McClure's Magazine
May, 1918

Midnight in Russia

Sitting before our hot American fire that night in our cold Petrograd hotel, we were marveling that we could not remember to say "Come in" in Russian. We knew the word, we wanted to learn the language, and we believed that if we used the little we had of it all the time, we might speak the impossible someday. Others did. But let a knock come and we both called "Come in!" It had just happened. It was most humiliating, machinelike. So we agreed that it would not occur again; we were making a solemn compact that thereafter we would wait when someone knocked—wait till we had presence of mind enough to say it in Russian, when there was a knock.

"Come in," I called, and Benton echoed, "Come—."

We were staring, disgusted, at each other as the door opened and a young soldier stepped in. He saved us from ourselves. A dark, handsome Jewish boy, in a blue uniform coat and cap, he cracked his heels together, military fashion, saluted with his left hand (his right arm was gone), and he smiled happily.

"Come in!" he repeated. "Good words, good American words. They are music to me. And you are Americans, real Americans; born there. And reporters!"

We had stood up. He shot his hand to us, one after the other, and a glad hand it was. I could feel the joy in his grip. It made us glad to see him, and Benton reached for his overcoat to help him off with it.

"No," he protested, with a gesture of pride. "I can do it alone. See?" And he threw off the coat and tossed it on the great lounge.

"I wish never to miss my lost arm," he explained. "I gave it to Russia. I gave it willingly to Russia, and Russia may have the other, also; and my legs, my head—my life.

"But I am glad to see you Americans. From New York? Sure. New York. What that means to me! And you are reporters, so you know it all: New York, Chicago, Frisco—the United States? And you know it as we know it, we immigrants; as I know it. I—"

His voice softened, and I guessed: "Homesick for the states?"

Benton was keener. "Miscue," he warned me, and the soldier, hearing, looked at him, amused, admiring. But he put out his hand deprecatingly to me.

"No," he said, "not that; not homesick. I am home here, now. But America means so much to me, so much. I was brought up there and I learned there—You will not misunderstand? It was in America that I learned to know and to love Russia."

Benton laughed. I started to explain how I had come to misinterpret the soldier's melancholy gladness, but—

"Let's sit down," said Benton, and we drew chairs close in around the fire.

"I was so glad," the soldier said, "and so sad, because I thought that you, as correspondents, you might help America to learn to understand and—and to love Russia and the

Russians, this beautiful revolution and the people who are making it, the beautiful Russian people."

"Beautiful?" I questioned. "Hark," said Benton sharply. "There they are now, a mob of them."

Listening, we heard the unmistakable sounds of a Russian mob: a low, slow clatter as of many hoofs on the pavement. That's all. No murmur of voices, no cries, no noise. We knew it well.

It was May, our calendar, the first week. The Revolution was young, about two months old. Milyukov was still at the head of the first Provisional Government, and all seemed well. But the people, who really reigned, had been growing restless. They were deeply troubled. We didn't know what the matter was; nobody seemed to, not exactly; not Milyukov—we had asked him; and not the mobs, either. They turned out, as the fire engines do at home, upon alarms we did not hear; at all hours; day and night. Only the mobs came out quietly, slowly, moving leaderless through the streets to head into the great squares, where the main herd stood still or, if excited, quietly milled, stamping but speechless.

"Yes," said Benton, getting up, "that's the mob, all right, the damned Russian mob."

"No," the soldier answered softly from his place at the fire, "that's the people, the beautiful Russian people."

I had gone to the window, and making out dimly in the dark the dull, moving mass of them, I remarked:

"Just like a herd of cattle."

"Exactly," Benton agreed, "the beasts."

"No," the soldier corrected, "beast. Some Russian poet called the Russian people a beast. 'That gentle beast,' he said, 'the Russian people.'"

I knew what ailed Benton. He had to go out and follow and report that mob; and it was cold, late, and probably useless. I boosted his great fur coat onto his bucking back.

"You've got a story there," he muttered covetously, jerking his head at the soldier. "Me for mere news." And aloud he grumbled. "Good night," and was gone.

I sat down beside the fire and the soldier—and his story.

"That isn't the way to feel about the Russian people," the soldier said gently. I explained that Benton, on a daily, had to "cover" all these mobs and report what they did.

