

AL ARAF

THE SYSTEM OF IVAN THE TERRIBLE

I saw the high life of Paris. On the banks of the Seine, beneath its bridges, in the suburbs and peripheral quarters, in the attics and secluded courtyards, everywhere was pervaded with misery. In this multitudinous human ant heap individuals appeared and disappeared without leaving a trace, as on some giant dungheap. Up the higher elevations of this dungheap waltzed another, less numerous stratum of people. The rich scattered money with both hands. I thought to myself: they are happy while they are able to relish all the delights of this world without having time to reflect on it too much. For reflection is the source of all the misfortune on this earth. Death snatches them directly from the clutches of intoxication. But among them I saw people dart like a pike among carp. These did not have riches. In spite of this they spun around in the centre of the most luxuriant life. They were referred to as adventurers. They lived from day to day. They feared nothing. They had a clear aim: to conquer fate. I suspected that behind their success lay an important secret. I was very keen to look it in the eye. [...]

"The great secret, the only thing that can guarantee lasting success," the Pole continued, "is a precisely constructed system that the inventor must stick to throughout all his actions. You're surprised? I'll show you straight away. [...] Yes, I too work according to a very particular and extremely successful system, that was not actually devised by me, just as Napoleon did not contrive his."

We followed his narrative very tensely. Walter poured wine into the glass that the Pole had just drained. He resumed:

"The system I follow was thought up some centuries ago by Ivan the Terrible. Why are you staring like that? Perhaps you don't believe me? It's true. He was its inventor. I traced its effects in the tsar's actions. In some historian I read a paragraph that revealed to me the secret. It was written something like this – I speak from memory: Ivan the Terrible used to summon each new courtier. He would start to relate just like that how much misfortune he had already brought on the world and how heavily he was oppressed by the weight of his sins. His whole life had been a plaything of his evil inclinations, that far surpassed in strength those of other mortals. He appeared troubled and dejected to the depths of his soul. The courtier could not believe his ears. What? Such torments troubled the dreadful tyrant, that no-one believed possessed an ounce of feeling or mercy? And he was the one to whom he he had just confessed! The courtier would eagerly begin to comfort him. Other people were no better. It was just that they were weaker and so hid their dark side more successfully. He himself in his callow youth had been afflicted by various weaknesses, he had cheated, stolen and lied as do most men. But he had never dared to admit it. Only the shining example of his ruler had given him courage. The tsar grinned slyly. He had him exactly where he wanted him. He started to fire off questions and the devillish tyrant soon knew all the courtier's secrets and sins. In this way he tightened the noose around his neck and the poor boyar trembled even at the very thought of the dreadful ruler. What could he have done with the secrets the tsar had entrusted? Did not the whole world know about them?! Whereas Ivan had exploited the courtier's credulity in such a way as to turn him into a blind creature that would always serve him in everything, doing whatever was demanded of him. That's roughly what our historian said. You see, gentlemen! This short description inspired me, I might say – a stroke of genius. A revelation came upon me when I was suddenly enlightened and I grasped the essence of this historical example. In my case, I would characterise it in the following way: 'Let someone have a taste of your flesh first, so that later they will let you devour them.'"