka said, chewing at a piece of bread.

“I was talking hypothetically. It’s just rumours.”

“No, it’s not just rumours,” Yelena replied stubbornly. “It’s a fact, not a rumour. I saw Mrs Shcheglova today and she said that two German regiments had withdrawn from Borodyanka.”

“Nonsense.”

“Think about it,” said Alexei. “Would it make any sense for the Germans to allow that sly devil to come anywhere near the city? Think about it! I cannot begin to imagine how they could coexist even for a single minute. A totally absurd idea: the Germans and Petlyura! They themselves call him nothing but a bandit. Just a laughable idea.”

“What are you on about? I’ve got to know the Germans now; I’ve seen some of them myself, in red armbands. And I saw a drunk warrant officer with some woman or other. The woman was drunk as well.”

“So what? You’ll get individual cases of misbehaviour just like that even in the German army.”

“And so Petlyura won’t enter the city, in your opinion?”

“In my opinion, that will never happen.”

“*Absolument*. Pour me another cup of tea please. Stop worrying. Remain, as they say, calm.”

“But where is Sergei, for goodness’ sake? I’m sure his train has been attacked and—”

“Stop it at once! That line he’s on is completely clear, I know it is.”

“Well, why isn’t he here then?”

“Good God! You know yourself what travel is like; I bet they’ve had a four-hour delay at every station.”

“That’s revolutionary travel for you: one hour on the move, two at a standstill.”

Sighing deeply, Yelena glanced up at the clock.

“But, Good Heavens,” she continued after a pause, “if the Germans hadn’t behaved so abominably, everything would have been fine. You only needed two of their regiments and this Petlyura of yours would have been crushed like a fly. No, the Germans are clearly playing some despicable double game. And what about the wonderful Allies? Where are they? The scum! They promised and promised...”

The samovar, silent up to this point, suddenly started to sing, and a few coals covered in grey ash tumbled out onto the tray. Involuntarily the brothers glanced at the stove. That was its answer perhaps: "The Allies are swine."

The hand of the clock reached a quarter past. With a distinct wheeze the clock struck once, to be answered immediately by the quiet high-pitched ring of the doorbell on the hall ceiling.

"Thank God, that must be Sergei," Alexei said joyfully.

"Yes, it's Talberg," agreed Nikolka, who ran to open the door.

Yelena stood up, her face flushed.

But it wasn't Talberg at all. Three doors slammed shut, and Nikolka's astonished voice could be heard indistinctly on the staircase. Then someone's reply, followed by the clatter of hobnailed boots and a rifle butt on the floor. The door into the hallway let in a draught of cold air, and in front of Alexei and Yelena stood a tall, broad-shouldered figure in a full-length army coat with khaki epaulettes, with the three stars of a lieutenant drawn in indelible pencil. The coat hood was covered in hoar frost, and the heavy rifle and brown bayonet filled the whole hallway.

"Hello," piped the figure in a hoarse tenor voice, as he clutched at his hood with numb fingers.

"Vitya!"

Nikolka helped the figure untie the ends of the drawstring, and the hood slipped down to reveal an officer's cap with a faded badge, and then, above the huge shoulders, the head of Lieutenant Viktor Viktorovich Myshlayevsky. It was a very handsome head, strangely sad and beautiful, its attractiveness the result of many centuries of good, if somewhat degenerate breeding, also reflected in his long eyelashes and the fearless expression in his eyes, each of a different colour. The nose was aquiline, the lips proud, and the forehead white and smooth, without any distinguishing marks. But one corner of his mouth drooped sadly, and his chin slanted slightly, as if a sculptor had begun with the intention of carving an aristocratic face, but had then conceived the wild idea of chipping off a chunk of clay to create a small, irregular chin that was more feminine than masculine.

"Where have you come from?"

"Yes, where've you been?"

"Careful," Myshlayevsky answered in a feeble voice, "don't break the bottle of vodka."

Nikolka carefully hung up the heavy coat. The neck of a bottle wrapped in newspaper peeped out from one of its pockets. Then, rocking the antler stand, he hung up the heavy Mauser in its wooden holster. Only then did Myshlayevsky turn to Yelena, kiss her hand and say:

“I’ve come from the Red Tavern area. Let me stay the night here, Lena; I won’t be able to make it home.”

“My God, of course.”

