THE SCHOOL

Arkady Gaidar

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ARKADY GAIDAR AND HIS BOOKS

Our era of great popular movements and sweeping historical changes has produced authors of a completely new mould whose lives were as eventful and heroic as the events described in their books.

In days of old, ships had a sailor on lookout duty all the time in the crow's nest, high up on the mast. His job was to scan the sea continuously and report what he saw. Only the most keen-eyed and dependable men were entrusted with this duty.

In days of old, mounted warriors on the march sent a horseman ahead as a scout. He was called a *gaidar*.

Arkady Gaidar was a keen-eyed scout, a man in the vanguard of Soviet literature. The pseudonym he chose proved to be an apt one indeed.

Both as a writer and a person Arkady Gaidar was a true son of the revolution, ready to give up his life to safeguard the happiness the people had won at the cost of so much blood, sweat and tears.

Arkady Gaidar, whose real name was Arkady Golikov, was born in the town of Lgov on February 9, 1904. Soon after, the Golikov family moved to Arzamas where, ten years later, Arkady watched his father, a schoolmaster, march off to war to the strains of a brass band and the roll of drums.

In 1918, when the young Soviet Republic was beating back the onslaught of numerous enemies, fourteen-year-old Arkady Golikov resolved that he, too, would join in the fight "for a better lot, for happiness, for the fraternity of the peoples, for Soviet power". Tail and broad-shouldered, he boldly gave his age as sixteen when he volunteered for the Red Army. A year later he finished a training course in Kiev and was put in command of a company. At sixteen he commanded a regiment.

The future writer Arkady Gaidar was in the thick of the fighting throughout the Civil War. He lost many close friends, he experienced the bitterness of defeat and the joy of victory. From early youth he knew sorrow and separation, aching wounds and the fire of battle.

When the Civil War ended, the young regimental commander, dedicated heart and soul to the army of the Land of Soviets, planned to remain in the service. But in 1923 an old head wound forced him to go into hospital. In April 1924, when Gaidar was twenty and had been in the Red Army six years, he was transferred to the reserve because of poor health.

The verdict of the army medical commission plunged him into despair. He wrote an impassioned letter of farewell to the army and sent it to People's Commissar Mikhail Frunze, the famous proletarian army commander. In his letter Gaidar did not complain or ask for favours; he simply bid farewell to the army. Frunze was so impressed by the letter that he asked Gaidar to come and see him. In the despairing lines of the letter Frunze had detected genuine talent and a maturing desire to write. He was not mistaken. Gaidar had started writing his first story, based on his experiences, about a year before. Frunze encouraged him to take up writing seriously. Gaidar's first stories appeared in print a few years later, between 1925 and 1927.

In 1930 he wrote *The School,* one of his best books. "Probably because I was only just a boy when in the army," he said, "I wanted to tell the boys and girls of the new generation what it was like, how it all began and what came afterwards, for I did manage to see quite a bit of life." *The School* is a largely autobiographical story about the school of life which the younger generation of the revolution passed through;

about "the hot, fateful winds of time" and about the fathers and sons who took up arms to fight a just war for a happy future.

The first edition of this book was called *An Ordinary Biography,* and the title page carried a picture of the author in Red Army uniform, his tall fur hat tilted dashingly, a sword at his side, and a red star insignia on his sleeve. The hero of the book, a soldier's son named Boris Gorikov, who tells the story, is easily recognisable as Arkady Gaidar.

The School immediately became one of the most popular children's books. A truthful, wise book, written simply and sincerely, a book that does not hide life's worries and disappointments from its youthful readers, *The School* has gone through many editions in the Soviet Union and in other countries.

Arkady Gaidar did not live long enough to write a great deal. But books like *The School, The Fourth Dugout, Distant Lands, Military Secret, The Blue Cup, The Drummer Boy, Smoke in the Forest, Chuck and Geek,* his frontline articles and stories and other writings, including, of course, *Timur and His Squad,* a book that is widely known in many parts of the world, will always be favourites with boys and girls who gaze out eagerly on life and are impatient to understand it so as to find a worthy application for their youthful energies.

Gaidar wanted his books to teach Soviet boys and girls the meaning of such concepts as honour, daring and truth and to bring them up as soldiers of a "strong, red-starred guard".

Military Secret (1935), a book about friendship among freedom-loving nations, the lofty ideals of the revolution and the brutality of the enemy, includes a story, a kind of fairy-tale, about a boy who knew a military secret. It reflects a boy's perception of the new world that was being born and extols the valour of the pure juvenile heart which Gaidar understood so well. Before long, the tale acquired independent renown. When the Great Patriotic War broke out and the unprecedented heroism of the Soviet people, including children, astounded the world, people often recalled the grudging admission by the boy's main enemy in the tale in Gaidar's book: "What is that strange and incomprehensible country where even little children know the Military Secret and keep their word so well!"

This "military secret" or "secret weapon", as Gaidar's tale explains, is that the Soviet people, young and old, are a closely-knit family united by the great ideals of fraternity, meaningful work and devotion to their free country. Arkady Gaidar always spoke to his young readers honestly, earnestly and respectfully. He was forthright in pointing out "the most important things in life". He did not hesitate to write about subjects and problems that books for children usually avoid.

The Drummer Boy, written in 1938, is an example. "This is not a book about war, but it is about things just as grim and dangerous as war," said Gaidar.

For still younger readers Gaidar wrote a delightfully poetic story called *Chuck and Geek* (1939), a story about two little boys, brothers, who lost an important telegram and about a trip they made with their mother to the distant Blue Mountains to pay their father a visit. The story of their travels and adventures is told with classical simplicity and clarity. With its bubbling humour and engrossing plot the book became an immediate success. Behind the author's jovial laughter you feel his love for our vast country and its brave, strong people, his respect for their courage, and his faith in the goodness of the human heart.

The book's closing lines, now familiar to millions of children and adults, read like the author's main message to every Soviet citizen: "Each understood the meaning of happiness in his own way. But one and all knew and understood that they must live honourably, work hard, and love and cherish the vast, happy land known as the Soviet Union."

The men and women in *Chuck and Geek,* as in all of Gaidar's books, are good people. They are affectionate, brave in adversity, and know how to reach a child's heart with gentle, wise words.

No one knew the secret of those pure words better than Arkady Gaidar himself, a writer with the heart of a warrior who regarded life as a battle for justice.

In *Timur and His Squad,* a book that appeared in 1940 and came to occupy a unique place in the history of literature, he again spoke to children about the most important things in life.

Heartfelt admiration for the men of the armed forces and boundless youthful generosity, the keynotes of Gaidar's previous books, were strikingly expressed in the image of Timur, the boy knight.

Timur was a schoolboy, a member of the Young Pioneers, who thought up a splendid way of assisting the Soviet Army. He and his friends began to help dependants of men who were in the armed forces, but they did it secretly, so as to remain anonymous and to shroud their work in the aura of mystery so dear to children. Timur, an energetic, daring, big-hearted lad, devised ingenious ways of doing this.

No sooner had they read the book than thousands of Soviet boys and girls began to emulate Timur. Each wanted to be as honest, brave and useful as Timur. Not only did Gaidar's book become tremendously popular among Soviet children but, unlike any other children's book, it overflowed into life, as it were. A countrywide movement, known as the Timur movement, sprang up. Gaidar had shown children a simple and effective way in which they could express their glowing admiration for the Soviet Army, their ardent affection for their country's defenders.

Gaidar's great achievement lies in that he discerned the image of his Timur in the thousands of good deeds performed by Soviet children. He summed up the finest traits of the rising generation in an integral, lifelike character portrait illuminated by the ardour of a great patriotic idea.

Timurite, a word that entered the annals of the Great Patriotic War, lives on in the language and consciousness of the Soviet people and will forever signify children's patriotism, their desire to contribute to the people's victory over the enemy.

Arkady Gaidar's name holds a place of honour among the heroes of the last war, side by side with the names of fighting men, side by side with the names of scientists, inventors, engineers and workers whose labour and whose ideas armed the people during their just war for our righteous cause.

Gaidar's life itself was like a soldiers' song in which the sadness of the final words is dispelled by a rollicking refrain thundered by the chorus. Deserved recognition in his lifetime has passed into lasting fame since his death. Gaidar's writings, his own heroic life of dedicated service to his country and the revolution, and his fidelity to his vocation of author and educator will forever remain a lofty example of the writer's mission in the Soviet socialist era.

Illness frequently forced Gaidar to set aside his pen, but as soon as he felt better he returned to his writing and became engrossed by new ideas. The creative urge and his unflagging determination to serve his country put illness to flight.

In the autumn of 1941 Arkady Gaidar was a war correspondent on the Southwestern Front and then became a member of a partisan unit operating behind the enemy lines, in the forests along the Dnieper in the Ukraine. True to his all-absorbing sense of a soldier's duty, he turned down insistent offers of a plane to fly him across the front.

A large, strong army group that was fighting its way out of nazi encirclement urged Gaidar to join it but he did not want to leave his new friends in the partisan detachment.

The partisans liked and respected this strong, kindly man for his honesty, bravery and sense of humour. He was a first-class machine-gunner. In a battle near a sawmill Gaidar and two other machine-gunners held off a sizeable group of nazis. In the intervals between battles, sharing the partisans' life of deprivation and constant danger, Gaidar kept the detachment's diary and wrote drafts of several lyrical stories. They were written in the form of letters to his wife and son. Gaidar always carried them with him and would read them aloud to the partisans.

On October 26, 1941, accompanied by four partisans, Gaidar set out to reconnoitre the environs of the village of Lepliavo, near the Kanev-Zolotonosha railway. He went in the lead; here, too, he was a *gaidar,* a scout.

At dawn the small partisan patrol marched straight into an ambush laid by a large detachment of SS men at a railway crossing. Gaidar was the first to catch sight of the nazis. He realised instantly that the only way he could warn the men following him was by sacrificing his life. Pulling himself up to his full height, he lifted his arm high, as though giving the signal for an attack.

"Come on, men!" he shouted. "Follow me!"

As he dashed forward, furious bursts of nazi machine-gun fire rang out. The partisans flung themselves to the ground and returned the fire. Gaidar fell, never to rise again. A machine-gun burst had pierced his heart.

Later a trackman found Gaidar's body and buried it beside the railway. At night several partisans made their way to the trackman's cabin and told him about the man whom he had buried that day. The trackman promised to tend the grave. Within a few days everyone in the village knew that the famous Arkady Gaidar was buried nearby.

Gaidar died fighting, as strong and undaunted as so many heroes of his books. To his last breath he affirmed by every action the truth of every word he wrote.

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Children in every town and village of the Soviet Union read Gaidar. His books were among the first to be sent to the libraries that were re-opened after the Soviet Army expelled the nazis from the regions they had occupied. Gaidar is read and loved by children in other countries too.

After the war, Gaidar's remains were transferred to the Ukrainian town of Kanev, where they were buried on a hill overlooking the Dnieper. A bronze bust of the writer on a high pedestal marks the grave. When you approach Kanev by boat you can see it from afar.

One cannot help recalling the fairy-tale that is a part of *Military Secret,* in which the young hero "was buried on a green hillock overlooking the Blue River".

As ships sail past they wave to the Boy,
As planes fly past they dip their wings to the Boy,
As locomotives race past they whistle to the Boy,
As Young Pioneers march past they salute the Boy.

Lev Kassil

THE SCHOOL

I. THE SCHOOL

Chapter One

Our town of Arzamas was a quiet little place, all buried in gardens and orchards behind rickety fences. "Parent cherries", early-ripening apples, blackthorn and red peonies galore grew in those gardens.

Placid scummy ponds ran through the town past the gardens. All the good fishes had died out in them long ago, and only slippery tadpoles and slimy frogs were to be found there. Under the hillside flowed the Tesha, a small river.

The town resembled a monastery. It had some thirty churches in it and four cloisters. There were lots of miracle-working icons in our town, but for some reason very few miracles happened in Arzamas itself. That was probably because the famous Sarovo Hermitage with its holy men was situated within sixty kilometres of our town and those holy men drew all the miracles to their place.

One was always hearing of things happening at Sarovo —now of a blind man recovering his sight, now of a cripple starting to walk, now of a hunchback becoming straightbacked, but nothing like this ever happened around our icons.

Once a rumour got around that Mitka the Gypsy, a tramp and well-known drunkard, who, every year at Twelfthtide bathed in the river through an ice-hole for a bottle of vodka, had had a vision and given up drinking. He had turned over a new leaf and was taking a monastic vow at the Monastery of Our Saviour.

Crowds flocked to the monastery. And sure enough, there was Mitka next to the choir, bowing away and publicly repenting his sins, even confessing to having stolen a goat from the merchant Bebeshin the year before and spent the money on drink. The merchant Bebeshin was moved almost to tears and gave Mitka a ruble to buy and light a candle for his soul's salvation. Many people had shed a tear at the spectacle of that sinful man mending his ways and returning to the fold.

This went on for a whole week, and just when Mitka was due to take his monastic vow, he failed to turn up at the church—whether because he had had another vision of an opposite nature or for some other reason, no one could tell. A rumour spread among the parishioners that Mitka was lying in a ditch in Novoplotinnaya Street with an empty vodka bottle lying next to him.

Deacon Pafnuti and church warden Sinyugin, the tradesman, were dispatched to the scene for the purpose of exhortation. These two gentlemen soon returned and announced with indignation that Mitka was indeed in a state of insensibility, like a stuck pig, that a second bottle lay at his side, and that when they did succeed in shaking him awake, he had started swearing, saying that he had changed his mind about becoming a monk as he was too sinful and unworthy of it.

Ours was a quiet patriarchal town. On the eve of holidays, especially at Easter, when the bells of all the thirty churches rang out, a din stood over the town which could be heard in the villages for twenty miles around.

The Annunciation Church bell drowned out all the rest. The bell of the Monastery of Our Saviour was cracked, and it made harsh jerky noises in a grating bass. The smaller bells of the St. Nicholas Monastery tinkled out their shrill song. These three leading songsters were supported by other belfries, and even the homely church of the little prison perched on the edge of the town joined the general discordant chorus.

I loved to climb up into the bell towers. The boys were allowed to do this only at Easter. It was a long way up the dark twisting staircase. Pigeons cooed softly in the stone niches. The countless turnings made you feel dizzy. From up there you could see the whole town: under the hillside the Tesha, the old mill, Goat's Island, the copse, and farther out the ravines and the blue hemline of the town's forest.

My father was a soldier in the 12th Siberian Rifle Regiment. The regiment was at the Riga section of the German front.

I was studying in the second form of the Technical High School. My mother, a feldsher, was always busy, and I grew up on my own. Every week I took my report card to my mother to be signed. She would run a cursory eye over the marks, and seeing poor ones for drawing or handwriting, would shake her head and say, "What's this?';

"It's not my fault, Ma. What can I do if I have no gift for drawing? I drew him a horse, Ma, but he says, this isn't a horse, it's a pig. So the next time I hand him my drawing and say, this is a pig, but he got angry and says, it isn't a pig and it isn't a horse, the devil only knows what it is. I'm not training to be an artist, Ma."

"All right, then what about the handwriting? Show me your exercise-book. Goodness me, what a mess! An ink blot on every line, and here between the pages a squashed beetle? Ugh, how disgusting!"

"The blots are an accident, Ma, but the beetle isn't my fault at all. You're always picking on me! It isn't as if I put that beetle there on purpose! The fool crawled in and got himself squashed, and I'm to blame for it! I should worry about handwriting—call that a science! I don't intend to become a writer at all."

"What do you intend to be?" Mother said sternly, signing the report card. "A lazybones? The Inspector here writes again that you climbed to the school roof up the fire-escape. What's the idea? Are you training to become a chimney-sweep?"

"No. Neither an artist, nor a writer, nor a chimneysweep. I'm going to be a sailor."

"Why a sailor?" Mother queried in a puzzled tone. "Nothing but! That's definite. Don't you see how interesting it is?"

Mother shook her head.

"Of all the crazy ideas! Don't you bring any bad marks home again or I'll give you a good spanking, sailor or no sailor."

Tell me another one! I can see her giving me a spanking. Why, she never touched me with a finger. Once she locked me up in the lumber-room and all next day fed me with pies and gave me twenty kopeks to go to the cinema. I wish she'd do that more often!

Chapter Two

One day, after gulping down my tea and hastily collecting my books, I ran off to school. On the way I met Timka Shtukin, my classmate, a fidgety little fellow.

Timka Shtukin was a meek, harmless kid. You could give him one on the nob without running the risk of retaliation. He willingly ate up his chums' unfinished sandwiches for them, ran to the grocer's next door to buy rolls for school lunch, and lapsed into a frightened silence at the approach of the form master, although he had no reason whatever to feel guilty.

Timka had one ruling passion—he loved birds. His father's cubbyhole at the graveyard church, of which he was the caretaker, was full of cages with all kinds of birds in them. He bought birds, sold them, swapped them, and caught them himself with a snare or trap in the cemetery.

He got it hot from his father one day when the merchant Sinyugin, paying a flying visit to his grandmother's grave, saw on the gravestone bait in the shape of scattered hempseed and a net with a string attached to it. Acting on Sinyugin's complaint, the caretaker boxed the boy's ears for him, and our teacher of religion, Father Gennady, said disapprovingly at bible lesson:

"Gravestones are put up in remembrance of the dead, and not for any other purpose. To place traps upon them, or any other contrivances is sinful and blasphemous."

He went on to cite several instances from the history of mankind when such blasphemy drew down upon the head of the culprit the dire punishment of the heavenly powers.

It should be said that Father Gennady was a master-hand at citing examples. I believe that if he found out, for instance, that I had been to the cinema the week before without leave, he would dredge up from his memories some historical precedent of the Lord's wrath descending upon the guilty criminal during his earthly existence.

Timka was walking along whistling like a thrush. Spotting me, he blinked in a friendly way while at the same time glancing suspiciously in my direction as if trying to guess whether this person was approaching him simply or intended to play some dirty trick on him.

"Timka! We'll be late for school," I said. "We may be in time for the lesson, but we'll miss prayers, sure as eggs is eggs."

"They won't notice anything?!" he said in a voice that sounded at once scared and interrogative.

"You bet they will. Ah, well, they'll leave us without lunch, that's all," I said calmly and teasingly, knowing how afraid Timka was of getting reprimands and being told off.

Timka shrank and quickened his pace, saying anxiously:

"It's not my fault! Father went to open the church. Left me in the house for a minute and was gone for ever so long. Sat all through the service. Valka Spagin's mother came to have prayers read for him."

"What, for Valka Spagin?" I said open-mouthed. "Is he dead?"

"It wasn't a service for the dead, it was for tracking him down."

"Tracking him down? What'yer talking about?" I said, a tremor in my voice. "You're talking out of your hat, Timka. I'll fetch you one on the nob in a minute. . . . I didn't go to school yesterday, Timka, I was running a temperature."

"Tweet-tweet. . . . Trra-ra-ra. . . ." Timka started whistling like a tit and hopped about on one leg, overjoyed at the fact that he was the first to tell me this news. "That's true, you weren't at school yesterday. Gee, you should have seen what happened!"

"What happened?"

"It was like this. We were sitting in the classroom. Our first lesson was French. The old hag made us do verbs in *etre. Les verbes: aller, arriver, entrer, rester, tomber.* She called Rayevsky to the board. He'd just started to write *rester, tomber* when all of a sudden the door opens and in walks the Inspector (Timka flinched), the Headmaster

(Timka threw me a meaningful look), and the form master. When we sat down the Headmaster says to us: 'Gentlemen, I have bad news for you. Spagin, a Pupil of your form, has run away from home. He left a note saying that he had gone off to the German front. I can't imagine, gentlemen, that he has done this without the knowledge of his classmates. Many of you, of course, knew of this flight beforehand but did not take the trouble to bring it to my notice. I must tell you, gentlemen...' and he worked his chin for over half an hour."

I caught my breath. So that's what it was! To think that I had played truant pretending to be ill, when such things were happening, when there was such staggering news of which I knew nothing! And no one—neither Yashka Zukkerstein nor Fedka Bashmakov—had dropped in after school to tell me about it. Pals, they call themselves! When Fedka needs plugs for his toy pistol he comes to me for them. And this is what I get for it! Half the school will run off to the front, while I sit here like an idiot!

I charged into the school like a fire brigade, threw off my coat on the run, and giving the supervisor the slip, mixed with the crowd of boys coming out of the hall where prayers were held.

For days afterwards the school fairly buzzed with the news of Valka Spagin's heroic flight.

The Headmaster was mistaken in thinking that many of us had been let into the secret plan. As a matter of fact no one knew anything about it. It never entered anyone's head that Valka Spagin could run away. He was such a goody-goody, never got mixed up in any scraps or in raids on neighbours' orchards, he was always losing his trousers—in short, he was a poor yap. The last man on earth you'd expect to pull such a thing off!

We all went into a huddle, tried to find out whether any of us had noticed preparations being made for the flight. Damn it all, a fellow couldn't just put on his cap on the spur of the moment and walk off to the front without warning.

Fedka Bashmakov remembered seeing Valka with a map of the railways.

Dubilov, the dunce, said he had run into Valka the other day in a shop, where he was buying a pocket-torch battery. No amount of questioning could elicit any further information pointing to secret preparations for the flight.

The class seethed with excitement. Everybody ran about, seemed to go haywire, gave irrelevant answers during lessons, while the number of pupils who were left without lunch those days was more than double the usual number. Several days went by. Then, all of a sudden, fresh news—Mitka Tupikov, a first-form boy, had run away.

The school authorities became alarmed in real earnest.

"There's going to be a talk today at bible lesson," Fedka told me confidentially. "About all this running away. I heard them talking about it in the Teachers' Room when I went in there with the exercise-books."

Our clergyman, Father Gennady, was seventy if he was a day. Not an inch of face could be seen through the beard and eyebrows; he was stout, and to turn his head to look round he had to turn his whole body, as he had no neck to speak of.

The boys liked him. At his lessons you could do anything you liked—play cards, or draw pictures, or put a banned Nat Pinkerton or Sherlock Holmes on the desk in place of the Old Testament, because Father Gennady was short-sighted.

Father Gennady came into the classroom, his hand raised in blessing, and instantly the monitor roared:

"God the Father, The Comforter, The Spirit of Truth. . . ."

Father Gennady was hard of hearing and always demanded that prayers should be read loudly and clearly, but even he thought the monitor was overdoing it that day. He waved his hand and said gruffly:

"Now, now. . . . What's this? You must read with a pleasing voice, but you sound like a roaring bull."

Father Gennady began from afar. At first he related the parable of the prodigal son. That son, from what I could gather at the time, left his father to go travelling, but then, after roughing it, he back-pedalled.

Then he told us the parable of the talents—how a man gave his servants money, called talents, and how some of the servants went and traded and got a profit out of it, while others hid the money and got nothing.

"Now what do these parables say?" Father Gennady continued. "The first parable speaks of a disobedient son. That son left his father, wandered about for a long time, and in the end returned home under the parental roof. Need it be said that your classmates, who are not inured to the hardships of life and who secretly left their homes —need it be said what a bad time they will have of it on the ruinous path they have chosen. I plead with you again —if any one of you knows where they are, let him write to them they should not fear to come back while there is time to the parental home. Remember, in the parable when the prodigal son came home, his father, in his goodness, did not rebuke him, but clothed him in the finest garments and had the fatted calf killed as if it were a holiday. So will the parents of these two stray youths forgive them everything and receive them with open arms."

I had my doubts about these words. As to how the parents of Tupikov, the first-form pupil, would meet him, I don't know, but that the baker Spagin would kill no fatted calf on the occasion of his son's return, but would simply give him a sound thrashing with his belt—of that I was certain.

"As for the parable of the talents," Father Gennady continued, "that says that one must not bury one's gifts in the earth. You are learning all kinds of knowledge here. When you finish school each one of you will choose a profession according to his abilities, inclination and position. One of you will be, say, a respectable businessman, another a doctor, a third a civil servant. Everyone will respect you and say to himself: 'Yes, this worthy man did not bury his talents in the earth, but increased them and is now deservedly enjoying all the good things of life.' But what"—here Father Gennady raised his hands to heaven—"what, I ask you, will become of these and suchlike runaways, who, spurning all the opportunities offered them, have run away from home in search of adventure, calamitous alike for body and soul? You are growing like tender flowers in the hothouse of a loving gardener, you know neither life's storms nor cares, and you are blossoming peacefully, gladdening the eyes of your teachers and tutors. But they ... even if they do withstand all life's adversities, they will grow up, untended, into rank weeds, exposed to the winds and mixed with the roadside dust."

When Father Gennady, majestic and glowing with prophetic zeal, had sailed out of the classroom, I sighed and became thoughtful.

"Fedka!" I said.

"Yes?"

"What do you think about those talents?"

"Nothing. And you?"

"Me?"

I hesitated a moment, then added in a lower voice:

"If you ask me, Fedka, I'd have buried my talents too. What's the fun in being a businessman or a civil servant?"

"So would I," Fedka confessed after a slight pause. "What interest is there in growing up like a hothouse flower? Just spit at it and it'll wilt. Weeds, at least, are tougher—they can stand rain and heat."

"Fedka," I said, "what about Father Gennady saying: 'You shall answer in the life to come'? Who cares about the life to come if you have to answer all the same."

This took time to sink in. Fedka, too, seemed to have only a hazy idea of how to avoid the threatened punishment. His answer was evasive.

"But that won't be so soon. We'll work out something when the time comes."

That first-form chap Tupikov turned out to be a fool. He didn't even know in what direction you had to run to the front. They caught him on the third day within sixty miles of Arzamas on the road to Nizhni Novgorod.

At home, people said, they made a terrible fuss of him, bought him all kinds of presents. He gave his mother his solemn word of honour never to run away again, and for this he was promised an air rifle in the summer. At school, however, Tupikov became an object of ridicule. "Who wouldn't agree to run around the town for three days and get a real rifle for it," the boys sneered.

Most unexpectedly, Tupikov got a wigging from our geography master Malinovsky, whom we called, behind his back, "the hell-roarer".

Malinovsky called Tupikov out to the blackboard.

"Well, well. Now tell me, young man, what front were you trying to run away to? The Japanese front, maybe?" "No, sir," Tupikov answered, reddening. "The German front."

"I see," Malinovsky went on maliciously. "And what devil, may I ask you, made you steer for Nizhni Novgorod? Where is your head and in what place do you store the geography lessons that I give you? Isn't it as clear as a pikestaff that you had to go via Moscow?"—he jabbed at the map with his pointer—"via Smolensk and Brest, if you intended making for the German front? But you went toddling East, in the opposite direction. What made you go the other way? You are studying with me in order to be able to make practical use of the knowledge you gain, and not keep it in your head as if it were a dustbin. Sit down. I'm giving you bad marks. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, young man!"

The effect of this speech, it should be noted, was to suddenly bring home to the first-form boys the benefits of learning and make them study geography with surprising zeal. They even invented a new game, called "Runaway". The game consisted in one boy naming a frontier town, and another boy rattling off the principal points along the way.

If the Runaway made a mistake he paid a forfeit, and in default got a clump on the side of the head or a flip on the nose, as per arrangement.

Chapter Three

Once a week, every Wednesday, a solemn prayer for victory was held in the hall before lessons.

After prayers everyone faced to the left where the portraits of the Tsar and Tsarina hung.

The choir started singing the national anthem "God Save the Tsar" and all the rest joined in. I sang at the top of my voice. My voice was not exactly made for singing, but I tried so hard that the master once told me:

"Take it a bit easier, Gorikov, you're overdoing it."

I got offended. What did he mean—overdoing it?

If I had no gift for singing, then I was to let others pray for victory while I stood mum—was that it?

At home I aired my grievance to my mother.

But Mother was cold about it and said:

"You're little yet. Grow up a bit. . . . What if people *are* fighting. What's it got to do with you?"

"What do you mean, Ma? And say the Germans conquer us? I've read something about their atrocities, too, Ma. Why are the Germans such Huns that they don't care for anybody—old people, children—but our tsar cares for everybody?"

"Never mind that!" Mother said, displeased. "They're a fine lot, all of them. They've all gone mad—the Germans are no worse than other people, and so are ours."

Mother went away, leaving me to puzzle this out. How could the Germans be no worse than our people, when everyone knew they were? Only the other day, at the pictures, the Germans were shown burning everything, caring for no one. They destroyed the Reims Cathedral, desecrated the churches, but our people didn't destroy anything, didn't desecrate anything. On the contrary, at the same cinema, I saw a Russian officer saving a German baby from the fire. I went to Fedka.

Fedka agreed with me.

"Of course they're brutes. They sank the *Lusitania* with peaceful passengers on board, but we didn't sink anything. Our tsar and the English tsar are noble men. So's the French president. But that Wilhelm of theirs is a cad!"

"Fedka," I asked him, "why is the French tsar called a president?"

Fedka slowly digested this.

"I don't know," he said. "I heard that their president wasn't a tsar at all, but just ... just like that."

"Just like what?"

"I don't know, really. You know, I read a book by Dumas. Interesting book, chock-full of adventures. According to that book the French killed their tsar, and they've had a president instead of a tsar ever since."

"How can you kill a tsar?" I said, indignant. "You're a liar, Fedka, or else you've got it all mixed up."

"They killed him, it's a fact, killed him and killed his wife too. They put them all on trial and sentenced 'em to death."

"Oh, tell me another one! How can a tsar be tried? Take our judge, Ivan Fyodorovich—he tries thieves. The chap who broke Plushchikha's fence—he tried him. He tried Mitka the Gypsy for pinching a box of waters from the monks. But he daren't try the tsar, because the tsar is chief over everybody."

"You can believe me or not!" Fedka said, turning sniffy. "When Sasha Goloveshkin is through with the book, I'll let you have it. The trial there was nothing like those of Ivan Fyodorovich's. There all the people gathered, and they passed judgement and carried out the execution. I even remember the way they executed them. They don't hang people there, they've got a machine—a guillotine. They wind it up, and before you can count two it chops your head off."

"And they chopped the tsar's head off too?" "The tsar's and the tsarina's and other heads too. I'll let you have that book if you like. Very interesting. It tells about a monk too. A cunning fellow he was, fat, supposed to be holy, but in fact he was nothing of the sort. When I read about him I laughed till I cried. Mother was so angry, she got out of bed and blew out the lamp. But I waited till she had fallen asleep again and took the little icon lamp to read by."

A rumour spread that Austrian prisoners of war had arrived at the railway station. Fedka and I ran off there soon after school. The station was a long way out of town. You had to run by way of the cemetery, through the copse, then come out on to the road and cross a long winding ravine.

"What do you think, Fedka—are the prisoners of war in irons?"

"I don't know. Maybe they are. Shouldn't be surprised. Otherwise they'd do a bunk. But you can't run far in irons. You should see the jail prisoners, they barely drag their feet along."

"But those are convicts, thieves—the prisoners of war haven't stolen anything."

Fedka eyed me narrowly.

"You think people are in prison only for stealing or murdering somebody? They're doing time for all kinds o' things, my dear chap."

"What kind o' things?"

"Well, you know. . . . What was our manual teacher put in prison for? You don't know? That's just it."

I always resented the fact that Fedka knew more than I did. No matter what you asked him about—so long as it wasn't lessons—he always knew something. Through his father, I suppose. His father was a postman, and postmen, during their rounds, picked up lots of news.

The boys were fond of their manual teacher, whom they nicknamed Jackdaw. He came to our town at the beginning of the war. Rented lodgings on the outskirts. I visited him several times. He was fond of us boys, too. Taught us on his bench to make cages, boxes and traps. In the summer he'd collect a crowd of kids and go off with them into the woods or go fishing. He was a dark, skinny man and walked with a little hop, like a bird. That's why we called him Jackdaw.

They arrested him quite unexpectedly, we could never make out what for. Some boys said he was a spy who gave away all our secrets about troop movements to the Germans over the telephone. There were some who swore that our teacher was an ex-highwayman who robbed people on the public road, and now the truth had come to light.

But I didn't believe it. For one thing, you couldn't draw a telephone line all the way from here to the frontier. Secondly, what military secrets or troop movements were there to give away in Arzamas? There were hardly any troops here to speak of—just a party of seven men with a batman and four bakers of the Victualling Post at the railway station, who were soldiers only in name; actually, they were just ordinary bread-bakers. Besides, all this time there had been only one movement of troops—that was when the officer Balagushin moved from his lodgings at the Piryatins to the Basyugins. There had been no other movements.

As to the teacher having been a highwayman, that was a barefaced lie. Petka Zolotukhin had made it up, and he, as everyone knew, was the world's biggest liar. If he asked for a loan of three kopeks he'd swear afterwards that he'd given them back, or else he'd return your fishing rod without the hooks and swear he hadn't taken them. Besides, whoever heard of a teacher turning highwayman? He didn't have the face for it, he walked in such a funny way, and he was a kind man, a skinny one, besides, always coughing.

We ran, Fedka and I, till we came to the ravine. Here my curiosity got the better of me and I asked Fedka:

"No really, Fedka, what was the teacher arrested for? All that talk about being a spy and a highwayman is bosh, isn't it?"

"Of course it is," Fedka said, slowing down and looking round cautiously, as if we were in a crowd instead of a field. "He was arrested for politics, my dear chap."

Before I could ask Fedka for what politics exactly our teacher had been arrested, the heavy tramp of an approaching column reached our ears from around the bend.

There were about a hundred prisoners of war.

They weren't in irons and they were escorted by only six soldiers.

The Austrians' tired gloomy faces merged with their grey army coats and crumpled caps. They walked in silence, in closed ranks, with the measured tread of soldiers.

"So that's what they're like," Fedka and I thought, as we watched the column go past. "So these are those Austrians and Germans whose atrocities have shocked all nations. Scowling, eh? Don't like the idea of being prisoners of war? Serves you jolly well right!"

When the column had passed Fedka shook a fist at it.

"Invented poison gas, the damned German sausages!"

We returned home somewhat depressed. Why, I couldn't say. Maybe because those tired grey-faced prisoners of war had not impressed us the way we thought they would. But for their army coats they might have been taken for refugees. The same gaunt emaciated faces, the same weariness and utter apathy to everything around them.

Chapter Four

We broke up for the summer. Fedka and I were full of plans for spending the holidays. There was lots of work to do.

In the first place, a raft had to be built and launched in the pond adjoining our garden, and we had to proclaim ourselves Mistress of the Seas and give battle to the joint fleet of the Pantushkins and Simakovs guarding the approaches to their orchards on the opposite shore.

We had a small home fleet in the shape of a garden wicket, but it was considerably inferior in battle efficiency to the forces of the enemy, who had half of an old gate serving as a heavy cruiser and a light torpedo boat made out of a log-built trough formerly used to feed the farm animals.

The forces were obviously unequal. And so we decided to increase our naval strength by building a colossal super-dreadnought, the latest word in engineering.

We intended using the logs of the broken-down bath house as material for our construction. To avoid a scolding, I promised Mother that our dreadnought would be built on such lines that it could always be used as a platform for rinsing the washing.

On the opposite shore, the enemy, noticing our rearmament activities, became alarmed and started building too, but our intelligence reported that the enemy was no serious match for us in this respect owing to lack of building materials. Their attempt to pinch some planks in the yard, which were intended for weather-boarding the barn, was a failure. The domestic council disapproved of such unauthorised use of material earmarked for other purposes, and the enemy's admirals—Senka Pantushkin and Grishka Simakov—got a sound thrashing from their fathers.

We spent several days messing about with those logs. Building a dreadnought was no easy job. It demanded a lot of money and time, and as it happened Fedka and I had hit a bad patch just then. We spent over fifty kopeks on nails alone, and we still had to buy rope for the anchor and material for the flag.

To raise the necessary funds we had to resort to a secret loan of seventy kopeks on the security of two text-books on religion, a German grammar and a Russian reader.

But then our dreadnought, when completed, was a beauty. We launched her late in the afternoon. Timka Shtukin and Yashka Zukkerstein gave a hand with the launching. All the bootmaker's kids, my sister and the little watchdog Volchok, alias Sharik, alias Zhuchka, acted as spectators. The raft, creaking and groaning, dropped into the water with a heavy splash. Amid loud cheers and the firing of toy pistols the ship's flag was hoisted to the mast.

Our flag was a black one with red edging and a blue circle in the middle.

Fluttering in the warm breeze, it made a brave display as we weighed anchor and shoved off.

It was getting near sundown. One could hear the distant tinkle of the bells of the homecoming herd of goats, of which Arzamas had countless numbers.

The dreadnought was manned by me and Fedka. Behind us, at a respectable distance, sailed our little wicket gate, serving as a dispatch boat.

Our squadron, fully aware of its strength, sailed out into the middle of the pond and cruised down the enemy shore. In vain did we challenge the enemy by means of speaking trumpet and signals—he refused to accept battle and hid shamefully in the bay under a half-rotten bough. In a fit of impotent fury the coastal artillery opened fire upon our ships, but we immediately placed ourselves out of range of the enemy's guns and coolly put into harbour without suffering any damage, not counting a slight shock caused by a potato which hit Yashka Zukkerstein in the back.

"O-ho-ho!" we shouted as we sailed away. "You haven't got the guts to come out and fight!"

"You wait! We'll come out all right. You needn't boast. You can't frighten us."

"Tell it to the marines! Fraidy-cats, that's what you are!"

We safely entered harbour, cast anchor, and, making our rafts fast by chains, jumped ashore.

That evening Fedka and I very nearly quarrelled. We hadn't made arrangements beforehand who was to command the fleet. My suggestion that Fedka should command the dispatch boat was turned down with a scornful spit. So then I offered him, in addition, to be captain of the dockyard, chief of the coastal artillery and chief of the air force, as soon as we got one. But not even the post of air force chief tempted Fedka, who insisted on being admiral, otherwise he threatened to go over to the enemy.

Not wishing to lose a valuable assistant, I finally gave in and suggested we should be admirals in turn—one day he, the next I.

And so we decided.

We made two bows, provided ourselves with a dozen arrows and went off into the wood. We had a stock of several "frogs". A "frog" was a tube of rolled up paper laced tight with a bit of string and stuffed with a mixture of potassium chlorate and ground charcoal. We tied the "frog" to the end of the arrow and lighted the fuse. The arrow shot up into the sky and the "frog" exploded high in the air, darting about in fiery zigzags and frightening all the jackdaws and crows.

The copse adjoined the cemetery. It was densely-wooded, pitted with holes and covered with small ponds. Yellow water-lilies, buttercups and ferns grew in the shady green glades.

Having played to our heart's content, we clambered over the wall and found ourselves in a remote corner of the cemetery. The stillness, broken only by the twitter of birds concealed in the foliage, had a soothing effect upon us after the excitement of play. We spoke in low tones as we made our way through a patch of waste land, passing burial mounds, which sometimes barely rose above the ground.

"Look," I said to Fedka, "we'll come to soldiers' graves in a minute round the corner. Last week they buried Semyon Kozhevnikov here from the hospital. I remember Kozhevnikov very well, Fedka. Long before the war, when I was still a little boy, he used to come to my father. Once he gave me a piece of elastic for a slingshot. Good elastic it was. Only my mother threw it in the fire afterwards, when the Basyugins got one of their windows smashed by a stone. She blamed me for it."

"Didn't you do it?"

"What if I did? It had to be proved, but no one saw me do it. It was just bare suspicion. D'you call that fair? Say it hadn't been me who smashed that window—I'd be blamed all the same?"

"You would," Fedka concurred. "Mothers are all alike. They'll never touch a girl's things, but if they catch a boy playing with anything they'll chuck it out. My mother broke two of my arrows with nails in them and afterwards took the rat out of the trap. Once it was still worse. I unscrewed an empty knob—you know, one of those gadgets they adorn beds with. Mother had gone to church. I sat there, got out some saltpetre and charcoal. I'll fill that knob with gun-powder, I says to myself, and then I'll go out into the wood and make an explosion. I was so busy at it that I didn't notice Mother come up behind me. 'What did you unscrew that knob for?' she says. 'Oh, you devil! And I was wondering where that knob could have got to.' And she fetched me one over the ear. Luckily, Father took my part. 'What did you take the knob for?' he asks. 'Can't you see?' I says. 'I'm making a bomb.' He frowned. 'Drop that,' he says, 'don't lark about with such things. How do you like that terrorist!' But he laughed and patted me on the head."

"Fedka," I said calmly, "I know what a terrorist is. It's one of those who throw bombs at the police and who go against the rich. What are we, Fedka, poor or rich?"

"In-between," Fedka answered after a thoughtful pause. "I wouldn't say we're very poor. Since Father got a job we have dinner every day, and on Sunday Mother makes a pie and sometimes stewed fruit. I'm terribly fond of stewed fruit. Aren't you?"

