An unusual photograph of Maxim Gorky, taken by the Soviet photograper Moisei Nappelbaum (1928).

# FROM FURMANOV TO SHOLOKHOV

## An Anthology of the Classics of Socialist Realism

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Ardis, Ann Arbor

Translated from the original Russian

Ardis Publishers
2901 Heatherway
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

From Furmanov to Sholokhov.

Translation from Russian.
1. Russian prose literature—20th century—Translations into English. 2. English prose literature—Translations from Russian. 3. Socialist realism in literature. I. Luker, Nicholas J. L. II. Title.
PG3266.F76 1988 891.78'42'08012 88-16635
ISBN 0-87501-036-9 (alk. paper)
ISBN 0-87501-037-7 (pbk.)

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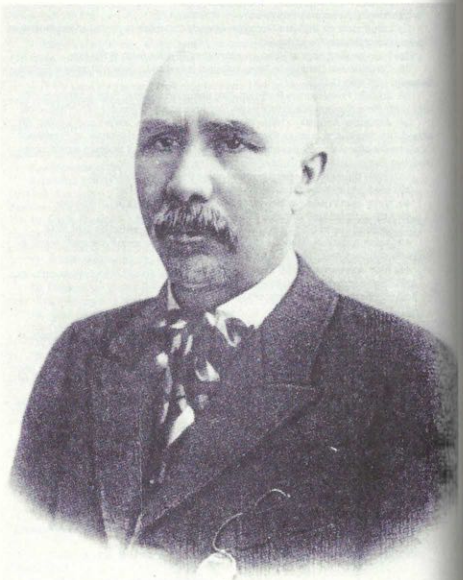

Alexander Serafimovich (1913).

# Alexander Serafimovich
# THE IRON FLOOD

Serafimovich and Ostrovsky's widow with Guards officers near Orpol on the western front (1943). Boris Polevoi is in the second row, far left.



## Alexander Serafimovich (1863–1949)

A genuine Don Cossack, Alexander Serafimovich Popov (Serafimovich was his usual pseudonym) was born in 1863 in the village of Nizhne-Kurmoyarskaya near Tsimlyansk, about 100 miles east of Rostov-on-Don in what was then the Don Military Region. When he was three, his family left for Poland where the father, a Cossack captain, served with Cossack regiments stationed there. In 1874, when Serafimovich's father was appointed adjutant to the district ataman, the family returned to the Don. They settled in the small town of Ust-Medveditskaya (renamed Serafimovich in 1933), about 175 miles north of Rostov, where the boy entered the classical *gimnaziya*.

When their father died in 1876, the family fell on hard times and the young Serafimovich had to help support them by giving lessons. But the boy's mother managed to secure a military scholarship for him, and in 1883 he enrolled in the mathematics and physics department at the University of St. Petersburg. Here he came into contact with progressive student circles, read Marx, and met Alexander Ulyanov, Lenin's older brother. He then joined a revolutionary student group, and from 1885 his activities brought him under secret police surveillance. In 1887, his final year at university, he was arrested for writing a proclamation about the attempted assassination of Tsar Alexander III in March of that year—an attempt for which Ulyanov and four others were hanged. After four months in prison, Serafimovich was exiled for three years to the town of Mezen in Archangel Province in the far north of Russia. There he met many political exiles, among them the well-known revolutionary and organizer of weavers' strikes, Pyotr Moiseenko, who was to be the writer's friend for many years.

When his term of exile ended in 1890, Serafimovich returned to Ust-Medveditskaya but remained under police surveillance. On regaining his right of free movement in 1892, he went first to Novocherkassk and then to Rostov-on-Don, where for the next few years he made a living by giving lessons and contributing feuilletons, articles and sketches to provincial newspapers. In addition, from 1901 until early

1902 he served as assistant chief clerk in the Don provincial administration in Novocherkassk.

In 1902 Serafimovich moved to Moscow, where he devoted himself wholly to journalistic and literary work. He was invited by the writer Leonid Andreev to join the Moscow paper *The Messenger (Kur'er)*, and then became a member of the *Sreda* ("Wednesday") literary circle, meeting in it such prominent literary figures as Maxim Gorky, Ivan Bunin, Alexander Kuprin and Vikenty Veresaev. In 1903 he joined Gorky's cooperative publishing enterprise *Znanie* ("Knowledge"), which had been established in St. Petersburg in 1898.

The 1905 Revolution saw Serafimovich closely associated with participants in the armed rising in the Presnya district of Moscow, an experience later reflected in his writing. The years before World War I brought not only varied journalistic and literary work, but also much travelling, notably to the Don and, in 1910, to Finland. In 1915, after the outbreak of war, Serafimovich went to Galicia, where together with Lenin's sister, Maria Ulyanova, he served as a medical orderly at the front and also worked as a correspondent for the newspaper *The Russian Gazette (Russkie vedomosti)*.

Serafimovich's reputation was only firmly established after 1917, when he became one of the first writers to support the Bolsheviks. His loyalty to them was rewarded by expulsion from both the "Wednesday" circle and the Writers' Publishing House in Moscow, measures indicative of the anti-Bolshevik mood prevalent among Russian writers shortly after the Revolution. Soon after October 1917 Serafimovich assumed responsibility for the artistic section of *Izvestiya*, and then in March 1918 became a correspondent for both *Pravda* and *Izvestiya*, visiting several fronts during the Civil War. In May of that year he joined the Communist Party.

After the Civil War Serafimovich played an important part in Soviet cultural life, both as an administrator and public speaker, and gave valuable help to several younger writers, among them Furmanov, Ostrovsky and Gladkov. At the same time he engaged in editorial work, notably as a board member of the journal *Creative Work (Tvorchestvo)* and as chief editor of *October (Oktyabr')*. In addition, he travelled throughout the USSR, speaking in factories and workers' clubs in the far north, the Urals and Siberia. 1931 in particular witnessed a memorable journey over the southern steppes, during which he visited Sholokhov at Veshenskaya on the upper Don. Despite failing health, Serafimovich remained extremely active almost to the end of his long life. During World War II, for example, the octogenarian writer visited the front and wrote articles and sketches about the fighting.



One of the first Soviet authors to be awarded a Stalin Prize and the holder of many distinctions, among them Orders of the Red Banner and of Lenin, Serafimovich is now regarded as a founding father of Soviet literature and a veteran proletarian writer. After a protracted illness he died on his eighty-sixth birthday in January 1949 in Moscow.

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Serafimovich's first published work was the short tale *On an Ice-Floe*. A story of hunters on the White Sea, it was begun in 1887 during his exile and serialized in the newspaper *The Russian Gazette* in February and March 1889. This was followed by *The Snow Desert* (1889) and *On Rafts* (1890), also written in exile, and then by *The Switchman* (1891), a railway story based on the author's experiences while staying near Tsaritsyn (later Stalingrad and now Volgograd) after leaving the north.

In 1901 Serafimovich's first collection of tales was published in St. Petersburg and won him praise from such prominent writers of the older generation as Gleb Uspensky and Vladimir Korolenko. 1902 witnessed the publication of *In the Health Resort*, a tale set in Yalta where the writer had received treatment for tuberculosis. The following year saw the appearance of two southern sea stories, the fishing tale *Into the Storm* and the shorter piece *On the Shore*, which is set in Kerch on the Sea of Azov. In 1903 the "Knowledge" enterprise started to publish Serafimovich's collected works in four volumes (the last appearing in 1910), and at the same time his stories began to figure in "Knowledge" miscellanies—his tale *On the Way*, for example, was included in the enterprise's first miscellany, issued in 1904.

The events of 1905 and Serafimovich's involvement in the Moscow rising found a reflection in several tales, notably *In Presnya* (1906), *The Bombs* (1906), and *How They Were Hanged* (1908). Echoes of the 1905 Revolution were also to be detected in the stories *In the Middle of the Night* (1906), with its portrayal of a workers' mass meeting in the Crimea, *The Glow of a Fire* (1907), describing the burning of church estates, and *At the Precipice* (1907), which mirrors the punitive measures taken by the authorities after the unrest of 1905. These works were followed by a series of tales on various subjects, among them *Forest Life* (1908), set in Archangel Province and based on the author's experiences in exile, *Sands* (1908), a story of peasant greed and murder which was highly praised by Leo Tolstoy, and *Chibis* (1908), a sad tale about a homeless family of farm laborers roaming the author's native Don country.

Serafimovich's first novel was *A Town in the Steppe,* published in the journal *The Contemporary World (Sovremennyi mir)* in 1912 and issued in book form the following year. Written between 1907 and 1910, it portrays the construction of a new industrial town in the Don steppes and the struggle between capitalists and proletarians that accompanies it. Several tales which followed were devoted to the harsh existence of the poor. Among them are *The Three Friends* (1914), about life on a small farm on the Don, and *Short Summer Night* (1916), which deals with the cruel exploitation of children.

During the First World War in stories such as *The Black Three-Cornered Cap* and *The Thermometer* (1914), Serafimovich wrote of the poverty and suffering of ordinary people both at the front and in the rear. A notable product of his experience as a correspondent during the Civil War was the vivid series of sketches and tales *The Revolution, the Front and the Rear* (1917–20).

Serafimovich's main post-Revolutionary work was *The Iron Flood,* now a Soviet classic and the novel for which he is best remembered. Begun in 1921, it was first published in the Moscow almanac *The Depths (Nedra)* in 1924 and appeared as a separate edition later that year.

*The Iron Flood* marked the high point of Serafimovich's career and he produced comparatively little of significance in the years that followed. 1926, however, brought the publication of *Two Deaths,* a dramatic short story set during the street fighting that accompanied the October Revolution in Moscow, while 1931 saw the appearance of *Over the Don Steppes,* a series of sketches devoted to the life of the Don Cossacks. The latter pieces were intended to serve as a prelude to Serafimovich's third novel *Collective Farm Fields,* which was left unfinished when he died. In addition, before World War II he embarked on an autobiographical novel and continued work on it until the end of his life, though sadly it too remained unfinished at his death.

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*The Iron Flood* describes the march of the Taman Army between late August and mid-September 1918, during the Russian Civil War. Red forces, cut off by the Whites on the Taman peninsula between the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea, fought their way under the leadership of E. I. Kovtyukh and I. I. Matveev through the coastal towns of Gelendzhik and Tuapse, then crossed the main Caucasus range to join up with the Red Army of the Northern Caucasus in the region of Dondukovskaya on the Laba River, northeast of the town of Maikop.

# THE IRON FLOOD

## 1

The orchards and streets, wattle fences and huts of the Cossack village were enveloped in thick clouds of stifling dust, and only the tops of the tapering poplars could be seen above it.

From every side came the sound of barking dogs, neighing horses and clanging metal. There were children crying, men swearing, women shouting, and drunken voices singing to an accordion. It was as though a giant beehive had lost its queen and were humming discordantly in confusion.

A fiery haze enveloped the steppe, spreading as far as the windmills out on the ancient burial mound, and there too could be heard the same ceaseless tumult of a thousand-voiced multitude.

Only the foaming river whose cold mountain water went racing past the village was not smothered by the stifling dust, while away in the distance the clear, dark blue mountains rose immense into the sky.

In the glittering, sultry air, red kites—those brigands of the steppe—drifted constantly to and fro, turning their hooked beaks from side to side and listening in amazement. But they could make nothing of it, for never before had there been such a sight.

Was it a fair? But if so, why were there no tents anywhere, why were there no traders or piles of merchandise?

Or was it a settlers' camp? But why were there ammunition wagons and piles of weapons, two-wheeled army carts and stacked rifles wherever you looked?

Or was it an army? But why were there children crying everywhere, nappies hung out on rifles to dry, and cradles swinging from the barrels of guns? Why were there young mothers suckling their babies, cows munching hay beside artillery horses, girls with sunburnt faces hanging pots of millet and lard over pungent fires of dried dung?

All was confusion and disorder amid the clouds of dust, all was commotion and uproar amid the constant hubbub of countless discordant voices.

In the village itself there were only old women, mothers and children left. Not a single Cossack had remained behind—they had all vanished as though the earth had swallowed them up . . .

2

Audible above the lowing of cows and the crowing of cocks were the voices of the steppe people, some raucous and hoarse, others ringing and firm:

"Hey, lads, hurry up!"

"Come to the meeting, comrades!"

"Over by the windmills!"

As the sun gradually cooled, the fiery dust began to settle, and the poplars emerged in all their towering grandeur.

Stretching as far as the eye could see, orchards slowly appeared from the haze, huts showed up white in the distance, and the village streets and lanes were filled from end to end with a stream of bullock carts and wagons, horses and cows. Passing through the orchards and spreading beyond them, they stretched as far as the windmills that stood out on the burial mound, their long, webbed fingers pointing in all directions over the steppe.

Around the windmills, amid the growing tumult of voices, a sea of people spread ever wider, their sunburnt faces stretching away into the distance further than the eye could see. There were gray-bearded old men, women with tired faces, and young girls with merry eyes. There were little boys darting to and fro between people's legs, and panting dogs with their tongues hanging out. But all these were lost in the vast, ever-surging mass of soldiers. They wore fearsome-looking, tall fur hats, threadbare peaked caps, and felt mountain bonnets with drooping brims. Some had long, narrow Circassian coats, faded cotton shirts or ragged tunics, while others were naked to the waist with cartridge-belts slung across their sunburnt, muscular bodies. And in a disorderly way a forest of burnished, dark blue bayonets bristled above their heads on every side.

Out on the burial mound near the windmills all the regimental, battalion and company commanders, together with the chiefs of staff, had gathered together. Who were they all? Some were Tsarist officers who had risen through the ranks, while others were barbers and coopers, fishermen and sailors from towns and villages alike. All were leaders of small Red Army units which they had mustered in their own villages and hamlets. There were a few regular officers, too, who had gone over to the Red Army.



Vorobyov, an enormously tall regimental commander with a huge mustache, climbed up to speak, and his loud voice rang out over the crowd:

"Comrades!"

"Go to hell!" came the reply.

"Down with him!"

"What kind of a commander are you?"

"Smash him, smash 'em all to hell!"

Near one of the windmills stood a short, very stocky man with square, tightly-set jaws, who looked as if he were made of lead. From under knitted brows his gray, gimlet eyes glittered as they took in everything around him. The shadow cast by his body was very short and its head seemed to be trampled by those standing around him.

"Where the hell are we going now?" someone cried.

"To Ekaterinodar!"[1]

"But the Cadets[2] are there!"

"There's nowhere else to go!"

The man with the iron jaws watched with his gray eyes that were as sharp as gimlets.

Then an irrepressible cry broke from the crowd:

"They've sold us out!"

The man with the iron jaws clenched them tighter still. Filled with despair, he surveyed the raging human sea to its furthest edge, and saw the dark, shouting mouths, the angry red faces, and eyes full of rage that flashed beneath knitted brows.

He felt particularly grieved: after all, he had fought side by side with these men as a machine-gunner on the Turkish front. There had been seas of blood and countless thousands of dead . . . Then, during the last few months, they had fought together against the Cadets, the Cossacks and the White generals. They had fought in Eisk, Temriuk, Taman[3] and the Cossack villages in the Kuban.

Then the man unclenched his jaws and said in a soft but iron-hard voice that could be heard above all the uproar and commotion:

"You know me, comrades—we have shed our blood together, and you yourselves chose me as your commander. But if you carry on like this, we shall all be done for. The Cossacks and Cadets are pressing hard on us from every side, and there's not a moment to lose."

He spoke with a Ukrainian accent which disposed the crowd favorably towards him.

But suddenly a terrible silence fell as all heads turned and all eyes looked in the same direction.

Across the steppe, bending low over the stubble with its body stretched out like a taut thread, a black horse was galloping towards them. Wearing a striped red shirt, its rider lay with his chest and face pressed to the animal's mane and his arms hanging down at its sides. Nearer and nearer came the horse. Now everyone could see how, crazed with fear, it was straining forward with all its might, leaving clouds of dust swirling behind it. Its chest was covered with flecks of white foam and its sweating flanks were thick with lather, while its rider, his head still resting on the mane, swayed to and fro in time to the animal's galloping hoofs.

Then a second dark speck appeared out in the distant steppe, and a murmur ran through the crowd:

"Look! There's another coming!"

"Yes, and he's going hell for leather too!"

Then the first black horse galloped up to them, scattering flecks of white foam and snorting. It came to a sudden halt in front of the crowd and sank down on its hind legs. Then its rider in his striped red shirt slid over the animal's head like a sack of flour and slumping heavily to the ground, lay there with his head twisted awkwardly and his arms outstretched.

