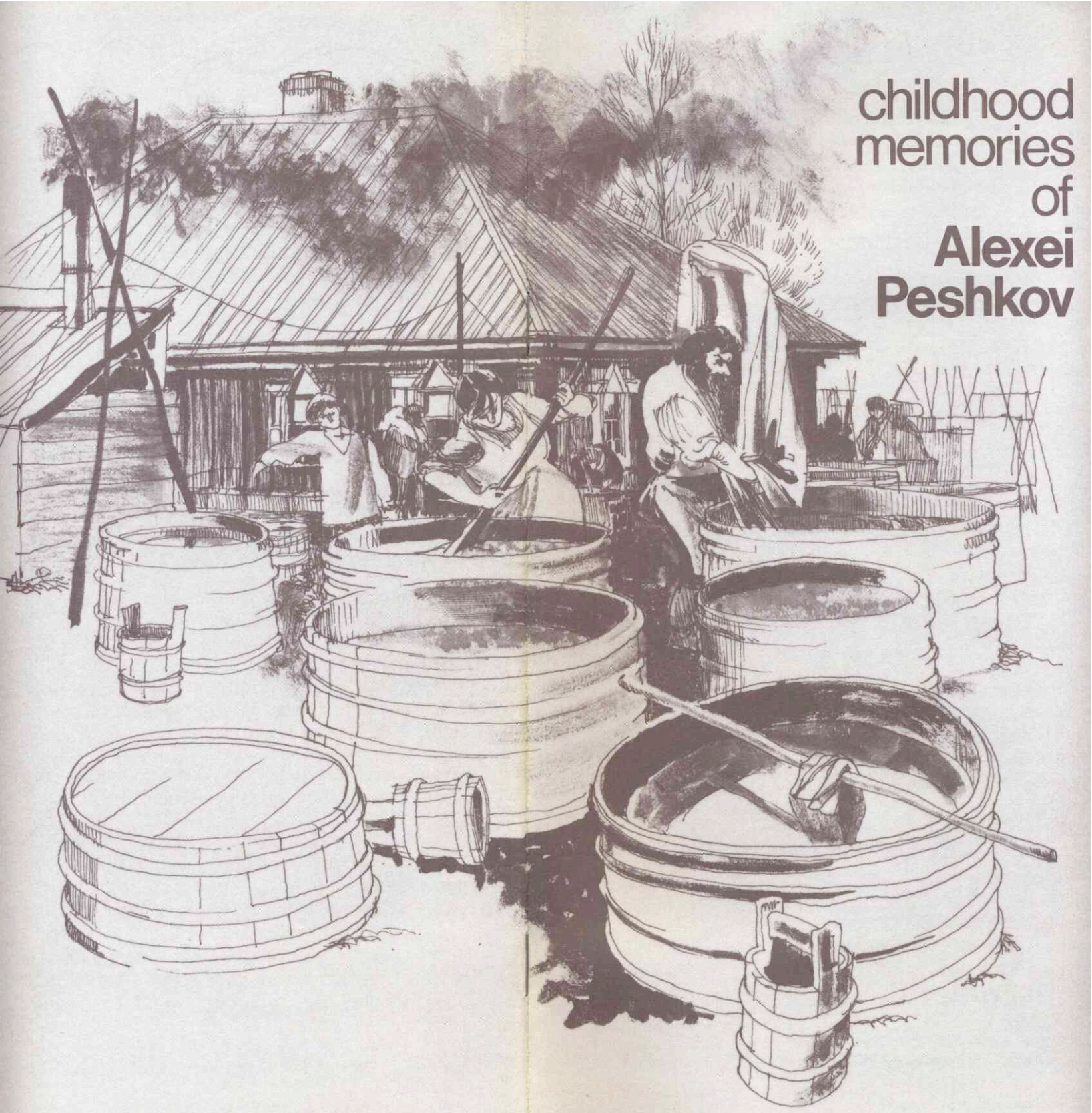

childhood memories of **Alexei Peshkov**

Exploring Childhood/Family and Society
experimental edition

Each autobiography in this series presents one person's experience, lived and remembered in his or her own special way. While aspects of this person's life circumstances may be shared by others, each life is a unique combination of events, and should not be viewed as typical of any group.