The soldier chuckled. "He needn't," he said. "They won't do anything; not a thing that's news. They haven't killed anybody; they haven't looted anything. The soldiers did; not the mob. On the contrary, the mob saved policemen—even policemen—from the soldiers, and they wouldn't let the revolutionist leaders kill their prisoners, the terrible old ministers of the czar who had killed so many of them. No, the Russian people do not kill."

He said this plainly, like a Russian; slowly, without emphasis or sentiment, as if it was merely a natural fact. Which it is. I recalled that the first official act of the Russian Revolution was the abolition of capital punishment.

"Sure," he said, "and they won't do anything tonight that an American reporter would report."

"But what are they out for?" I asked, a bit impatiently.

"They don't know," he answered. "That's why it was no use for your friend to bother. We know; I know what takes them out, but they don't, not the people. And that's one of the things I want to explain to you."

He didn't explain right away. He stared into the fire, and to keep him in mind of me, I got down the cigarettes, put them near him, and myself filled and lighted a pipe. The maneuver succeeded. He took and lighted a cigarette.

"You don't know the Russians at all, do you?" he began. "We do, we Jews. We're not Russians ourselves, not though we have lived here for generations. We're Jews. You call us Russian-Jews, and that's half right. We're Jews, but we know and we love Russia and the Russians, we Russian-Jews do. Isn't that queer?"

It was a sudden question, this, and he glanced up suddenly at me.

"Why queer?"

"Well," he answered, like a flash that casts a shadow, "we have suffered, my people have—we have known little else than injustice, cruelty, terror in Russia, and yet we love Russia and her people."

He stared steadily at me, repeating:

"Love, I say. That's what the hyphen stands for in Russian-Jew: love. Isn't that strange; and stranger still, all strange people that live here and know the Russians are the same. They also suffer and they also love Russia."

He was emphatic now, not Russian; a Jew again, he had a feeling about what he was saying.

"Take my case," he sprang on. "My grandparents were murdered in a pogrom—both my grandfather and my grandmother—by a Russian mob. . . ."

He expected something from me. I said it.

"By the beautiful Russian mob that does not kill."

"That's it," he said. And he saw what he was going to add. "They were torn to pieces, limb from limb, by this people which is against all killing. And my father was driven out of Russia; he ran away to America, ran away from Russia. Yet—I must make you understand."

Carefully, watchfully he went into his story.

"I was a child when my father took me to America. I remember the terror of the flight and the tragedy: he had to leave my mother and sister behind. And I remember the seaport and the sea; the ship that swallowed us down into its belly, and then heaved with us; sick, as we were, sick for days and days and nights. I remember the whole of that terrible, dark, long, heaving voyage in the stinking steerage of that dizzy ship across the clouds of the Atlantic—that's what I saw from the steerage: the clouds, not the sea—across the world of sky to the land of—"

He halted. He put his hand on my knee. "May I?" he pleaded. "May I tell the truth about it all, the raw Russian facts. It's important."

I divined what he was going to say, and I wanted to hear it. I wanted to hear just what the Russians who had been to the United States and gone back to Russia—I needed professionally to know—were telling the other Russians about us. It was affecting our relations with our ally; it was counting in war and peace and the Revolution.

"Go right ahead," I urged him. "Go on to the land of . . ."

He wanted me to finish, but I wouldn't. He did at last, in a low tone.

"Liberty," he said, and he hurried. "The land of liberty. You don't know, you Americans who are born there, you don't know what a vision we immigrants have of your country. And you don't know, and you don't use, the inspired spirit of willingness we bring to your shores. All immigrants are good men when they sail up your harbor; all are citizens, patriots; all. They are

loyal Americans; especially the Jews. For we have imagination. We have had a vision for thousands of years; our minds can see, we can almost map, the land of promise.

"It was ahead of our dark ship on that voyage, that vision. It was America. That was the light that kept us alive, guided our ship. I was sure. My father told us about it. All the grownups did; yes, and the children. We were all telling one another about America, describing, picturing it. It seems to me now as I look back that we were all worshiping our vision of the land of promise: America.

"And do you know?" he asked, turning to me directly, "I believe that that vision we flashed in upon one another's minds, that vision of the United States—not what you are; no, but what we dreamed that you were—that vision, brought back here by the thousands of us who have returned, that is the vision which is inspiring this Russian Revolution."

"Why not?" I said. "That vision is only the dream of all mankind. It's nothing but heaven on earth. And not only the Jews; our fathers, the Puritan fathers who found and founded the American colonies, they also saw it ahead of them when they crossed the Atlantic. And they thought they would create it; they meant to. All pioneers and all revolutionists mean to, and someday some of them will."

