

If I Were a Tsar

I would get up in the morning, wash myself, drink some tea with a bagel, and call for our sergeant major:

"Good health to you, Ipatych. Have you had your tea?"

"Yes indeed, Your Majesty. What Russian man doesn't drink tea in the morning?"

"And have the soldiers had theirs?"

"No, sir. According to the ration scale, natural tea provisions are not allocated for army units."

"Well now, Ipatych. They, I suppose, aren't Hungarians either. Russians are no worse than you. Give an order right this moment through the senior clerk that every soldier be issued a full bowl of tea morning and evening, enough to drown in. And four lumps of sugar each."

"One lump would suffice, Your Majesty. A soldier will drink his tea holding the sugar between his teeth. Otherwise, the whole army will gobble up about four poods a day—what an expense!"

"Ah, you fat-bellied drum. From the company cauldron, not just holding sugar in your teeth, but even jam and your offspring have enough. Yet you weigh the soldiers' lumps on scales? Order immediately that my ceremonial gold cigarette case be melted down into imperials; that should provide enough for the soldiers' tea and sugar for a year. If need be, I'll smoke from a silver one."

"How is that possible, Your Majesty! If the Shah of Persia comes to visit you, his cigarette case is all pure gold, diamond upon diamond, while yours would be plain silver. It would seem inappropriate."

"Don't grumble, Ipatych. You've seen a pheasant, I suppose: its rump and tail are all golden, dazzling even the sun, yet what can it do against the Russian gray eagle? Eh?"

Around noon, my adjutant arrives with a report. Whom to promote in rank, to which regiment to present monograms for excellent and diligent service.

"Well, that's not important. It doesn't burn. Wouldn't you like some mors, Your Hasty Majesty?"

"Much obliged."

"And you take a little chair. Though I am tsar, I prefer simple address... I wish, Your Hasty Majesty, to issue an order to all troops that soldiers not be shaved under the comb down to the bare skin. Let everyone style their hair according to their own fancy, whatever suits their taste."

"But according to regulations, Your Majesty, it is not permitted. Another might grow such a wild forelock that it would spoil the entire line of formation..."

"Don't poke my eyes with your regulations. As I wish, so shall your regulation be turned. Are you envious, perhaps? You yourself have probably fluffed up some tow for your own head, to the ruin of girls... Besides, look what forelocks the Cossacks wear, yet the empire suffers no loss from it."

"That is cavalry, Your Majesty. Cossacks are allowed elaborate coiffures for show. To intimidate the opponent..."

"And infantry, in your opinion, are dog's testicles, are they? Don't contradict me, or I'll order you shaved down to zero yourself, and then, my falcon, we'll talk..."

My adjutant scowled, didn't finish his mors, and flew out. Well, what of it? Am I, the tsar, to be led by the nose by an adjutant?

No sooner had I got rid of him than a special low-ranking military official rolls in through the door.

"Express message from the King of Sweden. He wishes to send his niece, a born princess, to visit Your Majesty. Since she has preserved herself in full form as a maiden, and you are an unmarried man, the king presumably desires to push you toward marriage. It would be an honor for him, and no disgrace for us... Though we have beaten the Swedes, theirs is still no insignificant power."

"Tell the Swedish king," I say, "to go to his Swedish mother on a light cutter... If I take a mind to marry, I'll marry a Russian woman. Their Swedish women are long-legged; how can they compare with our wheat-complexioned ones!"

"That is impossible, Your Majesty. The ministers will forbid it. Because they desire, for political reasons regarding Sweden, to pursue a marital alliance..."

"Your rank," I say, "is semi-officer, yet tarakan cockroaches suck your brain's footcloth. Let my ministers marry even Hungarian goats, but I am a patriot. Why do you flash politics at me? Are you not yourself married to a Russian woman?"

"Yes indeed. To Avdotya Kuzminishna. A very advantageous-looking lady."

"There you see... Yet you come bothering me with express messages. I'll demote you to a primitive state, and not a trace of you will remain..."

"Perhaps, Your Majesty, you could at least invite the Swedish girl for a viewing? She won't fade away, surely? You're not signing a contract with her in one stroke... What if she turns out to be a steak with raisins? Brought up on cream, specially mannered—in short, a princess."