Some of the crowd rushed towards him while others ran to the horse whose black flanks were sticky with blood.

"It's Okhrim!" they cried as they reached the corpse, then they carefully put it into a more comfortable position. On the man's chest and shoulder a long, bloody sword wound gaped wide, while on his back there was a black spot of clotted blood. The body was already growing cold.

Then, through the crowd, spreading beyond the windmills and away among the carts, echoing with alarm down the streets and lanes of the village, came the cry:

"The Cossacks have cut Okhrim to bits!"

Then the other horseman came galloping up. His closely-fitting shirt, his face and hands, his bare feet and his trousers were all bespattered with blood. But whose blood was it? His own, or someone else's? With eyes that were round with fear, he leapt from his swaying horse and rushed towards the body lying on the ground, its face already covered by the translucent, wax-like pallor of death and its eyes now thick with crawling flies.

"Okhrim!" he cried.



Then he quickly went down on his hands and knees and put his ear to the man's bloodstained chest. But he got up again straightaway and stood over the body with his head bowed:

"My son . . . " he said, "my son!"

For a while he did not move, then suddenly he cried in a hoarse voice that carried away among the carts to the furthest house in the village:

"Slavyanskaya has risen in revolt and so have Poltavskaya, Petrovskaya and Stiblievskaya[4] too! They've put up a gallows in each village—out in the square, in front of the church—and they're hanging anybody they can lay hands on, one after the other! The Cadets have come into Stiblievskaya, laying about them with sabres, hanging and shooting, driving people into the Kuban river with their horses and drowning them. They've got no mercy for those who aren't Cossacks—even old men and women—they treat them all just the same. They're all Bolsheviks, they say . . . The whole of the Kuban's in flames now. They torture those who are in the army, then hang them on trees. Some of our detachments are trying to fight their way through in various places—some to Ekaterinodar and others to Rostov[5] or the sea—but they're all getting hacked to pieces by Cossack sabres!"

Then the man fell silent, and with his head bowed, stood over his son's body once more.

In the leaden stillness all eyes were upon him.

Then he swayed, and seizing his horse's bridle, remounted. The animal's bloody nostrils still flared with stertorous breathing and its sweating flanks were still heaving after the furious gallop.

"Hey, Pavlo! Where are you going?"

"Stop! Come back!"

But he had already set off at a mad gallop and was fast disappearing into the distance. The long, slanting shadows of the windmills went chasing after him across the wide expanse of steppe.

"He's going to his death! It's senseless!"

"But the rest of his family's back there in Slavyanskaya, and his son's lying here—dead . . . "

The man with the iron jaws unclenched them and moving them heavily, said slowly and deliberately:

"Comrades, now there's nowhere left for us to go, because death lies both in front of us and behind us. Those folk over there," and he nodded towards the Cossack huts that were glowing pink in the setting sun, "might cut our throats this very night, yet we haven't got a single sentry or scout, and not even anyone in command. We must retreat! But where to? First of all we've got to reorganize the army. We must

choose commanders, but this time it's got to be for good and they'll have to be given the power of life and death over us. Iron discipline's the only thing that can save us now! We'll fight our way through to the north where our main forces are, then they'll reach out a helping hand to us. Do you agree?"

"Yes, we agree!" the steppe resounded with a united roar that echoed among the carts in the streets and lanes, and rolled away through the orchards right to the outskirts of the village, as far as the river itself.

"Good! Then let's choose a commander straightaway, and after that we'll reorganize our detachments. The baggage train must be separated from the fighting units, then each unit must be given a commander."

"We agree!" again the cry echoed over the boundless, yellow steppe.

Once again the man with the iron jaws unclenched them and said:

"Comrades! We must elect a commander, then he's got to pick his staff. So whom do you choose?"

For a moment there was dead silence, and the steppe, the village and the countless crowd all were still. Then a forest of calloused hands was raised, and to the very edge of the steppe, echoing through the spreading orchards and away beyond the river itself, thundered one name and one name alone:

"Kozh-u-ukh!"

Kozhukh clenched his iron jaws and saluted, and those near him could see the muscles working below his cheekbones. Then he went up to the corpse lying on the ground and took off his dirty straw hat. Following his example, all hats were raised and all heads bared as though a mighty wind had swept the crowd, and the women began to sob. With his head bowed, Kozhukh stood motionless for a moment over the body. Then he said:

"Let us bury our comrade with full honors. Come, lift him up."

An army greatcoat was spread out on the ground and Okhrim was laid upon it. Then they lifted him and carried him away.

The crowd parted to let the body pass, then drew together again and streamed on after the bearers in an endless procession, all heads still bared. Behind each of them and inseparable from him went a long, slanting shadow, and those walking behind trampled it underfoot.

Here were the crosses in the graveyard, some standing crookedly, others lying where they had fallen. Around them lay the deserted steppe, covered with scrub that stretched away into the distance. An owl flew silently by and bats flitted softly to and fro. Now and then



marble headstones showed dimly white and gilt inscriptions gleamed through the gathering gloom, revealing the tombs of wealthy Cossacks and merchants—monuments to a once prosperous and inviolable way of life . . .

Kozhukh climbed the mound of freshly-shovelled earth, his head still bared:

"Comrades! Our brother is dead and we must honor him, for he has perished for our sake. But comrades, Soviet Russia is not dead—no, for it will live until the end of time! We are caught in a trap here, comrades, and away over there are Soviet Russia and Moscow. But Russia will triumph in the end, for in Russia, comrades, power belongs to the workers and peasants, and that power will set everything to rights. We're being attacked by the Cadets—that is by generals, landowners and all kinds of bloodsucking capitalists—bastards, all of them! But to hell with them—we'll not give in! We'll show them all right! So comrades, let us now throw earth on our brother's coffin and swear over his grave to support Soviet power!"

They began to lower the coffin.

Then someone whispered in Kozhukh's ear:

"How many cartridges shall I give them?"

"A dozen."

"That's not many."

"We're short, you know. We've got to be sparing with every bullet now."

A thin volley rang out, then a second and a third, and each time, for an instant, wooden crosses, dark faces and quickly moving spades were illumined in the gloom.

When silence descended, everyone suddenly realized that night had fallen. All was still, there was a smell of warm dust in the air, and the incessant, drowsy murmur of the river brought back vague memories of things they could not quite recall, while away beyond the river, stretching far into the distance, lay the massive, black bulk of the mountains, their jagged peaks dimly outlined against the dark sky.

## 3

The little black windows stared into the darkness, and in their silent immobility there was an ominous air of mystery.

From the unshaded tin lamp standing on a stool, a plume of smoke rose quickly towards the ceiling, swaying as it went. The floor was spread with a fantastic carpet covered with countless blue and green

patches, winding black lines and curious symbols. It was a huge map of the Caucasus.

Crawling cautiously over it in bare feet were the officers, their army tunics unfastened. Some were smoking and trying not to drop ash on the map, while others were totally absorbed in what they were doing and simply went on moving to and fro all the time. Kozhukh was squatting beside the map deep in thought, gazing past the others with a faraway look in his bright, gimlet eyes. Clouds of blue-gray tobacco smoke filled the room.

Rolling in through the dark windows came the incessant sound of the river, a sound of which no one had been aware during the day but which now seemed full of menace.

But no matter how carefully they studied the map, it made no difference. To the left they were hemmed in by the dark blue sea, and to the right and further inland were scores of hostile Cossack villages, both large and small, while lower down, to the south, their way was barred by impassable ranges of ginger-yellow mountains. In a word, they were trapped.

Their huge camp now lay sprawled on the banks of the same black river that wound its way across the map. In the ravines and marshes, in the forests and on the plains, in villages and hamlets all over the map Cossacks were massing. So far, uprisings in the various villages had been put down somehow, but now the whole Kuban in all its vastness was engulfed by the flames of revolt. Everywhere Soviet power had been swept aside. Its representatives in the villages and hamlets had been hacked to pieces, and gallows now stood all over the land, clustering as thick as crosses in a graveyard. On them Bolsheviks were being hanged—most of them non-Cossacks, but some of them native Cossacks too. All these and others were now swinging in death. So where, then, was there to retreat to? Where could they find safety?

"It's obvious—we've got to force our way through to Tikhoretskaya and from there push on to Svyatoy Krest,[6] then after that we'll be able to get north into Russia."

"I say we must fight our way through to join up with our main forces."

"I think we should occupy Novorossiisk,[7] then wait till reinforcements come from the north."

"What I say is this . . . "

"Excuse me, comrade," interrupted a clean-shaven officer, "it's completely impossible to lead an army in the condition ours is in. It's not an army but a rabble, and it's just got to be reorganized. What's more, all these refugee carts bind us hand and foot, so we must separate them from the troops. Let them go where they like—even back home if they want to—but the army must be completely unhampered and free. I propose we draft an order to say we're staying in this village for two days so as to reorganize."



"What on earth are you talking about?" retorted Kozhukh in a voice that grated like rusty iron. "Every man's got relatives in that baggage train—either a mother or a father, a girlfriend or even his whole family. So d'you really think he'll leave them behind? And if we stay here and wait, we'll all be cut to pieces. No, we've got to keep going! We'll have to reorganize the units on the march. We must get past the town as quickly as we can, without stopping, and follow the coast. We'll get as far as Tuapse then take the highroad over the mountains and join up with our main forces—they'll not have gone far. But if we stay here, death gets closer to us every day."

The iron muscles of his face working, Kozhukh stood up, and surveying the commanders with his piercing steel-gray eyes, said:

"We march tomorrow—at dawn!"

## 5

Suddenly there was a great clattering and clanking, the clanging of iron, and a series of loud shouts. Ta-ta-ta-ta!

"What's that? What is it? Stop!"

What was that flaring across the sky? Was it a fire or was it just the dawn?

"First company! Quick march!"

Dark flocks of rooks wheeled ceaselessly in the red sky, filling the air with their deafening cries.

Everywhere in the gray light of dawn people were putting collars on horses and fastening shaft-bows. Refugees and men attached to the baggage train kept getting in each other's way, occasionally dropping the shafts and swearing in fury.

The work of harnessing went on at a feverish pace, wheels getting caught together as horses were whipped up. Then, with a great banging and crashing the baggage train set off and raced across the bridge at a furious speed, some of the carts becoming locked together and losing wheels as they went.

Rat-tat-tat-tat! Boom! Boom!

Now the artillerymen were frantically fastening the traces to the limbers.

Things had really begun in earnest now: on the outskirts of the village great clouds of smoke were rising quickly into the sky, and the cattle were bellowing for all they were worth.

Kozhukh was sitting in front of a hut. His sallow face was calm, as if he were at a railway station watching everyone hurrying busily to and fro before the train left, and knowing full well that as soon as it had gone, everything would be quiet once more. Every minute men came galloping up on foam-flecked horses bringing reports for him, while close by stood his adjutant and orderlies, ready to carry out his instructions.

As the sun rose higher, the crackle of rifle and machine-gun fire became intolerably fierce.

But to all the reports Kozhukh kept giving one and the same answer:

"Don't waste your cartridges! Treat them like gold and shoot only when it's absolutely necessary. Let the enemy get close before you open fire, but on no account let him reach the orchards—he mustn't get in there! Take two companies from the first regiment and recapture the windmills, then set up machine-guns by them!"

Men kept running up from every direction with alarming reports, but Kozhukh went on sitting there just as calmly as ever, except that the muscles were working on his sallow cheeks now. A voice inside him seemed to be saying cheerfully: "That's fine, lads, just fine!" Perhaps in only an hour or even much less, the Cossacks would break through and hack them all to pieces! Yes, he knew that might happen, but he could see, too, how obediently and promptly battalion after battalion and company after company were carrying out his orders, how fiercely these men of his now fought who only the day before had been more like an anarchist rabble than real soldiers, not giving a damn either for their commanders or for him, yelling their bawdy songs and doing nothing but drink and play about with women.

But when messengers came racing up from the rear and said breathlessly: "There's fighting at the bridge between the baggage carts and the refugees!" Kozhukh's sallow face turned as yellow as a lemon, and he hurried to where all the trouble was.

At the approach to the bridge there was utter pandemonium. Men were hacking with axes at the wheels of one another's carts and hitting each other with whips and sticks. The air was filled with shouting and roaring, the dirge-like wailing of women, and the screaming of children. The bridge itself was hopelessly blocked by carts, their wheels locked together, and by snorting horses entangled in their traces, with people trapped in all the confusion and children screaming in terror. No one could move either backwards or forwards, while from beyond the orchards came the sound of gunfire—Rat-tat-tat!



"Sto-op! Stop!" roared Kozhukh in a hoarse voice that grated like iron, but there was such an uproar that he could barely hear himself speak. Then he shot the nearest horse in the ear.

The peasants rushed at him angrily with their sticks.

"Ha, you devil's bastard! Kill our horses, would you? Get him!"

Together with his adjutant and two soldiers, Kozhukh retreated towards the river, while the sticks swished through the air above their heads.

"Fetch a machine-gun!" Kozhukh ordered hoarsely.

The adjutant slipped like an eel under the horses' bellies and the carts, and a few moments later a machine-gun came rolling up, accompanied by a platoon of soldiers.

With the agility of a wild cat, Kozhukh sprang to the gun, adjusted the cartridge-belt, and rat-tat-tat!—fired a sweeping burst over the heads of the crowd. The wind of death made the peasants' hair stand on end with its chilling song, and they fell back. But from the orchards came the chatter of enemy fire as before.

Then Kozhukh walked away from the machine-gun, and began to shout and swear foully at the peasants at the top of his voice. That calmed them down straightaway. Next he ordered the carts on the bridge that could not be disentangled from each other to be pushed off into the river. The peasants obeyed him and the bridge was soon cleared. Then a platoon of soldiers with rifles at the ready was posted at the approach to the bridge and the adjutant began to let the carts over it in an orderly line.

Nevertheless, they still went galloping across three abreast, with the cows tethered behind the carts tossing their heads as they ran. The pigs went racing across at full speed too, straining at their tethers and squealing as they went. The planks of the bridge thundered, leaping up and down like the keys of a piano, and the sound of the river was lost amid all the uproar.

Away beyond the river and into the distance rolled the baggage carts, stretching out in an immense line and disappearing in clouds of dust. And as they went, the squares, streets and lanes of the village grew more and more empty.

But the Cossacks had surrounded the village now in a wide semicircle whose ends reached the river, and their guns spat incessant fire. They were moving steadily inwards, drawing ever closer to the village, its orchards and the carts still streaming over the bridge. Kozhukh's men fought fiercely, valiantly defending every inch of ground as they

struggled to save their mothers, fathers and children. Using their cartridges sparingly, they fired very rarely, but every shot they fired made orphans of Cossack children and brought tears and sorrow to a Cossack family.

Still the bridge rumbled and still the water roared, but just before dawn the village was finally cleared. When Kozhukh's last squadron had thundered over it, the bridge was set on fire, and as the soldiers disappeared into the distance, volleys of rifle shots and bursts of machine-gun fire crackled thick and fast behind them from the village.

## 7

On and on marched the soldiers alongside the squeaking carts, swinging their arms as they went.

Four Cossacks who had been taken prisoner in the village were being led along with them and questioned on the way.

Then, at a bend in the road, the column halted and the prisoners began to dig a common grave for themselves . . .

But the endless line of creaking baggage carts moved on and on amid thick clouds of dust, winding its way for verst after verst along the country road towards the mountains that showed dark blue in the distance. The carts were packed with bright red pillows, buckets, spades and rakes. Now and then came the blinding flash of a mirror or a samovar, and amid all the bundles of clothing, blankets and rags could be seen the heads of little children and the ears of cats. Hens clucked in their wicker baskets, cows tethered to the carts plodded on behind, and panting dogs with burrs in their shaggy coats went loping along with lolling tongues, doing their best to keep in the shade. On and on went the creaking carts that were piled high with belongings of every kind, for the peasants had hastily flung into them everything they could lay hands on when they had been forced to flee by the Cossack rebellion.

It was not the first time that these non-Cossack folk had been driven from their homes. In recent months isolated Cossack uprisings against the Soviet authorities had forced them to leave several times, but it had never lasted for more than two or three days, because Red troops had always arrived to restore order and then the peasants had all gone home again.

This time, though, it was all lasting very much longer, and the Cossack revolt was in its second week now. But the peasants had only brought enough grain with them to last a few days. Each morning they kept hoping to hear someone say: "Well, you can go back home now," but things were still going on and on and growing more and more confused. The Cossack revolt was becoming increasingly violent, and news kept coming in from every quarter about gallows being put up in the villages and non-Cossacks being hanged. When would it all end? And what would become of the farms they had abandoned?