"So am I. But I like apple-jelly better. I think we're somewhere in-between too. Look at the Bebeshins—they own a whole factory. I went to their home once to see their Vaska. The number of servants and lackeys they have! And Vaska's father gave him a real live horse for a present—a pony they call it."

"They've got everything, of course," Fedka concurred. "They've got tons of money. The merchant Sinyugin built a tower over his house and put a telescope in. A whopper! When he's fed up with things on earth he goes to his tower, and they bring him snacks there, and a bottle. . . . And he sits there all night, looking at the stars and planets. The other day, though, he had a drinking party there with his pals, and they say some glass or other got broken after the observations, and now there's nothing to see any more."

"Fedka, why is it that Sinyugin has all the enjoyment, what with the stars and the planets, while others get nix? Take Sigov, who works at his factory—he has nothing to eat, let alone gazing at the planets. Yesterday he came downstairs to borrow fifty kopeks from the bootmaker."

"How do I know? Don't ask me. Ask the teacher or the clergyman."

Fedka broke off a sprig of wild jasmine as he walked along, then added in a lower voice:

"Father said everything will soon change the other way."

"What will?"

"Everything. I haven't got this straight myself yet, Borya. I was supposed to be sleeping but I only made as if I was. Father was talking to the factory watchman about strikes starting again, like in nineteen 'five. You know what happened in nineteen 'five?"

"I do, but not quite," I answered, reddening.

"There was a revolution. Only it failed. The idea was to turn out the landowners, give all the land to the peasants and take everything from the rich for the poor. You know, I heard all this from their conversation."

Fedka fell silent. And again I felt rattled that Fedka knew more than I did. I could get to know it, too, but there was no one to get it from. There was nothing about this in books. And no one talked to me about these things.

At home, after dinner, when Mother lay down to rest, I sat down beside her on the bed and said:

"Mamma, tell me something about nineteen 'five. Why do parents speak to other boys about it? Fedka knows so many interesting things, but I never know anything."

My mother turned round quickly with a frown. She looked as if she was going to scold me, but changed her mind and eyed me curiously as if she were seeing me for the first time.

"Nineteen 'five? What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about. Look how big and strong you are. You must have been quite grownup at the time, but I was only a year old, and I don't remember anything."

"What can I tell you? You should ask your father, he's a great one for telling stories. I had a beast of a time in nineteen 'five through you, you little monkey. You were a holy terror, forever screaming—I didn't have a minute's peace. When you'd start screaming the whole blessed night, I'd forget who I was and what world I lived in."

"Why did I scream, Mamma?" I asked, feeling a little hurt. "Maybe I was frightened? They say there was shooting and Cossacks. Maybe I got scared?"

"Scared your grandmother! You were just a capricious t squalling brat, that's all. You couldn't know what it was to get frightened. One night the gendarmes came to search ' our place. What they were looking for I don't know. They were carrying out regular searches in those days. They turned the place upside down, but didn't find anything. The officer was ever so polite. Tickled you with a finger and you laughed. 'Fine boy you've got there,' he says. He picked you up, sort of playfully, while he winked to the gendarme, who started to search your cradle. And suddenly you began to make water. Goodness gracious, right on that officer's uniform! I snatched you away and thrust a rag at the officer to wipe himself with. Just imagine, a new uniform he had on, and it was all soaking wet, dripped onto his trousers, too, even his sword. You gave him a proper douche, you little rascal!" Mother laughed at the memory.

"You're telling me about something quite different, Ma," I interrupted, now deeply offended. "I asked you about the revolution and you tell me some kind of nonsense—"

"Oh, leave me alone. You're are a nuisance!" Mother said, dismissing the matter.

But seeing my pained look, she paused, then got out a bunch of keys and said:

"I shan't tell you anything. Go and open the lumber-room. There's a big box there with all kinds of junk on top. Underneath them there ought to be a heap of books belonging to your father. Search among them. If he hasn't torn them all up you may find one about nineteen 'five."

I quickly seized the bunch of keys and made for the door. My mother's voice shouted a warning:

"If you get into a jar of jam instead of that box of books, or take down the pot of cream like you did last time, I'll give you such a taste of revolution that you'll never forget it!"

I spent several days in succession reading. I remember, in the first of the two books I had selected I read only three pages. This book, chosen at random, was entitled *The Philosophy of Poverty*. I could make nothing of this headachy stuff at the time. But the other book—stories by Stepnyak-Kravchinsky—was something I could understand, and I read it right through and reread it a second time.

Everything in these stories was the other way round. The heroes there were people the police were after, and the police sleuths, instead of arousing sympathy, provoked only contempt and indignation. These stories were about revolutionaries. The revolutionaries had their secret organisations and printing plants. They were preparing an uprising against the landowners, merchants and generals. The police fought them and hunted them. The revolutionaries then went to prison or faced the firing squad, while those who remained alive carried on their cause.

This book gripped me, because I had never read anything about revolutionaries before. I was so sorry that this Arzamas of ours was such a one-horse town and one never heard anything about revolutionaries in it. There were burglars—the Tushkovs had their attic with all the washing in it cleaned out; there were gypsy horse-thieves, and even a real robber—Vanka Seledkin, who killed the exciseman, but there were no revolutionaries.

Chapter Five

Fedka, Timka, Yashka Zukkerstein and me were just about to start playing gorodki *(Gorodki—a Russian game resembling skittles.—Tr.)* when the bootmaker's boy came running out of the garden reporting that two rafts of the Pantushkins and Simakovs had secretly moored at our shore and that those rascally admirals were now engaged in knocking the padlock off our rafts in order to tow them away to their side.

We dashed into the garden with wild yells. At the sight of us the enemy jumped onto their rafts and shoved off.

We decided to pursue the enemy and sink him.

That day Fedka was in command of the dreadnought. While he and Yashka were pushing off the unwieldy heavy raft Timka and I set off in our old tub to cut across the enemy's path. Our enemies made a mistake at the very outset. They evidently did not think that we would pursue them, and instead of steering straight for their own shore, they edged far off to the left. When they did notice their mistake they were already far offshore and were now exerting every effort to make a dash for it before we had time to cut off their retreat. Fedka and Yashka, however, were still struggling to untie the big raft. Timka and I were faced with a heroic task—that of holding up the superior enemy force for several minutes with our light vessel.

We found ourselves confronted, unsupported, by the enemy fleet and courageously opened fire upon it. It goes without saying that we immediately came under a heavy shelling from two sides.

I had been hit in the back twice with clods of earth and Timka had had his cap knocked off into the water. Our ammunition was giving out and we were drenched to the skin, but Fedka and Yashka were only just getting under way.

Seeing this, the enemy decided to make a breakthrough. We stood no chance in a head-on clash with their rafts. Our wicket would have been sunk as sure as anything. "Blaze away with our last shells!" I commanded. We held the enemy up for only half a minute with our deadly volleys. Our dreadnought was coming to the rescue at full speed.

"Steady!" Fedka yelled, opening up at long range. The enemy ships, however, were almost alongside. Only two courses were open to me—to let them get away to their home base or to block their path at the risk of a deadly engagement. I chose the latter course.

With a powerful thrust of my pole I placed our raft across their path.

The first enemy raft ran into us with a heavy bump and Timka and I found ourselves neck-deep in the warm stagnant water. But the enemy's raft, too, stopped from the blow. This was just what we wanted. Our powerful dreadnought—huge, clumsy, but sturdily built—ran head on into the side of the enemy's ship and overset it. There now remained the torpedo boat, originally the pig trough, to be tackled. Taking advantage of her high speed, she tried to slip past, but I tipped her over with my pole.

Timka and I clambered onto Fedka's raft, and now only the heads of the enemy crew stuck out of the water.

We were magnanimous, however. We took the capsized rafts in tow, allowing their vanquished crews to board them, and made a triumphant entry into our harbour with the trophies and prisoners of war amid the loud shouts and cheering of the small boys, who straddled the garden fences.

We rarely received letters from Father. And when he did write it was always one and the same thing: "I am alive and well, and sitting in the trenches, and I see no end to it."

I found his letters disappointing. No, really! Fancy a man being at the front and having nothing interesting to write about! Couldn't he describe a battle, say, an attack or some other heroic deed? Reading one of these letters gave you the impression that things were more boring at the front than they were in Arzamas in muddy autumn.

Why could others—Ensign Tupikov, for instance, Mitka's brother—write home letters describing battles and deeds of valour, and send photographs every week? On one he was photographed next to a field gun, on another next to a machine-gun, on a third on horseback with drawn sword, and there was even one picturing him with his head stuck out of an aeroplane. But Father never had himself photographed in the trenches, leave alone looking out of an aeroplane, and he never wrote home anything interesting.

One day, towards evening, there was a knock on our door. A soldier with a crutch and a wooden leg came in and asked for Mother. She wasn't at home but I was expecting her soon. The soldier then said that he was a comrade of my father's, they were serving in the same regiment, and now he was going home for good to a village in our district, and had brought us greetings and a letter from Father.

He sat down on a chair, placing his crutch against the stove, and after rummaging about in his inside pocket, produced from there a greasy letter.

The bulkiness of the packet surprised me. Father had never sent us such thick letters, and I decided that the packet probably contained some photographs.

"You served with him in the same regiment?" I asked, gazing curiously at the soldier's thin, gloomy-looking face, his grey rumpled greatcoat with the St. George's Cross and the wooden peg strapped to his left leg.

"Not only in the same regiment, but in the same company and the same platoon, and side by side in the same trench, elbow to elbow. You'll be his son, I take it?" "Yes."

"I see. Boris, eh? I know you. Heard about you from your father. There's a package for you too. Only your father said you were to hide it and not touch it until he came back."

The soldier reached for a home made leather bag cut from the top of a high-boot. With every movement of his a wave of strong-smelling iodoform spread through the room. He got out a package wrapped in a piece of cloth and tightly bound with string and gave it to me. It was a small package, but a heavy one. I wanted to open it but the soldier said:

"Don't be in a hurry. You've got plenty o' time." "Well, how are things at the front, how's the fighting, what's the spirit of our troops?" I enquired calmly and solidly.

The soldier glanced at me quizzically. His heavy, somewhat mocking glance was disconcerting, and my own question struck me as being rather pompous and silly.

"Spirit, did you say?" the soldier smiled. "I don't know about the spirit, but the smell's pretty thick. What can you expect in the trenches. Worse'n a backhouse."

He got out a tobacco pouch, rolled himself a cigarette and blew out a strong puff of acrid makhorka smoke. Looking past me at the window, which reflected the glow of sunset, he resumed:

"Everyone's fed up to the neck with it. And there's no end in sight."

Mother came in. Seeing the soldier, she stopped in the doorway and gripped the frame of the door.

"What... what's the matter?" she asked quietly with blanched lips. "Is it about Alexei?"

"Daddy has sent us a letter!" I yelled. "A thick 'un. Probably with photographs. And he's sent me a present too,"

"Is he alive and well?" Mother asked, throwing off her shawl. "When I saw a grey coat from the threshold my heart went cold. Something must have happened to Father, I thought."

"Nothing's happened so far," the soldier said. "He sends greetings, asked me to deliver this packet. He didn't want to send it by post. The post is unreliable these days."

Mother tore open the envelope. There were no photographs in it at all, only a batch of greasy close-written sheets of paper.

One of them had a bit of clay and a green dried blade of grass sticking to it.

I opened my package. Inside it lay a small Mauser with a spare clip.

"What's your father thinking of!" Mother said, displeased. "That's no toy!"

"Never mind," the soldier said. "Your son's not daft, is he? Just look at him, almost as big as I am. Let him hide it for the time being. It's a good pistol. Alexei found it in a German trench. Nice gadget. It may come in useful."

I touched the cold smooth handle, and carefully wrapping the Mauser up again, put it away in a drawer.

The soldier had tea with us. He drank glass after glass and kept telling us all about Father and about the war. I drank only half a glass, and Mother did not even touch her cup. Mother rummaged among her bottles and phials and fished out a small bottle with alcohol and poured it out for the soldier. He diluted it with water, then slowly drank it off. He sighed and shook his head.

"Life's gone all awry," he said, pushing the glass away. "They wrote me from home that the farm's gone to the dogs. But what could I do to help 'em? We went hungry ourselves for months at a stretch. You felt as miserable as sin, wished it was all over, one way or another. People have stood as much as a human being can stand. Sometimes you feel everything boiling inside o' you like rusty water in a billy-can. You think—ugh, if I only had the guts to chuck it all up and walk out. Let 'em fight if they want, but I don't owe Jerry anything and he doesn't owe me anything. Alexei and I talked about this a lot. The nights are long, you know. The fleas don't let you get any sleep. Your only comfort is singing or talking. Sometimes you feel like crying or strangling somebody, but you sit down and start singing. The tears have dried up. You feel like taking it out on somebody, but you just try! So you say, ah well, mates, buddies, dear comrades, let's have a song!"

The soldier's face reddened and became covered with moisture, and the smell of iodoform spread more and more thickly through the room. I opened the window. The air flooded in, bringing the smells of evening freshness, stacked hay in the yards and overripe cherries.

I sat on the windowsill, tracing patterns on the glass with a finger and listening to what the soldier was saying. His words left a sediment of dry bitter dust on my heart, and that dust gradually formed a thick coating over all my notions about the war, its sacred meaning and its heroes, all of which had been so clear-cut and intelligible to me until then. I looked at the soldier almost with hatred. He took off his belt and unbuttoned the wet collar of his shirt. He continued, evidently a bit tipsy:

"Death's bad, of course. But it's not death that makes war bad, it's the sense o' wrong. You don't feel that with death. Every man has to die, sooner or later—you can't help that, it's a law. But who thought up a law that you've got to fight? I didn't, you didn't, he didn't, but somebody did. Now if God were all-powerful, all-merciful and all-wise, the way they write about Him in books, He'd call that man up on the carpet and say: 'Now answer me this —what made you plunge these millions of peoples into war for? What do they stand to gain by it and what do you? Now then, come clean, so that everyone should know what it's all about.' Only"—here the soldier swayed and all but dropped the glass —"only God doesn't like to interfere in earthly matters. Ah, well, we can wait. We're a patient people. But when our patience wears thin, we'll go out ourselves and find the judges as well as the guilty parties."

The soldier fell silent and threw a sullen look at Mother, who, with eyes lowered to the tablecloth, had not uttered a word all the time. He got up and reached for the plate with the herring, saying in a conciliatory tone:

"Oh, I say! What a thing to be talking about! Never mind. . . . There'll come a time for everything. Is there anything left in the bottle, my good woman?"

Mother, without looking up, replenished his glass with drops of the warm odorous spirits.

Mother cried all that night behind the partition; I could hear the crackle of the sheets of Father's letter being turned over. Afterwards a dim greenish light shone through the crack and I guessed that Mother was praying before the icon with the little oil lamp over it. She did not show me Father's letter. What he wrote about and why she cried that night I did not know at the time.

The soldier went away in the morning.

Before leaving, he patted me on the shoulder and said, as though I had asked him something:

"Never mind, lad. . . . You're still young. Ah, you'll see a sight more than we did, I daresay!"

He took his leave and stumped off, taking away with him his crutch, the smell of iodoform and the depressing mood evoked by his presence, his coughing laugh and his bitter words.

Chapter Six

Summer was drawing to a close. Fedka was working hard for his second examination, Yashka Zukkerstein was down with the fever, and I suddenly found myself alone.

I lolled on the bed, reading Father's books and the newspapers.

Nothing was to be heard about the war ending. The town was full of refugees, as the Germans had pushed forward along the front and already occupied over half of Poland. The richer refugees put up in private houses and flats, but these were few. Our merchants, monks and clergymen were pious people who were reluctant to take in refugees, most of them poor Jews with large families, and so most of the refugees lived in bunk-houses near the wood, outside the town.

By this time all the young men in the villages, all the healthy muzhiks, had been driven off to the front. Many farms were ruined. There was nobody to work the fields, and beggars started drifting into town—old men and women and children.

Previously, you could walk about the streets all day without meeting a stranger. You might not have known this or that person's name, but you were bound to have met him before, but now at every step you met with strangers, unfamiliar faces—Jews, Rumanians, Poles, Austrian prisoners of war, and wounded soldiers from the Red Cross hospital.

There was a food shortage. Butter, eggs and milk were bought up at high prices on the market early in the morning. There were queues outside the baker's, white bread had disappeared, and there was not enough black bread to go round. The tradesmen kept pushing up the prices on everything unmercifully, even on things apart from foodstuffs.

People said that Bebeshin alone had made more money in the last year than he had in five previous years. As for Sinyugin, he had grown so rich that he donated six thousand rubles towards a church, had neglected his tower with the telescope and had had delivered to him from Moscow a real live crocodile, which he turned into a pool specially built for it.

When the crocodile was being transported from the railway station there was such a big crowd of curious people following the cart that Grishka Bocharov, the boss-eyed sacristan of the Church of the Saviour, took it for a religious procession carrying the Oransk icon of Our Lady, and started to ring the bells. Grishka got thirteen days' penance for it from the bishop. Many churchgoers said that Grishka was lying when he said he had started ringing by mistake; he had done it on purpose, they said, out of sheer mischief. Doing penance was not enough for him. He should have been put in jail and made an example of. It was one thing to take a funeral, say, for a religious procession, but to take such a loathsome beast for a holy image was a deadly sin.

I closed the book and went out into the street. Having nothing to do, I ran off to the cemetery outside the town to see Timka Shtukin. Timka was out. His father, a greyheaded sturdy old man, an old acquaintance of my father's, patted me on the back, saying:

"Growing up, laddie? Your dad won't know you when he gets back. You take after your father—big, strapping fellow you'll be! That Timka of mine's an undersized little wasp, worse luck. Takes after his granddad on his mother's side, I daresay. And the food he puts away! Father keeping well? Give him my regards when you write him. A real good man, he is. He and I worked together for eight years in a village school. He was teacher, 1 was caretaker. But that was a long time ago. . . . You were a suckling, you wouldn't remember. Well, well, run along. Timka's hereabouts somewhere, catching goldfinches. Look for him among the birches, in the corner, back of the soldiers' graves. He doesn't do his bird-catching nearer—the church-warden scolds him if he sees it."

I found Timka in the birch wood. He was standing under a tree, holding a stick with a loop at the end of it and carefully moving it towards a goldfinch which was barely perceptible among the yellowing foliage. Timka threw me a scared almost pleading look and shook his head vigorously as a warning not to come any closer and frighten the bird away. I stopped.

If you ask me, there is no greater fool of a bird in all the world than the goldfinch. The boys tie a length of horsehair in the form of a loop to the tip of a long rod. This loop has to be carefully slipped over the neck of the bird.

Timka slowly moved the tip of the rod towards the finch. It cocked an eye at the loop and lazily hopped onto a nearby branch. With his tongue stuck out, holding his breath, Timka started to move the loop up again. The silly finch eyed Timka's occupation with curiosity. With idiotic indifference it let the loop slip over its ruffled head. Timka jerked the stick, and the half-strangled finch, without as much as a squeak, flopped into the grass with a wild flutter of wings. A minute later it was hopping about in a cage together with five other captive companions.

"See that!" Timka yelled, dancing about on one leg. "Smart work, that! Six of 'em. Only they're all finches. You can't catch a tit like that. You've got to use traps and snares. They're a cunning lot! But these fools just stick their heads in—"

Timka suddenly broke off and his face froze into a stony expression as if someone had given him a crack on the head with a thick stick. He held up a warning finger and stood without stirring for fully two minutes, then gave another hop and said:

"Well, did you hear it?"

"Hear what, Timka? I only heard the engine hooting at the railway station."

"Holly Moses! He didn't hear anything!" Timka said, throwing his hands up in astonishment. "Robin! Didn't you hear him give a warble? A real redbreast. I've been after him for over a week. You know where that drowned man was buried? Well, he nests there, somewhere among the maples. They grow dense there, and their leaves now are like a flame, ever so brilliant. Let's go and have a look."

Timka knew every grave, every tombstone. Hopping along bird-like, he kept up a running commentary.

"Here lies the fireman—the one who died of burns last year, and here the blind man Churbakin. They're all that kind o' people here. Merchants are not buried here, they have a special site of good land. Look at that statue with the Archangels they've put up to the Sinyugin grandmother. And here"—Timka jerked a thumb at a barely perceptible mound—"here lies a suicide man. Dad said he hanged himself—did it on purpose. He was a fitter at the depot. I can't understand how a man can hang himself on purpose."

"Through a bad life, I suppose, not through a good one, Timka, surely?"

"What d'you mean!" Timka protested, looking surprised. "It isn't bad, surely?"

"What isn't?"

"Life isn't! Life's a jolly good thing. How can death be better? You run about, do whatever you like, and here you've got to lie quiet!"

Timka laughed a ringing rippling laugh and abruptly broke off again with a sort of stunned look. After a minute's silence he whispered:

"Quiet now. He's somewhere near. Hiding himself, the cunning little thing! All the same, I'll catch him."

I stayed with Timka till late in the afternoon. A funny boy, Timka. He was only a year and a half younger than me, but so small that you wouldn't give him ten, let alone twelve years. He was such a fusspot, his classmates always made fun of him and often gave him fillips on the back of his head, but he never got offended, at least not for long. When Timka asked for anything, a penknife, say, to sharpen a pencil with, or a nib, or for help in doing a difficult sum, he always looked you straight in the face with big round eyes and a sort of apologetic smile. He was a coward, but his cowardice was of a special kind. The approach of the Inspector or the Headmaster terrified him beyond words. Once, during a lesson, the porter came in and said that Timka was wanted in the Teachers' Room. Timka sat frozen to his seat and when he did get up he slowly passed an eye round the class as if asking: "What have I done? Honour bright, I didn't do anything!" His slightly pockmarked face turned ashen with fear, and he walked out unsteadily.

At playtime we learned that he had been sent for not to be put into irons and packed off to a convict's prison, and not even to be put on the list of conduct, but simply to sign for the textbook on arithmetic which he had received free of charge the year before.

Two days later school was resumed. The classrooms were full of hubbub. Everyone was telling how he had spent the summer, how much fish, crabs, lizards and hedgehogs he had caught. One boasted of having killed a hawk, another gave an excited account of mushrooms and wild strawberries collected in the woods, and a third swore that he had caught a live snake. There were even some who had spent the summer in the Crimea and the Caucasus, at health resorts. But these were only a few. They kept aloof, did not talk about hedgehogs or wild strawberries, but carried on a dignified conversation about palm-trees, bathing and horses.

That year, for the first time, we were told that life being so dear the guardians had allowed us to wear uniforms made of a cheaper material instead of the usual woollen cloth.

Mother made me a tunic and trousers out of a material called Devil's Hide.

It must have really been the hide off a devil's back, because one day, during a raid on the monastery orchard, when a great hulking fellow of a monk chased me with a stick, my trousers got caught in a nail as I was scrambling over the wall, and they didn't tear, but kept me hanging conveniently from the wall while the monk planted a couple of painful blows.

There was another innovation. An officer was attached to us, we were given wooden rifles that looked like real ones and started military drilling.

After that letter which the one-legged soldier had brought us, we did not receive a single letter from Father. Every time Fedka's father passed down the street with his postman's bag, my little sister, who stood looking out for him, would poke a head out of the window and shout in a shrill voice:

"Uncle Sergei! Anything from Daddy?"

And the invariable answer would be:

"No, girlie, not today. There'll be one tomorrow, I'm sure."

But tomorrow, too, there would be nothing.

Chapter Seven

One day—it was already September—Fedka sat with me till late in the evening. We were doing our lessons together.

We had scarcely finished and Fedka put his books away to run home when a heavy downpour suddenly started.

I ran to shut the window overlooking the garden.

The gusts of wind raised heaps of dried fallen leaves. Several big drops fell on my face.

I pulled one half of the window shut with difficulty and leaned out for the second when a pretty large lump of clay dropped on the windowsill.

"Some wind!" I thought. "Likely to break all the trees!"

Coming back into the room I said to Fedka:

"It's regular storm. Where are you going, you silly ass? It's raining cats and dogs! Look at this lump of clay the wind sent flying into the window."

Fedka looked at it sceptically.

"Tell me another one! How can the wind send a lump like that flying?"

"You think I'm fibbing?" I said, offended. "I'm telling you, I was just shutting the window when it flopped onto the windowsill."

I looked at the lump of clay. Maybe someone did throw it on purpose? But I immediately dismissed the thought and said:

"Nonsense! Who could have thrown it? Who could be in the garden in such weather? It was the wind, of course."

Mother was sitting in the next room, sewing. My sister was sleeping. Fedka sat on for another half hour. The sky cleared. The moon peeped into the room through the wet window and the wind began to drop.

"Well, I'll run along," Fedka said.

"All right. I won't lock the door after you. Shut it tight, it'll lock itself."

Fedka jammed his cap on, thrust the books under his coat not to get them wet, and went away. I heard the door bang to as he went out.

I began to take my boots off to go to bed. Looking down on the floor I saw an exercise-book which Fedka had dropped and forgotten. It was the book in which we had been doing our sums.

"The stupid!" I thought. "Tomorrow we're having algebra—our first lesson. I'll have to take it with me." Throwing off my clothes I slipped under the blanket, and was about to turn over on my side when the doorbell rang softly and cautiously.

"Who can that be?" Mother said, wonderingly. "A telegram from Father perhaps? No, the postman always pulls the door bell. Go and open the door."

"I've undressed, Ma. It must be Fedka, he's forgotten an exercise-book here and must have remembered it on his way home—he'll need it tomorrow."

"He's a nuisance!" Mother said. "Couldn't he have come for it in the morning? Where is that book?"

She picked up the exercise-book and went out with her slippers on her bare feet.

I could hear her slippers shuffling down the stairs. The lock clicked. In the same instant a muffled cry reached my ears. I jumped up. For the moment I thought it was burglars and seized a candlestick from the table to smash the window and call for help. But from downstairs came the mingled sound of laughter and kisses, and subdued whispering. Then two pairs of feet came shuffling up the stairs.

The door was thrown open, and 1 sat as if glued to the bed, undressed, with the candlestick in my hand.

In the doorway, her eyes filled with tears, stood my happy laughing mother, and at her side, overgrown with bristly beard, besmeared with clay and wringing wet, the dearest soldier in the world to me—my father.

In a bound I flung myself into his strong hugging arms.

Behind the partition my sister stirred in her bed, disturbed by the noise. I wanted to run in and wake her, but Father restrained me and said in a low voice:

"Don't, Boris ... don't wake her ... and don't make too much noise."

Then he turned to Mother.

"Varya, if the child wakes up don't tell her I have come. Let her sleep. Where could we send her for a couple of days?"

"We'll send her to Ivanovskoye early in the morning," Mother said. "She's been asking a long time to go and stay with Grandma. The sky has cleared, I believe. Boris will take her down first thing in the morning. You needn't speak in a whisper, Alexei, she's a heavy sleeper. They sometimes come for me at night from the hospital, so she's used to it."

I stood open-mouthed, refusing to believe what I had heard.

"What?" I thought. "They want to pack little saucer-eyed Tanya off to Grandma's at peep of dawn, so's she won't be able to see Daddy, who has come home on leave? What can it mean?"

"You'll go to bed in my room, Boris," Mother said, "and tomorrow morning, round about six, you'll take Tanya down to Grandma's. And don't tell anyone there that Daddy's come home."

I looked at Father. He pressed me to him and was going to say something, but changed his mind. He hugged me still closer.

I lay down on Mother's bed, while Father and Mother remained in the dining-room and shut the door. For a long time I couldn't fall asleep. I turned over from side to side and tried counting up to fifty, up to a hundred, but it didn't help.

In my head was chaos. The moment I dwelt on what had happened all kinds of thoughts thronged confusedly in my mind, which floated in a sea of conjectures, each more absurd than the other. I felt a tightness at the temples like the pressure on one's head after too long a ride on the merry-go-round.

I didn't doze oft until late in the night. A faint creaking sound woke me up. Father came into the room with a lighted candle.

I half-opened my eyes. Father was in his socks. Stepping softly, he went over to Tanya's cot and lowered the candle.

He stood there for about three minutes, gazing at the fair curls and rosy face of his sleeping daughter. Then he bent over her. Two emotions struggled within him—the desire to fondle his daughter and the fear of wakening her. The second gained the upper hand. Swiftly, he straightened his back, turned and left the room.

The door creaked again and the room went dark.

The clock struck seven. I opened my eyes. A bright sun shone through the yellow leaves of the birch tree outside the window. I dressed quickly and looked into the next room. They were asleep in there. I shut the door and began to wake my sister.

"And where's Mummy?" she asked rubbing her eyes and staring at the empty bed.

"Mummy's been called out to the hospital. She told me when she was going away I should take you down to Grandma's."

"Oh, what a fibber you are, Borya!" my sister said, laughing and wagging a finger at me. "Only yesterday Grandma asked me to stay with her, but Mummy wouldn't let me."

"Yesterday she wouldn't, but today she's changed her mind. Dress yourself quickly. Look how fine the weather is. Grandma will take you to the woods today to gather ashberries."

Seeing that I wasn't joking, my sister sprang out of bed, and while I helped her dress, she twittered:

"So Mummy has changed her mind? Oh, I do love it when Mummy changes her mind! I say, Borya, let's take the cat Lizka with us. Well, if you won't have the cat, then let's take Towzer. He's a jolly little doggie. He licked all my face yesterday. Only Mummy scolded me. She doesn't like your face to be licked. Towzer licked her once when she was lying in the garden and she shooed him away."

My sister jumped off the bed and ran to the door.

"Open the door for me, Borya. My headscarf is lying in the corner. My pram too."

I pulled her away from the door and seated her on the bed.

"You can't go in there, Tanya. A strange man is sleeping in there. He came last night. I'll go and get your headscarf for you."

"What man?" she asked. "Like the one last time?"

"Yes, like last time."

"With a wooden leg?"

"No, an iron one."

"Oh, Borya! I've never seen one with an iron leg. I'll just have one tiny peep through the keyhole. I'll go on tiptoes."

"You'll do nothing of the kind. Sit still."

I crept softly into the room and came back with the scarf.

"And where's the pram?"

"Don't be silly! What do you want the pram for? Uncle Yegor will give you a ride there in a real cart."

The path leading to Ivanovskoye ran along the bank of the. Tesha. My sister skipped along, stopping every minute, now to pick up a twig, now to look at the geese tumbling about in the water. I walked along slowly behind. The fresh morning air, the yellow-green expanse of the autumn fields, the monotonous tinkle of the brass bells of the grazing herd—all this had a soothing effect upon me.

The intrusive thought that had been tormenting me all night was now firmly established in my mind and I no longer tried to dismiss it.

I recollected the lump of clay thrown onto the window-sill. It wasn't the wind, of course. How could the wind tear up such a heavy lump of clay from the garden bed? It was my father. He had thrown it to attract attention. It was he, who, in the rain and storm, had hidden in the garden, waiting for Fedka to go away. He did not want my sister to see him, because she was little and might give the show away. Soldiers who come home on leave don't hide themselves from people.

There was no longer any room for doubt—my father was a deserter.

On my way back I ran straight into the school Inspector.

"Gorikov," he said sternly, "what's this? Why aren't you at school during lesson-time?"

"I'm ill," I answered mechanically, not realising how ridiculous the answer was.

"Ill?" the Inspector queried. "What are you talking about? Sick people don't prowl about the streets, they lie in bed."

"I'm ill," I repeated doggedly. "I have a temperature."

"Every person has a temperature," he snapped. "Don't talk nonsense. Off you go to school!"

"Now I'm in for it!" I thought, as I trudged along behind him. "What made me lie to him about being ill? Couldn't I have thought of some other plausible excuse for my absence from school without giving the real reason?"

The old school doctor put his hand to my forehead, and without even taking my temperature, announced his diagnosis.

"Suffering from an acute attack of truancy. I prescribe poor marks for conduct and two hours after lessons without dinner."

The Inspector, with the air of a learned apothecary, approved the medicine.

He sent for the caretaker Semyon and ordered him to march me off to the classroom.

Trouble came thick and fast to me that day.

Elsa Franciskovna, our teacher of German, had been questioning Toropigin when I came in. Displeased by the interruption, she said:

"Gorikov, *kommen sie hier.* Conjugate the verb 'to have'. *'Ich habe',"* she began.

"Du hast" prompted Chizhikov.

"Er hat," I contributed myself. *"Wir. . . ."* Here I stumbled again. I just couldn't keep my mind on German verbs that day;

"Hastus," someone at the back prompted maliciously.

"Hastus," I repeated automatically.

"What are you talking about? Where is your head? You should use it, not listen to a silly boy's prompting. Give me your exercise-book."

"I've forgotten it, Elsa Franciskovna. I did my homework, but I forgot all my books. I'll bring them at playtime."

"How could you forget all your books?" the teacher said angrily. "You did not forget them, you are deceiving me. You will stay on an hour after lessons."

"Elsa Franciskovna," I protested, "the Inspector has already given me two hours after school today. You don't expect me to sit here all night?"

The teacher came back with a long-spun German sentence the gist of which, from what I could gather, was that laziness and lies were to be punished and there was no avoiding this third hour of detention.

During the interval Fedka came up to me.

"Why did you come without your books and why did Semyon bring you in?"

I made up some excuse. The next, last, lesson—geography—I sat out in a sort of sleepy daze. Everything the teacher said and the pupils' answers drifted past my mind, and I only came to myself when the bell started ringing.

The monitor read the prayer. The boys banged down the tops of their desks and flew out one after another. The classroom emptied. I was left alone.

"My God!" I thought with anguish. "Three more hours ... three whole hours, and Father at home, and everything so odd. . . ."

I went downstairs. Outside the Teachers' Room stood a long narrow bench all covered with penknife carvings. Three boys were already sitting there. One was a first form boy, who had been ordered to be kept in for an hour for having shot a pellet of chewed paper at a classmate, another was punished for fighting, and the third for having tried to land a spit on the head of a passing pupil from the second-floor staircase landing.

I sat down on the bench, brooding. The caretaker Semyon went past with a jangle of keys.

The form master on duty, who kept an eye on the culprits, came out, yawned and disappeared.

I got up quietly and glanced at the clock through the door of the Teachers' Room. What? Only half an hour had gone by? I could have sworn that I had been sitting there for an hour at least.

A sudden wicked thought came into my head.

"Damn it all, I'm not a thief, I'm not in custody. At home I have a father, whom I haven't seen for two years and now have to see in such strange and mysterious circumstances, while I have to sit here like a prisoner only because the Inspector and the German teacher took it into their heads to pick on me!"

I stood up, but hesitated. Going away without leave when you were kept in was one of the most heinous offences you could commit at school.

"No, I'd better wait," I decided, turning back to the bench.

But at this point a feeling of harsh resentment suddenly gripped me. "Who cares," I thought, "Father has run away from the front"—this with a mirthless smile— "while I'm afraid to run away from here."

I ran to the cloakroom, slipped on my coat and dashed out into the street, slamming the door hard.

That evening Father tried to open my eyes to a good many things.

"Daddy," I said, "but before you ran away from the front you were a brave man, weren't you? It wasn't because you were afraid, was it?"

"I'm not a coward now either." He said this calmly, but I involuntarily turned my head to the window and started.

From the opposite side of the street a policeman was making straight for our house. He came along slowly at a rolling gait. On reaching the middle of the road he turned right and walked towards the market place.

"He's not .. . coming here," I said jerkily, my breath quickening.

The next evening Father said to me: "Borya, visitors may be coming down on us any day. Hide away that toy I sent you. Keep your nerve! You're a man now—look how you've grown! If you have any trouble at school because of me, don't take it to heart, and don't be afraid of anything. Watch what's going on around you and you'll understand then what I've been telling you."

"We'll be seeing you again, Dad, shan't we?" "Yes. I'll be coming here sometimes, but not to our house."

"Where then?"

"You'll be told when the time comes." It was already quite dark, but the bootmaker sat by the gate with his concertina and a noisy crowd of boys and girls around him.

"It's time I was going," Father said, looking worried. "I don't want to be late."

"They'll probably be there till late in the night, Daddy. It's Saturday today." Father frowned.

"What a nuisance. Can't we get out through the fence somewhere or through someone's garden? Put your wits to work, Boris. You ought to know all the holes here."

"We can't," I said. "The Aglakovs' wall on the left is a high one with nails on it. We could get through to the garden on the right, only there's a dog there, a vicious brute, like a wolf. I tell you what. If you like I'll see you down to the pond. I have a raft there and I'll take you straight to the ravines through the back yards. It's dark now, the place is deserted, and no one will see us."

The raft became awash under Father's heavy weight and the water covered our boots. Father stood without stirring. The raft slipped noiselessly through the black water. The pole often got stuck in the mud and silt at the bottom of the pond. I pulled it out every time with difficulty.

Twice I tried to come alongside the bank, but the bottom of the ravine was low and wet. So then I took a bit more to the right and moored at the bottom garden.

This garden was a deserted place, unguarded, and its fences were broken.

I led Father up to the first gap in the fence, through which one could get out of the ravine. There we took leave of each other.

I lingered for several minutes. The sound of snapping twigs under Father's heavy tread died away.

Chapter Eight

Three days later mother was called out to the police station and informed that her husband had deserted from his unit. She was made to sign a statement to the effect that she had no news of his present whereabouts and if she did have she would notify the authorities about it immediately and without fail.

Through the son of the chief of the local police the school learned the next day that my father was a deserter.

At bible lesson Father Gennady delivered a brief and edifying homily on loyalty to King and Country and the sacredness of the Oath. He added weight to this by quoting a historical instance of how, during the Japanese war, a soldier decided to save his life by fleeing the battlefield, but met death instead from the teeth of a rapacious tiger.

This incident, according to Father Gennady, pointed to the intervention of a divine providence, which inflicted dire punishment upon the deserter, for that tiger, contrary to custom, did not devour a single piece, but simply tore that soldier limb from limb and departed.

This sermon made a powerful impression on some of the boys. During the recess Toropigin timidly assayed that the tiger probably wasn't a tiger at all, but Archangel Michael, who had taken the guise of a tiger.

Simka Gorbushkin, on the other hand, doubted whether it was Michael, since Michael had quite a different mode of procedure—he didn't use his teeth, but hacked with a sword or stabbed with a spear.

The majority agreed with this, because one of the sacred pictures on the walls of the classroom showed the angels engaged in combat with the forces of hell. Michael on that picture had a spear, on which four devils were writhing, while three others made a beeline for their underground retreat heels over head.

Two days later I was told that the Teachers' Council had decided to give me a bad mark for conduct for having acted truant.

This usually meant that at the next offence committed by him the pupil would be expelled from the school.

Three days after this I was given written notice that my mother was to pay my full tuition fee immediately for the first half-year. Until then I had paid only half the fee because my father was a soldier.

Hard times set in for me. I was labelled with the shameful name of "deserter's son". Many pupils I had been friendly with gave me the cold shoulder. Others, while associating with me, treated me rather oddly, as if I had had a leg amputated or someone in the family had just died. Gradually I drifted apart from everyone, stopped joining in the games, taking part in raids on other forms and visiting my schoolmates.

I spent the long autumn evenings at home or with Timka Shtukin among his birds.

I became very friendly with Timka those days. His father was kind to me. What I couldn't understand was why he sometimes looked at me intently out of the corner of his eye, then come up and pat my head, and walk away, jangling his keys, without uttering a word.

Things in town took on a strange, lively sort of turn. The population doubled. The queues outside the shops stretched away for blocks. Knots gathered everywhere, on every street corner. Religious processions carrying wonderworking icons followed one after another. All kinds of ridiculous rumours would suddenly spread. Now it was Old Believers who were said to be taking to the forest on the upstream lakes of the river Serezha. Now it was the gypsies downstream who were said to be passing counterfeit money and the reason why everything was so dear was because there was such a lot of this false money about. And once the alarming news spread that on Friday night there was to be a beat-up of the Jews, because the war was dragging on through their espionage and treachery.

Suddenly, the town became full of tramps—God knows where they came from. All you heard was here a padlock smashed off, there a flat burgled. A Cossack squad was billeted in town. When the Cossacks, sullen-faced, with hanging forelocks, rode down the street in serried ranks wildly yelling and whooping, Mother recoiled from the window, saying:

"I haven't seen them for a long time... ever since nineteen 'five. They're at it again."

We had no news whatever from Father. I suspected that he was in Sormovo, near Nizhni Novgorod, but this was only a surmise based on the fact that before going away Father had questioned Mother about her brother Nikolai, who was working at a car-building plant there.

One day—it was already winter—Timka Shtukin came up to me in school and beckoned me aside. His mysterious manner excited my surprise rather than interest, and I followed him apathetically into a corner.

Timka looked round and whispered:

"Come to our place this evening. My dad said you were to come without fail."

"What does he want me for? What have you thought up this time?"

