



The Wood-Felling, The A Cadet's Story

The Wood-felling

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Chapter I

IN THE MIDDLE of the winter of 185-a division of one battery was on service with the detachment operating in that Part of the Terek Territory¹ called the Great Chechnya. On the evening of February 14, knowing that the platoon which I in the absence of any officer was commanding, was to join a column told off to fell wood next day, and having given and received the necessary orders, I retired to my tent earlier than usual. As I had not contracted the bad habit of warming my tent with hot charcoal, I lay down without undressing on my bed, which was supported on stakes driven into the ground, drew my fur cap over my eyes, tucked myself up in my sheepskin cloak, and fell into that peculiar, heavy, and deep sleep which comes at times of anxiety and when one is awaiting danger. The expectation of the next day's affair had this effect on me.

At three next morning, while it was still quite dark, the warm sheepskin was pulled off me and my eyes, heavy with sleep, were unpleasantly struck by the red light of a candle.

'Get up, please,' said a voice. I shut my eyes, unconsciously pulled the sheepskin back over myself, and again fell asleep. 'Get up, please,' said Dmitry once more, remorselessly shaking me by the shoulder: 'the infantry are starting.' The reality suddenly flashed on my mind, I sat up and jumped to my feet. After hurriedly drinking a glass of tea and washing

1 The Terek Territory lies to the north-east of the Caucasian Mountains. The Great and Little Chechnya are districts in the southern Part of it.

myself with icy water I crept out of the tent and went to the 'park' (the place where the cannon were). It was dark, misty, and cold. The dim red light of the night-fires, which gleaming here and there in the camp showed up the figures of the sleepy soldiers who lay near them, seemed only to make the darkness more intense.

Near by, quiet regular snoring could be heard, and from farther off, sounds of movements, voices, and the clatter of the muskets of the infantry preparing to start. There was a smell of smoke, manure, torches, and mist; the morning air caused cold shivers to run down one's back, and one's teeth chattered involuntarily.

It was only by the snorting and occasional stamping of the horses harnessed to them that we could tell where the limbers and ammunition wagons stood in the impenetrable darkness; and only the fiery dots of the linstocks showed where the guns were. 'God be with us!' With these words came the clanging sound of the first gun moving, then the noise of the ammunition wagon — and the platoon started. We all took off our caps and crossed ourselves. Having occupied the interval between the infantry companies, the platoon stopped and waited a quarter of an hour for the whole column to collect and for the commander to appear.

‘One of our men is missing, Nicholas Petrovich.’ With these words a black figure approached me, whom I only knew by the voice to be the gun-sergeant of the platoon, Maksimov.

‘Who is it?’

‘Velenchuk is missing. He was there all the time they were harnessing — I saw him myself — but now he’s gone.’

As the column could not be expected to start at once, we decided to send Corporal Antonov to look for Velenchuk. Directly after that, several horsemen trotted past us in the dark. They were the commander and his suite; and immediately the head of the column moved and started and so at last did we also, but Antonov and Velenchuk were still absent. We had, however, hardly gone a hundred yards before they both overtook us.

‘Where was he?’ I asked Antonov.

‘Asleep in the “park”.’

‘Why, has he had a drop too much?’

‘Oh, no.’

‘Then how is it he fell asleep?’

‘I can’t make out.’

For about three hours we moved slowly on in silence and darkness over some unploughed fields bare of snow and over low bushes that crackled under the wheels of the gun-carriages. At last, after we had crossed a shallow but extremely rapid stream, we were stopped, and we heard the abrupt reports of vintovkas¹ in the direction of the vanguard.

These sounds as usual had a most exhilarating effect on everyone. The detachment seemed to wake up: sounds of talking, movement, and laughter were heard in the ranks. Here a soldier wrestled with a comrade, there another hopped from foot to foot. Here was one chewing hard-tack, or to while away the time shouldering and grounding arms. Meanwhile the mist began to grow distinctly whiter in the east, the damp became more intense, and the surrounding objects gradually emerged from the gloom. I could already discern the green gun-carriages and ammunition wagons, the brass of the guns covered

with moisture by the mist, the familiar figures of my soldiers, every minute detail of which I had involuntarily studied, the bay horses, and the lines of infantry

1 The vintduka was a long Asiatic rifle used by the Circassians (Cherkeses). When firing, they rested the barrel on a support formed by two thin spiked sticks tied at the top by a strap. with their bright bayonets, their bags, their ramrods, and the kettles they carried on their backs.

We were soon again moved forward a few hundred yards where there was no road, and then we were shown our position. To the right one could see the steep bank of a winding stream and the high wooden posts of a Tartar cemetery; to the left and in front a black strip was visible through the mist. The platoon unlimbered. The Eighth Company, which covered us, piled their muskets, and a battalion with axes and muskets went to the forest.

Before five minutes were over fires were crackling and smoking in all directions. The soldiers dispersed, blew the fires and stirred them with hands and feet, dragged logs and branches, while the forest resounded with the unceasing noise of hundreds of axes and the crashing of falling trees.

The artillery, with a certain rivalry of the infantry, heaped their pile high, and though it was already burning so that one could hardly come within two paces of it and thick black smoke was rising through the frozen branches, which the soldiers pressed down into the fire (and from which drops fell sizzling into the flames), and though the charcoal was glowing beneath and the grass was scorched all around, the soldiers were not satisfied, but kept throwing great logs on to the pile, feeding it with dry grass beneath and heaping it higher and higher. When I came up to the fire to smoke a cigarette, Velenchuk, always officious, but to-day feeling guilty and bustling about more than any one, in a fit of zeal snatched a piece of charcoal from the fire with his bare hand and, after tossing it from hand to hand a couple of times, dropped it on the ground.

‘Light a twig and hold it up,’ said a soldier.
‘No, better get a linstock, lad,’ said another.

When I had at length lit my cigarette without the aid of Velenchuk, who was again trying to take a piece of charcoal in his hand, he rubbed his burnt fingers on the skirts of his sheepskin coat and then, probably for want of something else to do, lifted a large piece of plane-tree wood and swung it into the fire. When at last he felt free to rest a bit, he came close up to the fire, threw open his cloak which he wore like a mantle fastened by one button, spread out his legs, held out his big, black hands, and drawing his mouth a bit to one side, screwed up his eyes.

‘Ah, I’ve gone and forgot my pipe. Here’s a go, lads!’ said he after a short silence, not addressing any one in Particular.

Chapter II

IN RUSSIA THERE are three predominant types of soldier under which the men of all our forces — whether line, guards, infantry, cavalry, artillery, army of the Caucasus, or what not — may be classified. These principal types, including many sub-divisions and combinations, are:

1. The submissive;
2. The domineering;
3. The reckless.

The submissive are divided into (a) the calmly submissive and (b) the bustlingly submissive.

The domineering are divided into (a) the sternly domineering and (b) the diplomatically domineering.

The reckless are divided into (a) the amusingly reckless and (b) the viciously reckless.

The type most often met with — a type more lovable and attractive than the others and generally accompanied by the best Christian

virtues, — meekness, piety, patience, and devotion to the will of God, — is the submissive type in general. The distinctive feature of the calmly submissive is his invincible resignation to and contempt for all the reverses of fate which may befall him; the distinctive features of the submissive drunkard are a mild, poetic disposition and sensibility; the distinctive feature of the bustlingly submissive is limited mental capacity combined with purposeless industry and zeal.

The domineering type in general is found chiefly among the higher grade of soldiers: the corporals, sergeants, sergeant-majors and so on. The first subdivision, the sternly domineering, is a noble, energetic, pre-eminently military type and does not exclude high poetic impulses (Corporal Antonov, with whom I wish to acquaint the reader, belonged to this type). The second sub-division, formed by the diplomatically domineering, has for some time past been increasing largely. A man of this type is always eloquent and literate,¹ wears pink shirts, won't eat out of the common pot, sometimes smokes tobacco of Mousatov's brand, and thinks himself much superior to the common soldier, but is rarely himself as good a soldier as the domineering of the first sub-division.

The reckless type, like the domineering type, is good in its first subdivision, the amusingly reckless, whose characteristic traits are irresistible mirth, great capacity of all kinds, and a highly gifted and daring nature. As with the domineering class, the second sub-division is bad; the viciously reckless are terribly bad, but to the honour of the Russian army it must be said that this type is very rare, and when found it is excluded from companionship by the public opinion of the soldiers themselves. Unbelief and a kind of boldness in vice are the chief traits characteristic of this class.