The wagons and carts creaked on and on, with children's heads swaying to and fro among the pillows and mirrors flashing in the sun, while in an ill-assorted crowd the soldiers straggled along the road and across the tilled fields beside it that had been stripped bare of their sunflowers, pumpkins and melons as if by a plague of locusts. There were no companies, battalions or regiments any more—everything had become disordered and confused, and the men did exactly as they pleased. Some were singing, others quarrelling, shouting and swearing, while a few had climbed up into the carts and dozed off, their heads swaying sleepily from side to side.

Nobody gave a thought to the danger facing them or to the enemy close by, and no one obeyed the commanders either. Whenever an officer attempted to restore at least a semblance of order in this constantly moving human torrent, he was showered with abuse. Shouldering their rifles upside down and swinging them as if they were clubs, they puffed away at their pipes or yelled bawdy songs, shouting "It's not the bloody old regime now, you know!"

Kozhukh was overwhelmed by this incessant flood of people, and his breast felt as if it were gripped by a taut spring. If the Cossacks attack now, he thought, the entire column will be hacked to pieces. His only hope was that when faced with death, the men would obediently form ranks as they had done the day before, and fight. But might it not be too late?

In this wildly undisciplined, noisy torrent of men there were both soldiers who had been demobilized from the Tsarist army then recruited into the Red Army, and others who had joined the Red forces as volunteers, the majority of them minor craftsmen such as coopers, fitters, tinsmiths, carpenters, cobblers and barbers, together with an especially large number of fishermen. They were all non-Cossack folk who had always lived from hand to mouth, ordinary working people for whom the coming of Soviet power had been like a ray of light that had suddenly illumined their cheerless existence, making them feel that life might not always be quite as intolerable as it had been hitherto. But the overwhelming majority of them were poor peasants who had abandoned their farms almost en masse. Only the wealthy people had stayed be-

hind in the villages, because the officers and rich Cossacks would not harm them.

Striking by contrast in their long, narrow-waisted Circassian coats were the Kuban Cossacks, swaying gracefully on their splendid horses. No, these were not enemies but revolutionary comrades! They were poor Cossacks, most of them soldiers who had fought at the front and in whose hearts the Revolution had kindled an undying spark amid all the fire and carnage of war.

Squadron after squadron of them rode by, wearing shaggy fur caps trimmed with red ribbons and carrying rifles slung over their shoulders. Their black and silver daggers and their long sabres shone in the sun, while their fine horses kept tossing their heads proudly. These men alone were disciplined and orderly amid the chaotic flood of people around them.

They were prepared to fight even their own fathers and brothers. They had abandoned everything—their homes, their cattle and all their household possessions—for their farms had been laid waste. Dexterous and graceful, on they rode, the scarlet bows tied by loving hands on their fur hats blazing in the sunlight, and as they rode they sang songs of the Ukraine in their strong, youthful voices.

Kozhukh watched them affectionately and thought: "That's fine, lads! All our hopes are on you!" But his glance was more affectionate still as it fell on the barefoot, ragged horde of non-Cossack folk tramping along in a disorderly fashion amid clouds of dust, for, after all, he himself belonged to them and they were his own flesh and blood.

Like a long, slanting shadow, his past life stretched out behind him, a shadow that one may forget but never escape. It was the most commonplace steppe shadow, the shadow of a toiling family that was illiterate and hungry, a dark, slanting shadow. His mother had not been very old, but her face was furrowed by deep wrinkles and looked tired and worn, for she had always had many children clinging to her skirts. Kozhukh's father had spent his whole life toiling as a hired laborer on wealthy Cossacks' farms, sweating away and working his fingers to the bone, but however hard he had struggled, the family had always been desperately poor.

From the age of six Kozhukh had been a village shepherd. The steppe and its ravines, sheep and cows, clouds scudding across the sky and their shadows racing over the earth below—this was all the schooling he ever had.

Then, because he was a bright lad who was quick on the uptake, he had been hired by a rich Cossack to work in the village shop, and he had taught himself to read and write on the quiet. Then came military service, the war and the Turkish front. He became a first-class machine-gunner. On one occasion in the mountains he made his way with his machine-gun crew towards the Turkish lines and found himself in a valley in the enemy's rear—the Turkish front lay along a mountain ridge. When the enemy division retreated and started to come down from the ridge towards him, he opened fire with his machine-gun and began to mow them down. The men fell in rows like grass before the scythe, and warm, steaming blood rained down on him. Never before had he imagined that one could stand knee-deep in human blood, but it had been Turkish blood so he had soon forgotten about it.



In recognition of his outstanding bravery, he was sent to the school of ensigns. But what a hard time he had there! He thought his head was going to burst with all the learning! But with bull-like doggedness he mastered his studies, then—failed the examinations. Both his teachers and the other officer cadets laughed at him: just fancy, a peasant wanting to become an officer! Riff-raff like him! A country bumpkin! The stupid brute! Trying to become an officer! Ha-ha-ha!

Glaring sullenly at them from under his brows and clenching his teeth, he felt silent hatred for them all. Then he was classed as unsuitable for the officer school and sent back to his regiment.

Once again it was bursts of shrapnel and countless deaths, blood and groans, once again his machine-guns mowed the enemy down like grass before the scythe, for he had an amazingly unerring eye. Amid all the inhuman strain, with death constantly staring him in the face, it almost never occurred to him to wonder for whose sake these seas of blood were being shed—was it for the Tsar, the fatherland or the Orthodox faith? And even if he did occasionally wonder, the answers he found were very obscure, as though wreathed in mist. But what was immediate and clear in his mind was his desire to become an officer, to make his way up amid all the bloodshed, groans and death, to struggle up just as he had managed to become a shop assistant after being only a shepherd boy. And all the while, clenching his stony jaws as the shells burst furiously around him, he remained just as calm as if he were cutting hay in his field back home, and all the while the enemy fell around him like grass before the scythe.

He was sent to the school for ensigns for the second time because there was such a dearth of officers—there were always too few of them at the front as it was. And anyway, he was virtually carrying out the duties of an officer, sometimes commanding sizeable detachments of men and never suffering a defeat. When all was said and done, as far as the soldiers were concerned he was one of them, he had sprung from the same earth as they had, and he was a peasant just like they

were. They followed him without question, this man with calloused hands and stony jaws, followed him through fire and water. In whose name did they do it? For the Tsar, the fatherland or the Orthodox faith? Perhaps it was for one of these. But all those things seemed remote, as though wreathed in bloody mist. Instead, what was immediate and vital was to advance, and to advance at all costs. If they had halted, they would have been shot, so it was safer to follow him, their own peasant commander.

How hard, how agonizingly hard it was for him to study! It was enough to make his head split in two. He found it infinitely more difficult to master decimal fractions than to look death calmly in the face under a hail of machine-gun bullets.

And the officers roared with laughter—the officers who packed the school to overflowing in countless numbers, whether they were needed or not—but mostly the latter. After all, the rear is always a safe place crammed with men trying to avoid the front, men for whom thousands of unnecessary posts had been created. The officers roared with laughter. A peasant, a country bumpkin! The dirty swine! How they mocked him and even failed him for answers that in the end, at the cost of immense effort, he managed to get right.

Again they sent him back to his regiment, sent him back saying he was incapable of following the officers' course . . .

Once again he was surrounded by bursts of gunfire, exploding shells, the soulless chatter of machine-guns and the hellish hurricane of blood and death, but he remained just as calm as if he were back at home—a busy, workmanlike peasant to the core.

As immoveable and stubborn as an ox, he pressed on indomitably, as unshakeable as a rock. Not for nothing was he of Ukrainian stock, with a brow that jutted out low over his piercing, gimlet eyes.

Eventually, because of the efficiency he showed in his deadly work, he was sent to the school for ensigns for the third time.

Once again the officers roared with laughter. That peasant again? And once again they sent him back to his regiment, saying he was unfit to follow the course.

Then Headquarters stepped in and ordered crossly: "Promote him to the rank of ensign—officers are extremely scarce at the front!"

Ha-ha! They were scarce all right because they were all running to the rear!

So it was that Kozhukh was contemptuously promoted to the rank of ensign and returned to his regiment with shoulder-straps gleaming on his uniform. He had made it after all. He felt both pleased and sad, though—pleased because he had achieved his goal and got what he wanted by dint of superhuman effort, but sad because the straps gleaming on his shoulders now separated him from his own kind, from the ordinary peasant soldiers who were close to him. Those straps distanced him from these men yet did not bring him any closer to the officers, and so he found himself surrounded by a void.



The officers did not say the word "peasant" to his face, but in camp and in the mess, in their tents and in all the places where two or three men with shoulder-straps gathered, he felt surrounded by a void. Though they never said anything, their eyes and gestures silently said it all: "Peasant, pig, country bumpkin!"

He felt hatred for them—a calm and stony but deeply concealed hatred. He hated and despised them, and concealed his feeling of alienation from the ordinary soldiers beneath his cool fearlessness amid the countless deaths that surrounded him.

Then all of a sudden everything reeled with a tremendous shock. The mountains of Armenia, the Turkish divisions, the Russian soldiers, the bewildered generals with their dismayed faces, the guns that had suddenly fallen silent, and the March snows on the high summits—all were profoundly shaken. It was as if the expanse of earth and sky had been rent asunder and something unprecedentedly vast had appeared in its place—something unparalleled that had nevertheless always been there, always alive far down in the depths of one's being, something that had no name but that once it had appeared was very simple and clear and quite inevitable.

Then new people came, ordinary people with the lean, sallow faces of factory workers, and they began to tear the great rent even wider, opening it more and more. From it came flooding age-old oppression and hatred, and with them age-old but now rebellious servitude.

Then, for the first time, Kozhukh regretted the shining shoulder-straps that he had struggled so hard to win, for he now found himself ranked with the enemies of the workers, enemies of the peasants and soldiers.

When the rolling thunder of the October Revolution finally reached him, he tore off his shoulder-straps with disgust and flung them away. Then, caught up in the tumultuous flood of soldiers heading for home, he hid in the dark corner of a jolting goods truck that was crammed to bursting, and did his best to keep out of sight. The drunken men around him were yelling songs and tracking down officers who were in hiding. If he had been discovered, he would never have survived.

Arriving home, he found that everything had gone to pieces. All the old order, the old social fabric, had fallen apart, while the new was still

vague and uncertain. Cossacks were embracing non-Cossacks and at the same time hunting down officers and killing them.

Like tiny seeds of yeast falling into dough, workmen from their factories and sailors from their scuttled ships came flocking to the jubilant peasant regions, and the Kuban rose in revolt like leavened bread. In villages both large and small Soviet power was proclaimed.

Though Kozhukh was not familiar with new words such as "class," "class struggle" and "class attitudes," he grasped their meaning when working men used them, sensing by intuition what they meant. And the thing that had once filled him with stony hatred—the officers—now seemed a mere trifle in comparison with his awareness of the immeasurable class struggle, and with his realization that the officers were simply the pitiful lackeys of the landowners and bourgeoisie.

But the epaulettes he had won seemed to burn his shoulders with shame, for even though the rank-and-file men knew he was one of their own, they still looked at him askance.

Then, just as resolutely, with the same Ukrainian doggedness with which he had won them, he resolved to obliterate the traces of those shoulder-straps with red-hot iron, to cleanse them with his own blood, his own life, and so serve—no, immeasurably more than serve—the countless poor with whom he was indissolubly one, flesh of their flesh.

It was when the new government began to equalize land owned by peasants and Cossacks that the Kuban rose in revolt and Soviet authority was swept aside.

So it was that Kozhukh was now riding amid the creaking of carts, the tumult of thousands of voices, the snorting of horses and the endless clouds of dust.

## 8

The last halting-place at the foot of the mountains presented a picture of unbelievable confusion. Everything was in uproar, with people shouting, swearing and weeping as various military units and odd groups of soldiers came up, while beyond the camp the sound of gunfire could be heard. And from time to time the thunder of artillery echoed in the distance.

Kozhukh was here too with his column of soldiers and string of refugees. Other detachments kept coming up to join them, streaming in from every direction, all of them hard-pressed and harassed by the enemy. On this last remaining piece of ground tens of thousands of doomed people were crowded together. They all knew that neither



Cadets nor Cossacks would show them any mercy, and that all of them, young and old alike, would be cut down by sabres, riddled by machine-gun fire, hanged from trees or flung into deep ravines before being buried alive.

With enormous difficulty the men belonging to Kozhukh's column were managing both to hold the attacking Cossacks back and to restrain the general panic, but they all knew they could not do so for long.

The commanders were continually conferring with each other, but absolutely nothing came of it, and no one knew what would happen next.

Then Kozhukh said:

"Our only way of escape is to cross the mountains, then make a forced march along the coast by a roundabout route to join up with our army. So I'm leaving now!"

Half an hour later Kozhukh's column set off and no one dared to stop it. As soon as it did so, tens of thousands of soldiers and refugees, carts and animals, raced after it in panic, jostling one another and blocking the road, trying to pass each other and forcing those who were in the way off into the ditches.

Then, like an endless snake, the great column began to crawl up into the mountains.

## 9

They marched all day and right through the night, then just before dawn, without unharnessing the horses, they stopped, the column stretching for many miles along the highroad. Above the pass, looking as though they were very near, big stars were twinkling. The sound of rushing water came incessantly from the surrounding ravines, and on every side it was so dark that it seemed as if there were no mountains or forests at all. Only the sonorous munching of the horses could be heard. Then, almost before their very eyes, the stars began to fade, distant wooded ridges slowly appeared, and milk-white mist began to fill the long ravines. Then the column roused itself and crawled on once more, stretching for mile after mile along the highroad.

Rising beyond the distant peaks, the sun flooded the world with blinding light, casting long blue shadows over the mountain slopes. The head of the column reached the summit of the pass, and as it did so, everyone cried out in astonishment, for the ridge suddenly fell sheer away into an immense abyss, and like a faint smudge, the town showed dimly white far, far below. And beyond the town, startling in its unex-

pectedness, the sea rose like a boundless, dark blue wall, a wall of such unparalleled immensity that its deep, rich blueness was reflected in everyone's eyes.

Up over the ridge came streaming more and more ranks of gaily marching men, and as they did so, all were struck by the dense blue wall that seemed to rise to the sky and was reflected in their eyes. Then they all began to swing their arms in excitement as they marched off with long strides down the winding, white highroad.

After them, moving downhill now, came the string of baggage carts, the horses tossing their heads as the collars slid down over their ears, the cows lumbering along at a jog-trot, and little boys racing by astride sticks, shrieking as they went. Men ran quickly along beside the carts, trying to prevent them from gathering speed as they rolled downhill, and so all together, continually twisting to and fro on the winding road, the baggage train and its refugees went hurrying down towards whatever fate had in store for them. And as they went, the mountain ridge rose behind them, gradually blotting out half the sky.

With its head down, the endless, snake-like column skirted the town, and passing between the cement works[8] and the bay, stretched far away into the distance in a thin line. On one side, pressing close to the shore, towered barren, rocky mountains, while on the other, so beautiful that it made the heart miss a beat to see it, lay the soft blue expanse of the sea.

There was not a wisp of smoke or a single white sail to be seen upon it—nothing, save the delicate line of surf endlessly tracing its lace-like pattern on the pebbles of the beach. And in the fathomless silence echoed the age-old song of the sea, a song that only the human heart can hear.

But then a gloomy voice said:

"It makes no difference now—there's no escape for us! We've got the sea on this side, mountains on that, and Cossacks behind us, and even if we wanted to take another road we couldn't, because there isn't one! So the only thing we can do is march on!"

The head of the column now stretched far into the distance along the narrow shore, then disappeared round an outcrop on the coast, its endless, snake-like body skirting the town and its tail still winding down the mountainside as it followed the looping white road.

Here were the cement works and the highroad along the coast, and down the highroad hurried horses and cows, people and dogs, as the snake's tail slowly moved along.

The baggage train was gradually crawling away now, the wheels of the last few carts already raising clouds of dust in the distance as the creaking of their iron axles became almost inaudible. The town and its bay were left behind, and glowing red in the setting sun, the dust slowly settled.



And just then a detachment of Cossacks entered the town from the opposite direction.

## 10

The weary night dragged by, and without interrupting its tumultuous progress for a single moment, the dark human torrent streamed on.

Already the stars were beginning to turn pale as though in exhaustion and the desolate, sun-scorched mountains were appearing in the gloom of early dawn.