"That's it," the soldier said, passionately. "And this is that day. The Russians will do it. That's what I must make you believe and report to America. The Russians will really do it. No? Yes. It isn't so impossible, that dream. Take mine: take the picture they painted of America for me in that ship. There would be no pogroms; no cruelties; no brutal police; no need of a police; because there would be no unjust government. You think we thought of picking up gold in the street? No, no. We thought of work, plenty of work, and we wanted to do it, well; but it was to be well paid for, we dreamed; so that a man by working all his life could live well all his life, live well, and be safe, he and his family. Yes, work. Workmen want work, and so that was in our dream. Work. And a chance. A fair chance. Equal opportunity, you call it. Not a chance to graft, and get rich, and live without working; no; but only to get on as well as you worked, as well as everybody. Hope, you see. Not despair, not misery and fighting and meanness. No suffering of the soul, but only working, whistling and—hope. That's all. Is that so impossible? No. Not as I saw it; not as we saw it. The land of promise we saw was not gold; it was green. And I ached for the green, for the green grass and the blue sky, sunshine, and—work, work and no fear.

"And it was green." He laughed. He laughed as he must have laughed when he sighted land. "It was spring when we arrived. Long Island was fresh with new leaves, and the breakers on the shore seemed to make it smile. And then, staten Island! Do you know what a part staten Island plays as the foreground of ten million pictures of America in ten million memories? It is—it looks like the threshold of heaven: so green, and kind, so earthy, and—home, after the waste of water and—Europe."

He picked out another cigarette, but he didn't light it. He didn't look at it. He was looking at me.

"We were herded ashore at the Immigrant Station. We were hustled in contempt by harsh, strange voices. Anxious, we were confused; uninformed, we were frightened; in a panic, we were driven like cattle and jammed. And," very slowly, he added, "we were robbed." He stopped.

"Go on," I said. "I 'covered' Ellis Island as a reporter once. I know."

"That's what I meant," he cried, "when I was so glad you were reporters; that you knew what we immigrants know. You know how we were robbed there. We were poor, and we were robbed on the Island, and again on shore. And we were distracted; strangers, without the

language, we were misled, misdirected—robbed, till we had nothing. Nothing. It was an awakening—from the dream.

"We found our own people at last—those that had gone before us—on the East Side, in the ghetto, as in Russia. Oh, I know. No police, no written law kept the Jews there; only poverty, misery, and the need of friends. And such misery, such darkness, dirt, and the stink, and the crowd. America . . .

"It began right away. My father had been well-to-do, a merchant tailor of known skill, but he couldn't get work in New York, not for weeks—weeks of worry for him, of terror for me: I felt, I saw his despair. And then when he got a job, at last, then he might have risen fast, he was so clever, but the bosses ground him down, him and all labor; the bosses or the competition for work. Then the unions began to organize. . . ."

Again he hesitated, apologized. "I know," he said. "I didn't then, but now I understand that if you start a country off wrong underneath—economically wrong; not as a commonwealth for the common good, but each for himself and the mines and the lands for the firstcomer—then, of course, labor must organize to force the workers to unite for the good of all. A wrong to fight a wrong, a monopoly of labor to meet the monopoly of—I understand, we Russian-American-Jews, we know now, and we've warned the Russians here in Russia, and—But they understood before. That's why they despise the organized labor of America, and want to prevent the evils that make labor unions necessary.

"My father, I, we Jews are individualists. He didn't want to combine. He only wanted to work, by himself, and he could have risen fast, out of his class, the labor class, so—labor beat him up, the leaders did. He never got over it; he lost his job; he lost his skill. His hand was hurt, and his head! Permanently.

"He peddled. He had a cart on Hester Street. You know? The police came. It was against the law, blocked traffic, but—you know. Blackmail. My father was a bearded, orthodox Jew, honest. He would not bribe. One day there was a raid and the policeman on post picked him out; split the scalp off his skull. I saw that! His skull was cracked. He died.

"He died in the hospital. A Hebrew society protested; no good; but the head of it took to me. He liked me, sent me to school, college; you know—College of the City of New York. I was bright, quick, eager to learn—everything. I chose law. I had ideals; can't help it. That vision—it stuck; it sticks. My best friend got me into a Wall Street law firm, clerk, but I was advanced and—I saw what the law is, and the courts; heard it and saw it, and—I did things myself, too, little things, but I know about the big things. You know. And I was willing.