"Clearly, fate has placed something in your hand. But how can I conduct a light amorous conversation with her without a common language?"

"An interpreter from among the generals will be assigned to you, Your Majesty."

"Well there, brother, one can see immediately that except for an inkwell and Avdotya Kuzminishna, you've never touched any female object. What kind of interpreter is needed in such matters? How could I play the accordion through someone else's hands? Get lost, go to the dogs... There's no life for a tsar because of you lot. Go off to the horse farm and manage things there, while I, when I wish and whom I wish, will marry myself..."

He stirred me up so much, brothers, that I drained an entire bottle of Madeira alone, without any snack, locked the door on the hook, stretched out beneath the tsar's canopy, and lay like a bull until dinnertime.

I wake up. What, I think, should I eat or drink? And you, Sidorchuk, happen to be my orderly. Why did you snicker, you fool? We're not appointing you field marshal straightaway, you peasant clod.

"Hey," I shout, "Sidorchuk! Do we still have the turkey left from yesterday?"

"Yes indeed, Your Majesty... I did gnaw off the legs, truly, but around the rump there's still some sweet meat to scrape off."

"Bring it here. How interested you are in legs. And uncork a new flask of rowanberry vodka. Sit opposite me; let's have a lampada glass each. No need to rush in summertime..."

"How can I, Your Majesty, drink with you given your position? When the falcon drinks, small birds tremble behind the bushes."

"But I command you. Everything, brother, is now in my power. Today you're an orderly, and tomorrow, if I wish, I'll make you even into a woman."

"Much obliged."

Naturally—you immediately gape your trough wide open and almost swallow the rowanberry vodka straight from the shot glass.

We drank a second round. Two sisters of mercy fan us to cool the temperature.

"Well, Vanya," I ask you, "now I am tsar, take advantage. Why not do something for a fellow countryman? Just don't overdo it; you must remember your place."

"Well, Your Majesty," says the section leader, Corporal Barsukov, "he allows himself too much. Yesterday I didn't polish the buckle on my belt until it was hot, so he hit me, excuse me, in the cheek with the buckle."

"Knocked you sideways?"

"No, sir. I always yield ground. But it's very offensive—wasn't he himself beaten not long ago..."

"Alright. Barsukov, you say. I appoint him to serve as your orderly. That way you'll get even... What are you laughing at? Your section leader is nothing. If I wish, I'll harness him even into a water cart if he treats my soldiers with buckles for no reason."

We tackled the flask together. Generals cough in the duty room. But where should I hurry? They're all bringing complaints, undermining each other. I glanced out the little window—and in the yard, the same old nonsense: little soldiers are stabbing a scarecrow at full run.

"Hey!" I shout. "Cease! That's enough, devils, spilling straw blood. I dismiss everyone for three days and three nights... One ruble each, and whoever is from my province gets an extra quarter-ruble... Head into town. Only without misconduct: if you get drunk, behave honestly—if you sway one way, correct yourself the other."

The company, naturally, is delighted. Fellow countrymen crowded under the window, faces red, shouting until the golden palace trembles:

"Much obliged, Your Majesty! And concerning behavior, rest assured—we won't mess up... Only allow us to report, couldn't everyone get a ruble and a quarter? It's unfair. After all, other provinces are no worse than yours..."

I stepped out onto the malachite balcony and replied kindly:

"The devil with you. I don't mind the quarter-rubles; I'll mint as many as I wish."

The fellow countrymen roared until the iron on the roof hummed:

"Hurrah! We'll come hoist you up right now, Your Majesty!"

"Impossible, brothers; my position doesn't allow it... Attention! Form one rank. Count off one and two! Who's that chatterbox on the right flank talking? I'll give you something to talk about! Double ranks! Cease. Do it cleaner! Sidorchuk, take charge of the company. If anything happens, I'll unscrew your head... Thank you, eagles, for your service!... With God... Left-right, left-right... Present foot!"

I got sweaty, went up to my study. I sent the sisters with their fans off to their bald mothers—presumably their fiancés are waiting for them in the city garden too. I went out to the generals, shook hands:

"My goodness, Your Excellencies, you've brought so many papers, all onto our soldiers' heads. After all, the Turks live without chancelleries, yet their army is renowned... At

For three days I'm dismissing you; perhaps the state won't crack.