"I haven't thought up anything. Be sure to come."

Timka looked grave, even somewhat anxious, and I realised that he was not joking.

That evening I went to the cemetery. A snowstorm was blowing. The dim lamps, muffled in snow, barely lighted up the streets. To get to the wood and the cemetery I had to cross a small field. The sharp snowflakes pricked my face. I drew my head down into my collar and strode off along the snow-carpeted path towards the green lamp burning at the cemetery gates. My foot got caught in a gravestone and I fell into the snow. The door of the caretaker's lodge was locked. I knocked, but no one answered. I knocked again and heard footsteps behind the door.

"Who is it?" the caretaker's familiar bass demanded.

"It's me, Uncle Fyodor."

"Is that you, Boris?"

"Yes. Open the door, quick."

I entered the warmly heated lodge. On the table stood a samovar, a saucer with honey and a loaf of bread. Timka sat mending a cage as if nothing had happened.

"A snowstorm?" he said, seeing my red wet face.

"You said it!" I answered. "I hurt my foot. It's pitch dark."

Timka laughed. I couldn't make out what he was laughing about and I looked at him in surprise. Timka laughed still louder, and I could tell by his glance that he was not laughing at me but at something behind my back. Turning round, I saw Uncle Fyodor and my father. "He's been with us two days," Timka said, when we had sat down to have tea.

"Two days. . . . And you didn't tell me before! Call yourself a pal after this?"

Timka, with a guilty air, glanced first at his father, then at mine, as if seeking their support.

"A stone," the caretaker said, patting his son on the back with his heavy hand. "He may not be much to look at, but he's a reliable little chap."

Father was in civvies. He was cheerful and animated. He asked me about my school affairs and kept laughing every minute, saying:

"Never mind.. . never mind. Don't worry. Look what days are coming—don't you feel it?"

I said I felt that at the first admonition I received at school I would be kicked out.

"You should worry!" he answered coolly. "Given the desire and a good head you won't remain a fool, school or no school."

"Daddy," I said to him, "why are you so jolly, laughing all the time? Our clergyman read a sermon about you and everyone thinks of you as of the dead, and here you are as jolly as can be."

Ever since I had become Father's involuntary accomplice I spoke to him differently—as to a senior, but an equal. I could see that Father liked it.

"I'm jolly because exciting times are on the way. We've had enough tears! Ah, well. Run along now. We'll be seeing each other again soon."

It was late. I said goodbye, put on my coat and ran out onto the porch. Before the caretaker had time to come down and bolt the door after me, I felt myself flung aside with such force that I went flying head foremost into a snowdrift. In the same instant there was a stamping of feet, whistles and shouts in the entry. I ran back and saw the policeman Yevgraf, whose son Pashka had attended the parish school with me.

"Hold on," he said, recognising me and detaining me by the arm. "They'll manage there without you. Here, take the end of my hood and wipe your face. You didn't hurt your head, God forbid, did you?"

"No, I didn't hurt myself," I whispered. "What about Dad?"

"What about him? No one told him to go against the law. You can't go against the law, old chap."

Father and the caretaker were led out of the lodge with their hands tied behind them. Timka trailed after them with his coat thrown over his shoulders, but without a cap. He did not cry, but merely shivered in a strange way.

"Timka," the caretaker said gravely, "you will spend the night with your godfather. Tell him to look after the house in case anything gets lost after the search."

Father walked out in silence, his head bent. Seeing me, he straightened up and shouted encouragingly:

"Never mind, son. Goodbye. Kiss Mother and Tanya for me. And don't worry. Exciting times are on the way, old chap!"

II. EXCITING TIMES

Chapter One

On February 22nd, 1917, the court martial of the Sixth Army Corps sentenced private Alexei Gorikov of the Twelfth Siberian Rifle Regiment to be shot for deserting the theatre of military operations and for subversive propaganda.

The sentence was executed on February 25th, and on March 2nd a telegram arrived from Petrograd saying that the autocracy had been overthrown by the insurgent people.

My first clear glimpse of the revolution was the fiery glow of the Polutins' burning manor house. Till late at night, through the dormer window, I watched the tongues of flame sporting with the fresh spring breeze. I softly stroked the smooth warm hilt of the pistol in my pocket. It was now my dearest token of remembrance from my father. I smiled through my tears, which had not dried yet after my grievous loss, as I thought of the "exciting times" that were coming.

During the early days of the February revolution our school resembled an ant heap into which a smouldering brand had been thrown. After prayers supplicating victory, some of the pupils started, as always, to sing "God Save the Tsar", but the others shouted them down, whistling and whooping. Pandemonium reigned, the pupils broke ranks, someone threw a bun at the portrait of the Tsarina, while the first formers, glad of a chance to kick up a dust with impunity, began caterwauling and bleating.

The bewildered Inspector could not make himself heard above the hideous noise. The yells and catcalls did not cease until Semyon, the caretaker, took down the portraits of royalty. With wild screeches and a stamping of feet the excited boys ran off to their classrooms. Red bows appeared from somewhere. The boys of the senior forms demonstratively tucked their trousers into their high boots (formerly this was forbidden) and gathering outside the lavatory started smoking deliberately under the eyes of the form masters. Officer Balagushin, the drill teacher, went up to them. He was offered a cigarette, which he accepted. At this unprecedented spectacle of unity between the school authorities and the pupils a loud cheer went up.

At this stage, all that the pupils gathered from these happenings was that the Tsar had been deposed and the revolution was beginning. As to why the revolution was something to be rejoiced at and what good there was in the overthrow of the Tsar, before whose portrait the choir, only a few days ago, had fervently sung the national anthem—this, most of the boys, especially those of the junior forms, failed to understand.

For the first few days there were practically no lessons. The boys of the senior forms joined the militia. They were given rifles and red arm-bands, and proudly paraded the streets, maintaining public order. For that matter, no one thought of disturbing public order. The bells of all thirty churches pealed forth a paschal song. Clergymen in brilliant chasubles administered the oath of allegiance to the Provisional Government.

People appeared in red shirts. The son of priest Iona, seminarist Arkhangelsky, two rural teachers and three others, who were strangers to me, called themselves S.R.s. *(Socialist-Revolutionaries, abbreviated S.R.s.—Tr).* People also appeared in black shirts, mostly senior form students of the Teachers' and Theological seminaries, who called themselves anarchists.

Most people in the town immediately joined the S.R.s. Credit for this was in no little measure due to the Rev. Pavel, who, during his sermon at the cathedral after the prayer for the prolongation of the days of the Provisional Government, declared that Jesus Christ, too, was a socialist and a revolutionary. And as the inhabitants of our town were pious people, mostly merchants, artisans, monks and pilgrims, this interesting sidelight on Jesus Christ aroused their quick sympathy towards the S.R.s, especially since the S.R.s did not have much to say about religion and spoke mostly about liberty and the need for carrying on the war with redoubled energy. The anarchists, though they said the same things about the war, spoke ill of God. Seminarist Velikanov, for instance, bluntly declared from the speaker's platform that there was no God, and if there was a God, then let him accept his, Velikanov's, challenge and show his might. At these words Velikanov threw back his head and spat straight into the sky. The crowd gasped, expecting the heavens to cleave asunder at any moment and fling thunderbolts upon the head of the blasphemer. But as the heavens did not cleave asunder, voices were raised in the crowd suggesting public chastisement by a kick in the anarchist pants without waiting for divine retribution. Hearing such talk, Velikanov judiciously beat a hasty retreat, receiving only a feeble punch from Maremiana Sergeyevna, a spiteful old woman, who sold curative oil from the lamps of the Sarovo icon of the Mother of God and dried crusts with which that Holy Man Serafim of Sarovo fed the wild bears and wolves out of his own hand.

On the whole, I was astonished at the number of revolutionaries that were to be found in Arzamas. Absolutely everybody was a revolutionary. Even Zakharov, the former Rural Superintendent, pinned a huge red bow made of silk to his jacket. In Petrograd and Moscow there was fighting, and the police shot at the people from the roofs, but our police gave up their arms voluntarily, and changing into civilian clothes, peacefully walked about the streets.

One day, in the crowd at a meeting, I met Yevgraf Timofeyevich, the policeman who had taken part in the arrest of my father.

He carried a basket from which peeped a bottle of vegetable oil and a cabbage. He was standing listening to what the socialists were saying. Seeing me, he touched his cap and gave me a polite bow.

"How's life?" he said. "You've come to listen, too? Well, well, listen. . . . You young people must find it interesting. Even we oldsters do. See how things have turned out!"

"Do you remember how you came to arrest Father, Yevgraf Timofeyevich?" I said. "You spoke then about the law, one couldn't go against the law, you said. But where's that law of yours now? Your law is finished with, and all you policemen will stand trial too."

He laughed good-humouredly and the oil shook in the neck of the bottle.

"There was law before and there'll be law now. You can't be without a law, young man. As for trying us, well—let 'em. We won't be hanged. Not even our chiefs are being hanged. The Tsar himself is only under house arrest, so what can you expect of us! Just listen. The speaker says there should be no vengeance, men should be brothers, and now, in free Russia, there should be no prisons, no executions. That means there'll be no prisons or executions for us either."

And he ambled off.

I watched him going, thinking: "How can that be? Do you mean to say that if Father had got out of jail he'd allow his jailer to walk about calmly and wouldn't touch him only because all men had to be brothers?"

I asked Fedka about it.

"What's your father got to do with it?" he said. "Your father was a deserter and there was a stain on him all the same. Deserters are being hunted down now too. A deserter is not a revolutionary, he's just a quitter who doesn't want to fight for his country."

"My father wasn't a coward," I answered, paling. "You're talking through your hat. My father was shot for propaganda as well as for running away. We've got a copy of the sentence at home."

Fedka looked put out. He said in a conciliatory tone:

"I didn't make it up myself, did I? All the newspapers are writing about it. You read Kerensky's speech in *Russkoye Slovo.* A fine speech. When it was read out at the general meeting in the Girls' School it had half the hall crying. It speaks about the war, too. About how we must exert all our strength, about deserters being a disgrace to the army and that 'over the graves of those who have fallen in the fight against the Germans free Russia will erect a monument of imperishable glory'. That's what it says—'imperishable'! And you argue!"

Speakers took the platform one after another. They spoke about socialism in voices that had gone hoarse. There and then they wrote down people who wanted to join the party and volunteered for the front. There were speakers who got on to the platform and spoke until they were dragged off. New speakers were pushed forward in their place.

I listened and listened and felt my head swelling with all that I heard, like an empty ox bladder. The speeches of the different orators got all mixed up in my head. I just couldn't make out how to distinguish an S.R. from a Cadet, a Cadet from a Popular Socialist and a Trudovik from an anarchist, and all that remained of all the speeches was the one word: "Liberty ... liberty ... liberty. . . ."

"Gorikov," I heard a voice behind me and felt a hand upon my shoulder.

Next to me, who should I see but our manual teacher Jackdaw.

"You?" I said, overjoyed. "What are you doing here?" "I've come from Nizhni Novgorod, from prison. Come down to my place, my dear boy. I've taken a room not far from here. We'll have some tea, I've got a white loaf and honey. I'm so glad that I've met you. I arrived only yesterday and was going specially to call on you today."

He took my arm and we made our way through the noisy crowd.

At the adjoining square we ran into another crowd. Bonfires were burning here and knots of curious bystanders stood around them.

"What is this?"

"Oh, tomfoolery," Jackdaw said, smiling. "The anarchists are burning the tsarist flags. They'd do better to tear up the cloth and give it away. The peasants are grumbling. You know how precious every bit of rag is nowadays."

Jackdaw's arms were long and skinny. He spoke rapidly as he brewed the tea, every now and then smiling.

"Your father died too early. We were both in the same cell until he was sent to the Corps Tribunal."

"Semyon Ivanovich," I said over the tea, "you say that you and Dad were Party comrades. Was he in the Party? He never spoke to me about it."

"He didn't speak about it because he couldn't."

"You didn't speak about it either. When you were arrested, Petka Zolotukhin said you were a spy."

Jackdaw laughed.

"A spy! Ha-ha-ha! Petka Zolotukhin? Ha-ha! It's pardonable in the case of Zolotukhin, he's a silly boy, but when big fools now are spreading rumours about our being spies—that's still funnier, my dear chap."

"About who are they spreading rumours, Semyon Ivanovich?"

"About us Bolsheviks."

I glanced askance at him.

"Are you Bolsheviks then—I mean, so Father, too, was a Bolshevik?"

"He was."

"Why did everything go wrong with Father, not like with other men?" I said regretfully, after a moment's thought.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, other men are soldiers as soldiers go. If they're revolutionaries they are real revolutionaries, and nobody can have a bad word to say of them. Everybody respects them. But Father—at one moment he's a deserter, the next he turns out to have been a Bolshevik. Why a Bolshevik, and not a real revolutionary, like the S.R.s, say, or the anarchists? As if on purpose, he had to go and be a Bolshevik! At least I could then have told everyone that my father was shot for being a revolutionary, and everyone would shut up and nobody would point a finger at me. But if I said Father had been shot because he was a Bolshevik everyone would say 'serves him right', because it's written in all the newspapers that the Bolsheviks are German agents and that Lenin of theirs is working for Wilhelm."

"Who's the 'everyone'?" Jackdaw said. Throughout my vehement speech he had been looking at me with smiling eyes.

"Yes, everyone. Anyone you meet. All the neighbours, and the clergyman in his sermon, and these speakers here. . . ."

"Neighbours! Speakers!" Jackdaw broke in. "Silly boy. Why, your father was ten times a more real revolutionary than all these speakers and neighbours of yours. Who are your neighbours? They are monks, corn-dealers, merchants, pilgrims, market butchers and all kinds of petty folk. The trouble is there is hardly a right-minded person among all these neighbours of yours. We don't even try to win over this mob. We leave it to those red-shirted gas-bags to suck up to them. We can't waste time with them. All the same, these monks and merchants will never be our allies. You wait, I'll take you to places where we hold meetings. Places like barracks for the wounded, soldiers' barracks, the railway station and the villages. That's where you will hear things! Talk about judges here! Neighbours!" Jackdaw laughed.

Timka Shtukin's father was released at the beginning of the revolution, but he was not reinstated in his old job. The church warden Sinyugin ordered him to vacate the lodge immediately for the newly employed man.

None of the merchants wanted to employ the caretaker. He tried here and there, but there were no jobs going either as furnace-man or yard-keeper.

Sinyugin, he said bluntly:

"I'm helping the Russian army. I've made a donation of a thousand rubles to the Red Cross and distributed over two hundred rubles' worth of gifts, flags and portraits of Kerensky among the military hospitals, while you are encouraging deserters. I have no job for you."

This was more than the caretaker could stand, and he answered back:

"I am much obliged to you for those words. But allow me to tell you that flags and portraits won't help you. You'll get what's coming to you all right. And don't you yell at me!" Uncle Fyodor suddenly went up into the air. "You think because you've grown a fat belly, put in a telescope and feed that crocodile o' yours with beef, that you're mightier than tsar or God? Don't you believe it. You just listen what the people are saying at those mills of yours. We've taken a smack at 'em, they say, now what about giving 'em the works?"

"I'll ... I'll have you jailed!" Sinyugin stammered, thunderstruck. "So that's what it is! I'll write a complaint. . . . My factory's working for the army. The new authorities, too, think well of me, and you. . . . Get out of here!"

The caretaker put his cap on and went out.

"And they call this a revolution. All the dirty scum are still in their old places. And he dares to tell me off, when he and the military chief and the town council nobs are as thick as thieves. What they want is a good scraping down with nails. Patriot!" he growled as he strode down the streets. "Made thousands out o' rotten boots. Bought his son off from military service. Slipped the chief three hundred and the hospital doctor five hundred. Boasted of it himself when he was tipsy. You're all good at fighting the war with other men's hands. Bought portraits of Kerensky. You and that Kerensky of yours ought to be strung up on the same tree. This is the liberty we've been waiting for! Three cheers!"

Everybody seemed to have gone crazy. All you heard was: "Kerensky, Kerensky."

Every issue of the newspapers carried his portraits: "Kerensky makes a speech", "The populace strews Kerensky's path with flowers", "A delighted crowd of women carry Kerensky in their arms". Feofanov, a member of the Arzamas Town Council, went to Moscow on business and shook Kerensky's hand. People ran after Feofanov in droves.

"Do you mean to say he shook hands with you?"

"Yes, he did," Feofanov answered proudly.

"Actually shook you by the hand?"

"Yes, he shook my right hand."

"There!" came an excited whispering among the crowd. "The Tsar would never have done it, but Kerensky did. Thousands of people come to see him every day and he shakes hands with all of them, but before—"

"Before, there was tsarism."

"Sure. Now we have liberty."

"Hurray! Hurray! Long live liberty! Long live Kerensky! Let's send him a telegram of greeting."

It should be said that by this time one telegram out of ten passing through the post office was a telegram of greeting addressed to Kerensky. They were sent from public meetings, from school gatherings, from meetings of the Church Council, the Town Council, the Gonfaloniers' Society—from absolutely everywhere, even if it were only a group of several people.

One day the rumour spread that the Arzamas Society of Poultry-Breeding Lovers had not sent a single telegram to the "dear leader". The local daily printed an indignant denial by the Society's president Ofendulin. Ofendulin flatly declared that the rumour was a vicious slander. Actually two telegrams had been sent, the editors certifying in a special footnote that Mr. Ofendulin's statement was supported by evidence in the shape of appropriate receipts bearing the stamp of the post and telegraph office.

Chapter Two

Several months had passed since I met Jackdaw.

In Salnikov Street, next door to the huge building of the Seminary, there stood a little house with a garden. The man in the street, on passing by its open windows, through which faces could be seen floating in a haze of strong tobacco smoke, would quicken his step and spit angrily when out of hearing: "This is where the provocateurs meet!"

This was the Bolsheviks' club. There were altogether some twenty Bolsheviks in the town, but the house was always crowded. It was open to everybody, but it was frequented mainly by soldiers from the hospital, Austrian prisoners of war and workers from the tanneries and felt factories.

I spent practically all my free time there. At first I had gone there with Jackdaw out of curiosity, then through habit, and after that I was drawn into the maelstrom, swept off my feet. Like the peelings of a potato under a sharp knife, all the rubbish with which my head had been stuffed fell away from me.

Our Bolsheviks did not speak at church disputes or at meetings among the tradespeople. They held meetings outside the workers' bunk-houses, outside the town and in the war-wearied villages.

I remember a meeting once held at Kamenka.

"We must go for sure! There'll be a real fight. Kruglikov himself is going to speak there for the S.R.s. You should hear him sing," Jackdaw said. "After a speech of his at Ivanovskoye the peasants were so bamboozled they all but went for us."

"Let's go," I said eagerly. "Why is it you never take your revolver with you, Semyon Ivanovich? It's always lying about just anywhere. Once you stuck it in the tobacco tin, and yesterday I saw it in the bread basket. I always carry mine about with me. I even put it under my pillow when I go to bed."

Jackdaw laughed, and his beard with crumbs of makhorka on it shook.

"What a kid you still are!" he said. "Now, if things turn out badly for us, I'd simply catch it in the neck, but if I tried to draw my revolver they'd probably make potted meat of me. We'll use revolvers when the time comes, but just now our best weapon is the word. Baskakov is going to speak today for our people."

"Baskakov?" I said, surprised. "But he's such a bad speaker. He can hardly put his sentences together. Between one word and the next you can fall asleep."

"That's how he is here, but you should hear him at meetings."

The road to Kamenka ran across an old rotting bridge, past uncut flood meadows and small channels overgrown with tall dense reeds. Peasant carts coming from town stretched along the road. Barefooted peasant women with empty milk cans trudged home from the market. We were in no hurry, but when a droshky packed with S.R.s overtook us, we quickened our steps.

Groups of peasants from the neighbouring villages flocked to the square from all sides along the wide streets. The meeting had not yet begun, but the noise and hubbub could be heard at a distance.

I saw Fedka among the crowd. He snooped backwards and forwards, thrusting leaflets into the hands of passers-by. Seeing me, he ran up.

"Oho! So you've come too. Gee, it's going to be exciting today! Here, take a batch and help me hand them out."

He gave me a batch of some dozen leaflets. I unfolded one of them. They were S.R. leaflets in favour of war to a victorious finish and against desertion. I gave them back to him.

"No, Fedka, I'm not going to hand out these leaflets. Do it yourself if you want."

Fedka spat in disgust.

"You're a fool. You're not with them, are you?" he said, jerking his head in the direction of Jackdaw and Baskakov. "You're a nice one, I must say. And I relied on you!"

With a contemptuous shrug, Fedka disappeared among the crowd.

"He relied on me," I said to myself with an ironical smile. "As if I haven't got a head of my own!"

"To a victorious finish..." I heard a quiet voice next to me.

Turning round, I saw a bareheaded peasant with a pock-marked face. He was barefooted, too, and in one hand he held a leaflet, and in the other a torn bridle. He must have been engaged mending it and had come out of his hut to hear what people were saying.

"To a victorious finish—I like that!" he repeated, eyeing the crowd with a puzzled wondering look. He shook his head, sat down on the doorstep, and poking a finger at the leaflet shouted into the ear of the deaf old man sitting next to him:

"Again to a victorious finish. We've been hearing that since nineteen fourteen. How d'you make that out, Grandpa Prokhor?"

A cart was rolled out into the middle of the square. A chairman, whom no one had elected—a perky little fellow—got up on the cart and shouted:

"Citizens! I declare the meeting open. I give the floor to Comrade Kruglikov, the Socialist-Revolutionary, who will report on the Provisional Government, on the war and the present situation."

The chairman jumped off the cart. For a minute or so there was no one on the "platform". Then all of a sudden Kruglikov sprang up on it, stood up to his full height and raised his hand. The hubbub was silenced.

"Citizens of great free Russia! On behalf of the Party of Socialist-Revolutionaries I convey ardent greetings to you,"

Kruglikov started speaking. I listened to him, careful not to miss a word.

He spoke about the difficult conditions the Provisional Government was obliged to work in. The Germans were pressing on the front, dark forces—German spies and the Bolsheviks—were agitating in favour of Wilhelm.

"We had Tsar Nicholas, now there'll be Wilhelm. Do you want a tsar again?" he asked.

"No, we've had enough!" hundreds of voices answered from the crowd.

"We're tired of the war," Kruglikov went on. "Aren't we fed up with it? Isn't it time to finish with it?"

"Hear, hear!" the crowd responded with still greater unanimity.

"What's the idea, speaking off somebody else's programme," I whispered indignantly to Jackdaw. "They don't stand for ending the war, do they?"

Jackdaw nudged me in the ribs. "Shut up and listen."

"It's high time! There, you see," the S.R. continued, "you all say that to a man. But the Bolsheviks don't give the war-weary country a chance to get the war over with victory. They are demoralising the army, and the army is unfit for action. If we had a fighting-fit army we would deal the enemy a decisive winning blow and conclude peace. But we can't conclude peace now. Whose fault is that? Whose fault is it that our sons, brothers, husbands and fathers are rotting in the trenches instead of coming home to peaceful work? Who is putting off victory and dragging out the war? We, Socialist-Revolutionaries, solemnly declare: Long live the last decisive blow at the enemy, long live the victory of the revolutionary army over the German hordes, and after that—down with war and long live peace!"

The crowd breathed hard amid clouds of makhorka smoke. Shouts of approval were heard here and there.

Kruglikov began speaking about the Constituent Assembly, which was to be the master of the land, about the arbitrary seizure of the landed estates, and about the need for preserving order and carrying out the instructions and commands of the Provisional Government. He spun a fine web around the minds of his listeners. At first he stood up for the peasants, whom he reminded of their needs. When the crowd started to shout its approval— "Hear, hear!" "You're right!" "It couldn't be worse!"—Kruglikov, by imperceptible degrees, began to reverse. It suddenly turned out that the crowd, which had just agreed with him that without the land there was no freedom for the peasants, was led to the conclusion that in a free country the land could not be taken away from the landowners by seizure.

He ended his ninety-minute speech amid a loud hum of applause and curses hurled at the heads of the spies and the Bolsheviks.

"Baskakov is no match for Kruglikov," I thought. "Look how worked up they all are!"

To my surprise, Baskakov, who was standing next to me, puffing at his pipe, did not reveal the slightest intention of getting up on the platform.

The S.R.s huddled round the cart were somewhat puzzled, too, at the behaviour of the Bolsheviks. They decided that the Bolsheviks were waiting for somebody else to arrive, and so they let out another speaker. This one was much weaker than Kruglikov. He stammered in a low voice and repeated much of what had already been said. When he got down there was considerably less clapping.

Baskakov still stood smoking. His long narrow eyes were pursed and his face wore a good-humoured artless expression as much as to say: "Let 'em jabber. Who cares? I'm smoking my pipe, not interfering with anybody."

The third speaker was no better than the second one, and when he got down most of the audience started whistling, whooping and shouting:

"Hi, Mr. Chairman there!"

"Let's have other speakers, you chump!"

"Let's have those Bolsheviks! Why don't you give 'em the floor?"

Countering this charge, the chairman protested that he was giving the floor to anybody who wanted it, but the Bolsheviks didn't ask for it themselves, because they were probably afraid. He couldn't force them to speak.

"If you can't, then we can!"

"Gone and done the dirty and now they're trying to hide!"

"Drag 'em to the cart by the scruff of the neck! Let 'em speak out in front o' people. . . ."

The roar of the crowd frightened me. I glanced at Jackdaw. He was smiling, but pale.

"That'll do, Baskakov," he said. "It may end badly."

Baskakov cleared his throat with a loud noise, thrust his pipe away into his pocket and shambled towards the cart past the angry crowd, who made way for him.

He took his time. First he glanced incuriously at the knot of S.R.s around the cart, then wiped his forehead with the flat of his hand, ran his eye over the crowd, folded his huge fist into a fig, held it up for everyone to see, and said in a cool, loud, mocking voice:

"Seen that?"

Such an extraordinary opening startled me. It took the peasants, too, by surprise.

It immediately evoked angry cries:

"What's this?"

"What's the idea, showing people a fig?"

"Answer in words, damn you, not figs, if you don't want to get it in the neck!"

"Seen that?" Baskakov began again. "If you haven't, they'll show you one better," he jerked his head in the direction of the S.R.s. "Enough to make a cat sick, the way you citizens of free Russia swallow everything you're told. Now tell me this, citizens—what good has the revolution done you? You had a war, and you've still got it. You had no land, and you still haven't got it. The landowner lived next door and he's still there, alive and kicking. He should worry. You can whoop and hoot till you're blue in the face. This government, too, will stand up for the landowner. You ask the Vodovatovo villagers —what happened when they tried to get at the squire's land? They found a military detachment there. It was fine land all right, but there was nothing doing. You've stood it for three hundred years, you say? Go on, put up with it still longer. God loves patient souls, they say. Wait for the landowner to come and doff his cap, saying: 'Would you like some good land? Take it, please, do me a favour.' You can wait till doomsday. Have you heard that the Constituent Assembly, when it meets, is going to discuss the question—'Should the land be given to the peasantry with or without redemption payments?' Now then, count your money when you get home and see if you have enough to buy off the land. That's why there was a revolution, according to you—so that you could buy your own land off from the landowners? What the blazes, I ask you, did we need such a revolution for? Couldn't you have bought off the land for your own money without having a revolution?"

"What's that about redemption payments?" angered and worried voices were raised in the crowd.

"Just this..." Baskakov said, producing a crumpled leaflet from his pocket and reading out from it: " 'Justice demands that the landowners receive compensation for the land which is handed over from them to the peasants.' That's redemption payment for you. That's what the Cadet Party writes, and they're going to sit in the Constituent Assembly too. They, too, are going to fight for their own interests. But we, Bolsheviks, say bluntly: It's no good waiting for the Constituent Assembly, give us the land right away, without any discussions, without stalling, and without redemption payments! We've paid enough." "Paid enough!" hundreds of voices echoed in the crowd. "Discussions be damned! Like as not we'll get nothing again."

"Shut up, can't you! Let the Bolshevik speak! Maybe he'll say something hot again."

I stood open-mouthed next to Jackdaw. A sudden wave of joy and pride for Baskakov swept over me.

"Semyon Ivanovich!" I cried, pulling Jackdaw's sleeve. "And I thought that of him. Why, it's not even a speech he's making, he's simply talking to them."

"My, what a fine chap, what a clever chap Baskakov is!" I thought as I listened to his calm heavy words dropping into the excited crowd.

"Peace after victory?" Baskakov was saying. "Not a bad idea. We'll conquer Constantinople. We're desperately in need of Constantinople, we are! We'll conquer Berlin, too, while we're at it. I ask you"—Baskakov jabbed a finger at the peasant with the bridle, who had pushed his way forward—"I ask you: Has the German or the

Turk borrowed money from you which he doesn't want to give back? Come on, my dear man, tell me what business you've got in Constantinople. Are you going to cart potatoes to the market there? Why don't you speak?"

The peasant reddened and blinked, then spread his hands and answered in an irate tone:

"I don't need it at all. . . . What do I want it for?"

"You don't want it, nor do I, nor does anyone else here. The merchants want it so's to carry on a profitable trade. If they want it let 'em fight for it. What's the peasant got to do with it? Why have they driven half your village off to the front? To help the merchants rake in the profits! What boobs you are! Big fellows with beards, yet anyone can twist you round his little finger."

"You've said it!" the peasant cried, smacking his leg. "Daze my eyes, the man's right!" He heaved a deep sigh and lowered his head.

"Well then, we tell you," Baskakov said, winding up, "we don't want peace after victory, until the cows come home, and more thousands of workers and peasants will have been maimed—we want peace now, without any victories. We haven't won a victory yet over the landowner on our own land. Am I right, brothers, or not? If anybody doesn't agree, let him come out here and say I'm a liar, say I wasn't telling you the truth. I've got nothing more to say!"

I remember, a moaning roar broke from the crowd. The S.R. Kruglikov, with a white face, jumped up, waving his arms in an attempt to make himself heard. He was pushed off the cart. Baskakov lighted his pipe, and the peasant with the pock-marked face, the one Baskakov had asked what he wanted Constantinople for, tugged at his sleeve, inviting him into his hut to have tea.

"With honey!" he said in a voice that was almost pleading. "We've still got a little left. Let your friends come, too."

We drank boiling water brewed with dried raspberries. There was a pleasant smell of honeycomb in the hut. The droshky loaded with S.R.s rolled past the window down the dusty road. Dry stuffy evening set in. Far away in town the bells were droning. The monks and clergy of the thirty churches were offering up prayers for the appeasement of the rebellious land.

Chapter Three

I went to the cemetery to say goodbye to Timka Shtukin. He and his father were going to his uncle in the Ukraine. His uncle had a small farm somewhere near Zhitomir.

Their things were packed. Timka's father had gone to get a cart. Timka seemed cheerful. He couldn't sit still, and kept running from one corner to another as if to take a last look at the walls of the lodge in which he had grown up. But I had a suspicion that Timka wasn't really cheerful and was trying hard to fight back the tears. He had set free all his birds.

"They've all ... flown away," Timka said. "The robin, and the tomtits, and the goldfinches and the siskin. You know, Boris, I loved the siskin most of all. He was quite tame. I opened the cage door, but he wouldn't fly out. I pushed him out with a little stick. He flew onto a poplar branch and started singing—you should have heard him! I sat under the tree and hung the cage on a twig. I sat there, thinking how we'd been living and about the birds, and the cemetery, and the school, and how it was all over and we had to go away. I sat a long time, thinking, then I got up and reached for the cage. And would you believe it—there sat my siskin. He got back into it, didn't want to fly away. All of a sudden I felt so sorry for everything, I nearly... I nearly cried, Boris."

"You're fibbing, Timka," I said, deeply moved. "You probably did cry."

"So I did," Timka confessed with a catch in his voice. "I've got so used to it all, Boris. I feel so sorry we've been kicked out of here. D'you know, I even went to the church warden Sinyugin without father knowing to ask him to let us stay. But he wouldn't." Timka sighed and turned away. "What does he care? He's got such a fine house of his own. . . ."

Timka's voice dropped to a whisper at the last words and he quickly went out into the next room. When I joined him there a minute later I found him crying, his face pressed into a big bundle with bedding.

At the railway station Timka and his father disappeared, swept along by the human mass that made a rush for the cars as the train steamed in.

"He'll be crushed," I thought worriedly. "Where can this mass of people be going to?"

The platform was crowded to overflowing. Soldiers, officers, sailors. "At least these are used to it and they're in service, but where are those people going?" I wondered, glancing at the groups gathered around heaps of boxes, baskets and suitcases. Civilians were travelling in whole families. Clean-shaven irate men with perspiring foreheads caused by running about and agitation. Fine-featured women with tired harassed eyes. Old-fashioned maters in fantastic hats, stunned by the hurly-burly, obstinate and irritated.

On my left, on a huge suitcase, sat an old lady, looking like one of those old noble countesses they showed you at the cinema. With one hand she held a strapped bundle of bedclothes, in the other a cage with a parrot.

She was shouting something to a young naval officer, who was trying to shift a heavy iron-bound trunk on the platform.

"Stop it," he answered. "What porter can you get here! Oh, damn it! I say!" he called out, dropping the trunk and turning to a passing soldier. "Hi, you! Help me to get these things into the car, will you."

Taken by surprise and mechanically obeying the peremptory command, the soldier stopped with his arms down his sides, then as if ashamed of his hasty compliance under the mocking glances of his mates, he relaxed, slowly hooked his hand under his belt and looked at the officer with a cunning narrowed eye.

"I'm speaking to you," the officer repeated. "Have you gone deaf, or what?"

"No, sir, I haven't gone deaf, but it's no business of mine to drag your wardrobes for you."

The soldier turned away and sauntered off down the length of the train.

"Gregoire!" the old lady cried, goggling at the officer with faded eyes. "Find a gendarme, Gregoire, let him arrest that rude man!"

But the officer waved his hand at her with a hopeless gesture, and suddenly flying into a temper, answered sharply:

"I wish you wouldn't poke your nose in! What do you understand? What gendarme are you talking about—one from the next world? Sit still and keep your mouth shut."

Timka unexpectedly poked his head out of the window.

"Hi! Boris! We're here!"

"How are you fixed up?"

"Not bad. Father is sitting on our baggage, and a sailor has given me a place next to him on the top ledge. 'Only don't fidget, he says, 'or I'll drive you off.' "

At the sound of the second bell the hubbub rose to uproar. Full-flavoured oaths mixed with French speech, the smell of perfume with that of sweat, the sounds of an accordion with someone's weeping, all of which was suddenly drowned in the screech of the locomotive.

"Goodbye, Timka!"

"Goodbye, Boris!" he answered leaning out of the window and waving his hand.

The train disappeared, carrying away with it a varied assortment of hundreds of people, but the station was as crowded as ever.

"Whew, look at 'em!" I heard a voice beside me. "All making tracks south. For Rostov, the Don. All the trains going north are carrying only soldiers, servicemen, but those going south are packed with the gentry."

"Where are they all going—to the health resorts?"

"You said it," came a mocking voice. "To take a cure from the heeby-jeebies. They're sick with fear these days, the gentry."

I walked towards the exit past boxes, trunks and sacks, past people drinking tea, cracking sunflower seeds, sleeping, laughing and quarrelling.

Semyon, the lame newsman, popped up from somewhere and hobbled down the platform on his wooden leg with surprising agility, shouting in a shrill raucous voice:

"Late edition! *Russkoye Slovo!* Staggering details of Bolshevik demonstration! Government breaks up demonstration! People killed and wounded. Vain hunt for the chief Bolshevik—Lenin!"

The papers were snatched out of his hands, no one demanding change.

On my way back I turned slightly right off the road and walked down a narrow path running through a field of ripe rye. As I descended the ravine I saw a man coming towards me on the opposite slope, bent beneath the weight of a heavy package. I had no difficulty in recognising Jackdaw.

"Boris," he called out, "what are you doing here? Coming from the railway station?"

"Yes. And where are you going? Not to catch the train, surely? If so, then you're late, Semyon Ivanovich. The train has just gone."

Jackdaw stopped, dumped his heavy burden on the ground and sat down in the grass.

"Tut, tut," he said with annoyance. "What am I going to do with this now?" He prodded the tied-up bundle with his foot.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Mostly literature. And something else besides. . . ."

"Then let me help you carry it back. You can leave it at the club and go tomorrow."

Jackdaw shook his black beard, which, as usual, was strewn with crumbs of makhorka tobacco.

"That's just the trouble, old chap, I can't leave it at the club. Our club's gone phut. The club's no more."

"What d'you mean?" I said, almost jumping. "Has it burned down, or what? I passed it only this morning on my way here."

"It hasn't burned down, it's been closed down, old chap. Luckily, some of our people managed to warn us in good time. They're searching the place now."

"But Semyon Ivanovich," I said in perplexity, "how can anyone close down the club? This is not the old regime. We've got freedom now. The S.R.s have their club, so have the Mensheviks, and the Cadets, and the anarchists are always drunk, what's more, they've boarded up their windows from outside, and nobody touches them. We behaved quietly, and all of a sudden they close us down."

"Freedom!" Jackdaw smiled. "Freedom for some, a duck's egg for others. But what am I to do with this package? I must hide it somewhere till tomorrow. I can't very well drag it back to town—they may take it away."

"Then let's hide it, Semyon Ivanovich! I know a place near here. A little way down the ravine there's a pond, with an opening at the side where they used to dig clay for brickmaking. There are lots of holes there in the walls. You could hide a horse and cart there, let alone a package. Only there are snakes there, they say, and I'm barefooted. But you've got boots on, so it's all right. Even if you do get bitten it doesn't matter—you won't die, you just get sort of dopey."

Jackdaw did not like this tailpiece, and he asked me whether there wasn't some other hiding place nearby without any snakes in it.

I said there was no other suitable place nearby. There were always people about—either grazing the herd, or weeding the potatoes, or else it was boys hanging around the vegetable gardens.

So then Jackdaw shouldered the package and we walked along the bank of the stream.

We hid the package in a safe place.

"Now run off to town," Jackdaw said. "I'll come for it myself tomorrow. If you see any of our committee men tell them I haven't gone yet. Wait a minute—" he stopped me and peered into my face. "You'll keep this to yourself, I hope, old chap? No babbling."

"Why, of course not!" I muttered, wincing at the hint of offensive suspicion. "Have I ever said a word about anybody? Why, even in school I never blew the gaff on anybody, not even in games, and this is not a game, this is serious. How could you—"

Jackdaw did not let me finish the sentence. He patted me on the back with his skinny hand and smiled.

"All right, all right. Run along. Eh, you conspirator!"

Chapter Four

Fedka grew up and matured during the summer. He let his hair grow long, sported a black Russian blouse and a brief-case. With this brief-case, stuffed with newspapers, he rushed about from one school meeting to another. Fedka was chairman of the Class Committee. Fedka was delegate of the Technical High School at the Girls' School. Fedka was the elected representative at the Parents' Meetings. He became expert at speechifying, quite a second Kruglikov. He'd clamber up onto a desk at debates on subjects such as "Must pupils answer their teachers sitting down or standing up?" or "Is card-playing permissible in a free country during bible lessons?" He'd put one foot forward, thrust a hand under his belt, and start off: "Citizens, we call upon you... the situation is such... we bear responsibility for the destinies of the revolution. . . ." He'd talk nineteen to the dozen.

We didn't seem to get on, Fedka and I. Things had not reached an open breach yet, but relations between us got worse day by day.

I stood aloof again.

The incident concerning my father had almost been forgotten, and the chill between myself and some of my former chums had begun to show signs of thawing, when this new wind blew from the capital; our townspeople got wild with the Bolsheviks and closed down the club. The municipal militia arrested Baskakov, and here again I was to blame: why was I thick with the Bolsheviks, why had I hung out a flag on the roof of their club on May Day, why had I refused to help Fedka at the meeting hand out leaflets in favour of war to a victorious finish?

All the boys at our school handed out leaflets. Some of them would grab batches of leaflets, not caring whether they were Cadet, anarchist, Christian Socialist or Bolshevik leaflets, and run off, thrusting them into the hands of passers-by. And these fellows got away with it, as if it was just as it should be.

How could I take the S.R. leaflets from Fedka when Baskakov had just given me a whole batch of his own to distribute? How could you hand out both the one and the other? I could understand if they were alike, but one of them says, "Long live victory over the Germans" and the other, "Down with the predatory war". One says, "Support the Provisional Government" and the other, "Down with the ten capitalist ministers" in that government. How can you heap them together, when one leaflet is prepared to devour the other?

Very little teaching was done at the time. The teachers sat at club meetings, and the avowed monarchists among them had resigned. Half the school was occupied by the Red Cross.