Velenchuk belonged to the bustlingly submissive. He was an Ukrainian by birth, had already served for fifteen years, and although not a showy or smart soldier he was simple-minded, kindly, extremely

1 A distinction very frequently met with in Russian is between literate and illiterate people; i.e. between those who can and those who cannot read and write.

though often inopportunately zealous, and also exceedingly honest. I say exceedingly honest, because an incident had occurred the year before which made this characteristic quality of his very evident. It must be remembered that almost every soldier knows a trade. The most usual trades are tailoring and boot-making. Velenchuk taught himself the former, and judging from the fact that even Michael Dorofeich, the sergeant-major, ordered clothes from him, he must have attained some proficiency at his craft.

Last year, in camp, Velenchuk undertook to make a fine cloth coat for Michael Dorofeich; but that very night after he had cut out the coat and measured out the trimmings and put them all under his pillow in the tent, a misfortune befell him: the cloth that had cost seven rubles, disappeared during the night! Velenchuk, with tears in his eyes, trembling white lips and suppressed sobs, informed the sergeant-major of the occurrence. Michael Dorofeich was enraged. In the first moment of irritation he threatened the tailor; but afterwards, being a man with means and kindly, he just waved his hand and did not demand from Velenchuk payment of the value of the cloth.

In spite of all the fuss made by the fussy Velenchuk, in spite of all the tears he shed when telling of his mishap, the thief was not found. A strong suspicion fell on the viciously reckless soldier Chernov, who slept in the same tent; but there were no positive proofs. The diplomatically domineering Michael Dorofeich, being a man with means and having some little business transactions with the master-at-arms and the caterer of the mess (the aristocracy of the battery), very soon forgot all about the loss of his mufti coat. Not so Velenchuk. He did not forget his misfortune.

The soldiers said they feared at the time that he might commit suicide or run away into the mountains, so great was the effect of his mishap upon him. He neither ate nor drank and could not even work, but was continually crying. When three days had passed he appeared, quite

pale, before Michael Dorofeich, took with trembling fingers a gold coin from under his cuff and gave it him. 'Heaven's my witness, Michael Dorofeich, that it's all I have, and even that I borrowed from Zhdanov/ said he, sobbing again; 'and the other two rubles I swear I will also return as soon as I have earned them. He' (whom 'he' meant Velenchuk did not himself know) 'has made me appear like a rascal before you. He — with his loathsome, viper soul — he takes the last morsel from his brother soldier, after I have served for fifteen years. . . .' To the honour of Michael Dorofeich be it said, he did not take the remaining two rubles, though Velenchuk brought them to him two months later.

Chapter III

BESIDES VELENCHUK, FIVE other soldiers of my platoon sat warming themselves by our fire.

In the best place, on a butt with his back to the wind, sat Maksimov, the gun-sergeant of the platoon, smoking a pipe. The habit of commanding and the consciousness of his dignity were betrayed by the pose, the look, and by every movement of this man, not to mention his nankeen-covered sheepskin coat and the butt he was sitting on, which latter is an emblem of power at a halting-place.

When I came up he turned his head towards me without removing his eyes from the fire, and his look, following the direction his head had taken, only fell on me some time later. Maksimov was not a serf but a peasant-yeoman; he had some money, had qualified to take a class in the school-brigade, and had stuffed his head with erudition. He was awfully rich and awfully learned, so the soldiers said. I remember how once when we were practising plunging fire with a quadrant, he explained to the soldiers gathered round, that a spirit level is nothing but as it occurs that atmospheric mercury has its motion.

In reality, Maksimov was far from being stupid, and understood his work thoroughly; but he had the unfortunate peculiarity of sometimes purposely speaking so that there was no possibility of understanding him and so that, I am convinced, he did not understand his own words. He was Particularly fond of the words 'as it occurs' and 'continues', so

that when I heard him say 'as it occurs' or 'continues', I knew beforehand that I should understand nothing of what followed. The soldiers on the other hand, as far as I could judge, liked to hear his 'as it occurs' and suspected it of being fraught with deep meaning, though they did not understand a word of it any more than I did. This they attributed entirely to their own stupidity, and respected Theodor Maksimov all the more. In a word, Maksimov was one of the diplomatically domineering.

The soldier next to him, who had bared his sinewy red legs and was putting on his boots again by the fire, was Antonov, — that same Corporal Antonov who in 1837, remaining with only two others in charge of an exposed gun, persisted in firing back at a powerful enemy and, with two bullets in his leg, continued to serve his gun and to reload it.

The soldiers used to say that he would have been made a gun-sergeant long ago but for his character. And his character really was very peculiar. No one could have been calmer, gentler, or more accurate than he was when sober; but when he had a fit of drinking he became quite another man; he would not submit to authority, fought, brawled, and became a perfectly good-for-nothing soldier. Only the week before this, during the Carnival, he had had a drinking-bout, and in spite of all threats, persuasions, and being tied to a cannon, he went on drinking and brawling up to the first day of Lent.

During the whole of Lent, though the division had been ordered not to fast, he fed on dried bread, and during the first week would not even drink the regulation cup of vodka. But one had to see his sturdy thick-set figure, as of wrought iron, on its stumpy bandy legs, and his shiny moustached visage when in a tipsy mood he took the balaldyka in his sinewy hands and looking carelessly round played Lady, or walked down the street with his cloak thrown loosely over his shoulders, his medals dangling, his hands in the pockets of his blue nankeen trousers, and a look on his countenance of soldierly pride and of contempt for all that was not of the artillery — one had to see all this in order to understand how impossible it was for him at such a moment to abstain

from fighting an orderly, a Cossack, an infantry-man, a peasant (in fact, anyone not of the artillery) who was rude to him or happened merely to be in his way. He fought and rioted not so much for his own pleasure as to maintain the spirit of soldiership in general, of which he felt himself to be the representative.

The third soldier, who sat on his heels smoking a clay pipe, was the artillery driver Chikin. He had an ear-ring in one of his ears, bristling little moustaches, and the physiognomy of a bird. 'Dear old Chikin,' as the soldiers called him, was a wit. During the bitterest frost, or up to his knees in mud, or after going two days without food, on the march, on parade, or at drill, the 'dear fellow' was always and everywhere making faces, twisting his legs about, or cracking jokes that convulsed the whole platoon with laughter. At every halting-place, and in the camp, there was always a circle of young soldiers collected round Chikin, who played Filka¹ with them, told them stories about the cunning soldier and the English milord, personated a Tartar or a German, or simply made remarks of his own at which everyone roared with laughter. It is true that his reputation as a wit

¹ A soldier's card game. was so well established in the battery that it was sufficient for him to open his mouth and wink in order to produce a general guffaw, but really there was much in him that was truly humorous and surprising. He saw something special, something that never entered anybody else's head, in everything, and above all, this capacity for seeing the funny side of things was proof against any and every trial.

The fourth soldier was an insignificant-looking boy recruited the year before and this was his first campaign. He stood surrounded by the smoke and so near the flames that his threadbare cloak seemed in danger of catching fire, yet judging by the way he extended the skirts of his cloak and bent out his calves, and by his quiet self-satisfied pose, he was feeling highly contented.

The fifth and last of the soldiers was Daddy Zhdanov. He sat a little way off, cutting a stick. Zhdanov had been serving in the battery longer than

anyone else, had known all the others as recruits, and they were all in the habit of calling him 'daddy'. It was said of him that he never drank, smoked, or played cards (not even 'noses'), and never used bad language. He spent all his spare time boot-making, went to church on holidays where that was possible, or else put a farthing taper before his icon and opened the book of psalms, the only book he could read. He seldom kept company with the other soldiers. To those who were his seniors in rank though his juniors in years he was coldly respectful; with his equals he had few opportunities of mixing, not being a drinker. He liked the recruits and the youngest soldiers best: he always took them under his protection, admonished them, and often helped them. Everyone in the battery considered him a capitalist because he had some twenty-five rubles, out of which he was always ready to lend something to a soldier in real need.