"And politics. Our crowd, the young fellows in our ward, we all went into politics. The old Irish leader, Tim; you know him? Sure. Well, Tim showed us the game, and we—I played it. 'Peanut politics,' we called it, but we knew the big game, we heard all about it; from the inside. I was going in for it, when—but wait.

"I heard the socialists talk on the corners, the fellows that didn't go to college. They knew something, too; they had a science of their own, history, political economy, literature, plays; they had a culture. Absurd, it sounded, at first, so different from what the college taught, and I was fixed against it, I thought. But—that vision, that old vision. They had it. They saw something better, the promised land, heaven on earth. I didn't join. No, but I would have. Sure. I listened. And I saw. I saw the whole thing, the wrong of it, the right. But—

"The war came, Russia's war, the czar's. I didn't care. It was Russia in need. Maybe it was my mother, and home, too; I don't know. I think it was just Russia that I loved, but maybe it was because America was—was not what we thought. I used to remember, as I learned your

ways, the ways of Russia, and not so different! Not so bad, but not so hard, either; not so—so businesslike. I had begun to—love Russia, and to think that, not yet free, it would be really free someday; not yet democratic, it would know what democracy was. We knew how bad Russia was, and how good, and in New York—we didn't. How can you be free if you think you are free; how can you become a democracy if you think you are one?

"Anyway, when the Kaiser struck at Russia, I ran—yes, ran—I ran to the Russian consul; I ran to the ship; to Russia. To fight. I had to fight for Russia. I wanted to.

"Well, I did. They let me. Even a Jew could do that. I went home to our old village. Terrible. I saw my old mother, and my—my sister, old, too, with poverty. They had been living on the little I had sent them, living and lying to me; telling me they had enough! No matter. I enlisted. I marched. . . ."

He stood up, and his face glowed with the sight he was seeing.

"That was good. That was the best I had ever known, the march and the battle. It was in the Carpathians, way up in the air; that's where—there in the clouds—they turned us loose.

"I fought for the land I loved. I fought for Russia. I led that charge, yes, I did; I couldn't help it. It was all wrong, they said, but when they showed us the enemy of Russia and said, 'Go.'

"I went. I laughed, I think; I know I was glad, I ran and I—I fought for Russia, the country I found I had been looking back to from America all those years. It was good; it was good. I lost my arm, you see, hardly knowing it; I know I fought after it was hit. It didn't hurt, then. I fought on, and well, you can see—they gave me this decoration on the field." He tapped the ribbon I hadn't noticed before in his buttonhole.

"I wear it," he said, "not because I'm proud. No, I wear it because Russia gave it to me."

He leaned against the mantelpiece, lit his cigarette and smoked, thinking, smiling at first, then he frowned.

"When I came out of the hospital," he said in the slow Russian way, "I had a leave to go home. At the station where we changed cars, most of us, we got out and the train for Petrograd was late. We hung around the station, all us invalids; hours. About ten o'clock at night, it happened, the thing I want to tell you first. A freight train came up to the station, a train of cattle cars. It didn't belong on that track, not at the station, and I remember vaguely that I wondered. But it came there, and stopped. It stopped at the station platform.

"I smelled it. I was leaning against the corner of the station with some friends, other wounded men, and we looked at one another. That smell! What was it? Then they opened the doors, the brakemen did, running up and down; and out came people.

"Yes, there were people in those cars, Jews. They were being deported, in wartime, to the border and dropped there—nowhere. While I was fighting for Russia at the front—I, a Jew—Russia had cleared out my people from many towns, and was shipping them off, like that, men, women, and children. I was stunned. I was hurt, deep down. It was a pain, a sharper, more piercing pain than the shot in my arm. But I leaned there, watching, helpless till—"

He threw his cigarette into the fire.

"Out of the car, right in front of me, out of that stink, with the crowd, came my mother, yes, my own, old mother weeping, scared. She was supported on one side by my sister, who was so young, younger than I, and so old-looking. On the other side, holding her other arm, came a woman of the town that I had known as a girl and seen at her trade when I went home. And I had . . . ! She saw me first. It was she who told my mother. . . .