Maxim Gorky describes his early childhood in Russia a hundred years ago.

Maxim Gorky: MY CHILDHOOD, trans. by Ronald Wilks (Penguin Classics 1966). Copyright © Ronald Wilks, 1966.

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Born in 1868, Gorky (whose real name was Alexei Peshkov) grew up in Czarist Russia, just before the upheavals of revolution. In an extraordinary autobiography, Gorky vividly recaptures details of the first eight years of his life.

After the death of his father, five-year-old Alexei and his mother moved in with her parents, where Grandfather ran a fairly prosperous dye works. Gathered under this roof are the boy's wild-tempered grandfather, his loving grandmother, his stoic mother, rough and jealous Uncles Mikhail and Yakov and their families, and the lodger Tsiganok who had grown up as a member of the family.

These pages record some of Gorky's earliest memories of life in this often violent home. According to Gorky, the hard life he endured there gave him a lasting preoccupation with the sufferings of others.

I stood on a slippery heap of sticky mud and looked down into the pit where my father's coffin had been lowered. At the bottom was a lot of water, and a few frogs. Two of them had succeeded in climbing on to the yellow coffin lid. My grandmother, myself, a policeman who looked soaked to the skin, and two men with spades who were evidently in a very bad mood, had gathered round the grave. A warm rain, as fine as delicate beads, began to fall gently on us.

"Fill it in," said the policeman as he walked away.

Grandmother burst into tears and hid her face in her shawl.

The gravediggers, bent double, began piling the earth into the grave at great speed. Water squelched. The frogs jumped off the coffin and tried to escape up the sides, but were thrown back by clods of earth.

"Let's go now, Lenya," said Grandmother as she put her hand on my shoulder. Reluctant to leave, I slipped out of her grasp.

"God help us," she grumbled—not at me, or even at God, and she stood by the grave for a long time, quite silent. Even when the grave had been levelled off she still stood there.

The gravediggers smacked their spades against the mud, which made them ring out with a hollow sound. A sudden gust of wind drove away the rain.

Grandmother took my hand and led me to a distant church surrounded by a great number of dark crosses.

"Why don't you cry?" she asked when we left the cemetery. "You *ought* to cry."

"I don't want to," I replied.

"Well, you'd better not if you don't want to," she said softly.

I found this very strange. When I did cry, which wasn't often, it was usually because of some insult, and not from physical pain; my father always laughed at me, but Mother would shout:

"Don't you dare cry!"

Afterwards we rode in a droshky along a broad and very muddy street lined with houses painted deep red. I asked Grandmother:

"Will the frogs get out?"

"No, they don't stand a chance, God help them!"

Neither my mother nor my father ever mentioned the name of God so often and with such familiarity.

*

A few days later we were all travelling in a small cabin on board a steamboat....

I clambered up on to the piles of luggage and trunks, and looked out of the porthole, which was round and bulging like a horse's eye. Beyond the wet glass the swirling foamy water stretched away endlessly. At times it seemed to rear up and lick the glass, making me jump back on to the floor.

"Don't be frightened," said Grandmother as she gently lifted me in her soft arms and put me back on the pile of luggage.

A grey, damp mist hung over the water. Somewhere, in the distance, a dark mass of land would loom up, and then disappear. Everything around me was shaking. Only my mother, who was leaning against a wall, her hands behind her head, stood firm and steady.

Her face, clouded over, grimly set and with the eyes shut tight, was that of a blind person. Not once did she speak. She seemed to have changed into somebody else, strange and new. Even her dress was different.

Grandmother asked her over and over again, in the soft voice she had:

"Varya dear, try and eat something, won't you?'

My mother didn't reply and remained motionless....