Myshlayevsky suddenly gave a groan and tried to blow on his fingers, but his lips wouldn’t obey him. His white eyebrows and velvety trimmed moustache tipped with hoar frost had begun to thaw, and his face ran with moisture. Alexei unbuttoned his service jacket, running his hand down the seam of his dirty shirt as he started to pull it away.

“I knew it: crawling with lice.”

“I know what,” Yelena said, suddenly stirring herself, momentarily forgetting about Talberg in her anxiety. “There are some logs in the kitchen, Nikolka; run and light the boiler. Oh, it’s so awful! Why on earth did I have to give Anyuta the evening off? Quick, Alexei, take his jacket off.”

In the dining room Myshlayevsky, by now giving full rein to his groans, slumped down on a chair by the stove. Yelena bustled about, her keys jingling. Alexei and Nikolka knelt down and tugged off Myshlayevsky’s tight-fitting dapper boots buckled at the calves.

“Hey, gently... gently...”

Then they unwound his disgusting, filthy leggings to reveal his lilac-coloured silk socks. Nikolka immediately took the jacket out to the cold veranda; the lice can all die out there. Sitting in his dirty linen vest, black braces and blue-striped breeches, looking ill, worn and thin, Myshlayevsky cut a pathetic figure. He clapped his blue hands together and rubbed them along the tiles of the stove... *terr... new... hor... way... love... May...*

“The bastards!” exclaimed Alexei. “They might at least have given you proper felt boots and warm sheepskin coats.”

“Felt boots,” repeated Myshlayevsky mockingly, the tears in his eyes. “Felt boots...”

The warmth inside the apartment was inducing unbearable pain in his frozen hands and feet. When Yelena’s footsteps in the kitchen were no longer audible, he cried out angrily and tearfully:

“What an utter shambles!”

Twisting and turning, breathing hoarsely, he slumped down again and jabbed a finger at his socks:

“Take them off, take them off...”

There was a revolting smell of methylated spirits, and a mound of melting snow lay in the basin. With a glassful of vodka inside him, Lieutenant Myshlayevsky had suddenly become inebriated; all sense had gone from his eyes.

“I hope to God they won’t have to be amputated...” he said bitterly, rocking in his chair.

“No, they’re fine; they’ll be all right. The big toe’s frostbitten, that’s all. It will come back to life, just like everything else...”

As Myshlayevsky put his stiff, wooden arms into the sleeves of a shaggy bathing robe, Nikolka squatted down by his feet and pulled on a pair of clean black socks. Hunched up, in clean underwear and bathing robe, the frozen Lieutenant Myshlayevsky returned to the land of the living; red spots had appeared on his cheeks. Swear words started leaping violently about the room like hail on a window sill. With unfocused eyes, he began to direct a torrent of obscenities at the general staff in their first-class railway carriages, at a certain Colonel Shchetkin, at the frost, Petlyura, the Germans and the blizzard, finishing by referring to the Hetman of all Ukraine himself in the basest and foulest terms imaginable.

Alexei and Nikolka looked at the lieutenant as he sat there thawing out, grinding his teeth. Every so often they made sympathetic and understanding noises.

“The Hetman, eh? The motherfucker!” roared Myshlayevsky. “And what about the Horse Guards? Where were they? In the palace! How about that? But we were sent off to fight as we were. How about that? Whole days and nights out in the snow and the frost... Good God! We thought we wouldn’t get through, fuck it! Nothing but a few officers strung out every couple of hundred yards. Do you call that a defensive line? Could have been slaughtered like a lot of chickens.”

“Wait a moment,” Alexei said, reeling from the coarse outburst. “Tell us who it was in the Red Tavern area exactly.”

“Pouf!” Myshlayevsky gestured dismissively. “Absolutely no idea! Do you know how many of us there were there? For-ty of us. Then that old witch Colonel Shchetkin arrives and says” – at this point Myshlayevsky screwed up his face and, speaking in a repellently thin lisp, attempted to mimic the hated Colonel Shchetkin – “Gentlemen, the entire hope of the City rests on you. Be worthy of the trust of the dying mother of Russian cities, and if the enemy should appear, then attack. God is with us! You will be relieved in six hours. But use the

ammunition sparingly.’ And off he swishes in his car with his adjutant,” continued Myshlayevsky, now speaking in his normal voice. “It’s dark as an arseho—! And the frost jabs into you like needles.”

“Yes, but who was it there, for Heaven’s sake? Petlyura can’t be anywhere in that area, surely.”