The sky was growing lighter and lighter, and as it did so, the ever-changing sea gradually appeared in all its boundlessness, first a smoky white or soft lilac color, then tinged by the pale blue sky that was reflected in it.

Then the mountain ridges were illumined by the rising sun and countless swaying bayonets caught the light.

Covering the rocky ravines and coming down to the highroad itself were vineyards with white summer cottages and empty villas among them. Occasionally there would be people in rough straw hats standing by them with picks and spades, steadily watching the endless ranks of soldiers marching by with their countless bristling bayonets.

Who were all these men and where did they come from, they wondered. And where were they marching to, swinging their arms so wearily? Their faces were as yellow as tanned hide, their clothes were ragged and covered with dust, and they had dark rings round their eyes. The carts creaked, the horses' weary hoofs beat hollowly on the ground, and there were little children peeping out of the carts.

Then the onlookers' spades began to turn the earth once more. After all, what did it matter to them? But when they grew tired and paused to straighten their backs again, they could see the column marching on and on, patiently following the winding road along the coast, the men's countless bayonets swaying into the distance.

Already the sun had risen high above the mountain crests, flooding the earth with burning light, and the brilliance of the sea made the men's eyes ache. For one hour, then another, then for five hours more, the column marched on and on. Men began to sway and horses kept coming to a halt.

"This Kozhukh must be out of his mind!"

"He'll be the death of us!"

"What's he driving us like this for? There's the sea to our right and mountains to our left, so who can harm us? But if we go on like this we'll all drop dead with exhaustion, Cossacks or no Cossacks! We've already left five horses behind that can't go any further, and people are starting to collapse at the roadside now!"

When the sun was almost at its zenith, they halted for fifteen minutes to water the horses. Streaming with sweat, the people slaked their thirst too, then on they went once more down the scorching highroad, dragging their leaden limbs along in the burning air. Close by them, the sea glittered with unbearably dazzling light. On and on they went, and a muffled but clear murmuring of discontent began to unsettle the ranks. Several battalion and company commanders told Kozhukh they would detach their units from the column, let them rest for a while, then go on independently.

Kozhukh's face darkened but he made no reply, and the column marched on and on.

When night fell they halted, and camp fires began to glow in the darkness for dozens of versts along the highroad. The stunted, wiry scrub had to be cut for kindling as there were no trees in this desolate region. Garden fences belonging to summer villas were broken up, window frames pulled away, and furniture dragged outside, then chopped up and burnt. Over the fires hung pots with thin gruel cooking in them.

One would have thought that in their immense exhaustion all the people would have sunk to the ground and slept like logs. But illumined by the red camp fires, the darkness shimmered with flickering light and was strangely full of life. There was talking, laughter and the sound of an accordion. The soldiers played the fool, trying to push one another into the nearest camp fire, or went off to the baggage train to flirt with the girls. There was buckwheat porridge cooking in the pots hanging over the smaller fires, while the flames of the bigger ones licked at the sooty, black cauldrons of entire companies. Scattered here and there, field kitchens sent clouds of smoke up into the sky.

The vast camp looked for all the world as though it would stay where it was for some considerable time.

## 17

Night finally came into its own. Now there were no fires to be seen and no voices to be heard, no sound save that of horses grazing. Soon



they fell silent too, and some of them lay down on the ground. Before long it would be dawn.

Below the silent, dark mountains the endless, sleeping camp stretched away into the distance.

But in one place and one place alone the darkness failed to cast its irresistible spell of drowsiness: through the trees of a sleeping garden a light was shining, and there one man and one alone remained vigilant for all the rest.

In the enormous, oak-panelled dining room of a villa, its walls hung with valuable paintings that had been pierced and torn by bayonets, there burned a wax candle that was stuck to the table. Its dim light revealed saddles heaped in the corners of the room, rifles stacked in pyramids, and soldiers sleeping in strange postures on the expensive curtains that had been torn down from the windows and spread on the floor. The air in the room was heavy with the smell of sweat of both horses and men.

Positioned in the doorway, a machine-gun peered out into the darkness, its narrow muzzle gleaming like a small, dark eye.

Bending over the magnificent, carved oak table which stretched almost the entire length of the room, Kozhukh stood with his little eyes—those eyes that no one could avoid—fixed on a map spread out before him. The candle-end flickered, dripping wax onto the table, and live shadows went flitting over the walls and floor and across the faces of the men in the room.

Over the mountain ranges that looked like shaggy centipedes and over the dark blue sea bent Kozhukh's adjutant, he too peering at the map.

Nearby an orderly stood ready with his cartridge pouch on his belt, his rifle slung over his shoulder and his sabre at his side. His whole body was flickering in the dancing shadows.

Then for a moment the candle guttered and all the shadows suddenly became still.

"From this ravine here," said the adjutant, pointing at a mountain range, "they can still attack us."

"But they can't break through this way—the mountains are too high for them to reach us from the other side."

The candle dripped hot wax onto the adjutant's hand.

"If only we can get to this turning here, they'll not be able to reach us any more, but we'll have to make a forced march to do it."

"But there's no food left!"

"That doesn't make any difference. Staying here won't bring us any either, so the only chance of escape we've got is to keep moving. Have all the commanders been sent for?"

"Yes, sir, they'll be here in a moment," said the orderly with a movement that set the shadows flickering on his face and neck.

Only outside the huge windows was there stillness, where the black night lay motionless.

Rat-tat-tat-tat . . . Shots echoed in the dark ravines somewhere in the distance, and once again the night was filled with menace.

Suddenly heavy footsteps resounded outside, and passing across the verandah to enter the dining room itself, they seemed to bear that menace with them. Even the dim light of the flickering candle showed how thickly covered with dust were the commanders that came in, and because of their immense fatigue, the incessant marching and the heat, their faces all looked angular and drawn.

"What's going on out there?" asked Kozhukh.

"It's all right, sir—we've driven them off," came the reply.

Kozhukh's face seemed to have turned to stone, and as he frowned, his heavy brows jutted out low over his eyes. Then everyone realized that it was not the Cossack attack that was worrying him.

They all crowded round the table, some chewing crusts of bread or smoking, others not really paying attention but gazing wearily at the map lying spread out in the dim light of the candle.

Then Kozhukh said through clenched teeth:

"You're not obeying my orders!"

Immediately flickering shadows began to dance over the tired faces and grimy necks around the table, and the room was filled with raucous voices that were more accustomed to shouting commands in the open air:

"But you've pushed the men too far!"

"My unit's worn out! You'll never get them back on their feet again now!"

"When we halted, my men just dropped down on the ground and fell asleep where they lay! They were too tired even to light any fires!"

"It's just unthinkable to go on marching for so long! If you carry on like this you'll destroy the army in no time at all!"

"No, it's no good!"

But not a muscle moved on Kozhukh's face, and beneath his low brows his small eyes did not so much look at the men as listen and wait. Outside the huge windows that had been flung wide open stood the motionless darkness, and beyond it lay the night itself, full of weariness and unease. No more shots came from the ravine, but the darkness that filled it seemed blacker still because of the silence.

Then Kozhukh said slowly:



"Who's in command? You or me?"

Once again the shadows began to flicker, and as they did so, they seemed to change not only the men's expressions but their faces too.

Then hoarse, excessively loud voices filled the room once more:

"We commanders also have a responsibility towards our men, and it's no less than yours!"

"Even under the Tsar officers were consulted in critical situations, and we've had a Revolution!"

Kozhukh heard what they were saying, but narrowing his small eyes as before, listened to the darkness outside the windows—and waited.

Then he said, forcing the words out through clenched teeth:

"You ought to know, comrade commanders, what kind of position we're in. Both the town behind us and its harbor are occupied by Cossacks. About twenty thousand sick and wounded Red soldiers were left behind there, and every one of them has been butchered by order of the Cossack officers. The same thing will happen to us too. The Cossacks are pressing hard on our rearguard at this very moment. To our right we've got the sea, and to our left the mountains, but in between there's a gap which is where we are just now. The Cossacks are keeping up with us on the other side of the mountains, attacking us through the ravines so that we've got to fight them off all the time. They'll go on attacking us too, until we get to where the mountains turn away from the sea—the range is high and wide there, and the enemy won't be able to reach us any more. So we've got to follow the coast as far as Tuapse which is about three hundred versts away. From there a high-road runs inland over the mountains, and by taking it we can cross back into the Kuban where our main forces are and where our only chance of escape lies. So we've got to make a forced march. We've only enough food left for five days, and after that we'll just have to starve. We've got to march on and on, run for our lives without even stopping to eat, drink or sleep, just run as fast as we possibly can, because that is our only chance of escape! And if we find our way is blocked, we've got to smash through!"

Then he fell silent, not looking at anyone around him.

The crowded room was filled with silence and the fading shadows cast by the guttering candle. The same silence hung in the vastness of night outside the dark windows and over the immensity of the invisible, soundless sea.

Then Kozhukh lowered his eyes and said through clenched teeth:

"Find yourselves another leader—I resign!"

"Comrade Kozhukh," said a brigade commander, "we all realize what enormous obstacles lie in our path. Behind us is destruction but if we delay now, then death awaits us here too. So we must move on with all possible speed. Only you have the resourcefulness and energy to lead the army to safety, and that, I hope, is the opinion of all my comrades too!"

"Right! Correct! Stay in command!" echoed the other commanders quickly.

"How on earth can you resign?" said the cavalry squadron commander, confidently pushing his fur cap so far back on his head that it nearly fell off. "After all, you were chosen by the people!"

Kozhukh shot him an uncompromising glance from under his low brows.

"All right, comrades," he said. "But I'm going to make one absolute condition for you all to sign. From now on, if any man disobeys an order, however slightly, he must be shot. You will all sign to that effect."

"Comrade Ivanko," he went on, "put that down in writing and let the commanders sign it—capital punishment without trial for the slightest disobedience to orders or for any disagreement whatsoever."

The adjutant took a scrap of paper from his pocket, and making room for himself on the table beside the candle, began to write.

"Now, comrades," said Kozhukh, "return to your positions and inform your companies of this decision. It means iron discipline and no mercy for anyone!"

Dawn was already breaking over the sea.

The commanders felt as if a great weight had suddenly been lifted from their shoulders. Now everything was definite, simple and clear. Laughing and joking with one another, they came up to the table to sign the death warrant.

Kozhukh, his level brows still hanging low over his eyes, was issuing brief orders, as if what was happening at the table bore no relation at all to the immense task that he had been called upon to fulfill.

"Comrade commanders," he said, "every unit must be ready to leave within the hour, and you must march with all possible speed. Only halt to let the men drink and to water the horses. In the mouth of every ravine you must post a line of riflemen and a machine-gun. Don't let your units get separated from each other, and ensure with the utmost strictness that the local inhabitants are not harmed in any way. Report the condition of your units to me as often as you can by mounted messengers!"

Then the adjutant folded up the map and Kozhukh and he went out of the villa.



In the vast, now deserted room, its floor littered with cigarette-ends and bespattered with spittle, the forgotten candle-end flickered and glowed red. The air was oppressively heavy now that everyone had gone, and the wood under the candle was beginning to char and crack, sending a wisp of smoke up into the air. All the rifles and saddles that had been in the room were gone now.

Through the great, wide-open doors of the villa lay the sea, now wreathed in the thin, bluish haze of daybreak.

Echoing again and again back and forth along the coast and among the mountains that sloped down to the shore, the drums rolled to wake the sleeping men. Somewhere far away in the distance bugles sounded, calling like a flock of strange brass swans, and the sound echoed in the ravines and along the coast, then faded and died out over the boundless sea. Above the splendid now empty villa an enormous pall of smoke was rising—the candle-end left burning on the table had made the most of its opportunity.

## 20

The sky was barely light, but already, crawling along the highroad, the head of the column stretched far away into the distance.

To the right lay the same blue expanse of sea, while to the left towered the densely-wooded mountains with their rocky summits.

Over the barren crests came floating the fiery heat of morning, and soon the same clouds of dust hung over the highroad as before. Thousands of flies incessantly pestered both people and animals, familiar flies from the Kuban steppes that had accompanied the column from the very start, remaining with it through the night and rising with it again at dawn.

Twisting to and fro like a great white snake, the dust-shrouded highroad crept deep into the forest. There all was cool shadow and stillness, and rocks could be seen among the trees. Only a few paces away from the road the undergrowth was impassable, for everything was entangled with wild creepers and vines. Mountain shrubs bristled with huge spines and the hooked thorns of strange bushes clutched at the men's clothing. These forests were the home of wild cats and bears, goats and deer, as well as of the lynx that at night utters its loathsome, cat-like cry. For hundreds of versts around there was no sign of a single living soul and there was not a trace of Cossacks either.

The men tightened their belts still more, for the rations distributed when the column halted were becoming smaller and smaller.

On and on crawled the carts, the wounded holding on to them and dragging themselves along, the children's little heads swaying to and fro, and the emaciated artillery horses straining at the traces of the one and only field-gun.

Then, curving in a playful loop, the highroad began to wind its way down towards the sea. Stretching across the infinite blue expanse of water lay a shimmering ribbon of sunlight, a ribbon so dazzlingly bright that it hurt the eyes to look at it.

Translucent, barely perceptible ripples came moving elusively across the water from afar, and endlessly washed the pebbles on the beach.

The vast column crawled on and on along the highroad without a moment's rest, while young men and girls, children and walking wounded ran down to the beach, and tearing off their ragged clothes, plunged headlong into the blue water. Splashing gaily, they sent up clouds of glittering spray that sparkled and flashed with rainbow colors, and their bursts of sunfilled, joyous laughter, their shrieks and cries suddenly brought the coast—hitherto so deserted—gaily alive.

Like a giant beast with kindly wrinkles on its wise-looking face, the great sea grew quiet, affectionately licking the animated shore and the brown bodies that frisked amid showers of spray and bursts of merry laughter.

But the column went crawling on and on.

Those in the sea leapt from the water, snatched up their foul-smelling clothes, and seizing their rifles, ran to catch up with their comrades, droplets of water flashing like iridescent pearls on their sunburnt skin. Reaching the column marching along the road, they quickly pulled on their sweat-soaked rags again amid cheerful whooping, roars of laughter and bawdy jokes.

Then others came running eagerly down to the sea, tearing off their clothes as they ran, and flung themselves into all the hubbub and glittering spray, while the great beast quietly licked their bodies too with the same translucent, quivering ripples that endlessly lapped the shore.

The column went crawling on and on.

Then, in a wide valley where the mountains drew back on either side, they came unexpectedly upon a village inhabited by Russians. A sparkling little river wound its way down the valley, and peasant huts and cattle could be seen in the fields. One side of the valley was yellow with stubble, so wheat was evidently grown here. The people were originally from Poltava[8] and spoke the same dialect as many of the soldiers.



They shared their wheat and millet with the men as far as they could, and asked them where they were going and why. They had heard that the Tsar had been deposed and that the Bolsheviks were now in power, but they did not know how things stood in the country as a whole. The soldiers told them everything they knew, and then, even though they felt sorry about doing it to their own people, they took all the hens, ducks and geese in the village, despite the women's loud wailing and lamentation.

Without stopping, the column crawled on past the village and away down the highroad.

## 21

Bending low in the saddle with his fur hat pushed far back on his head, a Kuban horseman came galloping along the road towards the moving column of refugees, shouting:

"Where's the chief?"

The rider's face was streaming with sweat and his horse's wet flanks were heaving.

Shining white, enormous clouds were gathering above the forested mountains and hanging over the road.

"Looks like there's going to be a storm," someone said.

Further on, round a bend in the road, the head of the column had come to a standstill, and now the ranks of infantry behind it were halting too, closing up and becoming confused. Pulling hard on the reins, the drivers of the baggage carts almost ran into the back of the vehicles in front when they tried to stop, and as the process went on, the entire column soon came to a standstill.

"What's wrong? It's too early for a halt yet!"

The rider's sweat-soaked face, his breathless horse and the unexpected halt sent alarm spreading down the column like wildfire. Then, suddenly lending ominous meaning to what had happened, from somewhere far ahead came the faint crackle of gunfire. Though it soon died away, the sound left a clear impression in the silence that had suddenly descended upon the column, and it was an impression that could not be forgotten.

Then Kozhukh drove quickly by in his light cart, hurrying towards the head of the column. A few moments later several horsemen came galloping up from the opposite direction, and cursing violently, blocked the road.

"Get back!" they shouted. "Or we'll shoot! There's going to be a battle soon and you'll be in the way! It's orders—Kozhukh's told us to shoot anyone who disobeys!"

