THE RUSSIAN CHARACTER

The Russian character! For a short story the title is rather pretentious. Still, it cannot be helped—it is precisely the Russian character I want to talk to you about.

The Russian character! It is not an easy thing to describe. . . . Shall I tell you a story of valour and heroism? But so many could be told, that one is simply at a loss to make a choice. A friend of mine has helped me out of my difficulty with an episode from his personal experience. How this man fought the Germans I shall not stop to tell you, though he
does wear the gold star of Hero and half his chest is covered with decorations. He was a simple, quiet, ordinary man—a collective farmer from a Volga village in the Saratov Region. Among his fellows, however, he was conspicuous for a stalwart well-knit figure and handsome features. To see him climb out of the tank turret was a thing to incite admiration. A veritable god of war! He would jump to the ground, pull the helmet from his sweating brow, and wipe a blackened face with an oil rag, invariably smiling with sheer good humour.

At the war fronts where life is a constant play with death, men become better, they shed all frippery like an unhealthy skin after a severe sunburn, leaving only the kernel of the man. To be sure, in some men it is harder, in others softer, but even those whose kernel has a flaw in it try to make good, to be good and faithful comrades. But my friend Yegor Dremov even before the war was a man of moral excellence and he nourished a deep respect and love for his mother, Marya Polikarpovna, and his father, Yegor Yegorovich. “My father’s a respectable man, with him self-esteem stands above all else. You, my son, he says, will see a lot in life and will visit foreign parts but remember always to be proud that you’re a Russian...”

He had a sweetheart in his native Volga village. We speak a good deal about sweethearts and wives, especially during a lull in the fighting, when there is a frost outside and the men have gathered after mess round a cheerful little stove in the dugout dimly lit by a smoky oil wick. Here yarns will be spun and many a tale embroidered. One will start the ball by propounding: “What is love?” One man will say: “Love’s founded on mutual respect....” Another: “Nothing of the sort, love’s a habit, a man doesn’t only love his wife, he loves his father and mother and even animals....” “Pshaw! Silly ass!” a third will say. “Love’s a thing when you’re all sizzling inside and
a fellow goes about as if he was drunk....” And so they torture the question for a good hour or two until the sergeant brings the argument to an end with a peremptory but conclusive word of his own.... Yegor Dremov, obviously shy of joining these conversations, merely made a passing remark to me about his sweetheart, from which I could gather that she was a nice girl, and that once she had given her word to wait for him, wait she would though he’d come home on one leg.

Neither was he inclined to dwell on feats of war. “One doesn’t care to remember such things!” he would say with a frown and begin smoking a cigarette. About the battle exploits of his tank we usually learned from his crew. Especially thrilling were the accounts of tank-driver Chuvilev.

“...We’d only just deployed, you know, when suddenly I sees him coming up over the hill.... I yelled: Comrade Lieutenant, a Tiger! Straight ahead, he shouts, step on the gas! I started zigzagging in and out of the fir trees.... The Tiger began nosing around with his gun muzzle, groping like a blind man and sent a washout at us.... Our Lieutenant let him have the fireworks, straight in the side—the sparks went flying! Then he got one smack into the turret—the Fritz’s tail went all skewy.... He sent a third shell, and that Tiger started belching smoke all over—the flames shot up out of him at least three hundred feet high.... The crew came tumbling out the emergency hatch. Then Vanya Lapshin started squirting ’em with his machine gun—and they went down, collecting the lead.... Well, now the way was clear. Five minutes later we dashed into the village. Here’s where I nearly burst me sides.... You ought to see the Nazis scuttling about.... It was muddy, you know, and some of the fellows had jumped out without their boots on, hopping about in their socks. They all made a dash for the barn. Our Comrade Lieutenant, he raps out the com-
mand: 'Now then, wade into that barn!' We swivelled the gun round and rode full tilt into that barn.... Crikey! The rafters came raining down on the armour, with boards and bricks and fascists that had been sitting inside.... I ironed that barn out again—the rest of 'em stuck up their hands, 'Hitler kaput'...."
But he never asked the nurse for the mirror again. He frequently explored his face with his fingers, as if trying to get used to it. The medical commission found him unfit for active service. He then betook himself to the commanding General and said: “Please let me return to my regiment.” “But you’re disabled,” said the General. “Certainly not. I’m a scarecrow, but that won’t interfere with my getting back to fighting form.” (It was not lost on Yegor Dremov that the General had tried to keep his eyes averted from his face during the interview, and Dremov’s livid, slit-like lips twisted in a wry smile.) He was given twenty days’ furlough to recuperate, and went home to his father and mother. That was in March.