When I woke up, the boat was shaking all over again and pounding through the water. Like the sun, the porthole seemed to be on fire. Grandmother was sitting near me, combing her hair and frowning as she muttered to herself. She had amazingly long hair—black streaked with blue—that reached right down to the floor, falling over her shoulders, breasts and knees. She would lift the long plaits with one hand and force a

wooden comb, which only had a few teeth, through them with great difficulty. Her lips twisted and her dark eyes shone angrily, and her face, framed by that huge mass of hair, became small and comical.

Today she seemed in a bad temper, but when I asked her why she had such long hair, she told me in the same soft and warm voice as yesterday:

"It's one of God's ways of punishing me—it's the devil's own job combing the damned stuff out! Ever since I was a little girl I used to boast about my lion's mane. Now it's the curse of my life! Time you were asleep! It's still very early, the sun's only just risen."

"But I don't want to sleep!"

"Then don't!" she agreed at once, plaiting her hair and looking at the divan where my mother lay, face upwards, taut as a violin string. "Tell me how you broke that bottle yesterday. But quietly!"

When she spoke she seemed almost to sing her words and this made them take root firmly in my memory, like flowers—soft, bright and full of richness. When she smiled, the pupils of her dark cherry-coloured eyes opened wide blazing with a light that was too welcoming for words, and her strong white teeth were laid bare. In spite of the many wrinkles in the swarthy skin round her cheeks, her whole face suddenly became young and radiant again. What spoiled it was that puffy nose with its inflated nostrils and red tip—she took snuff which she kept in a black box decorated with silver. A dark figure, she shone from within with a warm, cheering light. Although she had a bad stoop and was almost hunchbacked, and fat into the bargain, she moved with a surprising ease and agility, like a large cat—and she was just as soft as that affectionate animal.

Before she came into my life I must have

been lying asleep in a dark corner, but now she had woken me up, brought me out into the light, and bound up everything around me into a continuous thread which she wove into many-coloured lace. At once she became a friend for life, nearest to my heart, and the person I treasured and understood more than anyone else. It was her unselfish love of the world that enriched me and nourished me with the strength I would need for the hard life that lay ahead . . . .

My mother rarely went on deck, and never came near us. She said nothing all the time we were on the boat. Her large shapely body, her dark emotionless face, her heavy crown of bright, plaited hair, her firmness and strength—all this I can picture now as though I were seeing her through a mist or a transparent cloud, from which her grey eyes, large as Grandmother's, peered out coldly and distantly.

Once she said sternly:

"People are always laughing at you, Mamma!"

"Let them!" answered Grandmother in an unconcerned voice. "Let them laugh. It's good for them!"...

Mother produced a gloomy smile.

When the boat dropped anchor opposite the beautiful city in the middle of a river crowded with boats and bristling with hundreds of pointed masts, a large rowing-boat full of people came alongside and hooked on to the lowered rope ladder. One by one the people climbed up. In front of everyone else was a small, shrivelled-looking old man in long black clothes and with a beard of tarnished gold. He had a nose like a bird's beak, and small green eyes, and he climbed rapidly to the top of the ladder.

"Father!" my mother cried in a loud deep

voice and flung herself into his arms. He seized her head, swiftly stroked her cheeks with his small reddish hands and screeched:

"And how's my silly girl, eh? Now, now. You've come at last!"

Grandmother managed to embrace and kiss everyone at once and she spun round like a propeller. She pushed me forwards and said hurriedly:

"Move yourself now. This is Uncle Mikhail, and this is Uncle Yakov . . . Auntie Natalya, and these are your cousins, both called Sasha, and your cousin Katerina . . . it's a big family!"

Grandfather said to her: "Are you well?" They kissed each other three times.

Grandfather hauled me away from the thick mob and asked me, holding me by the head:

"And who might you be?"

"I'm from Astrakhan, from the cabin . . ."

"What's he talking about?" Grandfather said to Mother.

Without giving me time to reply, he pushed me to one side and said: "He's got his father's cheekbones . . . Get into the boat!"

We reached the shore and we all went up the hill along a road made of large cobbles, high embankments overgrown with rank trampled grass lining it on either side . . . .

We reached the end of the path. At the very top, leaning against the embankment on the right, and the very first house in the street, stood a squat, single-storeyed house painted dirty pink, with a roof hanging low over its bulging windows like a hat pulled down. From the street it looked very big, but inside its dim little rooms it was very cramped.