The same Maksimov who was now gun-sergeant told me that ten years ago, when he first came as a recruit and drank all he had with the old soldiers who were in the habit of drinking, Zhdanov, noticing his unfortunate position, called him up, severely reprimanded him for his conduct and even beat him, delivered a lecture on how one should live in the army, and sent him away after giving him a shirt (which Maksimov lacked) and half-a-ruble in money. 'He made a man of me,' Maksimov always used to say with respect and gratitude. He also helped Velenchuk (whom he had taken under his protection since he was a recruit) at the time of his misfortune. When the coat was stolen he helped him as he had helped many and many another during the twenty-five years of his service.

One could not hope to find a man in the service who knew his work more thoroughly or was a better or more conscientious soldier than he; but he was too meek and insignificant-looking to be made a gun-sergeant, though he had been bombardier for fifteen years. Zhdanov's one enjoyment and passion was song. He had a few favourite songs, always collected a circle of singers from among the younger soldiers, and though he could not sing himself he would stand by them, his hands in the pockets of his cloak, his eyes closed, showing sympathy by the movements of his head and jaw. I don't know why, but that regular

movement of the jaws below the ears, which I never noticed in anyone else, seemed to me extremely expressive. His snow-white head, his blackened moustaches, and his sunburnt, wrinkled face, gave him at first sight a stern and harsh expression; but on looking closer into his large round eyes, especially when they smiled (he never laughed with his lips), you were suddenly struck by something remarkable in their unusually mild, almost childlike look.

Chapter IV

‘I’LL BE BLOWED! I’ve gone and forgot my pipe. Here’s a go, lads!’ repeated Velenchuk.

‘You should smoke cigars, old fellow!’ began Chikin, drawing his mouth to one side and winking. ‘There, now, I always smoke cigars when I’m at home — them’s sweeter.’

Of course everybody burst out laughing.

‘Forgot your pipe, indeed!’ interrupted Maksimov without heeding the general mirth, and beating the tobacco out of his pipe into the palm of his left hand with the proud air of a superior; ‘where did you vanish to — eh, Velenchuk?’

Velenchuk, half turning round to him, was about to raise his hand to his cap, but dropped it again.

‘Seems to me you hadn’t your sleep out after yesterday — falling asleep when you are once up! It’s not thanks the likes of you get for such goings on.’

‘May I die, Theodor Maksimov, if a drop has passed my lips; I don’t myself know what happened to me,’ answered Velenchuk. ‘Much cause I had for revelling,’ he muttered.

‘Just so; but we have to answer to the authorities because of the likes of you, and you continue — it’s quite scandalous!’ the eloquent Maksimov concluded in a calmer tone.

‘It’s quite wonderful, lads,’ Velenchuk went on after a moment’s silence, scratching his head and addressing no one in particular; ‘really quite wonderful, lads! Here have I been serving for the last sixteen years and such a tiling never happened to me. When we were ordered

to appear for muster I was all right, but at the “park”, there it suddenly clutches hold of me, and clutches and clutches, and down it throws me, down on the ground and no more ado — and I did not myself know how I fell asleep, lads! That must have been the trances,’ he concluded. ‘True enough, I hardly managed to wake you,’ said Antonov as he pulled on his boot. ‘I had to push and push just as if you’d been a log!’ ‘Fancy now,’ said Velenchuk, ‘if I’d been drunk now! . . .’

‘That’s just like a woman we had at home,’ began Chikin; ‘she hardly got off the stove for two years. Once they began waking her — they thought she was asleep — and she was already dead. She used to be taken sleepy that way. That’s what it is, old fellow!’

‘Now then, Chikin, won’t you tell us how you set the tone during your leave of absence?’ said Maksimov, looking at me with a smile as if to say: ‘Would you, too, like to hear the stupid fellow?’

‘What tone, Theodor Maksimov?’ said Chikin, giving me a rapid side-glance. ‘In course I told them what sort of a Caw-cusses we’d got here.’ ‘Well, yes, how did you do it? There! don’t give yourself airs; tell us how you administrated it to them.’

‘How should I administrate it? In course they asked me how we live,’ Chikin began rapidly with the air of a man recounting something he had repeated several times before. ‘“We live well, old fellow,” says I.

“Provisions in plenty we get: morning and night a cup of chokolad for every soldier lad, and at noon barley broth before us is set, such as gentlefolks get, and instead of vodka we get a pint of Modera wine from Devirier, such as costs forty-four — with the bottle ten more!”

‘Fine Modera,’ Velenchuk shouted louder than anyone, rolling with laughter: ‘that’s Modera of the right sort!’

‘Well, and what did you tell them about the Asiaites?’ Maksimov went on to ask when the general mirth had subsided a little.

Chikin stooped over the fire, poked out a bit of charcoal with a stick, put it to his pipe, and long continued puffing at his shag as though not noticing the silent curiosity awakened in his hearers. When he had at last drawn enough smoke he threw the bit of charcoal away, pushed his

cap yet farther back, and, stretching himself, continued with a slight smile —

‘Well, so they asked, “What’s that Cherkes fellow or Turk as you’ve got down in your Cawcusses”, they say, “as fights?” and so I says, “Them’s not all of one sort; there’s different Cherkeses, old fellow. There’s the Wagabones, them as lives in the stony mountains and eat stones instead of bread. They’re big,” says I, “as big as a good-sized beam, they’ve one eye in the forehead and wear burning red caps,” just such as yours, old fellow,’ he added, turning to the young recruit, who really wore an absurd cap with a red crown.

At this unexpected sally the recruit suddenly collapsed, slapped his knees, and burst out laughing and coughing so that he hardly managed to utter in a stifled voice, ‘Them Wagabones is the right sort!’

“Then”, says I, “there’s also the Mopingers,” continued Chikin, making his cap slip onto his forehead with a movement of his head: ‘ “These others are little twins, so big ... all in pairs,” says I, “they run about hand in hand at such a rate,” says I, “that you couldn’t catch ’em on a horse!” — “Then how’s it, lad,” they say, “how’s them Mopingers, be they born hand in hand?”’ He said this in a hoarse bass, pretending to imitate a peasant. “Yes,” says I, “he’s naturally like that. Tear their hands aPart and they’ll bleed just like a Chinaman: take a Chinaman’s cap off and it’ll bleed.” — “And tell us, lad, how do they fight?” — - “That’s how,” says I, “they catch you and rip your belly up and wind your bowels round your arm, and wind and wind. They go on winding and you go on laughing till your breath all goes.”’

‘Well, and did they believe you, Chikin?’ said Maksimov with a slight smile, while all the rest were dying with laughter. ‘Such queer people, Theodor Maksimych, they believe everything. On my word they do. But when I told them about Mount Kazbek and said that the snow didn’t melt on it all the summer, they mocked at me! “What are you bragging for, lad,” they says; “a big mountain and the snow on it don’t melt? Why, lad, when the thaw sets in here every tiny bit of a hillock thaws first while the snow still Lies in the hollows.” There now!’ Chikin concluded with a wink.

Chapter V

THE BRIGHT DISK of the sun shining through the milky-white mist had already risen to a considerable height. The purple-grey horizon gradually widened, but though it had receded considerably it was still as sharply outlined by a deceptive white wall of mist.

Beyond the felled wood a good-sized plain now opened in front of us. The black or milky-white or purple smoke of the fires expanded and fantastic shapes of white mist-clouds floated above the plain. An occasional group of mounted Tartars appeared far in the distance before us and at rare intervals the reports of our rifles¹ and of their vintoukas and cannon were to be heard.

This, as Captain Khlopov said, was 'not yet business, but only play.'

The commander of the 8th Company of Chasseurs, that formed our support, came up to our guns, pointed to three Tartars² on horseback skirting the

¹ Most of the Russian army at that time were armed with smooth-bore muskets, but a few had wide-calibred muzzle-loading rifles [stutzers), which were difficult to handle and slow to load. Vintovkas were also rifles.

² Russians in the Caucasus used the word 'Tartar' loosely for any of the native Mohammedan tribes (Circassians, Kabardans, etc.), much as among ourselves the word 'Niggers' is used to denote almost any dark race. forest some 1,400 yards from us, and with the fondness for artillery fire common among infantry officers in general, asked me to let off a ball or bomb at them.

'Do you see?' he said with a kind and persuasive smile as he stretched his hand from behind my shoulder, 'in front of those big trees there . . . one on a white horse and in a black Circassian cloak and two others behind. Do you see? Could you not, please?'