"I'm going to quit school, Mother," I used to say sometimes. "All the same we're not studying, and I'm at daggers drawn with everybody. Yesterday, for instance, Korenev went collecting with a cup for the benefit of the wounded; I had twenty kopeks, and dropped it in, but he scowled and says: 'The country doesn't need sops from rotters.' I could have bitten my lip through. And that in front of everybody! I says to him: 'If I'm the son of a deserter, you're the son of a thief. Your father's a contractor, he's robbed the army, and you too wouldn't mind making a bit out of the collections for the wounded.' We nearly had a fight over it. There's going to be a Comrades' Court in a few days. Who cares! Judges, they call themselves! They can go and eat coke!"

I always kept on me the pistol Father had given me. It was small and convenient, in a soft chamois leather holster. I wore it not for self-defence. No one threatened to attack me yet, but it was dear to me as a keepsake, a present from my father—the only valuable thing I had. Another reason why I loved the Mauser was because of the pleasant thrill and sense of pride I got from having it on me. Besides, I was fifteen at the time and I have never known a boy at that age who would refuse to have a real revolver. The only person who knew about the Mauser was Fedka. I had shown it to him when we were still friendly. I could see with what envy he had carefully examined my father's gift.

The day after that incident with Korenev I came into the classroom as usual of late—without greeting anyone or taking notice of anyone.

The first lesson was geography. The teacher spoke a little about western China, then paused to discuss the latest news from the papers. While this talk and discussion was going on I noticed that Fedka was writing notes and sending them round the desks. I started reading one of them over the shoulder of a boy in front of me and caught sight of my own name. It put me on my guard.

After the bell, I got up, keeping a watchful eye about me, and made for the door only to find it barred by a group of the form's strongest boys. A semi-circle was formed round me. Fedka stepped out from the middle of it and came towards me.

"What do you want?" I said.

"Hand over the gun," he said insolently. "The Class Committee has ruled that you are to hand over the gun to the Commissariat of the Municipal Militia. Hand it over to the Committee at once, and tomorrow you'll get a receipt for it from the militia."

"What gun are you talking about?" I queried, backing towards the window and trying my hardest to appear cool.

"Now don't deny it! Don't I know that you always carry a Mauser about with you. It's in your right pocket now too. You'd better hand it over voluntarily, or we'll call the militia. Come on!" He held his hand out.

"A Mauser?"

"Yes."

"You can have this, if you like!" I shouted, showing him a fig. "Did you give it to me? You didn't? Then go to hell before you get a punch in the jaw!"

Turning my head quickly, I saw four boys behind me, preparing to pounce on me. I sprang forward in an attempt to break through to the door. Fedka gripped my shoulder. I hit him with my fist, and was immediately seized by the shoulders and across the chest. Someone tried to knock my hand out of my pocket. I clutched the pistol tight without taking my hand out.

"They'll take it away. . . . They'll take it away in a minute. . . ."

Then, like a trapped animal, I gave a scream, whipped the Mauser out, jerked up the safety catch with my thumb and pulled the trigger.

The four pairs of hands that gripped me instantly dropped away. I leapt onto the windowsill. From there I had a momentary glimpse of the chalky faces of the pupils, the yellow tile on the floor shattered by the shot, and the figure of Father Gennady arrested in the doorway like the biblical pillar of salt. I jumped without hesitation from the height of the first floor and landed in a bed of vivid-red dahlias.

Late that evening I climbed to the upstairs window of our house by way of the rain pipe in the back garden. I tried to climb quietly so as not to frighten anybody, but Mother heard a rustle and came up to the window, saying in a low voice:

"Who's that? Is that you, Boris?"

"It's me, Ma."

"Don't climb up the pipe, you may fall down. I'll open the door for you."

"Don't, Ma. I'll manage it."

Springing from the windowsill, I stopped, prepared to listen to her rebukes and complaint.

"Do you want anything to eat?" Mother asked in the same low voice. "Sit down, I'll get you some soup, it's still warm."

Deciding that Mother knew nothing, I kissed her and sat down at the table, thinking how to break the news to her. I could feel her eyes fixed on me intently. It was disconcerting, and I lowered my spoon to the edge of the plate.

"The Inspector was here," Mother said. "He said they were expelling you from the school and if you didn't hand your revolver in to the militia by twelve o'clock tomorrow they would notify the militia and have it taken away from you by force. Hand it over, Boris."

"I won't," I said doggedly, avoiding her eyes. "It's Daddy's."

"So what? What do you want it for? You'll get yourself another one later on. I don't know what's come over you these last few months, you've gone crazy. You may shoot somebody yet with that Mauser of yours! Take it to the militia tomorrow and hand it over."

"No," I said, speaking quickly and pushing my plate away. "I don't want another one, I want this one! It's Daddy's. I'm not crazy, I'm not touching anybody. Why don't they leave me alone? I don't care if they have expelled me, I would have quitted myself. I'll hide it away."

"My God!" Mother said with exasperation. "They'll put you in prison and keep you there until you give it up!"

"A fat lot I care," I said angrily. "They've put Baskakov in prison too. They can keep me in prison, but I won't give it up. I won't!" I shouted this out so loudly after a slight pause that Mother recoiled.

"All right, then don't," she said more gently. "It's all one to me." She paused musingly, then got up and added bitterly as she made for the door: "How much more of my life will you all burn up for me before my time!"

Mother's compliance surprised me. It was so unlike her. She rarely interfered in my affairs, but when she did take a thing into her head there was no stopping her.

I slept soundly. Timka came to me in my dreams and brought me a cuckoo for a present. "What do I want a cuckoo for, Timka?" Timka said nothing. "Cuckoo, cuckoo, how old am I?" It cuckooed seventeen times. "You're wrong," I said, "I'm only fifteen." "No," Timka said with a shake of the head. "Your mother has deceived you." "Why should Mother deceive me?" At this point I saw that Timka wasn't Timka at all, but Fedka. He stood there grinning.

I woke up, leapt out of bed and looked into the next room. It was five to seven. Mother wasn't at home. I had to make haste and hide the Mauser somewhere in the garden while nobody was about.

I slipped on my shirt and pulled the trousers off the chair—and a sudden chill ran up my spine. The trousers were suspiciously light. Carefully, as if afraid to burn my fingers, I put my hand in the pocket. I thought so—it was empty. Mother had taken the Mauser out while I slept.

"So that's it. . . . She's against me too. And I believed her yesterday. No wonder she gave in so easily. She must have taken it to the militia."

I wanted to run after her.

"Stop! Stop! Stop!" the clock sang out, striking the hour. I stopped and glanced at the dial. What do you know? It was only seven o'clock. Where could she have gone so early? I looked round and noticed that the big wicker basket was missing. That meant Mother had gone to the market.

But if she went to the market she could not have taken the Mauser with her. In that case she had hidden it away at home for the time being. But where? I decided immediately—in the top drawer of the cupboard, because it was the only drawer that locked.

I recollected that once, a long time ago, Mother had brought pink globules of corrosive sublimate from the chemist's and had locked them in that drawer out of harm's way. Fedka and I had planned to do away with the Simakovs' ginger cat because the Simakovs had broken the paw of our little dog. We had rummaged about in some iron junk and found a key to fit the lock. We took one of the pills and threw the key back in its place.

I went into the lumber-room and pulled out a heavy drawer. In my search I rummaged among bits of old iron, nuts, screws. I cut my hand on a piece of tin, but immediately found three rusty keys. One of them was sure to fit. . . . This one, probably.

I went back to the cupboard. I rammed the key in with difficulty. It grated in the lock. Then with a click it opened. I pulled the drawer. There it was, my Mauser. And the holster, too, lying separate. I snatched both of them up. Locked the drawer, threw the key out of the window into the garden and ran out into the street. Glancing from side to side, I spotted Mother coming back from the market. So then I went round the corner and ran in the direction of the cemetery.

On the edge of the wood I stopped to recover my wind. I dropped onto a heap of dry leaves, breathing heavily and looking round from time to time to make sure no one was after me. A quiet little stream flowed past me. The water was clear but warm and smelt of water-plants. I scooped some water up in my hands without getting up and drank it, then dropped my head on my arms and started thinking.

What to do now? I couldn't go home again and I couldn't go to school. On second thoughts, though, I could have gone home. . . . I could have hidden the Mauser and gone home. Mother would be angry with me for a while, then she'd forget it. It was her own fault, she shouldn't have taken the Mauser on the sly. But what if the militia comes? If I say that I lost it—they won't believe me. If I say it isn't mine, they'll ask whose it is. If I don't say anything, they may really throw me into prison! What a cad, that Fedka! The rat!

Through the sparse trees on the edge of the wood I could see the railway station.

"U-u-u-u!" came the echo of a distant locomotive whistle. A wavy strip of white vapour spread along the track and a black engine, looking from here like a beetle, slowly rolled out from behind a bend.

"U-u-u-u!" it hooted again, greeting the friendly hand of the outstretched semaphore.

"What if I. . . ."

I sat up cautiously and began thinking again.

The more I thought, the more powerfully did the railway station lure me. It beckoned me with the hoot of its engines, the tuneful notes of the signal cabins, the almost tangible smell of burning petrol and the glistening track running out into unfamiliar horizons.

"I'll go to Nizhni Novgorod," I thought. "There I'll find Jackdaw. He's in Sormovo. He'll be glad and he'll let me stay with him for a while. Things will quieten down, and then I'll go home. And maybe..." here I felt a sort of inner prompting—"maybe I won't go back."

"Yes, that's decided," I resolved with sudden firmness, and as the importance of this decision dawned on me, I stood up, feeling at once big, strong and determined.

Chapter Five

The train arrived in Nizhni Novgorod in the night. I immediately found myself on the big square outside the railway station. The bayonets of brand-new rifles glinted under the lights of the street lamps.

A ginger-bearded man was addressing the soldiers from a platform about the necessity of defending the homeland. He assured them of the inevitable and speedy defeat of "the accursed German imperialists".

He kept turning towards the man next to him—an old colonel, who every time nodded his bald round head approvingly, as though certifying the correctness of the ginger speaker's conclusions.

The speaker looked exhausted. He beat his chest with the flat of his hand, and raised one arm, then both arms in turn. He appealed to the conscience of the soldiers. Towards the end, when he thought his oration had penetrated the grey mass, he swung his arm round, barely missing the ear of the startled colonel, who recoiled to avoid it, and began to sing the *Marseillaise* at the top of his voice. A score or two of scattered voices joined in, but the column of soldiers was silent.

The ginger orator broke off his song, threw his cap down on the ground and climbed down from the platform.

The old colonel spread his hands in a helpless gesture and with head bent, climbed down, holding on to the banister.

This turned out to be a battalion of draft reinforcements bound for the German front.

The soldiers had marched to the railway station with songs, and had had flowers and gifts thrown to them. Everything had gone well until they reached the station, where it was discovered that owing to someone's remiss-ness, there was not enough boiling water for tea to go round and some of the boxcars were not fitted with sufficient plankbeds. The disgruntled soldiers started holding a meeting.

Speakers appeared whom the command had not invited, and having begun with tea, the battalion suddenly came to the conclusion: "We've had enough of it. At home the farms are going to the dogs, the landowners' land hasn't been shared out, and we're fed up with this war!"

Bonfires were lighted, and the air smelled of resinous split boards, makhorka, dried fish dumped in stacks at the nearby docks, and the fresh wind of the Volga.

Excited and thrilled, I walked into the darkness of unfamiliar streets adjoining the railway station, past the bonfires, past the rifles, past the excited soldiers, the shouting orators, and the dismayed and furious officers. The first passer-by whom I asked the way to Sormovo answered with an air of surprise:

"You can't walk from here to Sormovo, my dear chap. People go to Sormovo from here by boat. You pay your fifty kopeks and climb aboard. But there won't be any boat now till the morning."

After wandering about a bit, I got into one of the empty cases piled up under a wall somewhere and decided to sit it out there till the morning. Soon I fell asleep.

I was wakened by a song. Porters were singing as they loaded something heavy.

Heave-ho, lads, easy does it!

a cracked but pleasant tenor voice led the singing.

The rest joined in with raucous voices: *Try, try and try again.* Something shifted with a loud creaking.

Yoho ... we started all right,
But the tykes slill sit tight.

I poked my head out. Like ants around a piece of rye bread, the porters surrounded a huge rusty winch, which they were dragging up inclined rails onto a flatcar. The song leader, unseen among the crowd, started again:

Yoho ... we've kicked out Nikolai,
Yoho... but what's the blessed good!

Something creaked again.

Come on, folks, rise up all,
And dump old Alec in the lake!

There was a clank and a thud. The winch sank heavily onto the flatcar. The song broke off and voices rose, shouting, talking and swearing.

"Some song!" I thought. "Who on earth is Alec? Why, that must be Kerensky! In Arzamas, for a song like that, they'd run you in jolly quick, but here the militiaman stands by and turns away as if he doesn't hear anything." The dirty little steamboat had long stood moored at the dock. I didn't have fifty kopeks for my fare, and the narrow gangway was guarded by a ticket collector and a sailor with a rifle.

I bit my nails and gazed miserably at the strip of oily water gurgling between the dock and boat's side. Water melon rind, wood splinters, scraps of newspaper and other rubbish floated on the water.

"Maybe I should ask the ticket collector to let me through?" I said to myself. "I'll tell him a story about being an orphan or something. Come to visit a sick grandmother. Please, let me through to go and see the old lady." The oily surface of the turbid water reflected my sunburnt face, my close-cropped large head, and the shining brass buttons of my school tunic.

With a sigh, I decided that the orphan story were best dropped. Orphans with such healthy faces were not very credible.

I had read in books that some boys, having no money to pay their fare, worked their passage before the mast as ship's boys. But this device was no good here, as all I had to do was to cross to the other side.

"What are you standing there? Move up!" I heard a saucy voice and saw a small boy with a pock-marked face.

He tossed a batch of leaflets onto a case and quickly pulled a thick dirty fag end from under my foot.

"Ugh, you gawk!" he said. "What a fag end you've missed!"

I told him I didn't give a damn for fag ends, as I did not smoke, and in turn asked him what he was doing here.

"Me?" The boy spat with such accuracy of aim that he hit the middle of a log that floated past. "I'm handing out leaflets for our Committee."

"What Committee's that?"

"The workers' Committee, of course. Want to help me?"

"I wouldn't mind, only I've got to get to Sormovo and I haven't got a ticket."

"What d'you want in Sormovo?"

"I've come to my uncle. He's working at the factory there."

"That's too bad," the boy said reprovingly. "Fancy coming to visit your uncle without a penny in your pocket!"

"I didn't have time," the words tumbled from my lips. "It was all so sudden—I ran away from home."

"You don't say so?" The boy's eyes slid over me with a look of incredulity and curiosity. Then, with a sniff, he added sympathetically: "You'll get it hot from your father when you go back."

"I'm not going back. Besides, I haven't got a father. They killed him in the tsarist times. My father was a Bolshevik."

"And mine's a Bolshevik," the boy inserted quickly. "Only mine's alive. My father's a big man, second to none in all Sormovo. You ask anybody you like—'Where does Pavel Korchagin live?'—and everyone'll tell you: 'Oh, that's the Committee. Ter-Akopov's factory in Varikha.' Yes sir, that's the kind of man my father is!"

The boy flung the fag end away, and, hitching up his trousers, which kept slipping down, he dived into the crowd, leaving the leaflets next to me.

I picked one up. It said that Kerensky was a traitor, who was preparing an agreement with the counter-revolutionary General Kornilov. The leaflet openly called for the overthrow of the Provisional Government and proclaimed the Soviet Power.

The sharp tone of the leaflet surprised me more than the audacious song of the porters had done. The boy popped up, panting, from behind some herring barrels, and cried out to me as he ran: "Nothing doing, old chap!"

"What?" I said blankly.

"I tried to get fifty kopeks. I saw Simon Kotikin here— one of our chaps. Said he didn't have it."

"What d'you want fifty kopeks for?"

"But you want it, don't you?" he looked at me in surprise. "You'd have bought a ticket with it, and in Sormovo you'd get the money from your uncle and give it back. I'm a Sormovo man too."

He disappeared again and reappeared as quickly.

"We'll manage it without a ticket, old chap. Take my leaflets and go straight onto the boat. See that sailor standing there with the rifle? That's Pashka Surkov. When you pass up the gangway turn to him and say, I'm taking these leaflets for the Committee, and don't talk to the ticket collector at all. Go straight ahead. The sailor's one of our men, he'll stand up for you in case of anything."

"And you?"

"I'll get through anywhere, old chap. I'm a local man."

The grubby old steamboat, bestrewn with husks and apple cores, had long pushed off, but there was no sign of my companion.

I found a place for myself on a heap of rusty anchor chains, and, breathing in the cool air, which smelt of apples, petrol and fish, I examined the passengers with curiosity. Next to me sat a priest—he may have been a deacon or a monk—very quiet, trying to look as if he wasn't there. He glanced around him furtively, taking bites at a water melon and carefully spitting the pips out into his hand.

Besides the monk, there were several peasant women with empty milk cans, two officers, and four militiamen, who kept somewhat aloof next to a civilian with a red band round his arm.

All the rest of the boat's passengers were workmen. Standing about in groups, they talked loudly, argued, swore, laughed and read out from the newspaper. It looked as if they were all acquainted with one another, the way some of them butted in on the arguing groups. Remarks and jokes flew from one side of the boat to the other.

Sormovo loomed ahead. It was a windless morning. The smoke of the factories, gathering in curling wreaths, looked from here like black boughs spread over the stone trunks of the gigantic chimneys.

"Hullo!" I heard the familiar voice of my young companion behind me.

I was pleased, because I did not know what to do with the leaflets.

He sat down next to me on the coil, drew an apple from his pocket and offered it to me.

"Take it. The porters gave me a capful, because I always go to them first when there's a new leaflet or a newspaper. Yesterday they gave me a whole string of voblas. *(Vobla—a. dried salted fish.—Tr.)* Doesn't cost 'em anything. Just stick an arm into the sack, that's all. I ate three of those voblas myself and took two of 'em home—one for Anka, the other for Manka. My two sisters," he explained, adding condescendingly: "Silly little toads. Always hungry."

The lively talk suddenly broke off, as the civilian with the red band, accompanied by the militiamen, suddenly started to check the passengers' documents. The workers silently produced crumpled greasy papers and passed icy hostile remarks.

"Who are they looking for?" "The devil knows 'em."

"I'd like to see 'em coming to Sormovo and making a search there!"

The militiamen looked reluctant; they obviously felt uncomfortable under the gaze of dozens of pairs of suspicious, watchful eyes.

Taking no notice of the general suppressed resentment, the civilian, with a defiant twitch of his eyebrows, went up to the monk. The monk shrank into himself still more, and spreading his hands, pointed to the cup hanging from his neck, bearing the inscription: "Good Christians, make a donation towards rebuilding the churches destroyed by the Germans."

The civilian turned away with a grimace of distaste and pulled my companion rather unceremoniously by the shoulder.

"Identity papers?"

"When I grow up!" the boy answered gruffly.

In trying to disengage his shoulder from the grip of the civilian, the boy twisted his body, lost his balance and dropped the batch of leaflets.

The civilian picked up one of them, hurriedly read it, and said in a low angry voice:

"You're too little to have identity papers, but grown up enough for propaganda leaflets, eh? Seize him!"

But the civilian was not the only one who had read the leaflet. The wind tore a dozen or so of the white papers out of the scattered batch and swept them over the crowded deck. Before the apathetic, confused militiamen could step up to the boy, the whole deck became a buzzing hive.

"Why don’t' you look for Kornilov!"

"You didn't bother the monk about his documents! Leave the boy alone!"

"You're not in town now, this is Sormovo."

"Now then, none of your lip!" the civilian snapped, glancing apprehensively at the militiamen.

"Oh, go and swallow yourself! Disguised gendarme! See how he pounced on those leaflets?"

A piece of fresh cucumber flew past the civilian's cap.

Pressed in from all sides by the surge of passengers the militiamen looked round in dismay, muttering:

"Stand back! Stand back, there. Quiet, citizens!"

Suddenly an ear-splitting blast came from the siren and somebody on the captain's bridge yelled wildly:

"Keep away from the portside! You'll capsize the boat!"

The crowd rushed to the other side across the heeling deck. Taking advantage of the momentary confusion the civilian swore fiercely at the militiamen and slipped away to the ladder leading to the bridge, where the two officers stood, white-faced and agitated.

The boat moored and the workers got off hurriedly. I discovered the boy at my side again. His eyes were shining, and he clutched the crumpled batch of leaflets to him with both outspread hands.

"Come and see me!" he shouted. "Straight to Varikha. Ask for Vaska Korchagin, anyone will show you."

Chapter Six

I glanced with surprise and curiosity at the little houses, grey with smoke and soot, at the stone walls of the factories, through the dark windows of which I caught glimpses of bright tongues of flame and the muffled roar of imprisoned machines.

It was the dinner hour. A locomotive towing some flat-cars loaded with wheels rolled past me straight across the road, scaring the stray dogs with a jet of steam. Whistles shrilled in varied keys. Crowds of sweating, tired workers came out of the gates.

Flocks of barefooted urchins ran towards them, lugging small bundles containing bowls and plates, which smelt of onions, sour cabbage and steam.

By crooked little streets I at last reached the street where Jackdaw lived.

I knocked on the window of a small wooden house. A skinny grey-haired old woman, tearing herself away from the washtub, poked out a red face and gruffly asked me who I wanted. I told her.

"He doesn't live here any more. Moved out a long time ago," she said, slamming the window to.

Stunned by this news, I went round the corner and stopped next to a mound of piled-up cobblestones, feeling how tired I was, how hungry and sleepy.

The only other person I knew in Sormovo was Uncle Nikolai, my mother's brother. But I did not know where he lived or worked, and how he would receive me.

I wandered about the streets for several hours peering with dogged obstinacy into the faces of the passers-by. Of course, 1 did not come across my uncle.

Feeling desperately lonely, beached and helpless, I sank onto a sickly-looking grass plot cluttered with fish skin and lumps of lime, which had turned yellow from the rain. I lay down there and shut my eyes, thinking of my sad plight and failures.

The more I thought the sadder I felt and the more senseless my flight from home seemed to me.

Even so, I shied at the idea of returning to Arzamas. It seemed to me that I would be lonelier than ever there; everybody would sneer at me, the way they used to sneer at Tupikov. Mother would suffer quietly, and for all I know she might go to school to ask the Headmaster to take me back.

But I was obstinate. Back in Arzamas I had seen real strong life rushing past our town in trains amid a shower of sparks and flashing lights. It seemed to me that all I had to do was to jump onto one of the steps of the flying cars, if only on the very edge of it, and grip the handrails hard, and then no one could push me off again.

An old man came up to the hoarding. He was carrying a pail, a brush and rolled-up placards. He laid the paste thickly on the bill-boards, stuck a placard onto it, and smoothed it down to take out the creases. He put his pail down on the ground and called me up.

"Get the matches out of my pocket, sonny—my hands are sticky with paste. Thanks," he added, when I had lighted a match and held it to his pipe.

When he had got it going, he picked his pail up with a grunt and said good-naturedly:

"Ah, me, old age is no joy! I used to swing a sledgehammer with the best of 'em, and now my arm grows numb from carrying a pail."

"Let me carry it for you, grandpa," I offered. "My arm won't grow numb. I'm as strong as anything."

And as if fearing that he wouldn't agree, I hastily drew the pail towards me.

"All right," the old man readily agreed. "Carry it, if you like. We'll do the job quicker together."

We walked down the fences, passing through many streets.

The moment we stopped, passers-by would gather behind us, curious to see what we were pasting up. Warming to the job, I quite forgot my own misfortunes. There were all kinds of slogans. One of them was: "Eight hours work, eight hours sleep, eight hours rest." Truth to tell, this slogan struck me as being rather prosy and uninteresting. The blue poster with the heavy red letters appealed to me much more. It said: "Only with arms in hand will the proletariat win the bright kingdom of socialism."

This "bright kingdom" which the proletariat was to win fascinated me by its haunting beauty far more than the glamour of those exotic lands which dazzled the minds of Mayne Reid's young readers. Those lands, far off though they were, had nevertheless been explored, divided and charted on dull school maps. But this "bright kingdom" mentioned in the poster had not been conquered by anybody yet. No human foot had yet trod its mysterious precincts.

"Maybe you're tired, lad?" the old man said, stopping. "Run along home then. I'll manage myself now."

"Oh, no, I'm not a bit tired," I said, thinking bitterly that I would soon be alone again.

"Righto then," the old man said. "But mind they don't scold you when you get home."

"I've got no home," I said in a sudden burst of frankness. "I mean, I've got a home, but it's far away."

And giving way to a desire to unburden my heart to someone, I told the old man everything.

He heard me out attentively and looked at me steadily with a slightly mocking glance.

"This wants looking into," he said calmly. "Sormovo's a big place, but a man's not a needle. Your uncle's a fitter, you say?"

"He was," I answered, cheering up. "His name is Nikolai. Nikolai Dubryakov. He must be a Party man, like Dad. Maybe they know him at the Committee?"

"No, I don't seem to know him. Never mind, when we've finished with these posters you'll come with me. I'll ask some of our people."

The old man's face clouded for some reason and he walked along in silence, puffing at his pipe.

"So your father was killed?" he suddenly said.

"Yes."

The old man wiped his hand on his patched greasy trousers and patted my back, saying:

"You'll come to my place. We'll have some potatoes with onions and heat up water for tea. You must be hungry, I daresay?"

The pail seemed quite light to me. And my running away from Arzamas struck me again as being necessary and sensible.

They traced my uncle. He turned out to be not a fitter but foreman of the boiler shop.

My uncle told me tersely not to be a fool and to go home.

"You can do nothing here. A man can only make good when he knows his place," he said morosely the very first day at dinner, wiping his brick-coloured moustache with a tea cloth. "I know my place. I was an apprentice, then a fitter, and now I've worked my way up to foreman. Now, why did I make good and another man didn't? Because he likes to argle-bargle. He doesn't like to work, if you please, he envies the engineer. Wants to fly high right away. Now, take yourself, why didn't you stick it out at school? You'd ha' studied quietly for a doctor, say, or a technician. But no, you wanted to be clever. Laziness, that's what it is. If you ask me, once a man is fixed with a job, he should try to work his way up at it. Take it slowly, steadily. That's the only way you can get on."

"But, Uncle Nikolai," I said quietly in a pained voice. "Take Father, for example. He was a soldier. According to you he should have entered a school for junior officers. He would be an officer. Might get promoted to captain. And everything he did, and the fact that he became an underground worker instead of a captain, was unnecessary then?"

Uncle frowned.

"I don't want to say anything bad about your father, but I don't see much sense in what he did. He was a muddle-headed man, a trouble-maker, if you ask me. He very nearly got me into it. The office had just picked me out for the post of foreman, when all of a sudden they come and tell me: 'So that's the kind o' relative who came to stay with you?' I barely managed to hush up the affair."

My uncle got a meaty bone out of the bowl, smeared it thickly with mustard and salt, and sank his strong yellow teeth into it, shaking his head ruefully.

When his wife, a tall handsome woman, served him after dinner with home-made kvass in an earthenware painted mug, he said to her:

"I'll have a nap, wake me up in an hour's time. I'll have to drop sister Varvara a line. Boris will take it when he goes."

"When will he go?"

"Why, tomorrow, of course."

Someone tapped at the window.

"Uncle Nikolai," a voice came from the street, "are you going to the meeting?"

"Going where?"

"To the meeting. Crowds of people have come to the square."

"Catch me going to their meeting!" my uncle said.

Waiting until my uncle lay down to take his nap, I quietly slipped out into the street.

"My uncle's an artful dodger, I see," I said to myself. "Fancies himself a big pot. Foreman! And I thought he was a Party man. D'you mean to say I'll have to go back to Arzamas?"

Some two or three thousand people stood in front of a wooden platform listening to speakers. I caught sight among the crowd of the pock-marked face of that pushful young chap Vaska Korchagin. I hailed him, but he did not hear me.

I started after him. Once or twice his curly head appeared among the crowd, only to disappear again for good. I couldn't get any nearer to the platform. I stopped to listen. One speaker followed another. I remember one of them, a plain-looking poorly dressed man, resembling a workman, of whom hundreds walked the streets of Sormovo without attracting any attention. He pulled off his pancaked cap with an awkward gesture, cleared his throat, and began to speak in a strained and, what seemed to me, embittered voice.

"You comrades from the locomotive shop, the car shop and many others of you know that I spent eight years in a convict prison as a political. And no sooner did I come out, before I had time to fill my lungs with fresh air, when bang!—I landed in jail for another two months! Who locked me in? Not the policemen of the old regime, but the toadies of the new regime. One didn't mind so much doing a stretch under the tsar. Our people always got it from the tsar. But getting it from these toadies is the bloody limit. The generals and officers strut about with red bows, you'd think they were friends of the revolution. But we chaps get slapped into jail for the least little thing. We're hounded and chivvied about. It's not my own grievance I'm speaking about, comrades, not because I did two months extra time. It's your grievance, the workers' grievance, I'm talking about."

He started coughing. When the fit was over and he opened his mouth to speak again, another fit of coughing came on. He stood there for quite a time, trembling and clutching the banister, then he shook his head and climbed down.

"They've broken his wind all right!" someone said in a loud indignant voice.

Powdery snow, the first of the season, fell from a grey overcast sky. A dry cold wind tore the last darkened leaves off the trees. My feet were chilled. I wanted to get out of the crowd to warm myself with walking. While elbowing my way out I lost sight of the speakers, when suddenly a familiar high-pitched voice made me look round towards the platform. The powdery snow blinded me. I was pushed about. Someone trod painfully on my foot. Getting up on tiptoe I was surprised and overjoyed to see the familiar bearded face of Jackdaw on the platform.

Pushing my way with difficulty through the dense crowd, I moved forward. I was afraid that Jackdaw would finish his speech and mix with the crowd. He would not hear me calling him and I would lose him. I waved my cap to attract his attention, but he did not notice me.

Seeing Jackdaw lift his hand on a rising note to wind up his speech, I cried out:

"Semyon Ivanovich! Semyon Ivanovich!"

Someone nearby hissed at me. A hand jabbed at my back. But I yelled still more wildly:

"Semyon Ivanovich!"

I saw Jackdaw spread his hands in a gesture of surprise, then he hurriedly finished the sentence and hastened down the steps.

An angry man in the crowd seized my arm and dragged me aside.

But I took no notice of the cursing and rough handling, and laughed gaily, crazily.

"Here, you hooligan, what's your little game?" the workman who had seized my arm demanded, giving me a shake.

"I'm not a hooligan," I said, smiling blissfully and dancing about on my chilled feet. "I've found Jackdaw. Semyon Ivanovich. . . ."

There must have been something in my face that made the man smile.

"A jackdaw?" he said in a milder tone.

"Not a jackdaw. Semyon Ivanovich. There he comes. . . ."

Jackdaw appeared through the crowd and gripped my shoulder.

"What are you doing here?"

The crowd became agitated. A murmur rose above the square. All around us were resentful, excited and bewildered faces.

"Semyon Ivanovich," I said, ignoring his question, "what's all this excitement about?"

"A telegram's just arrived," he said quickly. "Kerensky is betraying the revolution. General Kornilov has run away to the Don and is raising the Cossacks."

The short autumn days flashed past me like so many wayside stations rushing past an express train in a blaze of lights. A job was quickly found for me too. I, too, became a useful person, who was drawn into the vortex of rapidly developing events.

On one such turbulent day Jackdaw said to me in anxious tone:

"Run down to the Committee, Boris. Tell them Varikha has asked for a propagandist and I've gone down there. Find Yershov and tell him to go to the printer's for me. If you don't find Yershov, then----Give me a pencil. Take this note down to the printing-house. Not to the office, hand it personally to the maker-up. You remember him— that dark man in spectacles you met at Korchagin's. When you're through, come and join me in Varikha. If there are any fresh leaflets at the Committee, take some along. Tell Pavel I asked you to. Wait a minute!" he shouted after me. "It's cold outside. Put on my old mack at least."

But I was already off, charging down the street with the fine abandon of a cavalry horse going at full stretch, jumping over puddles and potholes in the muddy roadway.

In the doorway of the Party local, which was as noisy as a railway station before the departure of a train, I ran into Korchagin. If it hadn't been him, but somebody smaller and weaker, I would have knocked him over. As it is, I ran smack into him as if he were a telegraph pole.

"What's the hurry!" he said quickly. "Have you dropped off the roof?"

"No," I said, abashed, rubbing my bruised head and breathing hard. "Semyon Ivanovich sent me to tell you he's at Varikha. . . ."

"I know, they phoned up." - "He also asked for leaflets."

"They've been sent already. What else?"

"I have to tell Yershov to go to the printer's. Here's a note."

"What's that about the printer's? Let's see that note," an armed workman in an army coat thrown over an old jacket interrupted our conversation.

"What's biting Semyon?" he said to Korchagin after reading the note. "What's he worrying about the printing-house? I sent a guard down there soon after dinner."

More and more people kept coming up to the door. It was wide open, despite the cold, and revealed glimpses of greatcoats, blouses, and faded brown leather jackets. Two men in the passage were breaking open a case with hammers. Amid the straw packing lay brand-new rifles thickly smeared with oil. Several similar empty cases lay in the mud outside.

Korchagin reappeared, accompanied by three armed workmen.

"Go down quickly," he said to them. "And stay there. Let no one through without a pass from the Committee. Send someone from there to tell us how you've fixed up."

"Who shall we send?"

"Oh, anyone of our people who happens to be around."

"I'll be around!" I cried, experiencing a strong excitement and a desire to keep up with the others.

"Take him, then. He runs fast."

Here I noticed that almost every man coming out of the Committee office took a rifle from the broken case.

"Comrade Korchagin," I said, "everybody's taking a rifle. May I take one?"

"What's that?" he queried with annoyance, breaking off his conversation with a strong tattooed sailor.

"I want a rifle! I'm as good as the next man, aren't I?"

A loud voice in the next room called Korchagin and he hurried away, waving a hand at me.

It may have been just a gesture of dismissal, but I interpreted it as one of permission. I snatched a rifle from the case, and pressing it close, I ran after the armed guards who had started off down the street.

As I ran across the yard I heard the latest news which had just been received: the Soviet power had been proclaimed in Petrograd, Kerensky had run away, and fighting was going on in Moscow with the military cadets.

III. THE FRONT

Chapter One

Six months had passed.

A letter addressed to my mother was posted one sunny April day at the railway station.

"Mamma,

"Goodbye, goodbye! I am going away to join the group of gallant Comrade Sivers, who is fighting the White troops of Kornilov and Kaledin. Three of us are going. We have been given documents from the Sormovo combat squad, to which I and Belka belonged. They did not want to give it to me at first, they said I was too young. I had a job persuading Jackdaw, who arranged it for me. He would have gone himself, only he's weak and he coughs badly. My head is hot with joy. Everything that happened before is child's play. The real thing in life is only just beginning, that's why I feel on top of the world."

On the third day of our journey, during a six-hour stop at a small station, we learned that there were signs of unrest in the countryside around us. Small gangs of bandits had appeared, and in some places there had been fighting between the kulaks and the food-collecting teams. It was late at night when an engine was hitched to our train. My comrades and I lay side by side on the top ledge of the converted boxcar. Hearing the measured click of the wheels and the creak of the rocking car, I pulled my heavy cloth coat over my head and prepared to go to sleep.

Sounds of snoring, coughing and scratching could be heard in the darkness. Those who had been able to squeeze in on the ledge were sleeping. From the dense huddle of the less fortunate passengers sitting on the floor there came mutterings, grumblings, swearing and pushing.

"Don't push, there," a bass voice grumbled. "What are you trying to do—push me off my sack? I'll push you into the middle o' next week if you're not careful!"

"Look at him, the devil!" came a shrill angry feminine voice. "Sticking his boots right into my face! Come off it, damn you!"

A lighted match dimly revealed a stirring heap of boots, sacks, baskets, caps, arms and legs, then it went out, leaving a still greater darkness. Someone in the corner was telling a long tedious story of his sad life in a dreary monotone. A sympathiser puffed at his cigarette. The car quivered like a gadfly-bitten horse and moved along the rails in jerks.

I woke up from a tug at my sleeve by one of my companions. I looked up and felt a jet of cold refreshing air from the open window fan my hot face. The train was going slowly, probably uphill. A fiery glow lit up the whole skyline. Above it, as if seared by the flames of the conflagration, the stars faded like glow-worms and the pale moon melted in the sky.

"The land's in revolt," a calm cheerful voice came out of a dark corner.

"Asking for the whip, that's what it is," a voice answered savagely from another corner.

A sudden crash interrupted the talk. The car swayed and bumped, and I fell off the ledge onto the heads of the people below. Pandemonium broke loose in the darkness and everyone rushed to the open door of the boxcar amid screams. An accident.

I landed in a ditch alongside the embankment, after jumping out just in time to avoid being crushed by the hurtling bodies of the passengers. Shots were fired twice. A man next to me, with outspread shaking hands, muttered hastily:

"That's all right ... that's all right. Only don't run, or they'll open fire on us. They're not Whites, they're local villagers. They only rob you and let you go."

Two men armed with rifles ran up to the car, shouting: "Get back! Get back into the car!"

The passengers made a dash for the boxcars. In the rush I stumbled and fell into a damp ditch. Quick as a lizard, I flattened myself on the ground and crawled towards the tail of the train. Our car was the one before last, and in a minute I drew level with the dim signal lantern of the rear car. A man was standing there with a rifle. I wanted to turn back, but he evidently spotted someone on the far side of the embankment and ran towards him. In a bound, I reached the brow of a ravine and rolled down the slippery clayey slope. At the bottom I got up and dragged myself to the bushes, barely lifting my feet, which were plastered with clay.

The forest, covered in a haze of young greenery, had sprung to life. Somewhere far away cocks were exchanging lusty calls. Loud croaking came from a nearby clearing where the frogs had come out to warm themselves. Here and there in the shade still lay islets of grey snow, but in the sunny spaces last year's stiff grass was already dry. I rested, and cleaned the clay off my boots with a piece of birch bark. Then I plucked a handful of grass, dipped it in the water and wiped my muddy face with it.

These were unfamiliar places. How was I to get out of here to the nearest railway station? I could hear dogs barking—there must be a village nearby. What if I went and asked the way? I might walk into a kulak ambush, though. They'll ask me—who are you, where do you come from? And I have a paper on me, and a Mauser in my pocket. I could hide the paper in my boot, say, but what about the pistol? Throw it away?

I took it out and turned it over in my hands. I couldn't do it. The little Mauser with its glint of burnished steel sat so snugly in my hand that I felt ashamed of my thoughts. I stroked it and put it back under my jacket, in a secret pocket sewn to the lining.

It was a bright morning and the world was full of sounds. Sitting on a tree stump in the middle of a yellow clearing, I could not believe that danger lurked anywhere. "Ping, ping ... trrrr!" I heard a familiar whistle close by me. A blue titmouse alighted on a bough overhead and regarded me curiously with a cocked eye.

"Ping, ping ... trrrr ... hullo!" it warbled, hopping from one foot to the other.

I couldn't help smiling as I thought of Timka Shtukin. He called the titmice "footails". It seemed only the other day—the titmice, the cemetery, our games. And now? I knitted my brows. Something had to be done!

A whip cracked close by and cows mooed. "A herd," I said to myself. "I'll go and ask the herdsman the way. What harm can a herdsman do me? I'll ask him and clear off as quick as I can."

A small herd of cows, *lazily* tearing up the tufts of old grass, moved slowly down the edge of the wood. Alongside walked an old herdsman with a big heavy stick. I sauntered up to him with the calm unhurried air of a man taking a walk.

"Good morning, grandpa!"

"Good morning!" he answered after slight hesitation and stopped to examine me.

"How far is it to the railway station?"

"The station? What station may you be wanting?"

I was stumped. I did not know what station I wanted, but the old man himself helped me out.

"Alexeyevka, you mean?"

"That's right. I was going there, but I must have strayed a bit."

"Where are you coming from?"

I was at a loss again.

"From over there," I said as calmly as I could, with a vague gesture in the direction of a village that could be seen in the distance.

"H'm... from over there . . . . Demenevo, you mean?"

"That's right, Demenevo."

At this point I heard the growl of a dog and footsteps. I looked round and saw a strapping lad coming towards the old man. Evidently the herdboy.

"What is it, Uncle Alexander?" he asked, chewing at a lump of rye bread.

"A passer-by here. Asking the way to Alexeyevka station. Says he's coming from Demenevo."

The boy stopped chewing and stared at me blankly.

"How can that be?" he said.

"That's just what puzzles me, seeing as Demenevo's right next to the station. Alexeyevka, Demenevo—they're both one. What wind could have blown him here?"