Angry people rushed about in all directions like passengers about to disembark from a ship, ragged children swarmed all over the place like thieving sparrows, and the whole house was filled with a strange pungent smell [of the dyes].

I stood outside in the yard, which was just as unpleasant: all around it hung huge wet rags and it was full of tubs containing oily-looking water, all different colours. Pieces of cloth were being dipped into them. In one corner, under a ramshackle lean-to, wood burnt fiercely in a stove. I could hear water boiling and bubbling and someone I couldn't see was shouting, very loudly, these strange words: "Sandalwood, magenta, vitriol."

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And there began a new life, infinitely strange and varied, in which the days rushed by at terrifying speed. Now I see it as a grim story, the creation of a sincere artist with a passionate devotion to the truth, however cruel. As I try to bring the past to life I find it hard to believe that it all really happened. That dreary life was so full of violence that I would even like to question or gloss over much of it.

But truth is nobler than self-pity and in fact I am not writing about myself alone, but about that close-knit, suffocating little world of pain and suffering where the ordinary Russian man in the street used to live, and where he lives to this day.

Grandfather's house was filled with a choking fog of mutual hostility. It poisoned the grown-ups and even infected the children. Later on, Grandmother told me that Mother had arrived just at the time her brothers were continually pestering her father to divide up the estate. Mother's unexpected return only sharpened their desire to get what they thought was their rightful share. They were afraid that Mother would ask for a dowry, to

which she was entitled but which Grandfather had withheld because, as he put it, "she had gone her own way" and married against his wishes. My uncles thought the dowry should go to them. For a long time they had been having long and violent arguments as to which of them should open a dyeworks, in the town or across the Oka river in the Kunavino district.

Soon after our arrival a fierce quarrel started in the kitchen. The uncles, without any warning, suddenly leaped to their feet, leaned across the table, and started howling and roaring at Grandfather, shaking themselves and baring their teeth like dogs. Grandfather retaliated by banging his soup-spoon on the table. Then he went red in the face and screeched like a cock: "I'll cut you all off without a penny!"

Her face twisted with pain, Grandmother said:

"Let them have the lot, then they'll leave you alone!"

"Shut up! I know you're on their side!" roared Grandfather, his eyes flashing. I thought it very strange that someone so small could make such a deafening noise. Mother left the table slowly, went over to the window, and turned her back on everyone. Suddenly Uncle Mikhail gave his brother a backhander on the face. The injured brother howled with pain, started grappling with Uncle Mikhail, and they both rolled around the floor, groaning and swearing.

The children started crying. Aunt Natalya, who was pregnant at the time, gave a despairing moan. Mother took hold of her behind the arms and dragged her off somewhere. Yevgenia, our nanny, a cheerful pockfaced woman, chased the children out of the kitchen. Tables were sent flying. Tsiganok, a young broad-shouldered apprentice in the

dyeworks, sat himself astride Uncle Mikhail's back while our foreman, Grigory Ivanovich, who was bald, had a beard and wore black glasses, calmly bound his arms with a towel.

Uncle Mikhail groaned terribly as he stuck his neck out and rubbed his black beard on the floor. Grandfather ran round the table miserably shrieking: "Call yourself brothers! Your own flesh and blood . . . ."

Right at the beginning of the battle I had taken fright and leaped up on to the shelf over the stove. From this place of refuge I looked down with amazement at Grandmother washing the blood from Uncle Yakov's cut face with water from a copper basin. My uncle was crying and stamping his feet, while Grandmother said wearily: "Savages, that's what you are. Take a grip on yourselves!"

Grandfather pulled his torn shirt over his shoulders and bellowed at her: "Old bitch! It's wild animals you've given me, not sons!"

When Uncle Yakov had gone, Grandmother crept into a corner. She was shaking like a leaf and howling: "Holy Mother of God, please make my children see reason!" Grandfather stood at her side, surveyed the table, which was littered with a mess of smashed crockery and overturned dishes, and said quietly: "Mind they don't work Varvara to death. Anything that's decent they'll drag down into the dirt . . ."