'And there are three more riding at the outskirts of the forest,' said Antónov, who had astonishingly sharp eyesight, coming up to us, and hiding behind his back the pipe he had been smoking. 'There, the one in

front has taken his gun out of its case. They can be seen distinctly, y'r honor!

'Look there! he's fired, lads. D'ye see the white smoke?' said Velenchuk, who was one of a group of soldiers standing a little behind us.

'At our line surely, the blackguard!' remarked another.

'See what a lot of 'em come streaming out of the forest. Must be looking round... want to place a gun,' said a third.

'Supposing now a bomb was sent right into that lot, wouldn't they spit!'

'And what d'ye think, old fellow — that it would just reach 'em?' said Chikin.

'Twelve hundred or twelve hundred and fifty yards: not more than that,' said Maksimov calmly and as if speaking to himself, though it was evident he was just as anxious to fire as the rest: 'if we were to give an elevation of forty-five lines to our "unicorn"¹ we could hit the very point, that is to say, perfectly.'

'D'ye know, if you were now to aim at that group you would be sure to hit somebody. There now, they are all together — please be quick and give the order

¹ The 'unicorn' was a type of gun, narrowing towards the muzzle, used in the Russian artillery at that time. to fire,' the company commander continued to entreat me.

'Are we to point the gun?' suddenly asked Antónov in an abrupt bass with a look as if of gloomy anger.

I must admit that I also felt a strong wish to fire, so I ordered the second gun to be trained.

I had hardly given the order before the shell was charged and rammed in and Antónov, leaning against the cheek of the gun-carriage and holding two of his thick fingers to the base-ring, was directing the movement of the tail of the gun. 'Right, left — a bit to the left, a wee bit — more — more — right!' he said, stepping from the gun with a look of pride.

The infantry officer, I, and Maksimov, one after the other, approached, put our heads to the sights, and expressed our various opinions.

‘By Heavens, it will shoot over,’ remarked Velenchuk, clicking his tongue, though he was only looking over Antónov’s shoulder and therefore had no grounds for this supposition. ‘By Heavens it will shoot over; it will hit that there tree, my lads!’
I gave the order: ‘Two.’

The men stepped away from the gun. Antonov ran aside to watch the flight of the shot. The touch-hole flashed and the brass rang. At the same moment we were enveloped in a cloud of powder-smoke and, emerging from the overpowering boom of the discharge, the humming, metallic sound of the flying shot receded with the swiftness of lightning and died away in the distance amid general silence.

A little beyond the group of horsemen a white cloudlet appeared; the Tartars galloped away in all directions and the report of the explosion reached us. ‘That was very fine!’ ‘Ah, how they galloped!’ ‘The devils don’t like that!’ came the words of approval and ridicule from the ranks of the artillery and infantry.

‘If we had had the gun pointed only a touch lower we should just have caught him. I said it would hit the tree and sure enough it did go to the right,’ remarked Velenchuk.

Chapter VI

LEAVING THE SOLDIERS to discuss how the Tartars galloped off when they saw the shell, why they had been riding there, and whether there were many of them in the forest, I went and sat down with the company commander under a tree a few steps off to wait while the cutlets he had invited me to share were being warmed up. The company commander, Bolkhov, was one of the officers nicknamed ‘bonjourists’ in the regiment. He was a man of some means, had formerly served in the Guards, and spoke French.

But in spite of all this his comrades liked him. He was clever enough, and had tact enough, to wear a coat of Petersburg make, to eat a good dinner, and to speak French, without too much offending his fellow officers. After talking about the weather, the military operations, our

mutual acquaintances among the officers, and having assured ourselves of the satisfactory state of each other's ideas by questions and answers and the views expressed, we involuntarily passed to more intimate conversation. And when people belonging to the same circle meet in the Caucasus a very evident, even if unspoken, question arises: 'Why are you here?' and it was to this silent question of mine that, as it seemed to me, my companion wished to reply.

'When will this expedition end?' he said lazily. 'It is so dull.'

'I don't think it dull,' said I. 'It's much worse on the staff.'

'Oh, it's ten thousand times worse on the staff,' he said irascibly. 'No, I mean when will the whole thing end?' In the distance a puff of bluish smoke expanded and rose, blown about by the wind. When I had understood that this was a shot fired at us by the enemy, all before my eyes at the moment assumed a sort of new and majestic character. The piles of arms, the smoke of the fires, the blue sky, the green gun-carriages, Nikolayev's sunburnt, moustached face — all seemed telling me that the ball that had already emerged from the smoke and was at that moment flying through space might be directed straight at my breast.

'Where did you get the wine?' I asked Bolkhov lazily, while deep in my soul two voices spoke with equal clearness. One said, 'Lord receive my soul in peace,' the other, 'I hope I shall not stoop, but smile, while the ball is passing,' and at that moment something terribly unpleasant whistled past our heads and a cannon ball crashed down a couple of paces from us.

'There now, had I been a Napoleon or a Frederick I should certainly have paid you a compliment,' Bolkhov remarked, turning towards me quite calmly.

'You have done so as it is,' I answered, with difficulty hiding the excitement produced in me by the danger just passed.

'Well, what if I have? — no one will write it down.'

'Yes, I will.'

'Well, if you do put it down, it will only be "for kritikism", as Mischenkov says,' he added with a smile.

'Ugh! the damned thing!' just then remarked Antónov behind us, as he spat over his shoulder with vexation, 'just missed my legs!' All my attempts to seem calm, and all our cunning phrases, suddenly seemed to me insufferably silly after that simple exclamation.

Chapter VII

THE ENEMY HAD really placed two guns where we had seen the Tartars riding, and they fired a shot every twenty or thirty minutes at our men who were felling the wood. My platoon was ordered forward to the plain to answer the enemy's fire. A puff of smoke appeared on the outskirts of the forest, then followed a report and a whistle, and a ball fell in front or behind us. The enemy's shots fell fortunately for us and we sustained no losses.

The artillerymen behaved splendidly as they always do; loaded quickly, pointed carefully at the spots where the puffs of smoke were, and quietly joked with one another.

The infantry supports lay near in silent inaction awaiting their turn. The wood-fellers went on with their work, the axes rang faster and more unintermittently through the forest; but when the whistle of a shot became audible all were suddenly silent and, in the midst of the deathly stillness, voices not quite calm exclaimed, 'Scatter, lads!' and all eyes followed the ball ricocheting over wood piles and strewn branches.

The mist had now risen quite high and, turning into clouds, gradually disappeared into the dark-blue depths of the sky; the unveiled sun shone brightly, throwing sparkling reflections from the steel bayonets, the brass of the guns, the thawing earth, and the glittering hoar-frost. In the air one felt the freshness of the morning frost together with the warmth of the spring sunshine; thousands of different hues and tints mingled in the dry leaves of the forest, and the shining, beaten track plainly showed the traces left by wheels and the marks of rough-shod horses' feet.

The movement became greater and more noticeable between the two forces. On all sides the blue smoke of the guns appeared more and

more frequently. Dragoons rode forward, the streamers of their lances flying; from the infantry companies one heard songs, and the carts laden with firewood formed into a train in our rear. The general rode up to our platoon and ordered us to prepare to retire. The enemy settled in the bushes on our left flank and their snipers began to molest us seriously. A bullet came humming from the woods to the left and struck a gun-carriage, then came another, and a third. . . . The infantry supports that had been lying near us rose noisily, took up their muskets and formed into line.

The small-arm firing increased and bullets flew more and more frequently. The retreat commenced and consequently the serious Part of the action, as is usual in the Caucasus.

Everything showed that the artillerymen liked the bullets as little as the infantry had liked the cannon-balls. Antanov frowned, Chikin imitated the bullets and joked about them, but it was easy to see he did not like them. 'It's in a mighty hurry,' he said of one of them; another he called 'little bee'; a third, which seemed to fly slowly past overhead with a kind of piteous wail, he called an 'orphan', which caused general laughter.

The recruit who, unaccustomed to such scenes, bent his head to one side and stretched his neck every time a bullet passed, also made the soldiers laugh. 'What, is that a friend of yours you're bowing to?' they said to him. Velenchuk also, usually quite indifferent to danger, was now excited: he was evidently vexed that we did not fire case-shot in the direction whence the bullets came. He repeated several times in a discontented tone, 'Why is he allowed to go for us and gets nothing in return? If we turned a gun that way and gave them a taste of case-shot they'd hold their noise, no fear!'