He had expected to take a cart from the railway station but was obliged to walk the distance of eighteen versts. The snow still lay around, it was damp and desolate, and a chill wind blew out the skirts of his greatcoat, howling dismally in his ears. Dusk had fallen when he arrived in the village. There stood the familiar well with the tall crane swaying and creaking in the wind. His parents’ cottage was the sixth from here. Suddenly he stopped, his hands thrust into his pockets. He shook his head and turned towards the house. Knee deep in the snow he peered through the window and saw his mother—she was laying out supper in the dim light of a low-burning oil lamp, which hung over the table. Still in the same dark shawl, quiet, patient, gentle. She looked older, her thin shoulders were sharply outlined under the shawl. . . . “Ah, had I known it, I should have written her at least a couple of words every day about myself. . . .” She placed the frugal meal on the table—a jug of milk, a chunk of rye bread, two spoons and a saltcellar, and stood before the table with thin hands crossed on her bosom, lost in thought. . . . Looking at his mother through the window Yegor Dremov realized that she must not be fright-
ened, that the dear old face must not be made to quiver with despair.

Ah, well! He lifted the latch of the wicket-gate, passed through the little courtyard onto the porch and knocked. His mother answered from behind the door: "Who's there?" He replied: "Hero of the Soviet Union Lieutenant Gromov."

His heart throbbed violently and he leaned his shoulder against the lintel. No, his mother had not recognized his voice. He seemed to be hearing it himself for the first time, changed after all those operations—a husky, gruff, muffled voice it was.

"What do you want, my dear?" she enquired.

"I've brought regards to Marya Polikarpovna from her son, Senior Lieutenant Dremov."

She opened the door and ran to him, seizing him by the hand.

"Oh, he is alive, my Yegor? Is he all right? Goodness, come in, come in, my dear."

Yegor Dremov sat down on a bench by the table. This was where he used to sit when his feet did not reach the floor, and his mother, stroking his curly head, used to say: "Eat, my darling." He began to talk about her son, about himself, in detail—what he ate and drank, that he lacked for nothing, was always in good health and cheer, and briefly about battles he had taken part in with his tank.

"Tell me, is it very awful at the war?" she broke in, peering into his face with dark unseeing eyes.

"Yes, it is pretty awful, mother, but you get used to it."

Yegor Yegorovich, his father, came in. These years had told on him too, his beard looked as though it had been sprinkled with flour. Glancing at the visitor he stamped his worn felt boots in the doorway, slowly unwound his scarf, took off his
sheepskin coat, drew up to the table and shook hands—ah, how familiar was this broad, just parental hand!

Without asking any questions, for the presence of a guest decorated with military honours did not need explaining, he sat down to listen with eyes half-closed.

The longer Lieutenant Dremov sat thus, unrecognized, talking about himself, ostensibly about another, the more impossible it became for him to disclose his identity, to get up and say: don't you recognize me, mother, father, the scarecrow that I am! . . . He felt happy sitting at his parents' table, happy yet pained.

"Well, let's have supper, mother, get something for the guest." Yegor Yegorovich opened a little old cabinet, where in the left-hand corner had always lain a collection of fishing hooks in a matchbox—they were still there—and a teapot with a chipped spout—it still stood there too, and whence came the familiar odour of bread crumbs and onion peelings. Yegor Yegorovich brought out a flask of vodka, just enough to fill two glasses, and sighed over the fact that no more was obtainable. They sat down to supper as they did in the old days.

During the supper, Senior Lieutenant Dremov suddenly became aware that his mother was intently watching the way he held his spoon. He smiled wryly. His mother raised her eyes, her face quivered painfully.

They talked of this, that and the other, what the spring would be like, whether folk would cope with the sowing and that the war would probably be over this summer.

“What makes you think the war will be over this summer, Yegor Yegorovich?”

“The people's blood's up,” replied Yegor Yegorovich, "they've passed through death and nothing'll stop 'em now—it's kaput for the Germans.”
Marya Polikarpovna asked:

"You didn't say when he'll get leave to come home for a visit. We haven't seen him for three years. Must have grown up, I guess, goes about with a moustache. . . . Facing death, like that, every day, I should imagine his voice too has become rough."

"Well, you'll be seeing him—maybe you won't recognize him," said the Lieutenant.

They fixed up a bed for him on the Russian stove, where every brick was familiar, every crevice in the timbered wall, every knot of the wooden ceiling. There was a smell of sheepskin and bread, the cozy smell of home that a man never forgets even in the face of death. The March wind howled above the roof. His father snored behind the partition. His mother turned and sighed and could not fall asleep. . . . The Lieutenant lay on his stomach with his face buried in his hands. "Can it be that you didn't recognize me," he thought, "can it be? Mama, mama. . . ."