"For God's sake stop talking like that . . . let's have your shirt and I'll patch it up."

She squeezed his head between her open palms and kissed him on the forehead. He looked so small next to her and his face bumped against her shoulder.

"That's all I can do now . . . divide it between

them . . . ."

"Yes, that's what you've got to do."

They went on talking for a long time. At first it was friendly, but then Grandfather started scraping his foot over the floor, like a cock impatient for the fight, and he poked his finger threateningly at Grandmother and whispered, loud enough for me to hear, "Don't I know you by now! You feel more for them; that dear little Jesuit Mishka of yours; as for Yashka, he's nothing more than a Freemason! You'll see, they'll drink it all away. . . ."

I turned clumsily on my perch on the stove and knocked an iron over. It clattered down the small ladder and fell into the sink with a loud splash. Grandfather sprang on to the ladder, hauled me down and stared me straight in the eyes as if he'd never seen me before.

"Who put you up there? Your mother?"

"I went up myself."

"You're lying."

"No, I'm not. I was frightened."

He pushed me aside, giving me a gentle slap on the forehead.

"Just like his father! Clear off . . . ."

I was only too glad to get out of that kitchen.

I could see all too clearly that Grandfather was in the habit of following me with his clever, sharp-sighted green eyes, and for this I was afraid of him. I can remember that I was for ever trying to hide from those all-devouring eyes. To me, Grandfather was a wicked person. He was sarcastic and offensive whenever he spoke to anyone, and always trying to provoke people.

"Oooh, what a lot!" he would often exclaim. That long drawn-out "oooh" never failed to make me feel depressed and cold all over.

In the afternoon tea-break, when Grandfather, my uncles and the workmen came into the kitchen from the dyeing shop, tired out, with hands reddened by sandalwood and burned with vitriol, and their hair tied up in ribbons, so they all looked like the rather sinister icons [religious statues] in the kitchen corner—at that dangerous hour Grandfather would come and sit opposite me and make all the other children jealous by giving most of his attention to me. He had a sharp-edged angular appearance, finely moulded and well proportioned. His embroidered satin waistcoat was old and threadbare and his cotton shirt all crumpled. His trousers sported large patches at the knees, but in spite of this he looked well-dressed, cleaner, and smarter than his sons, with their jackets, false shirt-fronts and silk cravats.

Not long after our arrival he made me learn my prayers by heart. The other children were older and already learning how to read and write with the deacon from the Church of the Assumption—its golden dome could be seen from our windows. Aunt Natalya used to give me lessons at home. She was a timid, quietish woman with a face like a child's, and eyes so transparent I always imagined I could see right through them to the back of her head. I loved to gaze into her eyes for a long time without turning away or blinking. This made her screw up her eyes, move her head away and ask in a voice almost as soft as a whisper: "Please repeat after me: 'Our Father, Which art in Heaven' . . ."

If I asked: "What does 'art' mean?" she would look round in fright and say sternly: "Don't you ask now—that only makes it worse. Just repeat after me: 'Our Father.' Well?" Why asking questions should make things worse worried me. The word "art"

took on a mysterious meaning, and I repeated it wrongly whenever I had the chance: "which part," "which heart," and so on. But my aunt, so pale she seemed to be fading away, would patiently correct me. "Now just you say 'which art'." She seemed as difficult to understand as the words she was trying to teach me. This annoyed me, and made it hard work for me to memorize my prayers.

One day Grandfather asked: "Well, what you been up to today? Playing in the street, I bet. I can see from the bump on your forehead. It's not clever getting mixed up in fights! Can you recide the Lord's Prayer?"

My aunt said in her soft voice: "He's got a bad memory."

Grandfather laughed and cheerily raised his reddish eyebrows.

"In that case he deserves a good hiding."

He turned to me again and asked: "Did your father beat you?"

Not understanding what he was talking about, I didn't reply, and Mother intervened: "No, Maxim never beat him and he didn't let me either."

"Why not?"

"He used to say it never did any good."