It was true that it was time to do this, so I ordered them to fire a last bomb and then to load with case-shot. 'Case-shot!' Antonov called out briskly as he went through the thick of the smoke to sponge out the gun as soon as it was discharged.

At that moment I heard just behind me the rapid whiz of a bullet suddenly stopped by something, with a dull thud. My heart ceased beating. 'Someone of the men has been hit,' I thought, while a sad presentiment made me afraid to turn round. And really that sound was followed by the heavy fall of a body, and the heart-rending 'Oh-o-oh' of someone who had been wounded. 'I'm hit, lads!' a voice I knew exclaimed with an effort. It was Velenchuk. He was lying on his back between the limbers and a cannon. The cartridge-bag he had been carrying was thrown to one side. His forehead was covered with blood, and a thick red stream was running down over his right eye and nose. He was wounded in the stomach but hardly bled at all there; his forehead he had hurt against a log in falling.

All this I made out much later; the first moment I could only see an indistinct mass and, as it seemed to me, a tremendous quantity of blood.

Not one of the soldiers who were loading said a word, only the young recruit muttered something that sounded like 'Dear me! he's bleeding', and Antonov, frowning, gave an angry grunt; but it was clear that the thought of death passed through the soul of each. All set to work very actively and the gun was loaded in a moment, but the ammunition-bearer bringing the case-shot went two or three steps round the spot where Velenchuk still lay groaning.

Chapter VIII

EVERYONE WHO HAS been in action undoubtedly knows that strange and though illogical yet powerful feeling of aversion for the spot where some one has been killed or wounded. It was evident that for a moment my men gave way to this feeling when Velenchuk had to be taken to the cart that came up to fetch him. Zhdanov came up angrily to the wounded man and, taking him under the arms, lifted him without heeding his loud screams. 'Now then, what are you standing there for? take hold!' he shouted, and about ten assistants, some of them superfluous, immediately surrounded Velenchuk. But hardly had they moved him when he began screaming and struggling terribly.

‘What are you screaming like a hare for?’ said Antonov roughly, holding his leg; ‘mind, or we’ll just leave you.’

And the wounded man really became quiet and only now and then uttered, ‘Oh, it’s my death! Oh, oh, oh, lads!’

When he was laid in the cart he even stopped moaning and I heard him speak to his comrades in low clear tones, probably saying farewell to them.

No one likes to look at a wounded man during an action and, instinctively hurrying to end this scene, I ordered him to be taken quickly to the ambulance, and returned to the guns. But after a few minutes I was told that Velenchuk was asking for me, and I went up to the cart.

The wounded man lay at the bottom of the cart holding on to the sides with both hands. His broad healthy face had completely changed during those few moments; he seemed to have grown thinner and years older, his lips were thin and pale and pressed together with an evident strain. The hasty and dull expression of his glance was replaced by a kind of bright clear radiance, and on the bloody forehead and nose already lay the impress of death. Though the least movement caused him excruciating pain, he nevertheless asked to have a small chirez¹ with money taken from his left leg.

The sight of his bare, white, healthy leg, when his

¹ The chirez is a purse in the form of a garter, usually worn by soldiers below the knee. Jack-boot had been taken off and the purse untied, produced on me a terribly sad feeling.

‘Here are three rubles and a half,’ he said, as I took the purse: ‘you’ll take care of them.’

The cart was starting, but he stopped it.

I was making a cloak for Lieutenant Sulimovsky. He gave me two rubles. I bought buttons for one and a half, and half a ruble is in my bag with the buttons. Please let him have it.’

‘All right! all right!’ said I. ‘Get well again, old fellow.’

He did not answer; the cart started and he again began to groan and cry out in a terrible, heartrending voice. It was as if, having done with the business of this life, he did not think it necessary to restrain himself and considered it permissible to allow himself this relief.

Chapter IX

‘WHERE ARE YOU off to? Come back! Where are you going?’ I shouted to the recruit, who with his reserve linstock under his arm and a stick of some sort in his hand was, in the coolest manner, following the cart that bore the wounded man.

But the recruit only looked at me lazily, muttered something or other, and continued his way, so that I had to send a soldier to bring him back. He took off his red cap and looked at me with a stupid smile.

‘Where were you going?’ I asked.

‘To the camp.’

‘Why?’

‘Why? . . . Velenchuk is wounded,’ he said, again smiling.

‘What’s that to you? You must stay here.’

He looked at me with surprise, then turned quietly round, put on his cap, and went back to his place.

The affair in general was successful. The Cossacks, as we heard, had made a fine charge and brought back three dead Tartars;¹ the infantry had provided itself with firewood and had only half-a-dozen men wounded; the artillery had lost only Velenchuk and two horses. For that, two miles of forest had been cut down and the place so cleared as to be unrecognizable. Instead of the thick outskirts of the forest you saw before you a large plain covered with smoking fires and cavalry and infantry marching back to camp.

Though the enemy continued to pursue us with artillery and small-arm fire up to the cemetery by the little river we had crossed in the morning, the retirement was successfully accomplished. I was already beginning to dream of the cabbage-soup and mutton-ribs with

buckwheat that were awaiting me in camp, when a message came from the General ordering a redoubt to be constructed by the river, and the

3rd battalion of the K-Regiment and the platoon of the 4th Battery to remain there till next day.

The carts with the wood and the wounded, the Cossacks, the artillery, the infantry with muskets and faggots on their shoulders, all passed us with noise and songs. Every face expressed animation and pleasure caused by the escape from danger and the hope of rest. Only we and the 3rd battalion had to postpone those pleasant feelings till tomorrow.

Chapter X

WHILE WE OF the artillery were busy with the guns — parking the limbers and the ammunition wagons and arranging the picket-ropes — the infantry had already piled their muskets, made up camp-fires, built little

1 The 'Tartars', being Mohammedans, made a point of not letting the bodies of their slain fall into the hands of the 'unbelievers', but removed them and buried them as heroes. The capture of three bodies therefore indicates the vigour of the attack and the demoralization of the enemy. huts of branches and maize straw, and begun boiling their buckwheat.

The twilight had set in. Bluish white clouds crept over the sky. The mist, turning into fine dank drizzle, wetted the earth and the soldiers' cloaks; the horizon narrowed and all the surroundings assumed a gloomier hue. The damp I felt through my boots and on my neck, the ceaseless movement and talk in which I took no part, the sticky mud on which my feet kept slipping, and my empty stomach, all combined to put me into the dreariest, most unpleasant frame of mind after the physical and moral weariness of the day. I could not get Velenchuk out of my head. The whole simple story of his soldier-life depicted itself persistently in my imagination.

His last moments were as clear and calm as his whole life had been. He had lived too honestly and been too artless for his simple faith in a future heavenly life to be shaken at the decisive moment.

'Your honour!' said Nikoldyev, coming up to me, 'the Captain asks you to come and have tea with him.'

Having scrambled through, as best I could, between the piles of arms and the camp-fires, I followed Nikolayev to where Bolkhov was, thinking with pleasure of a tumbler of hot tea and a cheerful conversation which would disperse my gloomy thoughts.

'Have you found him?' I heard Bolkhov's voice say from inside a maize-hut in which a light was burning.

'I've brought him, y'r honour,' answered Nikolayev's bass voice.

Inside the hut Bólkhov was sitting on a dry mantle, with unbuttoned coat and no cap. A samovar stood boiling by his side and on a drum were light refreshments. A bayonet holding a candle was stuck into the ground.

'What do you think of it?' he asked, looking proudly round his cosy establishment. It really was so nice inside the hut that at tea I quite forgot the damp, the darkness, and Velenchuk's wound. We talked of Moscow and of things that had not the least relation to the war or to the Caucasus.

After a moment of silence such as sometimes occurs in the most animated conversation, Bólkhov looked at me with a smile.

'I think our conversation this morning struck you as being very strange,' he said.

'No, why do you think so? It only seemed to me that you were too frank; there are things which we all know, but which should never be mentioned.'

'Why not? If there were the least possibility of changing this life for the lowest and poorest without danger and without service, I should not hesitate a moment.'

'Then why don't you return to Russia?' I asked.

‘Why?’ he repeated. ‘Oh, I have thought about that long ago. I can’t return to Russia now until I have the Anna and Vladimir orders: an Anna round my neck and the rank of major, as I planned when I came here.’
‘Why? — if, as you say, you feel unfit for the service here.’