"We must send him to the village," the lad suggested coolly. "Let the military post sort it out there. He can tell you any story!"

Although I had no idea what sort of post this was and how they would sort things out, I had no desire to go to the village if only because the villages round about here were rich ones and unquiet. Losing no time, therefore, I leapt aside and plunged into the wood.

The herdsboy soon lagged behind, but the accursed dog managed to take a couple of snaps at my leg. I felt no pain at the time, though, neither did I feel the lashing branches, which spread clawing fingers in front of my face, nor the mounds and tree stumps that cropped up underfoot.

I roamed about the forest till nightfall. It wasn't a wild forest, because there were stumps of felled trees in it.

The deeper 1 tried to get into the forest, the fewer grew the trees and the more often did I come across clearings with traces of horse hooves and dung in them. Night came, and I was tired, hungry and covered with scratches. I chose a dry secluded spot under a bush, put a billet of wood under my head for a pillow and lay down. Fatigue began to tell. My cheeks were hot and the leg the dog had bitten was hurting me.

"I'll go to sleep," I decided. "It's night time now, no one will find me here. I'm tired, I'll go to sleep, and in the morning I'll think of something."

As I dozed off I thought of Arzamas, the pond, our war on the rafts, my bed under the old warm blanket. I thought of the pigeons Fedka and I had caught and roasted on Fedka's frying pan. Afterwards we ate them in secret. The pigeons were so tasty. . . .

A wind whistled through the tree-tops. The forest seemed empty and frightening. The old town of Arzamas floated up in my mind warm and fragrant, like a rich festive pie.

I turned my collar up and felt an unbidden tear roll down my cheek. But I didn't cry after all.

That night, numb with cold, I kept jumping up, running about the clearing. I tried to climb up a birch tree and even began to dance to warm myself up. Then I lay down again and after a while, when the woodland mists robbed me of my warmth, I jumped up again.

Chapter Two

The sun rose again and it got warm. The birds tweeted and files of cranes trumpeted cheerfully in the sky. I was smiling by now, glad that the night was over, and there were no longer any gloomy thoughts in my mind, except perhaps one—that of getting something to eat.

I had not gone more than two hundred paces when I heard geese cackling and pigs grunting, and through the foliage I spotted the green painted roof of a solitary farmhouse.

"I'll creep up," I decided. "If there's nothing suspicious I'll ask the way and ask for something to eat."

I stood behind an elder bush. It was quiet. There was no sign of any people, and thin smoke rose from the chimney. A small flock of geese came waddling towards me. A faint snap of a breaking twig sounded next to me. Instantly I braced my legs and turned my head. But fright immediately gave way to astonishment. From behind a bush, within ten paces of me, a pair of human eyes looked at me intently. The owner of those eyes was not the master of the farmhouse, because he too was hiding in the bushes, watching the farmyard. We stared at each other guardedly, like two wild beasts who had met, both hunting the same prey. Then, by tacit agreement, we drew back into the thickets and went up to each other.

He was the same height as I was. I took him to be about seventeen. His strong muscular figure was clothed in a double-breasted jacket of black cloth, on which there was not a single button. It looked as if the buttons had been specially cut off. Several dry burrs clung to his trousers, which he wore inside his clay-bespattered high boots.

His pale creased face with dark rings under the eyes suggested that he, too, had probably spent the night in the woods.

"Thinking of going there?" he said quietly, nodding his head in the direction of the farmhouse.

"Yes," I answered. "And you?"

"They won't give you anything. Three hefty muzhiks there—I've seen them already. You never know what you're up against."

"Then what's to be done? We must eat!"

"We must," he agreed. "But not by begging. No one gives alms these days. Who are you?" he asked, and without waiting for a reply, added: "Never mind. We'll get something ourselves. It's very difficult, I've tried, but the two of us will manage it. Geese are wandering about in the bushes here—big fat ones."

"But they don't belong to us."

He looked at me as if surprised to hear such a silly remark.

"Everything belongs to everybody these days," he said quietly. "Get round the back of the clearing and drive a goose quietly towards me. I'll hide behind a bush."

Singling out a fat grey goose who had strayed from the flock I barred its path. The goose turned and walked away slowly, stopping now and then to peck at the ground. Step by step I headed it into the ambush. It was almost level with the bush, when suddenly its neck curved and it looked suspiciously in my direction, puzzled at my persistent pursuit. Then, with an air of decision, it turned back, but the stranger, with the swiftness of a cat springing on a sparrow, darted out from behind the bush and grabbed the goose's neck with both hands. The bird barely had time to cry out. The disturbed flock started honking, and the stranger plunged into the woods with the fluttering goose. I followed him.

The goose flapped its wings and kicked its legs for a long time and only stopped struggling when we reached a secluded spot in a ravine. The stranger tossed it onto the ground, and getting out some tobacco, said breathing heavily:

"This'll do. We can stop here."

He got out a penknife and started to draw the goose in silence, every now and then glancing in my direction.

I collected brushwood and piled up a heap of it.

"Got any matches?" I asked.

"Here," he said, handing me a box of matches with bloodstained fingers. "Use them sparingly."

I had a good look at him now. The film of dust that had settled on his face could not conceal the smooth whiteness of his mobile features. When he spoke, the right corner of his mouth twitched slightly and his left eye narrowed at the same time. He was a year or two older than I and apparently stronger. While the stolen goose was roasting on a spit, spreading a tantalising odour, we lay in the grass.

"Want a smoke?" the stranger said.

"I don't smoke."

"Did you sleep in the woods? It's cold," he added without waiting for a reply. "How did you get here? From over there?" He waved his hand in the direction of the railway line.

"Yes, I ran away from the train when it stopped."

"Checking documents?"

"Documents—no. Bandits attacked the train."

"A-ah. . . ." He puffed at his cigarette in silence.

"Where are you heading for?" he suddenly asked after a long pause.

'The Don..." I began, then fell silent.

"The Don?" he queried, sitting up. "You're making for the Don?"

An incredulous smile flitted across his thin cracked lips. His narrowed eyes widened, but instantly faded and his face went cool again.

"Have you got relatives there, or what?" he asked offhandedly.

"Yes, relatives," I answered cautiously, sensing that he was trying to sound me out while remaining in the shadow himself.

He fell silent again. He turned the goose on its other side, from which drops of sizzling fat were dripping, and said calmly:

"I'm going that way too, but not to relatives. I'm going to join Sivers's detachment."

He told me that he had been studying at Penza and had come to visit an uncle, a schoolteacher, who lived in the country nearby, but the kulaks there had raised a revolt and he had barely managed to escape.

The burnt goose, smelling of smoke, had been torn to pieces and we fell to work upon it with gusto, the while we sat chatting in a friendly way.

I was happy to have found a companion. It put new heart into me, and I felt that the two of us now would have no difficulty in getting out of the trap we had both fallen into.

"Let's have a nap while the sun's up," my new companion suggested. "At least we'll have a good sleep. It's too cold in the night."

We lay down in a clearing and soon I began to doze. I would probably have fallen asleep but for an ant, which crawled up my nose. I sat up and gave a snort. My companion was fast asleep. His tunic was open at the throat and on the canvas lining of his collar I read the letters "Gt. A.C.C." stamped in black ink.

"What school is that?" I wondered. "I have the letters 'A.T.H.S.' on the buckle of my belt, standing for 'Arzamas Technical High School'. But here he has 'Ct.' then 'A.C.C.'." I figured it this way and that, but couldn't make it out. "I'll ask him when he wakes up," I decided.

I felt thirsty after the rich food. There was no water nearby, and I decided to descend to the bottom of the ravine, where, according to my conjecture, there should be a brook. I found the brook, but the bank was too slippery to get to it. I went down in search of a drier spot. At the bottom of the ravine a narrow cart-track ran parallel with the stream. In the damp clay I saw the imprint of horses' hooves and fresh horse dung. It looked as if a horse-herd had been driven that way only that morning.

Bending down to pick up the little stick I had dropped, I saw a small shining object trampled into the mud of the roadway. I picked it up and wiped it. It was a tin badge in the form of a red star, one of those crudely made badges that glowed on the *papakhas* of the Red Army men, on the blouses of the workers and Bolsheviks in the year 'eighteen.

"What's it doing here?" I wondered, carefully surveying the road. I bent down again to pick up an empty cartridge-case.

Forgetting my thirst, I rushed back to my companion. Instead of being asleep, he was standing next to a bush, looking around, evidently searching for me.

"Reds!" I shouted at the top of my voice as I ran up to him.

He ducked and sprang aside as if a shot had rung out behind him. The face that he turned to me was distorted with fear.

Seeing that it was only me, he straightened up and said crossly, as if to explain his fright:

"Yelling like mad, right into my ear. . . ."

"The Reds," I repeated proudly.

"Where?"

"They passed this morning. Hoof tracks all down the road, the dung's quite fresh. A cartridge-case, and this. . . ." I showed him the star.

My companion drew a breath of relief.

"Why didn't you say so?" And added again, as if excusing himself: "The way you yelled. . . . I didn't know what to think."

"Come on, quick. Let's go along that road. We'll get to the first village, maybe they're still there, resting. Hurry up, make up your mind."

"Come on," he agreed, not, as it seemed to me, without some hesitation. "Yes, of course, let's go."

He passed a hand across his neck and again I had a glimpse of the letters "Ct.A.C.C." on the lining of his collar.

"I say, what do those letters stand for?" I asked him.

"What letters?" he said, annoyed, as he hooked up his tunic.

"Those on the collar."

"God knows. It's not my suit. I bought it secondhand."

"A-ah. . . . I'd never say you'd bought it secondhand," I said cheerfully, stepping out at his side. "It's a perfect fit. My mother once bought me a pair of trousers secondhand, but no matter how I hitched them up they always kept slipping down."

The nearer we got to the village the more often did my companion stop.

"There's no hurry," he said. "It'll be more convenient to approach it in the evening, at dusk. If the detachment's not there, no one will notice us. We'll just pass through by way of the backyards, that's all. It's dangerous for a stranger nowadays in unfamiliar places."

I agreed with him that it would be safer to take the lay of the land at dusk, but I was so eager to join our people that I couldn't help quickening my pace.

Just short of the village my companion stopped in a hollow overgrown with bushes, and suggested turning off the road and discussing what to do next. In the underbrush he said to me:

"There's no sense in both of us sticking our necks out. I suggest that one of us stays here, while the other goes into the village by the back gardens and takes a look round. I've got my doubts. It's much too quiet and the dogs are not barking. Maybe there are no Reds there at all, only kulaks, blast them, with rifles."

"I tell you what, let's go together."

"Don't be silly," he said, patting me on the shoulder in a friendly way. "You stay here, I'll manage this by myself. Why should you run unnecessary risks? You wait for me here."

"A good chap," I thought, when he had gone. "Rather odd, but a good chap. Another would have shifted a dangerous job to someone else's shoulders or proposed a toss-up, but he volunteered himself."

He came back within an hour—earlier than I thought. He carried a thick heavy stick, which he had evidently just cut and peeled.

"You're back soon!" I shouted. "Well?"

"Nobody there," he answered from afar, shaking his head. "No sign of 'em. The Reds must have taken a different road, the one leading to Suglinki probably, not far from here."

"Are you sure?" I queried in a sinking voice. "D'you mean to say no one's there?"

"Not a soul. An old woman in one of the outlying huts told me, and a boy I ran into in the back gardens confirmed it. Looks like we'll have to spend the night here, my boy, and get on their trail in the morning."

I lowered myself onto the grass and grew thoughtful. I began to have my first doubts as to the truthfulness of my companion's report. Another thing that worried me was his stick. It was a heavy oaken club with a knob carved out on the tip. Evidently he had just cut it. It was about an hour's walk from here to the village. If you made your way there stealthily, questioning people, it would take you all of two hours to make it, but he had been gone an hour at the most and managed to cut and carve an oaken club while he was at it. Working at it with a penknife would take half an hour at least. Could it be that he had lost his nerve and sat it out in the bushes without trying to find anything out? But that couldn't be. Hadn't he volunteered to go and find out himself? Besides, he didn't look a coward. It was frightening, of course, but then he had to get out of it himself, too, somehow.

We gathered a heap of dry leaves and lay down side by side, covering ourselves with my coat. We lay like that for about half an hour in silence. I began to feel the chill of the damp earth in my side. "Must get some more leaves," I said to myself, getting up.

"What's the matter?" my companion said in a sleepy voice. "Why don't you sleep?"

"It’s damp. I'll get another armful or two of leaves." As we had gathered all the leaves around us, I went to the bushes closer to the road. The moon was only just emerging and it was difficult to make things out in the darkness. Twigs and branches kept getting in the way. A faint sound of footfalls came from the road. Somebody there was walking or riding. Dropping the leaves and trying not to tread on the twigs, I crept towards the road. A peasant cart was moving slowly and almost noiselessly down the soft damp earth track. Two men were speaking in low voices.

"It all depends," one of them was saying. "If you ask me, I think he was right."

"You mean what the commander said?" the other asked. "I daresay he was. The trouble is they don't stay. Today they come and have a talk with you, and tomorrow they move on. And then the bosses'll come along and they'll say to me, for instance: 'Oh, you this, that and the other, so that's your little game—narking on the kulaks, eh? Give him the works!' It's all right for the Reds, they've stayed a bit, and today they're getting the carts out, while we always have our kulaks with us. That'll make you scratch the back of your head all right!" "Getting the carts out, you say?"

"Sure. Fyodor, one o' their soldiers, knocked us up late this evening to tell us to have a cart ready by twelve."

The voices died away. I stood there not knowing what to think. It was true then—the Reds had been in the village after all. My companion had deceived me, then. The Reds were leaving. Try and find them again after that. We had to hurry. But what made him deceive me?

My first impulse was to run down the road alone and make for the village. But I remembered having left my coat in the clearing. "I must go back, there's plenty of time. I must tell him, though the fellow's a coward, he is one of us."

A rustling sound made me look round. My companion was coming out of the bushes. Evidently, he had followed me, and he too had overheard the conversation between the two peasants while hiding in the bushes.

"How could you..." I began accusingly.

"Come along!" he said excitedly by way of reply.

I stepped towards the road with him following me.

A heavy blow of the club knocked me down. It was a stunning blow, even though cushioned by my fur cap. I opened my eyes. Squatting on his haunches, my companion, in the light of the moon, was hastily examining the identity paper which he had pulled out of my trouser pocket.

"So that's what he was after," it dawned on me. "It wasn't cowardice at all. He knew the Reds were in the village and he purposely didn't tell me so as to spend the night together and rob me. He's not even a rebel, because he's afraid of the kulaks himself—he's a real White."

I made an attempt to get up and crawl away into the bushes. The stranger noticed this. He thrust the document into his leather case and went up to me.

"Still alive?" he said coldly. "Found yourself a comrade eh, you tyke? I'm running away to the Don, but not to that goddam Sivers of yours—I'm going to join General Krasnov."

He was standing within two paces of me, swinging the heavy club.

My heart thumped. It hammered persistently against something hard and firm. I was lying on my side and my right hand was on my chest. Carefully, almost involuntarily, my fingers crept under my jacket towards the secret pocket where my Mauser lay.

Even if the stranger had noticed the movement he would not have paid any attention to it, as he knew nothing about the Mauser. I gripped the warm handle and quietly released the safety catch. Meanwhile my enemy had stepped back two or three paces either to get a better look at me or, what is more likely, to give himself more elbow room with the club. Tightening my quivering lips and straightening my benumbed arm, I drew the pistol and levelled it at the crouching man.

I saw his distorted face and heard his shout as he hurled himself upon me, and my finger mechanically pulled the trigger. . . .

He lay within two paces of me, his clenched fists stretched in my direction. The club lay at his side.

"I've killed him," the thought shot through my dazed mind as I dropped my head in the grass.

I lay there for a long time, stunned and semi-conscious. The heat dropped. The blood drained from my face, and I suddenly felt cold, my teeth began to chatter. I sat up and looked at the hands stretched towards me. It was terrifying. This was real! Everything that had happened in my life until then had been merely a game really, even my running away from home, even my training with the splendid fighting squad of the Sormovo workingmen, even yesterday's wandering about the woods. Terror seized me, a fourteen-year-old boy, alone in this black forest with the body of a man whom I had killed outright. The buzzing in my ears stopped and a cold sweat broke out on my forehead.

Spurred on by terror, I got up, crept on tiptoes towards the body, snatched the leather case containing my identity paper, and backed away towards the bushes, keeping an eye all the time on the prostrate body. Then I turned and ran for it, straight through the bushes onto the road, making for the village where there were people. Anything but to remain here alone.

Chapter Three

At the first cottage a voice called out:

"Where the devil are you rushing? Hi, young scrub! Stop, you chump!"

The figure of a man with a rifle came out of the shadow of the cottage and went up to me.

"Where are you running to? Where d'you come from?" the sentry demanded, turning me round to face the moonlight.

"To you," I answered, panting. "You're comrades, aren't you—"

"We're comrades all right," he interrupted, "but who are your

'So am I—" I began jerkily. Unable to recover my breath, I handed him my case without a word.

"You are, eh?" the sentry queried in a more cheerful though still suspicious tone. "In that case, let's go and see the commander."

Despite the late hour the village was still awake. Horses were neighing. Gates creaked open to let peasant carts through, and someone yelled nearby:

"Dokukin! Do-ku-kin! Where the devil has he gone to?"

"What are you yelling about, Vaska?" my escort demanded as he drew level with the shouter.

"I'm looking for Mishka," the latter answered angrily. "We've been given sugar for two, and the boys say he's being sent ahead with the patrol." "He'll give it you tomorrow."

"Like fun he will! He'll eat it all up with his tea in the morning, the sweet-tooth!"

At this point the speaker saw me and immediately changed his tone, asking with curiosity:

"Who have you nabbed there, Chubuk? Taking him down to headquarters? Go ahead. They'll show him there what's what. Ugh, you swine," he suddenly swore at me and made a movement as if intending to prod me on with the butt of his rifle.

But my escort pushed him away and growled: "Get along with you. It's none o' your business. Just like a dog you are, snapping at a man before you know what it's all about!"

Clink, clink! Clink, clink! I heard a metallic tinkle from the side. A man in spurs, wearing a black *papakha,* a gleaming dragging sabre, and a Mauser in a wooden holster, with a whip slung across his arm, was leading a horse out of a gate.

At his side walked a bugler.

"Assembly," the man said, putting a foot in the stirrup.

"Ta-ta-ra-ta. .. tata..." the bugle sang out softly. "Ta-ta-ta-ta-a-a . . . ."

"Shebalov," my escort called out. "Wait a minute! I've brought a man here to see you."

"A man?" the other said, his foot still in the stirrup. "Who is he?"

"He say he's one of us. I daresay he's got documents."

"I have no time now," the commander answered, swinging into the saddle. "You're a literate man, Chubuk, check 'em yourself. If he's a friend, let him go wherever he wants to."

"I won't go anywhere," I spoke up, fearing to be left alone again. "I've been running about the woods as it is these last two days. I've come to stay with you."

"With us?" the man in the black *papakha* queried. "Maybe we have no need of you at all!"

"You do!" I repeated doggedly. "What am I to do with myself, all alone?"

"True enough! If he's really one of us, what can he do by himself?" my escort inserted. "This is a bad place for taking a stroll on your own these days. Don't beat about the bush, Shebalov, don't keep the man waiting. If he's lying, it's one thing, but if he's one of us, don't keep him on tenterhooks. Get off the horse, you've got plenty o' time."

"Chubuk!" the commander said sternly. "Is that the way to speak to your chief? Am I commander or not? I ask you—am I commander?"

"It's a fact!" Chubuk coolly agreed.

"In that case I'll get off without you telling me."

He sprang to the ground, tossed the bridle rein onto the fence and made for the cottage with a rattle of his sabre.

It was not until we were inside the cottage that I got a proper look at him in the dim light of a wick lamp. He had no beard or moustaches. His thin narrow face was coarse-grained. Thick whitish eyebrows met over the bridge of his nose, and from under them looked out a pair of kindly eyes, which he purposely screwed up, evidently to impart to his face a stern look. From the long time he spent reading my document, in the course of which his lips kept stirring slightly, I gathered that he was not very literate. After reading the document, he handed it to Chubuk, saying doubtfully:

"If it isn't a false document then it must be real. What do you say, Chubuk?"

"Uhu!" the other calmly agreed, filling his curved pipe with makhorka.

"Well, what are you doing here?" the commander asked.

Excitedly I began my story, fearing that they would not believe me. But apparently they did, because when I had finished the commander no longer pursed his eyes and he turned to Chubuk, saying genially:

"Strikes me that if this lad of ours is not lying he must be telling the truth! What do you say, Chubuk?"

"Uhu," the latter coolly observed, knocking the ash out of his pipe against the sole of his boot.

"What are we going to do with him?"

"We'll enrol him in Company One, Sukharev can give him the rifle Pashka used before he was killed," Chubuk suggested.

The commander thought this over, tapping his fingers on the table.

"All right, Chubuk, take him down to Company One and tell Sukharev to give him the rifle that Pashka used before he was killed. Let him have cartridges too—the usual ration. Let him enter this man in the list of our revolutionary detachment."

Chink-chink! Clink-clink!—rattled his sabre, spurs and Mauser. The commander pushed open the door and sauntered down to his horse.

"Come along," Chubuk said to me, and suddenly patted me on the back.

Again the bugle sang out its soft lilting song. The horses snorted louder, the carts creaked still more. I felt as happy as can be as I went, smiling, to meet my new comrades. We walked all night. In the morning we entrained at some wayside station. In the evening a battered engine was hitched to our troop train and we rolled on southward to join the combat units and workers' detachments fighting the Germans, the Gaidamaks and the Krasnovites, who had seized the Donbas.

Our detachment bore the proud name of Special Detachment of the Revolutionary Proletariat. There were not many men in it, only about a hundred and fifty. It was an unmounted force with its own mounted scout party of fifteen men under the command of Fedya Sirtsov. The detachment was commanded by Shebalov, a bootmaker, whose fingers had not yet healed from the cuts of the wax-ends and whose hands were still stained with blacking. He was quite a character, our commander. The boys treated him with respect, although they laughed at some of his weaknesses. One of these was his love of outward display. His horse was decorated with red ribbons, his spurs (which he must have dug up in some museum) were extraordinarily long-shanked, curved affairs such as I had seen only on pictures of medieval knights; his nickel-plated sabre reached to the ground and the wooden lid of his Mauser had a brass plate fitted into it bearing the engraved motto: "I'll die, but you'll perish, you skunk!" He was said to have left a wife and three children at home. The eldest was already working. He deserted from the front after the February revolution and sat stitching boots, and when the cadets started attacking the Kremlin, he put on his Sunday best, some customer's brand-new top boots just made to order, got himself a rifle from a workers' fighting squad in Arbat, and from then on, as he expressed it, "threw his lot in with the revolution".

Chapter Four

Three days later, just short of railway station Shakhtnaya, our detachment hastily detrained.

A young cavalryman came galloping up from somewhere or other and handed Shebalov a sealed envelope, saying with a smile, as if communicating good news:

"Yesterday at Krayushkovo the Germans mowed our men down like billyo. Gee, it was pretty hot!"

The detachment was given the task of cutting into the enemy's rear, avoiding the units scattered about the villages, and contacting the detachment of Donets miners under Begichev.

"How am I to contact 'em?" Shebalov said, jabbing at the map with his finger. "Where am I to look for the detachment? They write: 'between Oleshkin and Sosnovskoye.' You tell me the exact place, it's all very well to say 'contact' and 'between'. . . ."

Shebalov swore at the staff chiefs, who did not understand a blessed thing, and were only good at writing orders, and sent for the company commanders. Though he swore at the "staff crowd", Shebalov was nevertheless pleased at having been assigned an independent mission and not being subordinated to some other more numerous detachment.

There were three company commanders: the cleanshaven cool Czech Galda, the surly N.C.O. Sukharev, and the twenty-three-year-old jovial accordion player and dancer Fedya Sirtsov, a former cowherd.

They all sat round the map in a clearing, hemmed in by a ring of Red Army men.

"Well," Shebalov said, holding up the paper, "according to this order I have received, we've got to get into the enemy's rear to operate near Begichev's detachment, and we've got to march out tonight, giving the enemy units a wide berth and not touching 'em. Is that clear?"

"That's a mouthful—not touching 'em. How can you help it?" Fedya Sirtsov said with cunning naivete.

"By not touching 'em," Shebalov said, turning his head towards Fedya and showing him his fist. "I know you, you devil. I'll touch you! None of your monkey tricks, now! So we march out tonight," he went on. "No carts, machine-guns and cartridges in packloads—no noise or rattling. If there's any village in our path we bypass it quietly, no going for it like a hungry dog after carrion. This is specially for your benefit, Fedya. If those lazybones of yours see a farmyard they don't care a hang if it's out of the way or not, they make a beeline for it, after the cream."

"So do mine," the Czech Galda confessed. "Last times der scouts dey bring a cask with raw dough. I say to dem: 'Why you bring raw?' and dey say to me: 'We bake it on der fire.' "

Everyone laughed, and even Shebalov smiled. "That was at Debaltsevo," Vaska Shmakov said, laughing. "It's us he's complaining about. We went reconnoitring, and came on a Cossack—a rich Cossack. Someone in the house started peppering us with rifles, but we got in all the same. The place was empty. The stove was heating and on the table stood a dough-trough. We set fire to the place and took the trough with us. Afterwards, in the evening, we baked the stuff in a campfire. Tasty dough, it was, like a cake."

"You set fire to the farmhouse?" I queried. "How can you burn a farmhouse?"

"Down to the ground," Vaska answered coolly. "Of course you can, when the owners take pot shots at you. They're a bad lot, those Cossacks. He's a rich chap, he'll build a new house—it'll keep him away from those Gaidamak bandits."

"What if it only makes him wilder and he'll hate the Reds still more for it?"

"He can't do that," Vaska answered gravely. "The rich ones couldn't hate us more if they wanted to. Petka Kokshin, one of our boys, fell into their hands, and they flogged him for three days before they killed him. And you talk about hating us more!"

Before the night march the boys cooked porridge with pork fat in billycans, baked potatoes in the hot ashes, lolled about in the grass, cleaned their rifles and relaxed. In company commander Sukharev's cart I saw an old greatcoat. The skirt had holes burnt in it, but the coat was still wearable. I asked Sukharev to let me have it.

"What d'you want it for?" he said roughly. "You've got a good cloth coat of your own. I need this coat myself. I'll make a pair of trousers out of it."

"Make it out of mine," I suggested, "no, really. All the boys are wearing army khaki coats, and I'm wearing a black coat, like a crow."

"You don't say!" Sukharev looked at me in surprise. His coarse peasant face expanded into an incredulous grin. "You really want to swop? To be sure," he added quickly, "whoever heard of a soldier in an overcoat? Looks like nothing on earth. Never mind the greatcoat being burnt a bit, you can have it shortened. I'll throw in a grey *papakha* into the bargain—I've got an extra one."

We made the exchange, both pleased with the bargain. When I walked away, uniformed like a real Red Army man, with my rifle slung over my shoulder, I heard him say to Vaska, who had just come up:

"I'll send it home to the missus when I get a chance. What does he want it for? If he gets hit the whole coat will be ruined. Won't the missus be pleased!"

In the night Fedya Sirtsov secured two guides at the first farmstead we passed. Two in order to be sure that the detachment would not take the wrong road leading to the enemy. The guides were separated, and when, at the crossroads, one of them said we had to turn left, we asked the other one, and only when their directions coincided did we follow that path.

At first we walked in pairs through the forest, colliding every minute with those in front. Fedya Sirtsov had given orders beforehand for the horses' hooves to be wrapped in footcloths. At daybreak we turned off the road and came out onto a clearing, where we decided to rest, as it was dangerous to go any farther in daylight. We left a listening post near the road, among the raspberry thickets. Towards noon a west wind wafted up the heavy rumble of an artillery duel.

Shebalov went past with a preoccupied air. Fedya walked at his side with a firm springy step, talking quickly. They stopped next to Sukharev.

Their words reached me:

"Reconnoitre the ravine."

"Mounted?"

"No, too noticeable. Send three scouts out, Sukharev."

"You'll take charge, Chubuk," the commander said half-questioningly. "Take Shmakov and choose another reliable man."

"Take me, Chubuk," I said quietly. "I'll be very reliable."

"Take Simka Gorshkov," Sukharev suggested.

"Me, Chubuk," I whispered again, "take me. I'll be the most reliable."

"Uhu," Chubuk said with a nod.

I jumped up and all but squealed, because I did not believe myself that they would take me for such a serious job. I fastened on my cartridge pouch and slung my rifle on my shoulder, but stopped, put out by Sukharev's sceptical look.

"What are you taking him for?" he said to Chubuk. "He's likely to gum up the works for you. Take Simka." "Simka?" Chubuk queried musingly, striking a match and lighting up.

"Idiot!" I said to myself, my face turning white with mortification and hatred of Sukharev. "How can he say such things of me in front of others? If they don't take me, I'll go out on my own on purpose. I'll go right into the village, find out everything and come back again. Sukharev can go and bury himself then!"

Chubuk shot open the bolt, slipped four cartridges into the magazine, put the fifth in firing position and turned the safety lock. Indifferently, little knowing how important his decision was for me, he said:

"Simka? Well, I don't mind." He adjusted his bandolier, then, glancing at my white face, he suddenly smiled and said somewhat roughly: "Oh, I don't know about Simka. This one'll do, he means business. Come along, lad!" I made a dash for the edge of the wood.

"Stop!" Chubuk checked me sternly. "None o' your colting now. This is no picnic. Have you got a bomb? You haven't? Take one of mine. Don't stick it in your pocket handle down, the ring will slip off when you pull it out. Keep the primer down. That's right. Ugh, you eager beaver!" he added more kindly.

Chapter Five

"You take the right slope," Chubuk commanded. "Shmakov will take the left, and I'll go down the bottom, in the middle. Soon as you spot anything, give me the sign."

We moved forward slowly. Within half an hour I saw Shmakov on the brow of the left slope slightly behind me. He walked in a crouching attitude, his head thrust forward. His usually good-natured roguish face was now grave and hard.

There was a bend in the ravine and I lost sight of both Shmakov and Chubuk. I knew they were there somewhere, close by, moving forward like I was, screened by the bushes. The realisation that despite our seeming isolated-ness we were strongly linked together by our common task and common danger gave me courage. The ravine widened. The thickets grew denser. Another bend, and I dropped flat onto the ground.

A large cavalry detachment was moving down a wide stone-paved road that ran parallel with the right slope at a distance of a mere hundred paces or so.

The black sleek horses stepped out briskly under their riders; three or four officers rode at the head. Just opposite me the detachment halted, and the commander got out a map and studied it.

I backed away and crawled down, looking round for Chubuk in order to give him the prearranged signal.

Though my heart was in my mouth the thought flashed through my mind that I hadn't gone out reconnoitring for nothing and that I was the first to have spotted the enemy.

"But where's Chubuk?" I thought with alarm, looking round me hastily. I was about to scramble down to the bottom to look for him when my attention was drawn to a bush on the left slope of the ravine which stirred slightly.

Vaska Shmakov, looking out cautiously from behind the bush on the opposite slope, made warning motions to me with his hand and pointed to the bottom of the ravine.

At first I thought he was ordering me to go down, but following the direction in which he pointed I gasped and drew my head in.

A White soldier was walking along the densely overgrown bed of the ravine, leading a horse. Whether he was looking for a watering-place, or whether he was one of the mounted flank patrol guarding the movement of the column, he was an enemy who had penetrated our lines. I did not know what to do. The horseman disappeared behind the bushes. I could only see Vaska now. But Vaska, on the other side, must have seen something else that was hidden from my sight.

He stood on one knee with the butt of his rifle resting on the ground and one arm stretched out towards me warning me not to move, while he looked down, ready to spring.

A tramping on my right made me look round. The cavalry detachment had turned off onto a cart track and broken into a trot. In the same instant Vaska waved his hand to me with a sweeping gesture and leaping straight over the bush, he dashed down the ravine. I followed suit. Rolling down to the bottom I saw two men struggling, locked in each other's arms, next to the bushes. One of them I identified as Chubuk, the other was the enemy soldier. I don't remember how I got to the spot. Chubuk was underneath, gripping the hand of the White, who was trying to draw his pistol from its holster. Instead of hitting the enemy with the butt of my rifle, I dropped the rifle and started pulling him by the legs. He was heavy, though, and kicked me away. I fell on my back, but caught hold of his hand and bit his finger. The White cried out and jerked his hand away. All of a sudden the bushes parted noisily and Vaska appeared, wet from the waist down. With a practised drill-ground movement he leapt at the soldier and knocked him down.

Chubuk got up from the grass, coughing and spitting.

"Vaska!" he said in a hoarse jerky voice, pointing to the horse who was nibbling the grass.

"Aha," Vaska answered, and picking up the trailing bridle rein, he pulled it towards him.

"Take him along," Chubuk gasped, pointing to the stunned Gaidamak.

Vaska caught on at once.

"Tie his hands!"

Chubuk picked up my rifle, slashed the strap off with two strokes of the bayonet and pinioned the elbows of the still unconscious soldier.

"Take hold of his feet," he shouted to me. "Wake up, blast you!" he swore, seeing my confusion.

We rolled our captive across the horse's back. Vaska leapt into the saddle, and without a word, whipped the horse and galloped back down the uneven bed of the ravine.

"This way!" Chubuk wheezed, red and perspiring, pulling my arm. "After me!"

He clambered up the side, clutching at the bushes.

"Stop!" he said, halting near the brow. "Sit down!"

We crouched behind the bushes just in time to see five horsemen below. Evidently this was the main body of the flank patrol. The horsemen stopped and glanced around; they were obviously looking for their comrade. We could hear them cursing loudly. All five snatched their carbines from their shoulders. One of them dismounted and picked something up. It was the soldier's cap which we had left behind in the grass in our hurry. The horsemen began speaking in tones of alarm, and one of them, apparently the chief, pointed forward.

"They'll overtake Vaska," I thought. "He's carrying a heavy weight. There are five of them and he's alone."

"Chuck the bomb down!" Chubuk commanded. Something gleamed in his hand and hurtled down.

A dull thud stunned me.

"Chuck it down!" Chubuk shouted, then snatched the bomb from my raised hand, released the safety catch and threw the bomb down the ravine.

"Bloody fool!" he barked at me, utterly dazed as I was by the explosion and the swift succession of unexpected perils. "You pulled off the ring, but left the safety catch on!"

We ran across a newly ploughed muddy vegetable plot. The Whites were evidently unable to make a swift ascent of the slope on horseback on account of the bushes and were climbing out on foot. We had time to reach another ravine, then raced across a field and plunged into a wood. Far behind us came the sound of rifle shots.

"They must have caught up with Vaska!" I stammered in a voice not like my own.

"No," Chubuk said, listening to the shooting. "Just working off their bad temper. Come on, lad, put your best foot forward! We'll throw them off the trail now."

We went along in silence. It seemed to me that Chubuk was wild with me and despised me for having taken fright and dropped my rifle, for having bitten the soldier's finger in that ridiculous schoolboy fashion, for having been unable to control my shaking hands when hoisting our prisoner onto the horse's back, and most of all for having lost my nerve to such an extent that I was unable to throw the bomb. More bitter still and shameful was the thought that Chubuk would tell the men in the detachment about me, and Sukharev was bound to remark: "I told you not to take him. You should have taken Simka."

Tears of mortification and anger with myself for my cowardice started to my eyes.

Chubuk halted, got out his tobacco pouch and began to fill his pipe with makhorka. I noticed that his fingers, too, were shaking slightly. He inhaled thirstily, as if he were drinking water, then thrust the pouch back into his pocket, patted me on the shoulder and said simply and gaily:

"Narrow escape that was, old chap, eh? You haven't done so badly, Boris! The way you sank your teeth into his hand!" He chuckled at the memory. "Just like a wolf cub. Well, a rifle's not the only weapon you can use in war, old chap. Teeth come in useful too sometimes!"

"But what about the bomb..." I muttered guiltily. "I was going to throw it with the safety catch on."

"The bomb?" Chubuk smiled. "You're not the only one, old chap. Everyone who's not used to it bungles it at first —either he throws it with the safety catch or without the primer altogether. I used to throw it that way myself when I was young. You get all bamboozled, you don't know what you're doing. You just chuck the darned thing like you would a cobblestone. Come along. We've got a long way to go."

We walked the rest of the way to where our detachment stood with a light step and a light heart. I felt like a pupil at after-examination time.

Sukharev would never pass offensive remarks about me again.

On reaching the detachment, Vaska handed over his stunned prisoner to the commander. The White came to himself at daybreak and reported, when interrogated, that the railway line, which we had to cross, was guarded by an armoured train, that a German battalion was posted at the flag station and that a Whiteguard detachment under Captain Zhikharev was billeted in Glukhovka.

The vivid green foliage smelt of blossoming bird-cherry. The rested boys were cheerful and seemingly carefree. Fedya Sirtsov returned from reconnaissance with his rollicking cavalrymen and reported that the way in front was clear, and that the peasants in the nearby village stood for the Reds, because only the other day the landowner, who had run away at the beginning of October, had returned to the village and was making a round of the cottages with soldiers, collecting the property from his estate. All those who were found to have estate property in their homes were flogged on the square facing the church more severely than in the days of serfdom, and so the peasants would only be glad if the Reds came.

Washing down a slice of pork fat with hot water in lieu of tea, I joined the crowd of Red Army men huddled round the prisoner.

"Hullo!" Vaska Shmakov greeted me with a friendly shout, drawing his sleeve across his perspiring face after draining a messtin of hot water. "You're a fine one, you are. "

"What d'you mean?"

"Chucking your rifle away yesterday."

"And who was first to jump down the slope and last to come to the rescue?" I parried.

"I landed right in a bog, old chap, only just managed to pull my legs out. That's why I was late. We were pretty smart, though. When I heard that bomb go off behind me, I thought you and Chubuk were done for. I did, it's a fact. I came galloping in and told the boys: 'Their goose is cooked, I'm afraid.' And I says to myself: 'He didn't want to swap his leather case with me, and now the Whites would get it for nothing!' It's a fine case," he said, touching the flat mapcase slung across my shoulder, which I had taken from the stranger I had killed. "Ah, well, I care a fat lot—you can keep it if you want," he added. "I had a better one than that last month, only I sold it. You needn't be so stuck-up about it!" he wound up with a contemptuous sniff.

I looked at Vaska in surprise. He had such a foolish red face and moved about so clumsily that it was hard to believe that only yesterday he had shown such agility in spying out the Whites and had whipped his horse furiously as he galloped away with his captive bound to his saddle.

The Red Army men bestirred themselves, finishing their breakfast, buttoning up their tunics, rewinding their foot-wraps. The detachment was preparing to take off.

I was ready, and while waiting for the others, I went to the edge of the wood to have a look at the blossoming bird-cherries.

The sound of footsteps behind me attracted my attention. I saw the captive Gaidamak, and behind him, three of our men and Chubuk.

"I wonder where they are going?" I thought, looking at the dishevelled gloomy prisoner.

"Stop!" Chubuk commanded, and they all halted.

Glancing again at the White and at Chubuk, I realised what they had brought the prisoner here for. Tearing my feet away with difficulty, I ran back and stopped, clinging to the stem of a birch tree.

A short businesslike volley rang out behind me.

"My dear boy," Chubuk said gravely with a faint touch of regret in his voice, "if you think that war is a sort of game or a stroll through pretty places, you'd better go home. A White's a White, and there's no middle line between us and them. They shoot us, and we're not going to spare them!"

I looked up at him with reddened eyes and said quietly but firmly:

"I shall not go home, Chubuk. It was so unexpected. But I'm a Red and I went to fight myself. . ." here I faltered and added quietly, sort of apologetically, "to fight for the bright kingdom of socialism."

Chapter Six

Peace between Russia and Germany had long since been concluded, yet the Ukraine and Donbas were still flooded with German troops, who helped the Whites to form detachments. The boisterous spring winds breathed fire and smoke.

Our detachment, like dozens of other partisan units, operated in the enemy's rear practically on its own. In the daytime we lay concealed in the fields or ravines or pitched camp at some remote farmstead; in the night we made raids on small garrisoned railway stations. We lay in ambush along country roads and attacked enemy transports, intercepted military messages and dispersed foraging parties.

But the haste with which we steered clear of large enemy units and the constant striving to avoid a pitched battle struck me at first as being shameful. I had been in the detachment now for six weeks and had not yet taken part in a single real fight. There had been skirmishes, raids on sleepy Whites and stragglers. We had cut any amount of wires, sawn down any number of telegraph poles, but had not engaged in any real fight yet.