To major-generals I handed out two rubles each, to lieutenant-generals—a three-ruble note. To full generals, those anemic old men—not a kopeck: they don't drink, don't smoke, meet a young lady and their lip drops to the elbow, drool runs down their boots. A ceremonial case, but the violin has no strings. What do such folks need money for?

"Be off, Your Excellencies, while I catch some sleep. Rowanberry vodka is gentle. After crushing an ordinary flask, it made me sing 'the nightingale-bird'... But now I'm fine. Farewell."

By sunset I came to. Heartburn grips me, God forbid—as if I'd swallowed unslaked lime. Maybe go to the bathhouse, or drink some Tsimlyansk wine to shift my senses? Yet I reined myself in: the main laws, I thought, must be written, and the Tsimlyansk won't escape us. Ministers—what care they, so long as they receive their salary and shove whatever comes to hand before the Tsar? One, say, while holding his post, shaves hair from a bare palm; another, stepping into his position, sows hair on that same palm. That's the only difference. And what am I? A seal on an empty barrel, perhaps?..

I sat at the little table. Fell to thinking. First of all, being a military man, I thought about the army. I decided to cut the term of service in half. In four years you can train even a camel to do drills and run in place, but a Russian soldier isn't a dried-up idiot; two years with a crust of bread will suffice him... Let them, due to the reduced service, replenish the population and plow the land rather than vainly clatter about in government-issue boot soles.

The cavalry, especially the light cavalry—that soapy troop—I'll slash entirely... Nothing but dust from them, and chambermaids swell up. However, for imperial parades, on the occasion of Afghan princes arriving, to brighten the parade ground, I shall form three regiments of hussars composed of women. A woman alongside a horse makes quite a figure; her rear is splendid... And if adorned all over with sequins and braids, it suits her perfectly. I won't take them to war—they'll go twisting along the entire front; not one soldier would remain seated in the trenches.

To the sailors too I'll insert a fuse: one year in the fleet, one year in army infantry. So that, should the need arise, they suffer equally with us. Otherwise they've loosened their ribbons, wear lined trousers, get enhanced rations. When war breaks out—he, the scoundrel, occasionally fires once across empty water, while we, the land forces, every single day—a full lesson...

To the pilots—the first place. I'll cover them with silver, overlay them with gold. In formation each gunner is a hero—you couldn't refuse. Yet he operates alone atop a steel beetle heading into an unknown direction. Clouds and God—even Skobelev himself would pause to think.

Concerning sergeant-majors in all units, I shall issue an order: when soldiers sweat over literacy in company schools, these stallion-like fellows must not tug lower ranks by the ears. A volunteer instructor teaches syllables only from cardboard letters, but the sergeant-major grabs an ear: "Pull, you bastard cat, the vowel letter, so it comes out loudly!..." At this rate there won't be enough ears. And let company libraries be established everywhere. What purpose does literacy serve if inside the cupboard, besides the internal service regulations and the life of Reverend Virgin Anfisa, there's nothing at all? What sort of model is this: they've installed a stove, yet forbid lighting it?

Again concerning soldiers' wives... I, say, am unmarried; my heart stands vacant. Another man, married, sheds tears. He here performs jumps and smooth toe-stands, carrying out imperial service, while his wife back in the village idles away. Now a seminarian pops in for a light vacation with the priest—to whom else should he attach himself but a soldier's wife? Sweet vodka and pickled cucumbers—they go into the grove to count mosquitoes—and look, a warm breeze has impregnated her. Father-in-laws also turn up as tasty morsels: by day they adjust the wick in the icon lamp, by night they creep along the wall toward the little fish. Or perhaps she herself heads to town to become a black kitchen maid—whoever passes by tries grabbing her skirt: how much per arshin of calico? Like peas scattered beside the road...

This occupation, lads, I shall formally terminate. All soldiers' wives I order gathered by district into one dwelling; proper old women I shall assign to them as elders. Sew, cook, rock your child; full rations for them all from the treasury. Their soldiers may visit once every six months. Honorably. But whichever one twists against the law, leaps into buckwheat—her we shall dispatch to a special monastery for pacification, so she doesn't sour the soldiers' pure broth with tar...