‘But what if I feel still more unfit to go back to Russia to the same position that I left? That is also one of the traditions in Russia, confirmed by Passek, Sleptsov and others, that one need only go to the Caucasus to be laden with rewards. Everyone expects and demands it of us; and I have been here for two years, have been on two expeditions, and have got nothing. But still I have so much ambition that I won’t leave on any account until I am a major with a Vladimir and Anna round my neck. I have become so concerned about it that it upsets me when Gniloklshkin gets a reward and I don’t. And then how am I to show myself in Russia, to the village elder, to the merchant Kotelnikov to whom I sell my corn, to my Moscow aunt, and to all those good people, if after two years spent in the Caucasus I return without any reward? It is true I don’t at all wish to know all those people, and they no doubt care very little about me either; but man is so made that, though I don’t want to know them, yet on account of them I’m wasting the best years of my life, all my life’s happiness, and am mining my future.’

Chapter XI

JUST THEN WE heard the voice of the commander of the battalion outside, addressing Bolkhov.

‘Who is with you, Nicholas Fedorovich?’

Bolkhov gave him my name, and then three officers scrambled into the hut — Major Kirsanov; the adjutant of his battalion; and Captain Trosenko.

Kirsanov was not tall but stout, he had black moustaches, rosy cheeks, and oily little eyes. These eyes were his most remarkable feature. When he laughed nothing remained of them but two tiny moist stars, and these little stars together with his wide-stretched lips and outstretched neck often gave him an extraordinarily senseless look. In

the regiment Kirsanov behaved himself and bore himself better than anyone else; his subordinates did not complain of him and his superiors respected him — though the general opinion was that he was very limited. He knew the service, was exact and zealous, always had ready money, kept a carriage and a man-cook, and knew how to make an admirable pretence of being proud.

‘What were you talking about, Nicholas Fedorovich?’

‘Why, about the attractions of the service here.’

But just then Kirsanov noticed me, a cadet, and to impress me with his importance he paid no attention to Bólkhov’s reply, but looked at the drum and said— ‘Are you tired, Nicholas Fedorovich?’

‘No, you see we-’ Bolkhov began.

But again the dignity of the commander of the battalion seemed to make it necessary to interrupt, and to ask another question.

‘That was a famous affair to-day, was it not?’

The adjutant of the battalion was a young ensign recently promoted from being a cadet, a modest, quiet lad with a bashful and kindly-pleasant face. I had met him at Bolkhov’s before. The lad would often come there, bow, sit down in a corner, and remain silent for hours making cigarettes and smoking them; then he would rise, bow, and go away. He was the type of a poor Russian nobleman’s son who had chosen the military career as the only one possible to him with his education, and who esteemed his position as an officer above everything else in the world — a simple-minded and lovable type notwithstanding the comical appurtenances inseparable from it: the tobacco-pouch, dressing-gown, guitar, and little moustache-brush we are accustomed to associate with it. It was told of him in the regiment that he bragged about being just but strict with his orderly, and that he used to say, ‘I punish seldom, but when I am compelled to do it it’s no joke,’ but that when his tipsy orderly robbed him outrageously and even began to insult him, he, the master, took him to the guard-house and ordered everything to be prepared for a flogging, but was so upset at the sight of the preparations that he could only say, ‘There now, you see, I could-’ and becoming quite disconcerted,

ran home in great confusion and was henceforth afraid to look his man Chernov in the eyes. His comrades gave the simple-minded boy no rest but teased him continually about this episode, and more than once I heard how he defended himself, and blushing to the tips of his ears assured them that it was not true, but just the contrary. The third visitor, Captain Trosenko, was a thoroughgoing old Caucasian — that is, a man for whom the company he commanded had become his family; the fortress where the staff was, his home; and the soldiers' singing his only pleasure in life.

He was a man for whom everything unconnected with the Caucasus was contemptible and scarcely worthy of being considered probable, and everything connected with the Caucasus was divided into two halves: ours and not ours. The first he loved, the second he hated with all the power of his soul; but above all he was a man of steeled, calm courage, wonderfully kind in his behaviour to his comrades and subordinates and desperately frank and even rude to aides-de-camp and 'bonjourists', for whom for some reason he had a great dislike. On entering the hut he nearly caved the roof in with his head, then suddenly sank down and sat on the ground.

'Well?' he said, and then suddenly remarking me whom he did not know, he stopped and gazed at me with a dull, fixed look.

'Well, and what have you been conversing about?' asked the major, taking out his watch and looking at it, though I am perfectly certain he had no need to.

'Why, I've been asked my reasons for serving here-'

'Of course, Nicholas Fedorovich wishes to distinguish himself here, and then to return home,' said the major.

'Well, and you, Abram Ilych,' said Bolkhov, addressing Kirsanov, 'tell me why you are serving in the Caucasus.'

'I serve because in the first place, as you know, it is everyone's duty to serve.... What?' he then added, though no one had spoken. 'I had a letter from Russia yesterday, Nicholas Fedorovich,' he continued, evidently wishing to change the subject; 'they write that... they ask such strange questions.' 'What questions?' asked Bolkhov.

The major began laughing.

‘Very queer questions. . . . They ask, can jealousy exist where there is no love. . . . What?’ he asked, turning round and glancing at us all.

‘Dear me!’ said Bólkhov, with a smile.

‘Yes, you know, it is nice in Russia,’ continued the major, just as if his sentences flowed naturally from one another. ‘When I was in Tambóv in ‘52 they received me everywhere as if I had been some emperor’s aide-de-camp. Will you believe it that at a ball at the Governor’s, when I came in, you know . . . well, they received me very well. The General’s wife herself, you know, talked to me and asked me about the Caucasus, and everybody was ... so that I hardly knew. . . . They examined my gold sabre as if it were some curiosity; they asked for what I had received the sabre, for what the Anna, for what the Vladimir ... so I just told them...What? That’s what the Caucasus is good for, Nicholas Fedorovich!’ he continued without waiting for any reply:— ‘There they think very well of us Caucasians. You know a young man that’s a staff-officer and has an Anna and a Vladimir . . . that counts for a good deal in Russia...What?’

‘And you, no doubt, piled it on a bit, Abram Ilych?’ said Bólkhov.

‘He — he!’ laughed the major stupidly, ‘You know one has to do that. And didn’t I feed well those two months!’

‘And tell me, is it nice there in Russia?’ said Trosenko, inquiring about Russia as though it were China or Japan.

‘Yes, and the champagne we drank those two months, it was awful!’

‘Eh, nonsense! You’ll have drunk nothing but lemonade. There now, I’d have burst to let them see how Caucasians drink. I’d have given them some-thing to talk about. I’d have shown them how one drinks; eh, Bólkhov?’ said Trosenko.

‘But you, Daddy, have been more than ten years in the Caucasus,’ said Bólkhov, ‘and you remember what Ermolov¹ said? . . . And Abram Ilych has been only six.’

‘Ten indeed! . . . nearly sixteen. . . . Well, Bólkhov, let us have some sage-vodka. It’s damp, b-r-r-r! . . . Eh?’ said Trosenko, smiling, ‘Will you have a drink, Major?’

But the major had been displeased by the old captain's first remarks to him, and plainly drew back and sought refuge in his own grandeur. He hummed something, and again looked at his watch.

'For my Part I shall never go there!' Trosenko continued without heeding the major's frowns. 'I have lost the habit of speaking and walking in the Russian way. They'd ask, "What curious creature is this coming here? Asia, that's what it is." Am I right, Nicholas Fedorovich? Besides, what have I to go to Russia for? What does it matter? I shall be shot here some day. They'll ask, "Where's Trosenko?" "Shot!" What will you do with the 8th Company then, eh?' he added, always addressing the major.

'Send the officer on duty!' shouted the major, without answering the captain, though I again felt sure there was no need for him to give any orders.

'And you, young man, are glad, I suppose, to be drawing double pay?'² said the major, turning to the adjutant of the battalion after some moments of silence.

¹ General A. P. Ermolov (1772-1861), who was renowned for his firmness and justness as a ruler in the Caucasus, and who subdued Chechnya and Daghestan, used to say that after ten years in the Caucasus an officer 'either takes to drink or marries a loose woman'.