"That's what we're partisans for," Chubuk explained, quite unembarrassed, when I voiced my surprise at what I considered such unseemly behaviour on the part of our detachment. "You'd like to have it the way they show in pictures—column formation, arms atilt, forward march. See what a brave lot we are! How many machine-guns have we got? One, and with only three belts to it. Zhikharev has four Maxims and two guns. What chance d'you stand against them? We've got to go about it differently. We partisans are like wasps—small but stinging. Ours are hit-and-run tactics. Bravery just for the sake of show is no use to us just now. It isn't bravery, it's simply foolishness!"

I got to know many of my comrades during that time. At night on guard duty, in the evening round the campfire. in the indolent heat of midday under the cherry trees in the honey orchards, I heard a good many stories about the lives of my comrades.

The dour, always sullen-faced Maligin with one eye— the other had been blown out by an explosion in the mine—related of himself:

"I can't say much about my life. All I can say is it was pretty tough. My life during the last twenty years could be divided into three equal parts. You got up at six, your nob splitting from the day before, put on your pit clothes, received your lamp and went inbye. You drilled holes for shot-firing and blasted away. You blasted and blasted till you were deafened and dazed, then you made for the shaft to go outbye. You were whisked to the top like a devil, all wet and black. That was part one of my life. Then you went to the wine-shop and got yourself a bottle—they didn't ask for any money, the office paid for that. And then you went to the mine shop, showed them the bottle there, and they'd give you without a word two pickled cucumbers, a loaf and a herring. That was the snack you were entitled to on the bottle. Tuck in—the office would deduct it from your pay. That was part two of my life. The third was going to bed and sleeping. I slept like a log. Enjoyed it even more than the vodka. I liked it on account of the dreams. I don't know what dreams are to this day. You see funny things in a dream. Can't make it out. For instance, once I dreamt that the mine foreman sent for me and says: 'Go to the office, Maligin, you're fired.' 'What for, sir?' I says to him. 'You're fired, Maligin,' he says, 'because you're planning to marry the director's daughter.' 'Who, me?' I says. 'Bless your heart, sir, whoever heard of a shot-firer marrying a director's daughter? Why,' I says, 'not even a common girl would marry me, a man with one eye knocked out.' Then everything got mixed up. The foreman turned out to be no foreman, but the director's stallion, hitched to their carriage. The director himself steps out o' that carriage, bows to me politely and says:

'I says, shot-firer Maligin, take my daughter for your wife with a dowry of ten thousand together with the foreman—I mean, the stallion and the carriage.' I was struck all of a heap, dazed with joy, and was about to go up when the director started hitting me with his walking stick and the foreman trampled on me with his hooves and neighed, 'Ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha! Just look at him!' And he trampled and trampled on me. So viciously that I cried out in my sleep, waking the whole bunk-house. Someone jabbed me in the ribs and swore at me for not letting people get any sleep."

"Some dream!" laughed Fedya Sirtsov. "I bet you stared too hard at the young lady, that's why you dreamt about her. It always happens with me—if I think of anything before going to sleep I'm bound to dream about it. Take those boots on the dead German that I missed taking off the other day. A fine pair of boots, they were. I dream of them every night now!"

"Boots! You're a boot yourself," Maligin said testily. "I saw the man's daughter only once a year before that. I was lying drunk in a ditch. She and her mother were walking down the path by the kitchen gardens, their horses following alongside. The mother, a posh lady, grey-haired, you know—she comes up to me and says: 'Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Where's your human dignity? Think of God.' 'Sorry, Ma'am,' I says, 'I have no human dignity, that's why I drink.'

"Her Ma took pity on me. She pushed *a* ten-kopek piece into my hand and says: 'My dear muzhik, just look, Nature all round is rejoicing, the sun's shining, the birds are singing, and you go and get drunk. Buy yourself some soda water to sober you.' This made me wild. 'I'm not a muzhik,' I says, 'I'm a worker at your mines. Nature can rejoice as much as she damn well likes, but I've got nothing to rejoice at. As for soda water, I never drank it in my life, and if you want to do a kind deed, add another ten-kopek piece for a half bottle and I'll cool my coppers to mark this agreeable meeting.' 'Boor,' the noble lady then says to me, 'boor! I'll tell my husband tomorrow to dismiss you from here, from the mines.' She and her daughter got into the carriage and drove off. That's the only talk I had with her. As for the daughter, she stood with her head turned away while we were talking. And you say I stared at her!"

"Dreams—nothing!" Fedya Sirtsov said with a grin. "Want me to tell you a real story about me and a countess? It was this incident, one might say, that started me revolutionising. If you was to hear this story you wouldn't believe your ears."

Fedya tossed his mop of hair and screwed up his eyes ecstatically, like a cat coming out of the larder.

"More yarns, Fedya?" Vaska Shmakov asked with curiosity and disbelief, moving up closer.

"You can believe me or not—that's your business. I'm not going to produce any documents to prove it."

Fedya stretched himself, shook his head as if debating with himself whether to tell the story or not, then clucked his tongue with an air of decision and started off.

"It happened three years ago. I was a good looker, I needn't tell you, better even than I am now. Things worked out so that I was obliged to take a job as herdsboy at the Count's estate. Our Count had a wife, Emilia her name was, and a governess named Anna—Jeannette, they called her.

"Well, one day I was sitting near the herd by the pond, when I saw the two coming along under sunshades. The Countess had a white sunshade and Jeannette a red one. That Jeannette looked like a dried herring—skinny, with spectacles on her nose, and when she walked through the village she'd cover her nose with a handkerchief, because the smell of dung gave her a headache. I must tell you, I had a bull in my herd—a real Simmenthal, a huge prize bull. When that bull o' mine saw that red sunshade he made a beeline straight for Jeannette. I dashed across his path like mad. The two ladies screamed. The Countess dived into the bushes, but Jeannette lost her head and dived straight into the pond. The Simmenthal went in after her, but instead of throwing away her sunshade the fool-woman covered herself up with it for protection, screaming all the time in German or French, I couldn't make out which. I plunged into the water, tore the sunshade out of her hands and hit the bull on the nose with it. He went for me then like mad. I swam out into the middle and threw the sunshade away, then I struck out for the opposite bank and dived into the bushes. By this time the herdsmen had come running up; there was a racket and yelling, they rounded up the bull, and pulled Jeannette out of the ooze. On the bank she went into a faint."

Fedya breathed hard as if he had just escaped from the bull. He clucked his tongue, preparatory to continuing the story, but just then someone shouted out from the farmhouse porch:

"Fyodor ... Sirtsov! The commander wants to see you." ;

"In a minute," Fedya said, waving his hand with annoyance. Then, smiling, he went on: "While they were bringing Jeannette round, Countess Emilia comes up to me, white as a sheet, tears in her eyes, chest heaving. 'Young man,' she says, 'who are you?' 'I'm a herdsboy, Your Excellency,' I says, 'my name is Sirtsov, Fyodor Sirtsov.' So then the Countess sighs and says to me: Theodore,' she says—that's their name for Fyodor—'Theodore, come up to me closer.' "

What the Countess told Fedya, and what it had to do with him afterwards joining the Reds I was not to learn until another time, because there came a clink of spurs and an angry Shebalov cropped up behind me.

"Fyodor," he said sternly, stopping and leaning on his sabre, "didn't you hear me call for you?"

"I did," Fedya grunted, getting up. "What is it now?"

"What d'you mean 'what is it now'? Don't you have to go when your commander sends for you?"

"Yessir. What does your highness want?" Fedya came back mockingly.

This retort stung Shebalov to the quick, easy-going and mild-tempered though he usually was.

"I'm not your highness," he said in a grave pained tone. "You don't have to 'sir' me, but I'm the commander of this detachment and I've got to demand obedience. Peasants from Temlukov hamlet have just been here."

"So what?" Fedya's black eyes darted shiftily.

"They complained. They said: 'Your scouts came along. We were glad, of course—our own people, comrades. The man in charge, a darkish fellow, called a meeting and spoke up for the Soviet power, talked about the land and the landowners. But while we were listening and passing a resolution his boys started rummaging about in our cellars looking for *smetana* and catching fowls.' What is this, Fyodor? Maybe you've made a mistake in coming to us instead of the Gaidamaks? They practise this sort of thing, but we can't have it in our detachment—it's a disgrace!"

Fedya maintained a contemptuous silence as, eyes lowered, he tapped the toe of his boot with his whip.

"I'm telling you for the last time, Fyodor," Shebalov continued, toying with his red sword knot, "I'm no highness to you, I'm a bootmaker and a simple man, but so long as I've been appointed commander here I demand obedience from you. And I warn you now in front of everybody that if this goes on I'll send you to the rightabout, good soldier and a comrade though you are."

Fedya eyed Shebalov defiantly, and glanced at the faces of the Red Army men standing around them. Finding no support there other than three or four cavalrymen who smiled to him encouragingly, this put his back up still more and he answered Shebalov with ill-concealed resentment:

"Be careful what you're doing, Shebalov. Good men are not so easy to come by these days."

"I'll drive you out," Shebalov said quietly, and lowering his head, he made his way slowly to the porch.

The incident left me with an unpleasant aftertaste. I knew that Shebalov was right, yet I was on Fedya's side. "Why not just tell the man without using threats," I thought.

Fedya was one of our best men, always gay and full of life. Whenever there was a need to find things out, to make a sudden raid on a foraging party or to creep up to a landowner's estate that was being guarded by Whites, it was always Fedya who found a convenient road and stole up to the place by way of winding ravines and backyards.

Fedya liked to creep up quietly without a sound of hooves, clink of spurs of a neigh. He would not think twice about punching a horse's nose to quieten it, or using a whip on the riders' backs to stop their whisperings. Fedya's horses were trained not to neigh, and their riders, rooted in their saddles, not to whisper; Fedya himself at the head of the scout party, slightly hunched over the shaggy mane of his pacer, resembled a predatory pangolin wriggling towards a fat fly entangled in the grass.

But when the enemy guard did get wind of him and raised a panicky alarm, the taut little detachment, with whoops and yells, with the crackle of rifle shots and the crash of scattered bombs, would strike swiftly before the Whites, taken by surprise, had time to pull on their trousers or the sleepy-eyed machine-gunner could fix the belt. That is when Fedya loved a din and racket. What if the bullets, fired from the saddle of a galloping horse, missed their aim, what if a bomb, thrown at random into the grass, sent the terrified hens and fat ganders flying almost to the chimneypots, so long as there was plenty of noise and panic. The thing was to make the stunned enemy believe that a countless force of Reds had torn into the village. The thing was to make fingers fumbling with cartridge clips tremble, to make the machine-gun, rolled out hastily, choke with a twisted belt-feed, and to make the soldiers dash out of the houses, dazed and half-asleep, dropping their rifles and yelling wildly, gibberish with terror: "The Reds! We're surrounded!" And then, bombs back under belts, rifles slung across backs, Fedya's scouts, flushed with success, would start work silently with cold razor-edged sword blades. That was what our Fedya Sirtsov was like. "Fancy driving a man like that out of our detachment over some wretched fowls and cream!" I thought.

I was still thinking of the quarrel between Fedya and Shebalov, when Chubuk, occupying an observer's post on the roof, shouted down that a large enemy foot force was coming down the road towards the farm. The Red Army men started dashing about in a feverish bustle. No commander, it seemed, could succeed in putting this excited mass in order. No one waited for commands, and everyone knew beforehand what he had to do. One at a time, checking the cartridges in their magazines as they ran, chewing the last of their interrupted breakfast, the men of Galda's First Company ran, bending low, to the edge of the hamlet and dropped down onto the ground, forming an extended line. The scouts tightened the saddle girth and bridled their horses, and untied the hobbles, sometimes slashing them off with a stroke of the sword. The machine-gunners dragged their Colt and belts off the cart. Sukharev, red and perspiring, ran to the edge of the wood, followed by the men of Company Two. After a minute or two everything was quiet. Shebalov came down the steps, issuing some order or other to Fedya. Fedya nodded an "all right, it'll be done". The shutters closed with a bang and the farmer with his women-folk and children went down into the cellar.

"Stop," Shebalov said to me. "You stay here. Get onto the roof with Chubuk. Report to me on the edge of the wood whatever he sees from there. And tell him to keep an eye on the Khamur road on the right as well, in case there's anything there."

One, two, clink, clink. . . . A duck, lazily basking in the sun, quacked; a flame-coloured cock, its tail smeared with wheel-grease, crowed triumphantly from the fence. When it fell silent, flopping into the dusty weeds with a heavy beat of wings, everything became quiet at the farm, so quiet that one could now hear, floating out of the stillness, the trill of the sunny lark and the monotonous drone of the bees, gathering drops of warm sweet-scented honey from the flowers.

"What's the matter?" Chubuk said without turning round, when I had climbed up onto the straw-thatched roof.

"Shebalov sent me to help you."

"All right, sit quiet and don't show yourself."

"Keep an eye on the right, Chubuk," I said, passing on Shebalov's order, "in case there's anything on the Khamur road."

"Sit where you are," he answered briefly, and taking his cap off, he thrust his big head out from behind the chimney.

There was no sign of the enemy detachment. It was hidden in a hollow and would reappear at any moment. The straw on the roof was slippery and to keep myself from sliding down I sat without stirring and dug my heels in for a foothold. Chubuk's head almost touched my face, I noticed for the first time that grey streaks were breaking through the black wiry hair. "Can it be that he's an old man?" I wondered.

It struck me as odd for some reason that an elderly man like Chubuk with greying hair and wrinkles round the eyes was sitting here with me on the roof, lags clumsily parted to keep himself from slipping down and his big dishevelled head peeping out from behind the chimney. "Chubuk!" I whispered. "What is it?"

"You're getting old already, Chubuk."

"Sap. .." Chubuk said, getting angry. "Got a hinge on your tongue?"

Suddenly Chubuk ducked his head and drew back. The detachment was coming up out of the hollow. Chubuk's anxiety communicated itself to me. He began to breathe hard and stirred uneasily. "Boris, look!" "I see them."

"Run down and tell Shebalov they've come out of the hollow, but there's something suspicious about it: at first they were in a march column, but while they were in the hollow they deployed in platoon formation. D'you get me: why should they re-form in platoons? Maybe they've got wind of us being at this farm? Off you go! Get back quickly!"

I pulled my heel out of the straw, tumbled down and dropped onto a fat pig, who darted away with a squeal. I found Shebalov. He was standing behind a tree looking through his field glasses. I gave him Chubuk's message.

"So I see," Shebalov answered in a tone as if I had offended him in some way. "I see myself."

I realised that he was simply irritated at the enemy's unexpected manoeuvre.

"Run back and don't come down; keep a careful eye on the flank, on the Khamur road."

I ran into the empty farmyard and climbed up the dry wattle fence to get up on the roof.

"Soldier-boy!" I heard a whisper.

I turned round, startled, not knowing where the voice came from.

"Soldier-boy!" the voice repeated.

Here I noticed that the cellar door in the yard was ajar and a woman's head peeped out at me. It was the farmer's wife.

"Are they coming?" she whispered.

"Yes," I answered in a whisper.

"Have they got guns or only machine-guns?" the woman asked, hastily crossing herself. "I hope to God they've only got machine-guns, otherwise they'll smash the place to pieces!"

Before I could answer her a shot rang out and an invisible bullet sang its shrill "piing" somewhere high up in the sky.

The woman's head disappeared and the cellar door slammed to. "It's starting," I thought, experiencing a surge of that painful excitement that seizes a man before battle—not when the shooting has started with its angry spatter of machine-gun bursts and the deep chugging of batteries entering the fray, but when nothing yet has happened and the real danger is still to come. "Why is it so quiet," you think, "and so long in coming? I wish it started quickly!"

"Ping!" snarled a second bullet.

But nothing had started yet. Probably the Whites suspected that the farmstead was occupied by the Reds, but were not quite sure, and had fired two shots at random. So does the commander of a scout party creep up to the enemy's outpost area and open fire in order to ascertain the enemy's strength by the sound of his response, after which he moves to the other flank and opens a running fire to give the enemy the jitters, and then hastens back to his own detachment without having won any battle or inflicted any losses, but with his purpose achieved in that he had made the enemy deploy and reveal his actual strength.

Our detachment, strung out in skirmish line, was silent and did not answer the shot.

Then five cavalrymen on black prancing horses, defying danger, detached themselves from the enemy's ranks and started forward at a smart trot. Three hundred metres short of the farm the horsemen stopped and one of them trained his binoculars on the house. The lenses slid along the edge of the fence and crept upwards to the roof and the chimney, behind which Chubuk and I lay hidden.

"Cunning, they know where to look for an observer," I thought as I hid my head behind Chubuk's back, experiencing the unpleasant sensation that comes over a man in war, when the enemy draws you to his eyes with his binoculars against your will, when a searchlight beam stabs the darkness and snatches out the column in which you are marching, or when a reconnaissance plane circles overhead and you have no means of hiding yourself from its unseen observers.

Your own head then seems to have grown to an enormous size, your arms seem longer, your body clumsy and heavy. You are annoyed that you can't conceal them, can't shrink, curl yourself up into a ball, merge with the straw of the roof or the grass, like a grey ruffled sparrow merging with a heap of brushwood under the stony gaze of a silent hovering vulture.

"They've spotted us!" Chubuk cried. And as if to show that it was no use now playing at hide-and-seek, he came out from behind the chimney and shot the bolt home.

I wanted to climb down and report to Shebalov, but our men on the edge of the wood must have guessed that the ambush had failed and that the Whites would not attack the farm without deploying, because bullets flew after the retreating horsemen from behind the trees. The deployed platoons of the Whites, strung out in a broken dotted skirmish line, crept out to the right and left. Before reaching the knoll over which the Whites were scattered, the last of the galloping horsemen dropped into the road together with his horse. When the wind had blown away the cloud of dust, I saw that the horse alone lay in the roadway, while the rider, bent up double, ran limping towards his detachment.

A bullet striking the brickwork of the chimney amid a spatter of plaster dust made us hide our heads. The chimney was a good target. True, we were safe from direct hits behind it, but we were pinned down. If it were not for Shebalov's order that we should watch the Khamur road, we would have climbed down. The desultory shooting developed into a fire fight. The sporadic rifle shots of the Whites died down and the machine-guns started chattering. Under cover of their fire the uneven line moved forward several dozen paces, and lay down again. Then the machine-guns fell silent and the exchange of rifle shots was resumed. Thus, gradually, with a persistence that showed good discipline and training, the Whites moved nearer and nearer.

"Tough devils," Chubuk muttered. "Pushing forward like on a chess-board. They don't look like Zhikharevites. I wonder if they're Germans?"

"Chubuk!" I cried out. "Look at the Khamur road, something's moving there on the edge of the wood."

"Where?"

"No, not there. More to the right. Across that pond there. See it!" I shouted, catching a gleam of something on the edge of the wood, like a sunbeam striking a piece of glass.

A strange sound filled the air, resembling the death-rattle of a horse. The rattle turned to a roar. The air rang like a cracked church bell. Something crashed nearby. For a moment it seemed to me as if right here, close at my side, brown lightning burst from a cloud of smoke and black dust, the air shook and the blast, like a wave of warm water, struck me in the back. When I opened my eyes I saw the dry straw roof of the wrecked barn burning with a pale flame that was almost invisible in the sunlight. The second shell landed in the vegetable beds.

"Let's get down," Chubuk said, turning to me an anxious face. "We're in for it. I'm afraid these are no Zhikharevites but Germans. There's a battery on the Khamur road."

The first person I ran into on the edge of the wood was a Red Army man of short stature nicknamed Polecat.

He was sitting in the grass, ripping open the sleeve of his blood-stained tunic with an Austrian bayonet. His rifle, with open bolt, from under which one could see an unejected cartridge case, lay next to him.

"Germans!" he shouted, without answering our question. "We're slinging our hook!"

I gave him my tin cup to draw water in and ran on.

Strictly speaking, Polecat's blood-stained sleeve and his remark about the Germans were the last things I could remember in any order of sequence when looking back upon that first real battle. All the rest I remember quite well, from the moment when Vaska Shmakov came up to me in the ravine and asked me for my cup to have a drink.

"What's that you've got in your hand?" he asked.

I looked and reddened at the sight of a large splinter of grey stone clutched tight in my left hand. How it got there, I don't know.

"Why are you wearing a helmet, Vaska?" I asked him.

"I took it off a German. Let me have a drink."

"I haven't got a cup. I gave it to Polecat."

"Polecat?" Vaska whistled. "You can say goodbye to it then."

"What do you mean? I only lent it to him to get a drink."

"It's the last you'll see of it," Vaska said with a grin, drawing water from the brook in his helmet. "The cup's gone, and Polecat with it."

"Killed?"

"Killed dead," Vaska said, grinning for some unaccountable reason. "Private Polecat, has died the death of a Red soldier."

"You're always grinning at things, Vaska!" I said. "Aren't you a bit sorry for Polecat?"

"Who, me?" Vaska sniffed and wiped his wet lips with a soiled hand. "Of course I am. I'm sorry for Polecat, and for Nikishin, and for Sergei, and for myself too. Look what they've done to my arm, damn 'em!"

He twitched his shoulder, and I noticed that his left arm was tied up with a piece of grey cloth.

"A flesh wound, just a scratch," he added. "It burns, though." He sniffed again, and said perkily: "Come to think of it, what should we be sorry for? It's not as if anyone drove us here by force. We knew what we were letting ourselves in for, didn't we? So what's the use being sorry!"

Various moments of the fight were stamped upon my memory, only I could not piece them together in any coherent sequence. I remember standing on one knee and exchanging shots for a long time with one and the same German, who was within no more than two hundred paces of me. I therefore took hasty aim, afraid that he would shoot before I did, and so I would pull the trigger and missed. He must have had the same feeling, because he too missed.

I remember a shell burst knocking over our machine-gun. It was immediately dragged away to another place.

"Drag the belts over!" Sukharev had shouted. "Lend a hand, damn you!"

I had seized one of the boxes lying in the grass and started lugging it over. Afterwards I remember Shebalov giving me a jab in the shoulder and swearing at me; what for, I couldn't make out at the time.

And then, I believe, a bullet got Nikishin. But no, Nikishin was killed before that, because he dropped when I was still running with the box and he had shouted to me: "You're dragging it the other way! Take it to the machine-gun!"

Fedya had his horse shot down under him.

"Fedya's crying," Chubuk said. "Stuck his head into the grass and blubbering, the crazy man. I went up to him. 'Don't be silly,' I says, 'there isn't time to cry over people.' Fedya whirled round and grabbed hold of his gun. 'Go away,' he says, 'go away before I shoot you.' He had a mad look in his eyes. I walked away. No sense in talking to a crazy man. He's a bad egg, Fedya," Chubuk continued, lighting his pipe. "I don't trust the man."

"What d'you mean, you don't trust him?" I said. "He's as brave as they make 'em."

"So what of it? He's a bad egg all the same. He's disorderly, doesn't recognise the Party men. 'My programme,' he says, 'is fight the Whites till they all peg out, and we'll see what's what when the time comes.' I don't like that programme somehow. It isn't a programme, it's all fog. A wind'll blow and there'll be nothing left of it!"

Ten of our men were killed and fourteen wounded, of whom six died. If we had a proper dressing station with doctors and medicines many of the wounded would have survived.

Instead of a dressing station we had a grass-plot, instead of a doctor a medical orderly from the German war named Kalugin, and the only drug we had was iodine —

a canister full of it. We used iodine unsparingly. I saw Kalugin fill a wooden soup spoon full to the brim with iodine and pour it out onto Lukoyanov's wide lacerated wound.

"Never mind the pain," he reassured the man. "Iodine's good for you. If it wasn't for this iodine you'd go west, that's a fact. As it is, you may pull through."

We had to leave here to join up with our forces in the north, where there was a screen of regular Red Army units. We were running short of cartridges. But we were tied down by our wounded. Five of them could go along with us, but three were in a precarious state, neither dying nor getting better. Among these was Gypsy Kid Yashka. Yashka popped up among us unexpectedly.

One day, when preparing to march out from Arkhipovka hamlet, our detachment lined up for the count along the street. The left-flank man, little Polecat (now killed) sang out: "A hundred and forty-seven!"

Until then Polecat had always been the hundred and forty-sixth. Shebalov roared: "Number again!"

And again Polecat was a hundred and forty-seventh.

"What the hell!" Shebalov cried angrily. "Who's muddling up the count. Sukharev?"

"No one," Chubuk answered from the ranks. "We've got an extra man here."

Indeed, standing in the ranks between Chubuk and Nikishin was a new man. He must have been eighteen or nineteen. A dark young fellow with a curly tousled head.

"What are you doing here?" Shebalov demanded, surprised.

The boy was silent.

"He took his place next to me, I thought you had taken on a new man," Chubuk explained. "He came along with a rifle and stood here."

"Who are you?" Shebalov demanded.

"I'm a... a gypsy, a Red gypsy," the other answered.

"A re-ed gy-yp-sy?" Shebalov queried, staring at him, then suddenly added with a laugh: "You're not a full-grown gypsy, you're a gypsy kid!"

He stayed with us, and the nickname Gypsy Kid stuck.

Gypsy Kid was now wounded in the chest. His swarthy face was pallid, and he kept muttering rapidly in a strange tongue with parched lips.

"I've been in the army this many a year, and served half through the German war, but I've never seen a gypsy soldier," said Vaska Shmakov. "I've seen Tatars and Mordvinians, even Chuvashes, but never any gypsies. They're a bad lot, these gypsies, if you ask me. They don't grow corn, they don't go in for any trades, all they're good at is stealing horses, while their women fool honest people. It can't make out what brought him here. Freedom —they've got all the freedom in the world. They don't have to defend their land. What do they want land for? They've got nothing to do with the workers either. What does he stand to gain by getting mixed up in this business? There must be something in it. I wonder what he is up to."

"Maybe he's for the revolution, too, how do you know?"

"Not on your life! I'll never believe that gypsies can be for the revolution. He was beaten in the old days for stealing horses, and he'll be beaten for the same thing all his life!"

"But maybe he won't steal anything after the revolution?"

"Oh, I don't know," Vaska said with a wry smile. "They beat 'em with cudgels in our village and beat 'em with poles, but it did no good. They were at it again. What makes you think the revolution will cure 'em?"

"You're a fool, Vaska," Chubuk, who had been silent till then, put in. "You don't see a damn thing through that cottage of yours and your horse. According to you, the whole revolution will boil down to your getting a slice of the landowner's estate and some twenty logs from the landowner's woodlot. And the chairman of the Soviet will take the place of the starosta, while life itself will go on in the old way."

Chapter Seven

Two days later Gypsy Kid felt better. In the evening, when I went up to him, he was lying on a heap of dry leaves, staring up into the black starry sky and humming a tune.

"Gypsy Kid," I said to him, "I'll light a fire next to you and heat up some water. We'll have tea, I've got some milk in my flask. Okay?"

I ran off to fetch some water, hung the messtin up on a ramrod laid across the fire between two bayonets stuck into the ground, and moved up to the wounded man.

"What song are you singing, Gypsy Kid?" I asked.

His answer was delayed.

"I am singing an old song which speaks about the gypsies having no homeland of their own, home to them being the land where they were well received. Then it goes on to say: 'Tell me, Gypsy, where are you well received?' And he answers: 'I have walked the length and breadth of many lands, I have been with the Hungarians, and with the Bulgarians and in the country of the Turks, but never yet have I found a country where my people were well received.' "

"Gypsy Kid," I said to him, "what made you come to us? Your men are not being called up."

The whites of his eyes gleamed as he raised himself on his elbow and answered:

"I came myself, I don't need to be called up. I am fed up with gypsy camp life. My father knows how to steal horses and my mother tells people's fortunes. My grandfather stole horses and my grandmother told fortunes. And none of them ever stole happiness for themselves, or told their own good fortunes. It's all wrong."

Gypsy Kid sat up in his excitement, but winced from the pain of his wound and fell back on the heap of leaves with a faint groan.

The milk boiled over and instantly put out the fire before I could snatch the messtin off the coals. Gypsy Kid suddenly laughed.

"What are you laughing at?"

He tossed his head with a gay gesture. "I was thinking, all the people were like that. The Russians, the Jews, the Georgians and the Tatars, they all put up with the old life until their patience boiled over and they threw themselves into the fire, like water from a messtin. The same with me. . . . I stood it for as long as I could, then I snatched a rifle and went in search of the good life."

"You think you'll find it?"

"Not by myself, I wouldn't . . . but all together we ought to, being so keen on it."

Chubuk came up.

"Sit down and have some tea with us," I said.

"No time. Will you come with me, Boris?"

"Yes," I answered quickly, not even asking where he was calling me.

"Then finish your tea quickly. The cart's waiting for us."

"What cart, Chubuk?"

He drew me aside and explained that the detachment was setting out at daybreak to join up with Begichev's detachment of miners not far from here. Together we were to make our way out to join the main forces. We could not take the three badly wounded men with us, as we would have to pass the Whites and the Germans.

Not far from here there was a bee-garden. It was an out-of-the-way place, and the beekeeper, who was friendly disposed towards the Reds, had consented to shelter the wounded men until they recovered. Chubuk had come from there with a horse and cart, and the wounded had to be moved out while it was still dark.

"Anybody else going with us?"

"No. Just we two. I'd manage myself, only the horse is a jibber. One of us'll have to lead it by the bridle while the other looks after the wounded comrades. Will you go?"

"Why, yes, Chubuk. I'll go anywhere with you. Where do we go from there—back here?"

"No. We go straight across the river from there to meet our detachment. Let's be going," Chubuk said, making for the horse's head. "See my rifle doesn't fall out," his voice came through the darkness.

The cart started with a slight jerk, a dewdrop splashed into my face from a bush as the wheels grazed it, and the dying campfires scattered by the detachment in preparation for its departure passed out of sight.

It was a heavy road, full of ruts and mudholes and bumpy with gnarled roots. It was so dark that I could see neither the horse nor Chubuk from the cart. The wounded lay on a litter of fresh straw and were silent.

I walked behind the cart, holding on to the back of it with one free hand—the other being engaged holding the rifle—to keep myself from stumbling. It was quiet. But for the monotonous wailing cry of a lapwing the darkness all around us might have been dead. All were silent, except for an occasional faint moan from Timoshkin, one of the wounded men, whenever the wheels dropped into a hole or bumped over the stump of a tree.

The sparse half-denuded spinney seemed a primeval impenetrable forest to us. The clouded sky hung over the cut through like a black ceiling. It was stuffy, and we seemed to be groping our way through a long winding corridor.

It reminded me of a similar warm night long ago, three years ago perhaps, when my father and I were returning home from the railway station by way of a short cut through a copsewood. The same cry of the lapwing, the same smell of overripe mushrooms and wild raspberries.

At the railway station, where he had seen off his brother Pyotr, Father had drunk several wineglasses of vodka. Whether it was that, or the sweet smell of the raspberries, Father was unusually excited and talkative. He told me on the way back about his young days and his studies at the seminary. I laughed at his accounts of his school life and of how they were birched, and it seemed ridiculous and incredible that anyone could birch such a tall strong man as my father was.

"You must have read that somewhere," I said. "There's a book by some author that describes it. *Seminary Sketches* it's called. But that was donkey's years ago!"

"You think I studied not long ago? It's years ago."

"You lived in Siberia, Dad. It must be awful there, what with all those convicts. Petka told me they could kill a man there easy as anything and there was no one to complain to."

Father had started laughing and tried to explain something to me. What he was trying to tell me I couldn't understand at the time, because, according to him, it worked out that the convicts were not convicts at all and that even some of his acquaintances were convicts, and that there were lots of good people in Siberia, more than in Arzamas, at any rate.

I had let all this drift past my ears, as I had many other talks, the meaning of which I began to understand only now.

"No, never in all my past life had I ever suspected or thought that my father was a revolutionary. And the fact that I was now with the Reds and carried a rifle on my shoulder was not because my father had been a revolutionary and I his son. It came about of itself. I came to it myself," I thought. And the thought made me feel proud of myself. No, really, look how many parties there were, yet I had chosen the only right one, the only revolutionary party!

I was eager to share this thought with Chubuk. And suddenly it seemed to me that there was no one at the horse's head and the horse had long been hauling the cart at random along an unfamiliar road.

"Chubuk!" I cried, frightened.

"Eh!" I heard his gruff stern voice. "What are you yelling for?"

"Is it a long way off yet, Chubuk?" I said, somewhat confused.

"A good distance," he answered and halted. "Come over here and open your coat, I want to light up."

The pipe swam alongside the horse's head like a firefly. The road smoothened, the wood widened out and we walked side by side. :

I told Chubuk what I had been thinking and expected him to commend by intelligence and good judgement, which had led me to throw in my lot with the Bolsheviks. But Chubuk was in no hurry to praise me. He smoked out at least half a pipe before he came out with the grave comment:

"These things happen. A man sometimes will work these things out for himself. Lenin, for instance. I don't know about you, though."

"What do you mean?" I said in a low hurt voice. "I came to it on my own."

"On your own. . . . Of course you did. That's what *you* think. Life turned out that way for you, that's all. For one thing, they killed your father. Secondly, you fell in with such people. Thirdly, you quarrelled with your schoolmates. Fourthly, you were kicked out of school. Leaving out all these events, the rest may have been your own doing. But don't be sore," he added, sensing that he had wounded my feelings. "No one's asking more of you, are they?"

"It works out then that I'm just making believe . . . that I'm not a Red?" I said in a drooping voice. "It isn't true. Haven't I always gone out with you on reconnaissance, and didn't I go off to the front on my own so's to fight. . . and now. . . ."

"Silly ass! Now nothing! I'm telling you—it's just circumstances. Now say, for instance, that you'd been sent to military school—they'd have made a cadet out of you and you'd now be serving with General Kaledin."

"What about yourself?"

"Me?" Chubuk smiled. "I've got twenty years mine work behind me, my lad. And no cadet school of yours could knock that out of me!"

I felt terribly hurt. Chubuk's words had offended me deeply and I fell silent. But I couldn't keep silent.

"In that case, Chubuk, I've got no business in the detachment, once I could have turned out a cadet, a Kaledinite. . . ."

"Silly ass!" Chubuk answered coolly, seeming not to notice how sore I was. "Who cares what you could have been. It's what you are that counts. I'm just telling you this so's you shouldn't give yourself airs. With all this said, you're not a bad chap. When we get to know you better maybe we'll take you into the Party by and by. Silly kid!" he added in a kindlier tone.

I knew that Chubuk liked me, but did he realise how ardently, more than anyone else in the world at that moment, I loved him? "A good man, Chubuk," I said to myself. "Mind you, he's a Communist, spent twenty years in the mines and his hair has turned grey, yet he's always with me. With me alone. That means I deserve it. And I'll try to deserve it still more. Next time there's a fight, I purposely won't duck my head, and if I'm killed, I don't care. They'll write home to Mother then: 'Your son was a Communist and he died in the great cause of the revolution.' Mother would cry and hang my portrait on the wall next to Father's, and a new happier life would run its normal course past that wall."

"It's a pity, though, that the priests had lied about a person's soul," I thought. "He hasn't got one. But if he had a soul it would be able to see the life that is coming. It looks like being a good life, a very interesting one."

The cart stopped. Chubuk hastily thrust his pipe into his pocket and said quietly:

"Sounds like something knocking in front of us. Hand me my rifle."

The horses and the cart with the wounded men were taken aside into the bushes. Chubuk disappeared, leaving me with the cart. Presently he returned.

"Not a word now. . .. Four mounted Cossacks. Give me a sack, I'll cover the horse's muzzle in case it neighs."

The clop of hooves drew nearer. Just short of where we stood the Cossacks slowed down to a walking gait. A sliver of moon breaking through a gap in the torn clouds lighted up the roadway. From behind the bushes I saw four *papakhas*. The Cossacks had an officer with them; I caught the brief gleam of a golden shoulder-strap. We waited until the stamp of hooves had died away and started out again.

Day was beaking by the time we reached the farmstead.

The sleepy-eyed beekeeper came out to the gate at the sound of the cart. He was a lank red-haired peasant with a hollow chest and bony shoulders jutting out sharply from under his unbuttoned cotton shirt. He led the horse across the yard and through a small gate from which ran out a barely perceptible track overgrown with grass.

"We'll go here. There's a threashing-shed in the wood down by the bog, they'll be safer there."

It was cool and quiet in the small shed, which was packed with hay. Sackcloths were spread in the far corner. Two sheepskins, neatly folded, served as pillows. Nearby stood a pail of water and a birchbark can containing kvass.

We carried the wounded men over into the shed.

"Maybe they want something to eat?" the beekeeper said. "Under their heads is bread and pork fat. The missus'll bring some milk when she's milked the cows."

We had to be going if we were not to miss our detachment at the ford. Although we had done everything we could for our wounded comrades, we felt rather awkward, leaving them here all alone in enemy territory.

Timoshkin seemed to realise this.

"Well, goodbye," he said with pallid parched lips. "Thank you, Chubuk, and you, too, lad. Maybe we'll meet again in this life."

Samarin, who was more enfeebled than the others, opened his eyes and gave a friendly nod. Gypsy Kid was silent. Resting on his arms, he looked at us gravely and then gave a wan smile.

"Goodbye to you, boys," Chubuk said. "Get better quickly. Your host is a reliable man, lie won't leave you in the lurch. Keep well."

He turned towards the door, coughed loudly and tapped his pipe out against the butt of his rifle.

"Good luck to you, comrades, I wish you victory!" Gypsy Kid called out in a loud ringing voice. The sound of it made us stop and turn round in the doorway. "I wish you victory over all the Whites in the world," Gypsy Kid added just as clearly and distinctly, and dropped his dark head onto the soft sheepskin.

Chapter Eight

The sun-scorched sandy bank melted in the water, which sparkled in the rippling shallows. There was no sign of our detachment at the ford.

"They must have gone on," Chubuk decided. "It doesn't matter. There must be a cordon not far from here, and our detachment will call a halt there."

"What about having a dip, Chubuk?" I suggested. "We'll be quick. Look how lovely and warm the water is."

"This is a bad place for bathing. Too open."

"So what?"

"What d'you mean? A naked man is no soldier. You can take a naked man with a stick. Or a Cossack can come riding down to the ford and take your rifle away. Where will you be then? A thing like that happened once at Khoper. It wasn't just two men, but a whole detachment forty strong, who went bathing. Five Cossacks pounced on 'em and opened fire on the river. Talk about a panic! Some were shot down, others did a bank to the other side of the river. Wandered about the woods naked. Rich villages round about, mostly kulaks living there. Couldn't show up anywhere. A naked man meant you were a Bolshevik."

Nevertheless I persuaded him. We went aside into the bushes and had a quick dip. We waded across the river with our trousers and boots in a belted bundle hitched to our bayonets. After our bathe the rifle seemed lighter and the cartridge pouch did not press into your side. We stepped out lightly along the edge of a wood towards a derelict-looking hut with smashed window-panes; even the copper from the kitchen had been broken open. Apparently, the owners, before leaving it, had carted away everything they could.

Chubuk, with narrowed eyes, walked guardedly round the house, and putting two fingers into his mouth, gave a piercing whistle. The echo bounced and reverberated for a long time through the woods, gradually dying away in the leafy thickets. There was no response.

"D'you mean to say we've come before they have? Ah, well, we'll have to wait."

We chose a shady spot a little way back from the road and lay down. It was hot. I made a roll of my coat and put it under my head, and took off my leather case to feel more comfortable. During our marches and night halts, when we slept on the damp ground, the case had become frayed and faded.

The case contained my penknife, a bar of soap, a needle and a ball of thread, and the middle part of Pavlenkov's Russian encyclopedia.

An encyclopedia is a book that one can reread any number of times. All the same, you can never memorise it all. That is why I carried it about with me, and often during rest periods or while sitting it out in a ravine or in the depths of a forest, I would get out the book and reread the dog-eared pages, running through all the entries just as they came along. It gave the biographies of monks, monarchs and generals, prescriptions for making varnishes, philosophical terms, references to wars of olden times, the history of Costa Rica—a state I had never heard of before—followed by a description of fertiliser-meal production. I obtained a good deal of miscellaneous information, both useful and useless, from the letter F to the letter R, at which the dictionary broke off.

A few days ago, before going out to take up my post, I had hurriedly thrust a piece of black bread in the case. I noticed now that the forgotten bread had crumbled and some of the pages had stuck together. I shook the contents of the case out on the grass and began to scrape the crumbs off the sides with the flat of my hand. One of my fingers brushed a corner of the leather lining, which had come unstuck.

I turned the case up to the sun and looked inside. A piece of white paper could be seen hidden beneath the lining.

My curiosity aroused, I pulled back some more of the lining and drew out a thin sheaf of papers. I peeled off one of them. In the middle was a gilt emblem of the double-headed eagle and lower down, in gold embossed lettering, the word "Certificate".