"What a fool he was, that Maxim, God forgive me for speaking ill of the dead!" These words were spoken in an angry, clipped voice. They deeply hurt me, and Grandfather noticed it.

"Stop sulking. You should see yourself. . . ."

He stroked his silvery-red hair and added:

"On Saturday I'm going to flog Sashka. Because of the thimble."

"What's 'flogging'?" I asked.

Everyone laughed and Grandfather said: "Just you wait and see. . . ."

I was acquainted with every detail of the tempestuous thimble story. One evening, about an hour before supper, the uncles and the foreman were sewing up pieces of dyed material into one length and pinning cardboard labels on it. Deciding to play a joke on Grigory who was half blind, Uncle Mikhail told his nine-year-old nephew to heat Grigory's thimble over a candle. Sasha gripped the thimble in some pincers used for snuffing the candles, waited until it was red-hot, put it down near Grigory's hand without him seeing, and hid behind the stove. At that moment who should come in but Grandfather, who sat down and put his finger in the red-hot thimble.

I remember escaping from the uproar into the kitchen and seeing Grandfather clutching his ear with his burnt fingers and comically hopping and shouting: "What infidel did that?"

Uncle Mikhail, bent over the table, was chasing the thimble with his finger and blowing on it. Grigory went on sewing as if nothing had happened. Shadows from the fire flickered over his vast bald head. Uncle Yakov ran to see if he could help, then hid behind the stove, where he laughed quietly to himself. Grandmother took a moist potato and began grating it.

"It's Sasha's work," Uncle Mikhail said suddenly.

"That's a lie," retorted Uncle Yakov, springing out from his hiding-place.

In one corner his son could be heard crying and protesting:

"Papa, don't believe him. He told me to do

it!"

The uncles started swearing at each other. All at once Grandfather calmed down, pressed the bits of potato to his finger, and left the room without saying a word, taking me with him by the scruff of the neck.

Everyone blamed Uncle Mikhail. My question, during tea, "Would he get a flogging?" was perfectly natural in the circumstances.

"He deserves it," snarled Grandfather, looking at me out of the corner of his eye.

Uncle Mikhail thumped the table and shouted to Mother:

"If you don't take that brat of yours out of here I'll bash his face in!"

"Just you lay a finger on him!" replied Mother.

No one said a word.

Mother had a knack of using short words as defensive weapons for warding off people, repelling them and making them feel powerless. It was obvious to me everyone was afraid of her. Even Grandfather spoke to her differently and in a more subdued voice. This pleased me and I used to boast about it to my cousins.

"My mother's strongest!"

And they didn't dispute it.

But an event that took place the following Saturday completely changed my attitude to Mother.

By then I had managed to get myself into serious trouble. The skill with which the grown-ups made the cloth change colour used to intrigue me very much. They would take a yellow piece of cloth and soak it in black water

and it would come out deep blue, or "indigo" as it was called. Then they would rinse out a grey piece in rusty coloured water, and it came out "Bordeaux claret." It was all so simple—and mystifying.

I wanted to try my hand at dyeing as well and told Uncle Yakov's Sasha about it. He was a serious boy, always tried to please the grown-ups, was polite to everyone and ready to do whatever anyone asked of him. The grown-ups praised his intelligence and obedience, but Grandfather would squint at him and say: "You little crawler!" . . .

Uncle Yakov's Sasha could discourse at length and with the authority of an adult. When he discovered I wanted to become a dyer, he told me to get the white tablecloth, which was used for special occasions, and dye it blue.

"White's always easiest, and I should know," he said in a very serious tone.

I pulled the tablecloth out, ran into the yard with it, but no sooner had I dropped it into the "indigo" tub than Tsiganok pounced on me, hauled it out, squeezed it with his broad hands, and shouted to my cousin who had followed me out of the house to supervise the work:

"Call Grandmother at once!"

He shook his black, dishevelled hair ominously and said:

"You'll cop it for this!"

Grandmother came running, groaned, even burst into tears, and started to scold me with quaint, comical expressions.