² An officer's allowance in Russia proper was very small, but when on service in Poland, the Caucasus, Siberia, etc, they received a higher rate of pay. 'Yes, sir, very glad of course.'

'I think our pay now very high, Nicholas Fedorovich,' continued the major; 'a young man can live very decently and even permit himself some small luxuries.'

'No, really, Abram Ilych,' said the adjutant bashfully. 'Though it's double it's barely enough. You sec one must have a horse.'

'What are you telling me, young man? I have been an ensign myself and know. Believe me, one can live very well with care. But there! count it up,' added he, bending the little finger of his left hand.

'We always draw our salaries in advance; isn't that account enough for you?' said Trosenko, emptying a glass of vodka.

'Well, yes, but what do you expect. . . . What?'

Just then a white head with a fiat nose thrust itself into the opening of the hut and a sharp voice said with a German accent —

'Are you there, Abram Ilych? The officer on duty is looking for you.'

'Come in, Kraft!' said Bolkhov.

A long figure in the uniform of the general staff crept in at the door and began shaking hands all round with peculiar fervour.

'Ah, dear Captain, are you here too?' said he, turning to Trosenko.

In spite of the darkness the new visitor made his way to the captain and to the latter's extreme surprise and dismay as it seemed to me, kissed him on the lips.

'This is a German trying to be hail fellow well met,' thought I.

Chapter XII

MY SURMISE WAS at once confirmed. Captain Kraft asked for vodka, calling it a 'warmer', croaked horribly, and throwing back his head emptied the glass.

'Well, gentlemen, we have scoured the plains of Chechnya to-day, have we not?' he began, but seeing the officer on duty, stopped at once to allow the major to give his orders.

'Have you been round the lines?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Have the ambuscades been placed?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Then give the company commanders orders to be as cautious as possible.'

'Yes, sir.'

The major screwed up his eyes in profound contemplation.

'Yes, and tell the men they may now boil their buckwheat.'

'They are already boiling it, sir.'

'All right! you may go, sir.'

‘Well, we were just reckoning up how much an officer needs,’ continued the major, turning to us with a condescending smile. ‘Let us count. You want a uniform and a pair of trousers, don’t you?’

‘Certainly.’

‘That, let us say, is 50 rubles for two years; therefore 25 rubles a year for clothes. Then for food, 40 kopeks a day — is that right?’

‘Oh yes, that is even too much.’

‘Well, never mind, I’ll leave it so. Then for a horse and repair of harness and saddle — 30 rubles. And that is all. So it’s 25, and 120, and 30 — that’s 175 rubles. So you have for luxuries — tea, sugar, tobacco — a matter of 20 rubles left. So you see ... Isn’t it so, Nicholas Fedorovich?’

‘No, but excuse me, Abram Ilych,’ said the adjutant timidly, ‘nothing remains for tea and sugar. You allow one suit in two years; but it’s hardly possible to keep oneself in trousers with all this marching. And boots? I wear out a pair almost every month. Then underclothing — shirts, towels, leg-bands,¹ — it all has to be bought. When one comes to reckon it all up nothing remains over. That’s really so, Abram Ilych.’

‘Ah, it’s splendid to wear leg-bands,’ Kraft suddenly remarked after a moment’s silence, uttering the word ‘leg-bands’ in specially tender tones. ‘It’s so simple, you know; quite Russian!’

‘I’ll tell you something,’ Trosenko remarked. ‘Reckon what way you like and you’ll find we might as well put our teeth away on a shelf, and yet here we are all alive, drinking tea, smoking tobacco, and drinking vodka. When you’ve served as long as I have,’ he went on, turning to the ensign, ‘you’ll have also learned how to live. Why, gentlemen, do you know how he treats the orderlies?’

And Trosenko, dying with laughter, told us the whole story about the ensign and his orderly, though we had all heard it hundreds of times. ‘Why do you look so like a rose, old chap?’ continued he, addressing the ensign, who blushed, perspired, and smiled, so that it was pitiful to see him. ‘Never mind, old chap! I was just like you once and now look what a fine fellow I am. You let a young fellow straight from Russia in here — haven’t we seen them? — and he gets spasms or rheumatism or something; and here am I settled here, and it’s my house and my bed and all, d’you see?’

And thereupon he drank another glass of vodka and looking fixedly at Kraft, said, 'Eh?'

'That is what I respect! Here's a genuine old Caucasian! Permit me to shake hands.'

And Kraft, pushing us all aside, forced his way to Trosenko and catching hold of his hand shook it with peculiar emotion.

'Yes,' continued Kraft, 'we may say we have gone

1 It is customary, especially among the peasants and soldiers, to wrap long strips of linen round the feet and legs instead of wearing stockings. through every kind of experience here. In '45 you were present, Captain, were you not? — you remember the night between the 12th and 13th, when we spent the night knee-deep in mud and next day captured the barricades they had made of felled trees. I was attached to the commander-in-chief at the time and we took fifteen barricades that one day, — you remember, Captain?'

Trosenko nodded affirmatively, stuck out his nether lip and screwed up his eyes.

'You see . . . began Kraft with great animation, making unsuitable gestures with his hands and addressing the major.

But the major, who had in all probability heard the story more than once, suddenly looked at the speaker with such dim, dull eyes that Kraft turned away from him and addressed me and Bolkhov, looking alternately at one and the other. But he did not give a single glance at Trosenko during the whole of his narration.

'Well then, you see, when we went out in the morning the commander-in-chief said to me, "Kraft, take those barricades!" Well, you know, a soldier's duty is not to reason — it's hand to cap, and "Yes, your Excellency!" and off. Only as we drew near the first barricade I turned and said to the soldiers, "Now then, lads, don't funk it but look sharp. If anyone hangs back I'll cut him down myself!" With Russian soldiers, you know, one has to speak straight out. Suddenly a bomb ... I look, one soldier down, another, a third, . . . then bullets came whizzing . . . vzin! . . . vzin! . . . vzin! . . . "On!" I cry, "On, follow me!" Just as we got there I

look and see a . . . a . . . you know . . . what do you call it?' and the narrator flourished his arms, trying to find the word he wanted. 'A scarp?' suggested Bólkhov.

'No . . . Ach! what is the word? Good heavens, what is it? ... A scarp!' he said quickly. 'So, "fix bayonets! Hurrah! ta-ra, ta-ta-ta!" not a sign of the enemy! Everybody was surprised, you know. Well, that's all right; we go on to the second barricade. Ah, that was a totally different matter. Our mettle was now up, you know. Just as we reached it I look and see the second barricade, and we could not advance. There was a what's-its-name . . . now what do you call it? Ach, what is it? . . .'

'Another scarp, perhaps,' I suggested.

'Not at all,' he said crossly: 'not a scarp but — oh dear, what do you call it?' and he made an awkward gesture with his hands. 'Oh, good heavens, what is it?' He seemed so distressed that one involuntarily wished to help him.

'A river, perhaps,' said Bolkhov.

'No, only a scarp! Hardly had we got down, when, will you believe it, such a hell of fire . . .'

At this moment someone outside the tent asked for me. It was Maksimov. And as after having heard the different histories of these two barricades there were still thirteen left, I was glad to seize the excuse to return to my platoon. Trosenko came out with me.

'It's all lies,' he said to me when we were a few steps from the hut; 'he never was near those barricades at all,' and Trosenko laughed so heartily that I, too, enjoyed the joke.

Chapter XIII

IT WAS ALREADY dark and only the watch-fires dimly lit up the camp when, after the horses were groomed, I rejoined my men. A large stump lay smouldering on the charcoal. Only three men sat round it: Antanov, who was turning a little pot of ryabco¹ on the fire; Zhdanov, who was dreamily poking the

1 Ryabco, soldier's food, made of soaked hard-tack and dripping embers with a stick, and Chikin, with his pipe, which never would draw well. The rest had already lain down to sleep — some under the ammunition wagons, some on the hay, some by the camp-fires. By the dim light of the charcoal I could distinguish familiar backs, legs, and heads, and among the latter that of the young recruit who, drawn close to the fire, seemed to be already sleeping. Antonov made room for me. I sat down by him and lit a cigarette. The smell of mist and the smoke of damp wood filled the air and made one's eyes smart and, as before, a dank drizzle kept falling from the dismal sky.