Suddenly alarm gripped them all, and old men and women, young girls and children alike began to howl and wail:

"But where can we go? What are you holding us back for? We belong with you! If we're going to die, then let us all die together!"

But the mounted men were implacable.

"Kozhukh says there's got to be five versts between you and the soldiers. Otherwise you'll get in the way and they won't be able to fight properly!"

"But aren't they our own people? My Ivan's there!"

"And my Nikita!"

"And my Opanas too!"

"You'll go away, and we'll be left behind! You'll leave us!"

As far as the eye could see, there were carts jammed together now. The wounded and those who were on foot were milling about in a vast crowd, and the air was filled with the wailing of women. Blocking the highroad for dozens of versts, the entire baggage train had come to a complete standstill. Overjoyed, the flies settled in dense swarms on the horses' flanks and backs, and covered the children by the score. Maddened by them, the horses tossed their heads in despair and tried to kick them off their bellies with their hoofs. Through the trees the dark blue sea was visible, but no one looked at it, for all eyes were on the small section of road where the horsemen barred the way, while beyond them were the soldiers, their own menfolk who were so near and dear to them all. There they were, just sitting at the roadside or rolling makeshift cigarettes from blades of grass and smoking them.

Then they all stirred, got slowly to their feet and marched away. The empty stretch of road grew longer and longer, and as the dust settled silently upon it, it seemed to signal both menace and misfortune.

But the mounted men were as implacable as ever. An hour passed, then another, and the highroad ahead remained deathly white and empty. Their eyes swollen with weeping, the women wailed and sobbed inconsolably. Through the trees the sea still showed blue, and from above the forested mountains the clouds gazed down on the water.

Then suddenly, nobody knew where from, came a sustained, heavy burst of artillery fire, followed by a second and a third. The volleys roared and the thundering echo went rolling away through the mountains and ravines. Then a machine-gun began its impassive but deadly staccato song.



At that, anyone who had a whip in his hand began to lash the nearest horse in desperation. The animals lunged forward, but swearing furiously, the mounted men too began lashing the horses of the baggage train facing them, flogging them about the eyes, ears and muzzle with all their might. Flaring their bloody nostrils, tossing their heads and snorting, the beasts threshed wildly in the shafts, rearing and kicking with fear-crazed eyes. Meanwhile, the drivers of other carts came rushing up from behind, shouting at the tops of their voices and lashing the horses for all they were worth. Shrieking as though their throats were being cut, the children beat the animals too, hitting them across the belly and legs with sticks and doing their best to hurt them. The women screamed and pulled at the reins with all their might, while the wounded dug the horses in the flank with their crutches.

Terrified, the animals lunged forward in frenzy, overturning and trampling all before them. Snapping bits of their harness and scattering the horsemen, they bolted off down the highroad, their necks outstretched and their ears pressed flat. Then the peasants leapt back into their carts and raced away, while the wounded who had been hanging on to them set off running alongside, and falling down, were dragged along before losing their grip and rolling away into the ditch.

Not until they had caught up with the soldiers did the carts slow down and continue at a normal speed.

Nobody knew what had happened. Some said there had been Cossacks ahead, but how could that be? They had been cut off from the column by the high mountains long ago. Others said it was Circassians, Kalmyks, Georgians or simply people with an unknown name, countless hordes of them. All this made the carts press on even harder to join up with the fighting units again, and there was no way of forcing them back apart from shooting all the refugees down to the last man.

Here and there men in the column broke into song. Straggling on and on down the highroad they went, leaving it occasionally to scramble up the hillside, tearing their already tattered clothing on spikes and thorns as they searched for small, wild apples. Then, pulling wry faces and wincing as they ate, they would stuff themselves with the unbearably sour fruit. Sometimes they would gather acorns under the oak trees and chew them, bitter saliva streaming from their mouths as they did so.

Occasionally, when the mountains receded, they would see a small, yellow field of unripe maize with a hamlet perched on the hillside not far away. Immediately the field would be overrun with scores of people as though by a swarm of locusts. The men would break off the heads of maize and return to the road, crushing them between their

palms as they walked on. Then, picking out the unripe grains and putting them in their mouths, they would chew them greedily for a very long time.

The women gathered maize as well and chewed it for a long time too, but they did not swallow it as the men did. Instead, using their warm tongues they pushed the porridge which they had softened with their saliva into the mouths of their small children.

Then from ahead came the sound of shots again and with it the chatter of a machine-gun, but nobody took any notice any more, for they were all used to it by now. After a short time the sound died away.

The string of refugee carts was now firmly attached to the rearmost infantry units, and all together, without a moment's rest, they streamed on and on down the highroad, enveloped in endless clouds of dust.

## 22

Then all of a sudden, for the first time, their way was barred by the enemy, and a new enemy at that.

But why? And what did he want?

Kozhukh realized that his position was impossible. To his left were the mountains and to his right the sea, while between them lay the narrow highroad. Further on, ahead of the column, a railway-type bridge of steel girders spanned a turbulent mountain stream, and there was no way whatsoever of avoiding it. In front of the bridge the enemy had positioned both machine-guns and artillery, with the result that any army could have been brought to a standstill here. Oh, thought Kozhukh, if only he could deploy all his forces! But that was only possible out in the broad expanse of the steppe.

His troops were stretched out along the highroad and he looked at them. They were ragged and barefoot, half of them only had two or three cartridges each, and the rest had rifles but no ammunition. He himself possessed one field-gun and sixteen shells for it, that was all. But he clenched his teeth and looked at his men as though they had three hundred cartridges apiece and as if his batteries were drawn up in stern array with their ammunition wagons full of shells, while all around them he imagined his native steppe in which the whole column can usually be deployed down to the last man.

Then, with his eyes and face shining with joy at what he seemed to see, he said:

"Comrades! We've fought the Cossacks and we've fought the Cadets too! And we know why we did it—it was because they wanted to destroy the Revolution! Well, we've escaped from the Cossacks—the mountains have shielded us from them and we've had a bit of a breathing-space—but now a new enemy stands in our way. Who are they? They are Georgian Mensheviks, but Mensheviks and Cadets are all the same, for both of them side with the bourgeois and dream of destroying Soviet power!"



Then, playing his last card, he addressed the cavalrymen:

"Comrades, it's your task to take the bridge with a mounted attack!"

Every cavalryman realized that their commander was setting them an impossible, insane task—to gallop in single file (the bridge was too narrow for them to ride abreast) under machine-gun fire. It meant that half of them would litter the bridge with their bodies, while the others, unable to leap over their fallen comrades, would be mown down as they turned and raced back.

But they looked so striking in their long Circassian coats, and their silver-mounted weapons that had belonged to their fathers and grandfathers before them shone so brightly, while their high Caucasian fur caps and flat lambskin hats looked so splendidly warlike and handsome! Their fine horses bred on the Kuban steppes tossed their heads, pulling at the reins in such a spirited way, and everyone was gazing at them with such open admiration that they all cried together:

"We'll do it, Comrade Kozhukh!"

Then the solitary, hidden field-gun began to fire shell after shell at the place beyond the bridge where the enemy machine-guns were concealed, filling the rocky slopes and ravines with a monstrously swelling echo, while the cavalrymen, silently adjusting their fur caps, came racing round a bend in the road without either shots or cries. With necks outstretched and ears laid flat in terror, flaring their bloody nostrils, their horses galloped up to the bridge and then across it.

Crouching under the incessant hail of shrapnel and deafened by the thunder of gunfire that was enormously multiplied by the mountain echo, the Georgian machine-gunners had not expected such foolhardy impertinence on the enemy's part. But they quickly recovered from their surprise and set their guns chattering away. One horse fell, then a second and a third, but the other riders had already reached the middle of the bridge, and a moment later they were across it. Just then Kozhukh's sixteenth and last shell burst and the Georgians took to their heels.

"Hur-rah!" yelled the cavalrymen as they slashed about them with their sabres.

The enemy units positioned a short distance beyond the bridge fired back, then raced off down the highroad to disappear round a bend.

The Georgians who had been defending the bridge and were now cut off from the rest of their forces, fled down to the beach. But their officers had managed to reach the waiting boats before them and were already quickly making for the steamers anchored out in the bay. Soon dense clouds of smoke started to belch from their funnels, and a few minutes later the ships began to move away out into the open sea.

Standing up to their necks in the water, the Georgians stretched out their arms towards the disappearing steamers. They shouted and cursed, they begged for mercy for their children's sake, but it was of no avail, for Kozhukh's sabres were already cleaving their heads and necks, and stains of blood were spreading wide in the sea.

Now the steamers were no more than black specks on the dark blue horizon and they soon disappeared altogether, while on the beach no one was left alive to implore or curse them any more.

## 23

The highroad ran through a narrow gorge between steep walls of rock that were festooned with the hanging roots of trees laid bare by the rain. The continual bends in the road made it impossible for any part of the column to see what was ahead or behind it. But they could not avoid the gorge or turn back, so the incessant human stream flowed on and on down the rocky corridor, its walls hiding the sea from view.

Then, after a final bend, the gorge opened out, and through its wide mouth dark blue mountains could be seen in the distance. Dense forest came down to a massif that directly faced the mouth of the gorge. The flat mountain top was all rock, and it rose sheer to a height of about thirty feet. That was where the enemy trenches were, and sixteen field-guns were trained avidly on the highroad where it came out of the gorge. When the column attempted to pass out of the rocky gateway, the enemy batteries and machine-guns opened fire, forcing the soldiers to retreat hurriedly behind the rocks. It was clear to Kozhukh that not even a bird could have flown out of the gorge alive. But there was not enough room to deploy all his men. There was only one way out of the gorge—along the highroad—and that meant certain death. He looked down at the little town that showed white far below, and then at the open expanse of the bay dotted with its black Georgian steamers. He had to think of a way out of the situation, but what could it be? Getting down on all fours, he began to crawl over the map that lay spread out on the dusty road, carefully studying every twist and turn, each track and path upon it.



Just then a battalion commander came up.

"Comrade Kozhukh," he said, "we've been down to the coast and it's absolutely impossible to get round that way—the shore's very rocky with steep cliffs rising straight from the sea."

"Is the water deep?"

"Yes, it's waist-deep near the cliffs, but in other places it comes up to your neck or even covers your head."

"But what does that matter?" asked a soldier who had been listening. "There's plenty of rocks that have rolled down off the cliffs into the sea, so we can get past by jumping from one to the next."

Everyone was offering Kozhukh information and making suggestions, some of them strikingly unexpected and clever, and gradually the general situation became clear.

Kozhukh called a meeting of the company commanders. His jaws were set firm, and under his heavy brows his gimlet eyes had a resolute look in them.

"Comrades," he said, "this is what we must do. All three cavalry squadrons will make their way around the town. It'll not be easy—they'll have to follow paths through the forest and down rocky ravines, and in the dark what's more—but it's got to be done, whatever the cost! Then they must attack the town from the rear and break into it!"

He fell silent, staring into the darkness that was descending upon the gorge, then suddenly added:

"All the enemy must be destroyed!"

Setting their fur caps at a rakish angle, the cavalrymen answered: "It shall be done, Comrade Kozhukh!" and leapt into their saddles.

Then Kozhukh went on:

"The infantry regiment . . . Comrade Khromov, take your men down the cliffs to the sea and make your way over the rocks to the harbor. At first light you must attack without firing a shot, and seize the steamers lying at anchor."

Again, after a brief silence, he said:

"All the enemy must be destroyed!"

"Very good, Comrade Kozhukh!"

"Now get two regiments ready for a frontal attack," Kozhukh ordered.

One after another the distant peaks still tinged with the scarlet glow of sunset began to fade, and the deep blue of evening slowly spread all around.

"I shall lead the attack," said Kozhukh.

Then he climbed up on to a rocky ledge. Below him stretched ranks of barefoot, ragged men, indistinct in the fading light, their crowded bayonets bristling.

All eyes were upon him, for it was he who had to solve the question of life or death on which they all depended. It was his duty to find a way out of what everyone could clearly see was a hopeless situation.

Inspired by the thousands of questioning eyes looking up at him, and sensing that the decision whether the men should live or die lay with him and him alone, Kozhukh said:

"Comrades! We have no choice! Either we lay down our lives here or we suffer death down to the very last man at the hands of the Cossacks! The odds facing us are almost insuperable. We've got no cartridges for our rifles and no shells for our field-gun, so we shall have to fight with our bare hands, and there's sixteen enemy guns pointing at us from up there. But if we all attack together, as one . . . " he stopped for a moment, his stern face looking as if it had suddenly turned to stone, then cried in a strange, wild voice that filled those listening with an instantaneous chill:

"If we all attack as one, then the road to safety will lie open before us!"

What he said was perfectly well known already, right down to the last man, but when he spoke in that strange voice, everyone was struck by the unexpected novelty of his words, and the men shouted in reply:

"All as one! We'll either get through or die!"

Now nothing more could be seen in the gathering darkness—neither the rocky sides of the gorge, the forest on the massif, nor the massif itself. The last horses of the cavalry squadron had already melted away into the gloom. The line of soldiers making their way down the ravine towards the sea, holding on to each other's tattered clothing in the darkness and sending loose pebbles rattling away beneath their feet as they went, was out of sight. The last ranks of the two infantry regiments had already disappeared into the thick forest, over which rose the great massif, its sheer, blank face a symbol of death itself. The baggage train had fallen silent too amid the vast stillness of night. There were no camp fires to be seen, no talking or laughter to be heard, and even the children lay quiet and still, their little faces gaunt with hunger.

## 27

The heat was becoming more and more intense, and an invisible, dead fog hung heavily over the town. Its streets and squares, its embankment and harbor, its yards and the highroad itself were littered with corpses. They lay in motionless heaps in various positions. Some had their heads twisted at a terrible angle and others had no head at all, while here and there brains lay splattered over the roadway, quivering like meat jelly. As though in a slaughter-house, dark streams of clotting blood ran along by the walls of houses and went trickling under the gates.



On the steamers too—down in the crew's quarters and the cabins, on the decks and in the holds, in the coal-bunkers and the engine rooms—the dead lay everywhere, young men with delicate Georgian features and small, dark mustaches.

They hung motionless over the parapet along the embankment, too, and if you looked down into the clear, blue water, you could see still more of them lying peacefully on the greenish, slimy stones that covered the sea bed, with shoals of gray fish moving slowly above them.

Only in the center of the town were a few still left alive, and the crackle of rifle fire and the chatter of a machine-gun came from where a company of Georgians was still holding out around the cathedral, dying heroically as it did so. But after a short while silence fell there too.

The dead remained lying where they were as the living filled the little town to overflowing, crowding its streets and houses, its yards and jetties, while outside the town, along the highroad, the mountainsides and ravines were thronged with horses, carts and people. There were exclamations, laughter and general hubbub.

Through these streets filled with both the living and the dead rode Kozhukh.

"Victory, comrades, victory!" he cried.

And as though the streets were not littered with corpses and the ground not stained with fresh blood, the joyous answer came rolling tempestuously back to him:

"Hur-rah!"

The cry echoed in the distant blue mountains, then faded and died far out beyond the harbor, the ships and the bay, away over the boundless expanse of dark blue sea.

## 29

In the ocean of velvet-black darkness camp fires flickered with a reddish glow, lighting up the corner of a cart, a horse's muzzle, and faces and bodies that looked as flat as if they had been cut out of

cardboard. The night was alive with exclamations, voices and laughter. Snatches of song rang out nearby and died away in the distance, somebody began strumming a balalaika, and then as if vying with it, someone else struck up on an accordion. The camp fires stretched away as far as the eye could see.

But the night was filled with something else too, something nobody wanted to think about . . . They were all aware of the heavy stench of putrefaction drifting down from the top of the massif, for that was where the corpses were most numerous.

"So we made our way through the forest," someone was saying, "and got to that rock, but then we thought we were done for, because we couldn't climb the cliff-face and we couldn't retreat either. When the sun came up, we reckoned we'd all be shot."

"A hell of a mess!" said someone else with a laugh.

"We were sure the bastards up there were only pretending to be asleep and we thought they'd open fire on us any minute. From that cliff-top a dozen men with rifles could have wiped out both our regiments as easily as swatting flies. Well, we started going up all the same, climbing on each other's heads and shoulders . . . "

"But where was the chief?"

"He was right there, climbing with us! But when we were nearly at the top, with only about fifteen feet to go, the cliff-face suddenly became sheer, just like a wall. We couldn't do a thing—it was impossible to go up any further or come down again, so we all lost heart and went quiet. Then the chief snatched a rifle from one of us, jammed the bayonet into a crack in the rock, and climbed up by standing on the rifle. Then we all did the same, and that's how we got right to the top."