“Who the devil knows? By next morning, believe me, we’ve practically gone out of our minds. Ever since midnight in fact, waiting to be relieved. All feeling in arms and legs has gone, but no sign of any relief. We can’t light any fires, of course – there’s a village less than a mile away, and the Red Tavern’s even closer. During the night you begin to imagine things: the field seems to be moving, could be people crawling. All right, I think, what shall we do? You fling up your rifle, wondering whether to shoot or not; it’s very tempting. You stand there and howl like a wolf. You shout, and someone farther along the line answers. In the end, you dig yourself a hole in the snow with your rifle butt, settle down, and try to stay awake. Sleep, and you’re done for. Just before daybreak, I can’t hold out any longer: I can feel myself dozing off. What do you think saved me? Machine guns! As the sun comes up, all hell breaks loose, perhaps a couple of miles away! And, can you imagine, I don’t want to get up! Then a field gun starts blasting away. I stand up. I feel as if I have heavy weights on my legs. That’s just brilliant, I think – Petlyura’s here. Our line closes up a little, and we start to call across to each other. We decide that, in the event of an attack, we’ll close up and form a single group, return fire, and move back in the direction of the City. If they overwhelm us, then they overwhelm us. At least we’d be together. And then, can you imagine, everything goes quiet. During the morning, groups of three of us at a time run to the tavern to thaw out. When do you think our relief arrives? Two o’clock in the afternoon – that’s two o’clock this afternoon. Two hundred cadets from the First Detachment. All properly equipped, as you can imagine, in fur caps, felt boots, and with a machine-gun unit. Led by Colonel Nai-Turs.”

“Ah, one of ours!” shouted Nikolka.

“Wait a moment, isn’t he with the Belgrade Hussars?”\*

“Yes, that’s right. Anyway, when they see us, they’re horrified, of course. ‘We thought there were two companies with machine guns here,’ they say. ‘How on earth did you manage to hold out?’”

“It turned out that those machine guns we’d heard at daybreak had been part of a motley group of about a thousand attacking Serebryanka. Luckily, they didn’t know just how thin our line was; otherwise, as you

can imagine, the whole lot of them would have been in the City. And lucky, too, that the others just had time to inform Post-Volynsky, which meant that some battery or other could shell the enemy. Anyway, they lost the will to carry on the attack and melted away into thin air, God knows where.”

“But who were they? It can’t really have been Petlyura, can it?”

“Who the hell knows? I think it was local peasants – God-bearers straight out of Dostoevsky!\*. . . The motherfuckers!”

“Good God!”

“Yes,” Myshlayevsky continued hoarsely, drawing on a cigarette. “We were relieved, thank the Lord. When we counted up there were thirty-eight of us. So there you are, you see: only two of us had frozen to death. Finished. But there were two others taken away to have their feet amputated. . .”

“What, two of you died?”

“Well, what did you expect? One cadet and one officer. But things were even more fun in Popelyukha, a village near the Red Tavern, where I’d gone with Lieutenant Krasin to get a sledge for those who’d been frostbitten. So here we are in the village – seems absolutely dead, not a soul. We look around and finally spot some old bloke in a sheepskin cloak hobbling along on a crutch. When he sees us he’s really happy. Can you imagine? There’s something going on that’s not quite right here, I’m thinking. Why’s this silly old codger shouting at us so ecstatically? ‘Hey, lads!’ he called out in Ukrainian. So I launch into Ukrainian as well, using my sweetest voice: ‘Hello, granddad, we need a sledge, quickly.’ And he goes and answers: ‘There ain’t no sledges; them officer lot have taken them all off to Post.’ So I wink at Krasin and say: ‘Officer lot, eh? So where’s everyone else then?’ ‘Them’s run off to join Petlyura,’ he blurted out. How do you like that, eh? The blind old fool hadn’t spotted the epaulettes under our hoods and had taken us for Petlyura’s men. So, as you can imagine, I can hold back no longer. . . I see red, what with the frost and everything. I grab the old boy by the front of his coat and shout at him so loudly he almost dies from fright. ‘Run off to join Petlyura? I’ll shoot you on the spot! That will teach you how to run off to Petlyura! You’ll run off to kingdom come, you swine!’ At this, of course, our saintly son of the soil” – a whole avalanche of abuse poured from Myshlayevsky – “sees the light in a flash, falls to his knees and starts shouting: ‘Oh, Your Honour, please forgive me, I was joking; I’m just an old man, can’t see very well. I’ll get your horses right away, many as you want, only please don’t shoot me!’ So we get our horses and our sledge.