One could hear the regular sound of snoring near by, the crackling of branches in the fire, a few words now and then, and the clattering of muskets among the infantry. The camp watch-fires glowed all around, lighting up within narrow circles the dark shadows of the soldiers near them. Where the light fell by the nearest fires I could distinguish the figures of naked soldiers waving their shirts close over the fire. There were still many who had not lain down, but moved and spoke, collected on a space of some eighty square yards; but the gloomy dull night gave a peculiar mysterious character to all this movement as if each one felt the dark silence and feared to break its calm monotony.

When I began to speak I felt that my voice sounded strange, and I discerned the same frame of mind reflected in the faces of all the soldiers sitting near me. I thought that before I joined them they had been talking about their wounded comrade, but it had not been so at all. Chikin had been telling them about receiving supplies at Tiflis and about the scamps there.

I have noticed always and everywhere, but especially in the Caucasus, the peculiar tact with which our soldiers avoid mentioning anything that might have a bad effect on a comrade's spirits. A Russian soldier's spirit does not rest on easily inflammable enthusiasm which cools quickly like the courage of Southern nations; it is as difficult to inflame him as it is to depress him.

He does not need scenes, speeches, war-cries, songs, and drums; on the contrary he needs quiet, order, and an absence of any affectation.

In a Russian, a real Russian, soldier you will never find any bragging, swagger, or desire to be fog or excite himself in time of danger; on the contrary, modesty, simplicity and a capacity for seeing in peril something quite else than the danger, are the distinctive features of his character. I have seen a soldier wounded in the leg, who in the first instant thought only of the hole in his new sheepskin cloak; and an artillery outrider who, creeping from beneath a horse that was killed under him, began unbuckling the girths to save the saddle.

Who does not remember the incident at the siege of Gergebel when the fuse of a loaded bomb caught fire in the laboratory and an artillery sergeant ordered two soldiers to take the bomb and run to throw it into the ditch, and how the soldiers did not run to the nearest spot by the colonel's tent, which stood over the ditch, but took it farther on so as not to wake the gentlemen asleep in the tent and were consequently both blown to pieces? I remember also how, in the expedition of 1852, something led a young soldier while in action to say he thought the platoon would never escape, and how the whole platoon angrily attacked him for such evil words which they did not like even to repeat.

And now, when the thought of Velenchuk must have been in the mind of each one and when we might expect Tartars to steal up at any moment and fire a volley at us, everyone listened to Chikin's sprightly stories and no one referred either to the day's action, or to the present danger, or to the wounded man; as if it had all happened goodness knows how long ago or had never happened at all. But it seemed to me that their faces were rather sterner than usual, that they did not listen to Chikin so very attentively, and that even Chikin himself felt he was not being listened to, but talked for the sake of talking.

Maksimov joined us at the fire and sat down beside me. Chikin made room for him, stopped speaking, and started sucking at his pipe once more.

'The infantry have been sending to the camp for vodka,' said Maksimov after a considerable silence; 'they have just returned.' He spat into the fire. 'The sergeant says they saw our man.'

'Is he alive?' asked Antonov, turning the pot.

'No, he's dead.'

The young recruit suddenly raised his head in the little red cap, looked intently for a minute over the fire at Maksimov and at me, then quickly let his head sink again and wrapped himself in his cloak.

'There now, it wasn't for naught that death had laid its hand on him when I had to wake him in the "park" this morning,' said Antonov.

'Nonsense!' said Zhdanov, turning the smouldering log, and all were silent.

Then, amid the general silence, came the report of a gun from the camp behind us. Our drummers beat an answering tattoo. When the last vibration ceased Zhdanov rose first, taking off his cap. We all followed his example.

Through the deep silence of the night rose an harmonious choir of manly voices:

'Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done as in heaven so on earth. Give us day by day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from the evil one.'

'We had a man in '45 who was wounded in the same , place,' said Antonov when we had put on our caps and again sat down by the fire.

'We carried him about with us on a gun for two days — do you remember Shevchenko, Zhdanov ? — and then we just left him there under a tree.'

At this moment an infantryman with tremendous whiskers and moustaches came up to our fire, carrying a musket and pouch.

'Give me a light for my pipe, comrades,' said he.

'All right, smoke away: there's fire enough,' remarked Chikin.

'I suppose it's about Dargo¹ you are telling, comrade,' said the infantry soldier to Antónov.

'Yes, about Dargo in '45,' Antónov replied.

The infantryman shook his head, screwed up his eyes, and sat down on his heels near us.

'Yes, all sorts of things happened there,' he remarked.

'Why did you leave him behind?' I asked Antonov.

'He was suffering a lot with his stomach. As long as we halted it was all right, but as soon as we moved on he screamed aloud and asked for God's sake to be left behind — but we felt it a pity. But when he began to give it us hot, killed three of our men from the guns and an officer besides and we somehow got separated from our battery. ... It was such a go! We thought we shouldn't get our guns away. It was muddy and no mistake!'

'The mud was worst under the Indeysky² Mountain,' remarked one of the soldiers.

'Yes, it was there he got more worse! So we considered it with Anoshenka — he was an old artillery sergeant. "Now really he can't live and he's asking for God's sake to be left behind; let us leave him here."

So we decided. There was a tree, such a

1 Dargo, in the Terek Territory, was the head-quarters of Shamil until 1845.

2 The soldier miscalls the Andiysky chain of mountains 'Indeysky,' apparently connecting them with India. branchy one, growing there.

Well, we took some soaked hard-tack Zhdanov had, and put it near him, leant him against the tree, put a clean shirt on him, and said good-bye, — all as it should be — and left him.'

'And was he a good soldier?'

'Yes, he was all right as a soldier,' remarked Zhdanov.

'And what became of him God only knows,' continued Antonov; 'many of the likes of us perished there.'

'What, at Dargo?' said the infantryman as he rose, scraping out his pipe and again half-closing his eyes and shaking his head; 'all sorts of things happened there.'

And he left us.

'And have we many still in the battery who were at Dargo?' I asked.

'Many? Why, there's Zhdanov, myself, Patsan who is now on furlough, and there may be six others, not more.'

'And why's our Patsan holiday-making all this time?' said Chikin, stretching out his legs and lying down with his head on a log. 'I reckon he's been away getting on for a year.'

'And you, have you had your year at home?' I asked Zhdanov.

'No, I didn't go,' he answered unwillingly.

'You see, it's all right to go,' said Antonov, 'if they're well off at home or if you are yourself fit to work; then it's tempting to go and they're glad to see you.'

'But where's the use of going when one's one of two brothers?' continued Zhdanov. 'It's all they can do to get their bread; how should they feed a soldier like me? I'm no help to them after twenty-five years' service. And who knows whether they're alive still?'

'Haven't you ever written?' I asked.

'Yes, indeed! I wrote two letters, but never had an answer. Either they're dead, or simply won't write because they're living in poverty themselves; so where's the good?'

'And is it long since you wrote?' 'I wrote last when we returned from Dargo . . . Won't you sing us "The Birch-Tree"?' he said, turning to Antonov, who sat leaning his elbows on his knees and humming a song. Antonov began to sing 'The Birch-Tree'.

'This is the song Daddy Zhdanov likes most best of all,' said Chikin to me in a whisper, pulling at my cloak. 'Sometimes he right down weeps when Philip Antonych sings it.'

Zhdanov at first sat quite motionless with eyes fixed on the glimmering embers, and his face, lit up by the reddish light, seemed very gloomy; then his jaws below his ears began to move faster and faster, and at last he rose, and spreading out his cloak, lay down in the shadow behind the fire. Either it was his tossing and groaning as he settled down to sleep, or it may have been the effect of Velenchuk's death and of the dull weather, but it really seemed to me that he was crying.

The bottom of the charred log, bursting every now and then into flames, lit up Antonov's figure with his grey moustaches, red face, and the medals on the cloak that he had thrown over his shoulders, or it lit up someone's boots, head, or back. The same gloomy drizzle fell from above, the air was still full of moisture and smoke, all around were the same bright spots of fires, now dying down, and amid the general stillness came the mournful sound of Antonov's song; and when that stopped for an instant the faint nocturnal sounds of the camp —

snoring, clanking of sentries' muskets, voices speaking in low tones — took Part.

'Second watch! Makatyuk and Zhdanov!' cried Maksimov.
Antonov stopped singing. Zhdanov rose, sighed, stepped across the log, and went slowly towards the guns.

15 June 1855.

The end