"Who did that?" he demanded—of me. He demanded it so suddenly, and in a voice that startled me. "Russia, you say? You say Russia did that? It's a lie. Government did that, the thing

that killed my father in America, and my grandfather, my grandmother in Russia; and in Germany made this war. And you come over here, you Americans, you Allies, and you advise us to hurry up and set up—government; and a police; and labor unions; and an army. And you wonder that we won't do it, that the Russians say no?"

He walked away. He was in a rage. He crossed the room, turned, and he flew back.

"You say the Russian people tore my grandfather and my grandmother and—many more, many, many—before my eyes? You think the Russian mob did that?"

He sat down, flaming, and he reached for me with hands and eyes, as he said, hissing:

"Yes, the Russian mob did that, the Russians did it. You are right. But that was the Russian people drunk, made drunk and told to do it, by officers of the law, government. Not sober people, like your mobs that burn Negroes. Oh, no. The Russians would not burn Negroes; not in their sober senses. Only drunken Russians would do that. Only drunken Russians, who have orders, and only drunken Russians will take orders to kill—drunken or beaten—and that's why the czar, and the government, and the master Russians, all of them, kept the Russian people drunk, drunk, drunk all the time. They had to."

He sat back, quietly, silent a moment. Then he bolted upright, and fired at me:

"They had to. They had to. That was the only way to rule the Russian people; with vodka. Yes, the czar caused the Revolution when he abolished vodka. That's what started it, and—Listen, if this Revolution fails, if those mobs out there do violence; murder and burn; and so have to be put down by force—listen—it will be because the Dark Forces remember and reintroduce—vodka."

Mobs had been passing all the time we were talking there, in waves—no, more like rollers. They rose and fell, as the mass increased and diminished, but they didn't break. It was a heaving, noiseless flood. The soldier's reference to them reminded me of the question he had set out to answer. I recalled it, partly to change his tone.

"I wonder what they are all out for?"

"They don't know," he said. "I'll tell you. They are governing Petrograd—Russia. Yes, oh, yes. They don't know just what it is, but they know things are not going right under Milyukov. Therefore they are out to make it right."

"At night?"

He smiled. "Yes. The Russian people are young, you know. You call them children, you foreigners here. They have been kept children by their rulers. They are ignorant; kept so, by the government which kept them drunk for the same reason. And the reason is that they are, naturally, like children—free; ungovernable. They can govern themselves, oh, very well; they understand that. But they don't understand being governed by others. They're like your Indians, free spirits, hopelessly free; but unlike your Indians, they are a people, one people."

Puzzled, my face must have shown my failure to understand.

"I mean," he said, "that they have a mass sense. They are farmers, not hunters like the Indians. They are just one step higher up off the ground. They live and do work in communities, and they think and they feel as they hold their land, as communities. And their minds were saved. Kept ignorant and sodden with drink, their minds were not taught, not written upon. You understand? They were clean, like the baby's. When the czar made war, he sent them in, drunk, and then he stopped the drink, and they looked up, sober, clean, clear-eyed. It was an awakening; like being born at the age of eighteen or twenty-five; and it was like looking out for the first time upon the world. They saw. They saw it, not as you and I do; not out of our education, which teaches us to see wrong, and—accept wrong. They saw it just as it is.

"Hence the Revolution! Somebody told the soldiers to shoot into the crowd in Petersburg. And the soldiers weren't drunk. So they wouldn't. They wouldn't shoot their own people. They would not kill. That was all, except that at the front, too, they would not kill, even Germans."

He laughed, but he ceased laughing; cut it sharp, short.

"It wasn't a decision, you understand," he said. "They didn't say, those Russian soldiers, they didn't agree together not to fire any more on the Germans. They merely didn't. They forgot to, when the Revolution broke. You can see why?

"Imagine a people, an army of people, who had lived always—always in the dark; pitch dark, inside their souls and outside. No hope, no light—nothing, nothing but a sound. They had heard in their drunken ignorance a whisper, the secret whisper of the propagandists: 'someday, the revolution.' And then—imagine it—one day in the trenches, the filthy, frozen, dark and deadly trenches, they saw a light, and they heard that sound, the glad cry of the revolution. Do you wonder they turned to look at that light; that they forgot the Germans, turned their backs on them and watched the fight in the east, from Petrograd. It was the dawn; it was the break, the morning of their day.