He was awakened in the morning by the crackling of the wood in the stove, by which his mother was quietly busying herself. His washed foot-wrappings were strung on the clothes line and his cleaned boots stood by the door.

"Do you like wheat pancakes?" she asked him.

He tarried with his reply as he climbed off the stove, slipped on his shirt, and drawing his belt sat down barefooted on the bench.

"Does Katya Malysheva, Andrei Malyshev's daughter, live in your village?" he asked.

"She finished her studies last year. She's a schoolteacher now in the village. Do you want to see her?"

"Your boy told me to be sure to give her his regards."

His mother sent the neighbour's little girl for her. Scarceley had the Lieutenant got his boots on than Katya Malysheva
came running in. Her wide grey eyes were shining, her eye-
brows twitched with excitement and her face was flushed with
joy. When she slipped the knitted shawl from her head onto
her broad shoulders the Lieutenant groaned inwardly. "Oh, to
kiss that warm, fair hair!" Thus had he always pictured to
himself his dear friend—so fresh, sweet, merry, and kind, and
so beautiful that the little cottage seemed filled with her golden
radiance.

"You've brought regards from Yegor?" (He stood with his
back to the light and merely nodded his head, for speak he
could not.) "I miss him terribly, tell him that."

Coming up closer to him she glanced at his face and sud-
denly recoiled with a look of horror in her eyes. At that
moment he definitely made up his mind to go away—that
very day.

His mother served wheat pancakes with baked milk. Again
he talked about Lieutenant Dremov, this time about his mili-
tary feats, concealing none of the cruel details, and keeping his
eyes averted from Katya's in order not to see on that sweet face
the reflection of his own hideousness. Yegor Yegorovich wanted
to make arrangements for a collective farm cart to take him
down to the station, but he set out on foot, the way he had
come. He felt very depressed over the way things had turned
out. He stopped now and again, clutching his head in his hands.
and asking himself hoarsely: "What's to be done now?"

He rejoined his regiment which had been withdrawn deep
into the rear for replacements. His comrades met him with
unfeigned joy. It was like balm to the agonizing heartache
which had deprived him of sleep, made it impossible for him
to eat or breathe. He decided to let his mother remain a little
while longer in ignorance of his misfortune. As for Katya—he
would tear that image out of his heart.
A fortnight later he received a letter from his mother:

"How are you, my darling boy. I'm afraid to write you about it, I do not know what to make of it. A man came here with greetings from you—he was a very good man, but his face was in a bad state. He had wanted to stay with us a bit but then suddenly went off. Ever since, my dear son, I can't sleep nights for thinking it was you. Your father scolds me for it, says you've gone crazy in your old age, woman, if he'd have been our son wouldn't he have said so.... Why should he have concealed it if it was him—a face like that man's who came to see us was only to be proud of. Your father tries to argue me out of it, but a mother's heart will have its own way—it was him, he was with us! That man slept on the stove, I took his coat out in the yard to brush and hugged it to me and cried—it's him, it's his! ... Yegor, darling, write me, for the love of Christ, tell me—who was it? Or maybe I've really gone crazy...."

Yegor Dremov showed this letter to me, Ivan Sudarev, told me his story, wiping his eyes with his sleeve. I said to him: "That's what I call a clash of characters! Don't be a silly fellow, write your mother at once, ask her forgiveness, don't drive her mad.... A lot she cares about your mug! She'll love you all the better as you are."

He wrote a letter that very day: "My dear parents, forgive me for my stupidity, it was really I, your son, who called on you that day...." And so on, on four closely written pages—he would have written twenty had it been possible.

A short time later we were standing together on the shooting grounds when a soldier came running up to Yegor Dremov: "Comrade Captain, somebody to see you...." The soldier's expression, though he behaved according to regulation, was like that of a man about to tip his glass. We went down to the settlement and as we approached the hut where Dremov and I
were billeted I could see he was feeling sort of nervous, kept on coughing all the time. . . . I thought to myself: "So you tank boys have nerves after all!" We went into the hut, he walked in first, and I heard:

"Hullo mother, that's me! . . ." I saw a little old woman fall on his neck. I looked round and saw another woman standing nearby. Upon my word, there may be beautiful girls somewhere, she's probably not the only one, but I'd never seen the likes of her yet.

He freed himself from his mother's embrace and went up to the girl—by the whole stalwart look of him this was the god of war.

"Katya!" he said. "Katya, what brings you here? You promised that fellow to wait for him, not this one. . . ."

The lovely Katya answered him—though I went out in the passage, I heard it:

"Yegor, I had intended living with you all my life. I'll love you truly, I'll love you deeply. . . . Do not send me away. . . ."

Yes, there you have them, the Russian characters! A man seems quite ordinary until grim fate knocks at his door and a great power surges up within him—the power of human beauty.