

## 20. NIMKA

I met Nimka in Paris yesterday. Nimka (or Nimotchka) is a White Russian of Caucasian origin, but she prefers to call herself Circassian—it gives her mystery distinction. Nimka has green mongoloid eyes, and a soft lolling tongue that contains rounded sweetness. When I knew her first, about twenty years ago, she served in some restaurant of the Quartier Latin, which gave her food and function and the few hundred francs that were necessary to make her mother live, from week to week. Nimka's mother was of course brought up at the Smolny, and the Smolny courtyard seemed to play a more important part in their family history than the Revolution and the Civil War. For in the Smolny courtyard, everyone on their walks *de jeunes filles* dreamt, and they dreamt such glorious dreams, that some Grand Duke of course went to a ball, and of course the Circassian beauty was the most ravishing of all that he had ever seen (and Smolny taught such rare bashfulness, it made even the horses at the sledges neigh) and the *Imperatrice*, naturally, would hear nothing of it all, but some high priest intervened, and as the Court loved escapades, the couple fled to Switzerland, and the Emperor was duly white and red with ire, but what was, was, and after all the Circassian beauty had a father who was a general, and he was made bigger and brought to the Court, and the fault was of course laid on Count Tolstoy who destroyed every vestige of Society, and Tolstoy wrote a letter to the Countess Straganza Boriloff, a letter which is still a treasure in the little room—*sous l'escalier A, un bis*, as the concierge shouts—and you knock at the door and this Circassian princess opens the door to you, with a smile that would warm your heart even on this

cold and wet summer of 1953. When I say you are warmed by Nimka's heart, I mean it, for I have sat hour after hour in her little room in Rue Fosse Saint Jacques, where no sun ever shone, and even the concierge's cat had to go and sit by the sill to see if there's sun shining anywhere in the sky. Nimka, of course, made such lovely borscht for her mother—they lived on the ground floor that opened on the yard, and students went in and out of the main door, casting mysterious glances at this young princess who fed the concierge's cat. Some of them had read Gorki's *Twenty-six Men and a Girl*, and the thought went through their minds that this princess may well be their inviolable deity. Nimka had naturally never read Gorki—how could she—but she knew what was right from what was wrong without her mother saying anything. The Tolstoy letter, duly framed and hung on the wall—the Ikon from Kiev stood a little further down in the corner—gave every advice that anyone could ever need. Tolstoy had said, in his rough flourishing hand—there were many French words in his epistle which showed to whom he was addressing himself—*'Il n'y a pas de doute que—Auguste Comte dit quelquefois—d'autre part il faut bien le dire—je suis, etc., etc....'* Tolstoy's flourishing hand said that the evil must be met with good. The good is what had distinction, and the bad what is successful. Even the cat knew what is good—one hadn't to call the cat when mother's meal was over and one brought the rest to the courtyard; the cat waited there, as though the right thing would come from the right place at the most appropriate time. He who knows himself good is known by the animals he has. The cat never miaowed—you hadn't, like the concierge, to call out Minou; Minou, the little white-streaked black thing was ever furrily present with uplifted gratitude. The old princess even left her small portion to the cat, and so the young Nimotchka left some of her foods for her mother. That is goodness if goodness needs a definition. Nimotchka was good, very good, and of a simple true beauty, as though

you cannot efface it even were you to cut her face with many crosses. Her beauty had certainty, it had a rare equilibrium, and a naughtiness that was feminine and very innocent. It projected a quality of assurance that you were good, even were you bad, for this beauty could not be bad, so you had to be good. It was beauty—it always will be, and you cannot take it, and as such you cannot soil yourselves. How could you, for when you contemplate beauty, you end in contemplation—you may even have a cup of tea. Nimotchkha loved tea—of course—and I loved it because she loved it.

I used to go to Nimotchkha—I was a student too, and at the Sorbonne—and, on Sunday mornings when she came back from church, she loved to have friends visiting her. That day, the lunch service was later, so you had an hour more. Nimka was gay, and when she came back, I read to her some text from the Ramayana or the Mahabharata, the story of Nala and Damayanti, and the exile of the royal couple always moved her. She made a link between the Smolny courtyard and the palace of Damayanti, and she had only to invent the Swan. I was the Swan then—I was the Swan now. Nimka knew the Indian saying that the swan knows how to separate milk from water—the good from the bad, and as I knew her to be good, she recognized me a swan. The swan sailed in and out and India became the land where all that is wrong everywhere goes right there. In India, the Smolny courtyard exists—it could not but exist—look at the number of Maharajas, the Maharajas of Kapurthala and His Highness the Aga Khan, all Indians and you saw their pictures in the newspapers. They assured you of your very existence—you had a right to exist in righteousness, for they existed and their decorous faces lit up the pages of the newspapers. Nimka, whom I had once taken to the Théâtre des Champs Elysées to see Uday Shankar dance, actually met the Yuvaraja of Mysore. I introduced her to him, and she gave such a curtsey and a smile—it made her certain her assuredness was right. The mother was

all grateful for my kindness. And in a few months a new picture went up on their wall. It was the picture of Mahatma Gandhi, for Tolstoy was a friend of Mahatma Gandhi (I read her the full text of Tolstoy's letter to Mohandas Gandhi—the one in Romain Rolland's *Life of Gandhi*, editions Stock) and so Tolstoy was right and India was right, and since she was right and India was right, and since she could not put up a picture of me on the wall, she put up Mahatma Gandhi's. It gave great beauty to Tolstoy's face—the one looked the disciple, and the other the master. Since I was a son of India, I was, as it were, a sort of grandson, and she was, so to say, of the same status as I. That made everything possible, the conversation, the gentle looks, and a dinner now and again—one had an afternoon off every fortnight, in those days—which made affinity permissible. I could also take her out to Chinese restaurants, and she loved to be the Princess. She had her mother's mink coat, of course, and a pearl necklace they had saved against all odds—it was to be her marriage gift. Nimka, I think, loved me, but somehow that necklace came in the way. She could not imagine me and the necklace altogether—that necklace was made of pain, it stood there as a reminder of man's inner strength against outer odds—it meant struggle and passion and poverty—the bow of Rama is easier to break than to twist the screw of that Russian necklace, the hand that could twist it needed a more masculine grasp, a more painful nobility, a graver happiness. The Indian is too simple in his depth—if there's no concierge and the cat, there's no goodness. Success is sin. Gandhi is poverty. The Maharaja is proof of truth. Truth is unnaked. Love is unsaid. So, Nimotchkha fell in love with Michel.