"And not only for the Russians. They called the good news to the Germans across the trenches. 'The revolution has come,' they said, and they thought it was for the Germans, too. They think so now. That's why they still won't fight. They are telling the Germans that the revolution has come, for the Germans, for all the people of all the earth; that we don't any of us have to kill one another any more."

"The brotherhood of man," I sentimentalized.

"No," said the Jew, "that's Christian; Jewish. That's acquired. We got it from not having it. We think that we ought to be brothers. The Russians can't think that; only an educated Russian like Tolstoi can preach that. Turgenev and Dostoevski couldn't; nor the others. They were it. The Russians never thought we were not; they think we are brothers. Not the czar, and the kings, and kaisers—they're only cousins; hence they fight, and make us fight, but we, the people, we are brothers."

"Literal," I said.

"The very word," he jumped, "literal; that's what they are, the children. It's that community sense. Having it for the village, they have it for the world, and it goes deep. That's the hope of this Revolution. For what's the matter with us everywhere? We are like my old father, out to make a success of our own lives, each one, a successful grab for—for things; things we all must have. So some get too much; most of us not enough. And the Russians had begun to get that spirit. The old reformers had been giving it to them with the vodka and the superstition. They had been breaking up the communal land holdings and establishing private property in the earth. So the peasants were learning to grab hold and hang on, each for himself. But most of them, the mass of this 180 million of newborn men, they are for community success, the common good, the welfare of man. They don't have to learn it; they are human nature in the raw. They have never unlearned it; so they and their Revolution have and will teach it to the rest of the world." "Let us hope," I breathed.

"Hope?" he said. "Well, hope is something in this world of despair, of mass despair. But I can give you faith, too. The Russians are literal, you say, and I say right. They mean it; they mean just what they say; yes, and they mean what you, what all the rest of the world merely say. You say, you Americans, for example, you say 'free speech.' They have it, absolutely."

I nodded. "Anybody can say anything here."

“Literally,” he said. “Anybody, good or bad, can say anything, right or wrong. And then you say democracy,” he said, “and you mean political democracy.”

“Government of the people by the politicians for the businessmen,” I quoted, smiling. “What does it mean here?” I challenged.

“Look out of the window,” he said. “Listen. What do you hear?”

We both listened; we both heard the mob.

“What the deuce are they out for?” I asked, remembering that he hadn’t answered, after all, the question I had started him with.

“That beast out there,” he said, “that gentle beast is made up of the Russian people, just folks, lots of simple workingmen and peasants. When the Revolution came here in Petrograd, and won, it meant to them that the czar was gone and that they, the people, were to govern. They began to govern at once, naturally; they didn’t, they don’t know just how to take hold, or where; they don’t know just what to do. But they took over, and they feel, each one of those two millions out there, they are carrying the sense of responsibility for Petrograd, Russia. They are trying soberly, anxiously, conscientiously to govern Russia right, for themselves, for all of them, all. And that’s democracy, isn’t it?”

“Well, yes,” I admitted, “in a very, very literal sense.”

“Well,” he answered, “that’s the Russian sense. That’s the sense in which they mean to get to the promised land, the literal sense; that’s what heaven on earth means to them. It means paradise here, now, for all. And that’s what the revolution means here, and now, and everywhere for all time, according to the Russians. It means literally no private property in land or oil or coal—literally; it means that each man and woman is to get what he produces, no more and no less; it means no loafers, not even rich loafers; no leisure class; it means no classes at all. Literally.”

“Literally?” I spurred.

“Literally,” he said, “literally. That’s the only difference there is between the Russians and—the rest of us. They practice what we preach.”

“All right,” I said, “but you said when Benton went out that he wouldn’t find out what the mobs were about, and that you knew. What is it?”

“I’ll tell you,” he said, “now that I have made you able to understand. There’s trouble in our relations with the other allies. It’s the secret treaties. They’re wrong. Milyukov knows it; but he thinks they are contracts which must be kept till finally abrogated by the signers of them. The mob doesn’t see that. All the mob knows is that there is something wrong with our side of the war; that Russia is up to something wrong, and—so the people are troubled. They don’t understand; but they’re worried, and since they govern—they, not Milyukov—since he is only their representative, and is not representing them, he must do right or go down. In other words, since he is wrong, they are wrong, or, as they would put it, if they could speak, it isn’t Milyukov at all, it’s they, the people, the responsible Russian nation that is wrong. But they can’t speak; they won’t say it. You’ll see, when your friend gets back, all they will have understood is that there’s something wrong and that they, literally, must make it right, gently, but—literally.”