"We lost a whole platoon," put in another, "they were drowned in the sea. We were moving along, jumping like hares from one rock to the next in the dark, but they slipped and fell into the water one after another and all got drowned."

Yet however animated the conversation and however cheerful the camp fires, the surrounding darkness was still filled with what everyone was trying to forget, and the heavy stench of putrefaction came drifting over them just as persistently as before.

Suddenly an old woman pointed into the darkness and said:

"What's that?"

Everyone looked in the direction she indicated. In the darkness where the invisible massif stood, flickering torches could be seen moving to and fro at different levels.

Then a familiar young voice said:



"It's only our men and some of the local folk clearing the bodies away. They've been at it all day."

Everyone was silent. Nobody else spoke.

## 30

Once again the sun was shining, once again the sea was a brilliant blue, and the outlines of the mountains were smoky-gray in the distance. Both they and the sea seemed to be slowly descending as the road wound its way higher and higher towards the sky.

The little town far below was now only a white smudge that was gradually disappearing from view. The dark blue bay was framed by its long breakwaters, so slender and straight that they looked as if they had been drawn with a pencil, and the abandoned Georgian steamers were no more than black specks out on the water. What a pity Kozhukh's army couldn't have brought them along too!

All the same, though, they had managed to seize a great deal of booty and they now had three hundred thousand cartridges and six thousand shells. Straining at their well-greased, black traces, the splendid Georgian horses were pulling sixteen captured field-guns, while the enemy carts were laden with a great quantity of military supplies—field telephones, barbed wire, medicines and tents. There were ambulance carts too—enough and to spare. But two things were still lacking—bread and hay.

The hungry horses plodded patiently on, tossing their heads wearily. The soldiers tightened their belts, but they were all in good spirits, for they had two or three hundred cartridges apiece now. They marched cheerfully on, enveloped by swirling clouds of hot, white dust, amid the swarms of persistent flies that had become inseparable from the column.

The bullock-carts and wagons creaked endlessly on, while the children's little heads swayed to and fro among the red pillows.

Its countless links moving on and on, the endless human chain crawled up into the mountains once more, climbing past precipices and clefts towards the barren summits, and crawling on like a giant snake towards the pass. From there it would descend into the steppe, where there was both food and forage, and where their own people were waiting.

Towards evening, above the endless creaking of the carts could be heard:

"Mummy! I'm hungry! Give me some food! I'm hungry!"

Their faces gaunt and dark, the barefoot mothers craned their necks like birds and stared with red eyes at the winding highroad as it climbed higher and higher, then they hurried on beside the carts in silence, for there was nothing they could say to their little ones.

Higher and higher they climbed, and as they did so, the trees gradually thinned and finally disappeared altogether. The column was now surrounded by a desolate wilderness of barren rocks, deep clefts and vast, towering cliffs that seemed about to hurtle down upon them. Every sound—the thudding of horses' hoofs and the creaking of wheels—echoed on all sides, becoming strangely magnified and drowning the sound of human voices with its reverberations. From time to time the column had to make its way round the bodies of horses lying in the road.

Then all of a sudden the intense heat began to abate and a cool wind blew off the mountain peaks, while the sky quickly turned gray. Darkness fell almost immediately and then torrents of water began to stream out of the black sky. It was not simply rain but a roaring flood that swept people off their feet and filled the darkness with a furious maelstrom. The water came pouring both from above and below, and in the deluge the column lost all sense of cohesion and direction. Carts became separated and began to lag behind, and as though they were plunged into a raging void, the people no longer saw or knew what was happening around them.

Suddenly a man was swept away . . . And now someone else was screaming . . . But how could a human cry possibly be heard above the uproar of the storm? All around them the water seethed, as the black sky raged and the wind roared, and it was as though the mountains themselves were hurtling down on to the column. And now it seemed as if the entire baggage train with its horses and carts were being swept away.

One pair of horses, knocked off their feet by the whirling torrent, plunged over a precipice, dragging a cart full of children with them, but those behind went struggling on, believing the vehicle was still in front of them.

In other carts little children buried themselves among the sodden pillows and clothing, crying out for their mothers and fathers, but their desperate screams were drowned by the furious roaring of water. Invisible in the darkness, rocks came hurtling down from the crags above, while the wind howled with a thousand frenzied voices and the rain poured down in endless torrents.



All was engulfed by the vastness of night. Then suddenly, drowning the hellish uproar of the storm, the mountainside itself seemed to crack asunder, and from its innermost depths came rolling such an enormous, thunderous roar that it was too vast even for the immensity of night to contain it. The sound seemed to explode into fragments that went on bursting as they rolled away in every direction, growing louder and filling the invisible precipices and ravines with a booming echo as they did so. The people were deafened by the noise, while the children lay motionless in the carts as though they had been struck dead.

Amid the streaming torrents of water, the lightning constantly flashing in the dark blue sky, and the incessant peals of thunder, the baggage train came to a halt, while the soldiers, ammunition wagons, fieldguns, carts and refugees all seemed utterly exhausted. Everything remained where it was, surrendering itself to the furious torrents, the roaring thunder, the wind and the deathly pale light that kept streaking the sky with its intolerable brilliance. The horses stood knee-deep in swirling water now, and there seemed no end to the horror of this tempestuous night.

But when morning finally came, the sun shone brightly once more. The air was limpid as though it had been washed clean, and the light blue mountains were vaporous and airy. Only the people were dark, their faces pinched and their eyes sunken. Summoning up the last ounce of their strength, they helped the horses pull the carts as the road climbed uphill. The animals were all skin and bone now, their ribs showing so clearly through their rain-washed hide that you could count them with ease.

Reports were brought to Kozhukh:

"Three carts have been swept over a precipice together with all the people in them. A wagon has been smashed by a boulder falling down the mountainside, and two men have been struck by lightning. Two more from the third company are missing, presumed dead, and there are dozens of dead horses lying along the highroad."

Kozhukh looked at the road that had been washed clean by the storm, then at the rocks towering sternly above them, and said:

"There'll be no halt for sleep! The march has got to go on without stopping—we must continue day and night!"

"But the horses can't do it, Comrade Kozhukh—there's not a single handful of hay left! At least when we were marching through the forest we could feed them on leaves, but now there's nothing around us but bare rock!"

Kozhukh was silent for a moment.

"We must go on without a moment's rest! If we stop, all the horses will die. Write out the order!"

The mountain air was so miraculously pure that to breathe it was sheer joy, but these tens of thousands of people had no thought for that. Staring down at their feet, they tramped silently along beside the field-guns and carts, keeping to the sides of the road. The dismounted cavalrymen trudged on too, leading their reluctant horses by the bridle.

All around them barren, wild crags towered into the sky, while the narrow, rocky clefts among them were filled with shadow. The bottomless abysses below them threatened destruction and death, while mists drifted through the deserted gorges.

The dark ravines were filled with the incessant creaking of carts, the squeaking of wheels, the thudding of hoofs and a continuous rumbling and clanking, and all this noise, echoing a thousand times on every side, gradually swelled to become an unremitting roar. The people trudged on in silence, but if anyone had uttered a cry it would have been lost without trace in this vast, creaking roar that could be heard for miles around.

Whenever one of the horses came to a halt, all those in the cart were filled with wild terror. Then in savage frenzy they would seize hold of the wheels, and putting their shoulders to the cart and lashing the horse furiously with their whips, they would yell in crazed, frantic voices. But all their desperate shouting, all their frenzied efforts, were swallowed up by the endless, echoing creaking of countless wheels that reverberated a hundred times around them.

The exhausted horse would take another step or two, then stagger and collapse on the ground, breaking its shaft-beam as it fell, and no one could make it get up again. It would lie there with its rigid legs stretched out, its teeth bared, and the light of day dimming in its bloodshot eyes.

Then, snatching the children from the cart, the mother would beat the older ones in a frenzy to make them walk, and take the younger ones in her arms or lift them onto her shoulders. But if there were many of them, too many . . . then she would leave one or two of the very smallest behind in the abandoned cart and walk on with dry eyes, without looking back. And behind her, not looking back either, came countless others, trudging on and on just as before, moving carts overtaking the abandoned one, living horses skirting the dead one, rescued children passing by the deserted ones, and echoing a thousandfold, the incessant squeaking of countless wheels steadily swallowed up what had just occurred.



Far away down the highroad, at the head of the column, walked the dismounted cavalrymen, leading their staggering horses by the bridle. The animals could barely walk now, and their ears drooped like those of a beaten dog.

It was becoming very hot, and the countless flies that had disappeared completely during the storm—all clinging in sheltered places under the carts—now filled the air again in dense swarms.

Then suddenly someone said:

"It's the pass!"

After another bend, the highroad began to go downhill, twisting to and fro as it went.

## 31

"How many of them are there?" asked Kozhukh.

"Five."

"All in a row?"

"Yes . . . "

His face streaming with sweat, the mounted Kuban scout did not finish what he was saying because his horse was jerking its head violently, making it hard for him to control it. Its flanks covered with foam, the animal was desperately trying to shake off the countless flies swarming round it, tossing its head and pulling the reins from the man's hands.

Kozhukh was sitting in his cart with his adjutant and driver, their faces a dull red color with the heat that made them look as if they had just come out of a steam bath. Apart from the scout there was no one else nearby.

"How far are they from the highroad?"

The scout pointed to the left with his whip. "About ten or fifteen versts, beyond that copse."

"And is there a side road that goes past them?"

"Yes."

"No Cossacks about?"

"No, none at all. Our lads have ridden about twenty versts ahead, and there's no sign of them."

The muscles were working on Kozhukh's face which had become sallow and calm once more.

"Halt the vanguard," he said, "turn the column onto the side road, and make all the regiments, refugees and carts file past the five you speak of!"

Bending slightly over the pommel of his saddle and anxious not to seem insubordinate, the scout said cautiously:

"But it'll mean a big detour, sir . . . people are dropping dead with the heat as it is and they're starving too!"

Kozhukh's small eyes gazed into the far distance that was shimmering in the heat, and as he gazed they seemed to turn gray. The people had not eaten for three days now, their faces were gaunt with hunger and there was a famished glitter in their eyes. The mountains were behind them now but they still had to press on with all possible speed so as to escape the barren foothills and reach the villages below, where they could find food for both themselves and their horses. They had to hurry, too, so as not to give the Cossacks time to strengthen their position ahead. They could not afford to lose a single minute, let alone the time it would take to make a detour of ten or fifteen versts.

Kozhukh glanced at the scout's youthful face that was dark with hunger and the heat, then his eyes flashed like steel and he said through clenched teeth:

"Turn the army into the side road and let them all march past what's there!"

"Very good, sir!"

The scout rode off into the swirling clouds of stifling dust. It was impossible to make anything out in it, but one could hear the disorderly ranks trudging on and on in exhaustion, the thudding of hoofs and the creaking of carts. Faces burnt black by the sun and streaming with sweat gleamed dully in the murk.

No one spoke, no one laughed. The great column simply went on and on, bearing its oppressive, fiery silence with it, and in that silence were the same weary footsteps, the same pounding hoofs and the same squeaking wheels as before.

All-enveloping, the stifling, whitish dust filled the air, and invisible in it were soldiers, horsemen, and creaking carts. But perhaps it was not heat or dust that hung in the air, but an all-pervading, profound sense of despair. There was no hope left and no thought of anything, save the inexorable end. These people were now exhausted and starving, barefoot and ragged, but the sun went on blazing mercilessly down on them. And all the while, eagerly awaiting them somewhere ahead, were fully-armed, well-fed and firmly entrenched Cossacks led by their rapacious generals.

Bumping into horses and men as he went, the Kuban scout rode up to the head of the column, and bending forward in the saddle, spoke to the commander of the leading detachment. The latter frowned, then with a glance at the blurred ranks of marching men appearing then vanishing amid the clouds of dust behind him, he stopped and shouted hoarsely:



"Regiment! Halt!"

Immediately, the stifling dust muffled his words as if they had been wrapped in cotton wool, but they seemed, nevertheless, to be heard by those for whom they were intended, and fading away into the distance, the command was repeated in various voices:

"Battalion! Halt! Company! Halt!"

Then suddenly the strange order rang out:

"Left turn!"

And as the column began to move again, each unit was astonished to hear:

"Left turn! Left! Left!"

In amazement at first and then in eager gladness, they turned quickly down the side road. It was stony so there was no dust on it. One could see the infantry units hurriedly turning off onto it, followed by the cavalry, and then, swaying ponderously, by the creaking baggage carts. In dense, black swarms the flies turned off too, and gradually, the highroad with its slowly settling clouds of dust and its oppressive silence was left behind, while the stony track came alive with exclamations and laughter.

"Hey, look!" someone shouted. "There's the chief!"

As they passed, all turned their heads to look at Kozhukh. Yes, there he was, just the same as always—short and stocky, in his battered straw hat with its drooping brim. He stood there watching them, and they could all see his hairy chest through his sweat-soaked, ragged tunic with its open neck. His trousers were in tatters and his feet in their torn shoes were covered with blisters.

"Hey, lads! Our chief looks just like a bandit! If you came across him in the forest, you'd run a mile!"

They all looked lovingly at him and laughed.

But Kozhukh was watching the noisy crowd as it went straggling by, and his observant little eyes that never missed a thing shone dark blue in his iron-gray face.

"Yes," he thought, "they're nothing but a rabble, a miserable rabble! If the Cossacks attacked now, we'd all be done for! They're just a rabble!"

Then all of a sudden someone asked "What's that? What is it?" and the question ran through the crowd.

Dead silence suddenly descended upon the column, and only the tramping of feet could be heard. All heads turned and all eyes stared in the same direction—to where a line of telegraph poles stretched

away into the distance like slender pencils hanging on a thread, growing smaller and smaller until they disappeared in the shimmering heat. On the four nearest poles the naked bodies of four men were hanging motionless, the air around them dark with countless flies. Their heads were hanging down on their chests, as if they were pressing their youthful chins on the nooses around their necks. Their teeth were bared and their empty eye-sockets that had been pecked clean by ravens were deep black, while from their bellies, they too pecked open, hung slimy green entrails. On their flanks the skin was gashed and dark where they had been flogged with ramrods. As the head of the column drew near, the ravens flew off the bodies to settle on the tops of the telegraph poles, and cocking their heads on one side, looked down on the crowd.

Four bodies . . . But there was a fifth too—the naked corpse of a girl, her breasts cut off and her flesh already burnt black by the fiery sun.

"Regiment! Halt!"

Nailed to the first pole was a sheet of white paper.

"Battalion! Halt!"

"Company! Halt!"

The command was passed down the whole column, the cries dying away in the distance.

The five bodies were sunk in profound silence, and from them came drifting the sickly-sweet smell of putrefaction.

Kozhukh took off his battered straw hat, and everyone else who had anything on his head did likewise.

"Give me that, comrade," said Kozhukh.

The adjutant tore off the sheet of paper fixed beside the first corpse and handed it to him. Kozhukh set his jaws firm, then said through clenched teeth:

"Comrades," he said, flourishing the paper which flashed white in the sun, "this is what General Pokrovsky[10] has sent you. He writes: 'Any person found guilty of having the slightest contact with the Bolsheviks will suffer execution in the way these five traitors from the Maikop[11] works did.'" Then, after a short pause, Kozhukh added: "These are your brothers and . . . this is your sister."

Once again he clenched his teeth, unable to say any more. But there was nothing more to be said.

Thousands of shining eyes stared unblinkingly at him, as one single heart—a heart that was immeasurably vast—began to beat throughout the column.

Drops of black blood kept dripping from the empty eye-sockets of the corpses, and the stench of putrefaction floated in the air.



The high-pitched buzzing of the flies and the vibrant, fiery heat gave way to stillness. There was only the deep silence of the grave and the sickly-sweet smell of putrefaction. And the drops of black blood kept dripping.

"Attent-ion! Quick march!"

Then the pounding of heavy feet suddenly echoed in the stillness, filling the burning air with the sound of a measured, even tread, as though one man and one alone, a man of inconceivably vast height and weight, were marching relentlessly along, and as though one giant heart were beating with superhuman power.

On they went, and without noticing it, all quickened their step, unaware that they were marching with more and more of a swing. The sun glared down as before, its heat insanely pitiless.

"That's fine, lads, just fine!" thought Kozhukh to himself as he watched them from under heavy brows, his eyes the color of blue steel. "At this rate we'll do seventy versts a day!"