"You no-good from Perm! Blockhead! I've a good mind to drop you in one of the tubs!"

Then she began exhorting Tsiganok:

"Vanya, don't dare tell Grandfather, whatever you do. I won't say anything and perhaps no one will find out."

Vanya said anxiously, wiping his wet hands on his many-coloured apron: "it's nothing to do with me, but I won't say anything."

"I'll keep him quiet with a few coppers," said Grandmother as she led me into the house.

On Saturday, just before evening prayers, someone took me to the kitchen, where it was dark and quiet. I clearly remember lots of doors shut tight, and beyond the windows, the misty greyness of an autumn night and the dull sound of rain. On a broad bench in front of the black-mouthed stove sat my friend Tsiganok, hardly recognizable. Grandfather stood in the corner by the sink, picking out long twigs from a bucket full of water. He measured them, bound them up, and made them whistle through the air.

Somewhere in the darkness Grandmother noisily took her snuff and grumbled: "Leave him be, you butcher!"

Sasha Yakovov, who was sitting on a chair in the middle of the kitchen, rubbed his eyes with his fists and said in a drawling voice that sounded more like an old beggar's than his own:

"For Christ's sake, forgive him. . . ."

Shoulder to shoulder, like tree trunks, Uncle Mikhail's children—brother and sister—stood on the far side of the table.

"I'll forgive him when I've finished," said Grandfather, laying a long wet twig across his hand. "Right, take your trousers off."

He said this calmly, and neither the sound of his voice, nor the noise of the children leaning on the creaky table, not even Grandmother scraping her feet along the floor, broke that

memorable silence in the gloomy kitchen, beneath a smoke-blackened ceiling.

Sasha got up, undid his trousers, let them down to his knees and managed to keep them from falling right down with his hands. Bent double, he stumbled across to the bench. It wasn't a pleasant sight, and my legs shook in sympathy. But worse was to come, when he lay on the bench, like a lamb for the slaughter, face downwards. With a wide towel Vanka tied him to it round the armpits and neck, stooped over him and gripped his ankles with his black hands.

"Come a bit closer, Alexei," Grandfather called. "Did you hear me? Now you'll see what I mean by flogging! One. . . ."

He swung his hand, not very high, and brought the twigs down hard on bare flesh. Sasha gave a piercing scream.

"Liar," said Grandfather. "That didn't hurt! Try this for size!"

He struck him, so violently that the skin became inflamed at once and a red stripe appeared. My cousin howled continually.

"Isn't that delightful?" Grandfather inquired, raising and dropping his arm at regular intervals. "Don't you like it? It's in payment for the thimble!"

When he swung his arm up or down, my heart rose and fell exactly in time.

Sasha screamed in a revolting, delicate little voice:

"I won't do it again. I told you about it, didn't I? I confessed. . . ."

Calmly, as though he were reading from the Psalter, Grandfather said:

"Telling tales is no excuse! Informers should

be punished first. That's for the tablecloth!"

Grandmother rushed towards me and seized me in her arms. She cried:

"I won't let you take Alexei. I won't, you monster!"

She started kicking at the door and called out:

'Varya, Varvara!'

Grandfather fell upon her, knocked her off her feet, snatched me away from her and carried me to the bench. I struggled, pulled his red beard, bit his finger. He roared, squeezed me and finally threw me on the bench so that I cut my face open. I still remember his wild cry:

"Tie him up. I'll kill him!"

And I remember, too, Mother's pale face with its enormous eyes. She ran the length of the bench gasping:

"Papa! Let him go. Please don't. . . ."

Grandfather flogged me until I was unconscious and for several days I was very ill. I lay in a wide, stuffy bed, face downwards, in a little room with one window. In one corner, in front of a case crammed full of icons, burnt an everlasting lamp.

These days of sickness were very important for my future development, and during them I must have grown up a lot. I began to experience a totally new kind of feeling. From now onwards my concern for others never let me rest for a moment, and, just as if my heart had been laid bare, I became almost intolerably sensitive to any insult or physical pain, whether I, or someone else, was the victim. . . .