In the companies, for easier passage of service, I shall order balalaikas issued to all who wish, or accordions, whichever suits one's taste. Lighting I shall double; why sit after roll call like drowned men in dark bunks?... Discipline is discipline, but even woodpeckers enjoy an hour daily. To each I shall provide a bun with butter; surely in Russia there's enough wheat for the lower ranks?... Strings strum, tea warms the guts; whoever knows how to read consults a dream-book, whoever bends sledges for a comrade on his bunk. Junior NCOs sit aside with their own teapots, eyes darting—but regarding remarks, not a word... Because that hour isn't theirs.

And on holidays I myself shall personally inspect all companies. And mind you, no dragging it out! Greet properly—that's enough. My footmen will bring roasted and steamed dishes, about a hundred baskets. I won't stint on provisions—I'm not that sort... We'll invite town young ladies—Sidorchuk among us is quite skilled. And when we strike up six accordions playing a curly polka—it'll roll right up to the officers' mess. "Ti-li, ti-li, they shaved the devil, curled his forelock..."

Your pay, naturally, I shall triple. On fifty kopecks a month even a mouse can't frolic. A soldier, though a lower rank, is surely made from the same rib. He too wishes to drink and smoke, and everyone finds it pleasant to wash on holidays with soap and mignonette. Besides, you can't play odds-and-evens for a trouser button...

And furthermore. If a soldier is placed under arms, loaded with full gear—they mustn't display him for amusement before the sergeant-majors' daughters at the clean entrance! But in the backyard. So that quietly and peacefully he serves his punishment, so that nobody dumps filth into his soul... This order I shall definitely give.

As for civil affairs, brothers, I truly don't know... I'll summon elders from various estates—some intelligent ones appear among them. Thus and so, fathers... Our state, presumably, is larger than Turkey's, yet we live sourly. Head in gold, body in scabs. Palaces and parades, domes gleam, harpists thunder in theaters, guest courtyards overflow with dates and gingerbread, while in our villages everywhere it's sixteen. The forest spirit rolls about in torn bast shoes, drives with a forty-kopeck coin, wipes tears with footwraps... To an Afghan prince we show a pie

on a golden dish, but the filling is cockroach. I am Tsar; this vexes me. If necessary, reduce my salary; I'll feed from the soldiers' cauldron—only establish complete order. And I'll lock those devils, those gray-mustached elders, in a separate palace—drink, eat, even swallow a button whole—but around it I'll station strict guards. Those villains I won't release until we reach the true point... Is there not enough gold beneath the soil in our Russia? Are our rivers overgrown with sedge? Is our land stone? Are the Russian people mere chaff in the field? Why then do we pour such masses for years from sieve to sieve, yet never attain proper life?..

Having pondered all principal matters, night suddenly descended. Duty nurses fluffed the featherbed, turned back the ermine blanket:

"Please, Your Majesty. Common soldiers dream of radish with kvass, but for you let it be hazel grouse in sour cream. Farewell. Tomorrow at first light we'll bring you a bowl of chocolate and half a pound of fatback. Your nightshirt lies beneath your pillow, because tsars do not sleep in daytime shirts."

They whisked out the door. Yet I, like a bedbug, remained upon the blanket. Melancholy and boredom swell within me. Sleep won't come—I snored enough during the day till my eyes bulged. Beneath the window stands the honor guard: two grenadiers glare at each other— chests wheel-like, mustaches like brooms. Before the bedchamber again stand two more. The duty lieutenant flits back and forth on quiet toes. The parquet shines... Candles burn in bundles in every corner—pure as at a memorial service. Am I a tsar, or a starling in a cage?...

I clapped my hands—from the rear door the orderly Sidor-chuk appears, himself, the bitch, chewing something. He's reached the royal kitchen...

"Go to the company. Immediately give the order to drag my cot here. And that womanly softness is unnecessary to me."

He yanked the ermine by its tail onto the floor, nudged the featherbed with his toe.