Now, Michel was a friend of mine. He was nineteen, and had a fine mask of dignity. He had gone through the Ecole Normale, and was at the Rue d'Ulm. I knew him for he'd taken Sanskrit for his Aggregation and I often met him at the Institut de la Civilisation Indienne at the Sorbonne. He was pale, with

a nervous twitch of the nose, and his hands ever trying to adjust his eye-glasses, as though however much he wanted to see clearly, he just could not see clearly. He said to me, 'When my teachers say green, I just do not know what green is—when they say red, I just do not know what red is—I know them as names of colours. All my life I just wanted to see—see it, the object, the object as reality, and my friend, what can I do? I just cannot look at it. I am a failure. I am damned. My father died in the war, and left my mother a widow of twenty-one. I am the hope of the family—hope indeed, he who cannot distinguish between red and green. Colour, yes, a name. A name is everything. Abelard, that old sensualist, was right. We are all nominalists. The object exists because of its name. Remove the name, and the object is space. Remove the space, and the object is the Reality. Poetry must be made of reality. Vocables are voluntary creations. We just invent language as we invent breath. Breath,' he said, opening his waistcoat, as though he wanted more air, and he stopped. Nimka, who served us, would wait with her plate till the speech was over. She loved his dignified voice and his love for scribbling all over the tablecloth. He wrote vocables. He invented vocables.

And one day when I'd gone out on Easter holidays and returned, I saw Nimka and Michel arm in arm. They smiled to me very sweetly. Michel was a poet. The poet is sacred. Tolstoy was not a poet. He was a writer. But then he was a poet all right. Michel wrote beautiful things. He said beautiful things. How he laughed, when Nimka laughed. I was their saint and protector. Since Michel lived in Rue d'Ulm and she couldn't take him to Rue Saint Jacques, they met in my room, in Rue du Sommerard. Michel read to her his poems. She never wore the pearl necklace for him. She became grave. I knew she never allowed him to touch her. Thus she respected me. Only once, said Michel, she allowed him to kiss her, and that was in a church (the Rumanian one, behind Rue du Sommerard).

She thought it improper—it had to do with the flesh—and she had to hide it from her mother. She decided then to marry, marry anyone. She could not marry me—I was too far, too distant and different. She could not marry Michel—he had kissed her. Michel was so desperate. Nimka married, almost a month after that, Count Vergilian Kormaloff, who ran the vegetarian restaurant, off the Pantheon. She bore him a child very soon, and though there was so much warmth in her heart, her face was infinitely sad. Sorrow seemed to sit on her brow, for the noble count, apart from being twenty years her elder and a widower, was interested in betting on horses. He lost everything he ever had on horses. Then he started borrowing from his clients. One day his restaurant too had to be sold. He left Nimotchkha during the days of the Czechoslovak crisis, and ran to Monte Carlo to make money. Boris, his little son, never saw him again.

When Hitler occupied France, I wondered what would have happened to Nimka and her mother. When the Hitler police saw the picture of Tolstoy and Gandhi, they never worried her, wrote Nimka. During the war, she said, she became, for Boris' sake, a mannequin. She knew nothing wrong could happen to her. Success she despised most of all. She liked to live as her mother had taught her to live. The mother had died during the Occupation. She believed that one day truth would reign in the world. She hoped Mahatma Gandhi might still save the world. She liked Hitler, for he liked India. . . . At seventeen Boris studied at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand. Boris knew all was good. So when the Russians invited the Russians from all over the world to return, he was so proud (anyway he did not like to do military service in France) and he went, hoping to come back and take his mother. Boris never returned, of course. Mahatma Gandhi was shot, and Nimka knew that was the price of righteousness.

Nimka lives in Rue des Ecoles, not far from Rue du

Sommerard, and she knits pullovers for the *Grands Magasins*. She sold her pearl necklace and put the money into a little cloth shop off Rue Poitou (for food and clothing are essentials of life and you cannot lose on that) and the returns are not too bad. The Ikon and the Tolstoy letter still adorn the walls, and the picture of Mahatma Gandhi has gone up above the bed. He knows, does Mahatma Gandhi, the pinching pain of mankind. With every scrub of the floor, and with every cry of the child in the street, there's a voice that responds, and that is Mahatma Gandhi's. Mahatma Gandhi, said Nimka to me yesterday, is not a man, he is not a saint, he is a country. Green fields must billow into the bright sun, and men must bend to collect the corn. The swan must fly there, and goodness is good for it is not success. Virtue is the woman's privilege, man is the undiscoverable. Nimka was not sad. Her heart contained an intimacy of sorrow that was almost kin of joy. She was warm, of course, and spoke beautifully. Her French accent had that silvery touch of the Slavs that makes the language almost sing. Nimka asked nothing of life. She asked nothing of me. When I said goodbye, she did not say when shall I see you again? She knew the life that has ended is eternal. When you are shot you become immortal.