Suddenly, as if he'd jumped down from the

ceiling, Grandfather appeared, sat on my bed and felt my head with a hand as cold as ice.

"Good morning, sir . . . . Now, answer me, and don't be angry. How are you?"

All I wanted was to kick him but the least movement was painful. His hair looked redder than ever before. He shook his head restlessly, and his bright eyes seemed to be looking for something on the wall. He took out of his pocket a piece of gingerbread, two sugar cakes, an apple, a little branch with blue raisins, and put them all on the pillow, just by my nose.

"Look, I've brought you some presents!"

He leant over and kissed me on the forehead. Then he started talking to me, stroking my head with his small, rough hand covered all over in yellow dye, especially the deformed, birdlike nails.

"I've been very hard with you. But you lost your temper. You bit and scratched me and made me lose mine! It won't hurt you if you got more than you deserved. I'll count it as part payment for the future! You must remember that when someone of your own flesh and blood beats you, it's for your own good, and should never be considered an injustice. Do you think I was never thrashed? I got such beatings, the like you'd never see even in a nightmare. I was so badly treated that God would have wept to see it! And what good did it do me? I was an orphan, with a beggar for a mother, and in spite of that I got where I am now—a freeman, a member of the guild, a leader of men."

He leaned up against me with his thin, finely built body, and began to tell me about his childhood in vigorous meaty words which he strung together with great skill and ease . . . .

He talked very quickly, and swelled like a cloud in front of me, changing from a small

thin old man into someone of fabulous strength—just him against the river with his huge grey barge. . . .

Several times someone poked his head round the door and called Grandfather, but I said imploringly:

"Don't go!"

He would laugh and wave everyone away:

"It won't be long. . . ."

He would go on telling his stories until the evening, and when he left, after an affectionate farewell, I realized Grandfather was not wicked or terrifying, and then it was terribly hard for me to remember that he had beaten me so cruelly; but all the same, I was never to forget it.

Grandfather's visit opened the door to the whole household, and from morning till evening there was usually someone sitting by the bed, doing all they could to amuse me. But their efforts weren't always successful. Grandmother was my most frequent visitor: she shared the same bed. But the one who left the most vivid impression on me was Tsiganok. With his huge square shoulders, broad chest and enormous curly head, he came to visit me one evening, gaily dressed, as if he were off to a party, in a golden, silky shirt, velvet trousers and boots that squeaked like a harmonica. His hair shone, his squinting eyes sparkled merrily under his thick eyebrows, and his white teeth gleamed beneath the black stripe of his young moustache. His shirt, gently reflecting the red flame of the icon lamp, seemed to be on fire.

"Just you look," he said as he raised his sleeve to show me his bare arm which was covered up to the elbow in red scars. "See how it's swollen! They've almost healed now—you should have seen them before! Like to know what happened? In comes your Grandfather in a blind rage and I see him

start on you. So I put my arm between you and the whip, hoping it would break, so that Grandfather would have to go and get another one, and your Grandmother or Mother could have dragged you to safety. But no, the twigs didn't break, as the water made them too supple. Even so, I saved you from some of the strokes—you can see from the scars how many. I can be really crafty when it comes to it!"

He broke out into a silky laugh, looked again at his swollen arm and said, still laughing:

"You don't know how sorry I was for you! It fair choked me. But the way he lay about you with that whip!"

He snorted like a horse, tossed his head and started saying something about Grandfather that at once warmed me by its childlike simplicity.

I told him I was very fond of him and he gave me an answer I shall never forget:

"But I'm very fond of you—do you think I'd have taken all that punishment if I wasn't? Do you think I'd have done that for anyone else? To hell with anyone else!"

He lowered his voice, looked every now and again at the door, and gave me the following lesson:

"When you get another beating, mind you don't tense your body—understand? It hurts twice as much if you do that. Relax; let your muscles go, so you're all soft, like a piece of jelly! And don't hold your breath back—breathe out as hard as you can, shout blue murder. Now remember what I'm telling you."

I asked: "Will they flog me again?"

"What do you think?" Tsiganok said calmly. "Of course they will. Hundreds of times more. . ."