The certificate was issued to pupil Yuri Vaald of Company 2 of the Count Arakcheyev Corps of Cadets to the effect that he had successfully completed his course of studies, had displayed excellent diligence and behaviour and was being moved up to the next form.

"So that's what it is!" it dawned on me as I called to mind the stranger I had met and killed in the woods. His black tunic had had all the buttons torn off it deliberately and the letters Ct. A.C.C. stamped on the lining of the collar.

The other paper was a letter, written in French and dated recently. Although school had left me with only a hazy memory of this language, nevertheless after poring over it for half an hour, filling in the gaps of my knowledge with guesses, I gathered that it was a letter of introduction to a Colonel Korenkov on behalf of Cadet Yuri Vaald.

I wanted to show these curious papers to Chubuk, but he was asleep and I didn't like to wake him—he had been on his legs since yesterday morning. I put the papers back into the case and started reading the dictionary.

About an hour passed. Through the murmur of the wind and the chatter of the birds I caught a faraway alien sound. I got up and put a hand to my ear. The tramp of feet and the sound of voices grew more and more distinct.

"Chubuk!" I said, shaking his shoulder. "Get up, Chubuk, our people are coming!"

"Our people coming!" Chubuk repeated mechanically, sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

"Yes. They're quite close. Hurry up."

"Fancy me falling asleep!" Chubuk said, surprised. "I just lay down for a minute."

His eyes were still sleepy and squinted against the sun as he slung his rifle on his shoulder and strode after me.

The voices sounded right next to us. I jumped out from behind the hut and threw my hat up into the air, yelling a greeting to our approaching comrades.

I did not see where my hat fell, because the realisation of a terrible mistake stunned me.

"Back!" Chubuk, behind me, cried out in a hoarse snarling voice.

Bang.. . bang. . . bang. . . .

Three shots rang out almost simultaneously from the front ranks of the column. Some hidden force almost tore the rifle from my hands and splintered the butt with such fury that I was barely able to keep my ground. But the road and the shock also aroused me from my stupor. "The Whites," it dawned on me, as I ran back to Chubuk. Chubuk fired.

For a full hour we were in danger of being rounded up by the scattered enemy. But we succeeded in giving them the slip. For a long time after the voices of our pursuers had died away we blundered along, wet and flushed. We gulped the moist air of the forest with parched throats, our aching feet clutching at tussocks and stumps with burning soles.

"Enough," Chubuk said, flopping down onto the grass. "Let's have a rest. Whew, that was a narrow escape! My fault. I fell asleep. You started yelling: 'Our people!' I thought you'd made sure of it and I pushed forward, half asleep."

It was then that I looked at my rifle. The stock was shattered to splinters and the magazine case was mutilated.

I handed the rifle to Chubuk. He looked at it, then threw it away into the grass.

"A stick," he said contemptuously. "It isn't a rifle any more, it's a cudgel to stun pigs with. Never mind. You were lucky not to get hit. Where's your coat? That's gone too, I lost my roll too. So that's how it is, old chap!"

We could do with a good long rest, lying in the grass without stirring, taking off our boots and undoing the collars of our shirts, but stronger far than fatigue were the pangs of thirst. And there was no water anywhere nearby.

We got up and walked on warily. We crossed a field; the little houses of a village nestled under the hillside; the white clay cottages with their straw-thatched roofs looked from here like a clump of brown-capped mushrooms. We did not dare to go down. We crossed the field and found ourselves in a small wood.

"A house," I whispered, stopping and pointing to the edge of a red iron roof.

Fearing an ambush, we cautiously crept up to the tall fence. The gate was locked. No dogs barked, no hens clucked, no cow stamped in the stall—all was quiet, as if all living things had gone in hiding at our approach. We walked round the house, but found no passage to it. "Climb up on my back," Chubuk said, "and look over the fence."

Over the top of the fence I saw an empty farmyard overgrown with grass and trampled flower-beds on which, here and there, grew a few crushed dahlias and blue starry-eyed pansies.

"Well?" Chubuk asked impatiently. "Get down! What d'you think I'm made of—stone?"

"No one's there," I answered, jumping down. "The front windows are boarded up, and the side one has no window frame at all. You can tell at once it's an abandoned house. There's a well in the yard, though."

We tore aside a loose board and entered the yard through the gap. The deep water in the mildewed hole of the well shone like an ink blot, but there was nothing to draw it with. Under a shed, among a heap of junk, Chubuk found a rusty leaky pail. By the time we pulled it up there was only a little water left at the bottom. We then plugged the hole with some grass and tried again. The water was clear and cold, and we had to drink it in small gulps. We washed our dusty perspiring faces and walked over to the house. The front windows were boarded up, but the door at the side opening onto a veranda was wide open and swung on a single lower hinge. Stepping carefully over the squeaky floorboards we went inside.

On the floor, littered with straw, scraps of paper and rags, stood several empty cases, a broken chair and a sideboard with doors that had been smashed open with some blunt heavy instrument.

"The peasants have looted the place," Chubuk said in a low voice.

In the next room lay a jumbled heap of dusty books covered with bast matting, among them the torn portrait of a portly gentleman upon whose white lofty brow someone had scribbled an indecent word with a finger dipped in ink.

It was a strange and interesting experience to go from room to room of this abandoned looted house. Every little thing there—a broken flowerpot, a forgotten photograph, a button glinting amid the rubbish, the scattered trampled chess figures, the King of Spades, lost from the pack, lying lonesomely among fragments of a broken Japanese vase—spoke of the occupants of this country house, and of a tranquil past so unlike the disturbed present.

A soft thud came from the next room, and this sound, so unexpected amid the decay and ruin of the deserted house, made us start.

"Who's there?" Chubuk's loud voice shattered the silence. He gripped his rifle.

A big ginger cat came towards us with long stealthy strides. It stopped within two paces of us mewing hungrily and staring at us malevolently with cold green eyes. I wanted to stroke it, but it backed away, then cleared the windowsill at a single bound, leapt out onto the trampled flower-bed and disappeared in the grass. "I wonder it didn't starve to death." "Why should it. It eats mice. The place is full of 'em, by the smell of it."

A distant door creaked with a dreary heart-chilling sound, followed by a slow shuffle, as if someone was rubbing the floor with a dry rag. We looked at each other. They were human footsteps.

"Who the devil can that be?" Chubuk said in a low voice, drawing me back towards the window.

With a little cough and a crackle of paper swept aside by the opening door, there came into the room a poorly shaved old man in shabby blue pyjamas and slippers worn on his bare feet. He looked at us in surprise but without fear, bowed courteously and said in an impassive tone:

"I was wondering who it was, walking about downstairs. Must be the peasants back again, I thought. But no. I looked out of the window and saw no carts."

"Who are you?" Chubuk asked with curiosity, slinging his rifle back onto his shoulder.

"May I be allowed to ask first—who are you?" the old man countered in the same quiet impassive tone. "If you have deemed it necessary to pay a visit, will you please introduce yourselves to the host. It is not difficult to guess, though," he added, his dusty-grey eyes gliding over Chubuk. "You are Reds."

The man's lower lip drooped as if someone had pulled it down. A gold tooth flashed and faded with a yellow gleam, and the awakened eyelids brushed the dust from his grey eyes. With the sweeping gesture of an hospitable host the old man invited us to follow him: "If you please, gentlemen."

We looked at each other, puzzled, and walked through the devastated room and up a narrow wooden staircase.

"I receive visitors upstairs, now," our host explained apologetically. "It's so untidy downstairs, there's no one to tidy up, everyone has disappeared. This way please."

We found ourselves in a small sunny room. Against the wall stood an old battered sofa with disembowelled entrails, covered with bast matting instead of a sheet, and with the remains of a once handsome carpet with burnt holes all over it doing duty as a blanket. Next to it stood a three-legged writing table and over it hung a cage with a canary in it. The canary was dead. It must have died a long time ago. It lay in the seed trough, feet upwards. Several dust-covered photographs looked down from the walls.

Evidently someone had helped the host to drag the remains of the smashed furniture into this room for him.

"Sit down, please," the old man said, pointing to the sofa. "I live alone, you know, I haven't had visitors for a long time. The peasants come once in a while, bringing products, but I haven't seen any respectable people for a long time. Captain Schwarz visited me once. Do you know him? Oh, excuse me, you are Reds, of course."

Our host went to the sideboard and got out two plates, which had survived the debacle, and two forks—one a plain kitchen fork with a wooden handle, the other a fancifully bent dessert fork with one prong missing, then got out a loaf of black bread and half a ring of Ukrainian sausage. He placed a kettle, almost black with greasy soot, on a lopsided oil-stove, wiped his hands on a towel that had not been washed for God knows how long, took down from the wall a quaint pipe on which was carved a grinning toothless he-goat with a human head, filled it with makhorka and sat down in a battered armchair with twanging, jutting springs. Throughout these preparations we sat silently on the sofa.

Chubuk nudged me, and smiling slyly, tapped his forehead with a finger when the old man's back was turned. I smiled back at him understandingly.

"It's a long time since I saw any Reds," our host said, and added enquiringly: "How is Lenin's health?"

"He's all right, thanks," Chubuk answered gravely.

"H'm, all right."

The old man poked the mouthpiece of his reeking pipe with *a* piece of wire and sighed.

"For that matter, why shouldn't he be?" He paused, then, as if answering our question, added: "I'm not in the best of health. Insomnia, you know. I've lost the old mental equilibrium. I get up sometimes and walk through the rooms—everything's so quiet, only the mice scratching."

"What are you writing there?" I asked, seeing a pile of small sheets covered with minute handwriting.

"Oh, just a view of current events," he answered. "I am outlining a plan of world reorganisation. I'm a philosopher, you know, I take a dispassionate view of life as it comes and goes. I do not complain of anything."

The old man got up and stole a glance out of the window, then resumed his seat.

"Life will create a big noise, but truth remains. Yes, truth remains," the old man repeated, slightly warming to his theme. "There have been riots before this. We have had Pugachev and nineteen 'five, when manor houses were demolished and burnt down in the same way. Time passed and the things that were destroyed rose again from the ashes like the phoenix bird, and things that were scattered were gathered together again."

"What do you mean? You're not thinking of turning things back the old way, are you?" Chubuk said rather roughly.

At this blunt question the old man shrank, smiled cringingly and said:

"Goodness, no! I didn't mean that at all. It's what Captain Schwarz wants, not me. He even offered to return to me everything the muzhiks had borrowed from me, but I declined. I'd rather have them help me out a little with food, let them enjoy my property in good health."

At this point the old man got up again, stood by the window, then quickly turned towards the table.

"Well, well. . . . The kettle is boiling, I see. Please come to the table."

We needed no second invitation. The bread crusts crunched on our teeth and the smell of garlicky sausage pleasantly tickled our nostrils.

Our host went into the next room and we could hear him in there opening drawers.

"A funny old boy," I said quietly.

"Funny, yes," Chubuk agreed. "But why does he keep looking out of the window?"

Saying this, Chubuk turned round and passed a quick eye over the room. A piece of old sacking spread in the corner attracted his attention. He frowned and crossed over to the window.

Our host came in. He held a bottle, from which he wiped a film of dust with the hem of his pyjama.

"Here," he said, coming up to the table. "Captain Schwarz did not finish it the last time he was here. Let me give you a little brandy with your tea. I like the stuff myself, but for guests ... for guests. . . ." He pulled out the paper plug with which the neck was corked and filled up our glasses with the contents of the bottle. I reached for my glass, but Chubuk quickly came away from the window and said to me gruffly:

"My dear boy! Can't you see there are not enough glasses to go round? Give your seat up to the old gentleman instead of lolling about. You can have yours later. Sit down, Dad, let's drink together."

I looked at Chubuk, surprised at the rough tone in which he had addressed me.

"No, no!" the old man said, pushing back the glass. "I'll have it afterwards, you're my guests. . . ."

"Drink, Dad," Chubuk repeated and moved the glass up to our host with a resolute gesture.

"No, no, don't bother," the old man repeated doggedly, moving the glass away awkwardly and upsetting it.

I resumed my former seat, and the old man crossed over to the window and drew the soiled curtain.

"What's the idea?" Chubuk said.

"Gnats," our host answered. "They're such a pest. It's low ground here, the place is full of them."

"You live here alone?" Chubuk suddenly asked. "Then what's that second bed doing in the corner?" He pointed to the sacking on the floor.

Without waiting for a reply, Chubuk got up, pulled the curtain back and put his head out of the window. I got up too.

The window commanded a broad view of the hills and woods. The road ran out into the distance, rising and dipping. On the elevated skyline, against the backcloth of a reddening sky, four moving dots came into view.

"Gnats!" Chubuk shouted roughly at the old man, and eyeing the shrinking figure with a look of contempt, added: "You're a gnat yourself from what I can see of it. Come along, Boris!"

As we ran down, Chubuk stopped to throw a lighted match into a heap of rubbish. The paper there caught fire and the flame crept towards some straw strewn over the floor. In another minute the whole cluttered up room would have been ablaze, had not Chubuk, with a sudden air of decision, stamped the fire out. He dragged me towards the door with an apologetic: "Better not. It'll be ours all the same."

Some ten minutes later four horsemen galloped past the bushes behind which we lay hidden.

"Making for the manor house," Chubuk said. "I guessed the old man wasn't living alone as soon as I saw that sacking on the floor. Did you see the way he kept going up to that window? While we were poking around the rooms downstairs he sent someone to fetch the Whites. The same with the tea. That brandy looked suspicious to me—maybe he put some rat poison into it. I don't like looted but hospitable landowners, I don't trust 'em. He can pretend to be what he likes, but at bottom he's my enemy number one."

We spent the night in a haying shack. A thunderstorm broke during the night with a heavy downpour, but we were glad. The shack was not leaky, and in bad weather like that we could safely have a good sleep. Chubuk woke me up at the peep of dawn.

"Now we've got to be on guard," he said. "I've been sitting up for some time. I'll take a nap now while you sit up. Somebody may pass this way, you can never tell. But mind you don't fall asleep too." "I won't fall asleep, Chubuk."

I put my head out of the shack. A stream lay reeking under the hillside. Yesterday we had waded waist-deep through a miry bog. The water had dried on us overnight, but the mud had formed a sticky crust over our bodies.

"I could do with a bathe," I thought. "The stream is close by, just a step down."

I sat on guard over Chubuk for about half an hour, but the desire to run down and have a dip became clamorous. "There's no one around," I said to myself. "Who could be up at such an early hour? Besides, I can't see a sign of any road. I'll be back before Chubuk can turn over on the other side."

The temptation was too great. My body itched all over. Throwing off my bandolier, I tumbled down the hill.

The stream, however, was not at all as near as I had thought and it must have taken me ten minutes to reach the bank. Throwing off my black school tunic, the one I had run away from home in, and pulling off the leather case, my boots and trousers, I plunged into the water. I caught a quick breath. I started threshing around and soon got warm. Gee, how lovely! I swam out quietly into midstream. There, on a sand bank, stood a bush. Something was entangled in it, probably a rag or a shirt that had been lost in rinsing. I parted the branches and recoiled quickly. A man lay there face downwards, his trousers caught in a branch. His shirt was torn and a gaping lacerated wound stood out in a black patch on his back. I swam back with swift hurried strokes as if the devil was after me.

As I dressed I turned my head away with a shudder from the luxuriant green bush growing on the sand bank. Whether it was caused by a jet of the flowing stream or by my accidentally releasing the dead body when parting the branches, but the body floated out, was turned over by the current and carried towards the bank on which I stood.

Hastily pulling on my trousers, I started to put on my tunic to run away from this spot as quickly as I could. When I thrust my head through the collar the body of the shot man was almost at my feet.

With a wild scream I involuntarily stepped forward and nearly stumbled into the water. I had recognised the dead man. It was one of the three wounded men we had left behind in the care of the beekeeper. It was our Gypsy Kid.

"Hey, laddie!" I heard a shout behind me. "Come here."

Three men were making straight for me. Two of them had rifles. Escape was cut off. In front of me were these men, behind me the river.

"Who are you?" a tall black-bearded man demanded.

I was silent. I did not know who these men were, Reds or Whites.

"I'm speaking to you!" the man repeated more roughly, gripping my arm.

"What's the use of talking to him," another said. "Let's take him down to the village, they'll question him there."

Two carts drove up.

"Give me your whip," Black Beard shouted to one of the drivers, who stood timidly at his horse's head.

"What for?" the other asked. "Why use the whip? Take him down to the village, they'll see to it there."

"I'm not going to whip him. I want to tie his hands. You just look at him—looks like he'll do a bunk at any moment."

My elbows were twisted back and I was pushed gently towards the cart.

"Get in!"

The sleek horses made off for the village at a brisk trot. It was a large village, with white chimneys gleaming on the green hillside.

Sitting in the cart, I was still hoping that these men were partisans from a Red detachment, and that things would be cleared up on the spot and I would be released at once.

Not far from the village a sentry in the bushes challenged us: "Who goes there?"

"Friends . .. the headman," Black Beard answered.

^A-a-ah! Where've you been?"

"Getting carts out from the hamlets."

The horses started off at a brisk pace. I had no time to examine the sentry's clothes or his face, as my whole attention was drawn to his shoulders. He was wearing shoulder-straps. *(In those days only the Whites wore shoulder-straps.—Tr.)*

Chapter Nine

No soldiers were to be seen in the street at that hour— they were probably sleeping.

Outside the church stood several dog-carts and a van with a red cross, while sleepy-eyed cooks were splitting firewood next to a field kitchen.

"Take him down to headquarters?" the cart driver asked the headman.

"I suppose so. His Excellency is still asleep though. It's not worth disturbing him for the sake of a kid like this. Let's take him down to the lock-up for the time being."

The cart drew up at a squat little hut with barred windows. I was pushed towards the door. The headman went through my pockets and took away my leather case. The door slammed to and the lock grated.

For the first few minutes of sheer terror that was almost a physical pain, I decided that I was as good as dead, and nothing could save me. The sun would rise higher, His Excellency, of whom the headman had spoken, would send for me, and then—death, the end.

I sat down on a bench and lowered my head on the windowsill, too stupefied to think. The blood hammered at my temples and one and the same thought ran through my mind with the dull iteration of a spoilt gramophone record: "the end, the end, the end...". After revolving sickeningly in this groove, the sharp point of consciousness seemed suddenly to slip into the needful convolution of the brain as if flicked by an invisible finger, and my thoughts raced along madly like a headlong torrent.

"Is there no way out? To get caught so absurdly! Maybe I can escape? No, I can't escape. Maybe the Reds are coming this way and will arrive in time to save me? But if they don't? Or if they come too late, when it's all over? Maybe. . . . No, there is no hope, no way out."

The herd was driven past my window. The sheep ambled along, huddled close together, goats bleated amid a tinkle of bells, and the herdsman cracked his whip. A baby calf skipped along, making comical attempts to catch the cow's udder.

This peaceful village scene made me feel the hopelessness of my plight more poignantly than ever. The sense of terror was mixed with and for a brief moment even overshadowed by a sense of angry grievance: a morning like this . . . everyone alive . . . sheep and all, and you had to die.

And as often happens, out of this chaos of confused thoughts and ridiculous impossible plans there emerged a single, remarkably simple and clear thought, the very one that could suggest a natural avenue of escape.

I had become so used to my position as a Red Army man, a soldier of a proletarian righting unit, that I had quite forgotten that this was taken for granted and required no proofs, that to prove or deny it was just as useless as trying to prove to a stranger that my hair was white and not black.

"Wait a minute," I said to myself, snatching joyfully at this straw. "All right, I'm a Red. But I'm the only one here who knows it. Are there any signs by which *they* could know it?"

Turning this thought over in my mind, I came to the definite conclusion that there were no such signs. I had no papers certifying that I was a Red Army man. I had lost my grey fur cap with the star badge on it when running away from the guards. My army coat, too, I had thrown away at the same time. The smashed rifle lay in the woods, and I had left my bandolier in the shack before going down to bathe. My tunic was a black one, worn by schoolboys. My age was not that of a soldier. What remained?

"Ah, yes! The small Mauser, hidden under my tunic, and what else? The story of how I came to be on the banks of the stream. The Mauser could be stuck away under the stove; as for the story—one could always make up some kind of story."

Not to get muddled up, I decided not to complicate matters by inventing for myself a new name, age and place of birth. I decided to be myself, that is, Boris Gorikov, 5th form pupil of the Arzamas Technical High School, who travelled with his uncle (I would give his real name) to Kharkov to stay with his aunt (I didn't know her address and had relied on my uncle for it). During our journey I was separated from my uncle, and was put off the train because I had no pass or documents (my uncle had them). So then I decided to walk down the track and get on a train at the next station. But here the Reds ended and the Whites began. If they ask me how I managed to live during my trek, I'll tell them I was given alms and food at the villages. If I were asked why I was going to Kharkov if I did not know my aunt's address, I'll say I had hoped to get it at the address bureau. If they said: "Where the devil do you get address bureau these days?" I'll feign surprise and say: "Why not? There's an address bureau even in such a one-horse town as Arzamas." If they asked: "How did your uncle hope to break through to White Kharkov from Red Russia?" I'll say that my uncle was such a cunning old fox he'd break through to Europe, let alone Kharkov. But I'm no good, I'm no fox. At this point I'd have to break down and cry. Not too much, though, just enough to show how miserable I was. So far so good. As for the rest, I'd see about that when the time came.

I took out my pistol, and was about to thrust it under the stove, but changed my mind. Even if they let me go, I could not get back here to recover it. The room had two windows, one overlooking the street, the other facing a narrow lane, through which ran a path overgrown at the edges with dense nettles. I picked a scrap of paper up from the floor, wrapped the Mauser in it and threw the small package into the thickest part of the nettles. I had no sooner done this than there came a tramp of feet outside. Three others had been brought in—two peasants, who had hidden their horses from the carts round-up, and a boy, who, for some inexplicable reason, had stolen a spare recoil spring off a dog-cart from a machine-gunner. The boy had been beaten up, but he did not moan; he simply breathed hard, as if he had been chased.

Meanwhile the village street was coming to life. Soldiers passed by, horses neighed, messtins clanked near the field kitchen. Signalmen appeared, who began to run down telephone wire. A squad marched past under the command of an important-looking sergeant either to mount guard or relieve an outpost.

The lock clicked again and the head of a soldier looked in. Stopping in the doorway, he pulled a crumpled paper out of his pocket, glanced at it and shouted: "Who's Vaald here? Come on out."

I looked at my companions, and they at me, but no one got up.

"Vaald. . . . Well, who's Vaald?"

"Yuri Vaald!" I thought aghast, remembering the papers I had found in the lining, and which I had entirely forgotten about in the excitement of the last few days. I had no choice. I got up and walked unsteadily towards the door.

"Why, of course," it dawned on me. "They have found the papers and take me for that.. . for the dead boy. What rotten luck! I had such a good simple plan worked out, and now I was in a fix, all at sea. I couldn't say the papers were not mine. It would arouse suspicion as to how they came to be in my possession." The so carefully thought out story about my journey to my aunt with an old fox of an uncle was clean forgotten. I had to think up something new, but what? Obviously, I'd have to work something out on the spot.

I straightened up and attempted a smile. But how difficult it sometimes is to look cheerful, how painful to keep the tremor off your lips, twisted, like rubber, into a forced smile!

A tall elderly officer wearing the shoulder-straps of a captain came down the steps of the staff headquarters. At his side, with the air of a kicked dog, walked the village headman. Seeing me, the headman spread his hands with an apologetic gesture, as much as to say, "Sorry for the mistake."

The officer spoke sharply to the headman, who, with a servile nod, ran off down the street.

"Hullo, prisoner of war," the Captain said in a half-amused but quite friendly tone.

"Good morning, sir," I answered.

The officer dismissed my escort and gave me his hand. "What are you doing here?" he said with a sly smile, getting out a cigarette. "Come to fight for King and Country? I read the letter to Colonel Korenkov, but it's of no use to you now, the Colonel was killed a month ago."

"Thank God for that," I said to myself.

"Come into my room. Why didn't you tell the headman who you were? Fancy landing in the lock-up just when you come among friends."

"I didn't know who he was. He looked just a muzhik to me—no shoulder-straps or anything. He may have been a Red for all I know. They're prowling around here, people say," I squeezed out of myself while at the same time thinking that the officer seemed a decent chap, and none too observant, otherwise he would have guessed from my self-conscious manner that I was not the person he took me for.

"I knew your father," the Captain said. "It was a long time ago, back in nineteen 'seven, met him at the manoeuvres in Ozerki. You were a nipper then, only a faint resemblance remains. Don't you remember me?"

"I'm afraid I don't," I answered apologetically, "I have a faint memory of the manoeuvres, but then we had so many officers there."

If I didn't have that "faint resemblance" the Captain had spoken of, and if he had had the slightest suspicion, he could have floored me with two simple questions—one about my father, and the other about the Military School.

But the officer had no suspicions. My reason for not having made myself known to the headman sounded quite plausible, and trainees of the Military School in those days were making for the Don en masse.

"You must be hungry? Pakhomov!" he shouted to a soldier who was busy with a samovar. "What have you got to eat?"

"A chicken, sir. The samovar will soon be boiling. The priest's wife has taken out the dough, the cookies will soon be ready."

"A chicken for the two of us? Rustle up something more."

"I have some lard with cracklings, sir, I can warm up yesterday's *vareniks."*

"Let's have the *vareniks,* let's have the chicken, only hurry up!"

At this point the telephone buzzed in the next room.

"Captain Schwarz on the 'phone, sir."

The staff officer gave his orders to Schwarz in a firm calm baritone.

When he had put the receiver down, some other man, apparently an officer, too, asked the Captain:

"Has Schwarz got any news about Begichev's detachment?"

"No. Two Reds dropped in on the Kustarev manor yesterday, but they got away. Oh, yes! Write up a report that according to Schwarz's secret service information Shebalov's detachment will try to slip past Colonel Zhikharev in the Red's screen area. They must be prevented from joining up with Begichev. Well, young man, let's go and have our breakfast. Have a feed and a rest, and then we'll decide where and how to fix you up."

We had no sooner sat down at the table than the batman set before us a bowl of steaming *vareniks,* the chicken, which, to judge by its size, was more like a full-grown rooster, and a sizzling frying pan with cracklings. I was just about to pick up a wooden spoon, thinking that fortune, at last, was smiling upon me, when from the gate came a noise, loud talk and swearing.

"You're wanted, sir," the batman said, coming back. "They've brought in a Red with a rifle. Caught him in a shack on Zabelenny meadow. The machine-gunners went out to cut grass and they found him there asleep in the shack with a rifle and bomb next to him. Well, they fell on him and trussed him up. Shall I tell 'em to bring him in, sir?"

"All right. But not in here. Let them wait in the next room while I finish my breakfast."

Once again came a stamp of feet and rifle butts. "This way!" someone shouted in the next room. "Sit down on the bench, and take your cap off—can't you see the icons."

"Undo my hands first before barking at me!" The *varenik* turned cold in my half-open mouth and flopped back onto the plate. I had recognised the voice of the prisoner—it was Chubuk.

"Hot, eh?" the Captain said. "Take it easy."

It is difficult to describe the state of agonising tension I was in. To avoid arousing suspicion I had to appear cheerful and calm. The *vareniks* were like lumps of soft clay in my mouth. It required a purely physical effort to push a piece down my tightened throat. But the Captain was convinced that I was very hungry—I had told him so myself before breakfast—and so I had to force myself to eat. Working slowly at the food with stiff jaws and mechanically impaling browned morsels on my fork, I was crushed by a sense of guilt towards Chubuk. It was I, who despite his warning, had abandoned my post to go and bathe. It was my fault that those two machine-gunners had caught him prisoner. It was my fault that my dearest comrade, the man I loved best of all, had been captured while asleep and brought down to the enemy's staff.

"Why, my boy, you're half asleep, I see," the Captain's voice came to me from far away. "You've got a *varenik* on the fork in your mouth, but your eyes are closed. Go and lie down in the hay and have a sleep. Pakhomov, show him the way."

I got up and made for the door. I now had to go through the telegraph operators' room in which Chubuk was sitting a prisoner.

It was a painful moment.

The thing was to prevent Chubuk, in his surprise, from giving me away by a gesture or an exclamation. He had to be given to understand that I would do everything in my power to save him.

Chubuk sat with bowed head. I coughed. He looked up and quickly threw himself back.

But before his back could touch the wall he recovered himself and smothered the startled exclamation that sprang to his lips. As if to stifle my cough I put a finger to my lips, and from the way Chubuk narrowed his eyes and shifted his glance from me to the batman following behind me, I realised that he had understood nothing and believed me, too, to have been arrested on suspicion. His encouraging look said: "Don't be afraid. I won't give you away."

All this silent signalisation was so brief that no one noticed it. I went out into the yard on unsteady feet.

"This way please," the batman said, pointing to a small lean-to. "There's hay inside and a blanket. Lock the door, otherwise you'll have all the pigs in there."

Chapter Ten

I buried my head in a leather cushion and lay still. "What's to be done now? How can I save Chubuk? What can I do to help him escape? It's all my fault, and I must clear up the mess I've made. Instead I am sitting eating *vareniks,* and Chubuk must suffer through me."

I could think of nothing, however.

My head grew hot, my cheeks flamed, and little by little a feverish excitement gripped me. "Am I acting honestly? Ought I not go and openly declare that I, too, am a Red, that I am Chubuk's comrade and I want to share his fate?" The simplicity and grandeur of this thought blinded me. "Why, of course," I whispered. "At least I'll be atoning for my unfortunate mistake." I was reminded of a story I had read a long time ago from the days of the French revolution, when a boy, released on parole, returned to the enemy officer to be shot. "Yes, of course," I hurriedly debated with myself, "I'll get up right away, go out and tell them everything. Let the soldiers and the Captain see how Red fighters can die. And when they put me up against the wall, I'll shout: 'Long live the revolution!' No, not that. . . . That's what they always shout. I'll throw into their faces: 'Cursed hangmen!' No, I'll say. . . ." Drunk with a sense of the mournful solemnity of the decision I had taken, I gradually worked myself up to & point when a person's conduct begins to lose all sense of reality.

"I'll get up and go out." Here I sat up in the hay. "But what will I shout out?"

At this point my mind became a whirl of blinding flashing thoughts, and all kinds of crazy phrases swilled back and forth. Instead of hitting on some appropriate dying word, I recalled, for some unknown reason, the old gypsy who had played the flute at weddings in Arzamas. I recalled many other things that had nothing whatever to do with my present state of mind.

"I get up. . ." I said to myself. But the hay and the blanket held my legs like a fast cement.

And then I realised why I didn't get up. I didn't want to get up, and all those musings about a last dying phrase and about the gypsy were simply an excuse to put off the fateful moment. No matter what I said and how much I worked myself up, I definitely had no desire to give myself up and face the firing squad. When I realised this, I lay back resignedly on the cushion and wept softly over my own insignificance, comparing myself with the famous boy of the remote French revolution.

A thump shook the wall of the lean-to adjoining the house. Somebody in there had hit it with something hard—either a rifle butt or the corner of a bench. Voices could be heard through the wall.

Swift as a lizard, I crept up to the wall and put my ear to the logs. Immediately, I caught the middle of a phrase uttered by the Captain: ". . . so it's no use talking nonsense. You're only making things worse for yourself. How many machine-guns are there in the detachment?"

"Things couldn't be any worse, so why should I beat about the bush?" Chubuk answered. "How many machine-guns, I ask you?"

"Three. Two Maxims and one Colt."

"He's saying that on purpose," it struck me. "We have only one Colt in the detachment."

"And how many Communists?"

"They're all Communists."

"All of them, you say? Are you a Communist?"

Silence.

"Are you a Communist? I'm speaking to you!"

"Why waste breath? You're holding my Party card in your hand."

"Silence! You're one of the rabid ones, I see. Stand up straight when an officer talks to you. Was that you at the manor?" "Me."

"Who else was with you?" "A comrade. A Jew."

"A dirty Jew? Where is he?"

"He ran away ... in another direction."

"What direction?"

"The opposite direction."

There was another thump, then the sound of a shifted stool, and the baritone resumed in a drawling voice:

"I'll give you 'opposite direction'. I'll send you in the opposite direction in a minute."

"Instead of beating me, you'd better give the order and have done with it," Chubuk's voice sounded fainter. "If our people caught you, sir, they'd punch you in the jaw once or twice and bump you off. But you've slashed me all over with your whip, and you call yourself an intellectual." "What-at? What did you say?" the Captain shrilled.

"I say there's no need to mess about so long with a man."

A voice interposed, the same voice as before: "Regimental commander wanted on the phone, sir!" For some ten minutes there was silence behind the wall. Then the voice of batman Pakhomov was heard on the porch steps:

"Musabekov! Ibragishka!"

"What is it?" a lazy answer issued from out of the raspberry bushes.

"Where the devil are you? Saddle the Captain's horse." From behind the wall came the baritone again: "Victor Ilyich, I'm going to the Staff. I'll probably be back at night. Ring up Schwarz and tell him to get into touch with Zhikharev at once. Zhikharev has reported that Begichev's and Shebalov's detachments have joined up."

"What about this one?"

"This one? He can be shot. On second thoughts, hold him until I get back. I'll have another chat with him. Pakhomov," the Captain continued, raising his voice, "is the horse ready? Give me my field glasses. Oh, yes—when that boy wakes up give him something to eat. Don't leave any dinner for me. I'll have my dinner there."

Through a chink in the wall I had a glimpse of the black *papakhas* of the orderlies. There was a muffled stamp of hooves in the dust. Through the same chink I saw Chubuk being escorted to the hut in which I had sat that morning.

"The Captain will be back late," I thought. "That means Chubuk will be brought in for the next interrogation at night."

Hope, like a faint breath, cooled my head. I was free here. No one suspected me. Besides, I was the Captain's guest. I could go wherever I wanted, and when it grew dark I would take a stroll as it were and go down the path running past the window at the back of the hut. I'd pick up my Mauser and put it through the bars. In the night the soldiers would come for Chubuk. He would step out onto the porch, and taking advantage of the fact that they would believe him to be unarmed, he would kill both of them before they had a chance to use their rifles. The nights were dark, and two leaps aside would conceal him at once. The thing was to push the pistol through the bars. But that should not be difficult. It was a brick-built hut with strong bars, and so the guard, fearing no escape through the window, sat on the doorstep, guarding the door. Only once in a while he would go to the corner, look round it and go back again.

I came out of the lean-to. To conceal the trace of tears I emptied a dipper of cold water over my head. The batman offered me a mug of kvass, and asked me whether I wanted dinner. I declined the dinner, went out into the street and sat down on the doorstep.

The barred window behind which Chubuk was sitting stared at me from the opposite side of the wide street like a black hole.

"It would be a good thing if Chubuk spotted me," I was thinking. "It would cheer him up and give him to understand that since I was walking about at large I would try to rescue him. How was I to make him look out of the window? I couldn't call out or wave my hand, as the guard would notice it. Ah, I've got it! I'd do what I used to do as a child when I wanted to call Yashka Zukker-stein out into the garden or to the pond."

I ran into the room, took a small mirror of the wall and went back to the doorstep. First I started examining a pimple on my forehead, then, as if by accident, I played a sunbeam into the roof of the house opposite and from there shifted it imperceptibly to the black hole of the window. The guard sitting by the door did not see the sharp ray striking through the window upon the wall inside. Then, without moving the mirror, I covered the glass with my hand and uncovered it again. I did this several times.

I counted on the prisoner's attention being attracted to the sudden flashes of light in the darkened room. And so it was. The next minute the silhouette of a man appeared in the window under the rays of my searchlight. Giving a few flashes to enable Chubuk to trace the direction of the beam, I laid the mirror aside and stood up to my full height, as if stretching myself, then raised my arm. This, in the language of military signalisation, meant: "Attention! Be prepared!"

Two trim-looking cadets in dusty caps, with rifles slung across their backs, came up to the porch and asked for the Captain. A junior officer, second-in-command, came out. The cadets saluted and handed him a packet.

"From Colonel Zhikharev."

From where I sat I could hear the telephone buzzing. The junior officer was insistently calling regimental headquarters. Four soldiers from the companies acting as messengers dashed out of the staff hut and ran off to different ends of the village. A few minutes later the gates on the outskirts were thrown open and ten black Cossacks swept out at a canter. The promptness and efficiency with which staff orders were carried out came as an unpleasant surprise to me.

The disciplined cadets and well-drilled Cossacks who made up the composite detachment were so unlike our own brave, but loud-mouthed and ill-disciplined boys.

The sun was still fairly high in the sky, but I couldn't sit still. From these preliminaries and snatches of conversation I gathered that the detachment was marching out that night. To beguile the time until nightfall and have a good look round while I was at it, I walked down the village and came out to a pond in which Cossacks were bathing their horses. The horses snorted and their hooves made squelching noises in the soft clayey bed of the pond. The turbid water dripped off their sleek glossy skin in warm rivulets.

On the bank a bearded naked Cossack wearing a cross round his neck was hacking at the thick growth of broom with his sword.

When swinging back his sword, the Cossack tightened his lips, and when bringing it down he emitted a short sigh, producing that indefinable sound which a butcher makes when dressing a carcass—"Uszza!"

The thick brooms fell under the sharp blade like grass under the scythe. If an enemy arm came under his stroke at the moment he would slash it clean off. If the head of a Red Army man got in the way he would cleave it down from neck to shoulder.

I had occasion already to see what Cossack swords could do. You would never believe that the death blow was dealt by a narrow blade at full gallop; rather did it look like the cool calculated stroke of an axe on the executioner's block delivered by a past master of the art.

Hearing the church bells ringing for vespers, the Cossack dropped his sword practice. He wiped the warmed blade with a grey footwrap, slipped it into the scabbard, and, breathing heavily, crossed himself.

Following a narrow path between the potato beds I came to a spring. The icy water trickled from an old moss-grown log with a cheerful gurgle. A rusty icon set into a rotting wooden cross looked down with dull faded eyes. Under the icon was a faint inscription cut out with a knife: "All icons and saints are a lie."

It was getting dark. "In half an hour I'll be able to make for the brick hut," I thought. I decided to go out to the edge of the village, cross the highroad and make my way from there to the barred window by a side path. I knew the exact spot where my Mauser had dropped. The white paper wrapping showed through the nettles. I decided to pick it up without stopping, thrust it through the bars and walk on as if nothing had happened.

Turning a corner, I found myself on a common. There I saw a group of soldiers and suddenly came face to face with the Captain.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, surprised. "Have you come to have a look too? It must be something new to you."

"Have you come back already?" I mumbled, staring at him blankly. I was too stupefied to take in the meaning of his words.

A command uttered on our right made us look round. What I saw there made me clutch the cuff of the Captain's sleeve convulsively.

Within twenty paces of us five soldiers with rifles atilt stood facing a man with his back to the wall of a deserted clay-hut. The man was bareheaded, his arms were tied behind him, and he was staring fixedly at us.

"Chubuk," I whispered, reeling.

The Captain looked round in surprise and put his hand on my shoulder with a reassuring gesture. Keeping his eyes on me all the time, and taking no notice of the command which brought the soldiers' rifles to their shoulders, Chubuk straightened up, shook his head contemptuously and spat.

Then there came such a blinding flash, such a crash, as if someone had struck a big drum close to my ear.

I swayed, ripping off the strap on the Captain's cuff, and slumped down on the ground.

"What's the meaning of this, cadet?" the Captain said sternly. "You old woman, you! You shouldn't have come if your nerves can't stand it. This will never do, young man," he went on more mildly. "Yet you've come running to join the army."

"He's not used to it yet," the officer commanding the firing squad put in, lighting a cigarette. "Take no notice of it. I have a telephone operator in my company, a cadet. At first he used to call his mother in the night, and now he's a regular daredevil. That one made a fine show, though," the officer continued, lowering his voice. "Stood up straight as if on sentry go. And spat, too, mind you!"

Chapter Eleven

The same night, during the first five-minutes' halt, I ran away, taking my Mauser with me and slipping into my pocket a bomb that I found lying in the Captain's cart.

All night, without stopping, without turning off the dangerous roads, I headed north with a sort of sullen doggedness. I no longer bothered to skirt the danger spots such as the black shadows of shrubs, dark ravines, little bridges, which at any other time would have put me on my guard as possible ambushes. Nothing could be more terrible to me than the experiences of the last few hours.

I stumbled along, trying not to think of anything, not to remember anything, not to wish for anything except to rejoin my detachment as quickly as possible.

The next day, from noon till late dusk, I slept as if chloroformed in the bushes of a hidden hollow. In the night I was up again and on my way. From the talk I had heard at the White headquarters I had a rough idea where I was to seek my detachment. It should be somewhere quite near now. But I trudged round and round the forest trials and country roads till late in the night and nobody stopped me.