"Inconvenient, Your Majesty. Even a sergeant-major sleeps on something soft. And given your position..."

"You, have you forgotten your oath? No arguments! Once I kick you across the Mordovian district, you'll roll straight to the company. Bring Sharik along; at least I'll amuse myself with the dog..."

"But how, Your

Your Majesty, perhaps? Would the duty lieutenant really let a simple company dog through?

"And I'll give you my ring. Show it, and he'll let even a mare through."

Five minutes later, I hear them dragging my cot. Sharik, the rascal, leaps like a goat for joy right at the sentries. He jumped into the bedchamber and licked me on the lips. Ah, you little dog, my bosom friend!

The soldiers laid out the cot—Kurosliep and Soleny, from our platoon. They stood stiff as posts, devouring me with their eyes.

"Sit down," I say, "lads. What's the matter. Sidorchuk will uncork a white-head for us this very moment. I'll have one last drink with you. Sit, don't be afraid. I order you."

No sooner had we settled—Sidorchuk instantly prepared a little snack for us, frying bacon so it sizzled in the pan... When suddenly, a hand braided with gold lace pokes through the door, offering a packet.

"What is it?! No rest for the Tsar from you, day or night. Can't you see people are having a snack? Put the packet on the chest in the anteroom; hopefully, it won't freeze there."

However, behind the hand, the courier himself stretches like noodles through the crack.

"Urgent, secret, into your own hands—read it to pass the time. Your Majesty's schedule of activities for tomorrow."

I took the paper, plugged the vodka bottle with the cork in annoyance so the strength wouldn't evaporate. Gave the courier a ten-kopeck tip for tea—the man is subordinate: you could shove a mad dog at his cuff, and he'd still deliver it without fail.

I opened the envelope, and inside, typed by some rapid-writing machine, was a whole sausage of text, impossible to turn over even with a shovel:

"At seven in the morning—go to the riding hall to watch the hussars' figure riding; at eight—show heavy artillery to the Dagestani Shah; at nine—congratulate the cadets on their promotions; at ten—bid farewell to the old convoy; at eleven—receive the new convoy; at twelve—approve buttons for the new model of border service; at one o'clock—check expenditures with the Palace Minister; at two—launch a submarine cruiser; at three—present a ribbon to the Greek King's nephew..."

Plus two guards parades, plus one army parade, plus an evening ball—may a bull fall off a Christmas tree!—the Turkish ambassador is giving his

great-granddaughter to my convoy yesaul... May the devil choke you all! I didn't read any further. Paths without wheels, a dog in the shafts—spin like a top around an oat stake...

I went to the Tsar's telephone, turned the crank, and called up that ordinary official again:

"Ding-ding. The Tsar speaking. I've received their list, but I'm putting my heel on their grandmother. And what will happen to me if I don't fulfill this roster?"

"Absolutely impossible, Your Majesty. The sun wanders across the sky all day too, illuminating much that is pointless. You cannot refuse."

"But when, with such a schedule, will I ever do anything real?"

I hear him chuckling, that scribbler, over the wire, answering in a rough voice yet with respect:

"Perhaps, according to the roster, this is what is real? There's one price list for all countries. Don't lie crosswise on the cot, Your Majesty—or your legs will go numb..."

I spat into the receiver, went back to my fellow villagers:

"Well then, fellow villagers, let's drink... Duties collected, goods drowned. This matter still needs some thinking over."

Boredom and anguish swell inside me—the bacon even tastes bitter. We finished off the forty-proof bottle; can't let the Tsar's good stuff go to waste. I walked across the carpet, released a May beetle that had foolishly flown into the Tsar's bedchamber out the window... And then it struck me:

"Bring the cot back, lads. Sorry for disturbing you for nothing..."

Well, I think, my power is still mine. Not all cards are beaten; one trump remains. Perhaps I'll win it back...

I sat at the little table and began writing an order: I ordered myself demoted to private rank and immediately transferred back to my very own company. And for the trouble, I commanded myself issued boots with welted soles from the Tsar's treasury. And immediately, brothers, as if an iron had been vomited up, I felt simply impossibly light...

There, you might say, my reign is over. As we say: the forest spirit found a monk's hood, but was afraid to take it...