Then he got down from the cart, and summoning up all his strength so as not to lag behind, marched along with the column, and was soon lost in the endless stream of swiftly moving men.

Standing solitary and bare against the sky, the telegraph poles receded into the distance. The head of the column turned right, back onto the deserted highroad, and as it did so, it was enveloped once again by the inevitable clouds of stifling dust in which nothing was visible. Only the rhythmical pounding of heavy feet, boundless in its immensity, could be heard amid the swirling clouds of dust rolling on down the highroad.

Meanwhile, one unit after another came up to the telegraph poles and halted before them, and the silence of the grave descended upon them too. The commanders read out the General's message from the piece of paper as thousands of unblinking eyes stared at the sight, and then a single heart, a heart that was unprecedentedly vast, began to beat.

The five bodies hung just as motionless as before, their blackened flesh torn and rotting under the nooses and their bones turning white in the sun.

On the tops of the poles sat the ravens, cocking their heads on one side and looking down on the column with flashing eyes, while the air was filled with the heavy, nauseatingly sweet smell of roasted flesh.

Then on they marched with measured tread, their feet pounding faster and faster, and unaware that they were doing so they too gradually formed up into close ranks. On they went, their heads still bared, oblivious now of themselves and no longer seeing either the line of

telegraph poles stretching away into the distance or the terribly short, dark midday shadows that they cast. Instead, their glittering eyes were narrowed against the brilliant light and their gaze was fixed on the fiery distance shimmering in the heat.

Quicker and quicker they marched, with ever more swinging stride, their serried ranks turning to the right and streaming back onto the highroad, where the clouds of dust swallowed them up and rolled along with them as before.

Thousands, tens of thousands, passed by the five corpses. There were no longer any platoons or companies, any battalions or regiments, but instead simply one indescribably vast, single mass of men. On they marched with countless steps, gazing ahead with equally countless eyes, a boundless multitude of hearts beating as one.

And all of them to a man had their eyes fixed on the fiery distance.

Behind the column as it moved away all was deserted, and the heavy stench of putrefaction filled the air.

## 32

Where the highroad left the mountains, the Cossacks were eagerly awaiting the column. They had received information that the horde streaming towards them was carrying incalculable treasure which it had looted on the way—gold, precious stones, clothing, gramophones and a huge quantity of arms and ammunition—but that the people were ragged and barefoot, evidently because of their vagrant kind of life. And the Cossacks, from their generals down to the last rank-and-file soldier, were smacking their lips with impatience, for all this wealth was slowly but surely moving towards them of its own accord.

General Denikin[12] had entrusted General Pokrovsky with the task of forming military units in Ekaterinodar so as to surround the horde as it came down from the mountains and destroy it to a man. Pokrovsky had therefore raised an excellently equipped corps and was now blocking the road along the Belaya River, so called because of the white foam it carries down from the mountains. One Cossack cavalry squadron had already been sent out to meet the horde.

Far away in the distance enormous clouds of white dust began to swirl in the sky.

"Aha!" cried the Cossacks. "There they are!" and set off at a gallop towards them, the wind whistling in their ears.

But only a few minutes later something wholly unexpected, something quite monstrous happened. The cavalry charged and collided with



the enemy, but then Cossacks suddenly began to fall headlong from their horses, their fur caps cloven in two, their necks slashed clean through, or both horse and rider bayoneted in a flash. The survivors hurriedly turned their horses and galloped away, bending so low in the saddle that they were hardly visible, but then all of a sudden they began to be picked off by bullets that came whining after them. The confounded, barefoot horde continued to advance, pursuing the enemy for two, three, then five and even ten versts, and if any Cossacks escaped alive it was only because the horses of those chasing them were exhausted.

Not until they reached their own forward positions in the trenches did the remaining Cossacks finally manage to shake off their pursuers.

Kozhukh did not want to deploy all his forces during the daytime. He realized that the enemy enjoyed a considerable advantage in numbers and he had no wish to reveal the size of his own forces, so he waited for darkness to fall. Then, at dead of night, there was a repetition of what had taken place during the day, for not ordinary men but furious devils seemed to fall upon the Cossacks with all their might.

Finally, unable to hold out any longer, the enemy fled, though even then the darkness did not save them, for they still fell in rows before Kozhukh's bayonets and swords.

When the sun rose above the mountain slopes, its long, slanting rays revealed the bodies of many black-mustached Cossacks strewn over the boundless steppe. There were no prisoners and no wounded, for all lay motionless in death.

## 33

Night had enveloped the vast expanse of steppe, and with it the foothills, the mountains that had loomed dark blue all day on the horizon, and the village on the enemy side of the river. Not a single light shone in the village and no sound came from it, so it was almost as if it did not exist. Even the dogs were quiet, frightened by the guns that had thundered all day. Only the river could be heard.

Ever since morning, from beyond the river that was now invisible in the darkness and from beyond the enemy trenches that showed gray in the gloom, the Cossack guns had thundered with shattering sound. Again and again they had fired, not sparing their shells, and countless puffs of white smoke had kept bursting over the steppe, the orchards and ravines. Kozhukh's response to them had been sporadic, reluctant and weary.

To the Cossacks the position now seemed clear: the enemy were exhausted and feeble, and no longer returned shot for shot. In the late afternoon the ragamuffins had launched an attack across the river, but they had got such a drubbing from the Cossack guns that their ranks had been thrown into confusion and they had been forced to take cover wherever they could. It was a pity night had fallen, otherwise they would really have been routed. But never mind—there was always the next morning to look forward to!

The river roared on and on, filling the darkness with sound. Kozhukh felt pleased and his sharp little eyes glinted like gray steel. He was pleased because in his hands the army was now an obedient, pliant tool. Just before nightfall, he had sent several units forward with orders to make a half-hearted attack then take cover. Now, as he checked the positions of his men in the velvet-black darkness, he found they were all at their posts on the edge of the fifty-foot cliff that dropped sheer to the water. At the foot of the cliff the river roared on and on.

Each soldier lay there in the darkness, feeling for the edge of the cliff and trying to estimate the drop to the water. All the men in these units now lying silently on the ground had studied their positions thoroughly in advance, so they were not simply waiting like sheep for their commanders to tell them where to go and what to do.

Rain had been falling in the mountains, and during the day the river had been covered in furious white foam, but now it was roaring like thunder. The soldiers realized the water must be five or six feet deep by now—some of them had already managed to measure it—and they knew they would have to swim in places. But that was nothing—it could be done easily enough. Before night had fallen, lying in gullies and hollows and among the bushes and long grass as the Cossack shells burst continually above them, each group of men had chosen the particular section of the enemy trench on the far bank that it would attack.

To the left two bridges spanned the river, one a railway bridge made of iron and the other a road bridge built of wood. Neither of them was visible now in the darkness, but the Cossacks had an artillery battery trained on them and had positioned a machine-gun beside them too.

In the darkness that was filled with the incessant roaring of the river, two of Kozhukh's regiments—one of cavalry and the other of infantry—stood motionless facing the bridges.

The Cossacks sat in their trenches listening to the sound of rushing water and keeping their rifles at the ready, though they knew perfectly well the ragamuffins would not try to cross the river at night. After all, they'd had a good enough thrashing during the day. The Cossacks sat and waited, and the night wore slowly on.



Kozhukh's soldiers lay like badgers on the cliff edge, looking over it in the dark, listening to the sound of rushing water just as the Cossacks were, and waiting. And then the thing they were all waiting for—something, it seemed, that would never begin—finally came: slowly and reluctantly, like only the merest hint of it, the dawn began to break.

Suddenly something almost imperceptible went flitting along the left bank of the river, as though an electric current had run through the men or a little flock of swallows had flown silently by in the gloom.

Then, as if they were falling out of a giant sack, soldiers began to scramble down the fifty-foot cliff, bringing crumbling clay, pebbles and sand with them as they came. The river roared on.

Thousands of bodies splashed into the water, but the thousands of splashes were drowned by the thundering of the river. The river roared on, its sound a continuous monotone.

In the gray light of dawn a forest of bayonets suddenly rose up before the astonished Cossacks' eyes, and the air was filled with shouting, curses and groans. These were no longer human beings but a seething, bloody mass of wild beasts. The Cossacks struck the enemy down in dozens, but they themselves fell by the score. Once again this devilish horde, come from God knows where, had fallen upon them with all its might! Were these really the same Bolsheviks whom they had chased all over the Kuban? No, these people were different. Not for nothing were they blackened by the sun, not for nothing were they half-naked and dressed only in rags.

As soon as wild uproar broke out along the entire right bank of the river, Kozhukh's artillery and machine-guns began to bombard the village, firing over the heads of their own men, while the cavalry regiment took both bridges with a furious charge. Behind them, running for all they were worth, came the infantry. The Cossack battery and machine-guns were seized, and Kozhukh's squadrons poured into the village. Suddenly they saw something white come rushing out of a hut and, leaping on an unsaddled horse, disappear with amazing speed into the murk of early dawn.

Now ashen-faced men wearing golden shoulder-straps were being led out of the village priest's house—some of the Cossacks' headquarters staff had been captured. In the yard near the priest's stable their heads were split open with sabres, and their blood soaked the horse-dung that littered the ground.

Near one hut, which had broken glass scattered around it, a small group of railwaymen had gathered.

"General Pokrovsky was spending the night here," they said. "You only just missed him! As soon as he heard you coming, he knocked the window out, frame and all, and wearing nothing but his nightshirt, jumped on an unsaddled horse and galloped away."

The Cossacks had taken to their heels. Seven hundred of them lay dead in heaps in the trenches and more were stretched out in a long line across the steppe. They were all dead. Once again, those who were still alive and fleeing were filled—despite their desperate efforts to save themselves and despite their abject fear—with irrepressible amazement at this mysterious, Satanic force that had overwhelmed them.

Rising over the distant horizon of the steppe, the sun dazzled the fleeing Cossacks with its long, slanting rays.

## 36

For the fourth day in succession now the guns were roaring when scouts reported to Kozhukh that a new general with artillery, cavalry and infantry had joined the enemy from Maikop. A council was held and it was decided to break through that night and move on.

Kozhukh issued the following orders: first, to cease fire gradually towards evening so as to reassure the enemy that all was well; second, to sight the guns carefully on the enemy trenches, fix the sighting, and stop firing completely for the night; third, to bring up the regiments under cover of darkness and take them as close as possible to the heights where the Cossack trenches were, being careful not to alarm the enemy, and then to lie low there; fourth, to complete all movements of the various units by 1:30 a.m., and then at 1:45 to open volley fire of ten shells each from all the sighted guns; and fifth, after the last shell at 2:00 a.m., to make a general infantry attack on the Cossack trenches. The cavalry regiment was to remain in reserve so as to support the infantry units and pursue the enemy afterwards.

The soldiers lay in long lines pressed close to the hard earth, with the thick, heavy darkness bearing down on them. Thousands of eyes as sharp as those of wild beasts peered into the darkness, but in the Cossack trenches all was quiet and still. Only the roaring of the river could be heard.

The men had no watches, but in each of them the tense spring of anticipation wound tighter and tighter. The night was oppressive and still, and for each of them the two hours after midnight dragged by. Time was slowly passing amid the incessant roaring of the river.



And though this was precisely what they were all waiting for, it still came as an unexpected surprise when the darkness was suddenly rent asunder to reveal fiery-crimson clouds of smoke shining in the night. Thirty guns began to speak with a full-throated roar, firing continuously, and hitherto invisible in the darkness, the Cossack trenches were suddenly illumined by an intermittently flashing necklace of dazzling shell-bursts, their echoing thunder revealing the sinuous line along which men were now dying.

Then, just as suddenly as it had been rent asunder, the darkness closed in again, smothering with instant silence both the flickering, crimson clouds and the inhuman roar of the guns. Above the enemy trenches there rose a line of dark figures that looked like a long stockade in the gloom, and then a new roar, a live roar like that of wild beasts, echoed along them. The Cossacks came staggering out of their trenches, extremely reluctant to have anything to do with this devilish horde, but once again it was too late, for their dugouts were already beginning to overflow with corpses.

Yes, they were a diabolical horde indeed, for they pursued the fleeing Cossacks for fifteen versts, covering them in only an hour and a half.

General Pokrovsky gathered together the remnants of his Cossack squadrons and his officer and infantry battalions, then led them, bewildered and enfeebled, off towards Ekaterinodar, so leaving the way clear for the "ragamuffins", as he had so contemptuously called them.

## 37

Straining every nerve, their feet thudding hollowly on the ground, the smoke-blackened, ragged ranks marched on with swinging step in close formation, their knitted brows covered with dust. And beneath their brows gleamed the tiny dots of their sharp pupils, forever fixed on the shimmering horizon of the deserted steppe.

Rumbling heavily, the field-guns hurried along too, the horses tossing their heads impatiently amid the clouds of dust, and the gunners keeping their eyes firmly fixed on the dark blue line of the distant horizon.

Amid incessant uproar the baggage carts dragged endlessly on. Solitary mothers trudged along beside other people's carts, their bare feet raising clouds of dust. In their sun-blackened faces eyes that were full of unshed tears shone with a dry glitter. They, too, gazed fixedly at the distant, dark blue line where steppe met sky.

Caught up in the general haste, the wounded tramped on too. One man went hobbling along with his foot wrapped in grimy rags, another, his shoulders hoisted high in the air, swung his crutches out wide as he went, while a third, utterly exhausted, clung to the edge of a cart with bony hands. But all of them alike had their eyes riveted on the dark blue distance.

Tens of thousands of inflamed eyes stared intently ahead, for somewhere out there in the steppe lay the end of all their fatigue and torment, somewhere out there lay happiness.

The sun—their own Kuban sun—was scorching hot.

And all this—the endless creaking of carts amid swirling clouds of dust, the hollow pounding of horses' hoofs, the heavy tread of countless feet and the constant swarms of flies—all this streamed on for mile after mile in a vast torrent, heading towards the alluringly mysterious, dark blue line of the horizon. At any moment the distant steppe would open to reveal what they were all waiting for, their hearts would be filled with joy, and they would cry: "Our people!"

But however far they marched, however many villages, hamlets and farms they passed, it was always the same—the dark blue distance kept receding further and further, remaining just as inaccessible and mysterious as before. And however far they went, they were always told the same thing:

"Yes, they were here, but now they've gone. They were here the day before yesterday, but then they suddenly left in a great hurry."

Yes, they had been here all right: here were a few horse-tethers they had left behind, and there was some hay scattered about. There was horse dung everywhere, too, but now all was deserted.

Here the artillery had obviously made a halt—there were the gray ashes of burnt-out camp fires and the deep ruts made by the wheels of field-guns outside the village as they had turned back onto the high-road.

The old Lombardy poplars at the side of the road had deep, white gashes in their trunks where the bark had been torn by the axles of passing carts.

Everything, everything spoke of their recent presence here, but still the dark blue line of the horizon kept receding, always unattainable.

Kozhukh, his body emaciated and his face burnt black by the sun, rode grimly on in his cart, and like everyone else kept his narrowed eyes riveted day and night on the distant horizon. But for him, too, it remained incomprehensibly and mysteriously deserted. His jaws were tightly clenched.



So village after village, farm after farm went by, and day after day passed too, filled with growing exhaustion.

During the night-halts messengers would bring reports to Kozhukh, but again it was always the same thing—the Cossack units ahead were falling back without firing a shot and letting the column pass. In fact, not a single attack was made on the column, either during the day or at night. Then, without touching the rearguard, the Cossacks would close ranks again after it had passed.

Then Kozhukh issued orders:

"Send mounted messengers to all baggage carts and units, telling them not to lag behind. They are not to halt, but must keep going on and on. No more than three hours are to be allowed for rest during the night!"

Once again the baggage carts creaked onwards, their exhausted horses straining at the traces, and the field-guns rumbled on with ponderous haste. Amid the fiery dust of midday, under the star-strewn night sky and in the half-light of early dawn, the incessant rumbling went on and on across the Kuban steppes.

Once again tens of thousands of eyes were fixed day and night on the distant line of the horizon, probing the expanse of steppe that was hard and yellow after the harvest.

Then suddenly, down all the baggage train, through the units and among the women and children flew the news:

"They're blowing up the bridges! They're retreating and blowing up the bridges behind them!"

And it was true, for wherever the head of the column came to a river or stream, a marshy place or ravine, they found splintered piles and smashed planks sticking up like jagged black teeth. The road was cut and the men were filled with despair.

Frowning, Kozhukh issued orders:

"Repair the bridges and ford the rivers! Make up a special team of all those who can use an axe, and send them ahead on horseback with the vanguard. Take logs, planks and beams from the local people and carry them to the head of the column!"