The night throbbed with the ceaseless murmur of birds, the croaking of frogs and the buzzing of mosquitoes. Close-drawn and star-spangled, it was alive with the restless cry of an owl, the rustles of the lush foliage, and the smells of the wild orchid and sedge.

Despair gripped me. Where was I to go, where was I to search? I came out to the foot of a wooded hill, where, exhausted, I lay down in a clearing overgrown with fragrant wild clover. I lay there for a long time, and the more I thought about it, the more forcibly was the ghastly mistake that had occurred brought home to me. It sank into my mind like a black sucking leech. It was at me that Chubuk had spat, at me and not at the officer. Chubuk had not understood anything, for he had known nothing about the cadet's papers and I had forgotten to tell him about them. At first Chubuk had believed that I, too, was a prisoner, but when he had seen me sitting outside the hut, and especially afterwards, when the Captain had laid a friendly hand on my shoulder, he must have thought that I had gone over to the Whites. There was no other explanation he could find for the concern and attention shown me by the White officer. His spit, ejected at the last minute, seared me like sulphuric acid. More bitter still was the thought that the thing could not be mended, that there was no one I could explain it to and put myself right with, that Chubuk was no more and I would never see him again, neither today, nor tomorrow, nor any other day.

My heart was crushed with a sense of self-reproach at the fatal mistake of my conduct in the forest shack. And there was not a soul around to whom I could unburden my mind. Only silence. Only the hubbub of the birds and the croaking of the frogs.

To this fury against myself was added hatred of this accursed soul-racking silence. In a fit of baffled rage, remorse and despair, I suddenly jumped up, pulled the bomb out of my pocket, released the safety catch and flung it onto the green meadow among the flowers, the dense clover and the dewy bluebells.

The bomb exploded with the deafening crash I yearned for, its wild echo rocketing far away into the distance.

I strode off along the edge of the wood.

"Hey, who goes there?" I presently heard a voice from behind the underbrush.

"It's me," I answered without stopping.

"Who's the *me?* I'll shoot!"

"Shoot, damn you!" I shouted defiantly, drawing my Mauser.

"Stop, you madcap!" cried another voice, which sounded familiar to me. "Wait a minute, Vaska. Why, if it isn't that Boris of ours!"

I had the good sense to control myself before I could let go at one of the men of our own detachment, the miner Maligin.

"Where the devil do you come from? We're not far from here. We were sent to find out who exploded that bomb. Was it you?"

"It was."

"What's the idea, chucking bombs about? Asking for it? You're not drunk by any chance?"

I told my comrades everything—how I fell in with the Whites, how I was captured and how our gallant Chubuk had died. Only one thing I kept back—that last spit of Chubuk's. While I was at it I reported everything I had heard at headquarters about the plans of the Whites, about the orders that had been given for the detachments of Zhikharev and Schwarz to hunt us down.

"Ah, well," Shebalov said, leaning on his sabre, which was dark with the wear and tear of battle, "that's bad news about Chubuk. He was a fine Red Army man, Chubuk was, our best soldier and comrade. That's too bad. You made a big mistake, my lad. . . . A big mistake." At this point Shebalov sighed. "But you can't recall the dead. I don't have to tell you anything—you didn't do it on purpose, of course. It might have happened to anyone."

"Sure, it might have happened to anyone," several voices re-echoed.

"As for the smart way you acted in finding out about Zhikharev and hastening to report it to your comrades— here's my hand and my thanks!"

Turning sharply off to the right and making long night marches, we moved far away from the trap which Zhikharev had set for us. Avoiding the large villages and destroying the enemy patrols standing in our way, we joined up with Begichev's detachment and a week later contacted the regular units of the Red Army which were acting as a screening force at the Povorino Station sector.

It was during those days that I became a cavalryman. Fedya Sirtsov came up to me while we were bivouacking and slapped me on the back with his hard little hand.

"Have you ever ridden horseback, Boris?" he asked.

"I have," I answered. "Only at my uncle's in the country, and that without a saddle. Why?"

"If you could ride without a saddle then you can easily ride a saddled horse. Would you like to join my mounted unit?"

"Why, yes," I answered, eyeing him doubtfully.

"Then you'll take the place of Burdyukov. You can have his horse."

"Why, where is Grisha?"

"Shebalov has kicked him out," Fedya said, swearing. "Kicked him out of the detachment altogether. During a search at the priest's place Grisha slipped a ring on his finger and forgot to take it off. It was a cheap thing, anyway, not worth more than a fiver at the outside in peacetime. It's a darned shame. Shebalov just kicked him out, took the side of that priest."

I wanted to tell Fedya that Shebalov was hardly one to take the priest's side and that probably Grisha had intended to keep that ring, but it occurred to me that Fedya would not like such an explanation and might change his mind about taking me on in his mounted reconnaissance party. So I said nothing. I had long been wanting to join the mounted scouts.

We went to see Shebalov.

Shebalov reluctantly agreed to my transfer from Company One. Unexpected support came from the morose Maligin.

"Let him go," he said. "He's a young nimble lad. As it is, he misses Chubuk, goes about all by himself. He and Chubuk always made a pair, and now he's got nobody."

Shebalov let me go, but he glanced at Fedya darkly and said, half in jest, half in earnest:

"Now mind, Fedya . . . don't you spoil the lad for me. You needn't look at me like that, I'm speaking seriously!"

By way of reply Fedya winked to me slyly, as much as to say: "All right, we know how many beans makes five."

A month later found me imitating Fedya like your true cavalryman. I walked about with my legs planted wide apart, I no longer got entangled in my spurs, and I spent all my free time with the skewbald jaded nag which I had inherited from Burdyukov.

I made friends with Fedya Sirtsov, though he was quite unlike Chubuk. As a matter of fact I fell more at ease with Fedya than I did with Chubuk. Chubuk had been a sort of father to me, rather than a mate. Sometimes, when he told you off or put you to shame, you'd just stand simmering and not dare to answer him back. With Fedya, on the other hand, you could have a row and then make up. It was great fun with him even when things were bad. The trouble with Fedya was that he was capricious. When he took a thing into his head there was no stopping him.

Chapter Twelve

One day Shebalov ordered Fedya:

"Saddle the horses, Fedya, and go down to Viselki village. The 2nd Regiment has asked us on the phone to reconnoitre whether there are any Whites there. We haven't got enough line of our own to reach them, so we have to speak through Kostirevo, and they're thinking of running a line out to us direct through Viselki."

Fedya jibbed. It was dirty rainy weather and Viselki was eight kilometres away. It meant trudging through heavy muddy ground, and there was no hope of getting back before dark.

"Who can be at Viselki?" Fedya protested. "Why should Whites be there? It's right out of the way, with marshland all round. If the Whites wanted to they'd use the highroad instead of pushing on to Viselki."

"Nobody's asking you! Do as you're told!" Shebalov interrupted him.

"That's a good 'un! What if I'm told to go in search of the devil's grandmother? Catch me obeying such an order. Send the infantrymen. I was going to reshoe the horses, and besides, the feldsher's been steaming two pails of makhorka to rub the horses down against the itch, and here you are sending me to Viselki!"

"Fyodor," Shebalov said in a weary voice, "I'm not going to change my order, even if you stand on your head."

Fedya splashed through the mud, swearing and spitting, and shouted at us to get ready.

None of us wanted to drag himself to Viselki through the rain and mire for the sake of some telegraph operators. The boys swore at Shebalov, called the telegraph operators sly dogs and lazy beggars, reluctantly saddled the wet horses and reluctantly, without songs, made for the outskirts of the little village.

The thick tacky clay squelched underfoot. We could move only at a walking pace. After an hour, when we were still half-way, we got caught in a downpour. Our coats got drenched and the water trickled from our caps. The road forked. Half a mile to the right, on a sandy hillside, stood a hamlet of five or six farmhouses. Fedya halted, and after a moment's thought, jerked the right rein.

"We'll warm ourselves up and then go on," he said. "You can't even have a smoke in this rain."

It was warm and clean in the spacious tidy cottage, which smelled of something tasty—either roasted goose or pork.

"Oho!" Fedya whispered, sniffing the air. "This farm is still well-stocked, I see."

The host turned out to be a hospitable man. He winked at a brawny maid, who, with a saucy look at Fedya, plumped wooden bowls down on the table, tossed out wooden spoons, and moving up the stools, said with a smile:

"What are you standing there? Sit down."

"Is it far from here to Viselki?" Fedya asked the host.

"In summer, when it's dry, we take a short cut through the marsh," the old man answered. "It isn't far at all, half an hour's walk at the most. But you can't do it now, you'll get stuck. By the road you were riding it will take a couple of hours, I daresay. It's a bad road, though, especially by the little bridge over the spring. On horseback it's all right, but it's bad in a cart. My son-in-law just came back from there and even broke a shaft."

"Got back today?"

"Yes, this morning."

"D'you know if there are any Whites there?"

"Not that I know of."

"That Shebalov gives you the pip. I told him there were no Whites there. If there weren't any this morning, then there aren't any now. It's been raining cats and dogs all day—who's going to drag himself out there. Come on, take your things off, boys. Catch me going on in this weather. We'll only break the horses' legs."

"Will it be all right, Fedya?" I said. "What will Shebalov say?"

"I don't care what Shebalov says," Fedya answered, throwing off his heavy mud-spattered greatcoat. "We'll tell Shebalov we've been there and didn't find any Whites."

A bottle of homebrew was served with the dinner. Fedya filled the cups and poured one for me too.

"Here's to the world proletariat and the revolution," he said. "I hope to God the revolution lasts our time and the supply of Whites never runs out! At least there's somebody to slash, God bless 'em, otherwise life on this earth would be a bore. Here goes!"

Seeing that I had not raised my cup, Fedya gave a whistle.

"Whew! You don't mean to say you've never had one, Boris? You're no cavalryman, I see, you're a sissy."

"Who said I'd never had one?" I lied, blushing hotly, and tossed it back.

The pungent liquor caught at my throat and took my breath away. I bent my head and clamped my mouth down on a soft pickled cucumber. Soon I was in a gay mood. Fedya pulled his accordion out of its leather case and struck up a tune that made you feel light at heart. Then we drank some more, drank to the health of the Red Army men who were fighting the Whites, and to our comrades the horses, who carried us into mortal combat, and to our sabres—may they never get blunted in their job of hacking off White heads—and a good deal more we drank to that evening.

Fedya drank more and kept more sober than anyone else. Black locks of hair clung to his clammy forehead. He worked the bellows of his accordion furiously, singing in a soft tenor voice:

The Reds are abroad across the Don...

while we joined it in a straggling chorus:

Hey, hey, have a good time...

Then, off again went Fedya, tossing his head and screwing up his moist eyes:

Their companion a sharp knife
And a trusty sword...

which we re-echoed in a swaggering reckless recitative:

And a trusty sword. . . .

Then all together in a chorus:

E-ekh! Life is a gamble...
Not worth a kopek. . . .

Fedya wound up on such a high note that he drowned out all our voices and his accordion. He lowered his head and sat brooding for a while, then tossed his head furiously, as if a bee had stung him, banged his fist down on the table and reached for his cup again.

We left late in the evening. I had difficulty in getting my foot into the stirrup, and when I did finally mount my horse it seemed to me that I was sitting in a swing instead of a saddle. My head spun and I felt sick. It was drizzling, the horses were restive, kept breaking ranks and colliding with those in front. I swayed for a long time in the saddle, and finally slumped over my horse's mane like a dead man.

The next morning I had a bad hangover. I went out into the yard, feeling disgusted with the happenings of the night before. There was not a grain of oats in the horse's nosebag. On returning in the evening I had scattered all the oats in the mud. Fedya's colt, on the other hand, had his feeding trough piled high. I got a bucket and filled it from the trough. In the entry I ran into two of our scouts. They both looked angry, bleary-eyed and fuzzy.

"Do I look like that?" I wondered, startled, and went off to get a wash. I was a long time at it. Afterwards I went out into the street. A ground frost had settled overnight, and the sparse flakes of the year's first snow dropped onto the hardened clay of the battered roadway. Fedya Sirtsov hastened up to me from behind, yelling:

"What's the idea, you son of a gun, helping yourself to my oats? I'll punch your jaw for you if I catch you at it again!"

"You'll get tit for tat," I snapped back. "Has your horse got to bust, or what? Why did you take an extra measure for your horse when you were sharing out?"

"That's none o' your business," Fedya shouted, foaming at the mouth as he sprang up to me, waving his whip about.

"Put that whip away, Fedya!" I yelled in a towering rage, knowing Fedya's mad ways. "If you as much as touch me with that whip I'll fetch you one on the nob with the flat of my sword!"

"Oh, you will, will you!"

Fedya went right off the handle and I don't know how this conversation of ours would have ended had not Shebalov appeared from round the corner.

Fedya did not like Shebalov and was a bit afraid of him, so he took a vicious swipe at a little dog who happened to be around, and went away, after showing me his fist.

"Come here," Shebalov said to me.

I went up.

"What's the idea—one minute you and Fedya all but hug each other, the next you're like cat and dog? Come into my hut."

Shutting the door behind him, Shebalov sat down and asked:

"Were you at Viselki with Fedya too?"

"Yes," I answered, thrown into confusion.

"Don't tell lies! None of you were there. Where were you all that time?"

"At Viselki," I repeated doggedly.

Angry though I was with Fedya I did not want to let him down.

"All right," Shebalov said after a thoughtful pause. "I'm glad to hear it. I had my doubts, you know, but I didn't want to ask Fedya—he'd tell me a lie just the same. Those bums of his are a choice lot too. They rang me up from the 2nd Regiment, wild as anything. 'We sent our telephone operators down to Viselki,' they said, 'taking your word for it, but they barely got away by the skin of their teeth.' I says to them: 'Then the Whites must have come afterwards,' but to myself I said: 'The devil knows that Fedya. He came back late and smells of vodka.' "

Shebalov crossed over to the window, pressed his forehead against the misted pane, and stood there for several minutes in silence.

"They're giving me no end of trouble, those scouts," he resumed, turning round. "They're brave boys, mind you, but they're a bad lot. And Fedya, too—absolutely no discipline. I'd drive him out, only there's nobody I can replace him with."

Shebalov looked at me in a friendly way. His tufted eyebrows smoothed out and his grey eyes, always screwed up to give them a stern expression, radiated a warm shy smile, as he said with sincerity:

"You've got no idea how difficult it is to command a detachment! Bootmaking is child's play compared to it. I sit nights poring over the map, trying to get used to it. Sometimes 1 feel dazed. I've got no education, general or military, and the Whites are so stubborn. It's all right for their captains, they're educated and have always been on the job, but I can barely spell out a military order. And on top of it, we've got such boys here. They've got discipline there. Said and done. But our men haven't got used to it yet, you've got to check up on everything yourself. In other units at least they have commissars. I keep asking for one, but they tell me: 'You can do without it for the time being, you're a Communist yourself.' But what Communist am I?" He corrected himself: "I'm a Communist, of course, but I have no education."

The burly Sukharev and the Czech Galda burst into the room.

"I a soldier give for reconnaissance, I a soldier give for machine-gun, I a soldier give for kitchen—but he give nothing," the hooknosed Galda said indignantly, pointing at the flushed and angry Sukharev.

"He gave a man to the kitchen to peel potatoes," Sukharev shouted, "but I didn't take the picket off until midday! He gave a man to the machine-gunners, but my boys from Platoon 2 have been helping the artillerymen to repair the bridge since this morning. I'm not going to give any men for communications, and that's flat! Let him give them."

Shebalov's pale eyebrows contracted and his eyes narrowed. Not a trace remained of the shy good-natured smile in his grey weather-beaten face.

"Sukharev," he said sternly, leaning on his sabre. "No nonsense, please! Look at the fuss you're making because your men haven't slept for one night. You know very well that I'm giving Galda a rest because I'm sending him on a special assignment. He's going out to Novoselovo tonight."

Sukharev let off three long bursts of unaddressed oaths; the hooknosed Galda, mixing Russian words with Czech, started to wave his arms about. I went out.

I felt ashamed at having lied to Shebalov. "Shebalov is our commander," I said to myself. "He goes without sleep and has a hard time. But we ... this is the way we do our duty. Why did I have to tell him a lie about our reconnaissance having been at Viselki? We only let the telephone operators down. Luckily no one was killed. It isn't right though, it's not playing fair towards the revolution and towards one's comrades."

I tried to justify myself in my own eyes by the fact that Fedya was my chief and he had ordered the change of route, but the next minute I saw how lame this excuse was. "Did your chief order you to drink vodka too?" I thought, furious with myself. "Did he order you to tell the commander a lie?"

Fedya's tousled head was thrust out of the window and he called out: "Boris!"

I made as if I had not heard him.

"Boris!" he repeated in a conciliatory tone. "Oh, don't be so touchy. Come and have some pancakes. Come on. I've got something to tell you. Tuck in!" he said, moving the frying-pan up to me and peering anxiously into my face. "What did Shebalov call you for?"

"Asked me about Viselki," I answered bluntly. " 'You weren't there at all,' he says."

"And what did you say?"

Fedya fidgeted so uneasily that one would think he had been seated in the frying-pan together with the pancakes.

"What could I say? I ought to have come clean, but I was sorry for you, damn fool that you are."

"Easy now," Fedya began truculently, but then, remembering that he had not got everything out of me yet, he moved up and asked with worried curiosity: "What else did he say?"

"He said you were cowards and self-seekers," I lied to Fedya to his face. " 'They were afraid to show their noses at Viselki,' he says, 'and they sat it out somewhere in a ravine, most likely. I've noticed for some time that the scouts are getting funky,' he says."

"You're making it up!" Fedya said angrily. "He didn't say anything of the sort."

"Go and ask him," I went on maliciously. " 'I'd better send the infantry out on such jobs,' he says. 'All these scouts are good for is to nose out cream jugs in people's cellars.' "

"You're lying!" Fedya went up in the air. "He must have said: 'Those lazybones are getting out of hand, they've got to be disciplined,' but he didn't say anything about the scouts getting funky."

"What if he didn't," I admitted, well satisfied at having got Fedya's rag out. "Even if he didn't, do you think it's right? Our comrades relied on us, and this is what we go and do. Because of you a regiment of men were misled. How are people going to look at us now? 'Self-seekers,' they'll say, 'you can't trust them. They go and report that there are no Whites at Viselki, and when the signalmen go out to lay down the wire they get fired at.' "

"Who fired at them?" Fedya said, surprised.

"The Whites, of course. Who else?"

Fedya looked put out. He knew nothing about the telephone men having got into trouble through him, and the thing touched him to the quick. He withdrew into the next room without a word.

He got out his hoarse-voiced accordion and gave vent to his bad humour in the sad old waltz *On the Hills of Manchuria.*

Presently he broke off abruptly, and hitching on his Caucasian sword, walked out of the hut.

Some fifteen minutes later he reappeared under the window.

"Get on your horse, quick!" he commanded gruffly through the window pane.

"Where have you been?"

"With Shebalov. Get a move on!"

Shortly our scout party rode past the outguard at a jogtrot over the lightly frozen road.

Chapter Thirteen

At the crossroads where we had turned off to the farmstead the evening before, Fedya halted, and calling aside two of his smartest men, spoke to them for a long time, pointing down the road, then, swearing at each of them in turn to hammer home his instructions, he rejoined us and ordered us to turn off to the farmstead. There, without a single word that would have reminded our host about yesterday's doings, Fedya questioned him about the short cut to Viselki through the marsh.

"You won't be able to make it, comrades," the man said. "You'll only drown your horses. It's been raining all the week, you couldn't go through on foot, leave alone on horseback."

Meanwhile the two scouts Fedya had sent on ahead returned and reported that Viselki was occupied by the Whites and that there was a road block there. Taking no notice of the farmer's expostulations, Fedya ordered him to get ready. The man swore more earnestly than ever that the marsh was simply impassable. His wife started to cry. The rosy-cheeked girl, his daughter, who had exchanged saucy glances with Fedya the night before, snapped his head off for making a mess on the floor with his muddy boots. But Fedya was deaf to everything and insisted on having his own way. I asked him what his plans were, but he did not even swear by way of reply, he just glanced at me sideways with a twisted ironical smile.

Presently we rode out of the farmstead. The farmer rode ahead beside Fedya on a poor nag of a horse. We turned off once into a birch wood. Muddy water squirted from the quaggy moss under the horses' hooves. The road got worse and worse. The horses sunk deeper and deeper in the mire; here and there moss-grown hummocks stuck out in blackened islets over the waterlogged meadow.

We dismounted and walked on. We proceeded in this way until we came to the brushwood road the farmer had told us about. Before us lay a narrow strip covered with a thick ooze of twigs and rotted hay that had risen to the surface.

"H'm," Fedya muttered, stealing a glance at his frowning comrades. "Some road, this!"

"We'll drown, Fedya!"

"Easy as anything," the old farmer, our guide, put in. "The brushwood has rotted away, it's bad enough even in good weather."

"The horses can't swim or wade through this devil's muck."

"Never mind!" Fedya said encouragingly with a forced smile. "We'll beat the devil at it!"

He jerked the bridle of his jibbing horse and was first to plunge knee-deep into the rank-smelling mire. We followed him, two at a time. The water, filmed over here and there with an ice crust, trickled down the tops of our boots. The thin hidden litter shook under our feet. It was terrifying to step out blindly, expecting at any moment that your foot would find no support and you would be sucked down into a slimy bottomless hole.

The horses snorted, jibbed and quivered. From somewhere out in the mist came Fedya's question, like a voice from the other world:

"Hullo there, are you all alive?"

"Well, boys, we've come to the end of our tether. Hadn't we better turn back?" out ginger bugler muttered, his teeth chattering from cold.

Suddenly Fedya popped out of the mist.

"Now then, Pasha, don't you start a panic," he warned him in a low angry voice. "If you're going to whine, then you'd better turn back and go back by yourself. I say, Dad," he turned to the old man, "my horse is up to the belly in it. Have we a long way to go yet?"

"It's not far now. The ground will rise soon, it'll be drier, but the spot before that is the most dangerous of all. If we pass that now, then we're safe for the rest of the way."

The water reached our waists. The old man halted to take off his cap and cross himself.

"Now I'll go ahead and you follow me in single file, otherwise you'll tumble in."

The old man jammed his cap down and went forward. He walked slowly, stopping frequently to grope for the sunken brushwood road with his staff.

Strung out in a line, chilled by the frost-laden wind, drenched by the swamp water beneath, and our clothes sodden by the damp mist above we did no more than a hundred yards in half an hour. My hands were blue and my knees shook.

"That damned Fedya!" I said to myself. "Yesterday he didn't want to go because the road was muddy, and today he's led us into a quagmire."

A horse whinnied in front of us. The mist tore apart, and on a hillock we saw Fedya, now sitting astride his horse.

"Sh," he whispered, when we crowded round him, wet and shivering. "Viselki's behind those bushes, within a hundred paces. It's dry further on."

With wild whoops and whistling our half-frozen cavalry tore into the little village from the side the Whites least expected us. Scattering bombs about us we dashed to the small church next to which the White detachment had its headquarters.

In Viselki we captured ten prisoners and a machine-gun. When, tired, but pleased, we were returning to our unit by the main road, Fedya, who was riding beside me, laughed a harsh wry laugh.

"That's got the better of Shebalov, anyway! Will he be surprised!"

"What d'you mean?" I said blankly. "He'll be pleased."

"He will and he won't. He'll be annoyed that things turned out my way, not his, and with such good luck too."

"I don't understand, Fedya," I said with misgiving. "But didn't Shebalov send you out himself?"

"He did, but not that way. He sent me to Novoselovo, to wait for Galda there. But I went and turned off to Viselki. That'll teach him to kick up such a row over yesterday's business. He's got nothing to say for himself now. With these prisoners and the machine-gun we've captured he can't say a word."

"I don't know about luck," I thought. "It doesn't sound right to me. We were sent to Novoselovo, but went to Viselki instead. Luckily things ended the way they did. What if we had got stranded in that swamp—where should we be then? What excuse would we have?"

While still at some distance from the village where our detachment was stationed, we noticed signs of unusual activity there. Red Army men ran about on the outskirts, scattering in extended line. Several horsemen galloped past the vegetable plots.

And then suddenly a machine-gun in the village started chattering. Pasha, our bugler, the one who had suggested turning back from the swamp, dropped into the roadway.

"This way!" Fedya yelled, heading his horse for a hollow.

A second burst of machine-gun fire followed the first, and two scouts bringing up the rear toppled to the ground.

One man's foot got stuck in the stirrup and the frightened horse dragged the wounded man along with him.

"Fedya," I gasped, petrified, "why, that's our Colt blazing away. They're not expecting you from this side. We were supposed to be at Novoselovo."

"I'll give 'em blazes in a minute!" Fedya snarled, jumping off his horse and rushing over to the machine-gun we had captured from the Whites.

"What are you doing, Fedya, you madman! Firing at your own men? They don't know, but you do!"

Then, breathing heavily, he struck the top of his boot a savage blow with his whip, leapt into the saddle and sprang out onto the hilltop. Several bullets whistled over his head, but Fedya stood up in the stirrups to his full height and raised his cap aloft on the tip of his bayonet.

Several more shots were fired from the village, then all grew quiet. Our people had seen the signals of the lone horseman standing under the rain of bullets.

Fedya waved to us not to move too soon, and, spurring his horse, he dashed into the village at a full gallop. After a while we followed him. On the outskirts we were met by Shebalov, grey-faced and grim. His eyes in his haggard face had a faded look, his sabre was covered with dirt and his muddy spurs barely clinked. He ordered the scout party to their billets. His eyes glided over the men with a weary look, then he ordered me to dismount and surrender my weapons. Silently, in front of the whole detachment I slipped from the saddle, unfastened my sword and handed it to the scowling Maligin together with my rifle.

The detachment paid dearly for the scout party's daring but wilful raid on Viselki. Besides the three horsemen who had come under the fire of their own machine-gun, Galda's 2nd Company was routed at Novoselovo, where Fedya was to have met it, and Galda himself was killed. The Red. Army men of our detachment were furious and demanded that Fedya, who was arrested, should be tried and severely punished.

"We can't go on like this, boys! We must have discipline. At this rate we'll all be killed off and cause the death of our comrades too. What's the sense in appointing commanders if everyone's going to act on his own."

That night Shebalov came to see me. I made a clean breast of it and told him everything. I confessed that I had lied to him about Fedya through a sense of comradeship when I was asked that first time whether we had been to Viselki or not. Then and there I swore that I knew nothing about Fedya's wilful action, when he led us to Viselki instead of to Novoselovo.

"Look here, Boris," Shebalov said, "you've lied to me once already, and if I take your word for it this time and don't have you court-martialled together with Fedya, it's only because you're so young. But don't make any more of these mistakes, my boy. It was through your mistake that Chubuk lost his life, and it was through you fellows that the signalmen ran into the Whites. You've made enough mistakes! I say nothing about that devil Fedya—he's been a thorn in my side, more of a nuisance than a help. Now go back to Sukharev in Company One and take up your old place. Frankly, I made a blunder that time in letting you go to join Fedya. Chubuk ... he was different, you had something to learn from him. But Fedya? He's unreliable. And generally speaking, what's the idea taking up now with one fellow, now with another? You've got to make friends with everybody. When a man's on his own it's easier for him to go wrong and make mistakes."

That night Fedya escaped through the window of the hut in which he was being kept under arrest, and together with four of his cronies, he galloped off to the south through the front. It was said that he had gone to join Makhno, the bandit chief.

Chapter Fourteen

The Reds assumed the offensive all along the front.

Our detachment was subordinated to the Brigade Commander and occupied a small section on the left flank of the 3rd Regiment.

A fortnight had passed in heavy marches. The Cossacks fell back, hanging on to every village and farmstead.

Throughout those days I had but one desire—to atone for my guilt before my comrades and earn the honour of being enrolled in the Party.

In vain did I volunteer for dangerous reconnaissances. In vain did I stand up to my full height, pale, with teeth clenched, when many a tough soldier fired from the knee or lying down. No one yielded to me his turn to go out on reconnaissance, no one took any notice of my ostentatious heroism.

Sukharev even remarked to me once in passing:

"Why do you try to ape Fedya? Showing off in front of the men. There are braver soldiers than you here. What sense is there in sticking your neck out?"

"Fedya again," I thought with vexation. "I'm always having him thrown into my face. Why can't they give me a real job and say—now, do that, and everything will be forgotten, you'll become our friend and comrade again?"

Chubuk was gone. Fedya was with Makhno. Who wanted Fedya, anyway? I had made no special friends with anybody. Besides, the boys gave me the cold shoulder. Even Maligin, who used to like to have a chat with me, invite me to tea and tell me things—even he turned cold now.

Once I heard him through the door tell Shebalov about me:

"He goes about sort of miserable. Maybe he misses Fedya? Mind you, he didn't miss Chubuk very long when he got killed through him." Colour flooded my face.

It was true: somehow, I had soon got used to the loss of Chubuk; but it wasn't true about my missing Fedya— I hated the man.

I could hear the clink of Shebalov's spurs as he paced the earthen floor. After a pause, he answered:

"You're wrong there, Maligin. Yes. The boy's unspoilt. He can live it down yet. You're forty, Maligin, you can't be re-educated, but he's only fifteen. You and I are worn-down boots, resoled and nailed, but he's like a new upper, on whatever last you put him, that's the shape he'll take. Sukharev tells me he apes Fedya, likes to jump up in the skirmish line and show off how brave he is. But I tell him: 'You're a bearded old geezer, Sukharev, but you're blind. He's not aping Fedya at all, the lad's simply trying to make good and he doesn't know how.' "

At this point Shebalov was called out by a messenger tapping on the window. The conversation was interrupted. I felt better.

I had gone to fight for the "bright kingdom of socialism". That kingdom was somewhere far off. To reach it one had to trudge many difficult roads and overcome many formidable obstacles.

The Whites were the main obstacle along this path, and in joining the army, I had not yet learnt to hate the Whites the way miner Maligin, or Shebalov hated them, or dozens of others like them, who were not only fighting for the future, but settling their accounts for the painful past.

But now it was different. Now the atmosphere of rankling hatred, the stories of a past of which I had known nothing, of unredressed wrongs and grievances that had accumulated through the centuries, had gradually kindled an answering flame in me. I was like an iron nail, which, accidentally dropped into the ashes, becomes white-hot from the heat of the burning coals.

Through that deep hatred the distant lights of the "bright kingdom of socialism" glowed more alluringly than ever.

That evening I got a sheet of paper from our storekeeper and wrote a long application, asking to be admitted to membership of the Party.

I took this application to Shebalov. He was busy talking to a commissary chief and Company Commander Piskarev, who had been appointed in place of the late Galda.

I sat down on a bench and waited a long time for them to finish their business conversation. During the talk Shebalov looked up at me intently several times as if trying to guess what I had come for.

When the men had gone, Shebalov got out his notebook, jotted something down in it, shouted out to the messenger to run and call Sukharev, and then turned to me, saying:

"Well, what is it?"

"I've come, Comrade Shebalov ... to ... er, see you," I answered, stepping up to the table and feeling a light shiver run up my spine.

"So I see!" he said more gently, evidently noticing the excited state I was in. "Well, out with it."

Everything I had wanted to say to Shebalov before asking him for his recommendation to membership of the Party, the whole long explanation I had prepared to convince him that although I was to blame for what had happened to Chubuk and for deceiving him about Fedya, I wasn't really as bad as all that and never would be— all this was clean forgotten.

Silently, I handed him the sheet of paper.

It seemed to me as if the ghost of a smile born from under his fair eyebrows slid down to his chapped lips as he became immersed in my long application.

He read it half through and laid the paper aside. I started, realising that this meant a refusal. But Shebalov's face belied this. It was calm, slightly tired-looking, and his pale eyes mirrored the window panes which were covered with frostwork.

"Sit down," Shebalov said. I complied.

"So you want to join the Party?" "I do," I answered quietly but firmly. It seemed to me that Shebalov was putting his questions merely to show how unrealisable my desire was. "Ever so much?"

"Ever so much," I intoned, and shifting my glance to the corner, which was hung about with dusty icons, I decided that Shebalov was simply making fun of me.

"I'm glad to hear that," Shebalov resumed, and only now did I realise by his tone that he was not making fun of me at all—he was smiling at me in a friendly way.

He picked up a pencil that was lying among the breadcrumbs scattered over the table, moved up my application and signed his name on it together with the number of his Party card.

Having done this, he turned round to me together with the stool he was sitting on and said good-naturedly:

"Well, old chap, you'd better look out now. I'm not only your commander, I'm your godfather, in a manner of speaking. Mind you don't let me down."

"I'll never let you down, Comrade Shebalov," I said earnestly, snatching the sheet of paper off the table with unseemly haste. "Neither you nor any of my comrades, not for anything in the world!"

"Wait a minute!" he checked me. "You'll need a second signature. Who else could we have to recommend you? Ah!" he sang out at the sight of Sukharev, who came into the room. "You're the very man."

Sukharev took off his cap, shook off the snow, clumsily wiped his huge boots on the sack that served as a mat, leaned his rifle against the wall and asked, as he held his chilled hands against the hot stove: "What did you call me for?"

"Business. It's about the guard. The boys at the cemetery have got to be fixed up in the church. We can't have the men freezing. The priest will be here in a minute, we'll make arrangements with him. And now. . . ." Here Shebalov smiled slyly and jerked his head in my direction. "How's this lad acquitting himself?"

"What d'you mean?" Sukharev asked cautiously, a grin spreading over his red weather-beaten face.

"As a soldier, I mean. Make your report of him, regulation style."

"He's not a bad soldier," Sukharev answered after a thoughtful pause. "Does his duty well. There's nothing against him. Only he's a bit harum-scarum. And after Fedya, he's none too keen to make friends with the boys. They're wild with Fedya, may a bomb blast him."

At this point Sukharev blew his nose, his face reddening still more, and he continued angrily:

"May he get his head slashed open by a Gaidamak! Through him we lost a commander like Galda! What a company commander he was! You'll never find another one like him. Call that Piskarev a company commander? He isn't a company commander, he's a block o' wood. Only today I told him: 'Your patrols are for communication. I gave ten extra men yesterday for guard duty', but he—"

"Never mind that!" Shebalov interrupted. "Don't run that old gramophone record. You're crying up Galda now, but you were always like cat-and-dog with him before. What ten extra men are you talking about? You can't fool me. But we can go into that later. Tell me this. The lad wants to join the Party. Will you go surety for him? What are you staring at? Didn't you say yourself he was a good soldier, there was nothing against him, and as for the past—we can't keep raking it up for ever!"

"That's true enough," Sukharev said, scratching ^his head and dragging out his words. "The devil knows."

"The devil knows nothing! You're company commander, and a Party man at that. You should know better than the devil whether your Red Army man is fit to be a Communist or not."

"He's not a bad chap," Sukharev acquiesced. "The trouble with him is swank. He always pushes himself forward in the skirmish line, sticks his neck out for nothing. Otherwise he's all right."

"So long as he doesn't back out. That's not so bad. Well, what do you say? Will you sign or not?"

"I don't mind signing, he's not a bad chap," Sukharev repeated cautiously. "Who else is going to sign?"

"I am. Come on, sit down at the table, here's his application."

"You've signed it!" Sukharev said, taking the pencil into his bear's paw of a hand. "That's good. The lad's one in a thousand, only he hasn't been spanked enough as a kid!"

Chapter Fifteen

Fighting outside Novokhopersk had been going on now for several days. All divisional reserves had been drawn upon, but the Cossacks still stood firm.

The morning of the fourth day opened with a lull.

"Well, boys," Shebalov said, riding up to the dense line of the detachment strung along the brow of the hill, which was bare of snow. "There's going to be a general offensive this afternoon. The whole division is cracking into it."

His rime-silvered horse stood steaming. The long heavy sabre gleamed dazzlingly in the sunshine and the red top of his black *papakha* made a brilliant splash of colour amid the cold snowy field.

"Well, boys," Shebalov repeated in a vibrant voice. "This is a big day. If we dislodge the Whites here, they won't find a foothold all the way to Boguchar. Make a last good showing, don't put your old man to shame before the division!"

"Old man your grandmother!" Maligin barked, hoarse-voiced, as he came up. "I'm a bit older than you, but I pass as a young 'un."

"You and I are a pair of worn-down old boots," Shebalov repeated his pet saying. "Boris!" he called out in a friendly tone. "How old are you?"

"Getting on for sixteen already, Comrade Shebalov," I answered proudly. "I turned fifteen on the twenty-second of this month!"

"Already! I like that!" Shebalov said with feigned indignation. "I've turned forty-six already. Hear that, Maligin? Sixteen, eh? The things he'll see, you and I will never see. . . ."

"We'll have a peep at 'em from the next world," Mali-gin said with grim humour, muffling his neck up in the torn officer's bashlyk.

Shebalov touched his restive horse with the spur and galloped down the line of campfires.

"Come and have tea, Boris. My hot water, your sugar!" shouted Vaska Shmakov, taking his sooty billycan off the fire.

"I haven't got any sugar either."

"What have you got then?"

"Some bread, and I can give you some frozen apples."

"Come on with your bread then. I've got nothing at all. Just plain water."

"Gorikov!" someone hailed me from another campfire. "Come here."

I went up to a group of Red Army men, who were engaged in some argument.

"Maybe you can tell us," Grishka Cherkasov, a ginger lad nicknamed Psalm-Reader, said to me. "Let's listen to this man. You studied geography, didn't you? Well, what comes after this place here?"

"In what direction? In the south the next place will be Boguchar."

"And then what?"

"And then Rostov. Oh, lots of other places. Novorossiisk, Vladikavkaz, Tiflis, and still farther Turkey. Why?"

"So many of 'em!" Grishka murmured, scratching his ear. "At this rate we'll have to go on fighting half our lives. I heard that Rostov is by the sea. And that, I thought, would see the end of it."

The boys started laughing and Grishka looked at them in dismay. He slapped his thighs and cried:

"Holy Moses! Look how long we'll have to fight!"

The talk died down.

A horseman came down the road behind the lines at full gallop. Shebalov rode forward at a trot to meet him. The field gun on the flank fired two more shots.

"Company One, this way!" Sukharev shouted, waving his arms.

Several hours later our skirmish lines rose from the white snowdrifts in which they had been lying. Strung out and bleeding, knee-deep in the snow, our detachment went into action in face of the enemy's machine-guns and shells to deliver the last decisive blow. Just when our advance units burst into the outskirts a bullet hit me in the right side.

I staggered and sat down in the soft trampled snow. "It's nothing," I thought, "just a scratch. I haven't lost consciousness, that means I haven't been killed. Once I haven't been killed then I'll pull through."

The infantry, running far ahead, looked like so many black dots.

"It's nothing," I thought, holding on to a bush and leaning my head on the branches. "The stretcher-bearers will soon come along and pick me up."

It was quiet in the field, but fighting was still going on in the neighbouring section, whence came a muffled roar. A solitary rocket hung poised in the air like a yellow-flaming comet.

A trickle of warm blood seeped through my tunic. "What if the stretcher-bearers don't come and I die?" I thought, shutting my eyes.

A big black jackdaw alighted on the dirty snow and made for a heap of horse dung lying nearby with quick little steps. Then suddenly the bird turned its head, glanced askance at me and flew away with a flap of its heavy wings.

Jackdaws are not afraid of dead men. When I die from loss of blood the bird will come back and sit down next to me.

My head began to nod weakly. The shell bursts raking the snowdrifts on the right flank grew fainter and fainter, and the rockets brighter and more frequent.

Night sent out a patrol of a thousand stars to let me get another look at them. It sent out a bright moon too. I was thinking: "Chubuk lived, and so did Gypsy Kid, and so did Polecat. . . . Now they're gone, and I'll be gone too." I recollected Gypsy Kid once telling me: 'Ever since then I've been searching for the good life.' 'And do you expect to find it?' I had asked him. And he had answered: 'Not by myself, I wouldn't. But all together we ought to, being so keen on it.' "

"Yes, yes! All together," I whispered, snatching at the thought. "All together, certainly." My eyes closed and my thoughts wandered off along unrememberable but pleasant paths.

"Boris!" I heard a strained whisper.

I opened my eyes. Close by, hugging the trunk of a young birch tree splintered by a shell, sat Vaska Shmakov.

He had no cap on and his eyes were staring out into the moist deepening twilight, where the lights of the distant railway station glimmered in golden clusters.)

"Boris!" his faint whisper reached my ears. We've captured it after all."

"Captured it," I answered softly.

He hugged the broken young tree still harder, looked at me with a calm dying smile and slowly dropped his head onto a quivering bush.

A light winked and swayed. There came the low sad sound of a horn. The stretcher-bearers were coming.

1930

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