We sat there silent awhile, a long while. I was thinking over what the handsome boy had been saying; studying him there, the Jew, the Russian-American-Jew; and his aristocratic comprehension and his artistic appreciation of—other peoples, when there was a knock.

“Come in!” I exclaimed.

And, grinning in triumph, Benton came in. “Come in”—he laughed. “You’ll never learn Russian.”

“And how about you?” I asked. “Will you? What did you learn tonight?”

He pitched out of his coat, pitched it and his hat on the bed, and with an intimate American smile at the soldier, pushed in between us up to the fire.

“What did you find out?” the soldier asked. “Did the mob know why it was out?”

“The beast? No,” said Benton. “It’s a scream. Really. I’ll tell you just how it was. I hooked up with Wallace, from the embassy; he speaks Russian, and we interviewed the mob—the mobs. We laid for ’em, at the corner of the Nevski there, as they’d come down the street, each herd of ’em; we’d go out and I’d say, ‘Whoa,’ and they’d stop. The cattle! Anybody could stop them, or drive them, or—but nobody does. No leaders at all; none.”

“Not yet,” said the soldier. ‘Whom did you interview?”

“Just the mob,” said Benton, “anybody. When we’d hold ’em, so, we’d say, through Wallace:

“ ‘What’s the matter?’ and they’d consult—you know—talk it over with one another. Finally—

“ ‘Don’t know,’ they’d say.

“Who does know?’ I’d shout, and Wallace would translate, ‘Who does know?’

“ ‘Don’t know,’ they’d answer. ‘Maybe those people up in front know.’

“So we’d go up in front. Same questions. Same answers. ‘Didn’t know.’ I got mad. I got hot at Wallace.

“ ‘Ask ’em, then,’ I bawled, ‘why the hell they’re out here, a million of ’em, at midnight.’

“Wallace put it to them, and they consulted. You’ve seen ’em consult one another? They all talked, each one, in turn; all quiet; all listening; all so sober, so-patient, so-so gentle. Gee, but they certainly are what that poet said; I kept thinking of it: ‘That gentle beast.’ Took an hour or, anyhow, half an hour, and then Wallace turned to me and said:

“ ‘They say,’ he said, ‘they say that they don’t know what the matter is, but that it’s something; that there is a rumor that there’s something wrong in Petrograd and so, they said, they, the people, had to come out to see about it.’”

Benton looked from me to the soldier, and back to me; and back to the soldier.

“Do you get it?” he asked. “They think that they are the government. All of ’em. One mob after another. They all said the same thing; they all think the same things. . . .”

“From here to Vladivostok,” the soldier said, “they all say, think, and do the same things in the same way.”

Benton stared open-mouthed. “They think that they, the people, govern.”

“What did they do?” the soldier asked.

“Nothing,” said Benton. “Not a thing. The Russian reporters said there’d be speeches by about tomorrow afternoon. Can you beat it? They meet tonight at midnight, stand there silent all night, all morning, all forenoon, begin the debate at 2 p.m., and maybe the next day decide what to do.”

“And it will be done,” said the soldier. “Milyukov will abrogate the Russian secret treaty or be dismissed—by that mob which doesn’t know now that it will do that. And then, when they do it, all the communities, all the people of Russia and Siberia will, hearing of it, nod and say, ‘That is right,’ and, by and by, all the peoples of the world also will say, ‘That was right.’”

“And it will be right,” said Benton. “That stupid mob out there is the tightest, gentlest, justest—safest Thing I ever—felt.”

“Safe!” the Jew exclaimed. “Do you feel that, too—that you are safe with them? That’s the way we Jews feel now, safe. New Russia is the safest place in the world for us Jews. So you feel that!”

“Yes,” said Benton. “But—but what the deuce does it mean? Why is it right?”

“Because”—I laughed—“it has no education—”

“Sure,” said Benton, not laughing at all. “I see that. And it has no interest, no selfish interest.”

“No interest,” I quoted, “that is not a common, a community interest.”

“And no leaders,” said the Russian soldier. Benton stared at us, first at the soldier, then at me, and he said to me:

“You got the story, I see.”

“So did you,” I answered.

“Y-e-ss,” he said, “but the mob is the hero of my story.”

“Mine, too,” I said.

“And mine,” said the Russian-American-Jewish soldier.