The axes began their work, and white chips flew through the air, flashing in the sunlight. Then, over the hastily-built, swaying plank bridges, the thousands streamed on with their endless line of baggage carts and field-guns, the horses looking askance at the water and snorting in fear as they went.

On and on poured the human torrent, and as before all eyes were fixed on the same unattainable line that separated steppe and sky.

Then Kozhukh called a meeting of his commanders and with the muscles on his face working, said quietly:

"Comrades, our own people are running away from us as fast as they can . . . They're retreating and blowing up the bridges behind them. We can't go on like this for much longer—our horses are dropping dead by the dozen, men are leaving the ranks and getting left behind, and the enemy will soon cut them to pieces. For the time being we've taught the Cossacks a lesson—they're afraid of us and let us pass, and the generals keep all their units out of our way. All the same, though, we're trapped in a ring of steel, and if things go on like this for long, we'll be done for, because we've not got many cartridges left and there are very few shells. So we must get ourselves out of this situation!"

Then, uttering the words through clenched teeth, he went on:

"We've got to break through! But if we use a cavalry squadron, the Cossacks will cut them to pieces because our horses are in very poor condition and won't stand a gallop. No—we must do something else! We've got to break through and let our people know we're here!"

Then he said:

"Who will volunteer?"

A young man got to his feet.

"Comrade Selivanov," said Kozhukh, "take two men with you and set off in an armored car—and go like hell! You've got to get through, whatever the cost! And when you do, tell them where we are. What the devil are they running away from us for? Do they want us all to be killed, or what?"

An hour later, as the sun was setting, the armored car stood outside the hut where Kozhukh's headquarters were. It carried two machine-guns, one at the front and one at the rear. Wearing a greasy army tunic and smoking a cigarette as he worked, the driver was busy carrying out a final check on his vehicle. Selivanov and the two soldiers had carefree-looking young faces, but their eyes were filled with profound strain.

The car gave a snort, pulled out and raced away, raising clouds of dust as it went hurtling into the distance. It grew steadily smaller until it was no more than a speck, then disappeared.

But the endless crowds, baggage carts and lines of horses streamed grimly on, knowing nothing of the armored car and its mission. On and on they went, never stopping for a moment, peering both in hope and despair into the dark blue distance.



## 38

Cossack mounted patrols, scouts and units all let the furiously racing car pass by, taking it for one of their own. After all, what enemy would dare to venture so deep into Cossack territory?

In the late afternoon the white belltower of a large village church appeared in the distance, then orchards and poplars came quickly into view, and white huts rushed towards the car.

Suddenly one of the soldiers turned to his companion with a strange expression on his face and cried:

"It's our people! Our people! Over there!"

"Hur-rah!"

A large mounted patrol was riding towards them, scarlet stars flaring like poppies on their caps. But at the same time, from behind the wattle fences, orchards and huts came the crackle of rifle fire.

Selivanov's heart missed a beat. "It's our own people," he thought, "and they're firing at us!" Desperately waving his cap, he shouted in a high-pitched, broken voice:

"Friends! Friends!"

Then, seizing hold of the driver's shoulder, he cried:

"Stop! Stop! Put on the brakes!"

But the firing went on. Snatching their carbines from their shoulders, the patrol were galloping towards them now, shooting from the saddle and keeping their horses off the road so as to give their comrades firing from the orchards a clear view of the car.

"They'll kill us!" said the driver with stiff lips, and flinging himself away from the wheel, brought the car to a standstill.

The patrol came racing up at a full gallop, and ten black muzzles were trained point-blank on the car. Some of the cavalrymen, their faces distorted with fear, leapt from the saddle, swearing savagely and shouting:

"Get away from the machine-guns! Hands up! Now get out of the car!"

Others sprang from their horses and with deathly pale faces cried:

"Cut 'em to bits! What the hell are you waiting for? They're bloody officers, damn them!"

Unsheathed sabres flashed razor-sharp in the light.

"They'll kill us!"

Selivanov, the two soldiers and the driver immediately jumped out of the car, and as soon as they were surrounded by excited horses' heads, raised sabres and rifles, the tension relaxed, because all four

were now away from the machine-guns, the sight of which had so infuriated the cavalrymen.

Then, in their turn, Selivanov and his men let fly with choice swear-words:

"You're crazy! We're your own people! Are your eyes in your backsides or something? You never asked to see our papers! You might've killed us and then it would've been too late! To hell with you!"

The cavalrymen had cooled down a little now.

"But who are you?" they asked.

"Who are we?! You should ask first and shoot later, not the other way round! Now take us to headquarters!"

"But how were we to know?" said the cavalrymen apologetically, mounting their horses once more. "Only last week an armored car came racing up just like you did and opened fire. There was a hell of a panic!"

The four men got back into the car and two cavalrymen climbed in beside them, while the rest cautiously surrounded the vehicle with carbines in their hands.

They drove on into the village and stopped at headquarters which was located in the big house of the priest.

Then they burst in to see the commander of the Red detachment.

Beside himself with happiness and excited by all his recent experiences, Selivanov began to tell of the campaign and the battles with the Georgians and Cossacks, and in his eagerness to tell everything, kept skipping from one event to another.

Then he suddenly stopped short. Resting his long mustache and bristly chin on his palm, the commander sat hunched up without interrupting him, a hostile look in the eyes which he kept firmly fixed on the soldier's face.

Feeling the blood rush to his face and neck, Selivanov stopped in mid-sentence and said in a hoarse voice:

"Here are our papers," and pushed them towards the commander.

But without even looking at them, the commander passed them on to his adjutant, who began to examine them reluctantly as though everything were already decided and they would make no difference. Then, still not taking his eyes off Selivanov, the commander said distinctly: "We have very different information . . . in fact, precise reports to the effect that the entire army which marched off the Taman peninsula came to grief on the Black Sea coast and were all slaughtered to a man."

"Forgive me . . . but do our documents prove nothing to you?" asked Selivanov. "Is this really the way to treat us? We force our way through to our own people after an inhuman struggle, at the cost of incredible effort, and then . . . "



"Nikita," said the commander quietly, getting to his feet, "find the order."

The adjutant rummaged in his briefcase, and taking out a sheet of paper, handed it to the commander, who laid it on the table. Then, standing erect, he began to read it out loud:

*COMMANDER'S ORDER NO. 73*

A radio-telegram sent by General Pokrovsky to General Denikin has been intercepted. It reports that an innumerable horde of ragamuffins is advancing from Tuapse and the sea. This wild rabble consists of Russian prisoners who have returned from Germany, as well as sailors. They are extremely well-armed, have a great many field-guns and supplies, and are carrying a large quantity of valuables which they have looted. This armed horde defeats and sweeps aside everything in its path: the best Cossack and officer units, Cadets, and Mensheviks and Bolsheviks alike.

The tall commander looked hard at Selivanov and said again, but with more emphasis now: "And Bolsheviks!"

Then he went on reading:

In view of this I order you to continue to retreat without making any halts and to blow up the bridges behind you; to destroy all means of crossing the rivers; and to take the boats over to our side of the rivers and burn them. The unit commanders are responsible for ensuring that the retreat is carried out in good order.

Once again the commander looked intently at Selivanov, then without giving him time to speak, said:

"Now look here, comrade. I don't wish to suspect you of anything, but you must try to understand our position: we've never met before, and you can see for yourself what this report says. We just don't have the right . . . after all, we're responsible for thousands of people, and we'd be criminals if we . . . "

"But they're all waiting for you back there!" cried Selivanov in despair.

"Yes, I know, I know—don't worry! Look here—let's go and have a bite to eat, shall we? You must be hungry and I expect your lads could. . . "

After the meal it was agreed that Selivanov would drive back in the car accompanied by a cavalry escort who would verify what he had told the commander.

The vehicle drove back more slowly than it had come, the now familiar villages and farms receding into the distance behind it. Selivanov sat between two cavalrymen, their expressions strained as they held their revolvers ready, while all around the car—in front, behind and at each side—more riders rhythmically rose and fell in their wide saddles, first all together then each of them separately as they galloped on, their horses' hoofs flashing in the fading light.

"If we run into any Cossacks," thought Selivanov, "we're done for!"

## 40

The Caucasian sun was hot even though it was autumn by now, but the distant steppe was dark blue and translucent, and wisps of delicate gossamer sparkled in the grass. Poplars with thinning leaves stood pensive and still, and the orchards were faintly tinged with yellow. The belltower on the church gleamed white in the sun.

Beyond the orchards, away out in the steppe, was a vast human sea, a sea just as boundless in its immensity as it had been when the march began. But there was something different about it now. The same refugees were there with their countless carts, but why did their faces shine with such irrepressible confidence?

The same barefoot, ragged soldiers were there too, but why were they now silently standing to attention in endless ranks as straight as a taut thread? Why did their gaunt faces look as if they had been forged from blackened iron, and why did the dark lines of their bayonets seem as well-proportioned and orderly as martial music itself?

And why, facing them, did the ranks of well-dressed, well-shod men stand in slovenly, loose formation, their bayonets all pointing at different angles, and why were both bewilderment and expectation imprinted on their faces?

In the midst of this human sea was an empty green space with a cart showing up darkly on it.

They were all waiting, and as they did so, silent music seemed to float solemnly over the boundless crowd, rising into the dark blue sky and spreading far and wide over the steppe that was flooded with hot, golden light.

Then a small group of men appeared, and as they drew near, those standing in orderly ranks with faces dark as iron recognized their commanders, all of them to a man just as blackened and wasted as they themselves were. And those who stood facing them recognized their commanders too, for these were well-dressed and had healthy, weather-beaten faces just like their own.



Among the first group walked Kozhukh, short and stocky as always, his body sun-blackened and wasted to the bone. His clothes were as ragged as those of a tramp and his battered, gaping boots showed his dark toes. On his head, its torn brim drooping, was the tattered remains of what had once been his straw hat.

The group of men came up and gathered round the cart. Then Kozhukh climbed up into it, and pulling the straw hat from his head, cast a long, slow glance out over the iron ranks of his own men, over the countless carts stretching away across the steppe and the vast, wretched multitude of refugees who had lost their horses during the march, then he turned to look at the ranks of the main forces.

Each and every one of them was gazing at him. Then he said:

"Comrades! We have walked five hundred versts, barefoot, hungry and cold. The Cossacks pursued us like wild beasts. At times we had no bread, no fodder and no supplies of any kind. Our people died, fell over cliffs and were shot down by enemy bullets. But we had no cartridges, so we had to fight with our bare hands . . . "

And though they knew it all, for they had experienced it themselves or knew it from the scores of stories they had heard, Kozhukh's words were still full of shining novelty.

Then he went on:

"We left our children dead in the ravines . . . "

At his words the great human sea stirred and began to ripple from shore to shore:

"Our children! Oh, our children!"

Kozhukh looked gravely at them and paused, then went on:

"And how many of our people lie slain by bullets out on the steppe, in the mountains and in the forests, how many of them will lie there now till the end of time?"

Then all heads were bared, and spreading to the furthest edges of the crowd, a deep silence fell, and in the stillness the low sobbing of the women sounded like a funeral chant or the soft rustling of graveside flowers.

Kozhukh stood for a while with his head bowed, then he looked up again, and surveying the countless thousands before him, asked in the silence:

"And for whose sake did those thousands, those tens of thousands suffer such torment? For whose sake?"

Again he looked at the crowd, then said:

"For the sake of one thing and one alone: for the sake of the Soviet government, because it belongs to the workers and peasants who have nothing else but that!"

Then a great sigh broke from countless breasts, for the emotion was more than anyone could bear. Solitary tears began to trickle down the iron faces of Kozhukh's soldiers, crept slowly down the weather-beaten cheeks of the main forces, glistened on the faces of the old men and even shone in the eyes of young girls in the crowd.

"For the workers and peasants!" came the cry.

It was as if their eyes had been opened wide for the first time in their lives, as if an immense, mysterious secret had suddenly been revealed to them.

Then a great swell rose and swept the crowd like a wave thundering over the sea in a storm:

"Hurrah! That government belongs to us! It is our very own! Long live Soviet power!"

Scores of mothers cried aloud too. With their unshed tears and broken hearts, they would never forget those rapacious, barren ravines—no, never! But even those terrible places and the still more terrible memory of them had slowly been transmuted into quiet sorrow, and it too now found a place in the solemn music floating silently above the boundless human sea that covered the steppe.

Those who stood well-dressed and well-fed before the iron ranks of wasted, tattered men, felt like orphans in the face of this triumph that they themselves had not known, and unashamed of the tears welling up in their eyes, they broke ranks and surged forward in a sweeping avalanche towards the carts where the ragged Kozhukh was standing. And their cry rolled out and away across the steppe, spreading as far as the horizon itself:

"Chief! Chief! Lead us wherever you like! We will give our lives for you if we have to!"

Then thousands of hands stretched out to him, and pulling him down off the cart, lifted him above their heads and shoulders and carried him away. And the steppe shook for miles around, resounding with countless voices:

"Hurr—ah! Hurra—a—ah! Hurrah for Kozhukh, our chief!"

They carried him past his own men standing in their orderly ranks, carried him past the place where the field-guns stood and the cavalry squadrons waited, and as he passed, the horsemen turned in their saddles and with faces shining with delight and mouths wide with joy, they cried out in welcome.



They carried him past the refugees and past the carts, and the mothers held up their children to him.

Then they brought him back and carefully set him down on the cart again. He opened his mouth to speak and everyone gasped as if they had never looked closely at him before:

"Look! His eyes are blue!"

It was true—his eyes really were blue after all, a gentle, light blue that was lit with the loving smile of a child.

Then they cried:

"Hurr-a . . . ah for our chief! Long live Kozhukh! We'll follow him to the ends of the earth! We'll struggle for the Soviet government! We'll fight the landowners, generals and officers!"

Kozhukh looked at them all affectionately with his light blue eyes, and as he did so, his mind and heart were seared by the fiery thought:

"I've got no father or mother, no wife and no brothers, I've got no family, no relatives at all . . . All I have is these people whom I've saved from death and led to safety. Yes, I've led them, I myself have done it! But there are millions more like them, all with a noose around their necks, and I shall go on fighting for them. These people are my father and mother, my wife and children, and I have saved these thousands, these tens of thousands, from death, saved them from a terrible death. . . "

The unspoken words were branded on his heart in letters of fire, while his lips were saying: "Comrades!"

Though unable to express themselves, all these people still felt that cut off as they were from the north by limitless steppes, impassable mountains and great, dense forests, they too were helping to create—albeit to a much lesser degree—the thing that was being created on a world scale far away to the north, in the heart of Russia. And they felt that half-naked, barefoot and starving though they were, they were creating it here, all by themselves, without any assistance whatsoever. They did not know how to express this feeling, but they were aware of it just the same. All of them were filled with a steadily growing sense of boundless happiness at being indissolubly linked with that vastness which so far they only dimly knew but which bore the name of Soviet Russia.

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Innumerable camp fires gleamed in the darkness, while above them shone equally innumerable stars.

Illumined by the flames, the smoke rose gently into the sky, while each as ragged as the next, soldiers and old men, women and children sat wearily around the fires.

Just as the traces of smoke gradually melted away in the star-strewn sky, so the jubilation felt by this vast sea of people slowly faded and died, giving way to fatigue. In the soft darkness, lit only by the light of the fires, it was as though a gentle smile were slowly fading as sleep quietly descended upon them all.

The camp fires gradually went out and silence fell. In the stillness the night was blue—a deep, dark blue.

*1924*

**Notes**

1. Chief town in Kuban region of Northern Caucasus. Renamed Krasnodar in 1920.
2. Soldiers drawn from pro-monarchy Cadet Corps, *1924* élite military school for training officers in Tsarist army.
3. Towns on eastern coast of the Sea of Azov.
4. Villages east of Temriuk, near the Sea of Azov.
5. Rostov-on-Don, northeast of the Sea of Azov.
6. Towns northeast of Ekaterinodar (now Krasnodar).
7. Large port on Black Sea, southwest of Ekaterinodar.
8. This detail suggests that the town meant is Novorossiisk, well-known for its cement factories.
9. Town in the eastern Ukraine.
10. V. L. Pokrovsky (1889–1923), White commander of Kuban Cavalry Division in 1918, notorious for his wholesale hanging of people without trial.
11. Town northeast of Tuapse, on the Belaya River.
12. Anton Ivanovich Denikin (1872–1947), Commander of the Russian Volunteer Army from April, 1918.

# Fyodor Gladkov
# CEMENT